



RAW

Don't listen to your heart.
Your heart is a moron.

BELLE AURORA

Contents

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty Eight](#)

[Epilogue](#)

RAW

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Dedication:

To anyone who has ever loved unconditionally.

To all the people who have loved someone that did not deserve it.

And finally, to every person who has followed their heart down the path
less travelled.

This is for you.

PROLOGUE

Twenty years ago...

I can hear them again.

My neighbors are fighting. The little boy screams for him to stop.

I kneel down by my window. Closing my eyes tight, I cover my ears and sing to myself.

I don't like it.

Then, nothing.

I listen hard, then uncover my ears.

Turning around, I stand a little, peek over the edge of the window, and see him walking fast by the side of my house. He stumbles, falls, and crawls out of my sight.

He's hurt.

My heart races.

I could get in a lot of trouble. Daddy would be real mad.

Kneeling down out of sight for a moment, I stand quickly and creep to the doorframe.

I listen. Hard.

The TV plays and I hear him snore.

Hope ignites.

Tiptoeing down the stairs, I sneak into the kitchen. Getting a chair from the small dining table, I stand on it and reach for the top shelf.

I get what I need, slide the chair back in, and make my way to the back door.

My hand reaches for the knob, grips it tight, then...I still.

I could get in a lot of trouble for this.

My heart beats out of my chest.

Turning the knob, it squeaks a little, and fear washes over me. Stopping, I turn it so slowly that it takes forever to make the rotation.

Finally, I feel the latch click over, and I pull the door open. Taking off my slippers, I put them in between the door and frame so the door can't close.

Barefoot and dressed only in my white nightie, I tread softly through the backyard, the soft grass cold under my feet, following the sound of the heavy breathing and soft crying.

Finding him at the back of the property line under a tree, I see him cover his face with his hands. His body shakes.

Even hidden away in the dark, he doesn't want anyone to see his tears.

He's trying to be strong.

My heart hurts.

Slowly walking closer, I step on a twig. It breaks, and his face snaps up to look at me.

Jumping up like a jack in the box, he yells out, "Get away from me."

Not coming any closer, I put down my supplies and whisper, "You're hurt."

He watches me carefully, looking between the things I've brought and my face, as if searching for some hint of this being a joke.

He scowls and says quietly, "I'm always hurt."

Even in the dark, I see the hatred in his eyes. It shines bright as day.

I see his cheek become darker. Stepping forward with wide eyes, I tell him, "You're bleeding."

Reaching up to his cheek, he touches the wound with his fingertips, pulls it away, then looks at his blood. He rubs it between his thumb and middle finger slowly. Caressing the blood, as if in apology.

I stutter, "I- I can help you."

Lifting his cold eyes to me, he spits, "No one can help me."

He can't boss me around.

Placing a hand on my hip, I glare at him and whisper-hiss, "I could get into a lot of trouble. My daddy would be real mad. And...and I came to help you." Suddenly scared for myself, I say a hushed, "Please, let me help you."

I need to get back inside before my dad finds out I'm not in bed.

My face must show my fear because his posture relaxes a little, and he asks, "Why would you help me then?"

I'm not sure.

I shrug. "You're hurt."

"No one else cares if I'm hurt."

My heart races.

I whisper, "I do."

We stand there, staring at each other a long time.

Finally, he comes closer to me and asks, "What's your name?"

"Alexa. Alexa Ballentine."

He nods, but says nothing.

"What's your name?"

He kicks at a stone. "Doesn't matter. You'll forget it once I'm gone."

My stomach aches. I need to know his name.

Stepping closer, I promise, "No, I won't."

Lifting his head, he runs a hand through his messy brown hair to keep it out of his face. He watches me a second more before he utters, "Antonio Falco."

I want to say it's nice to meet him, but it doesn't feel right.

Shuffling around from foot to foot, I ask, "How old are you?"

He leans back on the tree trunk. "Eight."

He seems older to me.

He asks, "How old are you?"

"Six." Pause. "I'll be seven soon," I lie.

His brow furrows. "You look older."

Wow. I just thought the same thing about him.

Not thinking, I blurt out, "Why does your daddy hurt you?"

His jaw steels and he explains, "He's my step-dad."

Hearing a noise in the house, I turn, and my eyes widen in terror.

Turning back to Antonio, I whisper, "Please let me help you."

Lowering his eyes, he murmurs, "Okay."

Relief and joy swirl through my body.

He steps forward into the moonlight and I gasp. The top of his cheek is gaping.

I swallow hard, trying not to be sick.

Taking some cotton and antiseptic, I warn, "This smelly stuff stings."

But when I dab it on his wound, he doesn't even flinch. His eyes never leave mine.

Taking a band-aid, I open it and place it on the top of his cheekbone. It doesn't do much. The wound is too big. But he still mutters, "Thanks."

Another noise in the house makes me jolt. Looking into his brown eyes, I whisper urgently, "I need to go. I'll see you another time, Antonio."

He looks down at the ground. "No. You won't."

And I didn't.

Not ever again.

Lexi

Sydney, Australia. 2014.

The knocking on the door won't quit.

Burying myself deeper into the mattress, I pull the covers tighter around me and sigh dreamily.

Knock knock knock...

"Alexa, get your arse up! Did you forget what today is?" That sounds like Drew.

My eyes snap open and I gasp.

"Shit." I jump out of bed as if I was ejected. "Shit!"

Running down the hall to the front door, I undo the latch and swing the door open. An annoyed looking Drew stands there. He takes one look at my body and his mouth gapes.

Brow furrowing, I look down and yell, "Shit!"

I don't like to sleep in anything too bulky. A spaghetti-strapped tank and panties are my usual bedding combo. Running back to my room, I hear Drew chuckle and I shout, "Laugh it up, Drew! You'll get yours."

Drew is a fellow case worker, and I forgot – I fucking *forgot* – that we need to be in court early this morning.

I moved to Australia from the US when I was eighteen. My foster mom took care of me from the time I was sixteen, and when her health started to decline, she wanted to move to be closer to her family. Being Australian born, that's where she was headed, and I accepted that I was losing my mama.

Only, that's not what happened.

After days of being depressed over her impending departure, she stated, "You need to pack your things into boxes so I can send them ahead of us."

You should only keep a suitcase full of clothes. I'll make sure I don't send everything too early, but I still want our stuff to meet us when we get there."

My head snapped up.

Say what now?

Mom's face fell at my dumbfounded expression. "You don't want to come with me?"

Blinking a few moments, I let out an excited shriek and jumped on her. "Yes! Yes! I do, Mama!"

Thus ending our little miscommunication.

Undressing, I spray my body with deodorant for a good thirty seconds before tossing the can aside and rummaging for something decent to wear. I settle for a long-sleeved white shirt tucked into black slacks, and add a thin black belt.

Definitely courthouse chic.

Slipping on a pair of low heels, I swipe the sleep from my eyes, release my hair from its ponytail, shake it out, and look at myself in the mirror.

Not bad. It could be a lot worse.

Pursing my lips, I nod my head in affirmation.

It's going to have to do. I don't have time right now.

Stepping out of my room, Drew turns to me and does a double take. His blue eyes widen. "You seriously got..." he gestures to my entire body, "...all of *that* done in not even five minutes?"

Rushing to grab my purse in the kitchenette, I say, "Uh huh."

He shakes his head, muttering, "I gotta have serious words with my girl. Seriously, though. Who needs two hours to get ready to go to the movies?"

That is a long time.

Finally having located my purse and files, I walk back out to him. "Don't start anything that's going to backfire. She only takes so long because she wants to look nice for you."

Walking to my front door, he scoffs, "I prefer her without all the shit all over her face."

Stopping in my tracks, I place a hand on my hip and tilt my head. "Have you told her that?"

Drew's lips purse indignantly.

Just as I thought. No. He hasn't.

Lifting my brows and pointing my finger at him, I instruct, “You need to tell her that.”

We exit my unit and head out to his car. On the way over to the courthouse, he asks, “You know what you need to say?”

Nodding, I tell him, “It’s straight forward. In and out. Tahlia takes better care of herself than her parents do. And besides that, she’s seventeen. If she wants to be emancipated, I think she’s got a great chance. We’re not talking about a thirteen-year-old here. We’re talking about a seventeen-year-old who left home at fifteen, got a job, and found a place to stay. On. Her. Own. She’s responsible, and...” turning to Drew, I add with a smile, “She’s such a nice girl. So sweet and charming. I think she’s got what it takes to stay out of the system.”

Drew turns back to the road, smiling, “I think this one’s in the bag.”

A shit-eating-grin spreads across my face. “I know.”

I’m giddy.



As soon as we exit the courtroom, I lose my poker face, rush over to Tahlia, and whisper-shout, “Congratulations, honey!”

She laughs quietly and accepts my hug. I hold her tight, smiling all the while.

I love my job.

She mutters into my shirt, “Thank you. Really. Thank you so much.”

Pulling back, I place her hair behind her ear and admit, “It was my pleasure.”

Releasing her completely, I run her through the plan. “So what happens now is that you’re free to do as you please. That is not an invitation for you to have all-nighters and get wasted, you hear?”

Tahlia rolls her eyes. “Yes, *mum*.”

I chuckle. I love how blunt the Australian accent is.

Smiling, I place my hand on her forearm and squeeze. “You know you can call anytime. Even if it’s not important.” Shrugging, I tell her, “It could be something silly, like advice about a boy, or even what laundry detergent to use for a particular type of stain.” She laughs at me and my smile softens. “Anything, honey. You’re not on my books anymore, but you’ll always be one of my kids.”

The smile drops off her face; her eyes shine bright. She whispers, “Thanks, Miss Ballentine.”

Shaking my head, I utter in complete seriousness, “Oh, no. You’re an adult now. You get to call me Lexi.”

She wipes at her eye to stop the tear before it falls. “Thanks, Lexi.”

Walking backwards towards Drew’s car, I say, “You’re so welcome.”

Drew waits patiently in the driver’s seat playing around on his phone. As I approach the car, I feel *him* watching me.

Shivers break out over my entire body. My hair stands on end.

Stopping with a jerk, I try to play it cool. I open my purse and make it look as though I’m searching for something important.

My heart races.

Where is he?

I try to look around discreetly. My gaze drifts across the street to one of the many cafés there. My eyes dart around, looking for the familiar black hoodie. And just as I’m about to give up, I see him.

He watches me from under the hood of his jacket, reclining on a café chair.

I know I should report this.

He’s everywhere. And I mean *everywhere*. It almost seems like he knows where I’m going to be before I know.

His head lifts, and his eyes watch mine.

He never acknowledges me. He doesn’t ever make a move to meet me.

He just...*is*. Never bothering me.

In fact, seeing him stirs something in me.

He is lodged in my subconscious. The star of my dreams. Which is ridiculous. I know.

His eyes are fierce. Full of fire. I don’t know what to make of it.

Drew yells out, “Ready to go, Lex?”

And I shake my head, realizing I've been standing here for close to five minutes just staring at a strange man across the street. Face burning, I reply, "Yeah. Let's get back to the office."

My eyes drift back to him.

Just one more peek.

But he's gone. Like always.

Stalked by a phantom.

I mentally scoff.

Figures.



Arriving at our workplace, I say goodbye to Drew, and accept his four-hundredth congratulations on winning Tahlia's freedom.

Smiling all the way to my office, I step inside to see someone sitting in my chair.

Well, swinging on it with his feet up on my desk like a millionaire businessman.

"Michael, feet off the desk. Now."

Using my mom-voice doesn't really get me anywhere, seeing as I do it with a huge smile on my face.

But Michael's different. He's a good boy.

His feet slip off my desk and he smirks. "Got some news for me?"

Shit.

My face falls. And when he sees it, so does his.

Michael is almost seventeen. He has a foster family, but there lies the issue. His mother got out of jail not six months ago, and he wants to live with her again.

But she...

"She doesn't want me back." He glares down at his feet.

Walking forward, I place my bag on my desk and take a seat in the visitor chair with a sigh. "Oh, sweetie. It's not that. There's more to it than

just *wanting* you back, which she does, by the way.”

He turns his glare to me. “You’re supposed to be on *my* side.”

Leaning forward, I look him right in the eye. “I *am* on your side. Always. Don’t ever question that.”

Looking properly chastised but still pissed, he asks quietly, “Why?”

Leaning back in the chair, I explain, “There’s a huge process when a person comes out of jail. The housing they’re provided is usually not great, and basic as basic comes. Then there’s finding a job. And sticking to it. In your mom’s case, she needs to go to therapy every week, and she’ll have drug tests done on a monthly basis for a while. And honestly, honey...” He looks up. “...she thinks you deserve better. As do I. Her main concern was getting you back for a few months, you turning eighteen, and then going it on your own. Which you will. Won’t you?”

Michael’s face softens. “Yeah. I just need money first.”

A small smile appears on my face. “Okay, then. We’ll find you a job.”

He nods, then asks, “How’d it go with Tahlia?”

The little shi-

He knows I can’t answer that.

Putting on my poker face, I say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He grins, “Yes, you do. Her court thingy was today. And you’re her case worker.”

I shrug casually. “If you want to know anything about Tahlia, I suggest you ask Tahlia.”

Michael’s face turns dreamy. “She’s a hottie. I see her around school, but I never get a chance to talk to her. And I’d like to.”

That’s so sweet. My poker face starts to crumble, “Well, maybe you should make an effort. Ask her out. Go to a movie or something.”

His face becomes stoic. “The only time I’ll ask a girl out is when I can take care of her. And right now, I can’t. So dating isn’t an option.”

God help us. We’ve got a bossy little keeper in the making.

My face softens with a smile. “You’re a good boy, Mikey. We’ll find you a job. And soon.”

Standing suddenly, he picks up his school bag and heads for the door. “Later, Miss Ballentine.”

Turning to the door, I call out, “Later, sweetie.”

As soon as Michael exits, Charlie enters. Charlie is my boss and an awesome guy. He's Maori, from New Zealand. So he's this big, tall, thick, olive-skinned man, but his voice is so sweet and high-pitched, it's like talking to a lamb in a lion suit.

"Got time for a word, Lex?"

I motion him forward. "Sure thing. What can I do for you?"

Moving to sit behind my desk, he moves to the chair opposite me and hands me a flyer, along with paperwork. Already nodding, I know what this is.

Yearly drug tests.

It's mandatory in my field. Social work in Australia has a zero-tolerance view on drugs. Which is fine. I don't do drugs anyways.

Charlie leans forward and says softly, "These are coming early this year. We've got a tip that someone in the office has been using."

At the idea of someone I work with getting caught doing drugs, my scalp tingles, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand. Wide-eyed, I whisper, "Oh."

Charlie nods at my reaction. "Exactly. We're thinking of making them biannual, rather than annual. Make sure we keep people on their toes."

I nod in full agreement. "If people are starting to be lax, that might be a good idea. Especially if one of ours is using."

The idea of one of my kids being led by a person taking drugs makes me mad.

A lot of these kids have seen too much wrong in the world, and most of it has been caused by drugs. I want to protect them. I want them to have the childhood that I didn't get. I want to be there to pick them up when they're down.

But I need to be careful.

And I will be careful.

As much as a person with a stalker can be.



Driving home, I listen and sing along to the radio.

Knowing I have nothing, and I mean *nothing*, in the refrigerator to cook, I stop by a drive-thru restaurant and get a burger meal.

Pulling up to my unit building to park in my normal spot, I frown. The spotlights above the parking bay are both out. Normally, one works while the other is waiting to be fixed. I sit in my car a moment.

They were both fine last night.

Discreetly locking my car door, I look around the lot. Nothing seems out of place.

So why is my heart racing?

You're scaring yourself.

Huffing out a humorless laugh, I run my hands down my face. I really *am* scaring myself. The lights are out and I'm really wound up. Shaking my head at myself, I sigh and unlock the car door. On my way out, I reach over the seat to pick up my meal.

"Shit!"

I drop my drink and it spills all over my car seat.

Growling, I reach across the middle of the seats to the back where I always keep a gym towel. Finding it, I throw the sweaty towel on the seat and try to soak up as much as I can. Backing out of the car, a hand comes around my mouth while another cinches around my waist. Tightly.

Heavy breathing in my ear. "You scream and I'll fuck you bare. I've got AIDS, bitch. You want AIDS?"

Trying my best to keep calm, I shake my head quickly, and he laughs at the side of my face.

He smells bad. Really bad. Putrid.

He says, "You're going to come with me. You're not going to fight. You're going to be a good girl, aren't ya?"

Closing my eyes, I nod. But as he pulls me down the side of the building, I begin to cry. The tears fall down my face while my body shakes, trembling in fear. I can't help it. I know I said I wouldn't fight but I dig my heels in and claw at his arms. I don't want him to get me somewhere dark and out of sight.

This is a big man. A man I could never take on by myself. Knowing this, I cry harder.

I cringe in disgust when his warm wet tongue licks the side of my face, very slowly. “Oh, shush. You’ll like it. I promise.”

I won’t like shit, you twisted fuck!

He demands, “Close your eyes.”

I don’t listen. I’m being defiant. My eyes remain open.

Then he pushes a blade into my side. Deep. I feel the tip pierce my skin, and I whimper into his dirty hand. “Close your fucking eyes, bitch.”

My body quaking, I shut my eyes and feel his free hand try to tug my pants down. The belt stops that from happening and he barks, “Undo the belt and the pants. Now.”

My shaking hands work slowly, buying time, but I can only do it so long before my hair is tugged, hard. I cry out in pain. The blade disappears a moment before he wraps his forearm around my neck, hand clutching the knife tight, and he moves the blade to rest under my ear. Somehow, in my trembling state, I manage to undo the belt and buttons. He turns me around to press my cheek into the cold bricks on the side of the building, the blade now resting by the side of my throat. Yanking my pants down, he reaches forward then down, and instinctively, I snap my legs shut. His fingers work their way into the juncture between my thighs and he rubs my mound through my panties, making me cry out loudly. His erection presses into my ass cheek, and I cringe so hard my body shudders.

I’m disgusted. This is *disgusting*.

Tightening his arm around my neck, he hisses, “Shut your mouth and don’t make a fucking sound.” His smell all around me, crying as hard as I am, I gag.

His hand leaves my most intimate place, comes up under my shirt, and squeezes my breast.

My heart weeps with every revolting touch. He fondles my body as he likes, as if I were a toy and not human at all. Sliding his hand down my ribs, he rests it on my hip a moment before he utters, “Oh, man. You’re a pretty one.” He then slips his hand down the back of my panties, squeezes my ass cheeks hard, and my body jerks with every loud, muffled sob.

I’ve never been violated. But I work with people who have. And now I know that every single time I said the words *I understand* to one of my

kids, I didn't.

Not even close.

I can almost feel my heart shatter.

Suddenly, I'm pulled back harshly. I land on the hard concrete with a dull thud and watch the scene before me in alarm.

My large attacker gets his face slammed into the bricks at the side of the building by an equally tall man.

The black hoodie.

It's *him*.

He holds onto my attacker's neck and throws his head down while he brings up his knee.

Thunk, thump.

He does this again and again. My gut revolts at the level of ferocity before me. Eventually, I hear soft pings hit the ground and realize my attacker has lost some teeth.

Oh God.

The man in the hoodie continues his wordless assault. He throws my attacker on the ground and kicks him in the ribs as if he were kicking a football. He does this a few more times before his eyes catch me.

Breathing heavily, he stops and comes towards me.

Petrified, I watch him come towards me through blurry eyes. He's almost at my feet when I whisper shakily, "Please, stop. Don't come any closer."

My elbows throb; the skin on them surely gone. I try to scramble backwards and cry out in pain.

That's when he does something I've been wishing for forever.

He lowers the hood.

Lexi

“Not gonna hurt you.”

Oh God. That voice. It’s just how it sounds in my dreams.

Smooth with a little huskiness. Then, something registers with me.

“You’re American.”

Not missing a beat, he says, “So are you.” The tone of his voice conveys boredom.

Looking up at him, I still can’t see his face in the dark, but I hear a zipper come down and I whimper out loud.

Choking through tears, I beg, “Please, don’t hurt me. Please.”

Not saying a word, he comes towards me. Trembling, I shut my eyes tight and plead on a whisper, “Please. Please. Don’t.”

His strong arms come under mine and he lifts me to a standing position. He pulls something warm over my shoulders, and its then that I realize the zipper I heard was actually his jacket, not his pants.

I’m so relieved that I slump forward into him.

Burying my face into his chest, he wraps his arm around me while I sob noisily. His body bends and he reaches down. My pants come up my legs and he holds them in place, clearly too torn to zip up.

Leaving my attacker where he is, I secretly hope he’s dead. From the shuddering gasping noises he makes, I’m not so lucky.

The man holds me to him, walking me up to my unit. He takes his time with me, being extremely patient as I try to get my shaking legs up the steps to the second floor.

Once we reach my unit and he opens the door, it doesn’t hit me until we’re inside that he knows where I live.

So why don’t you feel like you’re in danger?

Because I’m not. I just know it.

I'm sure of it.

He closes the door behind us, flips on the light switch, and walks me down the short hall to my room. That's when I see his skin.

Decorated. Like one massive piece of art.

No longer crying, I ask through shuddering breaths, "Have you been here before?"

But he doesn't answer me.

Walking me to my bed, he sits me down, then walks out my bedroom door. Not thirty seconds pass when I hear the shower start, then he's back in my room.

He doesn't even look at me, just goes through my drawers, pulling out items of clothing for me.

So while I have a moment, I take him in.

If I saw this man on the street, the way he's dressed right now, I would put my head down and walk the other way. And pray to God that he doesn't see me do that, because a man looking like this while being pissed off is *surely* not a good thing.

He is gorgeous, though. Just not in a conventional way.

He's tall, a little over six feet, with a muscular body and olive skin. His dark brown hair is shaved close to the scalp at the sides, but long on the top. He wears dark blue jeans that encase his long and powerful legs, a white tee that covers his broad chest and shoulders, and he's rocking white sneakers and a thick black leather belt. But it's what's under the tee that draws me in.

Tattoos line his arms and neck. He has a small *13* tattooed on his right cheekbone.

The backs of his hands are beautiful. There's no other word for it. On the back of the left hand is an intricate, black-shaded rose with a smoky grey outline; the right hand has a grey-shaded skull with smoke lacing through it. It looks so lifelike, I shiver.

Oh God.

"You're hurt."

His knuckles are bleeding and swollen.

Stopping in his tracks, he turns his hooded eyes to me. They aren't hooded in a sexy way, just a bored, broody kind of way. Permanently.

It looks good on him.

He's handsome and would look something like a clothing model without the tattoos. He has a strong chin, full bottom lip, and high cheekbones. His eyes are a soft brown. He mumbles, "Don't worry about it. Go shower."

Not sure why I'm taking orders from a man who likes to watch me from under a hood, but I am. As soon as I stand, the hair on the back of my neck prickles, and I ask his retreating back, "Will you still be here when I get out?"

Turning slowly, he watches me curiously from those hooded eyes. We watch each other for a good thirty seconds before he asks in that husky voice, "You want me to be?"

Not trusting myself to speak, I avoid his eyes and nod.

I feel immediate relief when he nods in return, turns, and orders, "Shower."

Taking my robe off the back of my bedroom door, I shuffle my way into my small bathroom and undress without looking in the mirror. If I look in the mirror at the state of myself right now, I know I'll be past freaked-out. In fact, I'm sort of questioning why I'm not freaking out more than I am.

Stupidly, I peek at my reflection and bark out a laugh.

The mirror is so fogged that I can't see a thing. It just wasn't meant to be.

Undressing quickly, I step into the scalding hot spray, and hold myself there for as long as possible without actually getting burned. Reaching out blindly, I turn the knobs until the spray turns cooler and think about what just happened to me.

Did I really just get assaulted by a big scary man, then get saved by my stalker?

...Yeah. That about sums it up.

The first tear comes hard.

The next comes easier.

The rest fall freely, as if they were summoned by the first.

Holding a palm up to the wall of the shower to steady myself, my body shakes in silent sobs.

I don't want *him* to hear me.

Breathing deeply, I pull myself together and use the last of my energy to wash my hair. I soap up, rinse off, and head out.

Wrapping myself in my robe, I brush out my hair, then exit the bathroom to hear movement in the kitchen. Stepping into my room, I drop the robe and dress in the clothes he's laid out for me.

It's only once I'm dressed that I realize he's chosen my favorite pajama combo.

Coincidence?

Somehow, I think not.

Making my way down the hall in my Elmo pajama pants, white tank, and wet hair, I slowly walk into my TV room, glancing around cautiously. From where I stand, I see him standing in the doorway of the refrigerator with his back to me.

Knowing there's nothing in there for him to eat, I cringe. From what little I know about him, I know that I always see him on the street, wearing the same clothes. My caseworker brain automatically assumes he's homeless.

My chest squeezes. He must be hungry.

I clear my throat and he turns to me, "Hungry?"

My brows furrow in confusion. Shouldn't I be the one asking that?

"Uh, no. I don't think I could eat, even if I wanted to."

He nods thoughtfully, then asks, "You good?" while eyeing my body.

Dipping my chin, I answer back softly, "Yes. And I would've been a hundred times worse if you weren't there, so..."

My heart races. I'm suddenly nervous and antsy.

"Th-thank you. F-for what you did back there," I stutter.

His glacial eyes bore into mine. He mocks, "Don't kid yourself."

Taking a step towards me, his hooded brown eyes almost see right through me. "Monsters don't always lurk in the shadows."

Reaching up, he runs a fingertip slowly down the length of my jaw. Leaning forward, his breath warms me as he mutters a hairs-breadth away from my lips, "Sometimes they hide in plain sight."

Eyes still closed, I break into goosebumps, and the hair on the back of my neck stands. My nipples tighten when he runs his thumb down my cheek, so so gently. He mutters, "Got some scrapes."

I swallow hard and step back from him.

He's like a magnet, drawing my positive to his negative. It's too much right now.

Opening my eyes to find his still on my face, I ask a hushed, “What’s your name?”

The corner of his lip tips up. “Doesn’t matter. You’ll forget it once I’m gone.”

Taking a small step towards him, I promise, “No, I won’t.”

It’s his turn to take a step back.

He watches me some more. Those eyes. It feels as if they see everything.

Breathing in, he replies on an exhale, “I’m Twitch.”

Twitch?

Twitch? ...Really?

Feeling a little braver, I explain, “I meant your real name.”

“That is my real name.”

Shaking my head, I say quietly, “No, your given name.”

He looks annoyed. “That name *was* given to me.”

Now, I’m annoyed. “By your parents?”

He returns, “No. Does that make it any less my name? It’s the only one you’re getting, so take it or leave it.”

Hmmm. Interesting.

I look around the room, anywhere to avoid his eyes and ask, “Why do you...” *stalk* “...watch me?”

When I get no answer, I look up to find him inspecting me again.

It’s strange. He doesn’t look like a predator. Certainly doesn’t act like one. So what’s the deal?

Irritation surges through me quick as lightning. Placing a hand on my hip, I ask, “What is your deal?”

To that, I get a reaction. He smirks, knowing he’s getting to me, “It’s called people-watching.”

Frustrated, I scoff, “People-watching is watching multiple people. Different people in different situations. *You* are not people watching. You’re sta—”

All of a sudden, he’s up in my face. He’s so close, I can smell him.

“I’m what?” he says, daring me to say the ugly word.

Taking a deep breath, I wish I hadn’t. He smells really good. Like aftershave and musk...and *all* man.

I whisper, “I just want to know why you watch *me*?”

Not answering, he states acidly, "It was a fucking good thing I was, don't you think?"

An awkward, foul silence follows.

His eyes soften a little. "You're shivering." Pointing to my sofa, he says, "Sit."

Lifting my hands, I see that I *am* shivering.

This man – Twitch – he does something to me.

Shuffling over to my sofa, I sit and cover myself with a blanket. I'm surprised when he follows me and sits at the opposite end. My surprise turns to stunned disbelief when he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a packet of M&M's, and throws a few into his mouth.

He chews slowly, watching me watch his mouth. Leaning forward, he holds out the candy and jerks his chin towards it.

When I make no move to take any and continue to stare at him, he pulls back. "Suit yourself."

Moment of adrenaline over, I mutter, "I should call the cops."

His eyes flash, and he shakes his head slowly. "No. You won't. It's already taken care of."

What?

Brows furrowed, I ask, "What do you mean *taken care of*?"

His eyes search my face a long time before he utters, "Got a friend to come and sort out the problem."

My blood runs cold.

I swallow hard, then whisper, "Is- is he dead?"

Seeming annoyed, he shoots back, "You care?"

A moment of complete honesty passes through me. "No. When you pulled me up, I wished he was dead."

Twitch nods and his eyes soften. He seems to like that answer. "Don't ask, don't tell, Alexa."

My eyes widen and I shiver. "You know my name." A statement.

Throwing more candy into his mouth, he sucks on them and looks at me through narrowed brows.

I know what he's thinking. I'm thinking the same thing.

Why aren't you freaking out right now?

Then I remember.

Standing, I head to the kitchen, open the top cabinet, and get out my first aid kit. Bringing it back to the sofa, I reach for his hand, but he pulls away. His eyes darken. "Don't need to do that."

"Please, let me help you."

His eyes flash, and he shakes his head a little as if to clear it. Closing his eyes, he murmurs, "Okay."

Victory and joy swirl through my body. I'm momentarily elated.

My type of work means I come across a lot of different types of people. I know that everyone is different, but what I'm sure about Twitch is that he's a sociopath.

Opening the bottle of peroxide, I steady my jittery hand as much as possible and pour a little on some cotton. Reaching for his hand, he watches closely as I pick it up and bring it closer to me, resting it on my knee.

"This smelly stuff stings," I warn before I dab the cotton on his wound.

He doesn't flinch or make any sign that he's in discomfort, but his pupils dilate as I wipe at his raw knuckles. Not liking the idea of him being in pain because of me, I bend at the waist, lean down, and blow lightly on his knuckles.

When he grips my knee tightly, I lift my head to look at him. His jaw set, his eyes hooded, he looks pissed. I whisper, "I think you're good now."

His face softens at my hushed tone, and he orders gently, "You need to go to sleep. You'll be sore in the morning. Take ibuprofen."

I don't even get a word in before he stands, grips my upper arm firmly-but-gently, and pulls me up. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he walks me down to my room, lifts the covers of my bed, and helps me in.

I'm so relaxed right now. The ferocity of presence is alarming. I feel protected. And safe. I'm not scared of anything right now.

Laying my head down on my pillow, he pulls the covers up and over me before turning and walking away.

My head begins to pound, and my heart races.

What if you never see him again?

Just as I'm about to call out to him, he stops at the door and turns back. Looking a little unsure of himself, he watches me. I sit up, chest heaving. He searches my face for what seems like the billionth time, then asks, "You need my help sleeping?"

No hesitation. "Yes."

He blinks. His brow furrows. Then he walks away.

Feeling very much alone right now, I can't help the disappointment that courses through me. I accept the fact that this is how things are destined to be for me forever.

I've gone through everything in my life alone. I don't need anyone now.

You don't need anyone. It just would've been nice to have someone be there for you. Even if it was just for a little while.

Not wanting to think too hard, I close my eyes and lay my head down. But all I see is blackness in its bleakest form. All I feel is gripping fear. My body doesn't feel like my own at this moment. It feels tarnished and defective.

Shutting my eyes so tight that it hurts, I hear his disgusting panting and bite my lip to stop my whimper. Covering my ear with my palm, I breathe heavily, only to inhale his rancid smell.

The bridge of my nose tingles. And I'm hurting.

I hate *him* for leaving me.

I hate myself more for wanting him to stay.

Tears slide out of the corner of my eyes, dampening my pillow. I push harder on my ear, trying hopelessly to block tonight out of my mind.

Things like this don't happen to people like me. Maybe in my old life, but not anymore.

I'm not sure what I'm meant to be feeling after *that*, but I feel angry. And sad. And wounded. All at once.

I should be used to this. Comforting myself, that is. I revert back to my childhood and curl up on my side in a fetal position, lightly rocking. I need something to drown out my thoughts. Standing, I walk over to the CD player, press play, then all but throw myself back on the bed, once again curling up on my side.

I listen to Guy Sebastian sing about battle scars never fading. Keeping my eyes open for fear of what I'll see if I close them, I stare into the void that is my room, wetness sliding out of the sides of my eyes.

A creak down by my door makes my ears prickle. Light footfalls follow. My body breaks out into goosebumps. The bed dips. Fright forces my heart to race.

Then...nothing.

I wait wide-eyed for an attack. An assault. *Something*.

Turning, I see his hood in the low light of the room. And my tight chest eases.

He didn't leave.

Elation swirls through my troubled mind.

Curling up to watch him, I whisper, "You didn't leave."

But he doesn't answer me. Lying above the covers, he pulls the hood lower onto his face, then places his arms behind his head. He says through a sigh, "Sleep, Lexi."

Feeling safe, warm, and protected, I close my eyes and let slumber take me to a brighter place than today.

Tomorrow.



Waking with a start, my eyes snap open.

Disappointment fills me.

Twitch is gone.

I quell the urge to pout. Instead, I smile.

He might be gone now.

But he *stayed*.



Having done my best to cover the minor scrapes and bruising from the night before, Charlie looked at me a second too long and I jumped into panic mode. Immediately I forced a laugh and explained that I had a run in with a brick wall.

Charlie narrowed his eyes at me, but soon enough, smiled and shook his head in a ‘*you’re a nut*’ kind of way.

I managed to keep myself busy all morning, and before I knew it, lunchtime had come. Not wanting to stay inside and stuck in my head, I decided the park was the place to spend this fine sunny day. The urge to eat wasn’t very strong. My stomach still ached thinking about what could’ve happened the night before. Stopping at a local café, I bought a muffin and orange juice, then made my way over to the park across the street. Slipping off my shoes, I sat directly on the plush grass with my legs outstretched in front of me. Lifting my face, I took in the warm sun and sighed in bliss. I was beginning to relax again.

Which brings us to now.

My body hums in awareness. Awareness that I’m being watched.

My brows furrow. In the direct heat of the sun, I shouldn’t get goosebumps the way I just have. Suddenly, a feeling of contentment washes over me. Opening one eye, I turn and peer across the street as if I’m homing in on him.

And there he is.

A hooded figure, hands in his pockets, walking away from me.

Bubbles of warmth course through my body.

There he is. Watching me. Keeping me safe.

Or so my gut tells me. I know I should feel differently. I should feel uneasy. And even frightened. But I don’t. Something about this man puts my mind at rest. And I know deep down that I have nothing to fear. Twitch will protect me.

Just like he always does.

Lexi

The front door to my unit opens and I hear familiar voices.

“Alexa, baby, we’re here!” Nicole Palmer, my very Aussie, very uninhibited best girl friend yells out. She quickly adds, “Where are you?”

Smiling, I shout back, “In the shower; be out in a minute!”

“Take your time, love. We’ll just open some bubbly and chill on the couch.” That’s David Allen, my best guy friend. He’s tall, strapping, and handsome, a complete sweetheart, and tragically enough for the female population of Sydney, a one-hundred-percent show-tune singing pansy.

Gay as they come.

Every year, he makes us dress up and attend the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras. And every single year, I make a fuss about going. The costumes are so damn revealing! But every single year, once we’re there, I have a blast. And knowing I’m there to support my friend is enough to get me there.

The bathroom door opens, and Nikki says quietly, “Hey, babe, just thought I’d let you know that Dave and Phil broke up last night.”

With my hands in my hair, working the shampoo into a froth, I gasp.

No way!

David and Phil have been together almost a year. Dave spotted Phil at the gym working as a personal trainer and made me sign up with him for sessions to get information out of him. I, of course, did this for my friend. He’s so adorably needy sometimes that it’s hard to say no to that sweet face. Three sessions in with Phil – and my body screaming in pain – I decided to ask him out. Not that I wanted to ask him out. Oh, no. See, I knew he was gay from the very first session we had together. It wasn’t as if the guy was hiding the fact that he went out of his way to check out the other guys’ asses while they trained.

Surprisingly, Phil accepted my lunch date. Over that hour, we got to know each other, and I came to the conclusion that Phil was good enough to

date my friend. And I told him just that. He laughed at my forwardness and said full of attitude, “Honey, what makes you think your friend is good enough for *me*?”

And just like that, I smiled like a loon, clapped my hands together, and yelled in the middle of the café, “You’re perfect!”

Phil and Dave met the next day for dinner. And Phil...well...he sort of never left Dave’s house. Rather like a puppy being adopted.

They were super sweet together. Both affectionate and needy in their own ways, they fed off each other, blooming in ways I hadn’t thought possible, and I honestly thought they had what it takes to go the distance.

My hands stilling in my soapy hair, I groan softly, “Oh, no! Poor baby Dave! What happened?”

I hear the familiar squeak of her taking a seat on my laundry basket. Conversations in the bathroom are not an unusual thing for Nikki and me. We lived together while we studied, and modesty soon became a thing of the past. She sighs, “They had a fight. A bad one. Not like they normally do, you know? It was a doozy. Long story short, Phil accused Dave of cheating on him.”

Gasping a second time, I all but shout, “Get. Out!”

Nikki makes a noise of uncertainty in the back of her throat and whispers, “Well, no. Not really. But that’s how Dave saw it.” Gah! Dave is emotional at the best of times. Nikki sighs, “Told Phil to pack his shit and leave. So Phil did. And Dave sat back and watched. Now Dave is sad.”

Her short and sweet explanation of the events suddenly makes sense. Dave can be a diva at times. I confirm, “Dave wanted to take it back, but he didn’t, right? His fierce male pride got in the way and now he regrets it, leaving us with a whiny, emotional queen of a man who will likely be drunk by the time I exit the shower, yeah?”

Amusement lines Nikki’s voice as she responds, “Bingo bongo, baby. Hit that nail right on the head.” Her voice turns awe-filled. “You’re so good at reading between the lines!”

I bark out a laugh. “Nikki, do you know what I do for a living? I get lied to on a daily basis! Those kids...they’re smart as hell. They know what you want to hear and try hard as anything to get my sniffer dog ass off their scent so they can live happily uneducated and unsupervised on the streets. Believe me, I wish I didn’t have to read between the lines.”

But I have to.

The squeak of the laundry basket tells me Nikki is now standing. “I know, babe. But you’re good at it. And those kids might not think it now, but they’re lucky to have you. And I’m proud of you.” My heart swells and I smile. I really love this lady. “Now, hurry the hell up so we can supervise our very own street rat tonight.”

She leaves me to condition my hair in peace and my mind drifts back to the previous night. Before I allow myself to go there, I burst into song to distract myself. Well, that, and to distract my friends from the fact that I’m feeling down.

Blue, a little like a two dollar ho, and still shaken from last night’s attack.

My unique rendition of *Ginuwine*’s Pony should do the trick. When I say unique, I mean I can’t hold a tune to save my life. But I like to sing. So fuck everything that doesn’t make you happy. I’m going to sing my *out-of-tune* ass off.

Wrapping a robe around me and making my hair into a towel turban, I walk right down the hall and into the lounge-slash-kitchen to find Dave sitting slumped on the sofa staring into nothingness, while Nikki has a one-sided conversation with him from the kitchen. He hasn’t shaven for at least two days, and his eyes are bloodshot, a dead giveaway of just how much this break is affecting him. He takes a swig from the sparkling wine he holds in his hand.

Poor baby.

Without a word, I walk over to him, take the sparkling wine from his hand, place it on the coffee table, and climb into his lap. Sitting with my legs draped across his lap, I wrap my arms around him and pull his head into the crook of my neck.

No one gets Dave like I do. I know this because he tells me. I also know this because Dave talks to me. He tells me things he freely admits no one else knows. I am his confessional. And he is my therapy.

We have a strange, yet completely functional relationship.

I love him as if he were my brother. I wish he *were* my brother. The one God gifted me I left behind a long time ago. And he was a good brother. The type of brother a sister would be proud of.

I remember as a kid that he would always put me first. He would give me the bigger half of our split chocolate bars. He would never let anyone pick on me. He would tell me the best and scariest stories. He made time for me. And I miss him.

I know Dave needs affection. He needs affection like I do. We're affection-whores. But we'd never admit it to anyone. Our hard shells protect our soft interiors.

Dave sniffles. I feel wetness run down my neck. I let him silently pour out his sorrow. After a few minutes and no more tears, I whisper into his ear, "Want a *cocoa à la Lexi*?"

Nodding into my neck, I feel his smile on my collarbone and I smile to myself. He's sad, but not broken. We can fix this.

Cocoa à la Lexi is a fancy way of saying cocoa laced with hard liquor. It's my specialty. And I know how Dave likes it.

Lots of chocolate. Lots of cinnamon. Lots of booze.

Standing, I walk over to Nikki in the kitchen and pull out a pan to warm the milk. The kitchen timer dings, and smiling, she pulls open the oven door and the smell hits me like a brick to the nose. Turning to her, I gasp, then whisper wide-eyed, "Double choc, peanut butter niknaks?"

Laughing through her nose, she places the brownie tray on the kitchen counter and scoffs, "Well, *duh*! I think this occasion called for it. Don't you?"

Let's get something straight.

There is no occasion in the history of man that doesn't call for double choc, peanut butter niknaks.

Christening, bar mitzvah, wedding, funeral, Ramadan, the coming of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, AA meeting, the resurrection of Jesus, G8 summit, family reunion... these brownies would be welcome at any of the above. And I make it my business to invent occasions to enjoy these babies because Nikki is a hard nut to crack. When I say that, I mean the bitch is *mean*! She can be a softie, but not when it comes to double choc, peanut butter niknaks.

She does *not* make these brownies willy-nilly.

Watching me watch her niknaks like a fox watching a chicken out of the safety of its coop, she clears her throat. When I look up at her, she motions to the pan in my hand.

Right! *Cocoa à la Lexi!* Coming right up.

Maybe tonight won't be as hard as I thought it would be. That is, until Nikki's brow furrows and she steps closer to me with a scrutinizing eye. Reaching up, she touches my cheek, then my lip with a gentle touch and mutters, "Babe?"

Shit, fuck, crap!

My face flames and she steps back to search my face. Turning her head to check on Dave, she pulls me into the corner of the kitchen and whisper-hisses, "Talk."

So starts *Whisperfest 2014*.

"It's nothing. I swear. Don't make a big deal. I don't want Dave to freak out."

She whispers back heatedly, "If you don't want me to say anything, I suggest you tell me what happened so there will be less freakage on my part, and I won't need to alarm our sweet-yet-sad David."

Slapping her shoulder, I hiss out, "Shhhh! He'll hear you!" Not having taken an inch of my dramatics, she glares at me while tapping her foot. And I cave. "Okay, so you have to promise not to freak out."

But as soon as I say that – of course – she freaks out. Wide-eyed, she steps back and whisper-shouts, "Who did this to you? Was it George? It was George, wasn't it? I told you I didn't want you living next to an unstable dude!"

George, my bipolar neighbor, would never lay a hand on me. The guy loves me! Being a caseworker, the first time we spoke, I picked up on his behavior right away. I'm sure he wasn't used to what he got from me.

A hug.

I told George that I worked with a lot of people who suffered mental illness, and that if he felt a panic attack coming on that I would be there for him; all he needed to do was call. Which he has done. And I've always been there to help talk him down and soothe him from the overwhelming state he finds himself in. He has never – I repeat – *never* been violent towards me. So I'm a little pissed at Nikki right now.

I glower at her, "Don't you do that, Nikki! That's not cool, babe."

"Do what?" she responds, exasperated.

Staring her down a moment, I state, "Stereotype."

Brows rising, she whispers, “Holy shit. I totally did, didn’t I?” Taking a step away from me, her brows bunch. She’s obviously upset with herself. And now I feel like shit.

Taking her hand, I sigh, “Babe, I’ll explain everything later, I promise. But right now, I’ve got cocoa to make, you’ve got niknaks to slice, and we’ve got to come up with a way for Dave to make this right with Phil.” Gesturing to my face, I tell her, “This...is not a priority right now.”

Her eyes search my face, and I add, “Do I look like a withering mess right now?”

Rolling her eyes, she responds sullenly, “Well, no.”

Nodding, I agree, “Exactly, Nikki. Priorities.” She throws me a curt nod. I feel the need to add quietly, “Because what I’ve got to tell you...it’s not pretty.”

Her face turns anxious, but she covers it quickly. Clapping her hands together, she opens the fridge, hands me the milk and orders, “Right! *Cocoa à la Lexi*. Now, lady!”

This is one of the reasons I love Nikki. She knows me well enough to know I’ll talk to her when I’m ready. And we don’t keep secrets.

So why am I thinking of a suitable lie to tell her about the state of my face?

Pushing that thought aside, I go about making my famous concoction and pouring the steaming goodness into mugs. Placing the cocoa and bite-sized squares of niknaks on a tray, I walk them into the lounge room and put them on the coffee table.

Not even looking up at me, Dave reaches forward and takes a mug. Robotically, he puts the mug to his lips and sips. Two, three, four sips later, the robot comes back to life. “Damn, girlie. No one does cocoa like you do.”

Smiling gently, he looks up at me, and his face turns stunned, “Baby! What happened to your face?”

Lying like a pro, I shrug and say easily, as if rehearsed, “Tripped on the last step down and planted my face into the brick hall.” He gasps, and looking up in thought, I add to lighten the mood, “Not as much fun as it sounds.”

Dave chuckles, “Shit, Lex. Only you would do something like that. Queen klutz, you are.”

Smiling through my split lip, I glance over at Nikki. Her eyes narrow at me, and unease climbs over me. Clearing my throat, I take my mug and announce, “Right! Well I think the first course of action tonight is finding a way for Dave to tell Phil he wants him to move back in.”

Dave smiles at me so warmly, so brightly, that I’m suddenly reminded that there are people I also have that I can talk to about my issues. My mind stills on this thought.

People I can talk to.

Talk to.

Talk to them.

Don’t talk to them.

They would never understand.

I don’t want them to understand.

Twitch is mine. Just mine. And right now, I like it like that.



That night, my eyes flutter.

Then widen in alarm.

Then soften with my sleepy smile.

His hand rests gently on my hip as he maintains his distance, his body away from mine.

Closing my eyes, I listen to his steady breathing as he sleeps.

My last thought before I fall asleep is, “*He came back.*”



The next morning, Twitch isn’t there when I wake. Again. But it doesn’t bother me as much.

I'm thinking less and less about *that* night, and more about my hero.
My *distant* hero.

I find myself purposefully making my way to the park for lunch in hopes of seeing him. And today, I do see him. My spine tingles in recognition, I lift my head, and there he is.

Today is unlike other days. It is unlike other days, because his hood is down.

When I smile and lift my hand in a wave, I feel like slapping my forehead with my palm. Embarrassed, I lower my hand quickly and watch as he turns and walks away.

I don't miss the smile he tries to keep hidden.

Biting my lip to hold in my own escaping smile, I lift my face to the sun, and once again, take in its light.



Roused from my sleep, I enter the world of consciousness. Snuggling into something warm, I breathe deeply. And smell him.

I love his smell.

Nuzzling into the crook of his neck, I feel him move, then hesitate. I steady my breathing and place my hand on his tee-covered chest. Still, he hesitates. Feigning sleep, I lift my leg over his and feel his body shake in silent chuckles.

I want his arms to come around me. I want him to hold me tight. I silently wish for him to make a move.

But he doesn't.

He rumbles, "Get back to sleep."

No longer able to conceal my grin, I whisper into his neck, "Sweet dreams, Twitch."

My eyes flutter and I lose my battle to stay awake, just to memorize the feel of his body against mine.



Three days have passed, and every day this week has had the same routine. This is great for me because there's security in predictability. I feel safer and am less jumpy. My day's routine goes something like this:

*Wake up alone.

*Feel Twitch watching me at lunch. Sometimes catch him. Sometimes don't.

*Make my way home, where I have a slight freak out in the unit parking lot.

*Go to bed alone. Wake during the night wrapped around Twitch.

Which is where I'm at now.

Wrapped around Twitch.

Tonight is a little different though. Tonight, he's ventured under the covers with me and removed his tee.

My head rests on his bare chest, my arm wrapping around him much like I'd hug a teddy bear, my leg draping over him, trapping the both of his. Feeling me wake, his arm snakes around my back. Trailing his fingers across my shoulder, he asks quietly, "You good?"

I take a moment to think about that. Am I good?

Considering that my private area is tingling, and my nipples are so taut they could cut through glass, I'd say yes.

Rubbing my cheek along his pec, I breathe him in and reply on a soft exhale, "Yeah."

His fingers still at my back; he loosens his hold on me and utters sleepily, "Sleep."

Taking a second to give him a tight squeeze, I relax and exhale.

Twitch doesn't say much. He doesn't need to. You know that saying *actions speak louder than words*? His actions are speaking for him. And I like what they're saying.

I wonder if he'll let me keep him.

Lexi

Today has officially become a rewind day.

You know those days that are so tiring and draining; the type of day where everything annoys you and no one can say a right thing to you? My day has been one of those.

Why a *rewind* day?

Because you wish you could hit rewind and start it over in a much better way.

It all started last night. I had spent a little more time getting ready for bed. I shaved my legs, moisturised, and wore a plain but short nightie instead of my regular Elmo pajama combo. I made sure I sprayed myself with deodorant and perfume, and made sure my hair wasn't too unruly. Once I deemed myself kissable, I checked myself in the mirror one last time before sliding under the covers, making sure to show enough skin to look enticing to a certain someone I was beginning to have a major attraction to.

I mean, the attraction was there from the first time he lowered his hood, but as of the last few days, that attraction has quadrupled.

And I was going to do something about it.

I went to sleep thinking that this night would be the night we connected. Emotionally *and* physically. And I was looking forward to it.

There was one little hitch in my plan.

Twitch never came.

I woke in the morning alone. I lifted my head to find the opposite side of my bed untouched.

And it hurt. I was *irrationally* hurt.

My chest ached, and somewhere deep in my gut, I knew our time together was finished.

Which brings us to today's bad day. I'm sure my lips are in a perpetual state of *pout*, while my brow is stuck in the state of *furrow*. I must look like a ten-year-old who has been told she can't have any candy.

Which sucks, because I want *candy*. I would've done anything to have *candy*. I want *candy* to make me scream his name as we coupled for the first time.

I want the damn candy. I want to catalogue and alphabetize all the beautiful tattoo's I have seen, and those that I haven't. I feel connected to him in a way I can't explain. He makes me feel safe from everything. From everyone. Deep inside of me, I know he wouldn't let anyone hurt me.

He just wouldn't.

And now the candy is gone. Just when I needed a sugar rush.

Figures.

Leaning back in my office chair with a sigh I hope time has mercy on me and passes quickly.

Otherwise, I might just go insane.



Feeling a prickling sensation on the back of my neck, I wake with a start.

Lifting my head from my pillow, I sit up and watch the large shadow walk away from me.

And my heart sinks.

"Twitch?"

Stopping mid-step, he turns and slowly walks back to my bedroom door. My eyes adjust to the dark and I watch him as he watches me. I whisper, "You didn't come back."

Fully awake now, I realize how pathetic I must sound, all but begging my stalker-slash-protector to sleep with me forever and ever.

He searches my face in the dim light for a long moment. He asks roughly, "You need my help sleeping?"

Shit.

The way he said that indicated there will be no sleeping if I say yes.

My voice strains. "Yes."

My nipples become taut under his watchful eye, and he almost takes a step forward, but holds himself back. Reaching into his pocket, he takes some candy and throws them in his mouth. Sucking on them, he says gently but firmly, "There's only one way I fuck."

The words are so crude that my lips part and I huff in an unsteady breath.

He takes a step forward, his eyes never leaving mine. "Dirty." Watching my reaction, he adds, "And this type of dirty..." He breathes deep and says on an exhale, "...it doesn't wash off."

Say goodnight and forget this ever happened.

I stutter through my whisper, "Sh-show me."

You've lost your damn mind.

His brown eyes crinkle as his brow bunches, clearly not expecting that reply. "I don't think you know what you're sayin'." I swallow hard and he leans a hip on my dresser and explains, "You start this and change your mind, I won't stop. *Stop*, when I'm fucking, means a very different thing. Last thing I need is a woman crying rape."

Closing my eyes, I hope my shiver isn't visible. Forcing my eyes open, I say quietly, "I want it."

Standing straight, his expression turns indifferent. "Beg."

Oh God, what? Seriously? Tell him to leave!

"Please." I say this so quietly, the wind outside sounds over it.

I'm so ashamed of myself for wanting this. His brand of sex comes with a warning label. That should make me want to run in the opposite direction.

He slowly places his hands into the pockets of his pants, shaking his head. "No, Alexa. Not good enough." Then he turns and walks out of my room.

Sitting in my bed, my face flushes the brightest of pinks.

Did I seriously just get rejected by my stalker? What the fuck?

My body, not taking no for an answer, jumps up out of bed and runs down the hall, meeting Twitch at the door. Just as he opens it, I slam it shut.

My scowl must be fierce because his brows rise. As he takes in my expression, I bark out, “You can’t do that, Twitch. That’s an asshole move! You didn’t even give me a chance to—”

He cuts me off. “Gave you a chance when I asked you to beg.”

