

SHE'S NOT YOUR  
MEEK LITTLE LAMB

# Black Sheep

*a novel by*

ALEXA HARLOWE &  
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# **BLACK SHEEP**

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*For all the dark romance readers out there who hold true to their love of this genre: we hope Black Sheep does you proud.*

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# CONTENT WARNING

**Please feel free to skip this page if you don't have triggers and prefer to go in blind!**

Please be advised that Black Sheep is a dark romance with morally grey characters, as well as potentially troubling scenes and themes that some readers might find triggering.

Potentially triggering content:

- Religious trauma (references to cults in particular), including manipulation and degradation
- References to drug abuse
- Parental neglect
- Physical and emotional abuse/manipulation (no sexual abuse). Includes abuse suffered by a child from an authority figure (not a parent), which includes beating/whipping/burns leaving permanent scars
- References to an intended marriage between a minor and a young adult which is NOT consummated and no sexual contact occurs
- Physical violence, torture, and murder
- Claustrophobia
- Panic attacks and undiagnosed PTSD
- Explicit language
- Detailed sexual content. The sexual activity is consensual, though some consensual non-consensual (CNC) role play is depicted. It includes



some kinks and behaviors that some readers might find triggering, including breath play, praise, BDSM, and rough sex.

Please contact Brynne Weaver or Alexa Harlowe for any questions or concerns.

I don't always fuck a man before I kill him, but when I do, I find there's one thing they all have in common.

They're disappointing.

Exhibit number twelve. Tristan McCoy.

Even rolling his name through my mouth as I grit my way ever closer to a lackluster orgasm leaves a film on my tongue. I'm thinking about how much I would like to brush my teeth as he presses his hot palms to my breasts as though kneading thick batter. His hands are butter soft, no calluses from outdoor labor or rough sports. No, his Arnold Palmer golf gloves would never permit a callus on that skin.

Do you think it's strange that I know his brand of golf gloves? It should be. Perhaps it's nearly as strange as thinking about golf gloves while riding a stubby cock and purring out a name that fills me with loathing and excitement in equal measure. It likely doesn't fit into the conventional box of 'intimate'. But *intimacy* is defined as close familiarity.

Intimacy can be a touch between two lovers.

Or it can be the kiss of a spider's fangs in the body of a fly.

"Jesus, Emma," he hisses as I roll my hips. I smile as I run my fingers over his groomed chest. He doesn't notice that I put minimal effort into my grin. His half-lidded eyes are only focused on my tits. "Where have you been all my life."

*Killing dickheads like you and dissolving their bodies in sodium hypochlorite. Keeps a girl busy.*

"Waiting for you, baby."

*I need to scrub my brain with that toothbrush.* My reply might have been a little heavy-handed, but at this point, it doesn't matter. He eats it up.

My name's not Emma, by the way. But nothing about me or this situation is as it seems. The impending orgasm isn't very real, for one. I'll have to fake it. His short dick isn't going to get the job done, so I guess the disappointment will be more acute this time. This bedroom isn't really just a bedroom, not with my hidden selection of weapons lying in wait. The bookshelf on the wall to the left isn't even really a bookshelf. It's a door to a secret room. A whole lair, in fact. Everything about me, about this place, about this intimate moment...it's all a lie. The only truth is the web I've spun around us, the death that waits in the shadows.

"I'm coming," Tristan says as he tilts his head back on the pillow and scrunches his eyes closed. His neck is thick with the pressure of a held breath. His veins pop from his flesh. In moments like this, Death takes my hand in skeletal fingers, whispering in my ear. *Garrote.*

*Yes. Garrote.*

"Oh Tristan, yes," I say as I grind my pelvis over his. An orgasm sneaks its way through my midsection, clenching my sex around his short shaft. The release lasts about as long as a blink, though I pretend it goes on for much longer as he empties into his condom. My orgasm feels like water released through a valve in a dam. There's a whole lake trapped behind an impenetrable wall of concrete that I can never manage to reach.

I slip off of Tristan, wrestling my disgust under a mask I call "Sweetheart Sex Kitten" as he pulls the condom off with a slick snap. He takes a tissue from the box next to the bed and wraps it up, then puts it on the nightstand. Not in the waste bin next to the nightstand, just...on the nightstand.

*Garrote. Garrote. Garrote.*

"That was great, baby," I say sweetly as Tristan lies back, his chest still pumping heavy breaths. I fake the same breathlessness, but my heart has already returned to its normal rhythm.

"It was. You're amazing, Emma." His silky palm glides up and down my arm. He opens his mouth to say something, likely about leaving, having an early morning tomorrow, a work meeting, some bullshit. I don't let him get the words out.

"Stay for a little while," I purr, leaning in close to nibble his earlobe. It tastes like salt and Tom Ford cologne. "I'll let you put it in my ass."

Tristan chokes on a laugh. “Well, that’s an offer I can’t refuse.” He slaps my buttocks and I swallow a growl. I force myself away from his ear before I bite down on the spongy flesh and rip it off.

“I’ll get you something to drink, baby.”

I roll off the bed as I pull my lingerie back up from where he’d tugged it down to give me his best bakery moves, Tristan’s warm hand following me as though I’ll evaporate. I give him a wink over my shoulder, Sweetheart Sex Kitten mask firmly in place as I pad away to the kitchen. The mask falls from my face as soon as my back is turned.

The concrete floor is soothing on my bare feet. I don’t like the temperature of the bed with Tristan in it. It’s a tepid warmth. Sometimes I feel like I need to burn up, but that cleansing fire never comes. It’s just a slimy sort of heat in moments like this. I prefer the cool kiss of sealed stone composite on my skin.

I take a glass and fill it with water, scrutinizing the lilies in a vase on the island as I drink it down before placing it in the dishwasher. I don’t resent details like the flowers in the vase, or the clutter of a calendar and notes on my fridge, or the single loose thread on the throw of the slate-gray couch in the living room where my white cat, Kane, lies flicking his tail in the thin wedge of light from the kitchen. These are all part of my web. They are a shimmering illusion, carefully curated, each spun to present the image of normalcy. Of safety.