My mouth gapes. “That was a *test*?”

His eyes soften a little. “No. Not a test. Just what I like. And if you’re not into it, you’re not into it. Unless you give yourself to me completely, then...” he shrugs, “...not gonna happen.”

I’m unsure how to proceed. Do I risk losing myself? Even for one night?

He turns the doorknob once more, but I use my hip to bump it shut. “I’ll do it. Whatever you want. I’ll do it.”

“Show me how much you want it.”

My cheeks heat.

Licking my lips, I lean forward and up, but he catches my chin in his hand, holding it tight. His brows furrowed, he softens his reprimand with a gentle voice. “You don’t get to kiss me until I say you can.”

My brows furrow to match his.

Then how can I show him that I wa—

My eyes widen and I swallow hard. He sees the moment I catch on and his lip twitches.

Closing my eyes, I hold the door with one hand and kneel slowly. Once on my knees in front of him, I reach up and place my shaking fingers on his belt buckle. I’m not sure why I do it, but I look up at him, silently asking permission. His eyes soften and he places a hand on my head, softly stroking my hair.

Approval.

Feeling a little braver, I keep my eyes on him while I work his belt, and when it finally comes undone, I pop the button and lower the zip to his jeans. Opening the flaps, I rub him over the material of his boxers for a moment. He takes in a quick breath. A surge of confidence washes over me.

I reach into his boxers and pull him free.

My eyes widen.

Sweet mother of God!

With my eyes wide, I look up at Twitch. His eyes bore into mine. “Make me want it.”

Holding his semi-erect cock in my slightly shaking hand, I don't know what to do with this. I've never been with a man who has a piercing before. The bar goes vertically, with one silver ball resting on the sensitive underside, and the other just where the head starts on the top of his shaft.

He's thick. He's long. He's smooth.

He's impressive.

I've seen enough penises to know that this one is bigger than your average.

I guess a big guy needs a big cock...right?

Tightening my grip on him, I lift my other hand to join the other and stroke it. Almost completely erect, I hold his eye as I lean forward, part my lips, and gently kiss the tip. His cock jerks in my hands. Closing my eyes, I stroke slowly but firmly while placing kisses on the head.

Time to stop playing around.

Opening my mouth wider, I flatten my tongue and lick from the base to the tip, revelling in the smooth warmth of him. He tastes good. Clean and slightly musky, just like a man should. When I reach the head, I close my mouth around it and suck. Eyes still closed, I lower my mouth on his shaft. The balls of his piercing feel strange and unfamiliar, yet perfect at the very same time.

The soft firmness of his erection, and the solid warmth of the piercing on my tongue, put me in a daze.

No longer thinking about what I'm doing, I sigh softly around him and begin to bob my head. He spreads his legs wider. Removing one of my hands from his cock, he takes it, reaches into his boxers, and places them underneath his balls, pushing up.

It takes only a moment for me to get the hint.

Cupping them in my hand, I gently massage them, while slowly sucking and stroking him with the other.

I don't remember a time in my life when I've been more comfortable performing a sexual act.

Something in me desperately craves Twitch's approval.

When his hand strokes my hair again, I relax even further, taking him as deep as I can into my mouth without gagging. The hand on my head tangles in my hair and pulls. My eyes close in pain, and I gasp as I'm pulled back.

Wincing, I look up at him. His eyes so hooded they're barely open, he mutters, "Enough."

His hold in my hair eases. Gripping my upper arm, he lifts me to a standing position and orders gently, "Strip."

Not taking even a moment to second-guess myself, I grip the bottom of my tank and lift it over my head. My breasts free to the cool air makes my body break out into goosebumps. My nipples stiffen. This doesn't get past Twitch. His nostrils flare and his eyes flash before he reaches up and rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. My mouth opens in a silent moan and I lean forward into him. He pinches my nipple a little too hard. I hiss in a breath. He softly reminds me. "I said strip, Alexa."

God. This guy has me so hot and bothered I actually feel tipsy.

Placing my thumbs into the waistband of my pajama pants and panties, I slowly wiggle them down my thighs until they loosen enough to fall to the ground on their own.

So here I am. Naked. In front of the man who has been stalking me for as long as I can remember.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Before I can process my mind's question, Twitch reaches out. His hand grips my waist and he pulls me forward, pressing me into his body.

I'm not short. On the contrary, I'm kind of tall for a woman. But Twitch...he makes me feel small when I'm next to him.

His hand at my waist squeezes. "You sure you want this?" His hooded eyes search my face. "You need to open that pretty mouth and give me words, babe. This'll be your last chance to say no."

The thought of Twitch leaving *now* makes me anxious. Not happening.

Bare breasts pressed into his tee, I look up into his eyes and whisper, "I want you."

Something in what I just said makes him react. His lips curl and his eyes turn cruel. "'Bout fucking time."

Huh?

My mind shouts at me to think about what he just said, but when his hands slide from my waist, strokes back and then down over my ass, all thought is lost. Leaning my head back, I moan quietly as he palms my ass, none too gently.

His hands on my derriere, he pulls me back into his body. He demands, "Look at me." So I do. His brown eyes harsh, he asks, "Who do you want? Say it."

It takes me a second too long to answer. I know this because the hard swat that stings my ass jolts me so much that my body stiffens. I flush the brightest of reds.

What the hell? That hurt!

My eyes narrow at his, and just as I open my mouth to tell him my thoughts, one hand squeezes my ass so hard it aches, while the other tangles in my hair, fisting it hard enough to make me wince. Lowering his scowling face to mine til we're almost nose-to-nose, I see it.

Challenge.

He's daring me to say something. Anything. Daring me with nothing but a look.

My mind claps at my stupidity, clearly unimpressed.

This is what he warned me about. These are the terms I accepted.

Holding his gaze only a moment longer, I move my eyes down to his throat in defeat. What he does next surprises me.

Leaning forward, he places his lips at the top my head for a long moment before he softly kisses my hair and mutters, "Knew you'd be perfect. Fuckin' knew it."

My nakedness suddenly making me feel vulnerable, I pull my arms up between us and cover my breasts with my hands. Twitch kisses my head again. "You cold?"

I shake my head, feeling honesty is the way to go. He is, after all, a sociopath. I'd like to have his trust. He prods, his husky voice hushed, "You feeling uncomfortable?"

I immediately nod. Squeezing my ass once more, he places his lips at the shell of my ear. "Good. Get used to it. Because I'm going to do bad things to you."

And just like that, any warmth or safety I was feeling flies out the window.

I can't help but wonder what I've got myself in to.



Twitch

Alexa's face turns fearful.

She should be scared. If I didn't know this woman as well as I do, I'd turn her over my knee for letting a complete stranger into her home.

But that's just the thing. I'm *not* a stranger. And although she doesn't understand it yet, she feels what I feel when we're together.

Homecoming.

Which is a shame for her, because although I know her, it doesn't mean I'm gonna go easy on her. Quite the contrary.

I need to punish her.

You need her. Just her. Nothing else.

Ignoring my mind's voice, I look at my prey. She's the reason I am the way I am.

It's all her fault.

And she's going to pay.



Lexi

I should know better by now. I've dealt with bad people in my life before. I know the look Twitch wears, and although I don't know where this is going, I know one thing...

This will end badly for me.

But it seems I'm a glutton for punishment, because I won't stop what's happening here.

My mind wanders.

If I ask him to stop now, would he?

The need to test the waters is too strong for me to stop myself. "Stop, Twitch. Please, stop."

His hand stills on my ass. His face contorts in anger, eyes narrowing to slits. "I swear to you, Lexi..." He trails off, and I know I've made a huge mistake. I'm going to be punished for this.

When his lips twitch, I know he's caught on, and all I can think is *I'm screwed*. He sounds amused when he says, "Oh Lexi. What are you doin', babe? You think I was joking when I said I wouldn't stop? You testing me, baby?"

Honesty. Be honest.

Sometimes I wish I had a rewind button for my mouth. I try to fix what I'm doing a really good job at wrecking. "I'm sorry. I just needed to know for sure."

When he runs his hand up and down my back, I start to relax. I can't get a read on this guy. He goes from cold to hot, then down to warm in seconds. He's completely unpredictable. And that makes me uneasy.

Still fully clothed with his erection out, he continues to rub my back as he explains, "I told you you're not being tested, Alexa." Leaning forward,

he whispers into my ear, “All you need to do for this to go well...is give in.”

That sounds easy enough. In theory. Right?

No. Not right. Not in the slightest.

When you come from a home like I did and get out of said home, you hold onto your freewill with both hands. Because sometimes, it’s all you got. And there is security in knowing you have a choice. So even though I get Twitch and his need to dominate, I don’t know if giving in is something I can do so easily. Giving in to a person I trust though...

You trust him. You don’t know why...but you do.

A sudden rush of humiliation slides down my body. I can’t believe I’m doing this. Quiet as a mouse, I avoid his eyes and beg, “Don’t hurt me, Twitch. Please don’t hurt me.”

The hand rubbing my back stops, thus ending the small amount of comfort I’d been feeling. His husky voice demands, “Undress me, girl.”

My heart thumps out of my chest.

This is really happening. I’m really going to let him do things to me.
Bad things.

I seal my fate when I grip the bottom of his tee tightly and gently lift it over his head. It drops to the floor with a dull whoosh, and I move my thumbs into the sides of his jeans. Lifting my eyes, I look directly into his.

He doesn’t give anything away. His face remains devoid.
Expressionless.

Slowly pulling down his pants, they get stuck around his ankles. Damn. I forgot his shoes. Hoping I haven’t fucked up for the thirty-eighth time tonight, I look up at him wide-eyed. But he silently lets me know it’s okay when he shoots me a small smile. Kneeling by his feet, I undo his laces and remove his shoes and socks before working his jeans all the way off.

Well.

That was awkward.

For me.

He extends a hand to me; I take his offering and he helps me stand. Then he does something I don’t expect. He pulls me forward, takes my arms, and wraps them around his waist. His arms circle my body. And there we stand, naked, in a firm and intense hug. I want to listen to his heartbeat. I need proof that he has one. A heart, that is. Turning my head to the side, I rest the

side of my forehead on his chest, close my eyes, and sigh deep, squeezing his waist.

Just as I begin to feel I was worrying about nothing, his arms squeeze me tight. Really tight. Too damn tight. I'm constricted and feeling bound, so I tense. He says softly, "Don't fight me. I can make this good for both of us."

I silently agree, but my body has other plans. I begin to struggle in his arms and he chuckles. "Or fight. Whatever. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I need to, Alexa. It's your choice."

I continue my struggle and hiss out through gritted teeth, "There is no choice. I have no choice. I can't move to make a fucking choice!" Clearly, I'm panicked.

Gripping me harder than he should, he orders, "Look at me."

And I don't want to; I'm feeling indignant. And suddenly bitter. I don't want my right to choose to be taken away.

I don't want to be weak.

Without an answer, Twitch releases one of his arms, and before I know it...

Thwack!

My ass throbs. That was even harder than last time! My mouth opens before I have a chance to think about what I'm doing. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Stop!"

Thwack!

The throbbing on my ass cheek feels like it's on fire. But I keep going, "I don't want to do this anymore! Stop, Twitch. I've had enough of this. I don't want to be a weak little whore for you! We're done!"

What I've just said makes his brow furrow. Deep. He loosens his hold on me completely, and when his arms fall away, I feel a tremendous loss that I can't explain.

Stepping away from me, he stares me down a moment before he says slowly but firmly, "I don't take weak women to bed. Never." The air in the hall stills. And it's frightening. "Not ever."

I want him to explain what he means, but all I can do is wrap my arms around myself, covering my breasts. Finding some courage I must have stored deep inside of me, I open my mouth to ask what he means, but

nothing comes out. Mouth gaping, I shut my trap and come to terms with the fact that this isn't going to happen.

My chest aches.

Eyeing Twitch and his tall, solid body, I feel like crying.

What a damn shame.

A few minutes pass and we stand there still. When I risk looking up at him, his lip curves up at the side, giving him one of the most beautiful crooked smiles I've ever seen. Stepping forward, he wraps an arm loosely around my waist. "See? You're not weak." As I look up at him, he clarifies, "A weak woman would've apologized by now. And I know you want this like I want this, but you still didn't apologize for saying something you meant. A weak woman would've apologized, even though she wasn't sorry. Like I said, I don't do weak women. Do you realize how strong a woman has to be to do what I'm asking?"

Huh. I never thought of it like that.

He goes on. "It takes a strong woman to let go of her fears and step out of her comfort zone into something that makes her unsure, and even scared. I get you're an independent woman, and choice goes hand-in-hand with pride, but don't misunderstand me. A strong woman can *also* be submissive in bed. It doesn't make her weak. It makes her stronger than most. Putting your body into the hands of someone else...that takes balls."

Both hands move down to my bare butt and palm me. He leans down and whispers, "I know I'm scaring you, but I promise you: you give yourself to me and I'll make sure you never want sex any other way ever again. Be strong for me, Lexi." Nipping my ear, I break out in goosebumps. "Give in."

And just like that, I'm back on board. And hornier than sin.

Leaning down to the ground, he picks something up. He says, "Wrap your legs around me," not a second before he lifts me. I wrap my legs high up on his waist, my arms circle his neck, and he carries me unhurriedly to my room. As soon as we reach the door, he sets me down and my eyes are drawn to the object in his hand.

His belt.

His thick, black leather belt.

My brain screams, "*Oh, hell no!*" but my heart shushes it. Twitch won't hurt me. Not after what I went through the other night He wouldn't.

Wouldn't he?

Holy shit. It just hit me.

It just hit me that I don't know this guy. Not even a little bit. I've basically let a stranger into my home and begged him to have sex with me. Sure, he saved me, but seriously...

What in God's name is wrong with me?

You need him. You need to know who he is. Why he is. And why he watches you. Admit it, girl. You want him...as much as he wants you.

Oh, wow. I'm a stupid asshole. I'll be having words with myself about this later. Right now, I'm distracted. My distraction is in the form of a sexy, tall tattooed man stroking himself, watching me through a hooded gaze.

Swallowing hard, I lift my face to meet his eyes. His hooded gaze travels down my body in a slow intense stare before making his way back up to my face.

Our eyes meet. There is a familiar gleam in those warm brown eyes.

And I know what he wants. And he's going to get it.

Walking backwards to my bed, I stop when the frame hits the backs of my knees. Sitting, I push myself back to the middle of my bed, watching Twitch all the while. Lying in the middle of my bed, I extend my arms out at the sides.

Closing my eyes, I quietly but firmly whisper, "You win. I give in."

Lexi

The belt around my neck makes me feel like an animal on a lead. It's not too tight, and it's certainly not cutting off my air, but having something placed around my neck as if I'm a pet...I don't feel good about it. It's humiliating.

Twitch breathes hard into my ear and my pussy clenches, then floods.

Who knew dry-humping could be so erotic? He's doing a good job at distracting me from my nasty thoughts.

As soon as I'd said the words I knew he needed to hear, I heard his footsteps cross the room, and my heart skipped multiple beats.

I wanted this. I could lie to him. I could lie to everyone. But I couldn't lie to myself.

I always wanted to have sex with a stranger. It's one of my secret fantasies. I hear it's intense. I was about to find out just *how* intense.

Keeping my eyes closed, his hands gripped my hips and I was flipped to my stomach. Face down into my covers, he lifted my hips, elevating my ass, and I almost came right there. Something about a forceful man – a man who knows what he wants and will do what he has to to get it – turns me on something wild. Keeping my eyes closed, I waited for his touch. But before I could grasp what was happening, something came around my neck.

My life flashed before my eyes.

And what a sad life it was.

I have no real accomplishments. No real relationships. No one who would look for me too soon. In short, I suddenly felt pathetic.

I had escaped my family to get away from a toxic life and here I am, having dangerous sex with a dangerous man. A man who could hurt me in a way I never wanted to be hurt.

Bringing my thoughts back to what was happening in my bedroom, I opened my mouth and let out a small scream. But my scream was cut short

with a firm hand over my mouth. Twitch said a commanding, “No. Don’t.” and I stilled. As if it were a compulsion. He stated gently, “Not gonna hurt you. I just like it. I’ll leave it loose. Not gonna hurt you, Lexi. Not too badly, anyways.”

A sob tore out of my throat. I didn’t want to be hurt *any* way!

...or do I?

Twitch pressed himself into my back and the length of him settled between the cheeks of my ass. My tears were turning him on. That scared me like nothing else. The belt tightened slightly around my neck as he gently secured it, making sure to leave it loose enough to get a finger on the inside of it. Tears streaked my cheeks. He started to rock into me, leaving me momentarily distracted from my fear. My sobs stopped to be replaced with heavy breathing.

Which brings us to now.

Wrapping an arm under my body, he pulls me up while pressing deeper into me. His body warm, his smell surrounding me, all I can think about is how much I want him.

There’s something animalistic about this man. Something I want to be a part of. Something I want to be included in. He’s a force of nature.

Moving his head down to me, he presses his cheek to mine and demands, “Lexi, I need you to tell me who this body belongs to tonight.”

Arousal making my head swim, I answer immediately, “You, Twitch. It’s yours.” His low growl of approval makes my heart flutter and my core weep.

He toys with me. “You sure? I don’t think you’re all mine tonight. I feel you holding back. There’s still a part of you you’re trying to hold on to. And I don’t like that.”

Worry churns my gut. I don’t think I am. No. I’m sure I’m not holding back. But I’m not quick enough with my answer, so he repeats himself. “Is this body mine tonight?”

No hesitation. “Yes.”

“Mine to do with what I like?”

Quieter. “Yes.”

His heavy breathing in my ear makes me wetter than ever. Is there anything sexier than the noises a man makes during sex?

Moving his body against mine in a slow rhythm, the feel of his cock slipping up and down the cheeks of my ass makes me feel heady. Just as I wonder if he'll ever fuck me, he whispers into my ear, "Fucking hell, you're wet. When's the last time someone touched you?"

My cheeks flush and I whisper back, "About eight months ago."

Nipping my ear, he slides his hand down my stomach to my mound and cups it firmly. "After tonight, you're not gonna want anyone but me."

That's what I'm afraid of.

His hand loosens on my most intimate place, and he reaches up to cup my breast. On a squeeze, he orders, "Be still. I want to see you," then he leans back and away from me.

So there I am, face down, ass up, with all my modesty gone. Feeling a bit like a horse being inspected for sale, I bite my lip, praying to God that he likes what he sees.

A moment passes. Then another. And my heart beats so loud I think he might actually hear the rhythm of the hard thumping.

He doesn't say a word, and humiliation grips me.

He doesn't like what he sees. But still, I stay where I am. Doing as I'm told. Like a show pony.

My heart shrinks.

But restarts when his hands come down on my back softly. He moves them lower to my hips, then even lower to my upturned ass. Spreading my ass cheeks, he whispers, "Perfect."

And warmth flows through my entire body from scalp to toes.

Thank God.

When his thumbs run down the center of my exposed butt, I tense.

Oh, please God. No. Not there.

The very tip of his thumb gently passes over my rosebud and I can't help it. Gripping the sheets tightly, my body becomes stiff, and I almost yell out *stop*. But I don't.

His hand stills on me. The silence is thick. And awkward.

Then there's Twitch, always thinking of the big picture. "You don't want me to do this?" His thumb slides down my ass crack, stilling a moment where it makes me sweat. "I thought we had a deal. That this body was *all* mine tonight."

I don't know what to say to that. Placing his thumb back where I fear it most, he states, "This body is mine to do with what I want. And if you're good, I'll make you come. If you're bad, I'll leave you hanging. In saying that, I know you're going to be a good girl. Because you definitely don't want to disappoint me. Do you, Lexi?"

The thought of disappointing Twitch makes my stomach flip...in a bad way.

"No, Twitch."

His thumb rubs the puckered flesh more firmly. Leaning over me, he spits right on my back entrance, and I tense as the wet warmth slowly slides down the parted flesh. My mind yells at me as he pushes the tip of his thumb into my back entrance half an inch. He doesn't make a move to push it deeper. And I know what this is. I get it.

This is Twitch asserting his role. This is Twitch showing me who's boss.

And even though the thought of his length up my wrong-end makes me cringe, I like the dominance he's displaying. He's turning me on so much that I all but forget where his thumb is. He continues his slow, torturous assault on me and I feel myself getting wetter. The thought of his length penetrating me there makes me cringe but his dominance is turning me on so much that I almost want it. This is just how I pictured it in my head.

Raw and gritty, and dirty as hell.

And it's not often you see your fantasies come to life. This fantasy though? It's scaring the shit out of me. I wonder if I'll wake up soon to find this was all a dream.

Caught up in concentrating on my breathing, I haven't even noticed Twitch move until he places the tip of his cock at my entrance. The warmth of him makes me gasp lightly.

Oh, I want this so badly!

Removing his thumb from me, I breathe a sigh of relief, and leaning forward, he whispers into my ear, "Good girl."

Gripping himself, he works the head of his cock up and down my folds, transferring my arousal onto him. He doesn't say a single word when he slowly pushes into me. I feel the balls of his piercing slide past my entrance, and it adds a sensation I've never felt before. I'm subconsciously aware of it being there, but not in a bad or distracting way. He doesn't have to say a damn thing. He pushes further into me and I gasp lightly. The feel

of him – the thickness of him – makes me feel fuller than I’ve ever been. I feel as if a lost part of me has returned.

A dangerous thought. One I don’t actually want to think about.

My eyes close, and I let out a soft sigh as his hand comes around my waist once more, and he pulls me back gently as he pushes forward. It’s a strange feeling! The balls of his piercing hit something deep inside of me, and my entire body tingles. Toes curling, I grip the sheets tightly and moan out loud. I yelp when Twitch nips my back and answers my unasked question, “That’s your G-Spot, babe.”

I think it takes a selfless man to pierce his cock just for the pleasure of women.

Fully seated on him, he waits a moment for me to adjust before he orders quietly, “Put your hands behind your back, Lexi.”

Having my G-Spot tickled, I don’t even bat a lash at his request. My hands meet at the small of my back and he holds them both in one of his humungous ones. He pushes a little too deep into me and a twinge of pain hits my belly, but quickly enough, he pulls back and begins to rock into me.

Oh. My. God.

Mouth parted, my breathing deepens even further and my eyes roll back into my head.

He’s good. *Really* good.

Angling himself to the left side of my body, with every short thrust, he hits that same spot over and over. And suddenly, my body burns up, my core begins to contract, and I push back into him.

Then he’s gone.

What the fuck in fucking hell? What the fuck, Twitch? Goddamn it!

Face framed in an expression of disbelief, I turn back to find Twitch sitting back on his heels, lips pursed in disappointment. I ask heatedly, “What the fuck? Why’d you stop?”

Leaning forward, so close, his nose almost touches mine; his eyes pierce mine when he explains, “*You* are not in charge here. You don’t get to come without me allowing it. I am responsible for your orgasm, not *you*. You get me, girl?”

I don’t really understand, but I want this stupid conversation to end so he can stuff me like a Thanksgiving turkey again. I nod, and he asks, “Then

why are you pushing back on me and trying to take control?”

Feeling a bit like a child being told off, I pout and dip my chin. “I didn’t realize I was. This is new to me, Twitch. I’m used to participating. Sorry.”

In my peripheral vision, I see his hands move to his hips. He breathes deep and replies on an exhale, “You’re seriously fucking up my *mojo* right now.”

And I can’t help it.

I burst into laughter.

This is the strangest sexual encounter I’ve ever had. In my life. Still chuckling, I look up at Twitch.

He doesn’t look amused.

Rolling my eyes, I mimic his position and sit back on my heels. “Oh, come *on*. You don’t think this is even a little funny? I’m in bed with a stranger who won’t let me participate in sex...” Flipping the end of the belt with the tips of my fingers, I add, “I have a belt around my neck, and the guy I’m fucking tells me I’m making him lose his *mojo*! But no, not any guy. A guy who stalks me on a daily basis! A guy who saved me from being raped! This whole situation...it’s fucking ridiculous!” I exclaim on a chuckle.

When Twitch’s face doesn’t show any signs of him finding my story amusing, my chuckles die a slow death. I sit back on my heels and watch him through weary eyes.

Then something miraculous happens.

His lip curves up in what is the most gorgeous, gleaming smile I’ve ever seen. And it’s contagious. Smiling back at him, he scratches his chin and admits confusedly, “This was not what I had planned for tonight.”

Suddenly nervous, I admit back, “Me either.”

When his face turns hard and calculating, I risk my pride. Which is a surprisingly hard thing to do.

Flipping back over, I lie on my stomach with my ass in the air and my hands at the small of my back. “Tonight, my body is yours to do with as you please. Show me how to submit. I want to submit to you.”

It takes ten slow seconds before I feel the bed move, but my still heart beats again. Not wasting time with foreplay this time around, his arm returns to hold me up under my stomach; he places the tip of his cock at my slick entrance and pushes all the way in.

I'm full of steel heat. And it's *bliss*.

The arm around me wraps me tight and he begins to thrust into me. I'm so careful this time around not to make a sound or do something stupid, like come before I'm told. I need what he's offering, as fucked up as it is. I need to reclaim the sexuality I was so close to losing tonight.

He pumps into me, stroking me deeply, and I moan low in my throat. Closing my eyes, I feel his chest press down to my back. He rocks into me, and the connection – the closeness – feels almost intimate. His hand cups my chin and he squeezes lightly, turning my face as far to the side as it will go. My core begins to pulse and my eyes shoot open. He watches me through smiling eyes and a hard face. My eyes plead with him. I need to come. Now!

Looking deep into my eyes, he asks, "You gonna come on my cock, Lexi?"

I nod my head rapidly. Tingles line my spine, and white spots blur my vision. Just as my eyes close in bliss, Twitch whispers, "Come for me."

Gripping his cock tight, I pulse around him and moan, "Yes. God, yes."

His thrusts pick up and become harder, almost violent. Lifting himself off my back, he grips my hips tightly and pulls me back into his thrusts. In a sex coma, all I can do is moan and sigh as he does what he does. It's feels amazing. He suddenly grates out, "You on the pill?"

My eyes snap open. My sex coma gone.

Shit on a stick! We aren't using protection! What the hell is *wrong* with me?

I blame Twitch for my lack of thinkage. He has me all wound up, and now I have the dumb.

A slap to my ass brings me back to reality. "Yes. I'm on the pill."

Not a second after I respond to him, his fingers tighten around my hips, and he thrusts so hard, so deeply into me, that it feels like I'm bouncing on a trampoline. His grip tightens on me. He impales himself into me one last time and holds my hips tightly in place.

And I feel it.

His orgasm.

He groans deeply, then stills as his cock jerks, and with every throb of his release, a feeling of comfort washes over me. And what a feeling! Wet warmth coats me from the inside. It's amazing. I've never had sex bare.

My brain interrupts me with, “*You do realize you just had crazy-assed sex with a homeless, crazy-assed stalker-dude, right? You also let this guy come inside you and you’ve known him about a minute and a half.*” My brain’s eyes widen and it nods. “*You, my dear, are a stupid ho.*”

Twitch still hasn’t removed himself from inside of me. His thumb absently strokes my hip, and the only sounds that can be heard in my room is a duet of heavy breathing. I smile to myself.

Meh.

I’ll worry about the *BS* tomorrow.



Twitch

What the fuck was all that?

My head itches around the empty space where my brain should be.

Get out of there, man.

This was not how things were meant to go tonight. She was meant to be scared, and weak, and fragile. Not all...*fucking hell.*

She was meant to be everything I needed. She was meant to be something I could work with.

Who says she isn't?

I'm getting used to ignoring my mind's voice when it talks stupid smack like that.

She says the magic words – *I give in* – and my cock gets happy. I can't wait to break her in and start what I've waited years for. But *no*. She doesn't give in so easily...and even when she thinks she's giving in, she's only giving up a small part of herself. Not what I need her to give for this to work.

And it's not e-*fucking*-nough for me.

I need her. I want her. I *will* own her.

The need to punish her is getting worse.

So why didn't you?

Searching for my tee, I find it by the front door with the rest of my clothes and slip it over my head. Like I said, tonight did not go as planned. And I need to get away from her. From her sweet smell and soft mouth. I need to think.

Walking back to her room, I sit on the edge of her bed and go about putting my shoes on. Without turning to her, I walk back down the hall, grab my jacket from the sofa and walk out the front door. Giving her a false indication of what tonight meant to me.

Nothing.

I know I'm an asshole. I'm not even sorry.

As I close the door behind me, I force my eyes down, making sure not to look down the hall and into those big blue eyes.

No. Tonight definitely did not go as planned.



Lexi

I hear the latch click over as Twitch walks out of my apartment. I'm not really sure what I expected...but *that* was not it. I think I expected at least a goodnight.

My brow furrows. My brain works overtime.

With that exit, I'm left feeling like a hooker who paid her hero back through sexual favors.

And I suddenly feel dirty.

Standing on shaky legs, our combined juices run down my legs as I make it the bathroom just in time to throw up.



I woke this morning in a foul mood. This was expected. I went to bed in a foul mood, so it makes sense to wake up in one too.

After Twitch left and I made my mad dash to the bathroom to lose the contents of my stomach, I showered for the second time that night to wash the dirty feeling off of me. And while I was showering, I wondered what in the hell I was thinking allowing a man I don't know – a potentially dangerous man – to have his way with me.

My mind blanked. I had no answer.

It was a stupid thing to do. Something I'll never do again. I vow to never do anything like that again.

Because I am better than that.



Twitch

“What’s up your ass today?” asks Ling through narrowed eyes.

I barely spare her a glance and keep reading the newspaper without answering. But, Ling being Ling, she can’t help herself. “No, seriously, Twitch? Or should I drop the *t-w* and add a *b* instead?”

I hear the smile in her voice and I want to turn her over my knee. This wouldn’t be an unusual thing between us. In fact, most mornings lead to a hard and rough quickie. But my mind is on last night. In short, I’m not up to it.

More like my *cock* isn’t up to it. Ling is not the person *he* wants to play with.

I’m rethinking a lot of things since last night. I take a good look around me, at the rooms of my house that are visible from the dining table, and I think the view should make me happy. But today, it doesn’t.

What do you do when the goal you’ve been working toward your whole life goes up in a cloud of smoke?

Right. You find a new goal.

As of today, my new goal is set.

Lexi.

I smile cruelly into my paper.
I'm going to break her.

Lexi

A week has passed.

A week of bad moods. A week of gut churning anxiety. A week of silent depression.

Sigh.

It's been a hard week.

Why, you ask?

Well, that's quite simple. Twitch has disappeared.

Throughout the week I've been keeping an eye out for him, hoping he'll show. Make an appearance. *Something*. I normally feel his eyes on me before I even see him. Feel *something*. But, he's just... gone.

Which leaves me with the following thoughts racing through my head:

Was the sex really that bad? So bad that your stalker dumped you? I know it was awkward, but it ended well...didn't it?

Being dropped by your stalker is pretty bad. I mean he watches you week-in, week-out for almost a year, and then you have sex and he's like 'wham, bam, thank you, ma'am. We no longer require your position as victim. Don't call us; we'll call you. It's not you...it's me. We're just at different stages of our stalker/stalkee relationship. I need space.'

How pathetic are you? You're actually ticked off that your stalker is no longer skulking around in the shadows. That's just...pitiful.

I know it's weird, dammit! Which is part of the reason for my super bad mood. So when I settle at my desk, bring my coffee to my lips, and am I'm interrupted by a knock at the door, I growl. Yes. Actually growl out loud. "What is it?"

Charlie appears there, poking his sweet round face into my office, "Hey Lex, you got a minute?"

How could I ever be mad at Charlie? He's always so polite and gentle when he speaks. I feel like a bitch for growling at him. He makes me feel

even worse when his face shows worry and he asks quietly, “Lex, are you okay? You look a little down.”

Shit. Make me feel like a turd, why don't you?!

Forcing a smile, I tell him, “Just a little headache is all. Nothing a few painkillers won’t fix.”

His worry doesn’t cease. “I can get someone else to do this. It’s not a big deal.”

Smiling harder, I slap my desk. “Lay it on me, Charles! What’s up?”

Seeming convinced I’m okay, he explains, “We’ve got a new sponsor. A plastics company who wants to make a yearly contribution for the next five years.”

That is awesome! Although we’re government funded, there are tons of non-profit organizations and charities out there who need money to keep doing what they’re doing. The government helps out where they can, but the funds are limited and most of them miss out. Which is truly sad. Services like women’s shelters, and homeless dinner drop-off and drop-in centers for street kids depend on private donations to stay afloat. And if we’re talking a five year commitment, we must be talking big money.

Containing my sudden excitement, I ask quietly, “How much per year?”

Charlie’s smile gleams, “Five-hundred-thousand.”

And I grip the edges on my desk to stop myself from sliding onto the floor in a clean swoon.

That is a *lot* of dough for one company to give. That’s two-point-five-million dollars over five years! That is incredible...amazing...astounding! *This* is an amount we can work with to make something big happen. Big money over a period of time means big projects.

I’m giddy!

Standing so quickly my head spins, I walk over to Charlie and place my hands on his forearms, gripping them in excitement. I open my mouth to convey my level of excitement...but nothing comes out. Charlie watches my mouth gape and chuckles softly. “*This* is why I wanted it to be you that took the details.” His eyes turn soft. “No one cares about people more than you do, Lex.”

Finding my voice, I smile my first genuine smile in a week. “Send them in.”

Charlie's smile falters, "Okay. But Lex..." He drifts off and I raise my brows in question. But Charlie shakes his head slowly and utters, "Just... just remember our motto, yeah?"

Turning, he walks out of my office, leaving me confused and wary. Our motto.

Equality over stereotype.

In our field, we deal with all kinds of people from different backgrounds, races, and religions. There is no such thing as *normal* in our job. And the sad truth is that it's easy to place a stereotype on a person you don't know. One look at a person is all it takes for our minds to be made up on the type of person we *think* they are.

And ninety-nine percent of the time, we are wrong.

Well, now I'm a little nervous. Taking my coffee, I walk towards the door, when my heel catches. I wobble on the spot a moment and manage to steady myself, but not before spilling coffee down my arm and onto the floor.

Lifting my head in silent prayer, I breathe deeply, then walk around my desk, pulling a handful of napkins out of my drawer. Lifting my skirt an inch, I kneel down on the floor and start to mop up the mess.

Someone clears their throat. More specifically, a man.

A foot away from me, a pair of Italian leather dress shoes comes into focus. Nice. Working my way up the black slacks, which encase strong, thick and very male legs, my eyes pass over his crotch, up to his belt...

That belt.

My eyes widen.

That *belt*!

Skimming over his crisp white shirt, silk black tie, and classy black suit jacket, my eyes move up fast to meet a pair of hooded, soft brown ones.

My heart races.

What is happening here?

Searching his face as he looks down on me, my eyes drift over the small '13' tattooed on his cheekbone, then down lower at the artistic swirls, color, and grey shading peeking out from under his shirt that decorate his neck. We spend a moment watching each other closely. Me, trying to figure out what the hell is going on, and him, trying to gauge my reaction to seeing him in a more...*professional* sense.

Taking a small step towards me, we're impossibly close. My breast brushes his knee. His lips twitch, and he gestures to my position kneeling on the floor. Using one tattooed hand to adjust the opposite cufflink, his husky voice washes over me. "I feel we've been here before."

Oh my fucking God.

This is not happening.



Twitch

Goddamn.

Seeing the beautiful Alexa Ballentine on her knees in front of me was not how I assumed this meeting would start. And by the look on her stunned face, she didn't think it would either. But here we are.

Her clear blue eyes drift down to my belt, and her pupils dilate as she inhales quickly.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

She likes the belt. *No one* likes the belt. It's a fucking choker for chrissakes. A growl escapes me and her head snaps upwards. She tries to avoid my gaze. I don't like that.

Reaching forward, I cup her chin gently but firmly and lift her face. She has no choice but to make eye contact, and when our eyes meet, her face

flushes and her lips thin in obvious frustration and annoyance. She whispers, “What are you doing here?”

Never one to make it easy on someone, I reply just as quietly, “You’re already wet, aren’t you, Alexa?”

Hissing in a breath, she closes her eyes. “You shouldn’t be here. I have an appointment.”

Gripping her chin tightly, I mutter in a bored tone, “I know. Falcon Plastics. Donation. Interview. All that jazz.”

Her eyes snap open. She stumbles on her words, “S-so you’re still watching me? I-I haven’t seen you around. Or even f-felt you around. I just assumed you were done—”

Cutting her off, I grip her arm and pull gently. She stands, lowering her skirt back over her knees, and I announce, “I own Falcon Plastics, Lexi.” Her wide-eyed, incredulous face is...priceless. I love this. Awkward tension fills the office. So thick you could cut it with a knife. This is what I like. It’s my favorite thing to do. Making people uncomfortable is fun. “I’m your appointment, babe.” I grin a little too happily.

What she says next makes my smile melt off my face.

“B-but I thought you were homeless,” she mumbles.

My blood boils.

Nope.

My pride...it doesn’t like that.

I’ve been homeless. Best years of my life. Not even a joke. When I was eight-years-old, I decided that being homeless was better than being a punching bag for some overweight, disgusting slob that deserved the death he got...eventually. And it *was* better. I found there were a lot of kids like me out there. Running from home. Running from certain death. Most people think of home as a safe place. A haven. Not me. My home was...horrifying. A fucking nightmare.

Taking two steps backwards, I slowly move my hand up to flick over the sign on the door. This room is now *In Use*. Taking my time shutting the door, when the latch clicks loudly, Lexi jumps in...fright? In anticipation? In want and need? I’m not sure. Women are complicated creatures.

Looking back, I reach for the string hanging by my side, unwind it, and watch the open blinds drop to the floor, leaving us in complete privacy.

Lexi's face shows fear. But I know better. She isn't scared of *me*. Oh no. She's scared of herself. Of her own reaction to me.

I warned her. And I meant what I said. She will never want anyone else after I'm through with her.

And after I'm through with her. I'll leave. And never look back.

Getting back to the matter at hand, my fingers move to my right cuff, popping out the cufflink. My voice hoarse, I say slowly, "As you can see, I'm most definitely not homeless."

Not anymore. And I never will be again.

Stalking towards her, she backs up until the backs of her legs hit her desk with a soft thud. The fingers of my right hand work on the opposite cuff, and once it's free, I remove my suit jacket, throwing it onto her desk, and roll up the sleeves of my shirt to the elbows. My mind – ever calculating – suggests that I play with my newest toy. Who am I to refuse myself simple pleasures? I can't say no. She looks so flushed and meek right now. And I'm fully hard.

When in Rome...

My feet stop directly in front of hers; I reach up to cup her cheek, and when my hand brushes the skin at her jaw, her body jolts, as if shocked. My cock jumps. We like that. Leaning my head down to hers, I brush the tip of my nose against hers. "I'm willing to give a lot of money to your cause, Ms. Ballentine." Her breath warms my lips. Subconsciously, she inches towards my mouth. Pulling back, I add, "What are *you* willing to do for *me*?"

Lexi's eyes meet mine. So many emotions flash through them.

Anger. Excitement. Shame.

My hooded gaze stays on her, never giving anything away. She finally lowers her face, and I smirk in victory. She quietly asks, "Are you saying you won't donate if I don't..." she swallows hard and stumbles on her words, "...if we don't...I mean, if I don't let you—"

Saving her from herself, I loosen my tie and sniff, "Sure. If that's what you need to hear. If you need a reason to justify you sucking my cock in your office at 9am on a Monday." Tilting my head to the side in thought, I say absently, "Sucking cock for contracts..." I fade out and watch in pleasure as fury flashes in her eyes.

I'm stunned when her arms come out and push at my shoulders, hard. I'm forced a step back and half-smile at succeeding in getting her feathers

ruffled. Lexi spits, “I’m not a goddamn prostitute, Twitch. I won’t do it. You were going to donate anyways, so just do it already and leave.”

Would you look at that?

I like this angry side. There’s a fierceness in her I never knew existed. This discovery pleases me. It’s going to be fun. Breaking her, that is.

Taking my distance as an opportunity to escape, she moves behind her desk, pulls out her chair, and motions for me to sit in the guest chair before seating her sweet ass down. I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help myself.

You know that thing people have that tells them they’re doing something wrong or pushing too far?

Yeah. I don’t have one of those.

Walking around the desk to her, I pull her chair out using little force. Lifting her head, she scowls at me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Taking her hands in mine, I pull her to stand and take a seat in her chair. Grasping her hips, I push her back gently until her bottom hits the edge of the desk.

Her expression shows defeat. She looks defeated. So very defeated.

I like it.

I’m making progress with her that I hadn’t anticipated making so quickly. I had plans to wine her, dine her, and slowly build up her trust and affection before I socked it to her. The real me. And more importantly, why I am the way I am.

She’s making this too easy on me. I feel she needs to be rewarded for her good behavior. After all, when a dog does a trick or behaves, he gets a treat. And so Lexi shall get her treat.

Reclining in the chair, I place my arms behind my head, and her gaze drifts up to my exposed forearms. She likes the tattoos. A stupid part of my brain is pleased that she likes the tattoos. Snapping my fingers, her eyes come back to me.

Good puppy.

“Lift your skirt.”

Leaning back away from me, she watches me through narrowed eyes. She looks at me as if I’ve lost my mind. All I know is that she hasn’t moved a muscle. And I want her skirt lifted. So I repeat, “Lift it.” Her eyes dart from side to side, and I know she’s weighing up the pros and cons in her

mind. Sweetening the deal, I tell her on a whisper, “If you lift your skirt, I’ll make it so good, it’ll be worth getting caught over.”

Straightening a moment, she shakes her head as she reaches for the hem of her skirt and utters, “What is it about you that makes me want to do very stupid things?”

And although I don’t do more than smirk at her, I’m laughing on the inside. She really is cute sometimes.

Such a shame.

Sliding the material up past her knees, I watch through hooded eyes as she inches the skirt higher, higher up her silky smooth thighs, until I see white cotton peek out of the juncture between her legs. Tipping my head back, I hold in the urge to groan, just barely. Pulling myself forward a foot, without permission, I reach forward and under her skirt, hook the panties with my thumbs and tug. Then they’re gone.

Plain cotton panties.

These panties on anyone else would disgust me. I like my women to dress nice at all times; that includes lingerie. Lexi steps out of her panties and sits her ass back on the edge of the desk. Looking up at her, I ask in all seriousness, “Tell me what you need from me to make this contract legal.”

The stunned disbelief on her face is priceless. Looking around the back of the room with a confused expression etched on her face, she utters robotically, “Umm, okay then. Well, we need proof that you own the Falcon Plastics, as well as...” Lifting her legs swiftly, I place her heel-covered feet on my shoulders, and bury my face into the warmth of her pussy. She yelps, then squeaks, “...Ayyye!”

Lifting my head a moment, I warn, “You stop explaining and I stop too. Make it count.”

Lowering my face into her mouth-watering bald snatch, I don’t waste time with foreplay. *This* is foreplay. And I tell myself that rushing this has nothing to do with the fact that she smells so good that I fucking have to taste her before I start ripping shit apart. Softly swiping my tongue up her slit, that first taste is all I need to feel heady. She tastes amazing. Like a pussy should taste. Mildly musky, light, and slightly spicy.

My cock jerks in my pants. I feel the pre-cum beading. I shouldn’t be doing this. *She* should be sucking *me* off.

But I can’t stop tasting her.

She prattles off information that I don't need, and I'm sure makes no sense, just to make sure I don't stop my sweet torture. And, I gotta say, it makes me happy that she can follow instructions under pressure. It's a relief knowing when shit gets heavy between us, she'll cope. At least a little.

Looking up at her from between her legs, I bury my tongue into her wet warmth and watch her closely. Eyes closed, she talks softly as I slide my hands up her body to squeeze her tit, while the other pinches and rolls her opposite nipple. Not able to hold myself back, I groan into her and feel her muscles clench around my tongue. Unbelievable. I've never got off this much on eating pussy. But it's Lexi's pussy...

Reaching under her, I place my hands under her ass and grip the firm cheeks tightly while pulling her into my face, forcing my tongue deeper inside her. She stops talking a moment and moans long and low. Just when I think I've won, as soon as her moan ends, she starts up again, chattering away quietly. Too quietly. I can't even make out what she's saying. But I have to give her props for trying.

She can finish. I'll allow it.

Pulling out of her, I flatten my tongue at her entrance and lick torturously slow, swirling my tongue all the way up to her clit. "Close?" I ask.

Nodding, she opens her eyes and looks down at me through the haze I'm feeling as much as she is. I tell her, "I want you to come, Alexa."

I would never say 'You can come when you like'. That makes it sound like a request. Which it is not.

I'm a demanding guy. So sue me.

Lowering my mouth to her clit, I suck it gently in a steady rhythm before sucking hard. Lexi's hands fly to my head as she begins to grind herself against my face. Her breathing deepens, and she groans low in her throat. I keep up my sexual assault, licking and sucking. The forced calm in her voice spurs me on. The need to make her control break is extreme. I bury my tongue deep inside of her and the dam breaks. Clutching my head, she whimpers, jerking uncontrollably, pulling me deeper into her pulsating pussy.

The moment lingers, and then that moment is over.

Standing immediately, I adjust my erection in my pants, walk around the desk, pick up my jacket and open the door.

“Wait!”

Turning back, Lexi’s face is once again confused. Poor Lexi. She’ll learn. Eventually.

“Where are you going? We have paperwork to sign.” She says, looking more pissed than confused, and pulling at her hips to right her creased skirt.

“I know. I’ll send someone up to deal with it.”

She returns exasperated, “I thought you said you were the owner of the company!”

“I am.” Putting in a cufflink, I add, “Part-owner. Happy will be up to sign anything you need signed. I’ll call, Lexi.”

“Wait!” She shouts. “What’s your name?”

I know what she wants. And she’s not getting it. Not until I’m ready to give it. “Lexi, we’ve been through this already. I’m Twitch. Just...” I half smirk, “...Twitch.”

Turning and ignoring her plea to *wait*, I close the door behind me and nod to Happy, who waits in the hall. Happy knocks on the office door I just came from, and I don’t bother turning to see him walk in on the flustered mess that is Lexi.

I smirk to myself. That was fun. Straightening my tie, I silently chuckle. My tongue darts out, sliding along my bottom lip, tasting her.

We should do it again sometime.

Lexi

Oh man, am I pissed or what?

Tapping my pen rapidly on the edge of my keyboard, I confirm what few details I have. “So, Mr. Ahmadi, I don’t quite understand. You own Falcon Plastics, along with Mr.—”

I wait for him to give Twitch’s last name to me, but even as I wait, I know he won’t give me an inch. This guy is not stupid. He knows the score. I mean, he knows *Twitch*. Enough said. His cool demeanor is intimidating. He isn’t being rude. Not in the slightest. He’s been quite the gentleman, actually, but his character is cool. Almost brooding. He responds businesslike, “Please, call him Twitch. He prefers it. And I would like if you called me Happy. Or if you prefer to keep things formal, then Farid. Please.”

Happy? A strange nickname. Especially for someone who doesn’t look...happy.

“Very well, Farid. I see I’m not going to get any information out of you about my surprise guest, am I?” The small twitch of his lips is my answer. Nodding in resignation, I bring out the paperwork needed for long-term sponsorship. Farid hands me all the company paperwork I need to photocopy; he signs the contact and within half hour, we’re done. And we are five-hundred-thousand dollars up in budget.

And I’m suddenly giddy again.

Farid stares me down through his thick narrowed brows as if he can’t figure me out. His almost-black eyes are lined with thick black lashes; if his name didn’t alert me to the fact he is of a Middle Eastern background, that would’ve been the thing to tip me off. His bald-shaved head shines under the fluorescent lighting above. Almost as tall as Twitch, but much larger in stature, I wonder if he’s Twitch’s *muscle*. And I can’t help it. My smile widens. He asks, “This means something to you, doesn’t it?”

Whoa. Loaded question.

Suddenly emotional, I blink as my eyes mist, and I whisper, “You have no idea.”

His brow furrows deeper a moment before he nods. Holding out his hand, I take it happily as he says genuinely, “I’m glad we could help out. I’m also glad to know the person who took our donation is someone who’s clearly passionate about her job and will make sure it gets used the way it was intended to be used.”

I’m so grateful for people like this man right here. He genuinely cares. Most people who care like he does have been through something of their own – something hard – so they know the value of charitable organizations. It’s just my guess, but I’d say Farid has experienced some hard times, as I’m sure Twitch has.

I respond, “Thank you. Thank you so much. You have no idea what this will mean. For some, it’ll mean a warm bed to sleep in, or heat during winter, or even a decent meal. We can educate with this money. We can train with this money. We can make a difference with this money. Thank you, Farid. It was lovely to meet you.”

I’m pleasantly surprised when he covers our shaking hands with his free hand and says, “I hope you’ll call me Happy. Please, call me Happy.”

I have no idea what I’ve done to make this cool man warm up to me so quickly, but it’s kind of awesome. Smiling stupidly, I nod once and repeat, “Happy.”

Releasing my hand, he reaches into his back pocket and hands me a business card. It has no name on it, just a number. Happy leans closer to me and whispers, “If you ever get into trouble again like you did the other week and Twitch isn’t around, you call that number and someone will come out.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand.

I’m suddenly speechless. *Happy* is the person Twitch called to get rid of my problem. I feel the color drain out of my face, and Happy notices. Squeezing my forearm gently, he assures me, “We’re not all bad. Twitch is...well...he’s complicated.” I want to shout ‘*you got that right!*’ when he adds, “He’s not bad. He just...” Happy’s dark eyes meet mine as he says sincerely, “...he doesn’t know any better.”

And then he’s gone.

Leaning back to sit on the edge of my desk, I run a hand through my hair and think about everything that just happened.

Wow. What a crazy-assed morning.

What the fuck was up with that visit from Twitch? And more importantly, why did I give in to him so quickly?

Simple. You wanted his dirty mouth on you. More accurately, you wanted his filthy mouth to do nasty things to your body.

Although I won't deny my brain's completely wrong observation, I most definitely won't agree with it. Not now, not ever. Because Twitch is a weirdo who watches me. And for me to have intense feelings for a man who does that sort of thing...well...what would that say about me?

Allowing myself some quiet time to think does me no good. In fact, it makes me more and more angry at what transpired here not an hour ago.

Who does this man think he is? A freaking god? So what if he looks like a demi-god? He's not the boss of me.

I have a mind to tell him just that.

And that's exactly what I plan to do.



Sitting in my car next to the parking lot by Falcon Plastics, I look ahead into nothingness and bounce my leg rapidly in anxiousness.

I should've never come here.

A normal person would've gotten pissed, eaten an entire tub of ice cream when they arrived home from work, then gone to bed thinking of all the great comebacks that could've and should've been said at the time of the confrontation.

Steps one and three have already taken place, and I'm sure step two isn't far behind either, but I'm sure a normal person would *not* have gone to the

workplace of a potentially dangerous man to fight it out with him.

But me? I'm just special that way, I guess.

Chewing my gum almost as rapidly as my leg bounces, I almost shit my pants and shriek to high heaven when a loud knock comes from the outside of the car window.

Placing a hand on my heaving chest, eyes wide in fright, I turn to see familiar black eyes staring back at me. And those eyes...they're smiling.

Opening my car door, Happy mutters an amused, "Boss is wondering when you're gonna leave your car and get your ass inside."

My cheeks flush pink. I snap back, "Maybe I wasn't even here to see him."

He grins, "You've been sitting in your car in an industrial area looking like an on-edge crack junkie wanting her next fix for about half hour. So either you're here for drugs, or..."

He leaves his statement hanging, and right then, I hate him. Just a little. Feeling humiliated at being watched all this time, I roll my eyes, "Okay, so maybe I was wondering if what I was doing would be considered unprofessional."

Happy's face becomes serious as he states, "It is unprofessional."

Unsure whether he's serious or just very good at sarcasm, I swallow hard and open my mouth to defend my actions when he adds on yet another grin, "But Twitch started it." The knot in my stomach loosens a little at his casual demeanour. Pulling the car door all the way out for me to exit, I take my handbag and watch in stunned disbelief as Happy reaches into my car, takes the keys out of the ignition, closes the door, and locks it.

Smiling, he extends an elbow to me, and after looking between him and my car for a solid minute, I take what is offered by placing my hand into the crook of his elbow. Happy leads me through the parking lot and into the office. I chance a look around. It looks like any other office. A neutral off-white colors the walls, as well as just about everything else in the office. Cubicles, desks, appliances, even the staff all seem to be keeping up with the neutral color theme. What I notice more than anything else, however, is the staff.

They are happy.

Smiles, laughter, and conversation swirl around us as Happy leads me towards to an elevator. Up to the second floor we go, and all the way down

the long hall. As soon as we reach his office, I know it's his. Of course, the pompous shadow of a man would make *his* things different to everything else in the building.

The door in front of me was designed to intimidate. And right now, it's doing a pretty good job.

Thick, mahogany double doors hand-carved in a gothic theme brings shivers up my spine. Each door has an intricately carved weeping willow, which is blowing in the wind. Thin, leaved branches flow in all directions. Both willows are made to look the same, yet completely different in pattern and wind direction. It all looks so fluid. The person who made these doors is clearly talented. And I have no doubt that Twitch paid a huge amount for them.

Suddenly, I realize what I'm about to do is a big mistake. Turning to Happy, his eyes meet mine and his brow furrows. I whisper-hiss, "I've changed my mind. I'd like to leave now."

Pulling at his elbow, he stands firm while watching me closely for a full ten seconds before he lifts his hand and raps his knuckles on the door.

Oh, *what?* I can't believe he just did that!

Eyes wide, I look to him with a glare that would read *have you lost your damn mind?* His lazy stare says *I don't know what you're talking about.*

Closing my eyes tightly, I pray to a god I don't believe in to give me strength, when I hear the most sexually arousing voice I have ever heard in my entire life call out, "Enter."

My nipples tighten, so taut they actually hurt. I have this voice committed to memory. There are just some things in life that are worth remembering. This voice is one of those things.

Putting on my best poker face, I lift my nose in the air and look as if I've just sniffed something nasty. Happy chuckles by my side, and I want to kick him in the shin. Happy opens the door and guides me through it. My poker face falters slightly when I see a very petite, very gorgeous Asian woman perched at the end of Twitches penis-extension of a desk.

Okay, so the desk is also mahogany and huge, but calling it a penis-extension is rude. As well as false. I've seen the weapon he's packing. The guy doesn't need any sort of compensation.

Miss Asia looks up at Happy and me and doesn't bother to hide her glower, which incidentally, is aimed at me. This pisses me off. With a

swoosh of her perfectly straight, shoulder-length black hair, she moves to stand behind Twitch, and places a hand on his shoulder.

A claim, if you will.

Fuck a duck! The asshole has a girlfriend. Great! Just great. Which makes me that woman. The other woman.

Happy gently takes my hand from his elbow and pats it before lowering it to my side. Twitch, who hasn't lifted his head from his paperwork, draws into his reading material, "You following me?"

And my current emotional status of *pissed* upgrades to *slightly fuming*.

The words slip out of my mouth as if they're buttered. "You follow me. I thought it was our *thing*."

Miss Asia's glower turns into a death glare, and I fight the urge to flip her off as her lip curls. Twitch's lips curve at the corners; he lifts his head to watch me through those hooded eyes that I can't stop thinking about and places the end of his pen in his mouth, chewing gently.

I wish that pen was my lip.

His scrutinizing gaze is enough to make me squirm, but I fight it with every last bit of willpower left in my body. Then, suddenly he announces, "Everyone out."

Shit. This was a bad idea. This is actually happening. We're going to hash it out.

Happy doesn't waste any time questioning Twitch. He turns and leaves. Miss Asia, however, decides now is as good a time as any to have a stare off with me. Her brown almond-shaped eyes laser beam into mine. My gaze never waivers. I was a street kid for some time. I know intimidation tactics. They don't do much to me coming from another woman. Coming from Twitch though...

My thoughts are cut short when Twitch stands slowly and turns to his girl. Not looking impressed, he growls, "Ling." Her eyes hold mine only a second longer before she looks up at him. Her perfect red-stained lips match her perfect...everything.

I dislike this woman very muchly.

Twitch looks down at her in warning and her hard stare falters. "You hear me, bitch, or we need to get your ears tested?"

And just like that, I feel sorry for her. That's no way to talk to your girl. That's no way to talk to *any* girl.

I fix my own glare at Twitch when Ling passes me much too closely. Her shoulder nudges mine, and although it doesn't hurt, it annoys the shit out of me. Oh, and that sorry feeling I had? Gone.

Yeah. Walk away Skanks McGee.

The door closes harder than it should, and Twitch rounds his desk to sit on the front of it. "What are you doing here?"

Changing the subject, I state, "I don't think your girlfriend likes me." Putting on the most bored face I can muster, I add deadpan, "I'm torn up."

Shaking his head at me, he mutters, "Yeah, I can see that."

Question avoidance. Level: expert.

An awkward silence follows. A *long* awkward silence. And not making it the slightest bit easier on me, Twitch watches me from under his long lashes, his face devoid of expression.

The guy has had his dick in me. He has put his belt around my neck. I let him put his thumb in my virgin ass. He's brought me to orgasm. More than once. And I don't know a thing about him. Everything I thought I knew about him is wrong, or completely misunderstood.

Sighing deeply, he asks curtly, "You come to stare at me all day, or you gonna lay it out?" My face bunches at his blunt and rude demeanour. Eyes hardening, he all but barks, "Speak."

And with that, I blurt out, "I don't like what you're doing to me."

Crossing his long legs in front of him, he says completely uninterested, "No. You don't like what you *let* me do to you."

I ponder this. And when I realize he may possibly (definitely) be right, I ask weakly, "Why won't you tell me your name?"

His response is a bored stare in my direction. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a pack of colorful chocolate buttons, pours a handful into his palm, and shoves the lot into his mouth. Chewing slowly, I watch his throat work as he swallows bit-by-bit of the melted sticky sweetness, and I press my thighs together, trying in vain to deny the fact that this man has a hold on me.

Finding courage from somewhere deep in my gut, I take a step forward and state with false bravado, "I don't know who you are, but I'm going to find out...*Twitch.*"

His gorgeous face contorts in anger, eyes flashing. He stands abruptly and walks behind his desk to sit in the throne he calls a chair. Losing some

steam, he picks up a document and skims over it. “Don’t go digging, Alexa. You’re bound to find a few bones.” I don’t know what to say to that, but my stomach clenches tightly. Still reading, he adds, “Keep this up and you’re going to get hurt.”

My spine stiffens. “Is that a threat?”

Lifting his head, his soft brown eyes harden. “It’s a fucking promise.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I need to get out of here. This was a very bad idea.

Swallowing hard, I breathe heavily and take a step back, retreating while I still have some pride left. Halfway to the door, he asks, “Do you have any plans this weekend?”

Stopping in my tracks, I shake my head. Pulling open a desk drawer, he pulls out a golden envelope, removes the card from the inside, and scribbles something onto it. Holding the card in his outstretched hand for me to take, I resist only a moment before curiosity gets the better of me. Once at his desk, I take the card and read in silence.

A masque. Charity function. Saturday night. Costume ball.

I know two people who would love this. Feeling uncomfortable, I ask quietly, “Can I bring someone?”

Twitch’s lip curls. “No date.”

Hmmm. Interesting. We’ll think on that later.

Shaking my head, I start, “No, my two best friends would—” But I’m cut off when leans across the desk, snatches the card from my hand, and scribbles another something on the front. Turning the card over, he pens something on the back and hands the card back to me.

Lowering his head to his paperwork, he dismisses me with, “Til Saturday, Alexa.”

Too stunned to even tell him goodbye, I walk out of his office, close the door behind me, and look down at the card in my hand.

Alexa Ballentine and guests.

A small smile graces my lips.

I have phone calls to make.

Lexi

The front door of my unit bursts open, and there stands Nikki, looking haggard and worn. Smiling, I open my mouth to greet her, but she cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “No! You said you’d tell me. Now we’re both free and you can tell me. What the hell happened to you the other day? No more avoiding me!”

Why do people always cut me off?

Signing, I stand from my place on the sofa. “Coffee?”

Sitting in my now-empty space with a groan, she replies tiredly, “Do bears shit in the woods?”

Chuckling, I go about making coffee and thinking hard about just how much I should tell her. Nikki and I don’t have secrets, but in this case, I may need to make an exception. My gut churns in apprehension. Shit’s about to go down.

Placing our coffees on my coffee table, I sit away from her in the armchair so I can have some space while I relay what happened.

“So you know I said a while ago that I thought someone was watching me?” Immediately, her eyes turn worrisome. She nods and I add cautiously, “Well, it turns out I do...” pause, “...have someone...” pause, “...watching me.”

Eyes wide, mouth gaping, she doesn’t even blink. *Shocked* is the word I’d use. Definitely shocked. Unsure what to do here, I weakly yell, “Surprise.”

Lowering her wide eyes, she shakes her head as if to clear it. “He hurt you?”

Define hurt.

Sipping my coffee, I suddenly feel the need to defend Twitch. After all, he did save me. “No. If he wasn’t there when I was attacked...” Nikki gasps and covers her mouth with her hand. “...I would have been raped. Maybe

even killed.” Looking Nikki in the eye, I tell her honestly, “I don’t know what I would’ve done if he wasn’t there, Nik. He saved me.”

She says, “Oh my God.”

Leaning back in the armchair, I agree. “Yeah. Kind of freaky.”

Still in shock, she repeats distantly, “Oh my God.”

Nodding, I tell her. “Could’ve been much worse.”

And I know the exact moment what I just told her hits her, because jumping up, she covers her mouth with both hands and yells out from behind them, “Oh my fucking *God!*”

Throwing herself at me, I awkwardly wrap one arm around her while balancing my coffee with the other. Squeezing me tight, she says, “You got attacked and a weird stalker guy had to save you! And you got hurt! You were *hurt*, Lex! Oh my God. I can’t believe this. Stuff like this doesn’t happen to people I know, dammit!”

Sweet, sweet Nikki. Rubbing her back, I state quietly, “I’m okay. Like I said, it could’ve been worse, right?”

Nodding into my shoulder, she mumbles, “You’re so lucky he was watching.”

I know it.

Pulling away from me, she demands angrily, “You have a *stalker*? Best friends tell each other shit like that, Lexi! If this guy did something to you, how do you think I would’ve felt that you’d kept this a secret? How long have you known some guy was following you, Lex? That’s a really dumb thing to keep to yourself. He could’ve been the one to attack you! He could’ve *killed* you!”

Feeling like a child being chastised, I tell her weakly, “But he wasn’t. And he didn’t. He saved me, Nikki.” Her anger doesn’t cease, so I explain, “He never approached me. Not ever. He was always just...*there*. I figured he was harmless enough, but you’re right. Totally right. Because when he stepped in and I saw what he did to the man that attacked me, there was a split second there that I thought he was only stepping in to take over.” Staring her in the eye, I tell her firmly, “But he didn’t. He helped me up here and looked after me. He’s a little strange, but I...” Looking down at my hands, I say softly, “I feel safe around him.”

Breathing deeply, she blows out a long breath before nodding to my coffee. “I think I’m going to need something stronger than that.”

Bunching my face in a *please don't be mad at me* kind of way, I offer, "Cocoa à la Lexi?"

Her eyes narrow, and I know she wants to be mad at me some more, but her anger fizzles slightly when her lip twitches. "Yeah. Make it a double."

Smiling so hard that my cheeks hurt, I whizz off to the kitchen to whip up a strong batch of cocoa. Coming back with two mugs full, I hand her one, and when she takes the first sip with her eyes closed in bliss, I throw in there, "By the way, we've been invited to a masque this weekend. A charity function. And I know you think costume balls are lame, but I thought maybe if we got Dave out and about, he wouldn't feel so sorry for himself."

Dave and Phil still haven't patched things up. And not for Dave's lack of trying either. I spoke to Phil online for a while today and he explained that he just needs some time to think about what he wants in life and if Dave is something he could make a part of that.

Never a good sign.

Dave cut him deep. And he's paying the price.

You can only push someone so far before that push sends them walking away in the opposite direction. Everyone has their limits.

Dave may need to rethink his diva ways.

On a brighter note, Nikki seems to have perked up at hearing the word *invitation*. "Where did this invite come from? It's a little late notice, babe. Last minute costumes are hard to find."

Avoiding the first question, I try to get away with answering the costume dilemma. "There's an address on the card. A costume store in the city has been completely reserved for use of the masque. All we need to do is show up and take our picks."

Nikki spots my avoidance pretty quickly. "Who invited us?"

I'm so bad at masking my emotions. I wear them right there on my sleeve for all to see. So when my eyes widen and I stutter, "I-I'm not sure a-actually, I think s-som—"

"Cut the bullshit and tell me!"

"Twitch," I blurt out.

"Bless you."

Bursting into laughter, I repeat, "Twitch. That's his name. Twitch. The man who watches me. The guy who saved me."

Leaning away from me, her face bunches. Smiling, I nod. She asks incredulously, “Stalker dude is called *Twitch*?”

“Yep.”

After a second, she mutters under her breath, “Fuckin’ hippies.”

Another bout of laughter bursts out of me. “That’s not his real name, babe, it’s just what he calls himself, and from what I’ve seen, it’s what everyone else calls him too. He doesn’t want people to know his real name, and for now, that’s cool with me. He’s part owner of a business – a big business – so I know it would be easy enough to find out but,” my brows furrow and my lips purse a little, “it’s important to him for some reason. So if he doesn’t want people to know, I’m not going to go looking. Not until he tells me himself.”

Looking up at Nikki, her eyes on me feel more like an interrogation and I know I’ve fucked up. Suddenly, her eyes widen comically, she leans forward, and hisses, “You fucked him!” When my brows almost hit my hairline, she gasps, “You skank! You dirty hooker skank face! When did *this* happen? And more importantly, was it any good?”

Both taking our places on the sofa once more, I lean back into the soft cushion. “The other night. I don’t know if it was me reclaiming my sexuality and not letting my attacker have that stupid hold on me or if it was just...” *sigh*, “...just Twitch. I can’t really explain him to you. It’s something you have to experience. He likes control and he’s not afraid to let people know that. He can be so fucking arrogant and annoying one second, then the next second, he has you *wanting* to take orders from him. He’s intense. And kinda scary. And I want to know him better. So I’ll bide my time and do what I have to to make him open up to me.” Frowning, I look up into her eyes and tell her quietly, “Something bad happened to him, Nik. I can feel it.”

Her eyes turn sad. “Oh honey. I’m glad you’re safe and all, but can you really trust this guy? You barely know him, and you just said yourself that he’s kinda scary.” When I try to speak, she cuts me off with, “I trust you. You’ve never made a bad decision in your life. I know this. We’ve been through a lot together. And maybe you’re right. Maybe he needs someone. But I don’t want you to make him a *project*. You have to stop worrying about protecting everyone around you, and start protecting yourself.”

Staring eye-to-eye, a small smile breaks out onto my face as I whisper,
“He’s a freak in bed.”

Her body shakes with silent laughter. “Oh, I gotta hear this. Do tell.”
My belly flutters.

And suddenly, I can’t wait until Saturday.



Twitch

I don’t know if I can do this anymore.

The urge to touch her is overwhelming.

Never being one to deny myself, I allow my fingertips to glide over the
silky skin of her shoulder.



Lexi

Waking to feel of rough hand on my upper arm, panic sets in only a moment before I smell him.

My tense body relaxes almost immediately. The darkness of my room allows me to fake my sleep a little longer, savouring the gentle sweetness of a touch reserved for his private moments. Moments like these are fleeting. I know he would never touch me like this had he known I was awake.

The CD player on my dresser still on low volume, I've never been able to fall asleep without the TV or music playing. Something I took with me when I left home. As a child, I needed something to drown out the constant shouting and bickering. Music worked. And it stuck.

When the fingertips on my arm move away, I feel like crying. I want them back.

I want him.

Desperately.

The sounds of clothes being removed make my belly flutter, and I fight the urge to cheer and clap. The covers lift, and he climbs in and over me.

"Twitch?" I ask sleepily.

A long silence, then a husky, "Yeah." Pinching the material of my tank between his thumb and forefinger, he tugs and says, "Off."

Stretching, I work on my tank while he pulls off my pajama pants and panties in one swift yank. Then I'm lying naked in the middle of my bed, unable to see much of anything, just a silhouette of a large male body. And that body is stalking towards me, then covering me.

Chest-to-chest, he lies flat on top of me, skin-to-skin. His warm, firm body blankets mine. He presses me into the mattress, putting his weight on me. Putting pressure on me. It's not uncomfortable, but restricts me.

Reaching down, he links his fingers with mine and slowly pulls my arms up over my head. I know what he wants.

Tonight, he won't get a fight. I'll give in.

As much as is possible for me.

Looking down at my body, he takes his time drinking me in. And the way he looks at me is as if I'm precious. His slow, drawn out exhale makes my body break into goosebumps and I flush. His knee pushes between my legs, forcing them apart. I get the hint. Spreading my legs for him, he settles on top of me and puts his face close to mine. So close that his lips touch the corner of mine as he speaks. "Legs around me."

His breath warms my lips. I nod. My legs snake around his hips and wrap tight. He won't get away from me easily tonight.

Releasing one hand, he fists his cock and rubs up and down my damp entrance. Every time his piercing touches my clit, my eyes roll back into my head and I fight the urge to moan out loud. So I'm surprised when he growls, "Already wet. I knew you would be."

I'm ready for him when he pushes the head of his cock into me. Ready or not, I mew like a cat in heat. The fullness, the satisfaction, the stiff heat...it's perfection. How could I ever want more than this? I feel complete.

And it's then that my eyes fly open and his words come back to haunt me.

"You're not gonna want anyone but me."

As soon as my mind begins to panic, Twitch slides home. My mouth opens in a silent moan and my eyes close. Linking our fingers once more, he holds my hands firmly above my head, rocking into me slowly but deeply.

"Miss me?"

I hear the smile in his voice and can't help but smile back. "You're an asshole."

His voice changes. A strong agreement. "I know."

He thrusts deep and my channel grips him tightly. Almost as if even my body fears this will be the last time and doesn't want him to go. I don't know what possesses me, but the words fly out mid-moan, "Kiss me."

Thrust. Thrust. Thrust. "No."

Well, alright then. It was worth a shot. I guess.

Thank God the room is so dark that my embarrassed flush will go unnoticed.

When he stops thrusting and tries to unwrap my legs from around him, I squeeze them tighter around his waist. Dropping his hands, he says low in warning, “Lexi.”

And with a pout, I allow myself to be unravelled. Gripping my hips, he pulls me further down the bed, lifts my legs onto his shoulders, and enters me again in one harsh thrust. A whimper breaks free from me. As soon as Twitch hears it, something in him breaks. He grunts and slams into me. At this angle, it feels so much deeper. So deep that it almost hurts.

And I love every second of it.

He continues to work my body into a frenzy. Tossing my head from side to side, I moan loudly and grip the sheets. The first contraction warns us both that my orgasm is coming hard and fast.

So he pulls out. Again.

Exasperated and unsatisfied, I let out a growl of frustration. I can’t stop myself from asking between deep breaths, “So I’m not allowed to come tonight?”

Panting and making no effort to reply to me, he turns me on my side and settles in behind me. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he pulls me into him and nips my ear, “You wanna come, baby?” His fingertips trail down to my sensitive nub and circle slowly.

My nipples bead. “Yes. Please.”

Sucking the point where my neck meets my shoulder, he works me faster, and white sparks flash behind my eyes. “I want you to beg, Lexi.”

I’m close to the finish line, so begging is not above me right this second. “Oh fuck, Twitch! Please, please let me come. I need it so bad. Put your cock in me. Now! Please!”

Placing his knee between mine, he pushes my legs apart and drives back into me. A long groan is pulled from me as my contractions start. He whispers, “Oh baby, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

The tingles in spine turn to full blown fireworks when he slaps my clit. Hard.

Crying out, “Oh my fucking God,” my body jerks viciously as I come violently around him.

The arm around my waist pulls, seating me deeper onto his cock as his thrusts shallow. Panting through my orgasm, a sob escapes me. His free hand comes up to knead my breast, and a familiar tingle starts low on my back as I throb around him. He utters breathlessly, "*Fuck yeah. I knew it. I fucking knew it.*"

My eyes cross and I whimper when his thumb and forefinger work together to twist my nipple. Freeing his other hand, he slaps my clit lightly and it happens.

Never in my life have I had a multiple orgasm.

Never.

Not *ever*.

But I'm now living proof that they aren't a fable.

I whimper as tingling takes over my body and my pussy pulses lightly. My whimper turns into a moan when he thrusts harder and deeper into me. When he snarls and bites down on my shoulder, I tip my head back and cry out loudly. My body turns rigid as I begin to pulsate. Twitch bites harder, and the mixture of pleasure and pain breaks something in me.

If heaven were a place, it would be the tiny area Twitch's piercing touches when I come on him.

Tears trail my cheeks in complete and utter bliss.

The moment he stills, he groans around my shoulder. His cock jerks inside of me, and the warmth I feel tells me that he – once again – didn't wear a condom. If it were anyone else, that would be a big deal.

But it's *not* anyone else.

The arm around my waist holds me tight. Removing his teeth from my shoulder, he rests his forehead in their place. Both panting, we lay there a few minutes. Sooner than I'd like, he slides out of me, then my bed, dresses quickly, and walks away from me without even a peep. Or so I think.

At my bedroom door, he turns to me and speaks into the dark. "I'll call."

A sudden thought rushes through me, causing my stomach to coil, and without a second thought, I blurt out, "You're clean, right?"

He stills a moment before he answers in dead seriousness, "Of course."

My mind and body relax tenfold. Closing my eyes, I listen to the footsteps walk further and further away from me with only one thought in mind:

Please, don't hurt me.

Twitch

Turning my desk chair around to face out the window, I place my foot on my opposite knee and wonder why the fuck I can't concentrate today.

Closing my eyes, I tap the pen at my temple and try to avoid any thoughts of the woman whose pussy tastes so good that I want it available to me at all hours. The woman I already have a purpose for. The woman who is somehow scrambling my fucking brains to slop.

This was meant to be fun. And it started that way.

But it doesn't feel so fun anymore.

Julius would laugh his fucking ass off knowing I'm startin' to feel something more than physical for this sparrow.

Julius is my best friend. And the person I would do anything for. He's one of the rare people I listen to. Keeping me safe in juvie is one of the things I'll always remember.

He saved me.

The door creaks open, and the sound of heels coming my way alerts me to the fact that someone wants something from me.

Like always.

When she comes into view, I turn my head to see Ling smiling at me. "Got a sec?"

Nodding, I watch her smile turn predatory. And my mind sighs.

Not today.

Ling and I have a long standing arrangement. It's not a big deal. Just sex. But I haven't touched her since the day my girl got her ass beat. Trying to keep a clear head is hard when sex is involved.

Taking a step towards me, her petite hand and long red nails slide up my bent knee, then higher to my thigh. She wastes no time palming my crotch.

I mentally growl. She knows what happens when she takes liberties with me, meaning she's feeling frisky and wants a reaction.

When I don't react and let her palm me, her red lips pout. She wants a fight. She's not going to get one. Her almond eyes narrow and she presses harder into me. Fury masks her face, "What the *fuck* is going on with you, Twitch? You haven't touched me in ages."

I don't answer. She continues to palm my flaccid dick, looking for signs of life, but little Twitch doesn't want what's on the menu tonight. Little Twitch's tastes have changed. Trying to get a reaction out of me, she squeezes my dick hard and digs her nails in. I snarl and bare my teeth at her. Her eyes flare in excitement. This has gone on too long.

Placing my palm over her face, I push back, hard. She stumbles back in her heels and falls on her ass. "That what you want, Ling? You want it rough? Fuck off. I'm not in the mood."

Chest heaving, still seated on the floor, her face flames. Walking over to her, I offer her my hand, but she slaps it away.

The little woman has too much pride in her. She'll never learn.

Standing, she smooths down the front of her dress and asks in perfect calm, "You fucking someone?"

No hesitation. "Yeah."

"You wanna keep her?"

Ling knows me well. She's an observer. I scratch my chin absently. "Yeah. I'm keeping this one."

Her face displays stunned disbelief. Clearly not the answer she was expecting. Then a small smile spreads across her lips. A calculating smile. "It's *her*, isn't it?"

My face devoids. "Who?"

Ling smirks, "Her. The girl who came to the office. *Lexi*." Her eyes darken. "You know. The one you *watch*."

I don't like her tone. Anger surges through me.

Crossing the room in a quick stride, I place my hand at her throat and walk her back into the wall until she hits it with a small thud. Squeezing tight enough to warn, but not enough to hurt her, I've never been so serious in my life when I threaten, "Ling, I swear, if you fuck this up for me..." Her eyes full of lust, she bites her lip. Leaning forward, I whisper, "I will fucking kill you."

I squeeze her throat hard a moment before I let go. But Ling doesn't take the hint. Smiling, she looks up at me through hooded eyes and whispers back, "We can still have fun though. I don't care if you want her too. No one knows me like you do. No one knows what I like."

Rolling my eyes, I call bullshit. "Not true. I know you're fucking Happy." And about ten other guys.

Her cheeks turn pink. "He's not like you."

I bark out a humourless laugh and nod once. "Yeah. He has a *heart*."

Ling has unusual tastes. Maybe that's why I liked her. For a while. There was a time I thought we were one in the same, but it didn't take long to see that everything I thought I liked about her now just pisses me off.

Reaching forward and taking my hand, she guides it under her dress to her bare pussy and gyrates, masturbating against my loose fingers. Her eyes flutters closed. She grinds against me and moans out, "Do it."

This would normally turn me on. Normally.

I know what she wants. I'm so fucking agitated right now that I could. But that would mean she's won.

Not happening.

Looking around the room in a bored fashion, I sigh, "You gonna be done soon? I got shit to do."

Her eyes snap open; hurt shines there. She recovers quickly, rubbing her wet pussy onto my open palm. "Come on, baby. Help me. You used to love this." Her statement sounds more like a plea.

Not able to take any more of this shit, I pull my hand out from under her skirt and tell her firmly but quietly, "Enough. You're embarrassing yourself."

Her pretty face changes to something ugly and vicious. Taking both her small hands, she pushes at my shoulders. "Fuck you, Twitch! You think you're the only guy that can please me? Well, you're fucking wrong! I can get any guy. Any guy I want!"

I chuckle at the fact that she's just contradicted herself and shake my head. "Yeah. Okay. Can you take your bitch-fit outside? Like I said, I got shit to do."

Turning my back on her, I listen to her heels clip-clop away before my office door is slammed shut. Sitting back down in my chair, the first thing that comes to mind is the sweet smile of a woman I should never have had.

My cock stirs.

Running a hand down my face, I think long and hard about what needs to be done, all the while knowing I won't ever let her go.



Lexi

For the second time in a row, I contemplate what the heck I'm doing in my car, just beside the parking lot of Falcon Plastics. Before I can chicken out, I grab my purse and shuffle out of my car, making sure to memorize the reason I'm here. Or, that is, the reason I *say* I'm here.

Checking my wrist watch, the time reads 5:46pm and I wonder if anyone will actually be there. The thought that I've missed everyone comes as a great relief.

Yeah, because you don't want to see the gorgeous tattooed hunk who fucks like a pro.

What's the point in denying I like the guy? What I'm doing here has everything to do with that. I want to start fresh, and I know the only way to do that with someone like Twitch is to make the first move.

Approaching the double doors, I pull and meet resistance. My brain cheers and skips, while smiling big and saying, '*Oh well! We tried! Better luck next time!*'.

Standing there a moment, I wonder if I should back down so soon; just when I turn to look around for an intercom, the door opens before me, and a young woman crashes into me. Her body slams into mine and she squeaks, “Oh jeez! I’m so sorry! I didn’t see you there!”

Grabbing hold of her, I smile. “No, you’re fine. I didn’t realize you were closed.”

Pushing her hipster black glasses higher up on her nose, she smooths her dress down. “Oh, we technically are, but the bosses are still up...” When her face lifts to mine, she squeaks again. “Ms. Ballentine! Mr. T asked that you be let through the other day. If I don’t let you in now, he’ll be pissed. I’m kinda in a hurry, but if you give me a sec, I can show you to his office.”

And my day just got interesting. “I’m guessing Mr. T is Twitch?” She nods. “Okay, well I know how to get to his office. I can save you a few minutes by letting myself in?”

Her face relaxes instantly. “You have no idea how great that would be. I’m late picking up my daughter from after-school care and they close at six. I’m already stretching it.” Holding open the door for me, she quickly adds, “The elevator code is 2245. Go on up!”

Smiling at her, I nod and make my way through the now empty building. It’s so quiet here compared to the other day. It’s so eerie, that my body breaks out in goosebumps.

The elevator code works, and before I know it, I’m standing in front of the huge mahogany double doors that lead to the unknown. Raising my fisted hand, I hesitate to knock when I hear a groan and what sounds to be thumping.

My face flames.

Oh shit. He’s getting busy.

Suddenly, my stomach drops. That hurts in such an irrational way that I’m questioning my sanity. What’s worse is that I’m sure he’s doing it with his all-too-perfect bitch of a girlfriend.

I know I should walk away, but I...I just can’t.

Placing my hand on the lever handle, I press down as slow as I can and open the door an inch. When I see him, my heart stutters. Watching him through the crack, I smile and chuckle silently.

Well, that could’ve been embarrassing.

His shirtless back to me, I take in the artwork tattooed on him. His back is one big picture. What looks to be an angel – more accurately, a fallen angel – covers the length of him in one of the most realistic tattoos I have ever seen. The angel stands tall and proud in a tattered cloak of black, the wind blowing to one side separating the cloak, revealing a long, slender leg and bare foot. Her long blonde hair flares out to the side, the wind lifting the hood slightly to reveal her face. One side, gorgeous. The other, melted and disfigured.

I don't understand what it means, but her face is so unashamed and filled with pride that it's beautiful in a twisted way.

Panting with his back to me, he asks loudly, "You gonna stand there all night, or you gonna come in?"

Busted.

My face flames. Opening the door, I watch as he punches the boxing bag in the middle of his office before answering "Wasn't sure if I was welcome."

"You're not."

Well...shit.

That's when he turns and adds with a smirk, "But that doesn't stop me either."

Walking over to his desk, he picks up a towel and pats down his face, arms, and heaving chest.

I knew he worked out.

"Like what you see?" Arrogant ass.

My eyes never leaving his body, I swallow hard. "Yeah." When I see him step towards me, I quickly hold up my hands and step back. "No!" I say this in a way that you would say no to your dog for trying to steal your food. And it shocks Twitch. I know this because his eyebrows rise in disbelief. I'm shocked too. "Don't. Not tonight. I just came here to say thank you."

His brow furrows. "For what?"

"For the donation. For the money. I realized I never even said thank you, which was totally rude. My mom would be pissed at me. You have no idea how much we can do with that money. It's..." I stop a moment, trying desperately to get my emotions under control. I whisper thickly, "It's a godsend."

He stops mid-step to watch me closely. His forever-hooded eyes lazily scrutinize me. His eyes narrow dangerously, “Don’t mention it.” Standing by the office door, feeling awkward and vulnerable, I could kiss him when his eyes crinkle in the corners. “I can show you how you can thank me.”

Smiling, I dip my chin. “Not tonight. I’m here purely for professional reasons.”

His brows rise again. “Is that right, Ms. Ballentine?” I nod and take in his muscular body as he seats himself on the edge of his desk.

Good lord, this man is a treat! I don’t know if I like him better shirtless or in the damn suit. I can’t decide. He’s lickable both ways.

Crossing his long legs in front of him, he asks curiously, “And what is your purpose here tonight, Alexa?” The way he says my name like that, it’s not just a word or name, it’s a *caress*.

Leaning back into the wall, I state quietly, nervously, “I want to know how you work. How your company works. I want to know what you do here.”

His face turns hard. I have no idea what I’ve said for that to happen, but my palms begin to sweat. Running his tongue over his teeth, he sniffs, then nods to the guest chair beside him. “Sit.”

When I don’t make an effort to move, his eyes find mine and he says more firmly, “Sit, Lexi.”

Taking small steps on shaky legs, making sure I don’t fall, he pushes out the chair with his foot and I sit. Looking up into his soft brown eyes, he watches me, searching my face through narrowed eyes a long while before he states, “The company is a cover.”

My eyes widen as he continues, “Yes, we’re a plastics company. A successful one. Very successful. But there was only one reason a guy like me buys a place like this.” He states quietly, “And I think you know why that would be. You’re a smart girl, Lexi. What do you think we’re making and selling out of here?”

One thing pops into my head immediately, but I push it down trying to ignore the blood roaring in my ears. I think back to the other day when Happy helped me out of my car.

“You’ve been sitting in your car in an industrial area looking like an on-edge crack junkie wanting her next fix for about a half-hour. So either you’re here for drugs, or...”

Drugs. They're making and selling drugs from the warehouse.

A twisted smile appears on his face. "She knows."

My stomach drops. Disappointment and regret swirl through my rigid body.

I need to leave. As in, yesterday.

Standing and trying to avoid eye contact, I utter shakily, "It was stupid to come here. I'm sorry for intruding, Twitch. It won't happen again."

A hand on my arm halts my exit. "Stop." And I do, but when he sees my obvious panic, he whispers, "Breathe."

Sitting back down, I fight the shakes for a full minute before anger flows through my veins. I whisper, "Why would you tell me that? You barely know me."

He doesn't answer. When I look up at him, his face conveys his answer. That he knows me better than I think he does. I still can't believe this. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

His eyes narrow; he searches my face lazily and says bored-like, "I ask myself that question every day of my miserable life."

I allow his comment to slide off me. Now is not the time for sympathy. Feeling defiant, I state, "I could tell the police."

Reaching forward, he runs his fingertips down my cheek. Breathing deeply, he replies on an exhale, "You could. But you won't." Closing my eyes, I lean into his touch, now trailing my jaw. "You won't because you know what would happen to you, what happens to a squealer, don't you, Lexi?"

My body tenses. I pull away from his too-inviting touch. "Is that a threat?"

Shaking his head slowly, his eyes never leave mine when he points out, "No. Just the facts."

Staring him down, I refrain from telling him I know all about drugs. And none of that information came from being a caseworker, but rather from having to remove needles from my brother's arm when he was too high to notice he hadn't done it himself.

But that's what living in our house did to a person.

My parents were never the type to win the *parents of the year* award. More like the *hooray, your children are still alive* award. Dad was an alcoholic and just plain mean. Mom was good at pretending things were

okay while she worked long hours. Overall, I had two parents who weren't parents at all. My brother found his way to escape the fact that we were never getting out of the hellhole.

Thinking about my brother always makes me think of that line from the song *Me, You and My Medication* by *Boys and Girls*.

"We're all addicted to something that takes away the pain."

There's so much truth in that phrase.

My heart aches, suddenly taken back to a time long forgotten, bringing up memories long suppressed.

I'm brought back to reality when Twitch pulls me to stand in front of him. Spreading his legs, he holds my hand tight while I'm guided between them. Looking over me, confusion in his eyes, he states, "Think I'm ready for those lips now."

His eyes drop down to my parted mouth and I shiver. His arm snakes around my waist, holding me firmly against him. My front pressed into his, my tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip. Wanting that kiss so badly, my voice sounds weak, even to me. "You're manipulating me."

Reaching up with his free arm, he fingers a strand of my hair and admits freely, "Yeah." Leaning forward, his lips brush against mine for the briefest moment before he whispers into my cheek, "You have no idea how big a gift my words are. But you will."

I don't know what that means. Before I have time to think on it, he orders, "Now, kiss me, Lexi. I won't ask you again."

Breathing heavily, I touch the bare skin of his chest. A gentle caress on firm heat. Closing the distance between us, our lips touch and my body jolts. I moan softly, pressing a little firmer until our open mouths brush against each other, breathing each other in. The arm around my waist tightens.

His taste. Chocolate and mint. Just...*amazing*.

This taste is now committed to my memory. And one taste is not enough.

My mouth closes over his, placing soft kisses onto his surprisingly passive mouth. His tongue darts out, and for a moment, I forget who I'm with. Playfully pulling away, I smile when he growls, pulling me back into his body.

Thwack!

My ass throbs, and his mouth swallows my cry of surprise. No longer passive, his mouth devours mine, hungrily tasting me, coaxing my tongue to play with his.

My already wet core floods.

Reaching up between our bodies to cup his cheeks, he allows this only a moment before he gently removes my hands from him, pushing me away.

The air thick in the office, the only sound is of heavy breathing, Twitch stands suddenly, walking away from me, "I'll call."

And just like that, I'm dismissed.

I walk out of Falcon Plastics a little more informed and whole lot more anxious, because truthfully, I have no idea who I'm dealing with.

Lexi

It's around seven AM when my phone pings. Barely awake and sipping my coffee, I open it and read:

Unknown number: Saturday. Dress nice.

I stare at the message for a whole minute before I reply, knowing full well who sent it.

Me: Who is this?

Not ten seconds pass when I receive a response.

Unknown number: Lexi...

And I can almost hear the warning in his voice through the text that I chuckle while typing out my reply.

Me: Yes, TWITCH. I got it. Dress nice. Anything else?

This message must have dumbfounded him, because I don't hear my phone ping for a whole five minutes.

Unknown number: No.

Smiling to myself, I quickly save the number into my contacts, move to the bathroom, and turn on the shower, trying not to think about the fact that the guy I'm crushing on is, in fact, a drug dealer.



The second I feel his eyes on me, a stupid smile breaks out on my face.

Taking my sushi and bottle of water from the counter of the sushi place in the food-court by my workplace over to one of the benches in the park across the street, I sit down and discreetly watch for him. With my

sunglasses on and my phone out, everyone would be none the wiser as to what I'm really doing. When suddenly, my stomach dips.

He's still watching you. Have you forgotten he's a drug dealer? And he clearly needs anger management. What makes you think any part of this guy is right for you? He goes against everything you work for. Do not fuck up your life over some guy. He's just a guy. A dangerous one, at that. Wake up!

I ponder this. I've worked so hard to be where I am right now. I wouldn't do anything to put myself in a position for me to lose my job.

And as I say that, I know it's a lie. Because here I am, still wanting to cavort with my stalker, even though he's told me things that would surely get me fired. He's not worth it. I know this. So, why am I—

Ping

Almost throwing my phone out of my hands, I jump in surprise and put a hand to my now-heaving chest.

Twitch: What's wrong?

Looking down at the message, I think 'you' before I write a simple reply.

Me: I didn't know you were still watching. You surprised me.

Almost immediately, the message tone sounds.

Twitch: You never were before.

My brow furrows at that.

Me: Well, you weren't doing a good job at hiding it.

I wait and wait and wait. A few minutes pass and nothing comes. Placing my phone down, I sip at my bottle of water when the message tone sounds, and what he writes next makes my head silently implode.

Twitch: Maybe I wasn't hiding at all.

Lifting my head, no longer caring if he sees me watching for him, my eyes dart left-to-right, searching for the phantom of a man.

But as per usual, he's gone.

Throwing my phone down into my lap, I sit back on the bench and puff out a long breath.

I don't care if it'll be the death of me, I'm going to find out more about this strange man.

And in this case, I know patience is definitely a virtue.



Saturday night approaches quickly enough, and I look at myself in the mirror.

“Why do you always have to be Cleopatra? I wanted to be Cleopatra,” I say sulkily, looking at Nikki’s reflection as she sits on my bed applying peach-colored lip gloss to her pouty lips.

Not even looking up at me, she continues to smear color on and says gently, “Because Cleopatra is more my speed. You can’t be Cleopatra. She was all *death to this person* and *death to that person*, and you’d be all like *how can we help these people?*” I quietly laugh. She is kinda right. “No, babe. You’re not Cleopatra. You’re an angel. And a beautiful one at that.”

A growl at the door snags my attention. Dave stands there pouting, holding out his belt-slash-sword combo. “I can’t get this on.”

He is not in a good mood like I’d hoped he would be. It turns out Phil is happy being single again, and Dave, obviously, isn’t taking the news well.

Walking over to him, I take the belt from him and place it around his waist. He’s a pirate tonight, wearing leather breeches, a puffy shirt, an eye patch, and a sword. The whole she-bang. It takes a few seconds, but I get the belt on, and he sighs, “Thanks, babe.”

Looking up into his vacant eyes, I reply softly, “We don’t have to go. We can rent some movies and hang out here eating junk food ‘til we pass out.”

And he smiles. The first real smile I’ve seen him wear in over a week. It’s then that he notices my costume. Stepping back to get a good look at me, his face softens. “You really are an angel. And you look gorgeous. It’s perfect for you.”

Reaching up to cup his cheek, he accepts the gesture for only a moment before he clears his throat and backs out of my room. “I’ll be in the living room.”

Waiting for Nikki to complete the makeup that goes with a costume such as hers, I turn to the mirror one last time and take a good look at myself.

The long white dress I'm wearing is sweet and simple, long-sleeved, and decorated with small pearls and crystals glittering all over. It's stunning. The price tag on the costume read over a thousand dollars but it's beautiful. Twitch can afford it. So worth it. My wings are deceptively light considering the tips of them come past my bottom. This costume has no halo, but in its place is a tiara, once again gleaming with crystals and pearl. My long dark hair has been left down in loose waves, and Nikki did wonders with my eye makeup, which is pearly white and shimmering. My lips lightly glossed, I'm ready to go.

Nikki calls out from behind me, "Ready?"

Nodding at my reflection, I answer weakly, "Yeah."

As ready as I'll ever be.



Arriving at the historic mansion in Darling Point, I wonder how much this place costs for the night.

I know Twitch is well off, but a place like this would have cost over twenty-million dollars to buy, so to rent it for the night would be in the hundreds of thousands, I'm sure.

The taxi comes to a stop and the three of us look at each other in disbelief.

Dave asks, "Are you sure this is the place?"

With the amount of cars being ushered around the place, I would say yes, but I double check the invite anyways. "Yeah. It's the right place."

Nikki says in awe, "It's amazing. So beautiful."

I agree. It's breathtaking.

Paying the cab driver, we all head out towards the gorgeous mansion. Security guards stand by the giant, cast iron double gates taking invites and checking IDs. My face pulls an *I'm impressed* look to my friends, which they mimic in unison. Approaching the behemoth of a security guard, he takes the invite and checks our ID cards. My gut flips around when the

security guy looks me in the eye, takes out his walkie talkie, and announces, "She's here."

No smile. No anything. Security dude says, "Wait here," as if I was going to waltz past him and make a fuss, cussing up a storm.

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I open my mouth to speak when a deep and familiar voice utters, "Would you look at that? A real life angel."

Happy comes forward and surprises the hell out of me when he kisses my cheek and hugs me briefly. Smiling up at him, I muse, "No costume?"

He smiles big. "Nope. I'm on security detail tonight. Or I might have offered because I fuckin' hate dressing up." He winks, letting us all know that's exactly what happened.

Chuckling, I make introductions. "Nikki and Dave, this is Happy." When I turn to see them both gaping and making lusty goo-goo eyes at the brawny, bald man, I mentally cringe.

Damn. This got awkward quick.

But I'm doubly surprised when Happy grins and checks them out. *Both* of them.

Holy...Wow! I did not see that coming.

Happy extends one elbow to me, and the other to Nikki; we take hold and he leads us to a golf cart parked just inside the gates. Happy explains, "Twitch wasn't sure if you would wear heels tonight. He didn't want you to walk all the way to the house."

Nikki turns to me wearing puppy dog eyes and mouths, "So sweet!"

Oh dear God. Let's see if she thinks that after she meets him.

The golf cart takes off, and it's not a short drive up to the mansion. It takes about five minutes to get there while weaving in and out of people talking during their hike up the long gravel driveway. Once we reach the front of the house, Happy parks us off to the side and helps Nikki out, while Dave helps me out. Happy looks at us and promises, "I'll see you around tonight. Save a dance for me, yeah?"

All three of us nod stupidly and he chuckles as he walks away.

Dave immediately spouts, "I called him!"

Nikki's pretty face contorts, "He's *clearly* into women, Dave. Did you see how he looked at me? He wants me."

Dave retorts, "Bitch, please. He was staring because you have lipstick on your teeth."

Ah. There's the diva we all missed!

Nikki gasps loudly, "You *lie!*" while searching her clutch for a compact mirror. Rubbing her fingertips along her teeth none too softly, I look up at Dave and mouth, "You're mean."

Smirking like the asshole he is, he shrugs and mouths back, "He wants me."

And truthfully, I have no idea who Happy wants. He's hard to read.

Dave takes his place between us, and Nikki and I thread our arms through his elbows, then in we go. The entrance leads to a hall that could double as a ballroom all on its own. Silken drapes hang from the ceiling to the floor in emerald greens and ruby reds.

Pure class.

This place is elegant. And chic. And tasteful.

Pieces of artwork have been placed here and there, and although it should look odd, it doesn't. It looks fabulous. Taking our place in line to the ballroom, we wait and look around until I hear a female clear her throat by my side. Turning, I look to see a very bored-looking Ling by my side. She looks fabulous. Of course. I'm not really sure what she's meant to be, but she's dressed in a sleek black dress with her hair in a chic up-style, wearing long black gloves and pearls. Now that I look closer, she could be Audrey Hepburn a la *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. She can barely contain the eye roll as she says robotically, "You don't wait in line. Come with me."

Bitch.

Not saying a word, we follow Ling from the long line to a door hidden behind the gorgeous drapes. Looking Dave up and down, she licks her lips, "Shortcut."

When she turns her back on us, Dave's brows rise and I roll my eyes in a *don't ask* kind of way.

A long narrow hall that seems to go on forever leads us right into the kitchen. Workers hustle and bustle while we step around them. I catch Nikki snatching something off a tray and shove it into her mouth as quickly as she can. I bunch my face at her in warning and she shrugs, chewing as obviously as she can before she whispers, "That was *divine*."

When we reach another hall, Ling turns to me, but speaks without looking at me. "Follow the hall. First door on your left." Peeking through her long lashes at Dave, she runs a finger down his chest to his stomach

before licking her lips and walking away. We all watch a long while before Nikki mutters, “Her gaydar is broken.”

Silently chuckling, I open the door, and my eyes light up when I realize it leads right into the ballroom.

This place...Oh God, this *place*! It’s stunning. I want to live here. Forever and ever. Amen.

It’s the epitome of elegance. The sparkling white-tiled floor is freshly polished and waxed, with tall, thick Grecian-style pillars every few yards in the brightest of whites. They seem to be holding up the room while the walls gleam in gold and peach. Curtains, also peach-colored, decorate the six bay windows on both sides of the room.

Round tables that seat eight each are strategically placed around the room. The white tablecloths match the white chair covers, each chair decorated with a thick peach and gold ribbon fastened into a bow at the back.

And here we are, three nobodies who should not be able to afford to come to a charity ball like this, openly gaping at our surroundings.

A moment passes before Nikki murmurs, “Maybe we should get our masks on.”

I’ve been holding my mask the entire time. The invitation said costumes were a must but masks were optional, and from what I can see, most of the women have worn them while none of the men have bothered. Which is fair, because when I asked Dave which mask he chose, he laughed. And laughed. And laughed some more.

Nodding to Nikki, she comes forward to help me with my mask. It’s a little unusual, but I couldn’t say no. It’s all white lace in the shape of a butterfly, and lined with white velvet; she clips it into the sides of my hair. It’s so light, it doesn’t feel like I’m wearing anything at all, and although it covers most of my face, you can still see it’s me. Nikki chose a black and gold cat-eye mask, which is held up by a long thin pole in her hand.

Both masked, we smile at each other and take Dave’s elbow. Walking past a tall spiral staircase, I feel eyes on me. Halting in my tracks, I look up.

I spot him at the top of the stairs walking down towards me. He’s dressed in black slacks, a white shirt, and black silken wings. The wings are tattered and frayed. His slacks are ripped, his white shirt torn and slashed. Red droplets of dried paint drip from his heart. Something black that looks

like soot has been rubbed into his face to make him look dirty. When he reaches us, he looks Dave up and down before uttering huskily, “I believe this belongs to me.”

Holding his hand out, palm up, I don’t even think as I let go of Dave and move over to stand with him. Tucking my hand into the crook of his elbow, he holds out his free hand to Dave and introduces himself. “You’re David Allen.” Dave nods, dumbstruck. Letting go of Dave’s hand, he takes Nikki’s small hand in his and kisses the top of it. “And you must be the lovely Nicole Palmer.”

Oh my God. The nerve! Acting all fakely suave around my friends. Gah!

Gritting my teeth and gripping his shirt tightly, I watch my friends go gaga over Twitch and fight the urge to yell, “*It’s a trap! Don’t fall for it!*” and continue to hold onto him. He chats with Nikki and Dave a while, and Nikki shoots me a look that says she approves. As in, a lot. I can see Dave has his doubts, eyeing Twitch’s tattooed neck and hands. I want to flick his nose, telling him not to stereotype people, but in this instance, I’d be wrong.

Twitch is exactly as his stereotype predicts. And that sucks.

I wish he was different. He’s not exactly boyfriend material. That, and he has a girlfriend.

At least, I think he does. Ling’s a bitch. She’d suit him to a T.

Suddenly, we’re walking in the opposite direction from my friends. Brows bunched, I ask, “Where are we going?”

He says with no feeling, “I told them I’d claimed you as my date tonight.” Face scrunching further, he eyes me and his lip twitches. “Nicole seems to like me. David not so much.”

I scoff, “That’s because you’re full of shit! Nikki is a hopeless romantic, whereas Dave can smell bullshit a mile away.” He doesn’t respond, just walks me along nodding his head. We stop at a deserted corner of the room and Twitch takes his time looking over my costume.

The more he looks, the more irritated he seems to become. And suddenly, I’m petrified that I made the wrong choice. Trying to take attention off of me, I ask, “What are you meant to be?”

His gaze roams my body once more. His hooded eyes finally reach mine. Searching my face a long time, he finally turns away, looking into the

crowd. "Love."

My entire body breaks out in goosebumps and I visibly shudder.

Love? He's love? What the heck? He and I have very different views of love. That's sad. Just...sad.

Catching my eyes, he scowls, "Don't do that." My face falls, and as I go to ask him what he means, he adds, "Don't feel sorry for me. And don't assume you know me. You don't know shit about me."

Face flaming, wanting to avoid an argument, I let go of his sleeve and start to walk away. He catches my hand and holds it tight, leading me in the opposite direction. Confused, I ask quietly, "Where are we going?"

He walks me a long while before he answers, "Taking you on a tour of my home."

Lexi

Did he just say his home? *This* is his *home*?

Mouth gaping in disbelief, he leads me out of the ballroom, down a short hall, and up a flight of narrow stairs. As we reach the top of the stairs, he turns to glance at me and does a double-take at my extremely obvious expression. “Don’t look so shocked, Lexi. You know what I do for a living. Money comes easy. Spending it comes easier. And I don’t have many outlets.” The bored tone of his voice is starting to become irritating.

As he pulls me closer to him, I blurt out, “Is Ling your girlfriend?”

Sneakily side-eyeing him, I watch his lips tilt in the corners. “Does it matter?”

Yes!

Adapting his bored tone, I lie through my teeth, “Not really. As long as it doesn’t affect me or the men I...” *Ahem*, “...see.”

His grip tightens on my hand, and suddenly I’m pushed into the hall wall. Breathing heavily, I watch him transform from a dark prince to something demonic. His eyes flash and his face contorts in rage; reaching down, he paws my mound through my dress and says through gritted teeth, “*No one* touches you. You got that? As long as I want you, no one else gets you, and after I’m done with you...” He licks my jawline. My eyes flutter. He presses his erection into my thigh. “...you’ll be forever unsatisfied. No one will ever take care of you the way I can. The way I know you want it. I know what you need, Lexi, even if you don’t know it yourself. But I’ll teach you.”

My heart practically beats out of my chest. I’m a little frightened and not sure what to do with what he just said to me. Apart from the fact that he said he *will* leave me. Not a maybe. A fact. This is why I should just walk away. And I need to voice this. So I do.

I whisper shakily, “I need to walk away from you.”

His nose runs up the length of mine and my eyes flutter closed. His bottom lip barely touches my top one as he whispers back, "What makes you think I'll *let* you, Alexa?"

My stomach dips. Opening my eyes, I ask seriously, "Why do you watch me? I need to know."

My stomach dips a second time when he inhales, looks over my face as if it were a work of art, then leans forward and kisses the tip of my nose. And he does this so gently, so sweetly, that my heart aches. "All in good time. You don't know me. Yet."

That almost sounds like a promise. My heart kick-starts again. I can live with that. A small promise is good for now. I wasn't expecting much, so I guess I'm getting exactly what I expected.

Taking in a deep breath, I look at his soot-stained face and change the subject. "You're going to get me dirty."

His eyes darken a shade. "Already have, baby." And I know what he just said has *nothing* to do with soot.

Reaching by my left side, the squeak of a doorknob sounds and he pushes the door open. We stare at each other a second longer before he takes my elbow and leads me into a huge bedroom. My core clenches in excitement at the sight of the king-sized sleigh bed against the right side of the room, but I do an excellent job holding myself together.

Twitch stands by my side playing with his cufflinks which, upon closer inspection, tonight are black onyx skulls and crossbones. He states, "This is your room whenever you're here. You'll get a key and your own set of entry codes. You'll have access to the entire house, and I'd prefer it if you were here at least three nights a week."

As soon as I hear the words *your room*, my mind leans over and whisper-hisses, "*This boy has lost his mind. We best be leavin' now.*"

Unable to process what exactly we're discussing here, I take this opportunity to walk around the room. Reaching a solid antique dresser, I lift the lids on the two glass decorative pieces that sit atop it, making myself at home in what is apparently *my* freaking room. One is filled to the brim with colorful milk chocolate buttons, and the other has cuff links of all sorts inside.

My brow furrows. "But this is your room."