I take another two glasses from the shelf and press them against the dispenser in the door of the fridge to drop three ice cubes to the bottom of each. I pull some bourbon from the liquor cabinet and lemon juice from the fridge. And then I press my finger to the sensor of the hidden drawer in the cupboard next to the fridge. It slides down from the compartment Samuel built. It tilts to display the hidden vials of my own special concoction, a mixture of ketamine and chloral hydrate. I cast one glance over my shoulder, just to be sure Tristan hasn’t followed me in here, and then take a vial between my finger and thumb, rolling the crystals against the glass.

I make a whiskey sour and divide the cocktail between the two glasses, mixing the full vial of crystals into Tristan’s tumbler. The simple syrup will mask the taste of the bitter drugs. I give it a stir, add a straw to mine, and put everything back where it belongs before padding back to the bedroom, drinks in hand.

Tristan is lying uncovered on the bed, arms folded behind his head, his stubby, shrunken dick flopped to the side of his pelvis. It twitches as I approach. It takes a Herculean amount of strength to keep that Sweetheart Sex Kitten mask on my face and sashay my hips as I walk toward him. It helps that I have a glass full of hypnotic sedatives in my hand.

“Here you go, baby,” I say. I smile around my straw and hand Tristan his glass, taking just enough of a sip of my drink to coat my tongue with the burn of alcohol and no more.

“Whiskey sour, my favorite. How did you know?”

I give a coy little shrug. “Lucky guess.”

No, it’s not.

I’ve been watching Tristan for a while now. Of course I know it’s his drink of choice. I know what golf clubs are his favorite—Epic MAX Star Combo Set in black and gold, what porn he prefers—amateur double penetration on Pornhub, what protein powder he uses in his breakfast smoothie—Rocket whey powder in cookies and cream. I know what times he sets his three morning alarms for, what his Netflix password is, what brand of socks he buys.

And I know he handles investments for Lamb Health, one of Legio Agni’s subsidiary companies.

He makes them more money. He helps the elusive Caron Berger gain more power.

I pretend to take a sip of my drink and tip up the bottom of Tristan’s glass as he gulps down a long swig. Of course, once he’s gone, he will only be replaced by some other broker. But it’s still justice. He’s worked with Lamb Health for the last five years. He’s met in secret with Cynthia Nordstrom twice since November, according to the calendar that Samuel hacked. She’s the highest-ranking public member of Caron’s flock.

Tristan must know. He *must*. He knows what Legio Agni is. A cult that lures in broken women, desperate women, lonely women. Women who are just looking for someplace safe in this world. And then Caron Berger takes everything they have. Everything they are.

And for his role in Caron’s games, Tristan McCoy deserves to die.

My heart rate picks up. I feel it in my throat.

*Garrote.*

The release I’m really craving is creeping closer with every swallow.

“How’s the drink, baby? Would you like another?” I ask as Tristan takes a long sip. Only a quarter is left, which means he’s had more than enough of my little potion to start feeling the effects.

“Nah, this one is going straight to my head and I want to take you up on that offer,” he says, his gaze falling down my body. His lips pull back in a lecherous smirk, exposing his expensive veneers. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Just over there,” I say, nodding my head at a door to our right. Tristan gets up and stretches, his dick dangling like a fat maggot. He catches me looking with my mask down. I don’t need to put in the effort anymore. Nor do I want to. There’s only clinical interest in my expression now, but I give him a wink and a voice that doesn’t match the detachment in my eyes. “Hurry back now, baby. Don’t keep my ass waiting.”

Tristan ignores my facial expression and takes my words the way he wants to, as an invitation. His grin widens and he stumbles toward the bathroom with his glass in hand, downing the rest of the drink as he goes.

When the door is closed behind him, I pad toward the headboard, feeling beneath the overhang at the back for the piece of loose wood that slides out. Another scan of my finger and the cover retracts from a hidden panel. I reach for the wire of the garrote and pull it off the hook, then close the compartment and wait.

And wait.

*And wait.*

There’s a thud and then a curse. I smile. I lay the garrote out beneath a pillow, then tiptoe over to the bathroom door and tap on it twice.

“You okay in there, baby?”

A groan sounds from the other side. A shadow moves slowly beneath the door. I turn the handle, then push the door open with my toes, savoring every delicious moment as Tristan’s crumpled, naked form comes into view.

“Oh, you poor thing. Why don’t you come lie down in the bed.” I grip Tristan’s arm and haul him to his unsteady feet.

“What...whaaaattt...”

“What happened? You’re just tired, that’s all,” I say, patting his chest as we stumble toward the bed. “You need to lie down. Sleep off the ketamine.”

“K...ketttt...”

“Yeah, that’s right, baby. Ketamine. You just need to sleep it off. Permanently.”

Tristan tries to swallow the saliva that dribbles from his lips. His pupils are blown beneath his hooded eyes. He garbles a word around his drool but trips and crashes face-first onto the mattress before anything more than a slurred hiss can come out.

“That’s better,” I coo, maneuvering him further up the bed before he loses consciousness. I climb his legs like a panther, straddling his back as he groans. My chest drapes across his warm skin. His erratic pulse begs me to bring silence to his heart.

I lean forward, letting my palms drift across the sheets and under the pillow that lies just above Tristan’s head. I grasp the two handles of the garrote and slide it down, the wire skimming across his face until it stops just below his jaw. I blow in his ear and his unfocused eye opens. “When you get to hell, tell Donald Soversky Jr. that Bria sent you.”

I press my knee to Tristan’s spine and pull the wire taut and smile, relishing his every musical plea for air like a vibration in my web.

I’m coming for you, Caron Berger.

I’m coming for you.

## 2

---

BRIA

I press the hidden button for the floor panels and hum a tune as the gears below my feet whir to life. Slabs of concrete drop and roll beneath the floor on the tracks that Samuel built. The headboard of the bed pulls closer to the wall and that end of the mattress raises up within the frame to expose the square hole to the level below. Tristan's body tumbles down the mattress with the pillows, that stubby dick flopping like a gummy worm as he rolls into my pit, which I affectionately call my "Deconstruction Chamber." He lands on the floor below with a satisfying thud, and then I pull the sheets and the mattress protector off the bed and throw them down too, watching as they flutter away, white flags drifting into the darkness. After searching his pockets, I toss his clothes into the pit, then I press the button again. The pieces roll back into place, locking with a final click of gears.

I place Tristan's glass into the dishwasher and start the cycle before taking my own with me back to the bathroom where I remove my honey-blond wig and have a short, hot shower. I feel quieter inside now that this need has been sated, like there's a gentle hum where there was once a scratching beast, its talons so sharp it could scar my ribs trying to get out.

When I'm dried off, I clean the bathroom, wiping down any trace of Tristan's fingerprints. Drink in hand, I drift through the bedroom and toward the bookcase, shifting the sliding wooden panel to access the hidden lock. It scans my fingerprint and the bookcase opens into my security room and the stairway to my pit. I sit in the chair and check the monitors that divide the feeds of thirty-two cameras around my house and hidden at



various junctions of neighboring streets. The only movement of interest is a doe and her twin fawns from last season, their tawny colors muted to a static gray against the black backdrop of night.

I lay Tristan's belongings out on the desk and pick each one up. Keys for his home and the Audi A5 Sportback parked in his garage. His Piaget Polo watch. I got rid of his phone at the bar, and shockingly he didn't put up much fuss when he realized it was missing on the drive here. I think he was too eager to bury that little cock of his into my pussy. Rifling through his wallet unveils the usual smattering of credit cards and business contacts and two hundred in cash. I set the bills aside. And then I notice a slit in the wallet.

A black card is hidden inside.

Sleek. Embossed in gold.

*1294 Tropane Avenue.*

That's it. No name. No phone number. Not even a city. Not that it would matter. There could be a thousand Tropane Avenues in the world and I would check every one if I had to. If that's what it would take to find Caron Berger.

I stare at the card and then close my eyes.

One deep breath in, counting to five, then one out.

Another.

I clear my mind of everything but those numbers and letters.

I imagine myself walking through the gate of my memory palace, the card stiff between my fingers. My footsteps are just a whisper on the cobblestone walkway that leads to the glass door of the mansion. When I enter, I turn immediately to the left where a carved ebony box rests on a marble table. I keep details about Legio Agni closest to the door.

I open the box and look at the image of the card in my mind. *1294 Tropane Avenue.* I lay the card inside the dark interior.

My focus is fused to those letters until the lid of the box closes, burning the details into memory. Then I turn and leave my palace.

When I open my eyes, I slide the physical card back into the wallet. I take Tristan's belongings down the winding metal staircase, descending into my Deconstruction Chamber to burn them.

The furnace is already running, its complicated hidden ductwork built by Samuel to merge seamlessly into the chimney of the fireplace on the main floor. I open the cast-iron door and toss all of Tristan's belongings into

it, along with the bedding and his clothes. Once that's closed up and raging with flame, I turn back to Tristan's cooling body. Blood seeps from his mouth and nose, his mandible and zygomatic bone clearly fractured from the impact of the fall. I briefly consider slicing off his skin so I can see what else is broken, how many cracks and fissures mar the ivory scaffolding beneath his flesh. But I'm tired, and I have an early start tomorrow if I'm going to visit Samuel. It will have to wait until his flesh dissolves.

I back away from the body and press the first in a row of buttons along the wall. The section of concrete where Tristan's body lies begins lowering into the floor. Once it bottoms out at a depth of 1.25 meters, I press the second button to begin filling the pool with heated 6 percent sodium hypochlorite solution. After pressing the third button, a layer of false flooring covers the pool which vents out far into the woods behind the house, monitored by a camera. I watch until the floor closes and seals, leaving only the faint smell of bleach behind as the quiet fans suck the gases away into the night.

With one last check of the cameras, I finish cleaning and remake the bed, and sleep soundly with the body dissolving in the pit below my dreams.

I wake the next morning before my alarm and start my routine, which first involves opening the random number-picker app on my phone to have it choose a number between one and five. It picks four.

Makeup.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I hate when it picks one or two, breakfast or workout. I don't enjoy deviating from those preferences in my routine. Samuel forced me to find a way to include the element of chance into my daily rituals when he saw me becoming too wedded to precise schedules. "Normal people don't do that," he said. "Adapt to that which is beyond your control. Be ruthlessly meticulous in killing. Learn to be flexible in living."

I think about those early years with Samuel as I progress through my treadmill and yoga workouts. I was a fledgling when we met in the desert. A first kill under my belt. No experience living in the real world. Not even a last name. I wonder if I would have kept killing if I'd survived the wilds, if he hadn't found me and taken me in. Probably. But I likely would have been caught.

I clear all those thoughts from my mind as I meditate, the one non-negotiable step in my morning routine. It's sometimes the only chance I have to look at my trophies, and I just collected a new one for my memory palace. It's the image of Tristan's jugular vein surging against the wire of my garrote, his pulse growing weaker and weaker until it stops. I place this image in a frame where it plays on a loop, and lay it on the middle shelf of my trophy cabinet, marveling at this collection that lives only in my mind.

I pick up my favorite trophy so far, the voice of a man named Nick Hutchinson whom I killed last year. I've stored it in a pink conch shell. I raise the shell to my ear and listen.

"Please...*please* no, I'll give you anything...anything you want, it's yours..." and then the gurgling rush of blood as I sliced his throat.

I enjoy the sound of his begging.

When I'm done reminiscing, I leave my memory palace and my meditation behind, then shower and have breakfast, a half grapefruit and an avocado on toast. I find a TikTok tutorial for smoky eyes to shake up my makeup routine. When I'm happy with the result, I get dressed in my usual uniform of jeans and a black sweater, and head out with my coffee to drive to Cedar Ridge to see Samuel.

Cedar Ridge is the best nursing home facility in Montana. Unsurprisingly, it's also the most expensive, not that it matters to Samuel or me. I didn't want Samuel to go to a nursing home, I wanted to care for him myself after he finished rehab for his stroke, but he refused. "My legacy can't be trapped by my broken body," he'd said when I tried to convince him to stay. "You have to be out in the world, free to hunt."