A tattooed hand reaches around me to take a handful of chocolate. Without turning, I hear him shove the lot into his mouth. He says sarcastically, “And she’s smart too.”

Spinning around, my face bunches in annoyance. “I really don’t understand why I would be spending three nights a week here.”

Chewing the chocolate, he reaches for another handful while looking lost in thought. Finally, he shrugs, “Why *not*?”

Leaning back into the dresser, I lift my hand and point to my index finger. “Number one, I don’t even know you, Twitch.” Pointing to my middle finger, “Number two, this place is really far from where I work, as you know.” Pointing back to my index finger, “And number three, I have absolutely nothing here that is mine. So, it’s weird for me.”

Shoving the second handful of candy into his mouth, he chews, takes my hand, and leads me to a door by the bathroom. When he opens it, my mouth gapes.

This is ridiculous!

I’m panicked. And sweaty. I don’t feel good. I think I’m going to be ill.

Bending forward at the waist, I reach back with shaky hands to hold my hair out of the way as I begin to hyperventilate. I really wish I had a paper bag to breathe into right now. This is where Twitch asks in dead calm, “Too much?”

Standing straight, I blink at him for half a minute before I point to the open walk-in closet filled to the brim with women’s clothes, which all look to be in my size and screech, “Oh, because *that* isn’t weird! Not at all, Twitch!”

His smirk is so delicious that I want to lick him. But when he says, “Babe,” as if *I’m* the one being ridiculous, I lose my cool.

“No! Don’t you even do that, mister! Don’t *babe* me! I have heels on and I will use them as a weapon if I have to. You’re going to answer some of my questions right now.” Feeling a little too brave, I add with little to no steam at all, “If you don’t, I’ll leave. And I won’t come back.”

Popping a piece of candy into his mouth, he sucks on the button and utters, “Yeah, about that. I don’t do well with being threatened. And I definitely don’t take orders. But you’ll learn all this. Eventually. I get that I know you better than you know yourself, but there’s a few things you should know about *me*. And I’ll make it easy for you.” Mimicking my

pointing to my fingers, he points to his index finger. "Number one, you'll be here because you want to be here, not because I forced you. Ever." Pointing to his middle finger, "Number two, this closet is yours, and I expect you to use whatever is in there, down to your drawers." Pointing back to his index finger, "Number three, you're so fucking hot when you get worked up that I would really like for you to suck my cock. And when I say I would really like that, I mean suck my cock, Lexi. Now."

Pressing my legs together tightly, my core clenches.

I totally want to. "I don't want to."

His lip twitches, and he steps forward into the force field I've erected around myself. Lifting his hands, he spans them at the sides of my neck, halfway through my hair and says quietly, "I won't tell anyone. I know what turns you on, babe. Don't deny yourself. I'd hate that." Removing his hands from my neck, he takes care as he removes my mask, and when my face is finally exposed, his eyes crinkle at the corners as I'm suddenly pushed down to my knees in front of him. With both his hands at my shoulders, he utters, "You needed a push in the right direction. Now let's see if you can bring me to my knees too."

Challenge accepted.

My brows furrow in agitation. I work on his belt and when it's free, he slides it out of the loops of his pants and begins to fasten it around my neck.

I know this shouldn't turn me on. I know this is wrong in so many ways. But I want it so damn much. There's a part of me that wants whatever Twitch is offering, no matter how fucked up.

Popping the button and lowering his zipper, I part the opening and bite my lip when I see the thick, pierced semi-erect shaft at eye level. When the belt around my neck is pulled a little too tight, I look up at him with panic in my eyes. His eyes speak to mine. They say *I'll look after you*. Or at least, that's what I want to believe they're saying. They could be saying *I want to choke the life out of you* for all I know.

As soon as it's fastened, Twitch wraps the length of the belt around his hand and pulls gently. The pressure on my neck is alarming and uncomfortable.

So why am I dripping wet?

He catches my intake of breath and smirks.

He knows. He *always* knows!

The smirk fades, his hooded eyes darken, and he orders, "Make me hard," then pulls on the belt, forcing me forward into his crotch.

Not wasting a second, I wrap one hand around his hardening dick and guide it to my mouth, careful not to gag from the balls of his piercing. As soon as my tongue touches the sensitive underside, he sighs, "Yeah. That's it."

Pulling the belt closer to his side, it forces me closer to him, which in turn pushes him deeper into my mouth. Closing my eyes, I work him with my mouth. Squelching noises echo in the large room. Suddenly, I'm pulled too deep and I gag. My eyes snap open.

His eyes bore into mine as he keeps his length far too deep. "Eyes on me. Don't make me tell you again."

Clenching my throat around him, my eyes water and I nod vigorously. Pulling out of my mouth completely, I gasp in a breath, saliva dripping down my chin in a most unattractive way. He cups my cheek affectionately, "Good girl."

Not giving me a second to get my breathing under control, he drives himself back into my mouth. But I'm slightly freaked. I don't want to be gagged again.

Twitch must sense this because he states, "You do what I say and that won't happen again."

I guess it's beneficial for me to listen to him then.

There's something about having your choices taken from you that is equally liberating and frightening. Handing over control to a person is a big deal. A showing of trust. And sometimes, I would like to be taken on a ride rather than drive.

Blinking rapidly, I look up into his soft brown eyes as he slowly but deeply works my mouth. At this very moment, all I can do is take him in. White shirt, ripped and paint-splattered, mouth parted, eyes hooded in bliss, his filthy face looks almost angelic as he relaxes with every stroke of himself into the wet heat of my mouth. I could watch him all day long. Then his eyes close and he tips his head back in pleasure; the muscles of his neck tense a moment before he swallows hard, the inked artwork there seemingly coming to life with every movement of his throat muscles.

He is stunning.

And although he's no longer watching me, keeping an eye on me to make sure I'm following instructions...I can't take my eyes off him.

The sounds of leather squeaking softly by my ear alerts me to the fact that he has tightened his grip on the belt once again. Unable to stop myself, I stop my passive posture and give as good as he gets. And I know he's close. I know this because as I begin to bob my mouth on him, he hisses, "Fuck, Angel. Yeah, baby, suck it good."

Closing my eyes, I work him in a steady motion. I feel his fingertips slip into the collar that is his belt, and I know what's coming. And because I know, I'm prepared for it.

Pulling me by my choker, he pants, "I'm ready. Take it."

Sucking in air through my nose, I'm pulled forward further into his unbelievably hard cock. Relaxing, my throat opens. His hips jerk with the first contraction of his orgasm, and suddenly, I'm deep throating.

What's strange? I don't feel the discomfort I felt before.

Twitch groans long and low. I feel him jerk fitfully, and the warmth of his release slides down my receptive throat.

And it makes me so wet, makes me so horny, that I know a single touch would set me off.

Stilling, he begins to pull out. My throats reflexes kick in and I gag a little as his piercing knocks the top of my mouth. He finally frees himself. I feel wet warmth slide out of the side of my mouth. His nostrils flare and his eyes flash. Using his thumb, he wipes off the excess stickiness and offers it to me.

Mouth puffy from friction, I slowly extend my tongue and curl it around his thumb. I watch in delight as his almost-flaccid dick jumps. I feel powerful right now. Closing my lips around his thumb, I suck gently and release it with a pop.

Twitch teeters where he stands, and I bite my lip to stop my victorious smirk.

Twitch is not a person to whom you say *I told you so*, so I make sure I do not do that.

As gently as I can, I place him back into his pants and do him up. However, I leave his belt around my neck. I can't be sure I'm doing the right thing here. The last thing I want to give him is an excuse to punish me.

I like when he's happy with me. Although, having him be upset with me brings me quite the thrill.

Who knew?

Eyes closed, he visibly shudders before his eyelashes flutter and he looks down at me, his stare full of reverence. His lip curls up, "*Damn*. You sucked the sense out of me." His hand comes down onto my head and strokes my hair. He mutters, "You did good, *Angel*."

A small smile graces my lips. The way he just called me angel is as if he actually believes me to be one. Leaning into his touch, the moment is over too soon and his fingers gently undo the belt from around my neck.

A thought crosses me.

I don't want the belt to go.

My mind ponders this.

Whoa. You are a freak.

Helping me to stand, he possessively wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. Leaning into his chest, I breathe him in and take in his warmth. He guides us out of his room and down the hall. Down the opposite end from where we originally came.

That's when we both hear it.

A lady shrieks, "Help! No! No! Stop!" Sobs. "Please don't. I don't want you to! Please!"

My blood runs cold.

My body tenses and my eyes round. I look up at Twitch who watches me carefully, regret in his eyes. What shocks me is his lack of attempt to investigate or help. When the woman screeches at the top of her lungs, Twitch sighs, as if this woman isn't being attacked, but more of a pain in his ass.

Blood roars in my ears. I lose it.

Face bunched in disgust, I snatch my arm away from him, and gritting my teeth, I push at his shoulders before taking off down the hall, looking for the source of the cries for help.

"Lexi! Do *not* go in there! Wait, dammit!"

But I don't. I run. Frantically looking for the woman who obviously needs help.

Her moans, groans, and sobs appear closer and closer until finally, I stand just outside the door, afraid to peer in. Afraid of what I'll find.

My heart beats out of my chest.

Eyes wide, my shaking hand reaches for the doorknob. Turning it slowly, the latch clicks over and the door opens an inch, when I'm pulled back into a hard body. A hand tightens over my mouth and I struggle. Breathing heavily through my nose, I fight only a moment before Twitch says directly into my ear, "Stop. Watch. It's okay, Lex."

Still struggling, his hand tightens over my mouth. Tears form in my eyes and my body shakes. Pulling the side of my face into his cheek, he sways with me, gently rocking me from side to side. "Ssssh. Just watch."

Closing my eyes a long moment, I realize I'm not getting out of this until I do as he says. So sniffing, I open my eyes and take in the sight through the crack in the door.

My heart skips a beat. Anger surges through my veins like liquid lava singeing my insides. I'm appalled. And heartbroken.

I need to call the police.

Twitch

Lexi's rigid body shakes with soundless cries as we watch through the crack in the door. Wrapping my arm around her, I rock her in what I hope is an attempt at soothing her.

I'm not very good at things like that.

It's not a pretty sight. And part of me hopes to God that she'll see this through with me.

Regardless of what she thinks, she is strong.

She is perfect.

I knew she would be.

It's a lot to take in. But she will find a way to cope. I know it.

And I'll be there, guiding her all the while.



Lexi

Closing my eyes, I try to block out the image now burned into my brain. Unable to hold it back, I cry in complete silence, my body shaking against

the tall man who I suddenly hate.

I feel ill. And helpless. And morose.

But above any of those feelings, I *hate* Twitch.

Covering my mouth with one hand, he reaches across my chest to hold my shoulder while he gently rocks me, cooing. “Ssssh, Angel. I know it’s hard. I just need you to watch a little longer.”

I cry harder.

Who is this beast?

I know Twitch has issues. Deep seeded issues. But I never imagined how far those roots stem.

I should’ve listened to Nikki when she told me not to make this man a project.

His lips touch the shell of my ear and he whispers, “You gotta trust me, Lex.” His voice pleads. “Open your eyes.”

I want to screech ‘*Fuck you!*’...but something in his voice tells me to do as he says. So I do.

And my throat thickens. So thick that I can’t swallow.

The scene before me is horrific.

Ling lies on her stomach in the middle of the king-sized bed held in the pristine room. Her little black dress is ripped and left in tatters on her mostly-naked body. One long silken glove has come off, the other hanging off her straining fingers. Her pretty face is distorted by the distress and anguish she is experiencing at this moment.

My heart breaks for her.

My eyes refuse to blink, and tears trail down my cheeks.

I want to call out. I want her to know she isn’t alone. I want to yell for help. But above all, I want to kick the shit out of the brute of a man holding her arm twisted behind her back as he drives into her brutally.

No, strike that. I want to *kill* that man.

I’m positive that if I had a gun at this moment, I would use it. Not to defend. Not to maim. But to kill.

My gaze drifts over her body a moment before it settles back on her face. Silently sobbing, her voice strained and weak, she pleads, “Please. Please stop. Don’t do this.”

As if Twitch can sense my resolve breaking, his hand tightens over my mouth and he whispers, “Just a little longer. Then we can walk away.”

But I can't stop my body from reacting. Wrenching my arms as hard as I can, I struggle with the strong man. To no avail. So when he nips my ear hard, a muffled cry escapes me. That's when he growls, "She wants it. *Watch!*"

Oh God! He's one of those psycho stalker guys who rapes women then says they wanted it!

The man holding Ling down is more than twice her petite size; there's no way she could fight him, even if she wanted to. A sinking in my gut takes me back to those weeks ago when Twitch saved me from that... that...fucking *monster* who attacked me.

So why won't he help now?

The man holds her arm twisted awkwardly behind her back as he thrusts into her. And with every thrust, a look of pain covers her mascara stained face. Her lipstick smeared down her chin, she has a fat lip. The man has visible scratch marks on his chest; dark red covers those scratches and I feel a little satisfaction in knowing that she marked him.

Suddenly, Ling reaches back with her free arm and pounds the side of her fist into his hip. The attempt is so weak that her arm flops down. She's exhausted. Exhausted from fighting.

I can't watch anymore.

Closing my eyes, Twitch's hand drops from my mouth down to my chin, where his fingers hold it steadily. Almost forcefully, he shakes my chin harshly, "I told you to watch. Now fucking *watch.*"

My eyes snap open and what I see then changes everything.

Ling's eyes open wide, her mouth rounds in an *O*, and she says, "Do it! Do it, motherfucker!"

The man smirks, flips her over, plunges back inside of little weak Ling, rears his arm back, and slaps her across the face.

Pressure builds in my ears. My eyes widen in shock. I can't believe what I'm seeing.

She gasps loudly, then moans lustfully. He leans over her small body and fucks her hard. Fucks her like he hates her. With his extremely muscular arms on either side of her head supporting him, she leans up and their mouths clash in a vicious kiss.

I suddenly feel rude. As if I'm intruding on a special moment between the two. I haven't even noticed that Twitch no longer holds me tightly, but

has both arms wrapped around my waist with his lips at my temple.

The man snarls and I'm drawn back to the live show. Ling's eyes flash in excitement before her face contorts once more in fear. Ever the actress, she begs, "No more. Please! No more. I can't take it."

The man's hand slides across the cheek he had slapped and caresses it a moment before his arm rears back once more, and I don't watch this time. Closing my eyes, I black out what is about to happen.

Smack!

Whimpers fill the air, and Ling cries out, "Oh God! Yes!"

Peeking, I watch Ling's back come off the bed; her eyes flutter a moment before she jerks uncontrollably, moaning all the while. The man grits his teeth. "Fuck yeah! Come on my cock, babe. Milk me."

His body stills, his ass clenches, and tipping his head back, he roars as his body thrusts fitfully into the spent body that is Ling.

Feeling as worn as the two panting and lying in a tangle on the bed, my body weakens from the current state of emotions rushing through my head. I lean back into Twitch. With a squeeze to my waist, he leads me away from the mess in front of me and back to his bedroom.

I know what he wants.

I know it should happen.

But I'm dreading this talk.



Twitch

Fucking Ling.

Always messing with me. Always messing with what's important to me. I have no idea why I keep her around. The bitch is more trouble than she's worth.

You know why you keep her around.

Yeah. I guess I do. We're alike in many ways. Not all, but we get each other.

Squeezing Lexi's waist, I lead her down the hall until we stand in front of my room. Slowly, as to not spook her, I reach forward and open the door. Not saying a word, she allows me to walk her in and I shut the door behind us.

Letting go of her, I walk over to my bed and sit on the edge. But Lexi just stands there, by the dresser, staring into nothingness.

"Lexi, come over here."

Nothing. She stands where she is. The light in her eyes has dimmed so much that I wonder if I've broken her so soon in our game.

"Come here, Lexi. Sit with me. We'll talk."

Relief and disappointment both pass through me as her brows furrow. "I- I don't understand," she says softly.

I state, "You wouldn't."

Taking a step back, she bumps into the dresser. "He was hurting her. He was—" Her eyes lose focus. "And she was... He hit her and she... I don't understand."

I hate the way she sounds so young right now. It takes me back to my childhood. A place I'd rather keep buried deep. Standing, I take her in a moment. My angel. She looks beautiful tonight. As always. But right now, she looks like a fallen angel.

Devastated. Rocked. And Distressed.

It's sick, but I like it.

Begging my cock not to react is impossible. It jerks in my pants and I take a few steps towards her. I won't beg. I *don't* beg. But I will meet her halfway. For tonight. Holding out my hand to her, I order gently, "Take my hand."

Finally looking up at me, her blue eyes looking much too pale, the gloom there actually starts to bother me.

Nope. I don't like it.

Extending my hand a little further, she stares at it a long time before she whispers, “You knew. You- you knew.”

I nod. “Yeah. We can discuss it when you’re not so far away from me.”

Leaning even further back into the dresser, she asks, “What if I don’t want to discuss it?”

I don’t like being questioned. Gritting my teeth, I quash down my sudden annoyance and manage a gentle but calm voice as I tell her firmly, “We need to discuss it.”

Her eyes bore into mine. So much sadness there.

Reaching out slowly and uncertainly, she places her small hand into mine, and with a small tug, I pull her into my body, wrapping my arms around her and walking backwards towards the bed. Sitting, I bring her down to sit on my lap and play with the fingers on her left hand as I start. “You weren’t meant to see that.”

Nodding, she says dejectedly, “No. I suppose I wasn’t.” A short pause. “You knew she likes that stuff?”

I don’t reply. *That* being my reply.

Lexi stiffens. She whispers, “Have you...? I mean, how did you know?”

Once again, I let my silence speak for me.

She swallows hard. “I see.”

Suddenly, my chest pounds. It’s such an unfamiliar feeling that it rocks me. I realize the feeling is worry.

I’m losing her.

Quietly, I explain, “Ling is damaged. What she’s been through, I honestly don’t know how she made it out alive. I’m not saying her tastes are normal or natural, but I am saying to not judge her too harshly. She’s not all bad.”

Lexi tenses further. “How could you do that to her?”

Wrapping an arm around her waist as if to stop her from escaping, I remain honest. “Because she wanted it. It was consensual, even if it didn’t look like it. Ling is old enough to make her own decisions, and she isn’t dumb or impaired in any way.” Then, brutal honesty. “It was actually easy. It was hot. It turned me on. I enjoyed it, and I would do it again.”

Sad eyes meet mine. “You hit her?”

“Yes. More than once. Maybe even harder than he did.”

Nodding, her eyes turn frightened as she asks, “Will you hit me?”

Fighting to keep the anger under control, I ask, “You want me to hit you?”

And her answer is pure redemption. Her answer lets me know that I’ve far from lost her. “Not like that.”

Relief flows through me as I tug at a piece of her hair. “I’m good at reading people, Lexi. When we’re together, I know what you like and what you don’t. I know what you think you don’t like and are scared to try. I know how to push you further than you’re used to.” Allowing that to sink in a moment, I tell her, “I will spank you. I will be rough with you. I will push you to your limits. But I promise that if you give it a chance, you’ll enjoy taking it as much I like to deliver it.”

Her chest heaves with heavy breaths. “What if you read me wrong? What if it goes too far?”

Reaching up, my fingertips hold her chin firmly as I look into her eyes and ask seriously, “You like what we’ve done so far?”

She hesitates, and I know she wants to lie, so I’m surprised when she answers, “Yes. I did. You freak me out. You’re intense. And you kinda scare the shit out of me. But I like it.”

Hearing that makes me feel good. A little too good. Burying my face into her neck, I kiss the sensitive skin there and smile as her body shudders. Her next question has me seeing red. “So what do you like? Are you a Dom?”

Lifting my head away from her neck, I glare into her throat. My annoyance is clear when I snap, “Know what I don’t like? Labels.”

Her brow furrows. “Labels?”

Nodding, I confirm, “Labels.” Getting angrier by the second, I rant, “I like what I like and I make no excuses for that. Is what I like considered normal? Probably not. Yes, I think it’s clear that I enjoy being in control. Am I a Dom? No. Does that matter? No. Because I really don’t need anyone to get me unless I want them too.” My anger surges to a new level: Hulk. “Who the *fuck* is anyone to judge me? To put a label on me? No one knows me well enough to do that, and the people who do know me know that labelling me does not go well. So if you’re smart, Lex...you won’t do it.”

Lexi tries to stand. But I don’t let her up. My arm tightens around her waist and I hear panic in her voice. “I need you to let me go. I can’t think

when you're so close to me. I-I really didn't like what I saw there, Twitch. I need some time to think. Time alone."

Doing a remarkable job of suppressing my rage, I answer with a tight-lipped, "You can think later. Tonight, you stay with me. I already told Happy to arrange a car for Nicole and David."

Her dim eyes light with anger. "Why would you—? Who do you think you—?" The cutest little growl comes from her throat and she stands, dislodging my arms from her waist. She begins to pace in front of me. "Listen, I know I didn't make a big deal about you when you first started watching me. But *shit!* It's creepy when you think about it. I don't understand why I don't feel unsafe around you, but I'm sure it has something to do with the fact that you saved me from that asshole who tried to rape me." An emotion I'm not used to feeling settles over me. Guilt. She continues, "I need you to know that I'm currently in a state of *freaked the fuck out*. I won't lie. You're intriguing and attractive...well...*gorgeous*. And I was hoping to get to know you better. But now..." She stops her pacing to look into my eyes and says quietly, "...now I'm not so sure."

Women are complicated creatures. I don't know what to do with this information. It seems useless to me, but something deep in my gut tells me to listen to her.

Her shaking hands come together and she wrings them. "I need to go. And be away from you. I have a lot on my mind, and even though I like you in a weird way, you're..." She swallows hard. "...I don't think you're good for me, Twitch."

My lip curls, and before I can think of a response, the door clicks shut. I've lost her.



Lexi

As soon as I spy a smiling Happy at the bottom of the stairs, he takes one look at my face and his smile is replaced with a look of worry. Meeting me at the very last step, he wraps a large arm around my shoulders and I'm overcome with emotion. Gripping his lapel, I cry into his chest as he leads me through the back of the house to where a car is waiting.

He ushers me in, gives the driver my address, then says to me sadly, "Not everyone can be a fairy-tale hero." He pauses a moment, then adds, "The world needs villains too."

The car drives me home. I shower, then dress for bed.

I make an effort to text Nikki and Dave to let them know I'm home because I'm not feeling that great, and to party on without me.

Turning on my CD player and sliding under the covers, my last thought before I drift to sleep is how much I'm going to miss Twitch.



Twitch

Stooping to a level I never thought I'd reach, I contemplate my current position.

My mind's only excuse for what I'm doing is that I'm doing this for Lexi.

She needs me.

I need her.

I ignore my mind's voice.

Because it's wrong.



Lexi

My bed dips, a tall body slides in behind me, and a strong arm comes around my waist, pulling me back into warmth.

My heart begins to race.

That's when I smell his cologne.

I ask sleepily, "What are you doing here?"

Kissing my shoulder for a solid minute, he replies, "Ssssh. The more talking you do, the less time you're thinking. So think, Angel. I'm just gettin' some sleep."

My heart stupidly swells.

He made an effort. He's making an effort. Something tells me this is a big deal.

Leaning back into him, I whisper, "You're not going to let me go, are you?"

Burying his face into my hair, he breathes me in and orders, "Sleep. Now."

Unable to stop myself, I link my fingers with his at my hip and fall into a deep, restful slumber.

My brain at ease.

My heart content.

Lexi

Today is not going well.



Twitch

Turning left at the hall to get to Lexi's office, I stop short when I hear a raised voice.

My brow furrows.

"You just don't get it, Miss Ballentine! I have reasons. I can't tell you what they are. You're just going to have to trust me!" This comes from a young man. From the sounds of him, I'd say an adolescent.

Lexi shoots back, "Trust *you* like you *obviously* trust me?" Sarcasm drips from her voice.

I stand by the doorway and listen in on the heated exchange.

"Michael, you can't keep cutting school like this. Mr Gilbert called me four times last week to let me know you've been tardy, and I'm seriously *not* happy with lying to your principal." A pause, then more softly, "We had a deal. You keep your phone on you so I can contact you at all times. You really have no idea how much freedom I'm giving you, sweetie. Would you like to know why I treat you differently?"

I peek in.

Michael keeps his face lowered, arms crossed over his chest, chin squared in teenaged-defiance, while Lexi scoots closer to him and says quietly, "It's because you're smart, Mickey. I've been your case worker for two years now and I know smart when I see it. I also know that people are going to do what they can to make life easier, so I have to tell you how disappointed I am that Sam saw you the other day."

Michael's eyes widen, head still lowered. He shifts around nervously and swallows hard.

Lexi's sadness sounds through her voice. "I thought you weren't going to deal anymore. We had an agreement."

Michael stays quiet a long time before he whispers, "Sometimes good people have to do bad things. It's nothing personal. It's just life, Miss Ballentine."

Geez. That's rough. But he hit the nail right on the head.

I've decided I like this kid. And Lexi was right; he *is* smart.

Reacting without thinking, I stride into the office. Lexi looks up and her eyes widen. She smiles warmly before her face turns to stunned disbelief. Rushing over to me, she hisses, "What are you doing here?"

Placing a hand up to stop her from talking, I move to stand in front of Michael. "Stand up, boy."

Still sitting with his arms crossed, he looks me up and down with a curled lip before rolling his eyes and standing with a huff.

I ask, "How old are you?"

Looking to the side playing the *I'm so uninterested that I'm getting distracted* card, he replies, "I'll be seventeen next week."

"You need money?"

His face snaps up to mine.

Yeah.

I know desperation when I see it.

I state, "You need money." Making a snap decision, I tell him, "You just quit dealing. Tell Frank or Hamid that you're not dealing anymore. You tell them that you work for Twitch now and they won't give you shit."

Michael's eyes widen comically, obviously shocked that I know the name of two of Sydney's biggest dealers. He stutters, "Wh-wh-why? You don't even know me. Why would you hire me?"

Not missing a beat, I respond, "'Cause Lexi's right. You're too fucking smart to be a low-time drug dealer on the streets of Sydney. Come work for me and we'll turn you into something better. You won't be doing anything great at the start, but you got to start somewhere."

He eyes the tattoos on my neck, then looks down at the tattoos on my hands. His eyes move back up to my face and I know he's looking at the small thirteen tattooed on my cheek bone.

He's caving. And quick. I guess I expected more of a fight from him.

I ask firmly, "You in or out? 'Cause if you're out, I'll just let you know that you'll never get another opportunity like this again. I look after my employees, Michael, that's why they don't leave me."

Michael looks unsure for a second. He asks, "What's in it for you?"

My lip twitches.

Smart kid. I knew I liked him.

"A young employee who likes to learn. Someone with a fresh, untainted mind that I can teach without having to *unteach* the shit you've been taught. An employee who will work his way up. An employee who might even be *me* one day."

Michael's eyes have become both hopeful and wistful, and I know I've got him.

He nods and I smile gently, "Good." Handing him a business card, I explain, "This is your new workplace. You'll come every day after school and work with me 'til eight PM. I'll take you home myself, so you don't need to worry about that. If, at the end of the year, you decide working with me is some place you see yourself in the future, you can quit school and I'll pay for furthering your education through TAFE or university. Sound good?"

His face holds a look of disbelief and he nods slowly. Looking at his clothes, I tell him, "And dress nice, Michael."

His face falls and I could smack myself.

That was insensitive.

Reaching into my back pocket, I pull out my wallet. I take out five hundred-dollar bills and place them in his hand. "Like I was saying. Dress nice. And get a haircut too. You look like a freakin' hippy."

Dumbfounded.

That's the only word I could use to explain his expression.

He blinks down at the money, gripping it tightly. Recovering quickly, he says, "Thank you..."

"Twitch," I offer, then quickly add, "But you'll call me Mr. T."

Looking up at me, he utters, "Thanks, Mr. T. I promise I won't disappoint you."

I offer a small piece of my true self when I threaten, "You won't disappoint me, Michael. It would be very stupid of you to disappoint me."

Looking a little fearful, he says quietly, "Yes, sir."

Yes, sir.

I like that. This was a good idea.

"And if you have the slightest inkling that you're going to be late, even by a minute..." I wait to make sure he's listening. He nods quickly for me to continue. "...You call me *and* you call Miss Ballentine. I don't care what time of night or day it is. You fucking call. Got it?"

He nods vigorously. Wanting to put him at ease, I place a hand on his head and ruffle his scraggly brown hair. "Okay, boy. You're dismissed. See you Monday."

With his eyes to the money in his hand, he picks up his school bag and walks out of the office, closing the door behind him.

I inhale deeply, then exhale slowly, hoping that I somehow haven't made the wrong decision.

The boy is smart. He's quick with his words but has respect. He'll do nicely.

"What was that?" Ah. Lexi.

Fiddling with a cuff link, I tell her, "You were here, babe. Just gave the boy a job."

Walking across the office, she stands toe-to-toe with me.

And it makes me smile. A real smile.

She's so small. With her hands on her hips and her face bunched, she looks pissed at me. I don't know why she'd be pissed at me, but her stance has me a little worked up.

My eyes flash.

Sitting on the edge of her desk, I spread my knees apart and demand, "Come here, Lexi."

Bending at the waist, she whisper-hisses, "No! I will not *come here*, Lexi just because you said so! What I'm still struggling with is why you just gave my seventeen-year-old two-year case a *job* when I don't want him dealing!"

Back up.

Folding my arms across my chest, I lean back and study the floor, pursing my lips.

"You think I gave Michael a job dealing drugs for me?" I peek up at her through furrowed brows.

Her eyes lose some steam and her stance weakens. "Well, I *did*. Until you said *that*." Reaching up, she pinches the bridge of her nose. "Dammit, now I'm just confused."

Adorable. No shit.

"Babe, I gave that boy a job. A *legit* job. He needs the money for something, and he's desperate enough to turn to the streets. Not gonna happen now. He'll shadow me and be somewhat of a PA for me. You said it yourself, he's smart. He needs something better than dealing. And I promise, if he sticks with me, I'll take care of him. He'll go to school and get a degree. He'll be better off working for me."

Her face has softened, but her eyes are still wary. Rolling her eyes, she asks sarcastically, "So, what? You're just going to hire all my kids now?"

I immediately ask in all seriousness, "Would that make you happy?"

'Cause I'd fucking do it.

For her, I'd do it.

Not answering, she shakes her head and her face becomes sweet again. "I'm sorry. I jumped to conclusions and it was really shitty of me. I'm glad Michael is working for you rather than dealing. It was a nice thing to do. So, thank you, Twitch."

Patting the inside of my knee, I demand once more, "Come here, Lexi."

Looking me in the eye, she takes two steps forward to stand in-between my legs. Leaning forward, I brush the tip of my nose against hers and whisper, “You really happy about this, or you just sayin’ that?”

Her eyes close, she rubs the tip of her nose to mine again, and says huskily, “I’m really, really happy.”

I make a soft growling noise in my throat.

This little woman turns me on something fierce.

“So you’re grateful?” She opens her eyes and nods. Leaning back from her, I watch her through my hooded gaze and ask very slowly, “Grateful enough to suck my tongue?”

Her breath hitches and her eyes flash the brightest of blues.

I smile big.

She likes that.

Leaning closer, I lower my face to hers until our noses meet. Opening my mouth, I run my tongue along her lower lip. Her lips part a little and I slide my tongue into her mouth. And she sighs.

She fucking *sighs*.

As if my tongue was a fucking gift. The *best* gift she’s ever gotten.

Her lips close around my tongue and she sucks very, very gently. My already painfully-hard cock jerks in my pants. I’m craving her. I want to touch her, but this is about her showing me gratitude. My fingers curl around the edges of her desk to stop myself from kissing her back.

She sucks a little harder. Her lips are heavenly. Her hands come up to cup my cheeks, and tilting her head slightly, she sucks even harder, going so deep that our lips meet.

This is the single most erotic experience of my life.

A mewling sound escapes her and I pull back. Beautifully flushed, her eyes flutter open and I lick my lips.

I taste strawberry lip gloss.

Clearing my throat, I utter, “Gratitude displayed. Now thank me, baby.”

Asking her to thank me for letting her suck my tongue is a bit much, I’ll admit that, but she blinks before saying softly, almost dreamily, “Thank you, Twitch.”

And my cock nearly explodes.

I need to get out of here. Buttoning up my jacket, I stand. “Got shit to do, babe. I’ll call.”

Returning to her usual self, she smiles, “No. You won’t.”
Smiling back, I respond, “No. I won’t.”
Then I turn on my heel and walk away from the girl of my dreams.



Leaving Lexi’s office, I make it back to work in time for Happy to pull me aside for a rare moment of privacy. “You sort things with the girl?”

Staring him down, I search his face. My lip curls.

What the fuck is it to him?

When he catches my glare, he matches it. “Don’t look at me like that. It is my business because it’s your business. Do you remember that I own this fucking company too? Remember why you came to me for that reason? You’re too impulsive. Unhinged, even. And you know it. I just want to protect my investment. I won’t let you fuck things up for me, man. Love you like a brother, but I won’t let you do that.”

Won’t let... Won’t let me?

Taking a step towards him, fire in my eyes, he places something into my hand. Part of me begs the angry part to let it go. But the angry part...it always wins. Glancing at the business card, fury makes my brain scramble. Lifting my fist, I punch my friend square in the mouth. Stumbling back, he falls flat on his ass. Ignoring my throbbing knuckles, I shake my hand a moment to relieve the pain, then flick the business card onto his chest.

My eyes focusing on the blood dripping from the side of his mouth, I ball my hands into fists and count to ten to stop myself from attacking a second time. And a third time. My head pounds with the need to do just that. “Don’t need to talk to a fucking quack, *friend*.” I say friend in a way that makes it sound like he’s anything but. “I’m fine. I’m fucking *great*.”

Happy stands, takes out a handkerchief from his shirt pocket, and dabs at his bloody lip, panting. “That’s exactly why you need to see someone, bro.” We stare at each other. “You’re not fine. I don’t think you’ve been fine a day in your life.”

Happy is my friend, but he’s also a pain in my ass. Turning to allow myself a moment to calm the beast that resides in my head, I breathe deeply. “No quack. Subject closed. What’s on the agenda today?”

He responds immediately, “Damage control. Warehouse A.”

My brow lifts. A sadistic smile appears on my face.

Looks like I’ll be able to take out my anger on someone after all.



Sitting on a five dollar fold out chair from a hardware store, my anger builds watching the traitor who tries in vain to cover his story. But he lies.

I know lies. I’m the *king* of lies. And *his* are grating my nerves.

Happy kicks his knees out. He falls forward into a kneeling position.

The middle-aged, plump cronie shakes while pleading, “Mr. T, please, don’t do this. My family, they—”

He bites his tongue upon mentioning his family. As if I’ll go after them.

The guy doesn’t know me at all. That’s not my style.

Reaching into the back of my slacks, I pull out my .32 calibre semi-auto. She’s a beauty, but my .45 is my favorite. I won’t use my baby on this piece of shit though. I don’t want her dirtied by his filthy blood.

Looking down, right into his eyes, I hold his stare.

Using the barrel of the gun to scratch at my temple absentmindedly, I ask a second time, “What did you tell Hamid, Patrick? And don’t say ‘nothing’ because photographs don’t lie. And the way he shook your hand and smiled like he’d won the fucking lottery, I know you told him

something.” He trembles and cries. Snot runs down his nostrils and into his mouth. “Nothing? You won’t tell me?”

Standing, I take two steps towards him and sigh at the pitiful state of him. “It’s nothing personal. It’s just business.”

Raising the barrel of the gun to his forehead, I breathe deeply and close my eyes.

I exhale.

The shot rings out.



Lexi

Smiling like a dork, I’m giddy at getting some girl-time in. I really need it after this week’s occurrences.

Nikki and I have a weekly standing date at a local café. Somewhere we can meet during the week and spend our lunch hour yakking away. I don’t necessarily like today’s subject.

She stirs her coffee and avoids my eyes, looking guilty. “I don’t know anything about this guy and that worries me. I-” *Cough*, “I’ve asked around and—”

I cut her off with a gasp, “Nikki, you didn’t!”

Placing her hands up in a placating way, she adds, "I can't let me best friend go out with just anyone now, can I? It's beside the point, babe, because I couldn't come up with a damn thing. People know of him. People know about him. And people would rather swallow razor blades than gossip about Twitch. Meaning: he's not only scary, but the man keeps his shit tighter than a Vatican priest."

I'm not sure what to do with this information.

So I do nothing. And something.

I change the subject. "You do realize that it's only two weeks 'til your birthday, right?"

Completely on to me, she rolls her eyes, "Yes, mum, I do, but don't even try to change the subject, girlie." Smiling a sly smile, she whispers, "What's he like?"

She's dying to know. I can feel the want coming off of her in waves.

Thinking, I sigh and melt into my chair. "When it's good, it's the best and most beautiful thing I've ever experienced. So good, that it makes me feel bad for people who haven't had the honor." She smiles big and I add, "But when it's bad...it's *bad*, Nikki. A goddamn Greek tragedy. It's horrific. And really fucking scary." Stirring the coffee that no longer needs to be stirred, I whisper, "He scares me."

I watch as the smile falls from her face. She now wears a look of anxiety.

Reaching across the table to take her hand in mine, I tell her honestly, "But those good times..." I sigh dreamily. "I'll take the bad just so I can have the good. Because the good is outstanding. So, if you must know, I'm going with the flow and taking it as it comes."

Nikki still looks worried, but her eyes have turned dreamy.

That's what I love about Nikki. She's a total romantic at heart.

"Okay, girlie. You're smarter than anyone I know, so even though I worry about you, I know you'll do what's right for you. But promise me one thing: if it gets too intense, you'll get out, regardless of how good the *good* is."

I immediately reply, "I promise."

And then I wonder why I just lied to my best friend's face.

Twitch

The kid's got another five minutes to get here or he's fucking fired.
And that would be a shitty way to start your first day.

He hasn't called, even though he's running late, and I'm officially pissed off. If he doesn't know he's in deep shit, he'll soon find out when he gets here.

Suddenly my phone chirps.

Lexi: How's Michael's first day going? Please be nice to him. He's a good kid, Twitch.

My anger fizzles marginally.

I don't know how she does it, but she just does. My own form of anger management.

And she's afraid of you.

That sudden unwelcome thought pulls a furrow from my brow.

Me: I would tell you if he showed up.

Her reply is immediate.

Lexi: Please don't do anything rash. I'm on it.

Just as I hit reply, my office door opens and in comes Michael, head down, trudging into my office.

I quickly type to Lexi.

Me: He's here. Stand down, mama bear.

Standing, I tell him, "Nice of you to finally sho—" My words cut off mid-speak when he walks closer to me and I notice the fat lip. Standing, I meet him halfway; my brow bunches as I use my fingers to gently lift his chin. Steeling his jaw, he closes his eyes tightly and allows me to inspect him.

One black eye, a broken nose, and a busted lip.

Shit.

Someone took their fists to him. They knocked him around good. I wonder how bad his body looks right now, but I won't ask. I'll leave him with what he has left of his dignity. The kid has done what I asked and bought himself new clothes and got a neat, short haircut. The new jeans are ripped, his new sneakers scuffed, and his bright white polo shirt is blood-stained and filthy.

Letting his chin go, I place my hands on my hips and sigh, "What happened, boy?"

He speaks without emotion, "I was told to give you this."

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out a folded piece of paper, smeared with droplets of blood. I take the paper and search his face. Blood trickles down his broken nose and drips onto the Persian rug in my office. As soon as he feels it, he places his hand under his nose, catching the blood, and he whispers fearfully, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

Walking over to my desk, I pull a handful of tissue out of the box and hand it to him. He takes it with a shaking hand and I ask, truly confused, "You scared of me?"

Placing the bunched tissue on his nose, he answers, "Should I be?"

Honesty. "Yes."

Nodding, he looks me in the eyes. "Okay. That's good then. I *am* scared of you."

I like this kid. His smart mouth would normally annoy me. But with him, it doesn't. Unfolding the note, I look down and read.

You want a war, you got one.

I know the answer before I ask, but I feel I have to confirm this. War is a big deal. To some.

"This from Hamid or Frank?"

Frank's a pussy. He would never do something like this. His power was handed down from his father. I know for a fact he doesn't want the position he was given. I mean, he is a mob prince. He's an Italian mob prince who's in love with a Russian mob princess. If I were him, I'd fucking shoot myself.

Michael looks at me through wide eyes and I sigh, "Hamid, you stupid fucker."

This is definitely more Hamid's speed. He works off fear tactics. Which is not unlike myself, but my presence alone instills that in the people around me. I don't ever have to prove it. And if I do, they usually lose. Their lives, I mean. Hamid is an Iranian, sly fucking rat. He'd attack you while your back is turned. The guy is power hungry. Fuck drugs. *Power* is his drug of choice. And one day, it'll be the death of him.

Narrowing my eyes at my new PA, I ask in interest, "If you had a choice to do something to Hamid without there being any consequences, what would you do?"

Michael's eyes darken a shade. "I'd take his eye out. With something rusty. And blunt."

My lips tip up at the side. I knew I liked this kid.

Pulling out my phone, I ignore the message received and call Happy. As soon as he answers, I keep my eyes on Michael and tell my business partner, "We got an issue that needs to be dealt with. Pronto."

Happy responds, "What's up?"

"We're taking the kid off site for..." I smirk, "...training. We need ten men. Armed with something visible. Something big."

Happy laughs, "Oh shit. Someone's gonna get fucked up."

Smiling, I bite the tip of my tongue. "Hell yeah. You down with that?"

Happy turns serious, "You know I got your back, bro. Always."

And he does. I don't know where I'd be without Happy or Julius.

I simply respond, "Ten minutes."

Placing the corner of my phone in the dip in my chin, I hold it there a moment, lips pursed in thought. Pointing the phone at Michael, I tell him, "Get your face sorted. We start training in ten minutes."

The look of disbelief on his face is funny. So funny that I chuckle, walk over to him, and clap him on the shoulder. "Don't worry. You're gonna love it."

I walk out of my office wearing a grin.



Taking three SUV's over to the warehouse being used to package Hamid's gear puts on enough of a show that the man comes out to greet us himself.

Hamid stands at the delivery dock wearing a cocky smirk, black slacks, and a black shirt. His hair spiked in a youthful style, there is nothing about this man that would lead to you guessing his background. His pale skin, green almond-shaped eyes, average height, and black hair shows nothing of his Iranian culture.

As all three cars come to a stop, and all ten visibly-armed men, plus one beaten adolescent exit the vehicles, I swear he begins to sweat.

He should be.

He'll remember today for as long as he lives.

Waiting for my men to form a line behind me, I click my fingers at Michael, then point to my side. He joins me quickly enough. Happy stands on his free side, forming a protective barrier around my newest employee.

As soon as Hamid sees this, he knows he's made a mistake. His eyes flash, then narrow in confusion, then widen as he swallows hard.

We approach the nervous man. He greets us, "*Salam*, Twitch. Happy. To what do I owe this pleasure?" His thick accent a reminder that he's only lived in Australia a few short years.

This pisses me off. My eye twitches as I grit my teeth and say in dead calm, "You declared war. And beat my personal assistant, making him late for his first day. I think you know exactly why I'm here, Hamid. You dare greet us with the Persian word for peace?"

Yeah, that's right, fuckhead. I know what salam means.

Hamid's smile falls. "I did not realize he was an employee of yours. The boy—"

Michael cuts him off, "Actually, boss, it's the first thing I told him."

And I want to burst into laughter at the look of discomfit on Hamid's face. Truly, I'm not as angry as I could be, but this man needs a lesson in what happens when you fuck with me and mine.

You have to be prepared for war should you declare it.

"Is this true?" I ask Hamid.

Glaring at Michael, he answers, "I thought the boy was lying to get out of work. I also believed you were poaching my men, starting with this one." His fingers motion in Michael's direction. "Obviously, I was wrong. I apologize."

Nodding, I gesture to the warehouse. "I think we need to talk about more than just that. Don't you?"

Not trusting my calm tone, his eyes narrow on me for only a moment before he smiles, "Of course. Please come in."

He leads us to the warehouse office where he turns and states, "It would be wise to leave your men outside. I would not like my mules to be discouraged by thinking something was wrong."

Mules. This is what some drug manufacturers call the people packing their gear, as well as taking it over to assigned dealers. Seeing as the men being here was all for looks anyways, I nod to Happy, who tells them all to wait outside for us.

Michael tries to stay behind with the men, but I nod to my side. He scuttles over with his head down. When Happy joins us, Hamid asks, "A drink, perhaps?"

I scowl at him. He watches me for a full minute before he smirks and takes a seat behind his desk. "All this animosity over a child?"

The three of us stand in front of his desk. Happy pipes up, "All this animosity over *war*."

Hamid waves a dismissive hand, "That was before I realized you weren't poaching my men."

I state, "Patrick says hello."

Hamid blanches. The fact that I had to get rid of one of my men because of this asshole grinds my gears. He sputters, "W-what do you mean?"

Ignoring his attempt at playing dumb, I tell him, "Of course, where he is right now, it'll be hard for you to contact him again." I tilt my head and narrow my eyes at him. "Very hard. You could say that he's gone... *underground*...for a while."

Happy adds, "A *very* long while. He might never even resurface."

Hamid's false bravado disappears and a look of worry crosses his face. "I did not go to him. *He* came to *me*! And he said nothing of which I didn't already know. Now, we have spoken, and I have apologized; there is no need for this. We can go our separate ways and forget about it." Although he tries to make it sound like a statement, it comes out more as a plea.

Happy and I look at each other a long moment before Happy nods in my direction. I smirk internally. Walking around the desk, I speak as I go, "You know what? I think you're right. I don't think Patrick told you anything you didn't already know. But I do think you knew exactly why Michael was leaving you. And I don't think you liked losing a man to me, did you?"

Hamid scowls. I push further. "Did you?"

He responds with an acid tongue. "It does not matter, Twitch. It is over. There will be no war. I will not apologize a second time. I think it's time for you and your men to leave."

Finally reaching the back of his chair, I lean forward over his head and whisper loud enough for all four of us to hear, "All's fair in love and war."

As quick as a snake strike, my forearm goes around his neck and tightens enough to cut off his air. Happy doesn't react, but Michael whispers, "Holy shit."

Hamid reaches up and claws at my arms. It gets him nowhere. And this is the point where I look over at Happy and jerk my chin towards him. He comes forward as I lift Hamid by his neck out of his chair and stand him up. Happy comes from behind him and takes my place by putting Hamid in a chokehold. Breathing deeply, I tell Hamid, "You know, I wish people wouldn't force me to do things like this." Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my ivory switchblade and extend the blade. "Unfortunately, you leave me no choice with your blatant disrespect. And I've let that go on too long. So today will be your one and only lesson from me."

Lack of air makes the pressure build in his now-maroon-colored face. He chokes out, fear in his eyes, "What are you going to do?"

Looking into his left eye, then his right, I state robotically, "An eye for an eye."

Happy's hold on his throat tightens, he shoves a balled handkerchief into his mouth, and covers it with his free hand. Hamid struggles against his hold, his loud cries muffled. The man is petrified. I could let him go right

now. It would be a lesson taught to him, but that lesson would be soon forgotten. I want this fucker to wake up every morning with me on his mind.

I want him to remember me for the rest of his miserable life.

Clinically, I tell Happy, “Hold him still. I don’t want to take them both out.”

Hamid’s eyes widen a moment before he struggles harder and closes his eyes, tears rolling out of the corners. When I hear trickling, I look down to see the man has pissed himself. The smell of ammonia strong in the air, I glare at him. “Motherfucker. Let’s do this.”

A cut here.

Hamid screams until he’s hoarse, muffled by Happy’s makeshift gag.

A slice here.

He whimpers. His body shakes uncontrollably, going into a state of shock. His hands claw at air.

A gouge there.

His breathing heavies and his body stills, alerting me to the fact that he’s passed out.

Damn. Lucky son of a bitch.

What should probably be sad is that I feel little to nothing about doing this. There is no twinge in the back of my head telling me to stop. No emotion. There is just...*nothing*. My mind and I are completely at ease doing this to someone we believe is at fault. Someone who needs to be taught a lesson.

When I’m satisfied with my handiwork, I walk over to the door at the side of the office and open it. The bathroom is small, but it’ll do. I don’t like his blood on me.

Washing and washing and washing until I’m sure my hands are clean, I walk back out to the office to see Michael leaning over Hamid’s ashen face and twitching body, taking in his now-gaping eye socket with wide eyes. Happy stands to the side, also watching carefully to see what Michael will do.

Michael asks an empty, “Will he die?”

I answer softly, “No. But he’ll wish he did.”

The boy looks up at me, “Did you do this for—” He looks embarrassed. “For me?”

“Partly,” I tell him. And it’s the truth. No one fucks with my employees. But Hamid had it coming. If it wasn’t me, it would’ve been someone else. He’s lucky it was me, because he will live another day to be the rat he is.

Michael nods. I look over to Happy, his eyes still trained on the boy, an impressed look on his face.

Yes. He’ll do nicely.

Pulling out my wallet, I remove my business card from it and walk over to the desk to write a note for Hamid when he comes to.

Declaring war was a mistake. For the record...I won.

I always win.

Walking over his limp body, I let the card flutter down onto his chest and walk towards the exit, men in tow. As we approach the SUV, I hail one of Hamid’s goons and state, “You want your boss to live, you’ll call an ambulance. Right now.”

His eyes widen before he runs towards the office. My men packed up and ready to leave, we roll out to the sounds of hell breaking loose.

Turning to Michael, who sits next to me, he watches me through wide eyes.

I smirk and tousle his hair.

Yes.

The boy will do fine.



Lexi

Turning the key to unlock my unit, I wonder why Twitch never responded to my message asking if Michael is okay.

Face bunched in confusion, I hang up my coat, set down my bag on the breakfast bar, and walk towards my room. Stopping mid-step halfway down the hall, I listen closely.

The shower runs.

“Twitch?” I call out.

A familiar voice calls out, “No, baby. It’s me.” Dave. My smile dies as soon as he adds, “And we’re going to talk about why you think that strange man is in your shower as soon as I get out.”

Shit.

My phone pings.

Nikki: Girls night! Whoo! Be there soon x

Girls night? Tonight? There’s no way I would’ve forgotten something like that.

Having had a shower this morning, I dress in sweats and a tank, then spray the crap out of myself with deodorant.

You know...just in case.

As I walk into the kitchen, the bathroom door opens and I hear thumping footsteps coming towards me. Dressed in only a towel and still wet from his shower, Dave engulfs me in a bear hug that I’m not ready for. Faceplanting into his wet chest, the ass hugs me tighter when I say a panicked and muffled, “Can’t. Breathe!”

Pinching his side, he chuckles and hugs me harder. Literally having my air supply cut off by a hard chest, I act on instinct. Given no other choice, I bite his nipple. Hard.

Dave yelps and jumps away from me, looking miffed but still grinning, “That hurt, bitchflaps!”

Placing a hand on my hip and breathing heavily, I screech, “I was almost suffocated by man-boob!”

Dave gasps, “Those *boobs* are muscular, fabulous pecs, ho!”

Unable to stop myself from laughing at his offended expression, I ask warily, while running a hand down my face, “Why’d you call a girls night?”

What's up?"

He smiles like a goddamn loon. "All in good time. Nikki needs to be here for this."

Rolling my eyes, I turn and walk into the kitchen, making sure to have *Cocoa à la Lexi* ready for whatever news my friend is going to tell us.

Lexi

Placing the cocoa on a tray, I walk it over to my coffee table just as the front door to my unit opens. Looking up, I find a much too happy Nikki strolling in with a container.

A container full of...

“Double choc, peanut butter niknaks?” I almost screech. “You made *double choc, peanut butter niknaks?*”

Taking in her grin, I bounce on the spot in excitement. Those niknaks are the shit.

“What’s the occasion?” I ask from her side, reaching into the container. Slapping my hand away, she chuckles at my forlorn expression and utters, “All in good time, honey.”

When Dave strolls into the living area dressed in light grey sweat sans tee, towel drying his hair, he takes one look at Nikki and grins cockily, “I’m so glad you’re here!”

She sends him an equally winning smile and lays on the sweetness a little too thick. “Oh, sweetie, I missed you too! Come have a niknak.”

Dave spies the niknaks. His face pulls into a frown. Almost asking himself, he mutters, “Why do we have niknaks today?”

Nikki motions for us both to sit and says, “No. You go first! Tell us your big news!”

Dave, looking like a child being told he is allowed to jump on the bouncy castle, sits and starts, “Whelp. I know we had a little competition going on the other night with who would nail Happy...” Holy shit, this is news to me! My eyes widen in shock as he continues, “...so I hope there’s no hard feelings, sweet cheeks.”

Nikki’s eyes narrow dangerously. “What do you mean?”

Reaching for his cocoa, he sips then smirks into his mug. “I won.”

Nikki pulls the cocoa out of his hands and Dave glares at her, “Hey, it’s no big deal. He’s just into guy—”

But she cuts him off with an abrupt, “When? When did you fuck him?”

Dave clears his throat, “Well, technically, *he* fucked *me*. And the event occurred last night.”

Well. This is awkward. I wish the ground would swallow me up.

A small smile breaks out on Nikki’s face and I’m not sure what to make of it. It’s almost like the Mona Lisa smile. I narrow my eyes while searching her face. She’s hiding something.

Dave blinks a moment before he blurts out, “Well, this sucks. I thought I’d feel all triumphant, but now I just feel like poo on a shoe! Thanks, Nikki. Thanks a lot,” then shoves not one, but two nikkaks into his mouth in an attempt to show his current state of depression.

My wide eyes drift from Nikki to Dave, while trying to blend into the background like a chameleon.

I read somewhere that they can smell fear. Be still and impersonate a leaf.

That’s when Nikki picks up a nikkak and nibbles on it. With a sigh, she looks upset as she tells Dave, “Don’t sweat it, babe. But you’re wrong.”

Still nibbling her treat, Dave looks confused as he asks her, “What do you mean I’m wrong?”

Shoving the nikkak into her mouth, she replies a garbled, “Oo didit in. I id.”

Dave and I look at each other, unable to decipher her food-talk. Dave shrugs. “Yeah, I didn’t quite catch that.”

Taking her time chewing, she finally swallows, stands, and points at Dave, shouting, “You didn’t win! *I* did!”

Poor Dave. His level of confusion just went from *I don’t get it* to *I’m special*.

He mutters, “What? Whe—?” Gasping, he stands, points right back at Nikki, and yells, “Extra-long bathroom break at the masque!” Narrowing his eyes accusingly, he shakes his finger in her face. “There was no line, was there? You were getting porked! By the hottie!”

I can only watch in surprise as Nikki curtsies and announces, “Best fifteen minutes I ever spent in a bathroom.”

Unable to stand being a mere spectator any longer, I also stand and holler, “Who are you people and what have you done with my best friends?”

Nikki and Dave look shocked at my outburst before they look at each other and burst into laughter.

Dave moves to stand by Nikki, wrapping an arm around her waist. “Honey, this isn’t news. We do stuff like this all the time. You know? Playing *who can get the guy*.”

Nikki leans into Dave and nods, “Yeah. He’s right. Not the first time. Won’t be the last, either.”

I’m dumbstruck. Mouth gaping, I clarify, “So neither of you are pissed at each other? You don’t care that you’ve slept with the same guy?”

Nikki scoffs, “No way. It’s all just for fun. We haven’t done it in a long time. Not since Dave and Phil were together, so it was overdue.”

Dave chuckles, “Yeah, we’ve even done three in a bed—” Nikki’s eyes widen as she elbows Dave in the ribs. He scowls at her, “Ow! What the hell was that for?”

My jaw hits the floor.

No. Effing. Way.

Leaning forward, I whisper-hiss, “You guys have done threesomes together?”

Dave’s eyes narrow at my outburst. He quickly realizes why Nikki elbowed him to keep his mouth shut. Slowly walking towards me, his eyes watch me carefully as he says, “Yes, baby, we have.”

I’m a little miffed that I didn’t know this. Best friends tell each other things like this. When he spots my obvious hurt, he wraps me up in a hug. “It’s got nothing to do with how we feel about you, babe. We were both just in places where we didn’t want you to judge us for what we like. I’m not saying you would’ve done that, but the possibility was enough to make us keep it to ourselves. We love you.”

Taking a moment to ponder what he just said, I wrap my arms around his waist and squeeze him tightly. Arms come around me from the back and Nikki kisses my hair. “We do love you, Lex. Thinking you wouldn’t get it or think we were weird was scary as fuck. Do you think we’re weird?”

God, are they right? Am I *judgy*? I thought I was pretty open-minded, but my initial reaction shows that’s not entirely true.

If they only knew about the things Twitch likes to do to you...

Sweet lord in heaven. Here I am, silently judging them when I've done the same thing. I haven't told either of them the extent of my sexual relationship with Twitch; all I've told them is he likes it rough. They know nothing of his need for constant control, or the belt...

Sigh.

The belt. I love the belt.

Swallowing hard, I realize I'm not unlike them. And now that I've had a moment to gather myself, I tell them both, "No! I don't think you're weird, guys. It was just a shock. I guess I felt left out a little. So if you want to look at it like that...*I'm* the weird one!"

Group-hugging a little while longer, we release each other and spend most of the night chatting and eating nikkaks. Around eleven, my friends leave. Waving them off, I shut the door behind me and make my way down the hall to my room.

As soon as the door opens, my heart skips a beat.

Smiling a small smile, I listen to the footsteps as they make the slow decent towards me. Once my unexpected visitor reaches my back, his arms wrap around my waist, pulling me into him. Reaching back, I stroke his hair gently and say quietly, "Michael. He's okay?"

Twitch sighs, "Been waiting most of the fuckin' night for your friends to leave, so I don't really wanna talk right now, Angel."

He's been *waiting*? Waiting patiently like a gentleman? Whoa. That is big. No, it's *huge*.

Turning in his arms, I look up at him. With the lights off in my room, an angelic glow provided by the kitchen light in the distance covers his face. "You waited?"

His brow furrows in thought, as if he hadn't even considered that fact. "Yeah. I guess I did."

And I can't stop myself. Reaching up, I cup his cheeks and pull him down to me. Our lips connect. His arms tighten around my waist, but his lips don't respond to mine. "Kiss me," I beg on a whisper.

He whispers back against my lips, "Naw. I like when you kiss me."

Smiling against his mouth, I feel his returning smile and my heart swells.

Something is different about him tonight. There's something more to him this time.

Something *warm*.

His arms loosen, his hands slide down my hips, and he slowly cups my ass, squeezing. Hooking his thumbs into my sweatpants, he pushes them down, along with my panties. My most sensitive place throbs and I flood.

Walking me back to my bed, he pushes me, and I land with a bounce on my back. Looking me in the eye, he states, "You move, I stop." Lowering his face to my already-clenching core, he says, "Be vocal. I like to hear you."

Draping my legs over his shoulders and back, he kneels on the floor at the edge of my bed and takes a long, hot swipe of my pussy. Electricity flows through my veins. My body trembles as I let out a soft sigh. He licks twice more before he utters, "Never tasted anything like you before. Never had a pussy that tasted sweet." Flattening his tongue, he laps at my entry over and over and over again before saying, "If I could eat your pussy all day, every day, I'd fuckin' find a way to make it my job."

His words, although vulgar, are the sweetest things I've heard come out of his mouth since I've known him. Reaching up between my legs, I run my fingers through his hair, and his licking turns to sucking. My hips jerk involuntarily, pushing myself deeper into his face.

I moan loudly. He growls and sucks in perfect rhythm.

My eyes roll back when he flicks my clit with his tongue. My breathing turns heavy, and my thighs clench around his head.

"Do not come, Lexi."

Oh, you motherf—...frack you!

I'm so close I can taste it. Barely above a whisper, I chant, "Please, please, please."

With one final swipe of his tongue, he stands. And I want to kick him for teasing me. So I do.

I kick out at his hip, and when my foot taps him, he looks down at his hip with a frown, then back up at me. And suddenly, my annoyance is replaced with concern. All I can think is, "*Oh damn. I'm in trouble.*"

With a growl, he throws himself onto me and I squeal. His arms wrap around me and he flips us so I'm on top of him. I want to cry. I know he has anger issues and I provoked him. What the *hell* is wrong with me? My heart

races. I'm petrified. Then I feel something that makes me go from worried to mad in one second flat.

"What are you laughing at?" I ask defiantly.

Straddling his lap, I push on his chest and he laughs harder. "It's not funny, Twitch! I could've hurt you!"

His laughter borderlines hysterical. Crossing my arms over my chest, I glare at him and wait til he gets his laughter under control. When he breathes deeply and smiles up at me, my anger melts away. Pushing my hair behind my ear, he says, "Today was a bad day. So I come here to unwind, spend some time with my mouth on you, wanting your mouth on me. I didn't come here expecting to laugh like that. I haven't laughed like that since I was a teenager. And most of that type of laughter when I was a teen was because I was high as a fucking kite."

That makes me sad.

When he eyes my gloomy face, he smiles harder, "Fuckin' funny."

His eyes darken suddenly, and he sits up so we're chest-to-chest. "Don't think I forgot about your temper tantrum." Wrapping one arm around my back, his free hand slides down to my bare ass and squeezes hard enough to make me wince. Starting at my neck, he kisses a trail up my jaw, to my cheek, then finally at the corner of my lips. "Kiss me, Angel."

My breathing heavy, my eyes hooded, I answer on a hoarse whisper, "Okay, baby."

Brushing his lips over mine, I tilt my head slightly and lean into him. The kiss is slow but deep, and when his lips close over mine, I realize he's actually kissing me back this time. His hand kneading my ass, I fall into a dream-like state. A dream-like state that doesn't last long.

Thwack!

Crying out into his mouth, he kisses me harder as my ass cheek goes numb a second before it throbs.

Thwack!

Whimpering, my face contorts in pain. His hand caresses the throbbing area, and suddenly my brain interrupts the pain broadcast, thinking, "*Whoa. Is that meant to feel nice?*"

Thwack

Harder than the first two, I pull away from his mouth, and tilting my head back, I cry out. My eyes widen a moment. Wetness forms between my

legs.

Thwack!

My mouth forms an *O* in a silent scream. Our eyes meet, neither of us giving anything away. His hand runs over the sore, hot flesh before trailing low, lower to touch the puckered flesh. I tense. His fingers linger there a moment before he uses a fingertip to test the state of my arousal.

My cheeks heat. The ones on my *face*.

Normal people don't get off on stuff like this.

Twitch runs his fingertip up and down my wet and warm flesh. His eyes flash a moment, then darken, and he shuts them on a groan, "You need to sit on my cock."

Rolling us both to the side, he sets me down a moment before frantically undoing his belt and removing his slacks, shirt, and suspenders in record time. Standing in front of me, he strokes his thick, long cock; the silver balls twinkle in the subdued light. Lying next to me, he continues to stroke his cock. Turning, he mutters, "Ride me."

He doesn't need to ask me a second time. Climbing on all fours, I put one leg over and mount him. We're both ready. There's no need to waste time. Reaching behind me, I hold his cock up, line him up with my entrance and slowly sit, allowing the head of him into me.

Giving myself a moment to adjust, I place both hands on his chest, looking down at him as he grips my hips. He watches me through lust-hooded eyes. And suddenly, an unexpected wave of emotion passes through me. Reaching up, I stroke the inked thirteen on the apple of his cheek. I feel scarred flesh under the tattoo.

You wouldn't guess that thirteen is hiding a scar just from looking.

Shaking my head and closing my eyes, I pull my hand away. A tight grip on my wrist stops me, bringing my hand back to his cheek. He leans into my touch, almost like a cat. Turning his head, he kisses the inside of my wrist. And my throat clogs.

Do not fall in love with him!

Yeah. That would be all sorts of fucked up.

Needing the distraction from this heavy moment, I seat myself further down onto him, further still, until my ass meets his crotch. Feeling full and hot, my eyes flutter. He feels amazing.

Looking up at him, his brow furrows in what looks to be confusion.

Reaching up, he joins my hands with his, linking our fingers, and rests the backs of his hands on the bed by his head.

This is becoming too much. My throat thickens to the point where I can't swallow.

He's giving me control.

A hoarse whisper escapes me, "Don't play games with me."

Rather than answering me, he leans his face up and my chest aches. Leaning down, my lips connect with his in a sweet and gentle kiss. Against my lips, he mumbles, "Perfect."

Shit. This is intense.

Deepening our kiss, I begin a rocking motion and swallow his deep groan. Slow and steady, up and down, he allows me complete control over what's happening here. We rock together, kissing, touching, *connecting* in a way I never thought possible with a man like him. Pulling back slightly, I kiss his lips softly. Pressing whispers of kisses all over his face. His cheeks, his eyes, his nose, then finally back to his soft full lips, all the while grinding deeply onto him.

Lifting myself to a sitting position, I gasp as I find the spot. You know? *That spot.*

His eyes trained on me, he watches me come closer and closer to my release. I tighten around him and I'm there. My spine tingles; closing my eyes, white spots flash before me as I moan. Suddenly, my eyes snap open and I look down at him, holding back my release. His mouth parted, he nods, giving me what I need.

Permission.

My heart races. Tilting my head back, I moan long and low as the first contraction grips him tightly. Letting go of me, his hands span my hips. He holds me firmly, thrusting up into me. My core clenches around him and ecstasy flows through me.

The very last of my contractions subsides. I feel his cock swell inside of me. Pulling my hips down hard, my eyes meet his as he silently goes through his release, stomach clenching, never taking his soft brown eyes off mine.

Panting fills my room. Neither one of us makes an effort to disconnect. The thought of not having him inside of me right now makes my stomach dip in anxiety. As if he senses this, he rolls us over so I lie on my back.

Never leaving my body, he rests his forehead in the crook of my neck, kissing my collarbone, and my body relaxes completely.

Wrapping my arms around him, I grip the back of his neck with one hand, the other stroking his hair. My arms wrap around Twitch, and his unconsciously squeeze me tightly.

I could do this forever.

That was my last thought before I fell asleep.

Lexi

Making my way into work, I feel the eyes of people beaming at me like lasers, clearly confused at the obvious spring in my step.

“Good morning everyone,” I greet with a sly smile on my face. I’m pretty darn sure the thought on my co-workers minds is, “*Well, shit. Somebody got the business.*”

And I did get the business.

Twitch is very good at giving me the business. But last night, it was more.

He gave me control of something he’s not used to passing the reins on. And what’s more is he didn’t sweat it. He didn’t get angry or frustrated. He showed me in his own subtle way that he trusts me. Which is a bucket load of awesome.

And it was amazing. It was also extremely emotional. Like watching a baby turtle hatch and make its way to the ocean on its own. It was slow. We took our time. But it was totally worth it.

If I had the energy to, I would’ve clapped and cheered at the end of it.

You can’t rush the progression of a person. It has to be done in their own time. You can push a person to change, but the only time the change will stick is when it’s something they want to achieve on their own.

When I woke this morning alone, it took me a while to get my suddenly-miserable ass out of bed. I made my way into the kitchen and saw a folded piece of paper taped onto the refrigerator door. Narrowing my eyes at the piece of paper, I looked left then right, making sure I wasn’t being watched, then plucked the paper from the door and opened it.

And what I saw lifted my mood from a *Class A glum chum* to a *Class B rainbow fairy*.

And rainbow fairies are pretty damn happy.

Well, if they're not, they should be. They make rainbows for chrissakes!
Reading the note a second time, I leaned my hip on the kitchen counter and sighed.

Dinner. 6pm. Staying with me tonight. I'll send a car. Dress nice.

Chuckling, I looked down at the command I'm given almost every time we're together.

Dress nice.

I desperately needed to go shopping. Which is why I text Nikki, asking her to meet me for lunch.

Walking into my office, I stop in my track when I see Michael sitting behind my desk. Glaring at him, my fists ball by my sides and I grit my teeth. "You'd better have a good reason for skipping school, Mickey."

He grins, "Pupil free-day."

My steam evaporates and I stroll all the way into my office, "Well, that's a pretty good reason, I'd say." Winking at him, I walk all the way over to him and sigh. Twitch told me he'd been roughed up. He also told me he dealt with it. When I asked what had happened, he threw seriousness in my face and said in dead calm, "*Don't ask, don't tell.*"

That obviously made me feel about as relaxed as a person with a boil on their eye.

Taking Michael's face in my hands, I look down at him with sad eyes. "Let me look at you, sweetie."

His nose swollen and crooked, his lip cut at the left side, and his eye black but the swelling seeming to have gone, I decide to play it cool and not show just how much I'm freaking out over the fact that one of my kids was beaten. And beaten good.

Still cupping his cheek, I run a hand through his now short and neat do. "You okay?"

His eyes close at the feel of my fingers in his hair.

My chest pangs.

How long has it been since someone has shown Michael motherly affection?

My guess is a long stinking time.

Eyes closed, he mumbles, "I'm good. Nothing I haven't been through before. I love my job."

That makes me smile. A genuine smile.

Releasing him from my clutches, I cluck, “Good! No, great! How’s your new boss?”

Okay. I’m officially fishing for information. Can you blame me?

Michael dips his chin and smiles softly. “I don’t know where that guy came from, Miss Ballentine. But I’m grateful.” Looking up at me, his face turns serious. “The way he took care of what happened...” His eyes widen and he shakes his head. “Your boyfriend is seriously fucking scary.”

Rather than correct his assumption, I scowl at him. “Language.”

Looking into me with empty eyes, he utters distractedly, “Sorry. He was all cut, stab, and gouge, and I was just like *what?* And then he was all smiley again, like nothing happened, and I was seriously freaking out worrying.” His eyes meet mine, and Michael comes back from the trip delved deep into his mind. “But I think he likes me.” He smiles.

He looks so happy. But I’m still stuck on *cut, stab, and gouge*.

My blood runs cold.

Clearing my throat, I turn my back to him and ask in false cheer, “What are your plans today?”

I hear Michael stand. “Work. I should get going. Mr. T wouldn’t be happy if I was late.”

Pretending to fetch some books from the shelf at the side of the room, I call out, “Okay, Mickey. Be safe.”

The door closes behind him, and placing a hand to my heaving chest, I wonder how I’m going to get through dinner tonight.

Cancelling on Twitch is not an option.



Sitting in the back of the car, smoothing down my little black dress which doesn’t need smoothing, I hyperventilate a little more and think

about how I bring up what Michael told me today.

Having decided I would wait until dinner is over, I do my best at placing a poker face on as the door to my side opens and the mature, greying driver holds a hand out to me. Placing my hand in his, I step out and come face-to-face with Twitch. His eyes crinkle in the corners, but then he loses his smile when he spots my dress and heels. His already hooded eyes hood a wee bit more, and he leans in, placing his lips at my cheek in a gesture of affection that takes me aback.

Breaking out into goosebumps, I shiver and close my eyes.

Twitch takes my small hand in his large tattooed one and leads me towards the front door of the quaint little Italian restaurant.

His choice of venue surprises me. This doesn't look like something he would choose. He looks the type to choose fancy. Or expensive. And modern.

Not sweet, warm, and delicious.

We stand in line waiting to be seated when an older man comes towards us wearing a white shirt and a white chef's hat, wiping his wet hands with a dish towel, and speaking rapid-fire Italian.

Twitch grins at the man before letting go of my hand and taking a step towards him. The older man kisses his cheeks, still talking up a storm. With his animated hand gestures and playful scowls, I can't help but smile at him. He pinches Twitch's cheek hard, shakes it a little, then let's go, but not before slapping his cheek.

And the thought of someone treating him in such a way is a shock. So much of a shock that my eyes widen and I have to bite my lip hard to hold in my laughter.

When the man spots me, he does a double-take, and his enthusiastic speech halts. Smiling a sweet smile, he says, "Hello. I'm Joe."

Holding out a hand to me, I take it and smile genuinely. "I'm Lexi. Nice to meet you, Joe."

Twitch rolls his eyes at the man. "Just get us a table, old man. We're hungry."

Elbowing Twitch, he mutters, "I'll give you *old man*."

Escorting us to our table in the back corner, away from the other patrons, I look around and thank God for the privacy. I want tonight to be

the night we finally talk about more than just business. I want to know more about him, but I have to do this in a sneaky way.

I have to make him answer questions without it seeming like I'm asking any.

Picking up my menu, Joe snatches it out of my hand with a heartbroken look. "No, lady. No. It's your first night with us, so I get the honour of choosing what you'll eat." My heart sinks. What if he chooses something I don't like? This could be disastrous. Spotting my anxious face, Joe smiles. "Don't look at me like that. You'll like it. I promise."

Looking across the small table to Twitch, he rests his elbows on the table, linking his hands together just under his chin. He lifts his brows in a way that says, "*Don't bother arguing.*"

So I don't.

Putting on a bright smile, I tell Joe, "That's fine by me. But I should let you know, I don't love seafood."

Already walking away, Joe calls out, "Noted!"

Twitch utters, "Already told him about the seafood. And peppers. And peas."

My brow furrows in confusion only a moment before I remember Twitch has a habit of watching me.

I blurt out, "Do you still watch me?"

So much for sliding the questions in there. My mind slaps its forehead.

Picking up a bread stick, he leans back in his chair and stares at me. Taking a bite of the carby goodness, he nods once. So I ask more gently this time, "When was the last time you watched me?"

Swallowing his mouthful, he sits straighter in his chair. "Today. You and Nicole did some shopping."

I was not expecting that. Mumbling, "Okay," I watch as he takes a packet of chocolate buttons from his pocket. Already open, he shoves a handful into his mouth and chews.

Distracted from my train of thought, I utter through a small smile, "I don't get it? You don't seem like the colorful chocolate buttons type."

"Yeah, well, it's better than going through a shitload of crack."

That shuts me up. The smile falls off my face.

"I was an addict. I saw what it was doing to me and I quit. Cold turkey. Made Happy take me to the Kimberly's in W.A., lock me in a cabin, and

guard the door at gun point. I told him if I tried to leave, to shoot me.”

Happy? No way. I scoff, “That’s harsh. As if he would shoot you.”

Chewing another handful of chocolate, he barks a laugh. “Damn, girl. He emptied an entire clip around me, forcing me back in.” His smile fades, his face falls, and his eyes lose focus. “You have no idea what withdrawal is like. I swear I could’ve killed someone for a hit that first day. I spent three days puking, feeling as if I was dying, and clawing at my skin. I scratched at my whole body, opening wounds all over. It wasn’t pretty. I pulled a nail clean off just for the distraction. It was fucked. But it’s over.”

My mouth gapes. “Are you telling me you performed a DIY rehab on yourself?”

He nods solemnly.

I can’t believe it. Most of the kids I meet on the street are addicted to something or another, and it takes intense rehab, sometimes for months to get them out of the habit. Some even go back to using. So hearing that Twitch forced himself to rehabilitate...

Its remarkable. Truly remarkable.

I’m beyond impressed with his self-control.

This is the most he’s ever told me, and while I’m on a roll, I ask on a whisper, “Why me?”

This question makes him uncomfortable. I know this from his sudden squirming, and for a moment, I wonder if I pushed too far, too early. That’s when he answers, “Because you’re you.”

He says this as if that should explain it all. But I’m not satisfied with that. I ask, “How long have you been watching me?”

Looking me in the eye, his stare intensifies, “A long time.”

Clearing his throat, he leans forward and says things I never expected to hear. “When you’re an addict, becoming addicted to things is easy to do. And that’s a bit what I’m like. I have an addictive personality. So I stopped drugs, but got hooked on candy. Then I started going to the gym once a week to work off the candy. But it became an obsession. I need to work out three times a day. Then with you...” His gaze softens. “I told myself I would watch you the one time...” He trails off. And although I don’t get it, I understand what he’s saying.

It should be making me sweat, *not* making my heart swell the way it is. “I’m an addiction?”

He responds quietly, “The worst one. There’s no cure for *that* addiction.”

I respond breathily, “Oh.”

Suddenly frowning, he states, “I’m not a good person.” Leaning away from me, he adds, “You think a person like me deserves your type of goodness? No. I’ll tell you right now that I don’t.” Seeming frustrated with himself, he bites his thumbnail. “The thing is, I’m selfish. And I don’t give a fuck about what I deserve. All I care about is what I want. And I want you so fuckin’ bad that I’d do almost anything to keep you.”

Alarm bells ring in my head, but my heart flaps its hands their way, shushing them.

Once again, “Oh.” So quiet, I barely hear myself.

My mouth opens, ready to ask another question, when I spot Joe leading two men our way, their arms full of plates of food. A bubble of laughter pops out of me, and Twitch turns to look their way. He smiles and shakes his head.

Joe has one waiter bring over another table for all our plates. Each time he places one down, he explains in detail what the dish is and which part of Italy it originated from. We have steak, pasta, gnocchi, soup, a cheese platter, and thinly sliced prosciutto.

It looks heavenly.

Leaving us to eat with nothing more than a wink, I don’t wait for Twitch as I dig in to the gnocchi with rosé sugo. I love gnocchi. I think gnocchi is seriously underrated. And this gnocchi is light and fluffy, like little cloud pillows that melt in my mouth. I believe my view needs to be vocalized. “Gnocchi is so delicious. I think it’s one of the most underrated foods. People should know how delicious gnocchi is.”

Twitch chews on his forkful of pasta and garbles, “I think you just like saying *gnocchi*.”

With an almost regal nod, I confirm his suspicion with a quiet, “That too.”

We talk a little more, much to my delight, and I find out that Twitch was a runaway who ended up in juvie for four years until his sixteenth birthday. I’d love to say this is an unlikely story, but working my job, I see it all the time.

“What were you in juvie for?” I ask, nibbling on some provolone cheese.

“Assault and battery.”

“That’s a long time for a child to go to juvie for assault.”

That’s when he adds vaguely, “Assault and battery of a police officer.”

My lips purse. Yeah. That’d do it.

Rolling up a slice of prosciutto, I fiddle with it longer than I should.

“And the tattoos?”

He shrugs. “I got my first one at juvenile hall when I was fourteen. Then it became an addiction.” He wiggles his brows at the word *addiction*. “We didn’t have the right tools to make em look any good though. We used pins and pen ink. More often than not, they got infected.” He laughs, “A lot of the basic tattoos I had covered with new ones, but I still have some that mean something to me. They’re important. I keep ‘em to make sure I don’t forget.”

Although my mind grips me by the shoulders and shakes me while screeching, “*Forget what? Ask him! Please, ask him!*” I don’t ask. It seems too much for tonight; so with a smile, I let the conversation drift into a comfortable silence while we eat.

Finishing up our meal, I sink further into my chair and Twitch laughs. I’m rapidly falling into a food coma. When I spot Joe coming towards us with yet another plate, I mock sob and tell him as he approaches, “No more. Please. No more. If I eat one more bite, I’ll burst. Then you’ll have to clean up all the bits of Lexi around the place, and I’m sure that would be a safety hazard, not to mention wasting a crap load of delicious food that I wish to keep in my belly.”

Lifting my drowsy eyes to both men looking at me through crinkled eyes, I mutter, “It’s true. That would be tragic.”

Joe places the plate in front of Twitch, along with the bill, and I watch Twitch eat the entire piece of Tiramisu on his own while watching me. He places a few hundred dollar bills under the plate, reaches out to me, and helps me stand.

Linking our fingers, he pulls me close to his side. People watching us would be able to see we’re together. And I like that thought.

Walking me over to his sleek, sporty black Mercedes, he helps me in before seating himself. Once inside, he reaches over me and delves into the

glove compartment. Taking out a small tin, he opens it, and my eyes widen in shock. Leaning over to him, I whisper-hiss, “Are you seriously rolling a doobie?”

Twitch’s body shakes in silent laughter. “They haven’t been called doobies in about ten years, babe. But yeah, I am.”

Suddenly, I feel like a cheerleader being caught out with the town ruffian. Looking over at me, his lip twitches as he states, “I bet you’ve never even smoked before.”

My face bunches in annoyance at his baiting. “Yes, I have, thank you very much. I was a teen once upon a time.”

He grins, holding out the unlit joint to me. I stare at it a long while before shaking my head. “I can’t. We get random drug tests at work.”

Twitch grins harder, “It’ll spend a day in your system. Is it a saliva test kit?” I nod and he leans closer to me, “Get high with me. I’d love to see you loose. Be loose with me tonight.”

Dipping my chin, my face heats.

I must look like a complete nerd.

Not letting me dim his party, he lights the joint and breathes in deeply. The pungent smell fills the air in the car and my mouth waters.

Turning to him, he holds his breath, the smoke along with it, and watches me through hooded eyes. My brain sizzles, then stops working. Unable to help myself, I lean over to him. He meets me halfway. So close that our lips touch, I close my eyes and part my lips. He exhales slowly, and I inhale, taking in the sweet, strong-tasting smoke.

I hold it in for what seems like forever.

My head spins and my eyes blink in slow motion.

Finally exhaling, I turn to the gorgeous man, looking at his dimly-lit face and ask, “Where are we going now?”

Without turning to me, he starts the car and responds, “Tonight, we party.”



Driving up the long driveway to my house, I park and notice Lexi spying all the cars that line the sides of the drive. It's been a while since we threw a social party at the house between friends. Happy said we were overdue, and Ling seconded the motion. So here we are. Party central at my place.

I feel like I'm arriving at a party without an invitation, considering I don't know who will be here. I let them sort the guest list.

A party guest list by me would include maybe ten people. Not much of a party, I guess.

What can I say? I don't trust people. At the best of times, I don't even *like* people.

Parking the car, I move to exit the car when Lexi tugs on my sleeve. "Before we go in, can I please talk to you about something?"

She says this so quietly that my lips turn down into a deep frown. We were having a good time tonight, and I know whatever she has to say is serious. Turning to look at her, I answer, "Sure."

Looking down at her hands, she starts, "Michael came to see me this morning. And while we were talking, he told me how much he likes his job, and that he likes you a lot, even if you can be scary. I can tell he looks up to you a lot." Blinking rapidly, she rambles, "Which is great, because he needs a good male role model in his life. Especially one as successful as you, so I don't want you to think I'm on your back or anything given that you gave him a job that he needed, with no questions asked and—"

I cut her off, "This story got a point?"

Looking up at me, her pupils dilated, I can tell the weed has affected her, even though it was a small amount. She breathes, "Right." Swallowing hard, she whispers, "He...he sort of looked like he went into his head a

little while and mentioned something...something about *cutting, stabbing, and gouging.*"

My face devoids of all emotion.

That boy and I will be having a good talk tomorrow.

She sees the immediate change on my face and backs up, "He didn't say much..."

"He said something."

Rolling her eyes, she states, "He only said that because he thinks you're my *boyfriend!*" Then she scoffs as if this was the most ridiculous notion she's ever heard.

And just like that, everything I began feeling for Lexi over the last few days shrivels, shrinks, and dies away.

This is what she thinks of you. You're not good enough for her. You'll never be good enough for her. You'll always be too street for her. She'll never see you the way you want her to. And for good reason. You are scum...and you know it.

"Inside." I seethe as I exit the car.

Hearing the car door shut behind me, I don't wait for her as I approach the house. Walking up the front steps, the quick clicking of heels lets me know I'm walking too fast for her to keep up.

But I don't care.

Walking up the steps, I hear her call out, "Where are you going?"

"I'll be down in five."

Because, truthfully, I need that five minutes to get my shit under control.



Lexi

Finding a deserted corner in the ballroom, I watch through rose-colored glasses as everyone converses around me. I'm a wallflower. Or at least I will be until Twitch comes back down.

I don't know what I said to upset him, but I know it was something bad enough that he needed to get away from me that minute.

My foggy mind seems to be playing in slow motion, or even at a delayed pace, because an irritated cough lets me know that I'm not alone.

Blinking, I look up to find Ling holding out a mirror. Six lines of white powder sit on top of it, so neat, so pretty, that they actually look appetizing.

I know what it is. I don't have to have seen cocaine before to know that is exactly what I'm looking at. I've never done a drug so strong in all my life. Pot was the only drug I did, and even then it was only a few times in university. Until tonight.

Suddenly, I'm wistful.

The thoughts of how free the pot makes me feel return.

My body turns light. My frazzled brain clears. My inhibitions, gone.

Ling waves the mirror under my nose. I know what she's doing. I know what this is.

This is a dare.

She wants to see how far I'll go. And tonight, for Twitch, I'll show her just how far.

I pluck the short straw from her fingers and our eyes meet. Her brows rise in question. Lowering my face to the white gold, I put the straw to my nose.

Before I can stop myself, I snort.

One line.

A small smile forms on Ling's face. She's impressed. She can't believe I did it.

Neither can I.

Just as she moves to walk away, I lift the straw and snort again.

Her eyes widen in stunned disbelief. She blinks a moment before she catches herself. Bowing almost regally, she walks away to offer the stash to another guest.

A few minutes pass – at least I think it’s a few minutes – and I feel the change.

Wow.

I can see everything. And I mean *everything*.

I can see colors shoot out of the stereo speakers, along with the beat of the music.

Bright explosions of orange and pink and white swirl around the dancing guests.

And I’m delighted.

I can see the thoughts shooting out of people’s heads.

Some dark. Some sexy. Some plain fucked up.

I can see the air moving. Dancing. It’s begging me to join it.

Laughing out loud, I run a hand down my face before I stand and let One Republic’s *Counting Stars* wash over me.

I’m euphoric.

In a state of ecstasy.

And it’s bliss.

The music calls my name.

I need to dance.



Twitch

Walking down the stairs, I pop the link into the button hole on the cuff of my shirt. My brow furrows when I see people gathered around the center of the ballroom.

Curious as to what's causing the assembly, I walk a little faster the rest of the way down. I don't have a good feeling.

My gut clenches at the sight of her.

Lexi dances off-beat to the music, at her own pace. The skirt of her short black dress swishes around her thighs, lifting high enough to see the rounded cheeks of her ass.

She looks lost. And at the very same time, found.

The void in her eyes alerts me to the fact that she's high. Higher than high, actually.

She's wasted.

Fuck.

Searching the ballroom, I spot Ling leaning against the wall in the shadows, smirking at the sight of Lexi. Walking with a purpose, Ling spots me a few seconds before I get to her. Smile now gone, fear shines brightly in her eyes.

She should be scared.

If someone approached me looking the way I do right now, I'd shit my pants.

Walking harder, I don't stop until we're toe-to-toe. Leaning down into her face, I ask in perfect calm, "What did you give her?"

Eyes wide, Ling opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

My eye twitches. The rage starts to alight the blood in my veins.

Raising my hand in slow motion, I place it on her collar bone at her neck, resting it there.

A warning.

“What did you give her?”

Ling replies in panic, “She took it herself! I just offered it to her.”

The hand at her throat tightening, I hold myself back. Dipping my chin, my eyes close as I breathe deeply, trying to get myself under control.

Releasing her, I stand tall, straightening my jacket. “What’d she take?”

Ling remains silent. I keep my eyes on hers.

My scowl is enough to make her whisper, “Blow. Two lines.”

My jaw steels.

That’s a lot of cocaine for someone who doesn’t do drugs. No wonder she’s putting on a show.

Ignoring Ling’s terrified expression, I turn to the space that’s been cleared for Lexi’s performance.

Under the spotlight, I see the perspiration on her forehead reflect the gleaming light. Her hips sway from side to side, flowing like the rolling waves of the ocean. Her hands splayed on her hips slide slowly up her ribs to cup her breasts.

She looks beautiful. Like the angel I always knew she was.

An angel...

I hate her for that. Why couldn’t she have been an asshole? It would’ve made things so much easier for me.

The hands on her breasts squeeze gently for a few seconds before they trail higher up her chest. Eyes still closed and swaying sensually, she uses one hand to squeeze the side of her neck, while the other slithers up past her ear to slide into her hair. She tangles her fingers into her dark locks, and her hips jerk suddenly.

The vision of Lexi in a sexual trance is enough to give me hardcore wood.

Her lips part in a silent sigh.

The hand squeezing her neck glides down slowly across her breast once more, then lower still. When the hand sliding down her body halts low on her stomach, my cock twitches.

My eyes trained on her face, I watch her closed eyes and parted lips with only one thing in mind.

I want her. Now.

I'm snapped from my thoughts when I hear cat calls. Looking around, my body turns rigid when I spot Lexi.

In the middle of the ballroom. Under the spotlight. In a haze.

Her hand disappears under her dress, rubbing her pussy through the tiny white G-string. The other hand gently pinching a nipple through the silky white fabric of her dress. Mouth parted, head thrown back in ecstasy.

Swallowing hard, I openly stare.

She's *fucking* beautiful.

No reticence. Just living through the beat of the song.

A tall guy I've met a few times before lingers at the edge of her space before walking across the ballroom.

My brow furrows.

He walks up behind Lexi, wrapping one arm across her stomach, pulling her back to his front. I can't hear it, but I see her mouth part a little more in what looks like a moan. She leans back into him, taking his hand, pulling it down her body and replacing it with hers at her mound.

My head pounds.

She starts a soft circling motion with her hips, and I know she's rubbing her sweet ass into his dick.

The thing about my brain is that it's damaged. Thoughts don't get processed the way other people's do.

In fact, the term *think* doesn't apply to me.

Stalking across the ballroom, I reach Lexi's front. Gripping her forearm, I pull her away from the fucker. Hard.

She stumbles, but I don't notice.

I don't notice, because tall guy is already on his back.

My fists pound into his face continuously. Hard and fast. Face contorted in anger, my chest heaves with every heavy breath I take.

A spatter of wet warmth spurts across my face.

Blood roars through my ears. I don't hear the screaming and shouting for me to stop.

I can smell his fear.

His arms come up. He tries in vain to block the blows. Clenching my teeth, I lift my arm over my head, then bring my elbow down on his

cheekbone full-force. The feel of it shattering beneath me brings on a wave of euphoria.

His body trembles and jerks as if being electrocuted.

Strong arms come around me from behind. I vaguely hear, “Fuck, Twitch! You’re killing him! Stop!”

Struggling, I’m lifted clean off the moaning, bloody mess in the center of the ballroom floor. More clearly this time, I hear, “You got him, bro. You got him. He gets it. You’re good now. It’s time to stop.” That comes from Happy.

Panting heavily, I shrug him off me.

Turning, my eyes scan the room, coming into contact with the terrified faces of my guests.

Happy hands me something. A handkerchief.

Taking it and wiping at the blood on my cheek and forehead, I say through heavy breaths, “Get out. Party’s over.”

But no one moves.

Still, I watch them a moment before stepping forward and booming, “Get the fuck out of my goddamn house! Anyone still here in three fucking minutes, I’ll escort out myself. In a fucking body bag!”

They scramble, finally getting that I could actually do it, and not taking their chances in finding out.

Smart.

Stalking over to a still-dancing Lexi in the corner of the room to no beat, I grip her upper arm and all but drag her behind me. Halfway up the stairs, she stumbles and bursts into laughter, as if it’s the funniest thing she’s ever done in her life.

And it makes my blood boil.

I hate myself for craving the state of high she’s in. Like a petulant child, I’m taking out my jealousy on her. Pulling her up much too tightly, she yelps in surprise; I pull her along all too quickly. Once in my room, I open the door to the bathroom and throw her in. She stumbles and ends up on her knees on the bath mat. She giggles, and rage coils in my gut. Reaching past her to the shower, I turn the cold water on and spit, “Wash his smell off you. Now.”

Then I shut the door and pace, balling my fists tight, jaw ticking.

Once I think I'm no longer homicidal, I breathe deeply and sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for Lexi to finish her shower.

Five minutes pass. I hear her singing, so I give her some more time.

Another five minutes pass and my brow furrows. The singing has stopped.

Something pushes me to check on her, and when I open the bathroom door, my heart skips a beat.

Still in her clothes on the floor of the shower, she shivers uncontrollably.

Fuckin' hell!

Reaching in for her, the spray hits me and it's freezing. She just spent ten minutes in an ice bath.

Turning off the water, I yell, "The fuck is wrong with you?" As if it's her fault and not mine for leaving a woman who has never used cocaine before to shower alone.

I'm pissed at myself. But I'll never admit it.

Her lips are blue, her skin ashen, and her wide blue eyes watch me fearfully.

Placing a hand on my hip, I dip my head and pinch the bridge of my nose, forcing myself to calm the fuck down. Then, gently as I can, I reach out for her and say, "C'mon, baby. I gotta get you warm or you're gonna get sick."

That's not a maybe. That's a definite. But I gotta get her out and she looks scared. She's having a blow freak-out.

She blinks a moment before reaching out a shaking hand to take mine. I pull her to stand, but she shakes so much she almost looks like she's having a fit. Reaching for the hem of her dark dress – which is now pasted to her body – I lift it over her head and make quick work of her panties. Taking a big fluffy towel, I wrap her up and walk her out the bathroom and over to my bed.

I sit her on the edge, while I turn on the electric blanket and strip down to nothing.

I'm almost ashamed of myself for being hard, but with Lexi, I can't help it. It just happens.

Removing the towel from her shivering body, I lie down then pull her down next to me. I wrap my arms around her. My entire body breaks out in goosebumps when her body meets mine.

Dammit. Fuck!

She's freezing. So damn cold that the front of my body gets a pins-and-needles sensation through it. My arms tighten around her, knowing this is my fault; I accept the pain of her near-frozen body on mine. Punishment to myself, if you will. The electric blanket works quickly, and I rub her arms and back for a few minutes before her body stops shivering. Her teeth are still chattering when she asks, "Why didn't you come for me? I was calling you."

My chest feels like a bullet just went through it.

Feeling guilty as fuck, I respond quietly, "I didn't hear you, baby."

She buries her cold nose into my neck and whispers, "I called and called, but you didn't come."

If I had a heart, it would break.

Then I do something that even shocks me. Rubbing her back, I issue the first apology of my life. "I'm sorry, baby. I should've been watching you."

She doesn't respond, but her teeth chatter and she nods into my neck.

The childlike move pierces me like a knife to the side. I'm suddenly protective of Lexi.

What a load of shit.

Protective of the woman I had hurt myself.

I'm a fuckwit. Seriously.

Damaged doesn't even begin to cover what I am. I don't think a word has been invented for the level of fucked up I am.

The feel of Lexi's body slumping so suddenly into mine makes me jump. Gripping her arms tightly, I search her lifeless face and shake her hard. "Lexi! Fuck!"

When her eyes pop open and her eyes widen in fright, my heart begins to beat again. She asks, "What?"

I thought you were unconscious and it scared the shit out of me.

Shaking my head, I swallow hard. "Nothing, babe. Go back to sleep. I won't wake you again. Promise."

She buries her still-cold face into my neck and sighs.

My jaw tics.

Should've never brought her here.

Subconsciously, my arms tighten around her, defying my mind's statement.

Lexi

Waking in pitch black with a pounding head, a sore throat, and a boiling belly, I jump upright and bolt off of the bed towards the bathroom. Struggling with the door handle, my body begins to heave when a hand reaches past me to open the door. Once inside, I throw my shaking body over to the toilet bowl and let out the contents of my stomach.

Which is a serious shame.

I loved every morsel I ate at dinner last night.

Groaning into the acrylic toilet seat, something heavy covers my body, but I'm so hot right now, I shrug it off. A sleepy, "Keep it on, Angel," comes from my left.

Eyes closed, I frown, "Too hot."

A cool hand on my forehead makes me sigh happily. That is, until I hear, "Shit, Lexi. You're burning up."

And that's the last thing I remember before I doze off, head firmly fixed on the toilet seat.



The word "Twitch" is written in a large, stylized, handwritten font. The 'T' is very tall and has a long horizontal crossbar. The 'w' is formed by two 'u'-like shapes. The 'i' has a dot, and the 'tch' is written in a cursive-like style. The entire word is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

I know the exact moment Lexi passes out because the arms hugging the toilet bowl fall limp to the sides, her face smooshed into the toilet seat. The sweet sound of her steady breathing is the only thing that calms me at the moment.

Leaving her where she rests, I walk over to the nightstand, fetch my cell, and call Happy. At 3:57am.

He answers half asleep, "You better have a good reason, motherfucker."

Ignoring his frustration, I quickly tell him, "I need the number for the doctor."

Silence. Then accusingly, "What did you do?"

I bark back, "I'm gonna ignore your tone and that fuckin' statement and ask you one more time."

He immediately backtracks, "Don't be like that, bro. I'm sorry, alright? What did you expect I'd think, calling me this time of night, sounding like you're in trouble?"

I don't blame him. Really, I don't. I know he's got reasons to think the worst of me. The guy's been at the receiving end of my fists for little to no reason at all. And he's one of my best friends.

Running a hand over my face, I tell him, "It's Lexi. Ling let her have two fuckin' lines last night. I left her to shower and came back to find her sitting on the tiles under freezing water. So I don't know if she's sick, or just having a reaction to the coke. She's...not good."

His voice softens, "Let me handle it, man. Go sit with her. We'll be there soon."

I say, "Thanks, bro." What I don't say is, "*I owe you one.*"

But we both know that's a given.



The doctor looks over Lexi's unconscious and sweating body, now covered in one of my tees, *umming* and *ahhing* for close to ten minutes. Feeling her glands, peering into her eyes with a light, taking her temperature four times over the course of minutes. It's safe to say, I'm panicked.

If it were anyone else but her...

Pushing the thought out of my head, I watch him closely. I don't like his hands on her. All over her. This is how ridiculous I am. I know he's a doctor. I know he's here to help. But it doesn't stop me from wanting to take his head off at the sight of his hands on her body.

On *my* body. She is mine. She belongs to *me*.

For a second, I worry myself with thoughts that I've taken things with Lexi too far. For a second, I tell myself to break all ties with her. For a second, I wonder if I'm in too deep here.

For a second.

The doctor, a tall and fit middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, comes to stand by my side. Squirting hand sanitizer into his palm, he rubs his hands together. "So you say she's never done drugs before, then decided to do weed and cocaine all in one night?" His brow furrows. He doesn't believe a word I say.

Steeling my jaw, I explain, "I asked her to have a smoke with me and she did," looking him in the eye, I state, "willingly." He nods in a *duly noted* way and I add, "But I think the weed impaired her judgement enough to do the blow. I wasn't around, and when I came back, she was wasted.

She was worried about the weed in her system, so I don't know why she would've..." I shrug. The rest is self-explanatory.

The doctor watches me closely, eyes narrowing. The motherfucker is making me sweat and he knows it. Running a hand through his hair, he sighs, "It looks viral to me. The drug use may have amplified her body's reaction to the virus, but as far as I can tell, she's just severely dehydrated. Hence the drip."

I look at the IV hooked up to the top of Lexi's hand. Actually, I stare.

Can I really go through with hurting her, when I can't stand to see a fucking needle in her?

I'll never tell the fucker, but Happy was right. I've never been fine. Not a day in my life. My mind is...is...ruined. And I know the exact point it went from bad to worse.

Doc speaks on, "I'll have to stay here until she wakes. The drip will take another four hours to empty. So if you have a spare bed for me, I'll gladly take it. Preferably one close to the girl."

It takes everything I have in me not to bring this guy down. I don't like the way he said *the girl*. He said it like she was a junkie or a fuckin' prostitute or something. Little does he know the type of work she does, or how fuckin' lucky the government is to have someone as passionate as her on their side. But then, I *am* paying this guy a fuckload to avoid the question of identities.

"So," I continue watching Lexi, my angel, "she'll be fine, right?"

Picking up his carry bag, he states, "I can't confirm or deny that. I'll need to see her when she wakes."

A forgotten Happy emerges from the doorway and motions for the doc to follow him. And I'm left with the girl who is destined to hate me. The girl I lov—

Whoa. What the fuck?

My body tenses. Glaring down at Lexi, I shake my head as if to clear it. I don't like what she's doing to me.

My go-to emotion for anything I don't like or don't understand is anger. And I'm suddenly angry at her.

Scowling, I turn on my heel and stalk out the room.

Never should've brought her here.



Lexi

My heavy lids try to open, but the weight of them forces me to stop. A cool breeze wafts over my hot body, providing little relief, but still feeling good nonetheless. A pinching on my hand makes my brows knit. It feels like I'm being stung by a bee.

Willing my arms to lift, I manage to slowly reach for the sore area on top of my hand to feel bumpy plastic. My brow furrows more. That's when I hear someone speak by my bedside, "She's waking up. Yeah. I don't know. Okay."

Opening one eye to peek out at my visitor, I see Happy watching me through a cautious gaze.

The effort to open that eye seems to have taken all my energy with it. Closing my eye and ceasing all movement, I mumble, "Sick."

I feel Happy lean closer and brush the hair stuck to my forehead, "I know, doll. You're better some. Not so feverish. So that's good."

Swallowing hard, I whisper, "Twitch."

Happy hesitates a moment before leaning even closer and whispering, "He'll be home soon. 'Kay?"

My body heavy, I don't respond. Even a nod of my head would be too much.

I want Twitch.



Sitting up in bed, the doc looks over me. He goes over the motions and I look at the digital clock on the nightstand.

4:56pm.

I've been awake an hour. I've been told that I was dehydrated and needed two IV drip infusions. I have to admit after I managed to ignore the pinching, the IV was doing its job. I feel better already.

But one thing is missing.

Or I should say, one *person*.



The room dimly lit by lamplight, I turn to see Happy watching TV in the chair beside the bed.

I feel much better now. I'm no longer dehydrated and have eaten. The doc gave me parting instructions, which he said he would write down for

me. He shot me a glare as he handed me the folded paper. Then he was gone.

As soon as he left, I opened the note and read. The top of the paper had printed *Doctor's recommendation to patient*. Underneath that was scrawled:

Don't do cocaine.

My face flamed. I don't exactly remember what happened last night, but I do remember enough to cringe and wince at my actions. My heart races. There's no way around it. I'm going to lose my job. I won't pass this year's random drug test.

And I blame Twitch.

His mess of a life has become my mess.

Turning to the digital clock on the nightstand, I stare at the display.

22:45pm and he's still not home.

Fucking coward.

Hugging myself around the knees, I say quietly, "I'd like to go home now."

I feel Happy's eyes on me. He sighs, "You don't have to, Lex. You can stay—"

I cut him off. "I'd like to go home. If you can arrange a car, good. If you can't, I'll catch a taxi."

He scoffs, "Don't even think about it, girl. I'll drive you myself."

Within ten minutes, my miserable ass is driving away from the man I thought could change.

Would change.

I guess I was wrong.



One week later...

To say I'm jumpy is an understatement.

It's been a week since I saw Twitch. A week since I was sick. A week since I took cocaine for the first time.

Sitting behind my desk, I listen to Charlie without really listening to him. Small bits of the conversation drift in and out of my consciousness. "Yearly drug test... Every six months... Randomly... Tomorrow afternoon... Compulsory... Will result in immediate termination... Nothing to worry about."

My heart sinks.

Time to face the facts.

Tomorrow is the day I lose my job. A job I worked my ass off to get. A job I love with all my heart.

Charlie searches my face. He frowns, "Lex, I know we're not supposed to get personal at work, but I..." He sighs. "...I just want to ask if everything's okay. You haven't been yourself lately. I rarely see you smile anymore. I'm worried about you."

Standing abruptly, I wipe my sweaty palms on the front of my skirt. Putting on my brightest smile, I tell him, "I'm fine. Really. I just haven't been sleeping well lately. I have a lot on my mind."

Charlie throws me a sympathetic smile. "Okay. Well, you know you can talk to me anytime."

Standing, he takes his leave and I stand behind my desk, brain blank.

The past week has been shitty. Shitty because I felt ill most days, and shitty because Twitch decided he is sick of playing with me.

But didn't have the guts to tell me himself. I've been waiting a week for him to show up in my room or text me. I haven't even felt him watching me. He's just...gone.

I realize the cocaine thing was bad and I shouldn't have done that, but in all seriousness, I don't even remember doing it.

I mean, *me*? Doing cocaine? I-I don't know what happened.

That's just not like me.

I've avoided Nikki and Dave as much as humanly possible. They've been calling every day asking if we can get together, but I've told them that I haven't been well and didn't want to pass my bug on. Dave seemed mollified. Nikki? Not so much.

She knows. She always knows when something's happened.

And that asshole. That fucking *asshole*.

Ditching me like yesterday's trash.

I tell myself that I don't care and that it's much better this way. Cutting ties without leaving a mess. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't cut me deep.

I seem to be going through the stages of grief.

I've already been through the first step, denial and isolation, and have moved up to stage two, anger. And I'm angry right now.

How dare he? Who does he think he is? I don't need him.

Maybe if you just call him...?

Oh hell. I'm already on the verge of step three. Bargaining.

I don't care who he is, I'm not calling him. I haven't done anything wrong!

Sitting back down behind my desk, I text Nikki and Dave, asking them to meet me tonight.

I need a girl's night.



“So what you're saying is that he just stopped calling?”

Well, technically, Twitch doesn't call, but... “Yeah. That's about right,” I tell Nikki.

Dave looks over at me through sad eyes. “Maybe you should call him. He could just be busy.”

Rolling my eyes, I state, “You don't even like him! Why are you sticking up for him?”

Dave places his hands up in an *I surrender* gesture, “I may not like him, but I know you do, which means he's gotta have some redeeming qualities or you wouldn't want him.”

Does Twitch have any redeeming qualities? I'll have to ponder this question later.

Nikki asks, "You don't think he's just giving you some time to yourself after getting sick at his place? Maybe he thinks you're embarrassed about it and will come to him when you're ready."

Yeah. That's right. I'm officially a lying sack of shit.

I couldn't tell my friends that I had willingly taken drugs. They'd be so disappointed in me. Dave and Nikki aren't against the use of drugs, but they know what I do for a living. They know what happens if I take drugs. They know...they know I'll lose my job.

And tomorrow it'll all come out.

But I'll wait until then.

Throwing some potato chips into my mouth, I chew loudly, sigh, then let out a garbled, "Life sucks."



The woman who swabbed my inner cheek was young and plump, with short black hair and tattoos.

Tattoos that immediately reminded me of a certain someone I'd rather not think about.

She said, "You can wait here for the results," as she went to process my positive result.

Unable to sit there knowing what would be happening in a few minutes, I all but ran back to my office, and flustered, began looking through my drawers.