So even though he's fully regained the ability to talk and has good use of his left side, he's elected to stay at Cedar Ridge.

Really, I think because it's easy pickings to kill the other old folks. He literally gets away with murder with the least amount of effort required to cover his shuffling tracks. I doubt he even gets up from his wheelchair.

"Hello, Uncle Samuel," I say when I arrive in the common room, two cups of tea in hand from the sprawling kitchen. His watery blue eyes snap up from his book. He doesn't bother feigning any emotion when he sees me; there's no one to watch us as the nurses busy themselves with less mobile patients.

"Bria," he says gruffly as I kiss both his cheeks.

"Backgammon?"

“Yes.”

I set our tea down before wheeling Samuel over to the table by the window. I open the velvet-covered case, setting up the game between us. He’s always white, I’m always black. We each roll a single die, and he beats my three with a six, then starts the game.

“Four?” he asks, referring to my smoky eye.

“Yes. Do you like it?”

“Not particularly.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Samuel gives a little grunt. “How’s Kane?”

“The usual. Shedding white fur on all the furniture, bringing in mice. Living his best middle-aged feline life.”

“And school?”

“Good, I have a meeting with a potential thesis advisor tomorrow.”

“Who?”

“Dr. Kaplan.”

Samuel either already knows or has been researching all of my professors in the run-up to starting my doctorate at Berkshire University. He’s read their most prestigious papers, ripping several of them to shreds for weak analytical methods or shoddy statistical findings or reaching recommendations. But he nods at Dr. Kaplan’s name.

“Time?”

“Two thirty.”

Samuel nods again. I see some flashing lights filter through the white lace curtains of the common room window and turn as an ambulance pulls up to the front doors. The EMTs unload a gurney and wheel it into the lobby, heading toward the residents’ rooms. I pivot back to Samuel slowly, one eyebrow raised in question, and he gives me a noncommittal shrug.

We finish the rest of the first game in silence, which he wins.

“Are you going to tell me about it?” he asks as we set up the second game. I smile sweetly across the board and his eyes narrow.

“Whatever do you mean, Uncle Sammy?”

His scowl darkens as I smile and take a sip of my tea. He hates when I call him Sammy. But I won’t push him too far. I might wind up with poison in my tea the next time I come around.

“Ahh, my date,” I say. “Yes.” We each roll a single die and he wins again, starting the second match. “It was fine. Short. Underwhelming.”

Samuel snorts.

“Gary called, so it was over before I had much chance to play. But I was tired, so I didn’t really mind.” A spark lights beneath Samuel’s cataracts. “Gary the Garrote.” Samuel enjoys this game of speaking in code about killing. It’s one of the very few things he truly does enjoy, aside from doing the killing himself.

“What did Gary have to say?”

“Not much. It was a pretty one-sided conversation. Katie was on the line too.”

Samuel nods his head approvingly. “Katie Ketamine.” I know better than to subdue a man like Tristan on my own, even if his only exercise was playing golf twice a week while I work out a minimum of two hours a day. Samuel taught me well about mitigating risk.

“Any flooding in the basement?” he asks after a sip of tea.

“The usual. It’ll all be just fine. I’ll give it a few days.”

We exchange a dark little smile.

“Any future dates lined up?”

I shrug, moving my pieces on the board. “Maybe. I got a new number yesterday.”

Samuel eyes me, his gaze cataloging the details of my expressionless face. When he’s done searching my skin, he zeroes in on my eyes, burrowing into my brain like a twisting blade. “Don’t spread yourself too thin. You have time. You do too much, you’ll make mistakes.”

Samuel pauses the movement of his hand over the board. This is no game, no code. And I will not let him down. “Of course, Uncle. I’ll take my time. The semester is about to start up, and if Kaplan is willing to be my advisor, I’ll ensure that I prioritize my thesis work. I promise.”

He holds his hand aloft for another breath before giving a grunt of approval, knowing I’m good for my word. After all, I am not just his protégé. I owe my life to Samuel. I am his one moment of mercy. In one hundred and seventy-two killings, I am the only person he ever saved.

The gurney squeaks behind me. I twist around to watch the EMTs rolling out a body covered with a sheet.

I turn back to Samuel and he smiles.

One hundred and seventy-three.

### 3

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ELI

**Y**ou know that feeling where your instinct screams that you *need* to be somewhere, even though you have other plans?

That's exactly what's happening to me right now.

The plan was to go straight to my office to get this syllabus finished and posted. Several eager students have already emailed me about it. So much for enjoying the last moments of the summer, it seems. But that gut instinct drove me to Deja Brew, the campus coffee shop. I don't know if it's truly instinct as much as a desire to avoid my office until the last possible moment, but here we are.

"Hey, Dr. Kaplan," Marshall says as I approach the counter.

"Hey, Marshall. Last year?"

"Last year," he confirms with a proud grin, tapping the portafilter against the edge of the compost bin with a deft whack. His muscled arm flexes as he refills the filter. The guy doesn't have to work—he's here on a full athletics scholarship—but I think he enjoys the coffee shop and I respect the work ethic. "The usual, Kap?"

"Please."

Marshall works with efficiency, handing my Americano across the counter before we have a chance to delve into much small talk. I'm grateful for it. I like Marshall, but I'm not really in the mood for pleasantries today. As soon as I've paid, I find a table by the window and settle into my solitude.

I have that antsy feeling that comes with the start of a new year. Another crop of students. More faculty meetings. More politics and posturing. But

beyond that, it's the needling awareness that change is on my horizon. The upcoming break from academic life is a few short months away, and as much as it churns my guts with a swell of anxiety, there's excitement too. I'll be putting my skills to the hunt. All these years of studying, excelling, teaching, researching...the relentless work is finally culminating in a tangible result. Something good I can fix my name to. Something noble.

I just have to get through this semester first.