So here I am, waiting for someone to knock at the door and tell me my inevitable fate.

The knock sounds and I jump.

“Come in,” I call out weakly.

Charlie strides into my office with a white sheet of paper in his hands. Placing the paper on my desk, he glares at me. “Results are in.”

Oh shit. This is it.

Confusion washes over me as his face breaks out into a huge smile, then winks, “Passed. As per usual.”

The office door shuts behind him. I stare at it dumbfounded. I don’t understand. I was preparing to lose my job.

Maybe they made a mistake.

How could they? There’s very little mistake margin in those tests.

It had to have been a mistake. A happy mistake.

I still don’t understand.

What just happened?

My phone pings, scaring the life out of me.

Blinking, I look down at the display and my heart races.

Twitch: You’re welcome.

Oh.

That’s what happened.

Not a second passes when my phone pings a second time.

And this message makes my heart stop.

Twitch: For the record...you owe me, Angel.

I have no idea what that means, but I know this is not a good thing.

Sitting in complete silence, my chest aches.

What have I gotten myself into?



Going cold turkey when you're trying to break an addiction can be painful. More like excruciating.

It's been a week since I've seen Lexi. And I'm starting to sweat.

I don't like it.

I don't like the hold she has on me. I don't like how affected I am by not seeing her.

You could call my avoidance of her a test of sorts.

I needed to know how deeply I'm rooted into this...this...would you call what we have a relationship?

Personally, I'd call it give and take.

She gives and I take.

Watching her on the sly is driving me crazy. The stupid woman went to work the day after she left my bed sick. A *day*. I had to watch from a distance as she slowly walked up the steps to the building, hands shaking, weak posture, and pale-faced.

I could've spanked her ass for that.

There's something about a strong woman, though. Something that makes you watch her with pride.

Lexi lets nothing stand in her way.

Making a few calls to the right people, and finding out her mandatory drug test would be happening sooner than I thought, I knew I had to get involved.

Paying off the testee to swab her own mouth and replace Lexi's with it was easier than I thought. Well worth the five hundred big ones.

Just like any addiction, my excuse to use again was too strong to fight. Lexi being the addiction, I text her. As soon as I did, I set my phone down on my desk and closed my eyes tight.

It was official.
I was never letting her go.



Walking over to the storage cupboard to get myself another printer cartridge, I stop dead in my tracks when I hear muffled talking coming from the inside.

My brow furrows. I step closer to listen in.

“Was this your first time?” Ling.

No answer.

She pries, “It’s okay if it was. You did great.”

Then, “It wasn’t my first time.” Michael. He says this much too defensively.

My rage spikes.

Ling starts, “Mickey, baby, it’s not a big deal. Really, it’s—”

The door opens and I’m met with Michael’s mussed hair and half-unbuttoned shirt.

I’m furious.

“Get back to work, knucklehead!” Michael jumps to attention.

Eyeing an annoyed Ling, I keep a threat in my voice when I point my finger at her and say, “You and I are going to talk about this.”

Walking away from the enraging scene, I hear Michael follow close behind. He stutters, “B-b-but you haven’t given me anything to do yet.” He quickly adds, “Sir.”

As we approach my office, I realize I’m not angry anymore. Just tired. I ask, “You need me to tell you what to do? Get a pen and notebook from the cupboard, just there.” I point to the left side of the room and he scuttles over there, trying to be quick as he can.

Sitting myself down at my desk, I watch him approach wide-eyed and I state, “Number one on your *not to do* list...”

His face bunches and he questions, “*Not to do* list?”

Ignoring him, I play with the letter opener that usually resides on my desk, “Number one: Do *not* have sex with Ling.”

Finally looking up at him, I watch his face flame. He explains quietly, “Sh-she said you’d be angry if I didn’t.”

Oh man. I want to punish her for manipulating this kid the way she has. No doubt he was a virgin too. She really is a sick fuck.

Not that I can talk.

The look on my face must convey my thought about Ling at this moment because Michael panics, “Is she in trouble?”

Disregarding him, I state, “Number two on your *not to do* list: Do *not* piss me off.”

But he remains focused on Ling. “You won’t...” He swallows hard. “You won’t hurt her, right?”

Scoffing, I lift my hand high and bring down the letter opener down to my desk with a dull thud. The dagger stands upright, piercing my monstrosity of a desk and I point at him, giving my final instruction. “Number three on your *not do to* list: Do *not* – and I mean *ever*, Michael – do *not* ever question me.”

He blinks a moment before nodding his understanding and jotting down his directions. I see so much of myself in this kid that I feel something for him. Something almost paternal.

Rolling my eyes, I sigh, “Kid, the only time I’d ever put my hands to a woman,” I smirk at his sudden look of interest, “is if she begged me to.”

Stepping closer, he looks behind him at the open door before leaning closer and whispering, “D-does that happen a lot?”

Lord only knows what Ling made him do.

Steeling my face, my jaw tics as I answer, “No. That isn’t something you see often. But yes, some women like that.” Wanting to punch myself in the face for using a label, I explain in a way he can understand better, “It’s not what’s considered normal though.”

Nodding once more, I switch my attention to my computer screen and wave an arm his way. “Dismissed.”

Sounding panicked once more, he states on a rush, “But you still haven’t given me anything to do!”

“Get me some coffee. Make it strong and sweet with a dash of milk.”

He rushes off to do that and I smile to myself. He’s eager to please. He’s polite. But he’s still street. I really like Michael. He’s everything I was before the world made me the bastard I am today. My only want for this boy is for his story to end differently from the way mine will. I want his story to be fairy-tale happy, not a drama.

Lost in thought, Michael returns with my coffee. Standing, I meet him around the desk, take the mug from his hands, and sip. Mock-coughing, I sputter, “The hell did you put in this?”

The look of horror on his face makes me laugh out loud. Chuckling, I clap him on the shoulder, “It’s perfect. Relax Michael. You did good.” Breathing heavily, he nods, and my smile falls away. I tell him honestly, “Relax, Mickey. You’re safe here.” Never having stopped nodding, he continues to do this as I ruffle his hair and push him away, “Find Happy and get to work, knucklehead.”

If I had a kid like Michael, I’d make sure I taught him right. He’s good people.

He trudges away, dragging his teenage sneaker-covered feet, and something strange happens.

It takes me a minute to process the occurrence.

The awkward and unwelcome feeling of happiness washes over me. It feels rough and uncomfortable.

I don’t know if I like it. Yet.

What I do know, is that I continue to work all day with a small smile on my face.



Facing my computer screen, I hear a slight knock at my office door.
A bored voice asks, "You wanted to see me?"

Ling.

Without looking at her, I jerk my chin and grunt.

Closing the door behind her, she comes forward and sits in the guest chair. Already on the defensive, I spot her tight posture and rigid jaw. I ask her, "You have fun today with the boy?"

As if she's researched the facts – which no doubt she has – she fires off robotically, "Michael is seventeen. It's not against the law. He's above the age of consent in New South Wales. I didn't do anything wrong."

Ling is hard to deal with. Like me, she has skewed view of right and wrong.

"No. You're right. It's not illegal. Just immoral and unethical. Not to mention, you doing what you did at *work*." Leaning closer to her, my eyes dart into hers. "And telling him I'd be angry at him if he didn't fuck you is coercion. Coercion is almost as bad as rape in this state. Threatening him is most definitely illegal, and I don't need that kind of trouble, Ling. You're bringing me a shit storm. I can feel it."

Looking at nothing in particular, she sighs, frustrated. As if *I'm* a pain in *her* ass.

My anger wells.

"You're no better than your father. Or your brothers. You're just like them." Her jaw steels; her eyes blaze. I continue, "You gonna groom the boy like they groomed you? Fuck him until he can't see the wrong in it, then sell his body to every pedophile in Sydney? That your plan?"

Jumping up, she screeches, "Fuck you! *Fuck* you, Twitch! I am *nothing* like them."

Shaking, she reaches up and fists her hair harshly. Letting out a pained wail, she hollers, "They did things. They did things to me. I was just a girl. I didn't know!" Still pulling her hair, she whispers, "My family did bad things to me."

Seeing Ling fall apart is not something I like to see. She's so strong, but with one mention of her family, she falls apart. They damaged her. Much like my family damaged me.

We get each other.

Mascara-soaked tears run down her cheeks as she trembles in anger. Walking around my desk and placing my hands on her hips, I pull her towards me. "I know, LingLing. It wasn't your fault."

Sniffing, she whispers into my neck, "You saved me."

She calls it saving; I call it gaining a ruthless employee.

Ling was working the streets when I found her. She was high when she approached me on a night out, and when I refused her advances, she pulled a knife on me. Not even as a threat. The stupid bitch was so fucked that she actually attempted to slit my throat while trying to grab my wallet from my pants pocket.

I had two choices.

Kill the bitch.

Or employ the bitch.

I chose the latter. She came to live with me. I forcefully detoxed her and hired a nurse to watch over her for a month. After that time, she was partly-human again. The first words Ling ever heard come out of my mouth were, "You owe me."

I fed her, gave her shelter, and dressed her up in the finest brands.

And she was grateful.

She showed me almost any time she could just *how* grateful she was.

Never bothered me. Not until recently.

Ling is a self-confessed sex addict. I tried to get her help once. Once.

Then I found her eating out Dr. Laura McCullough.

The doctor was kind enough to suck my cock as I watched her get licked six ways from Sunday. Although it was hot, I never took Ling back there.

Ling pulls away from me. "You son of a bitch. Don't ever bring up my family." Angry once more, she slaps me right across the face and shrieks, "Not ever again!"

Her heels clip-clop away and my office door slams shut.

Rubbing my red, hot cheek, I smirk.

Doesn't take long to get her back to the way she was.

Picking up my cell, I call Happy. The phone rings twice before he answers, "Yo."

Pursing my lips, I ask, "What do you know about lingerie?"

A bark of a laugh, then, "Uh, I know women look good in it."

I chuckle, “No, I mean what do you know about brands of lingerie? Which ones are good and all that?”

Humor colors his voice, “Maybe you should talk to Ling about this.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I tell him, “Nah. I pissed her off.”

Happy sighs, “What she do now? You know she’s a liability, right?”

“I know. But so am I.” Silence, then I blurt out, “I want to buy Lexi some lingerie.”

He stalls a moment, then says in a sing-song voice, “Then I suggest you go shopping. Happy hunting.”

He hangs up on me.

I glare at my phone, then throw it onto my desk with a sigh.

Shopping.

How bad could it be?



Lexi

On edge from yesterday’s drug test, I jump when I hear the front door open.

Three guesses to who it could be.

Nikki, Dave, or Twitch.

Seeing as I spoke to the first two and know they're both busy tonight, by process of elimination, I go with option three.

And boy, are we gonna have words today.

Soon as I see him back through the front door, I start with, "You've got some nerv—"

Stopping mid-sentence, my mouth gapes. Dragging bags, bags, and more bags behind him, he kicks the door shut, then says, "Could use a little help here, Angel."

The way he calls me Angel...he should *not* be allowed to call me Angel. I breathe, "Okay."

Standing in my sweats, tank, ratty hair, and reading glasses, I walk over to his tall suit-covered frame and take some of the bags from him. He takes off down the hall toward my bedroom and places the bags on the floor. Placing my haul of bags on the floor next to his, I watch as he starts turning the bags upside down.

Clothes, accessories, and shoe boxes fall out onto my bed.

And I'm just standing here thinking, "*Um...aren't we pissed at each other?*"

I whisper, "What is all this?"

Not answering my question, he tirades, "Did you know there's a lady at the mall that you can hire to shop for you? All she needs is measurements and *bam*, she's off. Like a fuckin' machine. You tell her to spare no cost and she spares *no* cost." He looks back over his shoulder at me with a knowing look, "Know what I mean?"

Mouth still gaping, I manage an, "Uhh..."

He points to random things on my bed. "Evening wear. Evening shoes. Work wear. Work shoes. Some dresses and everyday clothes. Necklaces and frilly shit. Hair stuff." He grins, "And there are your delicates."

Delicates?

Looking up at him with a frown, I lean over and peer into the bag he just pointed to. Picking up a lacey see-through teddy, I squeak, "Lingerie."

Shaking my head, I ask angrily, "What are you doing here? I haven't heard from you in a week. You know? When you left me in your bed to recover from a virus and never even called to check up on me?"

Twitch doesn't flinch. "May not have called, but I knew you were fine. I always know. Just like I knew you needed help with your mandatory drug

test, little one.”

I bark back, “You didn’t think I wanted to see you? That maybe I *needed* yo—” I cut myself off. I won’t let him know how much I needed him then. How much it broke my heart that he could cut me out as if I were just another woman.

He stills, then turns to me. “Needed what?”

“I’d like for you to leave.”

His eyes darken a shade. “Not before I get what I came for.”

My voice drops marginally, “Wh-what did you come for?”

Slowly walking towards me with a purpose, I know exactly what he’s going to say before he says it.

“What you owe me.”



Twitch

I sit on the edge of the bed, holding my head in my hands, elbows to my knees.

Lightly rocking on the balls of my feet, I argue with myself.

The fuck are you doing? Enough. This has to stop.

The CD player on the dresser plays softly. *One More Night* by Maroon 5 plays.

“There you go again makin’ me love you.”

“You stuck on my body, on my body like a tattoo.”

My light rocking becomes harsher and harsher, bordering violent. My jaw sets and I squeeze my eyes shut tight. My face contorts with hate and anger. The hands at my head fist tightly. Gritting my teeth, I smack them hard into my brows.

Rage coils low in my gut.

Standing suddenly, I walk over to the dresser and pick up the CD player, yanking the cord out of the wall. Walking with a purpose over to the open window, I throw the CD player out as hard as I can and shut the window.

A muffled crash sounds.

I take it in.

Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply and wait patiently for my heart rate to return to normal.

Turning, I look over to the bed where she sleeps.

Only her bright blue eyes are open. And she saw what I just did.

I’m not used to people being around when I get angry.

She lies on her stomach, her naked back looking pale in the moonlight. The sheet rests low on her back, barely covering her sweet ass. She looks at me without judgement or anger.

And for a second, I’m taken back to a time long forgotten. A time when life was good.

Running a hand through my hair, I sigh and move over to the bed. Sitting next to her, I move her dark hair off her shoulder. I run my fingertips gently from her shoulder, down to her elbow, and back up.

“Hey.” I quietly greet her.

She replies cautiously, “Hey.”

My face softens at the sound of her voice. Fuck.

“I’ll replace the CD player.”

Her face remains passive as she replies gently, “It’s okay. I wanted a new one anyways and you just gave me a reason to get it.”

Fuck *me*.

Can I do no wrong in this woman’s eyes?

The niggling remains of my previous episode return and I glare at her. She stills immediately and her eyes become fearful. I chuckle humorlessly, "Babe. Seriously. You're too smart to be with a person like me, and you're definitely smarter than being one of those chicks who fucks a guy like me. But I get that you're diggin' slumming it." A cruel smile appears on my lips. "After all, the good girl always wants the bad boy. Doesn't she?"

Sitting up in the bed, the sheet falls and I'm graced with her naked beauty.

Her beautiful eyes are now sad and misting. Her face is pure fury. So angry she's shaking, she whispers, "Get out."

I chuckle low in my throat and roll my eyes at the show she's putting on. My laughter is cut short when the bedside lamp flies by me and smashes into the wall by my head. Broken glass falls to the floor by my feet.

I turn my glare on her, "You could've taken my eye out, Lexi. Fuck!"

Standing and walking across the room, she picks up a crystal vase and throws it at me, hard. I catch it mid-air as she shrieks, "I said get the fuck out, Twitch!"

Tears fall down her angry face; her body trembles in anger, and I feel like an asshole.

I can't let that show though. It's not part of who I am. Not anymore, anyways.

Placing the vase on the desk by the door, I wordlessly slip on my slacks, then my shoes; I take my shirt and jacket in my hands and leave.

Closing the door behind me, Lexi lets out a pained wail.

And there it is.

Just a reminder of why we can't ever be together.

Lexi

I thought long and hard about what happened with Twitch last night. I thought for hours and hours about how I feel, and thought even more about what needs to be done.

My mind made up, I decide to visit him at work. And it's only when I approach his office that I still in front of the door and realize how stupid I must be.

But if I don't do this now, I'll never do it. So I have to do this. Right now.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared.

Entering without knocking, his irritated face looks to see who has interrupted him. When he sees me, his brows rise in surprise, but he covers it all too quickly. Looking back down at the computer, he types and mutters, "Kinda busy here. What do you need, Lexi?"

Lexi. Not Angel.

I close the door behind me and move two steps forward. My bravado runs out of the open window. "I-I think you need to get some help," I say weakly.

His face hardens. His eyes turn cold.

Losing what little courage I think I have, my voice wavers. "Seeing a psychiatrist isn't a bad thing, Twitch. I do myself."

He stands suddenly. His chair hits the wall with a bang. I jolt. He orders, "Get out."

When he sees I don't mean to move, he stalks around his desk slowly, like a predator.

A lion going in for the kill.

And I'm just as petrified as I'm sure the antelope would be.

When he's a foot away from me, I whisper, "You don't have to live like this, Twitch."

His eyes close. "I said get out."

"It's a means to an end."

His jaw tics. "Get out, Alexa."

"You'll feel like a new person."

His eyes snap open. Leaning in until we're nose-to-nose, he grits his teeth and hisses, "Get the fuck out, bitch."

The insult slides right off me. Being a case worker, I know how people's defence systems work, and besides, I've been called worse. Trembling, I decide to try something.

Something incredibly stupid.

Slowly reaching up with shaking hands, I cup his cheeks gently. His jaw spasms under my palms, and his cold, narrowed eyes meet mine. I whisper, "You don't want to hurt me."

He spits, "If anyone gets to hurt you, it should be *me*."

My heart skips a beat. A cruel smirk spreads across his face. "What's the matter, Lexi? Are you scared?"

I blink.

My breath stutters. "You're terrifying."

"Then why are you still here?"

"Because you need help."

"Not from you."

"If I don't, who will?"

His eyes flash once more before he closes his eyes and lowers his forehead to mine. He says hoarsely, "I'm gonna hurt you." A statement.

My heart races, but my hands grip his cheeks tighter. "You won't. I have faith in you."

I watch him squeeze his eyes shut further. "Then you're dumber than I thought."

He lowers his demanding mouth to mine and I slump into him. He forces brutal, punishing kisses on me. And I take them, kissing back just as fiercely. His tongue strokes my lower lip as he grinds his erection into my hip.

Heat singes my insides.

My hands slide down his cheeks and back, to circle his neck. I need to get closer to him.

Pulling his head, I connect our mouths again and moan. He tastes so good. Like candy and scotch. I've never tasted anything more intoxicating in my life.

I'm beginning to understand the term love-drunk.

Without warning, his muscular arms wrap around my waist, lifting me. My legs circle his lean, muscular hips, and he walks me over to his desk.

I know what's coming. I should stop it. I really should.

But I can't.

I want it. Really bad.

My core floods. Twitch has that sordid effect on me.

Turning me almost harshly, he pushes on my back, hard, and my stomach meets the desk. My hands, having a mind of their own, meet behind my back, and he grips them tightly in one of his own. Lifting my skirt, he tugs on my panties and they're gone. Just like that.

Although I can't see him, I feel him. His free palm slides down my back to my ass, squeezing before I hear him expel a heavy breath while his fingertips trail the backs of my thighs. Letting go of my hands, he orders a gruff, "Keep 'em there. Don't fucking move, Lexi."

Linking my pinkie fingers behind my back, my pussy clenches when his fingertip trails my wet slit. I shiver. I hear him suck his finger while making a *mmm* sound. My hips jerk.

I need him so bad. And I know he can feel it. He's torturing me purposely.

I pout. His power display is unnecessary.

Suddenly, my ass cheeks spread and I feel a tongue swipe my folds. Clenching my hands together tightly, my eyes widen and I gasp, "Oh God!"

He barks, "Not a fucking word. Or I stop."

Biting my lip, I whimper but obey. As always.

Gripping my butt tighter, he pulls me apart; his tongue prods my entrance and my legs shake. The wet heat from his tongue is almost too much to bear. Pushing further into me, his nose bumps my puckered back entrance as he laps away at my slit.

He's making out with my pussy as if he would my mouth.

So enthusiastically. So determinedly. So demandingly.

It's heaven. I've never felt more wanted in all my life.

He asks, "You like that, baby?"

Immediately, I still. This is a trap.

I've come to know Twitch. He's a trickster. A cheat and a swindler.

But I'm suddenly nervous and sweating bullets.

When I don't answer, he utters approvingly, "Good girl."

And even though I hate that term, coming from him, it means something to me. My body slumps into the desk in relief, and he continues to eat me as if I were his last meal.

This is what oral sex should be. Uninhibited and freeing. Not awkward and clumsy, as I've always had.

His tongue slides up my pussy until the firm, wet warmth meets a place I haven't yet explored sexually, and he licks again and again. This is new to me. I'm not sure how I should be feeling, but my stomach is clenched and my back is rigid. I whisper, "Stop."

But, of course, he doesn't. What he does do is massage my ass cheek with one hand, and reach around with the other. His fingers meet my clit, and he strokes it slowly and gently. Almost lovingly.

The sensations start to change. I'm no longer uncomfortable. In fact, I'm burning up.

My breathing deepens, and I begin to move against his fingers. He stiffens his tongue and presses into me.

My insides flip and twist.

This shouldn't feel so good!

My pinkie fingers hold each other tighter. My body trembles.

He pushes in further, and his breath warms the skin there. Pushing back into him, he growls, licks once more, then stands.

I just know he's going to fuck me. And I could cry from happiness.

I hear the zipper lower. It sounds so loud in the still room. But when his cock touches me, my eyes widen and I push forward away from him.

Smacking my ass hard with an open palm, he makes me wince and jump. He reaches out to grip my hair, tight, and pulling it gently, he states, "You want this."

Do I? Do I *really*? I'm not so sure.

The head of his cock settles at my back entrance once more, and he mutters, "Now's your chance to get away. You're so sure I won't hurt you?"

Are you really stupid enough to stay?”

Fuck!

This is a goddamn test! And I’m going to fail. Dammit!

I’m not ready for this. Not this way. Any other time, *maybe*, but not now.

A tear slips out the side of my eye and I say unconvincingly through a shuddering breath, “I trust you.”

Where that came from, I’m not sure. But it’s been said now. It’s too late to turn back.

I feel his body go rigid as he hisses, “You made the wrong choice.”

The very tip of him enters me and I whimper. It hurts a little, but my entrance is so slick from his saliva that it might just be the shock of it. My breath hitches as another tear escapes me. He sighs behind me, and gripping my hands at my back in his, he leans forward and it pushes his cock a little further inside me. It stings and my eyes close, brows bunched in pain.

He whispers, “If you don’t want this to hurt as much as it could, you need to push down and out. Now.”

As soon as he finishes speaking, he slowly pushes in, and doing as I’m told, I push out and back into him. The balls of his piercing go in without issue. My stomach coils with sensations. I’ve never felt so full before. It doesn’t hurt, just stings a little. He stills a moment, breathing heavily. With his free hand, he strokes my hair and says gently, “Good girl.”

Not a minute passes before he releases my hands to grip my upper arms behind my back tightly. He murmurs, “Hold on, baby.”

And then it starts.

He pushes as deep as he can once, pulls out a little, then thrusts into me. White spots blur my vision.

Driving into me with a steady pace, all I can do is hold on as I’m ridden. I’m so confused by the sensations. It feels amazing. But then, everything with Twitch feels amazing.

The edge of the desk works my clit with every thrust, and almost out of nowhere, I feel myself tighten as my breath heaves. I clench around him and he groans, “Fuck, Angel. Do it. Let go.”

Unable to hold it any longer, I let go.

My body goes rigid and I feel as though I’m falling. Off the highest mountain. Into an ocean of pure ecstasy.

I pulse with every thrust, and bite my tongue to stop myself from crying out.

Just as quickly as it comes, it's gone. I'm left limp, resenting the person I'm being ridden by.

How does he do it? I'm so easily manipulated by him.

Eyes stinging, I close my eyes tightly, embarrassed by my want of him. Crying silently into the desk, my anger rises.

Suddenly, he stills. Groaning, warmth fills my behind and I bite my lip to stop myself from sobbing.

A moment later, he gently pulls out of me, handing me a bunch of tissue. Without asking, I hold the tissue where I'm likely to drip from, and walk over to his personal bathroom, locking the door behind me.

Taking my time to clean myself, once finished, I lower the lid on the toilet and sit a while.

Sniffling, I dab at my eyes and wonder why this man is doing this to me. My life was good before I met him. Now it's chaos. And what's worse is I'm letting it happen.

My mind throws a word out to me that I bury deep.

And although I don't want it to be true, I know in my heart that for some fucked up reason, I want Twitch, regardless of how damaged he is.

I came here today to find some form of clarity.

Sometimes, when you look close enough at a person hoping to find said clarity, the image of that person becomes so hazy, so distorted, that all you're left with is unclear thoughts and more questions.

This is what happens when I try to understand Twitch.

There is little to no predictability with this man. I know he is damaged. I know he is complicated. But I can't help but wonder what would happen to him if I deserted him. But that's just a thought.

A stupid one.

I can't leave him. I won't leave him.

He needs me.

You need him.

He needs me more. And I'll be there for him.

Nodding at my internal pep talk, I make my way out of the bathroom to find Twitch back behind his desk, typing away as if nothing happened. I

open my mouth to speak, when he utters, “Like I said, I’m busy. Next time, make an appointment.”

I stand there in complete silence. My heart cracks.

Was I just dismissed?

The more I stand there, the more my anger builds. Just when I tell myself to turn, leave, and never come back, I shriek unexpectedly, “God, you are such a fuck up!”



Twitch

“God, you are such a fuck up!”

My head snaps up, brows knitting. She pauses, panting, then, “And I hate myself for loving you.”

What did she just say?

Her lips quiver and she chokes out, “Because I can’t give up on you.”

A single tear trails down her cheek.

Hold up. Back up. What did she just say?

Lexi loves me? Since when?

Standing slowly, I make my way over to her, searching her tearful face. When we're almost toe-to-toe, I lift my hand to brush her cheek. But she flinches.

And it guts me.



Lexi

His hand comes up to cup my cheek.

"Don't, babe. Don't look at me like that. Not gonna hurt you. Not like that."

I don't know why, but somehow, I already know this.

He adds on a whisper, "I'd kill anyone who tried."

Immediately, I respond with, "I know."

What I don't add is, 'And it scares the shit out of me.'

Twitch's eyes peer down into mine; knowing what's coming, I tilt my face up as he lowers his to mine and takes my lips in a demanding kiss.

And that kiss conveys so much more than words ever could.

I hate myself for loving this man.



Twitch

Kissing Lexi with everything I have, I can almost feel her love flowing through me.

I feel drunk. Love drunk.

Placing my forehead on hers, I whisper, “You gotta promise to never leave me. I-I...you just gotta.”

Her response is, “You have to promise to try to love me back. What you’re doing to me...that’s not how you treat a person you love, Twitch.”

I’ve loved you since you were six.

Kissing her once more, I tell her without hesitation, “If you promise to never leave me, I *will* love you. And be good to you. I’ll treat you like a queen.”

My queen.

I heard somewhere that a king only bows down to his queen.

And I’m bowing down to Lexi.

My chest aches. I don’t know if I like this love thing.

She whispers the magic words, “I promise I won’t leave you.”
And just like that...
...Lexi became mine.

Lexi

Sitting at my desk, back at work, I chew on the end of my pen and recall the rest of our conversation today. I should be working, but my mind is trained on one thing. Twitch. Our talk was short, but it felt like so much was put out there in such few words.

He kissed me again and again, then asked, “You’re mine? Just mine?”

And the way he asked, with such insecurity in his voice, was as if he didn’t know the answer to his questions. And it calmed me to know he was as uncertain about this as I was. His questions lacked his usual confidence and sounded almost juvenile. I told him honestly, “If you let me in and you promise to try, for me, then yes. I’m yours.”

Pulling back and looking down at me, his eyes crinkled in the corners. “So we’re doing this? You’re my girlfriend?”

Blushing, I dipped my chin, “I-I guess so. That’s usually how these things go. I know you don’t love me...”

He cut in with, “I *will* love you.”

“...yet, but it doesn’t matter to me. I’m willing to make this work if you think you can let me in enough to understand you. That’s all I need, Twitch. Help me understand you.” I whispered by the shell of his ear, “Just let me in.”

Wrapping his arms around me, he held me tightly, buried his face into my neck, and mumbled, “I’ll try, baby. I’ll try.”

And I believed him.

How this all happened so quickly, I really have no idea.

One second I came to offer Twitch help – help he desperately needs – and the next, I’m losing my anal V-card. Then I’m yelling, and finally, I’m Twitch’s girlfriend.

Chuckling humorlessly, I shake my head at myself.

This could be the biggest mistake of my life.
Or it could be the most perfect prize. One you've earned.
There's something about Twitch.
He's just...*raw*.
Everything about him is raw. And gritty. And unbound.
He's a raging fire. And I'm a fragile moth fluttering into the flame.
Sooner or later, I'm going to get burned. I know this.
Will I even survive the heat?
How can I trust this man after everything we've been through in such a short time?
Without skipping a beat, my mind provides the answer.

Easy.



Spending the afternoon revisiting my decision to be involved with a man like Twitch made my mind turn to mush.

I have an ethical responsibility within my sector to help all that need it. I know Twitch needs help, even if he doesn't believe that. It's no real secret that man has anger issues that borderline violent. I wonder what I'm getting myself into. He has secrets. Secrets that run deep.

Thinking of the things that could have possibly happened to him makes my heart squeeze.

People don't turn into the kind of person Twitch is for no reason at all. Something terrible has happened for him to be this way. And I'll be there, waiting patiently for when he finally wants to reveal those reasons.

Something tells me that by giving him the promise he all but begged for, to not leave him, his trust in me has risen to a new level.

Twitch asked me to meet him at my place when I was done with work. He said he was taking the afternoon off and we're going to be staying at his house tonight.

Everything inside of me told me not to go. To not be at his beck and call. That I needed to be independent.

But all I could think about was how much lost time we had to make up for.

Truthfully, learning about Twitch is more important to me than anything. And tonight is going to be the night.

I text him back, telling him that I would meet him and that he'd better be ready to talk.

And talk is what we did.

I found him in my room when I got home, and at seeing my selection of underwear, he curled his lip in disgust. "Seriously, babe?"

"What?" I asked.

He took a pair of my pink cotton panties and stretched them between his fingers. Making a slingshot with them, he flung them across my room, then stalked over to the bed.

Sitting, his eyes took in my body as if he were undressing me with his eyes. And it made me a little uncomfortable. I'm not used to being scrutinised so close up.

He pulled me towards him so I stood between his legs. His hands travelled up my sides, then over my breasts and back down. He muttered vacantly, "This body."

Snapping out of his daze, he offered, "A body like this is a gift. So it needs to be gift-wrapped. I like my gifts to be wrapped in sexy." Trailing a fingertip from my belly button down to the top of my mound, he muttered, "I like my women in silk and lace, frills and bows. I don't do pretty, but I like women who do pretty."

Looking up at me, he stated, "You do pretty, you won't get rid of me."

For Twitch, that was kind of sweet. And very macho. And seriously sexist.

The feminist in me booed and hissed, while the horny teenager in me slumped against a wall and sighed dreamily.

Not wanting him to know that, I teased, “You’re my stalker. I couldn’t get rid of you if I tried.”

His lips twitched. “I like Lexi. She’s funny. Not a huge fan of *Alexa*, though. She kinda sucks.”

I was confused. “But I’m Alexa. And Lexi. We’re the same person.”

He grinned hugely, “No. You’re not. Just like I’m Twitch sometimes, but I’m also...” My eyes widened.

Please tell me. Open up to me. Please.

His smile faltered only a second before he said, “C’mon. Let’s go home.”

Home.

With Twitch.

That felt so right that my mind wasn’t able to form words. Mouth parted, I simply nodded, and off we went.

Home.



Twitch

Spending the afternoon with Lexi was crazy.

It was crazy because I don't remember a time in my life when I laughed so much or smiled so hard. The woman is a serious clown. She's adorably goofy. And I love that.

I never thought it could be this way with the two of us.

She says she loves me. And when she said it in anger, I knew it was true. I can't tell her how I feel about her yet. I need her to know me – all of me – before I can tell her that. I have my reasons.

We spent the day outdoors. She dressed herself in the bright yellow sundress I bought her, after an argument which lasted almost an hour about me buying her things. She lectured me about people starving around the world, and about kids living on the streets. She only gave up her argument when I blurted, "I know, Lex. I was a street kid. So I get it." Her face turned soft and her argument died. I added, "Just wanted to do something nice for my girl, okay?"

Standing by her dresser, she answered quietly, "Okay, honey."

Like I said, I *always* win.

I showed her some of my favorite places in the city, including a small Italian café where we had something light for dinner. She said smiling, "You like Italian food, huh?"

Leaning back in my chair, I told her, "I think it's got something to do with my heritage. I *love* Italian food. It's my favorite."

She smiled harder. I'm sure it had something to do with the fact that I was slowly giving her information about myself. "Okay, then. I'll remember that," she uttered.

Hand-in-hand, we walked all over, mostly in silence, but every now and then explaining to the other what places we liked and why.

I found out that Lexi loves Mexican food. The spicier the better. She also told me that she made a mean cocoa, as long as I didn't mind a lot of booze in it. She mentioned her brother, which held my attention. She said he was a great brother and was extremely protective. When I asked where he was, she pulled her emotions back inside of her and told me blankly that she hadn't spoken to him in a while, but the last time she checked, he was back in the US.

It made my chest ache for her.

The funny thing was that even though I knew everything she was telling me, it sounded like brand new information coming from her mouth. Like the way her eyes lit up when she spoke about her friends, Nikki and Dave.

Nikki and Lexi were roommates in University. Dave happened to attend the same University and worked at the campus coffee shop. Dave being gay was hassled on a daily basis, and one day spilled coffee on a male customer. Not thinking, Dave grabbed a handful of napkins, and apologizing, started to wipe the coffee off the customer. That was when the customer called Dave a faggot, knocked him to the ground, and started laying into him. Lexi and Nikki watched in horror for all of ten seconds before they took their book bags to the man and managed to knock him out cold. Smiling, she explained, "We were arrested, but the charges were dropped. Dave came to visit us the next day in our dorm, and started the conversation with 'well, aren't you all just a bunch of crazy bitches!'" She laughed openly, "And we've been friends ever since, even though Nikki and Dave have this stupid rivalry going on."

I was about to ask her about her family when she blurted out, "So, Happy, huh? He's like, gay or bi-sexual or something?"

That threw me off. "What?" I was confused.

She just played with my fingers, and I asked through narrowed eyes, "What do you know, Angel?"

"Just that he's enjoying the company of Dave. *And* Nikki. So I just assumed he was gay, but he'd definitely be bi then, wouldn't he?"

I told her pointedly, "He's not *anything*. He's just Happy." She looked at me like I was crazy when I reminded her gently but firmly, "You know how I feel about labels. Happy likes what he likes. He doesn't need a label."

Her brows rose in thought. She nodded once. "Okies."

"Okies?"

"You know? It's like okay, but cuter."

Staring into her laughing eyes, I muttered, "Okies?"

She burst into laughter, and I watched the way her face bunched in delight; her full lips framed her straight, white teeth, and it was then that I knew I was a goner.

Which brings us to now, chilling in my bed, watching TV with my girl.

"Why are you like this?" Lexi asks softly, as she reaches for my hand in the subtly-lit room. She entwines our fingers and whispers, "Something bad

happened to you.”

No shit, Sherlock.

A minute passes and we remain silent, but her thumb strokes mine so gently that the urge to talk overcomes me. “Had a shitty childhood. That shitty childhood turned into a shitty adolescence. I met someone when I was just a kid who made me believe it might get better. In my head, I told myself that I had to make the most of what I had to make things better, so I did what I could. I ran away from said shitty childhood and lived on the streets for a few years. Things got better in some ways. But other things just got worse. Ended up in bad places, doing bad things to make a buck to live. Eventually *bad* – in my mind – became *good*.” A look of confusion crosses her face. I try to explain, “What I mean is that those bad things, I didn’t see as bad anymore. It was just my life. So I guess you could say I’m desensitized to a lot of bullshit. Most shit that would shock and disgust a normal person doesn’t shock me at all. And *bad* doesn’t seem so bad anymore. In my mind, most bad things are good.”

Turning, I take in Lexi’s semi-lit silhouette, which watches me with wide eyes, clearly in shock over me revealing so much of myself. I’m shocked too. The only two people who really know about me – I mean *really* know about me – are Happy and Julius. Happy, Julius, and I all met in bad places. We get each other.

Turning the tables on her, I ask, “What made you who you are?”

Lexi shrugs. “A whole bunch of things. I don’t know really.”

I tut, “Bullshit. I asked you a question, girl. I expect an answer.”

She lies on her side, resting her chin on her upturned hand. “Okay, smartass. Well, I guess it started at home with me too. Things weren’t good. Mom was working all the time. Dad was a mean old bastard. Mom would work most nights because it was better money, and the dropkick I called Dad would spend most of that money on weed and booze, drowning out the mess that was his life. Me and my brother looked after each other as much as we could. But I couldn’t protect him the way he protected me. I was small and fragile. Whenever Dad got mad, my brother would shove me in my room and lock the door from the outside. They’d tussle, but nothing too bad. Eventually, my brother turned to drugs because Dad was...”

Her eyes lose focus, and something churns in my gut. An unfamiliar feeling.

Protectiveness. I feel protective of Lexi.

I don't know what to do with that.

Shaking her head, her eyes meet mine and she forces a smile.

"Everyone's got a story. It could've been worse though. My neighbors growing up, they..." Her brow furrows. "They weren't nice people. I was just a baby, maybe five or six, and I would hear them every night. Yelling and hurtin' on their son." She whispers, "He was just a boy. And I would sit in my room and...and just cry. Cry *with* him."

Her voice sounds pained, and my heart races.

She adds quietly, "I met him once. I saw him limping into my backyard. He was hurt. And when he fell, even though I was just a kid, I couldn't imagine leaving him there, all alone and scared." She whispers again, "He was just a boy. A little boy. And he was hurt bad."

Pulling her hand to bring her closer to me, I wrap an arm around her waist and she buries her face into my neck. I need to know. "What happened with the little boy?"

She inhales deeply and replies on an exhale, "He tried to fight me." And I smile at her temple. She must feel it because she laughs softly. "Yeah. He was a tough one. Not wanting help from anyone, especially me. Very wary and suspicious." Then she says something that makes my chest ache. "He was a little like you, Twitch."

Snuggling into me, she speaks into the side of my neck. "He didn't want to tell me his name. But I got it out of him. He told me I'd forget once he was gone and I promised I wouldn't. I remember trying so hard to make sure I didn't forget it." She smiles at my throat. "I even carved his name into the huge oak back home when I was ten." She chuckles, "It's like I wanted to prove to him that I kept my word." Silence, then, "It didn't matter, though. The day after I met him, there were ambulances and police cars all over his house. I hid in my room, covering my ears 'til they left. And I knew...I just knew he was gone."

My aching chest is soothed when a feeling of warmth settles over me.

Lexi yawns. "I guess that's why I do what I do. You know? Help the kids I help. It's sorta because of him. I'll never forget him. He was a fighter. I always thought of him as a survivor."

I don't want to ask. I don't want to ask. *Don't ask.* "Do you remember his name, baby?"

Half asleep, she whispers, “Antonio Falco.”

My body tenses, solid as a rock. I listen closely as her breathing deepens then evens out, and her body softens as she falls into a deep sleep.

Fuck me. Fucking *hell*. I don’t believe this shit.

Breathing heavily, my jaw tightens and I pull Lexi deeper into me, savouring her warmth and sweetness. Everything I’m too stubborn to let go of.

Goddamn it! This wasn’t meant to happen. This... Fuck me... This changes everything.

Lexi remembers me.



A piercing shriek in my ear makes my entire body jolt.

The shriek sounds again. Then again.

My bedroom door bursts open, and Happy stands there in his boxers, as well as Ling in a skimpy nightie, both looking just woken. When Ling spots Lexi at my side, she scowls. Lexi lifts her head and mumbles, “What’s going on? What’s that freaking noise?” Blinking, she looks to the door and yells, “What is *she* doing here?”

One question at a time, young grasshopper.

Answering all her questions out of order, I say, “That’s the alarm; someone’s breaking in.” I look to Happy, who nods in confirmation. “And Ling lives here, Lex.”

Ling smirks.

Lexi’s brow furrows. “Why?”

Not wanting to embarrass Ling, I pretend to kiss Lexi’s temple and whisper, “Got nowhere else to go.”

Lexi pushes her temple into my touch before pulling back wide-eyed and screeching, “*Someone’s breaking in?*”

Happy chuckles and Ling mutters, “Rookie.”

I grin. “Don’t sweat it. Happens all the time.”

Her eyes drift down to my chest as she stutters, “Ha-ha-happens all the time?”

Slipping out of bed, I pull on a pair of boxers and order, “Stay up here. Whatever you hear, do *not* come down. You hear me?”

She pulls the covers up to her neck and whispers, “I can’t promise that, but I’ll stay up here ‘til I can stay up here no longer pondering your imminent death.”

Stopping in my tracks at her overly dramatic explanation, I ask, “How long you think that’ll be?”

Looking up in thought, she mutters, “About five minutes.”

“Deal.” Pointing at her, I order, “Do *not* come down. For five minutes.”

As I walk out into the hall, Ling walks back to her room, closing the door behind her, while Happy follows behind me.

I ask him, “What do we have today?”

Happy snickers, “One guy. Looks drug-fucked. In the dining area, searching like a mad man.”

Sighing, I mutter, “They never learn.”

When we reach the staircase’s half-way point, we come face-to-face with a man, I’d say in his thirties, with blonde shaggy dreadlocks and bloodshot eyes, dressed in grey Bermuda shorts and a dirty white tee. I can’t figure out who sent him, *if* anyone sent him. From the looks of him, he could just be a junkie on a binge, desperately looking for something to hock for another fix.

He stands there a moment in shock before taking off like a rocket up the hall.

Oh, dear. Looks like he chose a dead end. What a shame.

Walking calmly down the hall to the formal dining room, I make my way into the room to spot the man trying in vain to pull himself out of the high set windows. With a shake of the head, I reach for his ankle and pull. Hard. He collapses at my feet in a shaking, sweating mess, and I ask, “Who sent you?”

Shaking his head, he utters, “No one, man. No one.”

Placing my hand on his head, he whimpers as I pat him like a dog. “Here I am, enjoying a night in with one of my girls, and I have to deal with this shit. I’d really like to know who sent you.”

Shaking his head once more, my anger builds. I tangle my fingers tightly into his hair and lift him by his dreads. He cries out, and from the way his voice gurgles and chokes, I’m worried he’s going to be sick. Pulling him over to the exquisite antique dining table, I kick a heavy chair out of the way before throwing his torso onto the surface of the unblemished mahogany.

Gripping his hair tight, I ask, “You wanna know why I keep my door locked at night?”

Breathing heavily, he nods his head.

Leaning closer to his ear, I tell him on a whisper, “To protect the people outside of it from *me*.”

Pulling his head up by his hair, I grit my teeth and slam his head down on the dining table. Repeatedly.

The sound of his nose snapping makes me shudder. I get too much pleasure from this shit. It’s almost alarming.

Almost.

Throwing him to the ground in an unconscious heap, my eyes catch something moving towards me. Lexi looks far away. She whispers distantly, “You said one of your girls.”

“What?”

Avoiding my eyes, she utters more firmly, “You said you were enjoying a night in with *one* of your girls. Not your girl.”

My brow furrows. Did I say that?

Reaching for her, she pulls back and sniffs, “I gotta go. It’s late.”

Fuck me. She’s pissed.

Before I can call out to her, she’s gone. Happy leans against the door, and I shrug at him in question. He nods, confirming I did say what cut Lexi deep.

Annoyance and frustration well up inside of me.

Looking down at the heap that is the intruder, I pull my leg back and kick him in the side. Once, twice, three times, then finally a fourth. He groans weakly, red-stained drool slides out of his mouth onto the floor.

Pointing towards the door, I glower down at his face and say, “Now look at what you did!”

Happy chuckles and I throw him a glare, warning him not to fuck with me.

Sighing, I run a hand through my hair.

Damage control at one AM.

This should be fun.

Lexi

Reaching for my shot, I down it in one. I'm not a big drinker, but Nikki, Dave, and I have had some doozies together. I remember all those times as fun. I suddenly wonder why this time doesn't feel so fun to me.

"Here I am, enjoying a night in with one of my girls..."

Without thinking, I reach for the next shot and attempt to drown out the man who poisons my usually-clear-thinking mind.

Catching a taxi at this time of night to a bar to drink myself stupid seemed like a good idea at the time.

But like my mama always said:

Nothing good happens after two a.m.



Twitch

Using the GPS tracking system I installed on Lexi's phone, I'm surprised to find her at a sleazy bar I used to attend frequently in the city at this time of night. That is, until I realize the reason I used to frequent this bar was because Lexi would come here with her friends.

It's so easy to keep an eye on someone when they're by your side most of the time. I haven't needed to watch Lexi much anymore. Besides, Lexi up-close beats far-away Lexi any day of the week.

Sitting at the bar, looking at the empty shot glasses in front of her, she cloaks her emotions as she seems to speak robotically to the man next to her. I pull in my anger at the sight of the man placing his hand on her arm, and make my way over until I'm standing behind her.

"Stand up, Lexi. We're going," I tell her, as I curl my fingers around her wrist.

Looking up, her face betrays her hurt. Struggling to get out of my grip, she slurs, "No. I'm not going with you. I'm staying here. Staying with—" She drifts off before looking at the man with pleading eyes. He chuckles, "Brad." She announces, "Staying with Brad!"

Tightening my grip on her, I put my lips to her ear, "You're not staying. You're coming home."

You're coming *home*? I meant to say 'to my place'. That's... I don't even want to analyze that right now. I've got bigger fish to fry.

Snatching her wrist out of my hand, her eyes void and her voice becomes bleak. "Don't want to go with you. You're poison."

My chest pangs.

Well shit. That fuckin' stings. Like a bitch.

It's not a lie, but it stings still.

I've never begged before. Never in my life. I sure as fuck am not gonna start now. Playing it cool, I chuckle. "Babe, what do you think you're doing here anyways? This place...it's not for the likes of you."

What I don't say is 'You're too good to be in a place like this. A place like this pulls at your *good* and dulls your sparkle. And I like your sparkle.'

Staring down at my chest, she takes a step closer to me and whispers miserably, "I'm here to let Brad fuck me." My cheek ticks and my head implodes. She steps closer to me to add, "He's going to fuck me. Fuck me

‘til I forget you. ‘Til I forget I ever met you. He’s helping me drown you out, and I like when I’m not thinkin’ about you.” She looks into my eyes and repeats on a whisper, “You’re poison.”

I’ve officially had enough of this conversation.

Taking her elbow, I pull her towards me, when Brad the asshole stands and starts, “Hey! Let go of her! She doesn’t want to go with you. You heard —”

Reaching into the back of my jeans, I pull out my .32 semi and point it right in the middle of his brows. Stepping away so quickly with his arms raised, he stumbles backward into a stool.

But I can’t walk away yet. His humiliation is something I need right now. I need him to learn. What, exactly? I’m not sure. But I want to see his fear.

Lexi pulls on my elbow and quietly says a defeated, “Okay, Twitch. You win. I’ll go with you. Leave him alone and we’ll leave, babe. Just me and you.”

It’s my turn to snatch my elbow from her alcohol-weakened grip. Taking two large steps, I push the barrel of the pistol into his forehead, hard. Listening to him whimper brings me a rush. Warmth spreads through me. Leaning closer to him, I grit my teeth and say quietly, “You got something to say to me, wise guy? Fuckin’ say it.”

Brad starts to shake, and I can feel eyes on me. Most likely from everyone in the bar. Lucky, I know the bartender. Well. Jimmy and I had business dealings. I know he knows I’m doing what I think I have to.

I give Brad a full thirty seconds to answer before I whisper, “Yeah, I thought so,” and move away from him. Placing the Colt back in my waistband, I move to stand by Lexi, wrap my arm around her shoulders, and tuck her into my side. Her hand slides up to the middle of my chest, and she fists my shirt. “Let’s go, babe. Let’s go,” she whispers.

Lifting my finger, I point hard at the quivering mess that is Brad and announce loudly, “No one plays with *my* things. *No one* touches what’s mine. *This...*” Sliding my hand down to Lexi’s ass, I make a show of cupping it and squeezing. Hard. “...this is *mine*. Got it?”

Brad – still with his hands raised in surrender – nods vigorously, and I know I’ve made my point.

To Brad. And to Lexi.

It's selfish to keep her around when I know she wants time alone. I know it is. But I can't let her go.

You need her.

I don't need anyone. I'm just selfish.

At least, that's what I tell myself.



“You left.”

Driving Lexi back to her place, I know we have to talk about what happened. This whole *having a girlfriend* thing blows so far. I repeat myself, “You left after you said you wouldn’t.”

Looking out of the window, she mutters miserably, “Yeah, well, I figured if you couldn’t keep your promise, then I shouldn’t have to keep mine either.”

It's times like this that I wish my brain worked like everyone else's.

Breathing deeply, I try in vain to calm my racing heart. “I’m not... It’s not like... I didn’t mean it, Angel. I swear. There is no one else. Just you.”

I wait patiently, but she doesn’t respond. Why did I think I would say what I had to say and she would just jump into my open arms cooing, ‘*I’m yours!*’?

Stupid movies and their completely inaccurate argument scenes.

Reaching over to hold her hand, I’m surprised that she lets me. Linking our fingers, I pull her hand onto my thigh and try again. “I’m not used to having one woman, Lex.” She scoffs and I cringe, knowing (now) that it wasn’t the right thing to say. “What I meant is that I’ve not ever given myself to one woman. I’ve always avoided relationships because I don’t like what comes with them. *This* being one of those things.”

She mumbles, “You said it yourself. You’re going to hurt me.”

Underplaying my words, I shrug. “It’s bound to happen, baby. I’m sure you’ll hurt me too. But that’s just something that happens when you care about someone too much. Everyone gets hurt.” She turns her sad eyes to me. I add, “But it makes the sweet so much sweeter. If every relationship was perfect, think about how bored everyone would be. Not to mention, make up sex is supposed to be fan-fuckin’-tastic.”

Her lip twitches and I know I’ve got her. She turns her face back to the window, “You’re a dork.”

Lifting our hands to my mouth, I nip her fingers. “I’m *your* dork.”

Snapping her head around, she asks in all seriousness, “You mean that?” Pause. “You’re mine? *Just* mine?”

No lies. “Completely.” She doesn’t look convinced. Kissing the back of her hand, I say something that I didn’t plan on telling her. “You own me.”

We stop at a red light, and turning my body towards hers, I splay my hands on her cheeks and pull her head towards mine. Nose-to-nose, my jaw sets and I whisper in false calm. “But you can’t leave me. Not ever.”

Her eyes turn sad and I know she thinks I’ve got issues. She wouldn’t be wrong. I do have issues. She kisses the tip of my nose. “Don’t you know?”

My brow bunches and she smiles.

Our lips touch. She whispers against them, “You’re what fills the hole in my heart.”

Warmth flows through me. My heart kick-starts. I feel the best I’ve ever felt in my life.

Then she ruins it.

“You saved me. You’re my hero.”

Letting go of her cheeks, I pull back and look her in the eye. “No. I’m not. You have no idea how wrong you are.” Breathing deeply, I speak through an exhale. “What you want me to be...I can’t ever be. It’s not me.” My face turns cold. “I’m the villain in this story.”

The car behind beeps its horn for us to move, but I hold Lexi’s stare. She looks around in confusion as to why we aren’t moving yet. The car beeps some more and my jaw tics. There is a reason for us not moving off yet, and I need her to see me.

See the real me.

This is important. It’s important because she’s stuck with me for life.

And she doesn't know that yet.

A muffled, "Move it along, asshole!" sounds from outside. I slowly and deliberately turn my head from side-to-side, cracking my neck. Leaving the engine running, I exit the car. Watching Lexi's beautiful mouth part in surprise, I tell her sweetly, "Be right back, Angel."

Walking over to the clearly-angry man, he unwinds his window and sneers, "Move your fancy car to the side of the road. This isn't a parking spot."

Looking chastised, I chuckle and lean down to the open window, "I know, but my girlfriend wanted to talk and we were having a moment." My hand strikes out at lightning speed, clutching his neck. Gasping for air, he claws at my hand. I snigger, "You gotta watch who you open your mouth to, pops. You never know when those words might be your last. You got me?"

The man nods wide-eyed. I let go of his throat and watch him pant. Gesturing to the side of the car, I tell him, "Move around. It's not hard."

The man does just that and I walk back to my car. Sitting down, I turn to Lexi and tell her, "*That's* why you can't leave me."