I open my laptop and join the Deja Brew Wi-Fi, then start looking through my emails. It seems like there are more students than usual who are eager to get ahead of reading assignments. I have five emails asking for reading lists, on top of the three I received earlier in the week. There's a new message from one persistent doctoral student, Sombria Brooks, a variation of the last four emails she's sent over the course of the summer. They've all been precise, direct. No ass-kissing, which I appreciate. The message from two weeks ago contained an abridged version of her dissertation proposal. Yesterday's message from Ms. Brooks was to confirm our meeting for today at two thirty, asking if I had questions she should prepare for. The truth is, I opened the document but didn't read any further than the summary. I already have a feeling the work will be solid, temptingly so, but there's no point becoming invested if I can't take her on as a student. Not if I'll be on sabbatical in four short months.

*Come on, Kaplan. Get your shit together. Read it before your meeting, at least. Don't be a dick.*

I sigh. That inner me with the tiny moral compass is right. I'm doing this student a disservice if I don't at least read the full proposal in advance of our meeting.

I navigate my mouse to click on the document when the bell dings above the door. It fades into the background of chatter and coffee shop indie music and the hiss of the espresso machine.

But what doesn't fade is a woman's clear, luxurious voice. It's like spiced liquor, full of heat and flavor.

*Oh.*

*That voice.*

My eyes shoot up and scan for the source. I look over to the cashier counter and there she is.

One glance at her traps the breath in my chest. Her face is in profile as she scrutinizes the menu above the counter. Her hair cascades over her

shoulders in loose waves the color of rich melted chocolate. Dark lashes, plump lips. Through her jeans and her snug-fitting black sweater I can see how slight she is, so slim she's waifish. I would break a woman like that in half. But the way she stands is forceful, as though her lithe form holds hidden strength.

She shifts her attention from the board and orders an espresso, a bottle of sparkling water, and a kale salad. Marshall rings her order in and I have to press my heels to the floor to keep from striding over and offering to buy her meal. *Don't be weird*, that voice with the tiny compass says. *She might be a student. Also, you're staring like a fucking creep.*

Shit. I am.

Not that I stop myself.

The rest of my brain, the feral part that likes to beat up the guy with the compass, is begging this woman to turn in my direction. I just want one glance of her full face. I want to put what I saw in profile into context. But the woman turns away as though she can hear my desperate thoughts. I watch as she leaves the counter with a table number and her water, her movement as graceful as a panther. She slides onto a chair several tables away, facing me but angled toward the window, and I catch myself before I audibly moan.

She's fucking *stunning*.

She sits with perfect, rigid posture, not letting her back touch the chair. The movement of her hands is smooth and graceful as she pulls a folder from her bag and lays it neatly in front of her, saving room for her salad to arrive. Her skin is luminous in the light of the window, a spread of freckles dotting her nose and lending a softness to the severity of her expression. There is strength in her beauty with her defined yet feminine jaw and her high cheekbones and her sharp stare that follows movement outside as though she might break through the glass to take her prey down. But it's more than just the harmony of her features. There's some kind of energy to her that pulls it all together. A gravity. A planet's worth of mysteries behind those piercing eyes.

*Stop. Staring. You. Fucking. Creep.*

My struggle to force my gaze away continues as Marshall delivers her salad and espresso. She gives him a polite smile, a flash of straight white teeth. Marshall asks if she wants anything else. He's lingering at the edge of her table, leaning a little toward her. Trying to give off signals. *Interested*



signals. *As if, Marshall. Keep dreaming, my man.* I wrestle a sudden urge to storm over there and pull him away even though he's technically just doing his job. Clearly, I don't need to worry about it. I can tell Marshall is about to turn on some of his lacrosse-star gym-bro charm when something intangible turns cold behind the woman's smile. She says a polite "no thank you" and then turns to her salad with finality.

I manage to tear my eyes from her as I bite down on my grin and focus my gaze on the screen. But all my attention is on her. I follow her movement in my peripheral vision. I steal subtle glances over my coffee cup. Her eyes are always on her food and her papers. It's almost as though she's actively avoiding me, and that's probably for the best. She's likely a student, and I won't go there. But I can't seem to stop myself from watching this woman who seems filled with some kind of rare, wild magic.

My effort to focus on the dissertation proposal is futile. I can't seem to concentrate on the content, even though the writing is concise and the topic is interesting. "Improving long-term memory recollection and reliability in expert witness testimony." I can understand why Ms. Brooks would want to meet given my expertise, and in any other circumstance I'd be delving into the detail of her proposal. But not with this sabbatical looming. And not with my thoughts entirely corrupted by the woman who sits across from me.

I look out the window and try to shepherd my scattered thoughts. It doesn't work. My attention keeps drifting to the table where the woman sits. The moment she walked in here and opened her mouth, it's as though she lured me into some kind of spell. I've been so bewitched by her that I only now realize my coffee has cooled to lukewarm and my screen has gone to sleep.

*Get your shit together, for fuck sakes.*

I check my watch, fighting her magnetic pull. It's 1:05 p.m. If I buckle down, I'll have enough time to finish the work I intended to do and struggle my way through this proposal in advance of my meeting with Ms. Brooks. Plenty of time if I get my ass in gear and *focus*. I should probably get up and go. I remind myself that this mystery woman might be a student.

*And if she's not?*

...I might never see her again.

The thought strikes me like a whip. I lift my gaze and it collides with hers.

*Shit.*

She's looking at me. Her eyes latch onto mine and do not let go. They're dark in color and intensity. There's a hidden world behind them, and that place looks full of secrets and shadows.

The woman arches a single eyebrow and lowers her mug, revealing a faint smirk. *Caught you*, it seems to say. She keeps hold of my gaze, unblinking, her motion as smooth as a predator as she lifts the mug back up to her lips and finishes her drink.

*Fucking hell. Who is this woman?*

A vibration on the table breaks the connection and I force my eyes down, even though it feels like fighting a tide. It's a message from Fletcher. Of course it is. Her cockblocking skills are legendary.

HEY KAP, ARE WE STILL ON FOR DINNER AND DRINKS LATER? YOU PICK THE PLACE, BUT YOU SHOULD KNOW I'M IN THE MOOD FOR SPINACH AND ARTICHOKE DIP. BLAKE HAS AN EMERGENCY AT THE HOSPITAL THAT SHE NEEDS TO TAKE CARE OF, SO IT'S JUST GOING TO BE US.

I'm tapping out a reply as I sense movement in my periphery and glance up. The woman has already gathered her things and stands, then strides toward the exit. *Damnit*, I'm going to lose her. If she's a student, I'll back off, pretend this never happened. But what if she's not? God, I really hope she's here at a college coffee shop for the amazing drinks or Marshall's reputation or the fucking kale, I don't care. Anything other than studying. I scramble to grab my things to chase after her.

*Her name. I need to know her name.*

I shove my belongings into my satchel and toss it over my shoulder with too much gusto in my desperation. It knocks my coffee cup over and onto the floor, shattering it into a hundred tiny shards. The remainder of my drink drips off the edge of the table and onto the jagged ceramic points. Marshall heads in my direction with a broom and some rags. I whisper a curse under my breath and pick up some of the largest pieces, slicing the tip of my finger in the process. *Of course. Because of all times for this to happen, it happens now.*

"You okay there, Kap?" Marshall asks as I grab a napkin and press it to the cut.

“Yeah, I’m sorry man. Really. I gotta run. I just realized I’m late,” I lie, my cheeks heating as the words tumble out of my mouth. I throw an extra twenty dollars on a dry section of the table and clap Marshall on the shoulder as I duck around him, leaving him to clean up my mess.

The bell strung above the door rings as I run out of the cafe. There’s a flicker of hope in my chest that I can catch up to her. I take in a ragged breath of mountain air, my heart hammering with anticipation. I scan my surroundings. *Where did she go? The parking lot? No. To the library? No. The dorms? No, thank fuck for that.* It’s as though she vanished into thin air.

Left.

Right.

And everywhere in between.

There was no sign of the beautiful woman with the mysterious eyes and the intoxicating voice.

She was real, right?

I pivot one last time and my shoulders drop as I accept the fact that she’s gone. Well, I don’t really *accept* it. It sucks. But there’s nothing I can do about it now except keep watch for her with every step I take. And if I do see her, I’ll push people out of my way if I have to. I’ll get to her and find out who she is.

I drag a hand down my face and fix the twisted strap of my bag before stalking off in the direction of the Psychology building. There’s no sign of the woman. I try to push her out of my mind as I make my way to my office on the third floor, sinking into my chair with a frustrated sigh. Once my computer is set up and I’m settled, I resolve to put all my focus where it’s meant to be. On this syllabus. On responding to reading list requests. I even manage to pull some lecture notes and slides together for the Introduction to Cognition class. By 2:10 p.m., I’m starting on the document from Ms. Brooks, trying again from the beginning, convinced I’ll have enough time in the twenty minutes before her appointment to pull together some high-level thoughts and recommendations for alternative advisors.

I’m wrong.

Three gentle knocks tap at my door. “Dr. Kaplan?”

That voice. *That* voice.

My eyes dart up to the open door, crashing into the gaze of the woman from the coffee shop. My heart triples in pace with a swirling mixture of apprehension and exhilaration.

“Yes,” I say, pushing my chair back, its legs grating against the floor. The woman steps toward the desk and extends her hand.

“I’m Bria Brooks.”

*Holy living fuck.*

I clear my throat and slip my hand into hers. She’s not a short woman, a bit taller than average, but also thinner than most women her height; her bones seem like they should be brittle. Her hands appear so delicate with those long, graceful fingers. Breakable. Fragile. But that’s not the case at all. Her grip is firm. Strong. Self-assured.

“You’re early,” I say, trying not to let the cringe that’s currently imploding inside me show on my face. I have apparently lost any kind of smooth game under the scrutiny of her gaze. She gives me the hint of a smile, her eyes lashing me with a bemused look.

“Yes. I apologize. I saw your door was open and thought you might like to get started now. If it’s inconvenient, I can leave.”

“No, no.” God no. But also yes. But mostly no. “Please, have a seat, Ms. Brooks.”

“Call me Bria.”

I motion to the chair which seems to draw Bria’s smile out, though not in a way that’s welcoming. It feels more like she finds the gesture redundant or simplistic. Like she’s smiling because I’m quaint.

“How was your espresso?” she asks, a glint of amusement in her eyes. “I prefer Uncommon Grounds on Wayworth, but the staff at Deja Brew are better.”

Bria smiles as though she’s just dropped a steak into a pool of piranhas. Is she calling me out for watching her? Is she baiting me into pledging my allegiance to Uncommon Grounds? I’m considering it already if it means I’ll run into her again. And is that comment about the staff a dig about Marshall? If it’s meant to stoke the flame of jealousy that licks up my spine, it’s working.

I swallow and sit back a little in my chair. Bria’s eyes haven’t left mine. “Grindstone is worth the extra distance. Their espresso is the best in town.”

Bria’s grin sparkles. I don’t know if I’ve just passed some kind of test or failed it miserably. “Duly noted,” she says, then opens her bag to withdraw her folder. “First, I want to thank you for meeting with me. I’m sure you’re busy with the start of the semester.”

A sense of dread climbs up my throat. “Sure. You’re welcome.”

And then without any other preamble, Bria launches into her research on memory and emotion in eyewitness accounts of long-term, chronic criminal activity, describing her work at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. She details her goals for improving interviewing techniques with more robust data on physiological responses to questioning. She outlines her hypothesis and the literature review and the unmet need for this research. I nod and try to keep my brain focused on the words coming out of her mouth and not the lips they pass between.

Bria's right, there is a need to refine interviewing techniques and obtain better quality data from witnesses for courtroom purposes. I know enough about this niche to keep up until Bria delves into the specifics of her proposal. I manage to successfully bullshit my way through providing her with a few suggestions about additional papers to consider for the comprehensive literature review she seems to have already started. At least, I *think* it's successful. Bria doesn't give much away in her responses, and I can't see what she writes as she takes a few notes. But then she starts discussing her proposed methodology, and I feel like I'm outside my own body. One half of me is sinking on the Titanic, and the other half is on a lifeboat watching it happen. She asks me questions. I try to answer. My answers are shit. Sometimes I even resort to deflection by turning the questions back on her. *What do YOU think would the best process for comparing the data points?* Christ. That cringe from earlier is back, swallowing all my organs as it's becoming increasingly obvious that I have not read her full proposal, and that I am a monumental dick.