Her face bunches in confusion once again and I explain, "Baby, that would've been much worse if you weren't here. You make me do things like *that*..." I motion with my thumb to the back of the car. "...less. You're good for me. You make it easier."

Eyes wide in interest, she asks on a whisper, "Make *what* easier?"

I smile a sad smile. "Life."

Placing her hand in mine, she says with determination. "I won't leave you, Twi—" Cutting herself off, she asks hesitantly. "I'd like to know...I mean, only if you want to tell...wh-what's your name?"

I should tell her. Now. It would make everything else come easier.

But I'm suddenly petrified that it'll be too much for her and she'll leave me.

So rather than giving her a mile, I give her an inch. "Tony. My name is Tony."

A small smile graces her lips. That small smile stretches impossibly. Then she's beaming at me. "I like it," she says humbly. "It suits you."

Driving her home, I grip the steering wheel tightly to stop myself from getting all caveman on her and dragging her by her hair back to my bedroom. Parking by her unit, I ask sly-like, "You want me to come up?"

She laughs, “Um. No. I’ll be fine, Tw—” She smiles. “Tony. I’ll be fine, Tony.”

Putting on my best sad face, I mutter, “What about the awesome make-up sex we’re supposed to have?”

Leaning over the seat, she kisses my lips. “Anticipation will make it all the more awesome.”

Kissing me again and again, I say against her lips, “Okay. No sex.” Another kiss. “Let me eat your pussy, though.”

Her body shakes against mine in silent laughter. She pulls back. “I’m exiting the car. Don’t follow me. I have a frying pan and I know how to use it.”

Palming my cock, I say dejectedly, “You’re so mean, Angel.”

Still laughing, she shuts the car door, shaking her head. Lifting her hand in a wave, I blow her a small kiss and wonder when it actually happened.

When did I *really* fall in love with Lexi?

What I used to feel for her, I now see was actually a dangerous and unhealthy obsession. I wanted to hurt her. I don’t want that anymore. I want to make her happy. Because she makes me happy.

I’m happy. For the first time in my life.

Smiling at her retreating frame, I ponder.

My smile fades.

I’ve got to tell her.

Everything.



Lexi

Laughing out loud, I talk to Nikki and Dave on my cell while I unlock the door to my unit.

Today was a good day. I spent some of the money that Falcon Plastics donated. I gave fifty-thousand to a new women's shelter that was in dire need of funding, I gave ten-thousand to a charity that focuses on feeding the homeless, and I gave twenty-five-thousand to a program which is known for their work with abused children in the foster system.

I've been laughing and smiling like a complete dork all day long. And I don't even care. I'm a dorkette, and Twitch is my dork. He said so himself. So I had to conference my friends and tell them all that had transpired between me and my man. Well, not everything. Just the essentials.

Dave shouts, "You're with him? As in 'honey, I'm home' with him?"

Nikki scoffs, "I think you know exactly what she means, sissy-boy." She then shrieks, "Oh my god! I'm so happy for you, babe! I knew it would work out. I just *knew* it."

Walking backwards into my unit, I tell them, "Yep. It's official. I'm with Twitch. And I would be super happy if you both supported me on this. I can't guarantee it won't be hard, but—" I yelp in surprise when strong arms circle my waist. My cheeks flame being busted speaking about him so freely with my friends. But I need to finish my sentence. "But I can guarantee that it'll be worth it." I quickly add for his sake, "If we *both* put in one-hundred percent, that is."

I'm rewarded with a squeeze.

Leaning back into him, he kisses my cheek; keeping his lips on me and closing my eyes, I breathe him in.

I love his smell.

My stressful work day is forgotten, all by a small hug and his scent.

Dave still sounds guarded, “I am supporting you, babe! I can’t even remember when’s the last time you went on a date, so this is huge. I know you wouldn’t have gone into this without thinking it through.” Then he says something that reminds me of why I love this man. “Maybe I just need to get to know him. We can do dinner one night. All of us. If he’s important to you, I’ll make an effort, sweets.”

I whisper through my thick throat, “Dave.”

Nikki says a wobbly, “Naww, Dave! This is why I love to hate you! No man should be so sweet. You’re ruining us for all other men.”

Then, in perfect Dave style, he ruins the moment. “Okay, fine. No more sap. But tell me one thing...” He dramatically pauses for effect, then, “... how big is his wang?”

Nikki and I both cry out, “*Dave!*” then promptly burst into laughter.

That’s when Tony snatches the phone out of my hand, and putting on his best husky voice, tells them, “It’s a fucking beast.”

Laughing so hard that tears spring to my eyes, I listen in as Nikki shrieks with laughter. The very last thing I hear before he hangs up on my friends is Dave shouting, “*Holla!*”

Wiping under my eyes, I chuckle, “That was hilarious. Who knew you could crack a funny?”

Not saying a word, he smiles, pulling my bag off my shoulder and placing it on the floor by the door. He walks over to the sofa and sits. Then spreading his legs, he pops a pillow on the floor between them and orders, “Lexi, sit.”

If he didn’t just say my name, I’d be looking around to see who he was talking to. That’s just odd. I don’t want to sit on the floor.

“Um. I usually just sit there,” I tell him, pointing to the space free by his side.

Walking over to him, he pats his knee. “Lexi, sit.”

I suddenly feel like a dog being called to heel. It’s humiliating and completely degrading. I don’t want to start our day with a fight though, so I move next to him and say, “I’ll just sit in my normal spot,” while attempting to park my ass on the cushy sofa.

Just as my butt descends, he hooks an arm around my waist and pulls me down to the pillow between his feet. He mutters, “That’s better.”

My jaw steels.

This is my house. And I'll sit where I damn well want to! This is absurd! Why am I allowing this?

I know he likes to be in control, but this is ridiculous.

Uncomfortable and rigid, I open my mouth to speak when he leans down and whispers in my ear, "I think you'll find I usually get what I want."

My brain's mouth gapes.

The fucking nerve!

Suddenly, his hands come down on my shoulders and he rubs them firmly. My rigid posture collapses, my head falls forward, and I moan low in my throat. He says, "You work too hard. Got knots all over. You need a break. Let the little shits fend for themselves a while. Take some time off."

I mumble, "They aren't little shits."

"Yeah, they are, babe. I know this because I used to be one of them. My caseworker was an asshole, though. Bitch used to hound me all the damn time 'bout growing up and getting a job. Then when I got a job, she demanded that I quit."

That's unusual. My brow furrows. "What job?"

"Dealing weed."

Laughter bursts out of me. "Oh, sweet lord. You would've been a handful. I'm glad I wasn't your caseworker."

"Baby, if you were my caseworker, I would be on the straight and narrow. And I would've done that shit just to impress you. Just like Mickey does."

I smile. "How is Mickey? He doesn't visit anymore."

Bliss flows through me as Tony's strong hands work my muscles into a pulp. He says, "Yeah, that'll be my fault. I'm keepin' him busy. Giving him lots a stupid shit to do. Things that really don't even need to be done. I just don't want him back on the streets dealing for easy money. I don't want him to be what I am. I want him to be better. He's gonna get a degree and be someone. Mark my words. The kid is smart."

I know Michael is smart. He has so much potential. What I originally thought was a bad idea has turned into something I'm grateful for. I'm glad he's working with Tony. He can learn a lot from him.

They can learn a lot from each other.

"Well, tell him to visit me. Mama Bear misses her cub."

His hands still, and using his knees for leverage, I stand, shrugging out the kinks in my neck. Taking my hand, he spins me towards him, brings me between his open legs, and pulls me close. Looking up at me, he utters quietly, “You gonna listen next time I ask you to do something?”

Thankful for my shoulder rub, I reply breathily, “Yeah.”

His lip twitches. “Good girl.”

And I think I just fell more in love with this man.

Twitch

“Angel, what is all this?” I ask, shoving a handful of chocolate into my mouth, peering at the bags and bags of groceries she and Happy trudge through the door and into the kitchen.

She yells out, “Shit! I forgot the damn milk!”

I can all but hear her pout from my place at the foot of the stairs.

Making my way to the kitchen, as soon as I see her standing in the middle of the room with a pout and her arms crossed, I smirk. “What’s the matter?”

She utters dejectedly, “I was attempting to be a good girlfriend and make you dinner and now it’s ruined, all because I forgot the freaking milk.” Walking over to her, I open my arms and she falls into me, muttering into my tee, “I’m sorry, babe. I was trying to do something nice.”

“It’s okay. It was the thought that counts, yeah? Anyways, I can drive you back to the store if you’re still up to cooking?”

Looking up at me with goo-goo eyes, she whispers, “Would you?”

I haven’t been to the grocery store in an age.

“Sure. Let’s go.”

And I was about to be reminded of why.



Lexi

Tony finds a parking spot at the local grocery store and we both hop out of the car. Holding his hand out to me, I take it eagerly with a smile and all but skip to the entrance.

I can't remember the last time I'd been so happy. All I know is that it had been a while. And Tony brought it out of me.

Hand-in-hand, we walk into the store and something pops into my head. "Can you get the milk? I just need to get some cinnamon while we're here."

"Sure," he utters as we part ways.

Asking an attendant where the spices are kept, I make quick work of picking up what I need and dawdle towards the milk section.

We have been official for two weeks now. He made sure we saw each other every single day, going out of his way to come to me when it was late at night or I was just plain tired. Every single day we made it to the bedroom. And it's been a far cry from our original arrangement. Don't get me wrong, he is still very controlling...in and *out* of the bedroom, but there's so much more to him that I'd never seen.

He's tender. And sweet. And passionate.

Every kiss he places on my body is filled with affection, and although he hasn't told me he loves me, his kisses convey exactly what he feels. And I *love* those knee-weakening kisses.

He spoils me too, bringing me something different every day and completely ignoring my pleas to stop. He said it was something I didn't get a say in, and he said this firmly, so I dropped it. For now. The last gift he

brought me was a bangin' new stereo system to replace the crappy CD player he threw out the window. I never got around to replacing it, and as it was used as a sleeping aid, of course he got me something fancy and top of the line. The one I had cost me forty dollars on sale. And I was happy with that. When he handed me the remote and I stood there staring at it, he asked me what was wrong.

Wide-eyed, I replied, "I don't want to break this doohickie."

His lips twitched. "Doohickie?"

Shrugging, I told him, "Doohickie is a word."

Tilting his head, he looked up in thought. "Doohickie. I like it."

Smiling at the memory, I quicken my pace to get back to him. With his back to me, I see him speaking with a man who works at the store. Okay, so the *man* is actually a *boy*. In his late teens at most. And he looks nervous.

Then again, everyone looks nervous around Twitch.

As I approach, I hear the boy explain, "Well there's a lot of types of milk. You've got your one and two percent, full cream, high calcium, omega three enriched, soy and almond milk..."

Walking closer, I hear Twitch tell the boy in frustration, "I just want milk."

The boy points to the display. "There's a lot to choose from. Which one do you need?"

Twitch hisses, "Any fucking thing!" Losing his temper, he shouts at the boy, "I just want regular fucking milk. Milk that you put in cereal, you little fuck!"

My stomach drops. A freak out was not on tonight's agenda.

Placing my hand on his arm, he flinches. He turns his red face towards me and sighs in relief. He sounds so defeated when he says, "Baby, I tried..."

Shushing him, I pick out the closest milk to me, take his hand and walk over to the checkout. We finalize our purchases and head back to the car. Halfway home, I ask gently, "You want to talk about what happened back there?"

He mutters, "Not particularly."

Patting his hand on the center console, I say, "Okay. But if you want to, you can."

We arrive home, and as soon as I move to open the door, he holds onto my hand, stopping my exit. “I always get a little stupid in grocery stores. It takes me back to when I was a kid.” Sitting back down in my seat, I gesture for him to continue. “You have no idea what it’s like being a kid on the street...”

I find this the perfect opportunity to let him in on a secret of my own. “Actually, for a year, when I was sixteen, I was a street kid too.”

He seems taken aback by this. “Really?” I nod, and with confusion written over his face, he asks, “Why?”

Playing with his fingers, I lower my gaze and explain, “I told you. My dad was an asshole.”

“What did your dad do to you?”

Anger threads this question, so I decide to tread lightly. “Um, nothing too bad. He liked to make me uncomfortable a lot and pull power trips over me. He played mind-games all the time. Like one day when I came home from school and he met me at the door with his hands on his hips. He said, ‘If you can’t play by my rules, I have to take something away from you.’” I shrugged. “I mean, I was just a kid. I told him I didn’t have anything to give. So he said, ‘It doesn’t matter, I’ve already taken something.’ And when I walked into the backyard, my dog was gone.”

Tony’s hand squeezes mine. I haven’t spoken about my dad in a long time. It feels good to get this off of my chest.

Losing myself in thought, I say bleakly, “I remember crying all night. All damn night. I was a mess. My dog was my best friend, apart from my brother. I was a child. Every child’s pet is their best friend.” Shaking my head as if to clear it, I continue, “The next night, I came home from school and Misty was wagging her tail at me like she’d always been there. And my heart broke all over again just from thinking she was gone forever. I cried and cried all over again. And there was Dad, smiling a cruel smile, knowing he’d broken a small piece of my spirit. When my brother started taking drugs to escape life at home, I knew I had to leave. Then my brother took off one night, and I had nothing to stay for anymore. So I left.”

As I finish, I find my hand being squeezed way too tightly. I look up to find Tony’s jaw set, and I attempt to laugh it off. “Mom wasn’t a bad person, she just wasn’t very maternal and worked long hours to get away

from Dad.” When his face doesn’t change, I add, “Oh, look, it’s not like he touched me or anything.”

“Abuse is abuse, babe. Doing it to your kid, though...that makes it ten times worse. He might not have put a hand on you. Doesn’t make it any less painful for the kid.”

And he is one-hundred percent right.

Abuse hurts regardless of the form.

I pluck at his fingers. “Tell me about what happened back there at the grocery store.”

“Only if you tell me about your time on the street.”

I immediately concede. “Deal.”

He clears his throat. “Yeah. Okay. So I was a street kid for a long time. Until I ended up in juvie. I did my fair share of shoplifting because, hey, I had to eat, right? All grocery stores remind me of being caught and feeling trapped. I hadn’t been to one in a long time and I forgot why. Until tonight.”

The thought of him feeling like a trapped animal makes my stomach clench. I wish I could take those memories away from him. I wish I could make it better somehow. It doesn’t justify his reaction to the young store clerk’s attendance, but I do understand it better.

Linking our fingers, I tell him, “Next time, I won’t leave you. Next time, we’ll shop together, and every time you feel like something’s sneaking up on you, you just tell me we need to leave and we’re gone. Okay?”

He doesn’t answer my question; instead, he changes the subject. “You on the street. Spill.”

I shrug. “Okay. I walked out of my home with fifty dollars in my pocket that I had stolen from my mom, and a backpack full of clothes. I wandered around, caught buses to wherever they were going, and spent a lot of time trying to be invisible. Somehow, I ended up in Chicago. It wasn’t all that bad. I met some great people on the street. A girl I became close with, Fran, would be a lookout while I would sneak into people’s yards and steal whatever we could use or sell for money to buy food. We did this for months without getting caught, and we became relaxed about it.” Looking at him pointedly, I tell him, “Way too relaxed. If you get what I mean.”

He smirks, “You got caught.”

I smile. “I did. I got busted. The old lady who owned the home called the cops because I was making so much noise. I didn’t notice them ‘til I was

being read my rights and lead to the back of a police car. They knew I was underage. I didn't say a word. Not a single word to the police. I was so scared they'd send me home. Back to the place I worked so hard to escape from. Suddenly, I'm being taken to a halfway house in the city and given a bed to sleep in 'til they can find out some information about me."

I chuckle humorlessly, "The thing about cops is that you don't know how smart they are. They figured out who I really was. I spent a week in a halfway house completely grateful that I had a bed to sleep in and food to eat, that I was oblivious to what decisions were being made about my life in that time." My face falls. "They contacted my mom." Looking up at Twitch, I smile sadly, "She didn't want me back." My throat thickens and I cough to cover it. "A week passes by and the police visit me at the halfway house. The senior officer asks me if I would rather stay there," my eyes tear up and I choke out, "or if I wanted to be someone's daughter again."

"I couldn't believe someone wanted me. It seemed surreal that my own parents, my own blood, cared nothing for me or my brother, but someone I didn't know wanted *me*. Wanted to take care of me. It was a no-brainer. I agreed to being fostered." I smile a watery smile. "You wouldn't believe it, but my new foster mom was the old lady that called the cops on me." Turning to him, I laugh through my tears. "And she was a crazy woman in the best way. We ate pancakes for dinner. Had dessert for breakfast. She sent me back to school and helped me with my homework. We spent most of our nights watching lame TV or blasting music 'til the early hours. She spent every day making sure I was cared for, cared about, and loved."

"She was my mom. I had a mother before her, but she was the one who I loved and followed to Australia because the thought of living without her made me ill." Wiping my nose with my sleeve, I shake my head. "She died a few years ago. Cancer. And I could've gone to work anywhere, but the thought of leaving Sydney makes me feel like I'm abandoning her. I can't leave. I'll live in Sydney 'til the day I die."

"Sounds like you had an adventure."

I smile. "Yeah. I consider myself lucky. I got my happily ever after. Most don't." He doesn't say a thing, and I'm officially over this conversation and the emotions being brought out of me. Turning to face him, I ask, "Hungry?"

He grins. "Starved."

And we're back to Lexi and Tony.
Just another night.
Cooking up a storm for my man.



Twitch

Who knew Lexi could cook? From the contents of her refrigerator, you'd think she was such a bad cook that she could set fire to cereal.

After an incredible dinner of made-from-scratch lasagna with béchamel sauce and homemade pasta, I'm done. I'm so full after my third helping, that I won't be surprised if I fall asleep in my chair. Happy decided to eat with us, but Ling declined. Smart girl. Happy sings Lexi's praises with every fucking bite. "Damn, girl. You can cook for me anytime. And I mean *anytime*."

Lexi smiles sweetly at him.

What a suck-ass.

Just as I open my mouth to tell him to shut his trap, my cell rings. Without looking at the display, I answer, "It's after hours. You got business to discuss, you need to call tomorrow."

Moving my finger to the end call button, I hear a familiar laugh. My finger stills. "Fuck off!" A smile spreads across my face. "Nox?"

Nox chuckles, "Oh no. This is a business call. I'll have to call you tomorrow."

It's been a long time. "Damn, man. How long has it been?"

I can almost hear his brows rise in thought as he responds, "Uh. A few years. I think. It's hard to keep track."

Lexi looks confused, but smiles with me at my happy expression. Happy shrugs in question and I mouth, 'Nox'. Happy smiles and gives me a thumbs up while shoving another forkful of food into his mouth.

I sigh, "Too long, man. Way too long. What do you need?"

He stalls, "Nothin' much. Just checking in. I hadn't heard from you since you asked me to track down that girl. Just wanted to see if you reconnected."

My face voids. Standing, I wink at Lexi and mouth, 'important' before taking off upstairs to my office. Once I close the office door behind me, I tell him honestly. "I did reconnect. She's actually my girl now."

Silence, then a restrained, "Glad it worked out."

Sitting in my desk chair, my brow furrows at his tone, "What's the problem here?"

Nox sighs, "Just...don't get pissed, okay? But Julius called and..." *Motherfuck!* "And he might've mentioned that this girl was in danger."

"From me, right?"

Pause. "Yeah, man. So you could say I'm a little worried about her, seeing as you've claimed her."

My blood pressure soars through the roof. I grit my teeth and count to ten.

Breathing deeply, I assure him, "Regardless of what Julius thinks, she's my girl. And I'd kill for her."

Nox sighs, "Julius doesn't see it that way."

I spit, "Julius needs to mind his own fucking business!"

Silence.

"Nox, don't fuck this up for me. I'm in a good place. For the first time in...ever."

Nox snorts in disbelief. "Your dumbass went and fell in love with her." A statement.

“I’ve always loved her, in a really fucked up way. You know that saying *there’s a thin line between love and hate*? I hated her. But that line teetered when I met the real her, compared to my mind’s version of her.” Nox is a good guy, and one of the rare people I work with that I trust. I need him to know this. “Listen, bro. I’ll be honest here. I wanted to hurt her. I was going to hurt her.” His intake of breath lets me know he’s pissed at me. I continue quickly, “But you gotta understand that my obsession with her started a long time ago, when I was a kid, and the mind distorts things. Especially when you’re high most of your teenage years.” I say quietly, “She’s nothing of what I made her out to be.”

He says gently, “Sometimes you gotta walk away for the sake of the people you love.”

“Spent my life searching for more. Never had something so good. Finally got something I’m proud of, and you want me to give her up? Not likely. You can pry her from my cold, dead fingers, bro.”

“I’m worried you’ll hurt her without meaning to.”

My eye twitches.

Anger surges through me. “You don’t know me anymore. She changed me. She calms me.”

Pause. “Twitch, you’re my friend. I got an obligation here. I’m telling you something that you need to hear. Not just hear, but *hear*. Listen carefully.” Rolling my eyes, I grunt for him to go on. “You love her, then you need to tell her the truth. You need to tell her now. Because time’s gonna pass and that secret is gonna be a noose tightening around your neck. You’re gonna love her so much and do everything to keep her, and that noose will become so tight that you can’t breathe. But one day, she’s gonna find out. And that’s when you’re going to realize that you lost her and that you got hung. With a noose you put around your own neck.”

Thinking hard about what he said, I say quietly, “Noted.”

A squeal in my ear sounds, and Nox yells out, “Lily! He’s loose!”

What the fuck?

A woman calls back, “You know, he wasn’t the Immaculate Conception. He’s your son too!”

Nox attempts to cover the phone, but I hear every word. “Rocco, go see mama. Mama’s got cookies. You want a cookie? Good. Get daddy a cookie too.”

The woman calls out, "No cookies! Dinner will be ready soon."

He calls back, "I want a cookie! I earned a cookie, dammit!"

The woman scoffs, "Oh yeah? What did you do to earn a cookie? All I remember was coming home to a messy son and an even messier husband!"

Nox scoffs, "He wanted to paint! What was I meant to do, princess? You know I can't say no to him." Suddenly, he shouts, "Rocco, come back with daddy's leg!"

A few more scuffling noises, then he's back, "Sorry about that. It gets a bit rowdy here at dinner and bedtime."

"What happened to your leg?"

He chuckles, "It ran away." I smile. Idiot. He explains solemnly, "Mission gone bad."

"You got a boy?"

I hear his smile. "Sure do. I'm retired. Married too."

I smile at that. "I heard. She sounds like she puts you to work."

He barks a laugh. "Oh yeah. Lily was my last mission." He doesn't have to say it. She was the reason he lost his leg. He whispers, "She's worth it, though."

I ask in all seriousness, "And if someone asked you to give her up?"

Long pause. "It's not the same."

I return fiercely, "Love is love. It don't discriminate. And it sure as fuck don't wait 'til you're ready for it."

He sighs, "I know it, man. I know." The sound of things clattering, then, "Listen, man, I gotta go. Rocco's playing Frisbee with dinner plates." I chuckle. "Just think about what I said."

Then my friend is gone.



I hear footsteps come up the stairs and stop typing. Lifting my head, I wait for them to come closer to me, but they stop halfway down the hall, by my office. My office, which is occupied by a tiny woman dressed in sweat pants and one of my tees.

Listening closer, I wait for my visitor to find me, and I'm already making excuses in my mind.

Can you believe that? Fucking *excuses*. As if I owe him an explanation. I slowly shake my head at my misplaced panic.

Finally, he comes looking for me, but by the time his silhouette shadows the door, I throw myself back into my work. If it looks as though I'm busy, he might leave me alone.

Keyword there: *Might*.

"There's a sparrow sittin' at your desk."

Not looking up at him, I grunt. "She has work to do."

Let it go, man. Let. It. Go.

As he takes a few steps into the room, I look up at my oldest friend. The man who most likely saved my life when he took me into his home and kept me under a hawk's eye, making sure I was healing from...well...what life had dealt me. I'm not sure which one of us was dealt the worst hand, but I do know that my head is not programmed like other peoples'.

No.

I *can* tell you that I have issues. Issues I'm not proud of. Issues I'm trying to overcome.

As usual, Julius looks like he just stepped out of an Armani photo-shoot. Wearing a tan suit that contrasts his mocha-colored skin, his dark hair – which we affectionately call 'nappy hair' – neatly cut and styled, and his

incredulous face set on mine. The only man I know with darker skin that has light blue eyes. Those eyes see more than they should.

He repeats himself, slower this time, “There’s a sparrow...sittin’ at your desk.” When I don’t respond, he pushes, “A sparrow, Twitch.” Remaining silent, he adds, “A sparrow at your motherfuckin’ desk. Using your fuckin’ computer. The computer that holds all your information on it. A computer that holds all of *my* fuckin’ information on it, brother.”

He’s pissed. No doubt. But he doesn’t know, Lexi. So it’s warranted.

Lifting my hand in a dismissive wave, I tell him distractedly, “I switched users. She’s got no access.”

“Who is she?”

“She is who she is,” I say in dismissal.

Stepping closer to me on the sofa, he asks slowly and almost threateningly, “I said, who is she?”

No answer. There’s no point. He’ll just go explore anyways. Just as I knew he would, without another word, he retreats and I sigh. He always did stick his nose where it didn’t belong. Standing from the sofa, I close my laptop and set it down on the mantle before I trudge after him.

Nosey motherfucker.

He’s already at the office door staring in when I reach him. A small smile pulls at his lips. And I can’t help but shake my head at Lexi. The ‘sparrow’ can’t sing for shit. But she doesn’t care. She likes to sing. So let her sing.

Approaching with slow steps, his head turns a little towards me, but he doesn’t take his eyes off Lexi. “She for reals?”

My lip twitches, but I don’t respond. Moving closer, I stand by my friend and watch Lexi from the door. She looks so small at my desk, in my throne of a chair. I’m sure her feet aren’t even touching the ground.

I take her in.

Even wearing what she’s wearing – which I do *not* approve of – she looks like she belongs on a magazine cover.

Singing (more like squawking) *Marry You* by Bruno Mars without a care in the world, she bounces in her chair but types away before stopping suddenly and leaning back to look at her work. Confusion written all her face, she stares at the computer screen and scratches her head. “Hey, Twitch,” she calls out.

“Yeah?” I answer from the door. She yelps in fright, her hand flying to her chest, “Don’t do that! I hate when you sneak. Or creep. Or skulk.” Her face scrunched in annoyance, she says, “No more skulking, dammit!”

Then she lifts her head to find the both of us looking at her through wide smiles. Her face pinks and the *lady* comes out of her. Standing slowly, she brushes down the backs of her sweats and my grey tee – which looks ridiculously huge on her – then reaches up to her messy bun as her eyes widen in what I think is shame at being caught out in an outfit like the one she’s wearing.

Serves her right.

Approaching the man by my side, she puts on an easy smile and holds out her hand to him. As he looks down at her with narrowed eyes and a small smile, she explains softly, “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

Taking her small pale hand in his mocha one, he shakes her hand gently and smiles, “I didn’t want to interrupt the show you were putting on.” Her face flames further and he chuckles, “I’m Julius.”

Nervous Lexi decides to make an appearance, and she rambles, “Like Doctor Hibbert. You know that strange doctor from *The Simpsons*?” Her eyes widen. “Not that *you’re* strange! He is! Doctor Hibbert, that is. You are *not*. I mean, you may be, but I don’t know you. Doctor Hibbert does that thing where he laughs at all the wrong times at things that aren’t funny, and it’s really awkward.” Julius looks down at her rambling self with a creased brow as if he’s not sure if she’s for real, and Lexi adds quietly, “Just like I’m making this conversation right now...” She trails off.

But Julius put her out of her misery with a grin, “I love *The Simpsons*. I still watch it to this day.”

And just like that, Lexi has found a kindred spirit. She smiles huge, “Me too! It’s my guilty pleasure. I don’t think there’s a life situation out there that doesn’t have a *Simpsons* line attached to it.”

I don’t get *The Simpsons*. I don’t really like watching TV. But I watch *The Simpsons* with Lexi. That way I can see her laugh. And I like to watch her laugh.

I butt in with, “I don’t get that show.”

Lexi shoots me a disgruntled look and opens her mouth to speak, but Julius cuts her off. “You don’t *have* to get anything, man. It’s stupid humor. Slapstick. It don’t gotta make sense.”

Lexi's eyes turn dreamy as she looks up at Julius. "Exactly! That's what makes it so funny!"

Julius laughs, "Damn, woman. You're my type of chick." Lexi blushes, and he laughs again, "So what's your name, singing bird?"

Shit.

Lowering her eyes in embarrassment, she answers quietly, "Alexa Ballentine. But people call me Lexi. I'd like if you called me Lexi."

Recognition causes his eyes to flash.

Dropping her hand a little too quickly, his eyes widen a moment before he looks down at her, forcing a smile, and says distantly, "Nice to meet you, Lexi. I hope to see you again. I was just on my way out and need a quick word with Twitch." Her face falls at his sudden change in behavior and his obvious dismissal. Julius spots it and grins widely, "Work stuff, you know?"

Forcing a smile, she says with false cheer, "Yeah. I know. Speaking of which, I have to get back to it. So if you'll excuse me."

Soon as we're back in my lounge room, he starts.

Turning, his eyes pin me down and hold me where I stand. "You are out of you ever-loving mind, brother." The way he just said *brother* is like I am anything to him but that. "Please tell me you're not goin' through with this, man." I don't say a word. I don't need to explain myself to anyone. I see fear for Lexi shine brightly in his eyes. "She's a nice girl, Twitch. She's not what you've made her out to be in your fucked-up head. She's not your enemy." If any other person ever called me fucked up in the head, I'd pop 'em right in the nose. Not even a joke. Pointing out to the door, he barks, "Look at her! She sings while she types! She talks about *The Simpsons* like they're her religion! She doesn't deserve it, man. Don't do it."

Looking all too bored, I reply, "Is that all, *brother*?"

Disappointment flashes on his face, but he covers it quickly. Standing, he looks at me indifferently. "Yeah. That's all. I'm out."

Then he's gone.

Nope. I don't like it.

This is the first disagreement I've had with Julius in years. It makes my gut churn. I don't care about disappointing people. But Julius isn't people.

He's family.

I need to clear this up. Stat.

Standing, I make haste, rushing into the hall, down the steps, and out the front door. I catch him just as he steps into his silver Mercedes *Kompressor*. I call out, "Wait."

Sitting, he closes the car door and lowers the window. "What?"

I don't know what to say here. Julius knows me better than anyone. He's had it worse than I have in a lot of ways, and even though he's my friend, I was always jealous that he managed to keep it together when I couldn't. I hated him for that for a long time. I've since made my peace with life.

"I love her."

Staring straight ahead, I see his eyes flash with surprise. He looks ahead a long while before asking, "For reals love? Or I-like-fucking-her-so-much-that-I-think-it's-love *love*?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh. "The first one."

"If you love her, you won't hurt her."

I scoff, "It's bound to happen, don't you think? She doesn't know yet, Jay! She doesn't know my name. She doesn't know why I want her. She doesn't even know I hired..." Shit. I can't even say it.

He finishes my last sentence for me. "She doesn't know you hired a man to violate her."

Swallowing hard, I suddenly feel ill.

Approaching the car window, I kneel by the side and whisper, "I needed an in. It was the only way..."

Julius cuts me off. "No it wasn't. You can't make excuses for that shit, bro. He beat your girl. You arranged it. You have to live with it. Not me."

Unable to conceal my rage, I punch the side of his car in both anger and fear. Anger at myself for what I let happen, and fear of losing her. I hate when he's right. I hiss, "He was never meant to take it that far! That's why he's dead and she's okay. Because I saved her!"

Julius looks at me through the disappointment lining his eyes, "Who you trying to convince, man? Me? Or you?"

With that, he takes his leave. And I'm left kneeling in the middle of my driveway, watching the silver Mercedes drive away.

Anxiety flows through me when I realize that cartook away my best friend.

And he may never come back.

Standing, I reach up and cross my arms behind my head while looking into the distance.

I'm a complete fuck-up.



Lexi

Spending time at *Casa de Twitch* has not been as uncomfortable as I thought it would be.

I have a place where I can do my work, I have good company (when Ling isn't around), and most of the time, it's just me and Twitch hiding away in his bedroom.

That's where the magic happens.

That's where Twitch comes alive.

I love sex with Twitch, but...

Oh man, this is hard to admit.

But I miss the belt.

He doesn't use it on me anymore. The sex is still rough, and he's still very controlling, but it's nowhere near how dark it was when we first met. And that first night...well...it set the tone of what I thought would come. And it did for a while. Alas, no more.

My poor vagina.

It misses the old Twitch as much as it loves the new Twitch.

A knock at my office door brings me back to the real world. "Come in."

My eyes widen when the door opens and a familiar but very new face pops in. He smiles, "Hope I'm not disturbing you."

I return his easy smile. "Not at all, Julius. How can I help you?"

Stepping in, he closes the door behind him and slowly looks around my office as he says, "You can help me, singing bird, by calling me Jay."

Why is he here?

"Okay, Jay."

Silence. Then he smirks, "Go on. Ask me why I'm here."

I like this man. "But that would be rude."

He counters, "Nuh uh. Rude is arrogance. Rude is feeling like you're above people. Getting to the point of things ain't rude, sugar. You're sweet as pie. I know this and I only met you last night."

A bright blush rises from my neck. "Th-thank you, Jay."

After looking around my office, picking things up at random to examine, he sits in my guest chair with a sigh. "Twitch is my best friend. My best friend in the entire world. Known him a lifetime."

If he wanted my interest, he certainly just got it.

But I'm confused. "He never mentioned you."

Julius nods. "I suspect he wouldn't. We met in juvie. It's not exactly a nice tale. Definitely not one you wanna tell to try and impress your girl."

He searches my face. I suddenly feel like a child when I whisper, "Tell me about him. Please."

"That's part of why I'm here. There's some things you need to know about him. About why to not give up on him. Do you know why he was in juvie?" I nod and he says, "He was in a bad way when he got to me. He'd been in for about three days and no one could calm the boy down. He was picking fights with anyone and everyone. So much anger in him. Never seen anything like it. Almost like he was a wild animal they were trying to cage." He smirks. "He caught my eye. I'd been in there two years when he came, so I knew the way of things and knew if he kept this up, he'd catch the eye of the guards. And their punishments. Well, let's just say that they would've torn him a new asshole. Pun intended."

I don't know if I can hear this.

Julius continues, “One day in the quad, he picked a fight with the wrong kid. Small kid. Looking like he’d easily take a beating. But the kid was skilled. I jumped in before Twitch got his ass beat, and he repaid me by giving me a black eye. So that night, when we went back to our dorms to sleep, I stayed up. Waited ‘til the lights were out, got my shank out of its hiding spot, and went to find Twitch. He was sleeping. Having bad dreams. I snuck up on him, put the shank to his throat, and woke him up by slapping him clean across the face.”

“He jumped up, saw the shank, and stilled.” His eyes become soft. And depressed. “It was the saddest thing I ever saw. Like he was at peace with dying. I told him that he could fight me all he wanted, but he needed to choose a side. With me or against me. He didn’t say a word for a long time before he asked me what I was in for. So I told him honestly that I’d killed my dad.”

Enthralled in this tale, I gasp. Julius looks at me with a sad smile.

“He asked why I killed my daddy. I told him I caught him raping my sister.”

My heart is breaking for this man. The familiar sting of tears forming in my eyes begins, and Julius catches me trying to cover them.

“See that?” He says, pointing to my watery eyes, “That’s why he needs you.”

Clearing his throat, he goes on with his story. “So, Twitch decides he’s with me. I lowered my shank and we became friends in a second flat. There’s a trust there between us. I can’t really explain it. We were both kids, but I was curious and felt I had to ask him. So I did. I asked him why he was so angry. He told me when he was eight, his step-daddy tried to kill him. Choked the life out of him. He was dead for fourteen minutes before they brought him back. Said he had minor brain damage, and some doctors even said that’s where his anger stems from. I told him that he was right to be angry about that. He shook his head and corrected my assumptions. He said, ‘No. I’m angry because I didn’t die.’”

Swirling my chair around, I turn my back to Julius.

It’s a very private moment when your heart breaks. I don’t want him to see. I suddenly wish I was alone.

Breathing through a thick throat, I try in vain to keep the tears at bay.

Julius says, “He thinks of everybody as nobody. If you don’t give up on him, he’ll make you somebody.”

Covering my face with a hand, I feel the warmth of my tears flow over my palm as I listen to my office door open, then close. I think the words I can’t bring myself to say right now.

Thank you, Julius.

Lexi

Coming home from a night out with Dave and Nikki, I unlock the door to my unit, and as soon as I step inside, I kick my heels off.

I have no idea why we women wear these things.

They're just modern-day torture devices.

The only reason I wore these was because they were the bright red fancy ones Twitch bought me. To match the tight little black dress that he also bought me. And the red leather clutch and ruby red crystal pendant to match. All on Twitch's expense.

Yikes.

I'm pretty sure my outfit tonight alone cost around a thousand dollars. Which is ridiculous if you ask me.

I needed a night with my girls. I say that without offence. Dave named himself one of us from the time we were in University together. So much love there.

I'm hungry.

I'm also drunk.

Holding onto the hallway wall for support, I take teeny tiny steps down to my room. Putting on some music, I sing along to Carrie Underwood's *Blown Away*. Such a sad song.

"Sad song. I don't want a sad song. I need something bouncy," I tell myself.

Teetering on the spot, I point carefully at the buttons and search my playlist. Landing on The Fray's *Love Don't Lie*, I whoop and bounce along to the beat. Reaching onto my dresser for my hair brush, I brush through the bird's nest that is my hair and think back on the night.

I met Dave and Nikki at the bar and sat on a rickety stool exchanging kisses and hugs. We spoke about what we got up to during the week, what

was new and our relationships. Which was just weird, because it went a little like this...

I told them, "Everything with Twitch is good right now. He's complicated and all, but he's different with me. He treats me well. He likes to spoil me and I'm loving him more every day. So it's going well, I guess."

Nikki and Dave smiled sweetly at me. I'm so glad my friends are behind me on this. It matters so much to me.

Then Dave looked at Nikki and uttered, "How do you think things are going with Happy?"

She shrugged. "Good. I guess. The sex is bangin', and I know he likes women, but..." She grinned up at Dave. "...I like watching Dave and him together. It's hot."

Dave nudged her playfully. "Naww, thanks babe. I like watching you guys fuck too. Pussy isn't my cup of tea, but watching anyone get off is hot."

I gaped at their strange choice of conversation.

Nikki giggled, "Oh, I especially like when he..." She leaned closer to Dave and whispered something into his ear. Dave bit his lip before muttering, "I like that too."

Raising my arm to match my brows, I hailed a bartender and placed an order, "I need about eleventeen cocktails to erase the last five minutes of fucked-up-ness. What would you suggest?"

Nikki and Dave just smirked like a couple of cats that got the cream while I squirmed.

We drank. And talked. And drank some more.

Then the conversations turned to things more my speed.

Dave slurred, "You know what's a weird word?" Nikki and I waited with baited breath.

"Pants. Why are the plural? Yes, there are two legs but it's only one piece of clothing. It's a pant for chrissake!"

Murmurs of approval went around. That's when I asked, "I don't like that. It's the same thing with Weetbix. Why is a single one called a Weetbix? It's a Weetbik if it's one, right?"

Dave sipped on his cocktail, nodding. "This is why we're friends."

Nikki slapped the bar in excitement. "I got one! Why are they called scissors then?"

Dave and I gave her our best *mind blown* looks and nodded in agreement.

I love my friends.

Shaking my head at our silliness at the bar, I bebop around my bedroom to the song playing on my expensive-ass stereo.

Turning, I squeak at the black shadow in front of me. Taking in a deep breath, I open my mouth to scream, when arms wrap around me and I smell him.

Silly Twitch. Sneaky, silly Twitch with his creeping, lurking, and skulking.

Melting into him, I blurt out the first thing I think of. “Why don’t you use the belt on me anymore?”

Wow. That sounded a lot more desperate than planned.

Pulling back, he responds, “Because I’m sure you won’t try to run now.”

Hmmm. Well, I guess that makes sense. In a fucked up kind of way. I guess.

Insert pout here.

He asks an amused, “Are you drunk?”

I scoff. “No. I just had...” I mentally count. “...six Long Island Iced Teas and a shot of tequila. I’m fine.”

As I say this, my knees give out and Twitch holds me up like a doll. He kisses my brow affectionately. “You want me to get the belt?”

I respond breathily, “Yeah.”

Setting me on my bed, I watch as he walks over to his pants on the floor, removes the belt from the loops, and stalks back over to me. Whoa. He does something to my head. Every freaking time. Normally, thoughts would lurk in the thing I call a brain. Right now, all I hear is a high-pitched whistling noise.

We are officially off the air.

In my alcohol-uninhibited state, I ask, “I want to try something new tonight.”

He stops halfway to me. Wrapping his belt around his hand nice and tight is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. “Oh yeah? What’s that, Angel?”

Crooking my finger, he comes closer to me. I kneel up on my bed and cup my hands around his ears to whisper, “Role play.”

He sniffs a laugh. “Sure. I’m down for that.”

Suddenly nervous, I lean back and dip my chin. “You’ll think I’m weird. That I’m not normal.”

He returns with, “Fuck normal. Who’s to say what’s normal. Labels, babe. That’s all they are. Tell me, baby.” But my mouth won’t open. “C’mon, Lex. I won’t judge you.” But I can’t. That’s when he asks quietly, “You wanna try what Ling was doing?”

I’m so ashamed. I cover my face with my hands as my heart races.

His fingers come under my chin and lift. I drop my hands to accept my fate. Looking into my worried eyes, he kisses me softly before saying, “As soon as I put this belt around your neck, it’s on.”

How did he make that so easy for me? And why do I want this so badly? Both of those thoughts circle my head. My thinking time is cut short when he works the thick black belt around my neck. Looking up at him, mouth parted slightly, he watches me carefully. Buckling on the tightest notch possible, he takes his time, giving me an opportunity to refuse.

But I won’t.

I can’t.

I need this.

Something inside of me desires Twitch’s approval, and has from that very first day.

The moment he releases me, he searches my face. I know the exact moment he turns into his character. My attacker. I know this, because his hooded eyes darken and his lip curls cruelly. He wraps the remainder of the belt around his hand tightly, yanking hard. I yelp as my body is crushed against his strong naked torso. A large hand firmly palms my ass through my little black dress. The touch isn’t warm or affectionate. It’s so unfamiliar that I feel this man isn’t even Twitch.

But isn’t that part of the appeal? That at this very moment, we can become two different people. People we never would be or become.

It’s absolutely thrilling. My heart races and I begin to sweat.

Breathing heavily, I steady myself as much as I can, slide off my bed, and stand in front of him. Twitch taunts, “Move and I fuckin’ kill you, bitch,” then pulls the belt slowly but firmly closer towards his body. The move makes us impossibly close.

Right now, I believe him; he could hurt me, even though I know this is a game. Right now, Twitch is the most alluring man on earth, as well as the

most terrifying.

It all happens so quickly.

His silky boxers are gone. I tremble as he grips the front of my dress, fisting it tight. He looks me in the eye as he pulls with all his might in opposite directions. The sound of material tearing fills the room before it falls at my feet in a heap. I openly gape at him.

I liked that dress.

Now dressed in only a strapless bra and a lace thong, my mind swims in an ocean of bliss as he yanks my bra down below my breasts. The move pushes them high up on my chest, and in the slither of moonlight through the closed curtains, I see his eyes fixed on them. Looking like a starving man eyeing his first meal in months, he steps out of character only a moment to run his thumb down the swell of my breast and mutter, "Perfect. So perfect."

Shaking his head as if to clear it, he looks down at me through hooded eyes and whispers roughly, "I'm gonna fuck you bare." My heart stutters. In a good way. He smirks. "Gonna blow inside of you. And you're going to like it."

Cue my first line. "No. Don't. Please don't. I'll get pregnant."

He barks a laugh. "Perfect." Crushing his lips to my cheek, he utters against it, "Every time you looked at him, you'd see me." Biting my cheek none too gently, he hisses, "You don't stop shaking and I'll make you choke on my cock."

It's almost worrying that he can do this so well.

Almost.

Lowering my voice to a whisper, I beg, "Please let me go. I'll never tell anyone about this. Just let me go."

Grinding his impressive length against my stomach, he reaches down to rub my mound through the lacey material. He tuts, "Bitches like you don't wear shit like this if you don't want a man to fuck you. I'm a man, baby. I'm going to fuck you. Whether you want it or not."

The fear in my voice suddenly feeling real, I tell him, "If you try, I'll scream."

I hear the smile in his voice. "Scream all you like." His lips touch the shell of my ear. "It turns me on when they fight." Pulling the material to the side, his finger comes into contact with the wet warmth of my extreme

arousal and he whispers, “See? You want this. Your body doesn’t lie. Don’t fight me.”

We both know he really means, ‘*Fight me, baby. I love it.*’

So I do. Pulling away from him, I lift my foot to his stomach and try to gain some distance between us by pushing away. He pulls on the belt, choking me a moment. I gasp then pant heavily, while my heart races and my head pounds. I push at his shoulders. He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me into his body, constricting me. I whimper. He snarls and bites my shoulder. I yelp and cry out in both pleasure and pain. My core pulses. I’m already close to orgasm.

I cry out, “Please don’t hurt me.”

He stills a moment before he utters all too quietly, “I have to.”

Lowering his head, he takes a nipple into his mouth, sucking hard, then biting the tender flesh. A moan escapes me as my hands grip the back of his head. Running my fingers through his hair, I realize I’m losing myself, and swiftly grasp then tug on his hair. He growls, “You’re gonna regret that.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I do something really damn stupid.

Lifting my knee, I take him by surprise when it connects with his thigh. His breath stutters and his arms fall to his sides. This is it. The moment of stupidity.

This is the part where I turn.

And run.

Making it half way down the hall, I hear his trailing footfalls pounding behind me, my heart also pounding in time. I’m truly petrified. Tears blur my vision, and when an arm wraps around my ribs from behind, I cry out. My distress at this point feels very real, even though my mind is very much enjoying what is happening here. Tears slide out of the corners of my eyes and my lips quiver. His other arm comes around my chest and he nips my ear. “Running was a bad choice.”

The fight ensues.

My hands fist and connect with his muscular arms as I try to escape. My body twists fitfully against his. My struggle is very real. Heart racing, I turn and fight to get away. Wriggling, I manage to face him. His hand regains the end of the belt, and he pulls hard to get my attention. But I don’t still. Instead, I lower my head to his collar and bite. Hard. I bite so hard that he

lets out a feral growl through gritted teeth and pushes me into the hallway wall. The back of my head connects with that wall with a dull thud.

The dim light from the kitchen makes enough light to see his silhouette.

Panting, his hand touches the place on his collar that I sunk my teeth into. He brings a finger to his mouth. Licking my lips, I taste metallic rust. I marked him hard enough to draw blood. My gut sinks. Stepping forward, he breathes a hostile, "Oh baby. You fucked up."

Stalking towards me threateningly, and as soon as we're foot-to-foot, I lean up into his face, and spit.

I watch in slow motion as he flinches, clearly not expecting it. Panting, I grunt, "Fuck you, motherfucker."

The second he touches me, I know this role play borderlines real life. Twitch fumes. I feel the anger coming off of him like electric sparks. Reaching forward, he throws my body down by his side. My palms connect with the floor, knees throbbing. Suddenly, his body covers mine, pushing me into the ground. I struggle and whisper repeatedly, "Please, don't. Please, don't." But Twitch isn't acting anymore. He's done with acting.

His arm circles my waist and he lifts me until I'm on all fours, like a dog. His hand reaches down to find my sopping wet core. He groans, moving the material of my thong aside, I feel the head of him meet my entrance. But I fight.

Struggling, I push my body away from him. On his knees behind me, he shuffles forward, but I escape him once more. His hand shoots out and circles my throat, squeezing. The fight in me fades when I realize it's about to happen. I have nowhere left to go.

Gritting my teeth, my chest heaves and my eyes water. The head of him touches my entrance once more; I feel the balls of his piercing as he runs the head up and down my slit. He pushes in. Just the tip. Lips softly kiss my shoulder blade. "I win."

My arousal makes light work of him pushing into me, all the way in. Simultaneously, we cry out in ecstasy.

Placed in a position that demands submission, I know I should be furious, but I'm not. My eyes flutter as he loosens his hold on my throat. I'm ecstatic when he keeps his hand on my neck while he grinds his cock into me. Seated deeply on him, I sigh silently. It feels amazing. So deep it feels like it's found a home in my stomach.

No one loses here. We both win.

And yet, I fight still. Struggling weakly, he begins to thrust, and from this angle, my arousal spikes. The balls of his piercing rub all the right spots, and in mere moments, I'm panting, "No. No. No."

I'm going to come.

Tightening around him, bright light blurs my vision and my entire body trembles with a pleasure high. Tipping my head back, mouth parted in a silent moan, I hear Twitch pant heavily. "That's it, Angel. Let go. Come on my cock. All over my cock."

The dam breaks. My face bunches in both pleasure and pain. I convulse around him. Moaning, my head thrashes from side to side in what is the most intense orgasm I've ever had in my life. With every pulse of my release, my body warms in complete bliss.

I'm suddenly exhausted.

Holding my throat with a gentle firmness, he pounds into my now limp body. I couldn't participate even if I wanted to. I'm spent both emotionally and physically. Holding an arm under my belly, he pulls me back into every thrust. A full minute of thrusting like a madman, he groans and holds himself deep inside of me for a long moment before he thrusts again and again. Wet warmth trickles down my thighs. His thrusts slowly. His panting follows suit. He finally stills inside of me.

Standing, he pulls me up and into him.

I feel dirty, used, and abused.

And I've never felt better.

So many thoughts rush through my head.

What have I done?

Wrapping my arms around his neck, he lifts me. My legs circle him as he slowly walks me over to my bed. He lays me down and slides in next to me. We don't bother to clean up. Something needs to be said.

Allowing another minute of awkward silence as we lie side-by-side, I ask quietly, "What just happened?"

Turning to me, I hear the smile in the darkness. "You just got fucked. Properly fucked."

A bubble of hysterical laughter climbs my throat. I can't hold it down. I chuckle. I feel the bed shake as he silently laughs with me. My throat

thickens and my eyes sting. My body shakes for a different reason as I begin to sob.

I don't like myself right now.

Twitch pulls me into him and cradles my head, placing kisses on my eyes and cheeks. He doesn't say anything. He knows me enough to know I just need him to hold me right now.

My mind wanders.

This is probably a bad time to mention I haven't taken the pill in two weeks.



Walking into my unit with a huge smile on my face, I think back on my impromptu sharing session this morning.

Having made an appointment with the office psychologist, Emeline, I squared myself for the fact that I was about to be told that I just wasn't right. I had been thinking that very same thought all night, so it wasn't exactly unexpected. I couldn't sleep. It was eating away at me. So when I walked into her office and sat with her, I expected to be interrogated. I soon realized I was wrong.

Really wrong.

Emmy had made us both a cappuccino on her fancy machine, and we both took a seat on the sofa in her office. The meeting I had dreaded somehow turned into a coffee meet between friends.

She asked, "So, I have to say I'm a little surprised to see you here, Lexi. Is everything okay?"

Well, I begged my drug dealer boyfriend to force fuck me last night. Oh, and I liked it. So, no. Not really.

Wringing my hands together, I looked down at my feet and started, "Well, it's not really about me. It's about a friend. I'm worried about her

and wanted a professional opinion before I tried to help in a situation that is completely alien to me.”

Lies. All lies.

Nodding, she looked sympathetic when she explained, “Sure. I know it can be hard watching your friends go through things. Humans do not like to feel helpless. It’s a very admirable thing you’re doing.”

Blinking, I swallowed hard and clarified, “She’s a close friend. I know her well, and she’s been through a lot in her life. More recently, she was close to being raped and was saved before her attacker could penetrate her.” Shaking my head, I exhaled, “Sorry. I’m not making much sense here.” Clearing my throat, I tried again, “A few nights ago, she called me devastated. She and her boyfriend had been having sex and things turned a little rough.”

Emmy’s brows furrowed, but she nodded for me to continue my story about my *friend*. So I did. “And...and...she liked it. Soon the sex turned rougher and rougher, and before she knew it, they were acting out a rape fantasy. And she enjoyed it. Immensely.” Allowing that to sink in a moment, I got to the point, “Now she thinks there’s something wrong with her, and I had no idea what to say to her.”

I looked up at my friend who watched me through worried eyes. I looked back at her with a pleading look. I needed help. Emmy, being the professional she is, leaned back on the sofa and sighed, “Well, you can tell your friend that there’s nothing wrong with her. Nothing at all. In fact, this isn’t unheard of in people who have been sexually assaulted. The thing is, the reaction can go from one extreme to the other. On one hand, you have people who can’t cope, and the thought of another person touching them can make them ill; on the other hand, you have people like your friend, itching to take control of a situation that they originally had no control over.”

What the what what?