I'm starting to sweat. Literally. First, I was bewitched by this woman, but I can't do anything about it because she's a student and I won't go there. Even if she's not my student or if she's in another department entirely. Doesn't matter. It's a rule I've set for myself and I won't break it. I rarely even date within the city, though for a shot with her I would have stomped on that rule and burned it. But none of that would matter anyway, because I am absolutely tanking this meeting with her.

And I swear that she knows it.

The look in her eyes grows colder by the minute. The temperature of the room feels like an inferno except for where her eyes meet mine. It's like she's frozen her gaze onto mine and crystals of ice are splintering into my soul.

She stops abruptly.

Mid-sentence. Just *stops*.

Her head tilts. Her expression turns blank. There's no amusement or dismay or irritation. Just an eerie void that draws me in.

Bria takes a sharp breath. Her voice maintains that same rich tone that I've been hearing for the last twenty minutes, but the lack of emotion on her face is menacing. "What did you think about my idea to partner with Dr. Li regarding measures of respiratory and cardiovascular activity during interviews? Do you think the attempt to differentiate emotional response to long-term memories versus short-term memories in eyewitness testimony would be a valuable element to the project?"

I blink. A long, slow, resigned blink.

I suspect she might be baiting me into a trap. I'd be willing to bet money that Dr. Li isn't mentioned anywhere in her proposal. That would be the proof she needs that I haven't read her document at all. What she would do about it, I have no idea. There's not much she *could* do, except to make me feel like even more of an idiot than I already am. Granted, that would be fair. I'm the one that put myself here, not her.

I sigh. Time to get this over with. It's not as though I could ever have a chance with this woman anyway, especially not now. Just rip the Band-Aid off. "Look, Ms. Brooks—"

"Bria."

"*Bria*. It all sounds like great work—" her eyes narrow, "and I can see the need for improvements in not only interviewing techniques, but obtaining quantitative data from eyewitnesses across different crime profiles. But—"

"How would you know if it's great work, Dr. Kaplan? You never read it."

Holy shit. She actually went there. Straight for the jugular.

Every muscle in my body seems to harden into plates of armor. There's no room for bullshitting now. "You're correct."

"Why?"

"I'm going on sabbatical. It was just recently approved. It's not been made public."

"Forgive me, Dr. Kaplan, but that's not a reason why." We stare at one another for a heartbeat too long as she waits for me to elaborate. I don't. I *can't*. "You could still provide advisory support if you wanted to. You agreed that work needs to be done in quantitative analysis of eyewitness

responses to interview questions, and yet you did not bother to read further than the summary of my proposal, assuming you even made it that far. That leads me to conclude that something within my summary was insufficient. Was it my methodology?"

"No, Bria. Nothing like that."

Bria's jaw hardens. Her eyes grow so dark and foreboding that hell might be visible in their depths. "*Nothing like that,*" she repeats.

How do I tell her anything even resembling the truth? There's nothing I can say. I need to place all my focus on Legio Agni. I need to keep my sights on Caron Berger. It's taken almost two years of work to get this close to him. The patterning, the criminal profiling, the hours and hours spent following the trail of a ghost... No amount of research in eyewitness testimony and interviewing techniques is going to get me closer than I am now to dismantling Caron's empire.

"I'm sorry, Bria."

She stands, as fluid and lethal as a beast of the jungle. "Don't be."

I expect her to say something further. Maybe something cutting, and I would deserve it, to be honest. But she doesn't. She just fixes her unblinking eyes to me as she pulls the strap of her bag up her arm and settles it on her shoulder. I'd like to chalk the boldness of her reaction up to being entitled. There are many students that feel like they're deserving of something they didn't earn, after all. But that's not what this is. She believes in her work. It might be great work that deserves more attention than the platitudes I've given her. And she knows I failed her by not giving her proposal the attention it deserves, whether or not I was willing to support it moving forward.

*It's for the best.*

Bria Brooks takes a step back from the desk. Her eyes stay fused to mine for one more step, and then she turns her back to me and leaves the office without another word. A breath that was caged in my lungs filters through my pursed lips. It feels like a tiger has just left the room, taking all of its deadly energy with it down the hall.

*Well. You really fucked that, didn't you, Kaplan.*

It's for the best.

...I think.

**F**ucking prick.

Kaplan didn't even bother to actually *read* my work. At least not the full document, that's for sure. He admitted it when I cornered him. He was able to follow along for the first few minutes of my discussion, so I'm guessing he read the summary, but nothing further than that.

Why, though? Did he see something I couldn't? Was he just too much of a coward to tell me? Did I miss something glaring? Is my methodological approach off but I'm too close to my work to see it?

And it's not just that.

I've been sporadically watching Kaplan for a few weeks. I recognized him in the window as I was about to pass Deja Brew. I almost kept going, but I wanted to get closer before we met in his office. Just a glance.

But with that first close look as I entered the cafe, I found that I wanted to stay.

I managed to avoid meeting Kaplan's gaze, even though I felt it latch onto me. I still stole glances when I could. A heated, dark energy seemed to roll from his wide shoulders in waves, pulling me in. And it didn't seem like I was the only one affected. Kaplan tried to focus on his work but he struggled, running his hand through his artfully disheveled dark brown hair, his muscles bunching beneath his shirt. He seemed tense. Frustrated.

And when I finally let our gazes collide, he seemed *interested*.

I was so sure of it. There was a humming current in the air between us, a vibration. Desire. But something darker, too. It felt like another predator was there in my midst, but one with a different kind of hunger to sate.



So why was he so dismissive when we finally met? Did I read everything wrong? When he got a closer look, could he see behind my mask? That's what he does, after all. Excavates the souls of people like me. Did he see darkness there with just a glance?

These unanswered questions burn in my mind like embers as I drive home. It takes every ounce of self-control I have to make it into the house and onto my treadmill without combusting in a red mist of rage. I skip the warm-up and just start running.

A 06:30 minute mile.

06:15.

06:00.

I'm pounding out a 05:10 pace, slick with sweat, when I hear the driveway alarm. I hit the emergency stop on the treadmill and rush to the security tablet on the wall, keying in my password and bringing up the camera.