Not hiding my confusion, I edged, “So, what you’re saying is...?”

Sipping her coffee, she explained, “Your friend is fine. There’s nothing wrong with role-play in the bedroom. It’s quite healthy as long as its legal and both parties consent; I don’t see an issue here. Your friend was almost raped, you say. Perhaps that sparked something inside of her, something primal and fierce. The thought of being attacked is horrifying. However,

your friend's primal instinct has kicked in and her mind – which is trying to make sense of what happened – has decided to try to turn the memory from something terrifying and frightening, into something..." Lifting her head in thought, she searched for a word. "...let's say, something pleasurable. Enjoyable. Your friend is stronger than she thinks." She ended this with a sad smile and I knew, I just *knew*, that she knew.

She confirmed my thoughts when she uttered, "You know, your friend is welcome to talk to me anytime. Anytime at all."

Reaching over and squeezing her hand, I whispered, "Thank you. It'll mean so much to her to hear that."

And so I left with a new, informed way of thinking, and the day got brighter from there. Which brings us to now. Walking down the hall, I look right to see a tall form standing in the open fridge door. A tall form in black sweat pants and nothing else.

Mmmm. Shirtless Twitch. Yum.

Eyeing his lean, muscular, ink-decorated torso, my eyes drift down where his sweat pants ride low on his hips, and the very tips of the V indented just below his hips stand out. Barely stopping myself from humping his leg, I call out, "Hungry?"

Still looking into the fridge with disappointment, he absently scratches his toned belly and replies, "Yeah, but I'm not having any luck in here. Don't you ever shop?"

Chuckling, I tell him, "Not really. I'm more a *buy as I need it* type of girl."

His face bunches in disappointment. "That blows. I'm hungry *now*."

Unable to contain the smile, he spots it and almost smirks before he stops himself. Pointing up at my lips, he says, "Explain this to me? What is this smile about? You were cryin' last night, and now I see this smile and it makes me wonder why."

Leaning my hip on the counter, I tell him, "Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all. I don't even know why I worried. I had an appointment with our psychologist this morning, Emmy, and explained to her what happened..." His hooded brown eyes narrow and I quickly add, "...But I said it happened to my friend." I wink at him. "And she said it was perfectly normal to role-play, and that someone who is in my situation where I was almost raped, it

was as if I was taking control in a situation that I normally wouldn't have control in! How great is that? I'm normal! High five!"

Bouncing on the spot, I hold up my hand for him to show me some *up high* love, and smile as big as I can. Watching Twitch's face brings an abrupt end to my excitement. His brow bunches and he places his hands on his hips repeating on a whisper, "She's normal. Fucking normal."

Not quite sure what the problem is, I ask quietly, "Why are you angry?"

Blinking at me, he extends an arm out my way and booms, "Again with the labels! Always with the fucking labels! Is it *that* important to you, Lex? Being labelled as something everyone else sees as normal?"

I want to say no. I want to defend myself. I want to go to sleep, pretend I never said a thing, and wake up when this argument is over.

Not sure how to answer, I remain silent, but one look at my face and Twitch smirks darkly. "Of course it is." Stalking towards me, he asks along the way, "Let me ask you this? How would you label *me*?" My heart begins to race and I swallow hard. His eyes flash, "Psychotic? Hmm? I don't know, maybe *insane*? Mad? You tell me, Lexi. What the fuck would you label me as?"

Terrifying. Disturbed. And frightening.

Gritting his teeth, he catches my chin in his hand. "You label yourself all you want, Alexa." Dropping his hand, he looks at me a moment, and what I see displayed on his face makes me want to throw up.

Disappointment. He's disappointed in me.

Turning, he picks up his tee from the sofa and opens the front door. Pausing a moment and keeping his back to me, he says lividly, "Do *not* fucking label *me*." His fists ball by his sides as he extends his parting words. "Think on this, girl." Spinning around, his eyes – full of fury – meet mine. "Who were you before people started telling you who you should be?"

And then he's gone.

The word "Twitch" is written in a large, stylized, handwritten font. The 'T' is tall and thin, with a horizontal crossbar. The 'w' is formed by two 'u'-like shapes. The 'i' is a simple dot over a vertical line. The 't' is a simple vertical line. The 'c' is a simple curve. The 'h' is a simple vertical line with a small hook at the bottom.

My office door opens, and Michael strolls in. Making himself comfortable in the guest chair, he puts his feet on the desk. I snap my fingers in warning. The feet come down.

That's better.

He sighs, "Give me something to do, boss. I'm bored."

I sniff, "Bored? Here? Get Happy to give you something to do. Or Li—" on second thought, "Not Ling."

After working with me for over a month now, Michael's fear of me has dimmed to almost nothing at all.

Almost.

I think he sees me more of a big brother now. Which is cool by me. I always wanted a brother. And if I had a brother in this life, I'd want him to be like Michael. It became clear to me weeks ago that Michael was smarter than even I'd given him credit for. When he approached my office one morning and asked straight out, "Are you a drug dealer?"

I stared him down. Much to my surprise, he didn't shrink back. Not even an inch. I was impressed. I answered, "Don't ask, don't tell."

He scoffed, "So that's a fancy way of saying yes." When I didn't respond, he said, "I could do drops, you know? I've done 'em before when I worked for Hamid. I know the ins and outs, so I wouldn't get busted. I wouldn't disappoint you."

"You never do, Mickey, but no. That's not happening. I don't need any more runners. You're here because you're working legit."

He muttered, "Like you can talk."

I smirked. He sure got my number down.

Turning to the boy, I ask, "What's up?"

He grumbled, “Nothing.” If the boy wanted to tell me, he would. So I let it go. As soon as I start typing again, he blurts out, “There’s this girl.”

Of course there is. There’s always a girl. “You seeing this sparrow?”

Shaking his head, he utters, “No. I don’t want to ask her out ‘til I’ve got myself sorted.”

“You look pretty sorted to me, youngin. Got a job, going to school, earning some cash, and doing that all while looking for a place to stay when you turn eighteen.” I raise a brow at him. “I’d say you’re good to go.”

He smiles softly. “Yeah.” Then a firmer, “Yeah, I guess so.” I watch him closely. I see the courage bloom in his eyes and fight my own smile. “I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna ask her out.”

My lip twitches and I nod at him in approval.

Suddenly, he turns to me. “How exactly do I do that?”

I laugh on the inside.

The kid is toast.



Lexi

The door to my office bursts open. “I’m gonna ask her out!”

Looking up, I see Michael looking snazzy in black slacks and a white shirt, with his sleeves rolled up and wearing black thin suspenders. He

looks so much like Twitch, it's scary. Minus the tattoos and all.

Narrowing my eyes, I point at his choice of ensemble. He looks down at himself and mutters, "Mr. T said to dress nice."

Why does this not surprise me?

I mutter to myself, "Of course he did." Quickly finishing my paragraph, I look up at him and grin. "You look so handsome. Like a mini-Twitch." He rolls his eyes and I fight the urge to laugh. "Who are you going to ask out, sweetie?"

"Tahlia."

Oh wow!

My heart swells.

I'm so giddy at the thought of Michael and Tahlia together. Both came from a less-than-stellar upbringing. They would totally get each other. And I know for a fact that Tahlia has a crush on Michael. When I called her last to check on her, she asked about him about three times.

Eyes wide, I lean over my desk a little and mock whisper, "Oh-em-gee! That's so exciting! How are you going to ask?"

His smile falters. "I-I was just going to ask. Mr. T said to be up front, but not in her face. Just ask, but not give her an option to say no."

I want to crow with laughter. He went to *Twitch* for dating advice? Oh dear God. I have to fix this. And quick.

Quelling down the insane urge to cackle, I start, "Honey, no. If you don't ask her right, it could ruin the whole experience." His eyes widen in fear, and I sigh, "Where do you plan on taking her?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. The movies or some sh- place."

I groan, then whine, "*Michael!* You have to have the date planned beforehand so you can give her the details when she says yes."

His brows rise. "She'll say yes?"

I nod and smile softly, "She'll say yes."

Suddenly serious, he sits on the edge of my desk and says, "Okay. Cool. I want to take her somewhere nice. Mr. T already said I can have use of the company driver. I want to take her somewhere fancy."

Ugh. No.

"Mickey, Tahlia isn't the type of girl who wants to go somewhere fancy. A fancy place would just make her feel awkward and would make it look like you're trying too hard. Tahlia would like somewhere homey." I shrug.

“Say, an Italian restaurant.” My brain pings and my eyes widen in excitement. “I know just the place! Hold on.”

Grabbing my cell, I quickly type a message.

Me: I need the address for the Italian restaurant you took me to the other night.

The reply comes almost immediately. I’m surprised there’s no hostility showing, being that we ended our visit yesterday in a rather abrupt way.

Twitch: Already booked for the kid and his girl. I’ll give him the address when he gets in. Tell him to move his ass. He’s gonna be late for work.

Smiling like a loon, I fire back a response.

Me: You are so getting laid tonight. Love you x

Twitch: I get laid every night, Angel. x

He doesn’t lie. He does get laid every night.

I’ve all but been living with Twitch for a few weeks now. I’ve only been home to get clothes and check my mail. And whenever I bring clothes from home, he glares holes in my head for not using the closet he’s designated for me. But I keep telling him the closet is creepy!

“You’re all booked, sunshine. Twitch has the details. You’ll get them when you make it to work, which, by the way, you’re going to be late for,” I tell him as I glance at my watch.

Checking his own watch, he hisses, “Shit!” then shoots out of the door. Not a second later, he runs back and pants, “How do I ask her out?”

I tell him what I’d like to hear. “Tell her you’ve been waiting for the right time to ask and that you’ve wanted to for a long time but didn’t know how. Bring her flowers. Daisies, I think. She’ll say yes.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Ms. Ballentine.”

I shrug. “You’re one of my kids. I’m going to lose you soon enough. I have to help where I can.”

He blinks at me a moment before dipping his chin. “I’ll always be your kid.”

Then he’s gone.

Leaving me a blubbering mess in my office.



Twitch

You're nobody 'til somebody loves you.

At least that's how I feel now that I have Lexi. I always thought I needed her because it's what my mind told me I needed. Because my mind is broken in more ways than one, my interest in her turned into an obsession. Add in a hardcore drug addiction and you're bound to have trouble. By that point, my mind had advised me that I didn't just need Lexi, I needed to make her suffer for making me believe there would be a point in my life when things would get better for me...as long as I had her.

When I was eight, I had her. For one night. Fate is a cruel ass bitch, and that night changed everything for me.

I can make excuses.

I could say I was just a damaged kid that grew up to be a broken man.

I could.

But I won't.

I don't like labels. I won't be defined by words like normal, unbalanced, or damaged. There's so much more to me than words. I have layers, just like the next person, and if you picked me apart layer-by-layer, you'd find a blackened crust where my heart should be. But ever since Lexi came into my life, a thin bud of greenery sprouted there, giving me hope that even I could be the person who makes someone's day better.

It's growing every day. And I'll be damned if anyone tries to take her away from me. I'd kill anyone who tried.

Running a hand through my hair, I swallow hard as my gut sinks.

A decision has to be made. No one would dare take her from me, so why am I risking losing her by telling her the truth?

I know what I did was unforgivable. I could tell her. I know what the result would be, though. My girl would walk out on me in a second flat.

The sinking feeling grows.

There's a lot that needs to be said. And Nox was right...the noose around my neck is tightening. I can hardly breathe.

"You okay, boss?" The concerned voice coming from the doorway snags my attention.

The kid. "I'm good." Smirking, I ask, "Are *you*? You ask your girl out yet or what?"

He half-glares at me. "I would've if I didn't think I'd have been late for work."

There are just some things that can't wait. I know this now.

Picking up my cell, I type out a text, press send, and wait. Michael looks more and more nervous by the second, and I smile. I like knowing he still fears me when he shouldn't. It's funny.

Happy appears at the office door behind Michael. "'Sup?"

Crossing my arms behind my head, I lean back in my throne and direct them both. "You're gonna take the kid along with you today. First, he's got a stop to make, though. Then you can both go about business as per usual."

Happy's eyes narrow on me. "No can do. I got..." His eye's bore into mine. "...shit to do."

Dammit. I forgot. He's accompanying some runs today for some bigger drops that need to remain secure. My face falls. I don't have time to take him myself. I've got an appointment in an hour.

I sigh. “Forget about it.” But then I see Mickey’s face. It falls faster than London Bridge. Fuck.

Happy raises a brow at me. I know he’d take him along, he just needs my say so. Lexi would be pissed.

That is, if she found out.

If. If is good.

A grin tugs at my lips. “Go on. Mickey, go ask your girl out, then you’ll be on the road with Happy most of the day.”

The kid’s face turns from stunned disbelief, to shock, to beaming, all in a matter of seconds.

“Seriously?”

Not wanting to see the mush coming off of him, I turn to my laptop, dismissing them both. “Go on. Get.”

Typing away, I pretend not to notice Mickey still standing in the doorway of my office.

“Thank you.” He says this so softly that I barely make it out. “For everything.”

My chest aches.

I respond with equal softness. “You’re welcome.” He gently closes the door behind him.

I whisper into the empty room, “You’re welcome, brother.”



Happy

Grinning like an idiot, I watch Michael run down the steps of the apartment building. His eyes wide, he looks like he’s about to faint.

My heart skips a beat. My smile fades.

He pauses mid-run and walks over to the car almost in slow motion.

Fuck. The kid looks like his heart is breaking.

Dammit.

When he finally reaches the car, he opens the door and sits, staring into the dashboard of the car, his eyes blank.

Reaching over, I clutch his shoulder and ask gently on a squeeze, “What happened, buddy?”

His mouth opens, but nothing comes out. He shrugs. A moment later, he whispers, “She said yes.”

I smile. “She did?”

Still looking confused beyond belief, he nods.

Pushing at his shoulder, I laugh, “Isn’t this what you wanted, kid?”

“Yeah. I mean, of course.” He pauses. “I just don’t get why she’d want me.”

Oh, man. This is getting too deep for me.

I offer him the best comparison I can think of. “You seen Lexi?”

His brow knits as he nods.

“You seen Twitch?”

Brows still bunched, he nods. He nods some more. A small smile tugs at his lips, and I know he gets me. I tell him, “Opposites, bud. Opposites attract.”

Starting the car, I pull out my cell and text Twitch.

Me: The kid got his girl.

Not ten seconds passes when my phone chimes.

Twitch: Good. Now get back to work.

Turning to Michael, I ask, “You ready to see the real side of Falcon Plastics, boy?”

His eyes widen and he whispers, “Fuck yeah.”

I chuckle.

The kid is doing just fine.



Lexi

Going through the rest of the budget from Falcon Plastics is stressing me out.

Who am I to decide which charities and organizations need it more than others?

Charlie stopped by half an hour ago to find me all but hyperventilating. He asked what the problem was. That was about the time *Alexa the Freak-Out Chick* pushed her way out of my brain by means of my mouth. “There’s not a lot of money left, Charlie, and I thought this would be easy, you know? Giving money out to people who need it like Robin Hood. Which makes you a member of my merry men. And that’s fine, because you’re like this huge Islander teddy bear, so people would be scared of you and have no idea that you’re a sweetheart, but as a member of my merry men, I have to ask you to take this burden away from me. Because it’s a lot of burden. And I’m only human, Charlie.” I looked up into his eyes in pleading. “I don’t like being Robin Hood. Please don’t make me wear tights.”

And pause for air.

Charlie smiled and stepped closer to me. Once he reached the edge of my desk, he said, “You know what I like about you, Lex?” I shook my head, still in a panic. He went on, “You’ve got heart. And I knew you’d be like this. I’m surprised this didn’t come sooner. But that’s also why I knew you’d be perfect to take care of the budget.” I wasn’t following. And from Charlie’s chuckle, he knew it too. “I know that whoever ends up on your budget will deserve it. I know that every last cent of that money will be

given to a range of organizations. The money will be distributed equally and without discrimination.” My heart warmed and he smiled. “That’s why I chose you.”

And with that, he left.

Sitting at my desk, while still stressing but feeling better about it, my phone chimes. Pulling it out of my bag, I see three messages.

Happy: The girl said yes.

Twitch: The kid got his girl.

Mickey: You were right. Tahlia said yes!

Smiling like a loon, I stare into the screen when another text comes through.

Mickey: I think I’m gonna be sick.

Laughing to myself, I suddenly realize I’m not so stressed anymore. There’s really no need to be.

Life is good.



The afternoon passes in a blur.

After double and triple checking my sums, I hand in the revised budget handouts to Charlie. Dawdling, I take my time walking back to my office. Halfway down the hall, I hear my cell ringing, and just as I approach my door, it stops.

Of course.

Walking into my office with a sigh, I check the display.

Ten missed calls from Twitch.

My brow furrows.

My cell lights up in my hand and chimes my ringtone. Twitch again.

I answer playfully with, “Hey you, are you stalking me?”

The response I get kills my good mood. “Baby, you need to come to the hospital. The one on Macquarie Street. You need to come now.”

My heart slowly begins to race.

My voice sounds weak even to me when I ask, “Are you okay?”

I hear him swallow hard. Then gently, “I’m fine. It’s not me, Lex. It’s the kid.”

He says three words that make the blood drain out of my body.

“Michael’s been shot.”

Lexi

Heart racing out of my chest, I run through the crowded city street.

I run so fast that my legs go numb. I nudge and push my way through the ocean of people without apology. I shout at people to move out of the way.

I'm panicked.

I'm irritated.

Don't these people understand I have an emergency? How dare they go about their lives when I feel like mine is crumbling?

I'm worried.

I'm frightened.

More so when I finally make it to the entrance of the hospital. Making a stop by the reception, I quickly ask where the emergency waiting room is. Once the answer is given, I'm off. Running down the halls of a sterile hospital, a million thoughts crash through my head.

What if Mickey's really hurt? What if he needs special help after this? What if he...

Shaking the crazy thoughts out of my head, I decide to wait to get the details so I know what I'm working with here.

It could be nothing.

I run to the end of the hall and I see Twitch. Panting and sweating, I walk over to him. With his back to me, I ask quietly, "What happened?"

Twitch turns to me. His face blank.

Searching my face a moment, he explains, "The kid wanted to ask his girl out. He told me he would've done it if he didn't have to be at work on time so I made Happy take him, then trail the rest of the day." Lowering his

eyes, he shifts around, leans closer, and whispers, “Happy had to make a few stops. Make a few drops. Secure a few shipments.”

The blood drains out of my face.

“Happy took the kid to ask the girl out, then they went to work. They’d been to three other places with no issues.” Taking a step closer to me, he grips my forearms gently. “Happy knew something was wrong as soon as they got in. Too many men. Too many armed men. They tried to snatch the shipment without payment. Happy played it cool, placing the kid behind him before he drew his weapon.”

He reaches up, taking my chin between his fingers and lifting so we meet eye-to-eye. “My runner got shot up. He died at the scene. Happy took one to the shoulder.” He holds my stare for a few seconds. “Michael took one to the back.”

A sudden intake of breath makes me shudder. I step out of his reach and ask shakily, “Where is he?”

Swallowing hard, he takes a step towards me, “Happy got ‘em out through a storm of bullets. He got him here quickly. He was losing blood...”

Another step back. Shakier, “Where is he?”

“...a lot of blood. They started infusing him as soon as he got in. Happy called ahead so they knew what to expect. They were waiting at the emergency doors...”

Quieter, “I want to see him, Twitch.”

“...the blood loss made him weak and he went into cardiac arrest. They brought him back a few times and he fought, baby, he fought hard, but...”

I whisper weakly, “I want to see my cub.”

His eyes turn sad. “...but he died, Angel. He’s gone.”

My heart stops beating altogether. Gasping, I step away from Twitch, holding out my arms as a warning. *Do not come any closer to me.* With every breath I take, it still feels like I still have no air left in me. My head spins.

He didn’t just say that.

He couldn’t have.

This is a joke. A stupid prank. I’m being Punk’d.

Don’t cry. You’re being Punk’d.

Chest heaving, I look up into those cold brown eyes. Only now, they're not so cold. They're warm, apologetic, and pleading.

That's when it hits me.

He's gone.

Michael's really gone.

"No," I whisper, lifting a shaking hand to cover my mouth while wrapping the other around myself, holding myself. Comforting myself. Closing my eyes tightly, a soft keening cry escapes me.

My sadness is cut short as anger surges through my veins like molten lava.

This is all his fault.

Panting, I snap my eyes open, grit my teeth, and hiss, "This is your fault. All *your* fault!" Twitch takes a small step back as if my words are physically wounding him. "He was just a boy. And now he's dead. My job is to help them, and I'm going to have to live with knowing I'm responsible for this – for his death – because..." My voice breaks. "...he never would've met you if I wasn't fucking you!" Dipping my chin, my shoulders shake in silent sobs. Fingers on my arm cause me to flinch away.

Slowly lifting my head, I glare up at him in disgust. "Don't. Don't you fucking touch me." Walking backwards, I throw my parting shot. "Everything you touch turns to shit."

Turning, I walk away. Crying to myself, I wonder how I'm going to tell Tahlia that her date is cancelled.



Some things in life are so sad that there are no words to describe the amount of sadness, grief, and sorrow a person is feeling.

I assume this is why God allowed humans the simple act of crying.

When a person cries, they feel the sadness slowly ease out of them. They feel as though they are justifiably respecting a person that has died through showing their grief. They allow a moment of sorrow to overcome them and cry out a small portion of their unseen pain.

Calling Tahlia was one of the hardest things I had ever done.

Holding back my tears for a moment, I tried to be strong for her. I really did. She assumed I had called her to congratulate her and give her tips for her date. When she laughed uninhibitedly and shouted, “I can’t believe he *finally* asked me!” that was the moment I broke down again.

I explained that her date wouldn’t be going ahead and she gave me radio silence. It’s hard to read someone over the phone when they go silent on you. You don’t know what’s happening or what they’re feeling. Sniffing, I told her there had been an accident and that Michael was taken to the hospital. Immediately, Tahlia asked which hospital in a panic. She said she wanted to go see him. I tried hard to ease her into the deep end. That is, until I realized there is no easy way to tell a person that someone they care about has died.

Tahlia continued her silence while I explained that Michael was fatally shot. She listened patiently, never giving away her emotions. She ended our call abruptly with a furious, “Is that all, Ms. Ballentine? I really need to get going.”

Her sudden change in character should’ve been alarming, but I know she was just protecting herself. I pulled myself together enough to tell her I was always free if she needed to talk, and to please let me know if she needed anything. She grunted in my ear and told me that wouldn’t be necessary. We said our restrained goodbyes, and Tahlia had thrown her phone down obviously thinking she had ended the call. But she hadn’t.

I listened to her cry for an hour.

I couldn’t bring myself to hang up. I felt that it would be abandoning her. I couldn’t do that. Not to one of my kids. So I cried with her.

Charlie gave me the rest of the week off. I tried to hide just how badly this was affecting me, but he saw right through me. What he doesn’t know is that a week to myself is a week of torture. My mind will wander down all the paths it shouldn’t.

I’ll spend the week blaming myself. I’ll spend the week hating Twitch. I’ll spend the week missing Michael.

Somewhere in the early hours of the morning, I fall asleep letting out a torrent of tears.

My heart is silently breaking.

Guilt eats away at me.

Why did he have to die when I am allowed to live?

He was seventeen years old.

Somewhere in the middle of sleep and wakefulness, I feel someone slide into bed with me. I smell him right away. Not even fully awake, my mouth parts, and I let out a soft cry as I'm reminded of why he had to sneak in. His arms circle me. He holds me close, rocking me and cooing. I hear his voice hitch every now and then. The warmth of his tears slide down my temple.

He tells me it's going to be okay. He says he'll make it better. He tells me he's sorry. Over and over again.

We fall into a tangle of limbs, and my last thought before I fall asleep is, *"This is a bad time to tell him I'm pregnant."*



Waking in the dark, I find myself alone and panic for a moment. Lifting my head, I hear movement in the kitchen and my head falls to the pillow with a whoosh.

I dreamed of Twitch while I slept.

He was high up, mounted on a white stallion, wearing gleaming silver armour. His tattooed hand lowered to reach out for me. I stared at that hand a long while before I stepped away from him and watched as he faded out of my mind's eye.

Perhaps I built him up so much in my head that I don't see him for what he truly is.

I don't want a knight in shining armor.

I want a knight in scuffed armor.

I want his helmet to have dents. I want my knight to be real, and dark, and savage. I want my knight to be a survivor. Someone who's been tested and got through his trials. Not some pussy in gleaming metal.

I don't want gleaming metal. I don't need a fucking knight.

I need a fearless warrior.

I need Twitch.

Approaching the kitchen, I stand at the end of the hall looking in.

My heart breaks for him.

He sits with his back to me, shoulders slumped with his chin dipped.

Leaving him to some peace and quiet, I turn to leave.

"I need help," he whispers.

Without turning back to him, I grip the doorframe tightly and respond just as quietly through the thickness in my throat. "I know, baby."

A moment passes before he asks quietly, "How would I-I mean, how do I—" I hear the frustration loud and clear. "How?"

Finally turning, I take in his defeated posture. "I'll help you."

"No. Anyone but you."

Firmer this time. "I'll help you, Twitch."

I almost miss it when he whispers, "Don't deserve your help."

He's right. He doesn't. But that doesn't mean I'm going to ignore his plea. I can't do that.

Making my way across the room, I place my hand on his bare, tattooed shoulder. He flinches. Recovering quickly, he places his hand on mine and squeezes. "I need help."

Squeezing his shoulder in a silent show of support, the bridge of my nose tingles. Tears well in my eyes. I try desperately to hold it inside of me. All in vain.

My body shakes in silent sobs. Relief flows through me.

I can't believe it. I'm stunned. I never thought I'd see the day.

He's ready.

He wants help.



It's all over the news.

How a boy of seventeen caught up in delivering drugs was shot and killed by drug dealers in a crooked part of town. How a lucky passer-by and high profile business owner is lucky to be alive after trying to assist the wayward youth. But everyone who hears the story shakes their head in a *well, that's what you get* kind of way. Because Michael was just another boy in the system. Another rebellious kid just looking for ways to shock people and be a nuisance. He was just a piece of dirt asking for it.

My heart – barely held together – cracks with every false retelling of the story.

And it gets worse and even more fabricated every damn time.

No one even knew him. He was destined for bigger things. He wanted a life. A good life. He was working hard at achieving that.

But it wasn't meant to be.

Twitch disappeared this morning before I woke. I was hoping to tell him about our little peanut. Alas, today is not the day. I have no idea how he'll react. It's not like I did this deliberately. Spending all those nights over at his house, I really did forget about the darn pesky pill. It sits on my nightstand, so I'm reminded to take it before I go to bed. Unfortunately, after spending a week at his place and only stopping home to check mail, it wasn't on my mind. And now I'm in the early stages of my pregnancy. So early, that I need to talk to him about it so I can plan, come what may.

A stupid part of my brain wishes he'll hear the news and vow to be a better man, starting that very minute. The realist part of my brain scoffs.

Not likely.

I'm prepared to do this alone though.

I won't lie. Having a piece of Twitch inside of me...it feels nice.

Clutching the remote with a death grip, I can't seem to look away as they accuse Michael of being everything he wasn't. I want to stand and

shout, “*You didn’t know him!*”

My blood boils.

I click to TV off and throw down the remote.

If there’s anything this situation has taught me it’s that life is short, and if you want something, you have to reach out with both hands and grip it tightly.

I smile to myself.

Good or bad mood, today is the day Twitch finds out I’m pregnant.

I hope for the best while expecting the worst.



Nikki and Dave sit before me, mouths gaping in stunned silence.

I wait patiently for their reactions while I sip at my green tea.

Dave is the first to break. “Pregnant, as in, you’re having a baby? Or pregnant, as in, you’re so full of emotions that you’re pregnant with them, and you could burst at any moment, showering the people of Sydney with a mixture of happy and sad?”

Nikki and I both turn to look at him wearing identical expression of confusion.

His shoulders slump. “Oh dear God. You’re pregnant with sexy demon spawn.”

I smile sadly. “Oh, be nice. He’s not that bad. He’s...” My mind wanders back to the other night. “He knows he needs help. He’s asking for help.”

Nikki reaches across the café table and rests her warm hand on mine. “I know you’re going to be the best momma ever. I just know it. And if Twitch is ready for that, then I’ll support you both one-hundred percent. I know you’d never do a thing to harm your child.”

She’s right. I wouldn’t.

Dave tuts, “Babe, I just don’t get how you let this happen. This was a dumbass thing to do. You barely know the guy.”

Nikki smacks him and I’m thankful for it. I don’t need to hear this right now.

Dave shrugs and mouths, “*What?*”

At seeing my defeated expression, he caves with a roll of his eyes. “I’m not saying that this is a bad thing. But it could be better, right? And I know with losing Michael you’re on an emotional high right now. I just don’t want you to make any decisions on impaired judgement.” Shuffling his chair close to mine, he wraps an arm around me. I lean into him. “I love you. And whatever decision you make, I’ll be standing right by your side. Like you stood by me. And fought for me.”

And I love him again. The rat bastard.

Playing with my teacup, I avoid their eyes. “I wanted to tell you guys first. I don’t know how this is going to go, but I have faith. He hasn’t told me he loves me yet...” I look up at them both, determination in my eyes. I whisper, “...but I *feel* it. I know he loves me. It’s almost like he’s afraid to say it. As if it’ll mean he’s weak or something.”

Nikki nods. “Loving someone is a weakness, Lex. You’re handing your heart up on a silver platter for someone to use as they please. You have to have a lot of faith in that person to do that.” She sighs, “You haven’t told us anything about the drug dealing accusations being thrown around, and by you not telling us it’s preposterous, it’s a thing. A real deal kind of thing. So instead of lecturing you, I’ll say this. Someone like Twitch declaring his love for someone is totally a weakness.”

My heart stutters.

They know.

Nikki goes on. “You think on it. Someone who’s got issues with Twitch suddenly has issues with you. It doesn’t have to be personal.” My eyes widen. She’s right. She leans forward and whispers, “Someone who’s got issues with Twitch...” she pauses, “...has issues with your *child*.”

Nope. I did not think of that.

My heart races.

Dave remains tight-lipped but I can see he wants to say something. I ask, “You got something to add?”

He whooshes out in a rush, “Oh, thank you!” Clearing his throat, he utters, “If you’re serious about this guy, you got to be prepared for what comes with a man in his lifestyle.” He says everything I’m happily blocking out. “Drugs, misery, addiction, women.” He looks at me apologetically. “A man like Twitch doesn’t lock himself down to one woman, baby. I’m sorry, but they don’t.”

Tapping the edge of my teacup with my fingernail, I take in the sudden silence with thanks.

I have a lot to think about.

Twitch

I stare hard at the photo in my shaking hand.

Rage coils low in my gut.

Michael's limp body in Happy's arms as Happy tries to escape the carnage that is the ambush.

Turning the photo over, I read.

Everyone you love will die.

Pressure builds in my head as I read the next sentence.

She's next.

Blood roars in my ears.

As soon as I saw the handwriting, I knew who this came from.

A Persian with one eye just summoned himself a death wish.

Which leaves me with one choice.

It's time for Lexi to hurt.



Lexi

Standing before the gorgeous carved mahogany that is Twitch's office doors, I hesitate to knock.

Swallowing hard, I turn my head to the left and spot Ling staring holes into my head.

God forbid the woman smile. I think her face would crack.

Turning to my right, I spot Happy sitting on the edge of a desk giving instructions to a male employee, his arm in a sling. He sees me and my heart stutters. His eyes meet mine and I see pain flash across his features. I know he feels responsible for what happened to Michael.

I'm not stupid. It wasn't his fault. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt to look at him. Alive and well.

My brows furrow.

What am I waiting for? I need to do this.

Placing my hand on the doorknob, I enter without knocking. I steel myself for this encounter, mentally giving myself a pep-talk. Twitch loves me, whether he'll admit it or not. I know it.

He's it for me.

I'll never love someone the way I love him. My love for him is almost desperate.

Approaching his desk, I smile. "Hey baby, can we talk?"

Without looking up at me, he answers on a sigh, "Seriously, Lexi, I can't just drop everything when you need to chat. We'll talk later. You're at my place tonight, by the way."

My nose bunches.

What happened to *I'll make it better* and *I'm sorry*? This isn't the man I left in my bed this morning. Something isn't right.

Shifting from foot-to-foot, I ask, "O-okay. You sure you don't have time for a quick word?"

He lets out a harsh breath and stands. Looking at me through cold eyes, he utters, "Pretty fucking sure, Alexa. I don't have time for your shit today."

And those words hit me like a slap to the face.

I hate myself when I feel the bridge of my nose start to tingle. I'm not a weak person. I'm going to find out what's happening here.

"What's wrong, babe?"

Walking around his desk, he says frustrated, "Nothing. Nothing at all. I mean it when I say I don't have time. And you're pushing the issue when there shouldn't be one."

I return, "Something's not right. I can hear it in your voice. Something's changed." Piling up all my courage, I ask, "Are you breaking up with me?"

He smirks cruelly, "In order to break up with you, we'd need to be a thing."

A small piece of my heart breaks off and falls to the floor, shattering on impact.

Tears sting my eyes. "I don't understand. I thought we—" Stepping back, I shrug.

Stopping directly in front of me, he booms, "Everything that's wrong with my life is because of *you*!"

My body trembles in fear. My heart races.

I'm really very frightened right this second.

"What do you want to hear, Lexi?" He sneers, "That I fucking love you? That you mean..." Gritting his teeth, he pounds on his chest with a closed fist, "...*everything* to me?"

My head thumps softly. Through quivering lips, I whisper, "I just want to understand you."

He barks a humorless laugh. "Good luck with that. I can't even figure *myself* out."

He starts pacing. His jaw tics. "You know what I can tell you about me? Honestly?"

Looking up at him through blurry eyes, I nod.

I'd kill to know anything about him.

Looking at me through a scowl, he hisses, “I am *not* a good guy. I can tell you that for sure.” My heart sinks. He adds, “Wanna know how I know?”

Holding back my sobs, I nod and as I do, and a tear falls down my cheek. He watches that tear closely and mutters, “You choose me, a lot more tears you’ll shed. I guarantee it.”

Lifting his arms, gesturing to everything around us, his office, he explains quietly, “All this, I did for you. And you didn’t even know me.”

Hope beams somewhere deep inside me. Twitch sees it and shakes his head. “This, what I’m telling you, is not good, Lexi. So listen up. I need you to know how fucked up I am. It’s time that you knew about me.”

Moving backwards to the front of his desk, he sits on it with a sigh, “Always knew I had to make something of myself, and I was no good at school, so I had to figure out another way.” His head falls forward a little. “That’s where the drugs came into it. So my plan was to work hard, earn a lot of money, and come back for you.”

I can’t help the stutter my heart gives out.

What he says next makes my chest cave in.

“I was going to trap you,” he whispers.

Taking a step back, I breathe in a shaky breath.

He watches my feet as I move away and says, “Good girl. Finally seeing some sense.”

He’s pushing me away. I don’t know why, but I intend to find out.

I ask shakily, “W-why? And how?”

His hands grip the edge of his desk. He breathes deeply and replies on an exhale, “You were meant to be living in a shitty house, with a shitty family, and have a shitty life. I was counting on that. So when I made my first million and came back for you—” I gasp and place a hand on my chest. His eyes flash and he smirks cruelly, “Oh, yeah. I came back for you. Only, you weren’t there. But your family still was. So when I pounded on the door and asked if Alexa was home, your dad laughed at me.”

His jaw steels. “He fucking laughed at *me*. Here I was, a fucking self-made millionaire, and a guy with none of his own teeth left fucking laughs at me? No. Not happening.”

“What did you do to my dad?”

He leans forward and curls his lip. “Nothing the fucker didn’t deserve. I should’ve made him beg. Did you even know your brother died, Lexi? Did the asshole even try to find you to tell you?”

Walking backwards, I lose my stepping, stumble back, and fall hard on my ass.

No. No!

And Twitch just stands there. Looking down at me. Like I’m a piece of garbage.

“Who are you?”

He laughs, “Now you ask? You’ve been fucking me for months and you don’t even know my name. Who *does* that?”

What he says next makes me realize that as much as I tried to understand this man, I don’t know him at all. He looks me in the eyes and announces clinically, “My name is Tony Falcon. I spent my nights dreaming of a girl named Alexa who helped me when I was eight years old. She told me she wouldn’t forget my name.” His face turns harsh. “And I promised myself to make sure she wouldn’t.”

My eyes widen in stunned disbelief and my blood runs cold. The pressure in my ears builds.

No!

This is a bad dream. A fucking nightmare. This isn’t happening to me.

The tears come strong and fast. I mutter between heaving breaths, “Antonio? Antonio Falco?”

Nodding slowly, he searches my face for a long moment before he crosses his legs and makes himself comfortable. “In my mind, you were this little fucking bitch. Some stupid asshole who couldn’t mind her own business. And I promised myself that I would find you and fucking *own* you. All because you helped me. You gave me hope in a fucked up world. And when that hope dwindled and died, I was bitter. I *am* bitter. It was your fault I ever fucking had dreams. Dreams I never should’ve had, Lexi.” Closing his eyes, his voice softens a little. “Then I couldn’t find you. You weren’t anywhere. I had all this money. All these resources at my fingertips, and I couldn’t find you.”

His eyes open and he glares at me. “It’s as if you were hiding from me. *Mocking* me. Telling me I couldn’t have you. And *no one* says no to me,

Lexi. If they do, they change their minds pretty fucking quick enough, or they die. Simple as that.”

Why aren't you leaving?

Because it's cutting me so deeply that I need to hear it to the end. Twitch might just get his wish after all.

Straightening a little, he removes his cufflinks and places them next to him on the desk. “So I hired someone who wouldn't fail. And it cost me that first million, Lexi. Nox is the best at what he does, and he didn't find you...for a fucking year. So that just made me madder.” His eyes flash. “So when I finally got that call, I was pissed. He tells me you'd been living in Australia for a few months and that your foster mom was dying. See, that should've made me feel bad, but it didn't, because if you were alone, I could manipulate you more easily. I thought maybe it would only take a few dinners and me being sweet to you to make you fall. Boy, was I wrong!”

My brain is on freeze. “Wh-what happened then?”

Crossing his arms, he breathes deeply and replies through an exhale. “You were independent. And sweet. And fucking cute. You got educated all by yourself. You didn't even need my money. At least, I don't think it would've made you happier. And I felt something the first second I sat back and watched you from under my hood.”

Me too.

He dips his chin. “And you did too. I know you did.” Lifting his suddenly-tired face to mine, he utters warily, “I wasn't meant to fall for you. You were just going to be a toy for me. Nothing more, nothing less. I was going to humiliate you whenever I could, just because I could. Make you realize that hope means shit. I was gonna make you do horrible things, all for my pleasure.”

Don't want to listen to anymore. Let's go.

Standing on shaky legs, I turn and walk to the door.

That's when he says it.

“You're the best thing that ever happened to me. If it weren't for you, I'd be in jail. Or dead. I don't know which one's worse. But you saved me.” He sounds disappointed in himself when he whispers, “Wasn't meant to fall for you.”

The tears start to fall, my breath hitches, and I turn the knob.

His voice sounds from behind me, cruel and taunting. “Good riddance. Knew you’d be trouble from the second I hired that street rat to rape you.”

Walking away, I mentally hear glass cracking under my feet because I step right over my shattered heart.

His words should halt me. They should’ve made me angry. Made me want to fight.

But there’s no fight left in me.

I’m done.

Done with this relationship. Done with settling for someone who doesn’t want me or love me. Done with the lies and hiding things.

I am done.

My heart isn’t breaking. There’s nothing left of it to break. I’m hollow.

My mind replays what Twitch just said.

Knew you’d be trouble from the second I hired that street rat to rape you.

A sob bursts out of me as I try to escape Falcon Plastics. Funnily enough, Ling catches me off guard waiting by the lift. Her face a mixture of worry and sadness, “He break up with you?”

I spit, “Fuck off, you dumb whore.”

She sighs and leans by the lift door. “If he broke up with you...” She straightens, then starts to walk away. “...then there’s a good reason for it.”

Dismissing her cryptic message, the lift opens and I feel him at my back.

He sounds desperate. “You’ll take the next lift. We need to talk.”

His hand tries to capture mine, but I pull away. “Nothing left to say.”

Stepping into the empty lift behind me, the doors close and he whispers, “Thought I could do it. Thought I could let you go. But...but I can’t.” My anger spikes. “Soon as I saw you walk away, something snapped inside of me. I-I didn’t mean it. I panicked. Please talk to me.”

Without turning to him, I ask, “Did you really hire that man?”

He replies immediately, “Yes.” My gut sinks and he adds urgently, “But he wasn’t meant to take it that far. And he’s dead now. So it doesn’t matter. I saved you.”

I scoff and he utters, “I needed a chance to meet you. I needed to have something on you. Something you owed me for. I-I love you, Lexi.”

“You got a funny way of showing it,” Turning to him, I sneer, “Antonio.”

Standing in front of me, blocking my exit, he snatches my hand and places it over the small thirteen tattooed on his cheekbone. His frantic eyes meet mine. “Feel that scar? Know how I got it?” His lip quivers. “You should. You were there.”

Cupping his cheek, I dip my chin and cry softly, “I still love you. So I need to walk away from you. You need help.”

He ignores me, “This angel appears in front of me. I think to myself that God sent her to me. That I was going to die and that she was there to guide me to heaven.”

My shoulders shake with every heaving breath, I stutter, “P-please, stop.”

Catching my face in his hands, he goes on, “She was bossy as hell. And I fell in love with her. But I thought she’d never want someone like me. And my life got complicated, and my brain stopped working like other peoples. Somewhere between then and now, she fell in love with me too.”

Kissing my mouth, he utters, “She’s in danger, though. And I need to keep her safe. Because I *love* her.” Another kiss. “I’d kill anyone who tried to hurt her.”

“*You’re* hurting me. You’ve been hurting me from that first day. And my heart can’t take it anymore. I’m done.”

The lift doors open and he pulls back, “You said you’d never leave me. And I’m holding you to that. Because when you’re safe again, I’m coming for you, Angel.”

Leaving him in the lift, I turn and start to walk backwards. Watching him watch me, I tell him, “I’m pregnant.”

His face contorts in pain. A tear falls past the thirteen on his cheek. Sniffing, he turns his head to wipe the tear away. He sounds so determined as he says, “Then I’ll come for both of you.”

Realizing there’s no point in arguing with Twitch, I turn and walk my broken self towards the main entrance. A man holds the door open for me. He smiles sweetly, and I return the smile. No point in being angry at a man I don’t know. Especially one who wears an eye patch.

I walk a short distance before I hear Twitch shout, “Lexi! Run!”

But I don’t. I turn to the sound of his voice.

The man with the eye patch has his gun aimed at me. A chorus of panicked shouting erupts, and people scatter like ants.

I don't blame them. If I wasn't so petrified, I'd run too.

The man smirks at me and shouts back to Twitch, "You should know better, old friend." Holding my gaze, he utters, "No one wins in war."

Closing my eyes tightly, my hands cover my stomach protectively as I await the inevitable.

Today, I die.

The shot rings out, and I'm amazed by how little I feel.

Another three shots ring out and I open my eyes. Twitch has the man on his back, with the gun pointed at his forehead. The man laughs, "Oh well. It was worth a try."

And those would be the last words that man ever said.

The man's body jerks uncontrollably as Twitch pulls back on the trigger and places a bullet into his brain.

Twitch kneels over the man's body, panting. Reaching up, he cups the side of his neck, and from this angle, I can't tell how badly hurt he is. My brain finally tells my feet to move and I run towards him. My mouth won't work. My eyes move down to the side of his neck where he clutches his palm. Blood trickles from between his fingers and I choke out, "You're hurt."

He chuckles, "Just a graze, babe. Seriously, it's nothing."

I watch as the trickle turns to a gush. His eyes flutter as he says weakly, "Go get Happy. Right now."

Standing quickly, I run back into the building and screech, "Happy! I need help!"

Not a second passes before I see Happy exit the door to my right and run towards me. Not allowing myself even a moment away from Twitch, I run and Happy follows. He yells out, "What happened?"

I shout back, "He's been shot. In the neck."

When we reach him, my rapidly beating heart stills. He's not moving. Happy runs right to his side and lifts him. I see the bullet hole in his neck. With every beat of his heart, more blood is pumped out of his body and onto the sidewalk. Happy says, "C'mon, man! Wait! Just wait! Twitch! Wake up!" Happy shakes him and he stirs.

Pulling out his cell phone, Happy dials and says, "Gunshot wound to the neck. Losing a lot of blood. He's barely conscious." He rattles off the address while Twitch and I stare into one another's eyes.

He murmurs, “Too stubborn to die, babe. You know that.”

I *do* know that. At least, that’s what I choose to believe right now.

Blurry-eyed, I whisper unconvincingly, “Okay.”

He forces a smile and says weakly, “Had worse wounds than this one.”

His eyes flutter. “Tell me what we’re naming our baby.”

I know what he’s doing. He’s trying to distract me.

The bullet hole oozes thick blood and I stand there, petrified, but unable to look away. He whispers, “Baby, look at me. In my eyes. You know I love when you see *me*.”

Blinking through my tears, I tell him, “I haven’t thought of names. It’s too early.”

He half-smiles. “Maybe we’ll do it together when I’m better, yeah?”

I reply immediately, “Yes. Okay, honey.”

The sounds of sirens blaring along with red and white flashing lights stall my happy thoughts. Hands come to my shoulders, and when I look up at the paramedic, I see his mouth moving but the words don’t reach me. The blood roaring in my ears has me temporarily deaf. Fear has me immobilized. Then Twitch is being loaded into the back of the ambulance, smiling at me faintly. Happy jumps in with him and yells out to me, “Meet us at the hospital, Lexi.”

Nodding through a torrent of tears, I order shakily, “Don’t die, okay?”

He responds as firmly as he can, “Gonna be okay.”

And he says this so fiercely that I believe him.

I believe him.

EPILOGUE

Lexi

Five years later...

Waking in the morning to something wriggling at the foot of the bed, I smile sleepily.

“What on earth is *that*? Is there a monster in my bed?” I try my best to sound horrified.

The hysterical giggling is enough to give him away, though.

In one swift movement, I pull back the covers and roar like a lion. AJ squeals, completely giddy before jumping into my arms.

I wrap him up tight and rock him, placing kisses on his forehead.

Spotting something on his hands, I double take and choke a laugh in my throat before I ask, “Sweetie, what happened to your hands?”

Looking up, he smiles, and I catch my second laugh at the gap made by the missing top two front teeth.

I know he’s my child but, by *God*, he is adorable.

He points to the backs of his hands and explains, “I’m like Daddy.”

Checking his hands again, I look closely at the marker drawings all over his hands.

No one ever accused him of not loving his daddy.

Speaking of which, we need to get up.

The two of us live alone in a three bedroom home on the outskirts of Sydney.

Living with Twitch is not an option.

I quit my job as a caseworker and now proudly wear the title of stay at home mom to my four-and-a-half year old, black-haired, brown-eyed baby boy.

And he's so much like Twitch it's scary.

Same looks. Same attitude. Same *everything*.

Sometimes I wonder if this kid is even a little bit *mine*.

Knowing Twitch, his sperm probably got to my womb and decided he was going to do the whole baby thing on its own. The stubbornness must be in the genes, because AJ has it too.

Being a single mom isn't always easy, but when I look at my son, I couldn't picture my life without him. He's completely worth it. And he means everything to me.

Placing one last kiss on his head, I tell him, "C'mon, sweetie. Time to get ready. We're seeing your dad today."

He jumps up and shouts, "Woohoo!" Then takes off like a rocket down the hall to the bathroom. I hear the water start and I know he's brushing what's left of his loose teeth.

Chuckling to myself, I get out of bed, stretch, and start getting ready.

AJ runs down the hall wearing a tee and underwear; looking panicked, he asks, "What do I wear?"

Dipping my chin, I hold back my laughter.

Twitch.

Total Twitch-ism right there. The day he starts telling people to 'Dress nice', I'll have a heart attack.

Knowing he wants to dress nicely to see his dad, I tell him, "How about the black jeans and your Spiderman sweatshirt?"

My son looks up at me wide-eyed in awe as if I'm a genius, and without a word, runs back to his room. I hear things being thrown around and I can't stop it.

I quietly laugh while shaking my head.

He comes back out all dressed and I say, "There! You look great, honey." And he does.

Then I spot his hands still messed up with marker, I suggest, “Maybe we should wash those hands, though.”

AJ gasps dramatically, “Mum, I have to show dad!”

And that settles it. How can I argue with that?

I quickly dress and call out, “C’mon, AJ. Let’s go.”

He follows me out the door and we’re off.



AJ tells me to wait at my normal spot while he talks to Twitch, loud and animated.

Pretending to read, I sit on the bench and watch as AJ shows him his ‘tattoos’ and some of his new toys. His new favorite being a Buzz Lightyear doll he got just last week.

AJ plays spaceman for a little while, then he sits in front of his dad and talks his ear off some more.

When a half-hour passes, my chest squeezes.

Reluctantly, I approach them and ask AJ, “Hey bud, you mind if I speak to your dad alone for a little while?”

AJ doesn’t look happy, but he mutters, “Okay.”

I tell him, “Stay where I can see you, baby.”

He moves to sit at the bench where I normally wait, and I turn to Twitch.

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?” I ask.

But, as per usual, the shiny white headstone doesn’t respond.

And my heart aches.

The day I tried to leave and Twitch got shot, he spent a week in an induced coma before finally fading away.

And it was hard.

It’s always hard losing someone you love. But this was harder.

It was harder because we fought.

It was harder because I told him Michael's death was all his fault.

It was harder because I'd just found out I was pregnant.

It was also harder because I had two deaths to mourn.

Michael *and* Twitch.

I took leave from work indefinitely, but decided in the end that I am now too damaged to want to help other damaged people. It was selfish, but I had to do what was best for me.

Happy, Nikki, and Dave are all still a huge part of our lives. They have to be. I didn't leave them a choice.

They're AJ's godparents.

We get together as often as we can, which is usually once a week. AJ revels in the stories that his Uncle Happy tells him about his dad.

A month after he passed, Ling showed up at my door. We stared at each other a long time. She looked down at the small swell of my belly before breaking down. I held her and we mourned together, joined in our love for Twitch. Before she left, she handed me an envelope, and before I opened it, I knew what it was.

Lo and behold, a check for a seven-figure number was inside. So I cashed it, and when AJ was born, I put most of it in a trust fund for him, which he can access when he's twenty-one. I bought our home with the money, and some of it I keep for us to live off. Not that it's needed. Every month, a more-than-decent amount of money is transferred into my account. The amount would be enough for AJ and me to live off of quite comfortably. I've asked Happy to stop doing it. He confided it wasn't him, and upon further detective work, the source of the money is untraceable.

AJ carries Twitch's name.

My baby's full name is Antonio Falco Jr.

The check was not a surprise to me. I always knew Twitch would look after me. Not always the way I wanted.

He always did the right thing the wrong way.

But he loved me. In his own way. I know he did.

The thing is, I'm still in love with him.

Looking down at the marble gravestone, the bridge of my nose tingles.

Lip quivering, I choke out, "It never gets any easier, babe. Someday, I want to come here and leave without crying." The tears fall freely. "But I

can't. It's too hard." I sniffle. "I still feel you. I know it's crazy, but I feel you watching me. It brings me comfort. Even if it is just in my head. Sometimes I can't stop myself from looking for you. I would give anything to see that hood."

Wiping at my cheeks, I take a deep breath, inhale, and exhale slowly. "I love you. Your son loves you." My voice trembles, "I hope you're up there feeling the love. Because we still feel you down here. AJ is proud you're his daddy. And so am I." Walking backwards, I whisper, "You're forever my hero. Happy birthday, Twitch."

I walk over to my son, take him by the hand, and together, we make our way to our car. AJ breaks free and runs back to Twitch. Digging into his pockets, he removes his little fists from his pants and lays the M&M's on the gleaming headstone before running back to me, smiling. He reaches me panting, and wrapping an arm around him, I lean down and kiss his sweet-smelling head. Reaching up, he takes my hand once more. A familiar feeling washes over me.

My heart aches as I walk away from the only man I've ever loved.



I watch from my usual spot, the binoculars helping me see as clearly as possible.

AJ's hands covered in marker makes me cry like a fucking baby.

Seeing Lexi lose it doesn't help either.

That woman should be my wife.

I'm jealous of Happy. Jealous that he gets to spend time with my family when I'm nothing but a shadow.

But my son deserves a good life, and if that means not having me be part of it, then so be it.

So I have to watch him grow up from afar.

It fucking sucks, but I love him enough to know he's better off without me.

Turning, I walk away knowing that by becoming dead, I did the unselfish thing.

For once in my life.

I'll come for them.

Redemption is at hand. And I call him AJ.



A message from the author

Hi guys,
Thank you for reading RAW.
You can help me an awful lot by leaving a review on Amazon and
Goodreads.

Thanks again. Your love and support mean everything to me.

Belle xx