Amy. My cleaner.

*Fuck.*

In my fit of rage at Kaplan's dismissal, I forgot she'd changed times to come in the afternoon. And I'm not in the mood to see anyone right now. For their safety and mine.

I grab a towel and head downstairs to the front door just as Amy walks through.

"Hi, Bria!" she says in her singsong, cheery voice as she turns and disarms the security system. I want to snap her neck and strip out her vocal cords with my bare hands.

"Hello, Amy."

"Getting an extra workout in?"

My molars grind together as I force a smile. "Yep."

Amy bustles past me with her supplies, blowing a lock of over-bleached hair from her eyes as she sets them down beside the kitchen island. Kane saunters in from the living room to rub against her legs. She coos in a baby voice to the cat who relishes every moment of the affection. I fold my hands into fists when she calls him "Sir Kitty Candy Kane."

I could grab a knife from the kitchen. Or the steel throwing needles hidden in the living room. Or the Glock 43 from the closet; shoot out her kneecaps. It would be so easy. So easy to kill and feed this fury. To feel the euphoric release of a life ebbing away by my hand.

“I’m going out for a run,” I announce, heading toward my bedroom to change into dry gear.

“Be careful out there, Bria,” Amy says. The worry in her voice is so genuine that it forces my feet to a halt. “It’ll be dark soon.”

I scowl at my watch. “It’s only four thirty.”

“I know, but I worry about you. I don’t want you to get hurt. You don’t know what kind of weirdos are out there in the shadows.”

I look at her over my shoulder, some of that scratching rage calming, just a little. She knows a lot about weirdos in the dark. And I know there are just as many in the bright desert sun as there are in the cool Montana night. “I’ll be careful. Thank you, Amy.”

She smiles, the worry still heavy in her weathered skin. The wrinkles of her hard early life make her look older than she really is. I walk away toward the bedroom, get changed, and leave without another word.

I sprint down the driveway and the gates open as I draw near, sliding back into place once I’ve passed into the empty street. There are few cars and no pedestrians, just me and my music which I keep low enough to hear my surroundings. I take a few turns and head in the direction of Berkshire’s campus.

It takes me thirty minutes to work my way there. I twist through the sprawling grounds, narrowly avoiding the few students who have returned to get a jump on the next semester. I exit the campus, crossing a few streets until I arrive at Bloomfield, the condo looming ahead like a fortress of concrete and glass.

When I arrive, I key myself in with my fob and then take the elevator to the eleventh floor. I watch my reflection in the mirrored walls as I ascend. Sweat dots my skin, plastering wisps of hair to my forehead. There’s no expression on my face. Just a mask of skin and muscle that hides the rage still boiling deep within.

The elevator dings and the door opens. I turn right and head down the empty hall to apartment 1142.

When I unlock and enter, everything is just how I left it. Well-hidden. Clean. Simple. It’s a bland two-bedroom condo facing the campus and the mountains beyond, and it suits my needs well. There are too many people in the building for my sporadic comings and goings to be noticeable, but I’ve still made sure to set the lights, music, and television to come on at different times. The hidden cameras and the security system are only paired with my

computer in my secret room at the main house. The system will alert my phone if an alarm is triggered, but otherwise I keep everything separate. The fewer links between me and my lairs, the better.

After a cursory glance at the space, I head to the shower. As soon as I'm changed into fresh clothes and a blonde wig, I gather a few snacks and make a brief tour through the hidden drawers in the furniture. Before an hour is up, I'm heading back to the elevators, descending to the underground parking levels.

Of the three vehicles I have here, I take the most nondescript option, a silver Honda Accord. I leave the parking garage, heading for the city limits, for a dead-end dirt road where I can change my license plate without the threat of onlookers. It seems like overkill, doesn't it? Wearing a wig, switching plates on a deserted road, maintaining a second apartment...but Samuel taught me early on that there's no such thing as too much preparation.

*There is no overkill, his voice reminds me, drifting around my mind like a desert wind. There is only kill, or die. Death need not be your heart stopping. It can be the loss of music. Or memory. Or freedom. Whatever you fear most, that is death. So kill, Bria. Kill every risk that would kill you first. Only then can you enjoy the death that is suffered by your hand.*

And I will. I will enjoy it very much.

*I'm coming for you, Caron Berger. One little lamb at a time.*

I push my memories and desires into the depths of my heart, and then I drive back into the city, heading for the business park on the outskirts of town, closing in on 1294 Tropane Avenue.

The business park is pristine, the well-spaced trees following the curving road past glass and steel buildings and sculpted waterways. A few pedestrians follow the wide sidewalks in their suits and skirts and heels, none of them paying any attention to my unremarkable car as I drift through their domain. The various buildings are host to an array of businesses, from the headquarters for a biotech company to an advertising agency to a law firm, and numerous others, all laid out in clean, sweeping lines of modern architecture.

When I arrive at 1294 Tropane, there's very little to glean from the company sign at the entrance to the building. "Praetorian."

Nothing else. Just that single word. Not even anything illuminating in the logo design. Just the letters in forward-leaning silver blocks.

*Cave Praetorianos*, I hear in my Latin tutor's deep, resonant voice.  
*Beware the Praetorian Guard.*

I keep going past the building and follow the curving road, making a full loop around the business park only to come back again. I turn into the parking lot for the business across the street, an architecture firm, parking close to the road where the front entrance of the Praetorian building is visible through the branches of the trimmed bushes.

I rest my binoculars on my lap. And then I wait.

And wait.

I break out my snacks and wait some more.

Every time the door opens, which is not often, I watch through the binoculars, memorizing faces. A tall, broad-shouldered man with short blond hair and a scar through his brow. A petite woman with a sleek black bob, her dark almond eyes casting a sharp glance over her surroundings as she walks to her car. A few more people here and there, none of them familiar.

And then suddenly, a jackpot.

I sit forward a little in my seat, riveted as Cynthia Nordstrom leaves the building. Caron's second-in-command, his only public representation. His most devoted little lamb. She's a tricky little creature at that. She has a tendency to disappear. My mouth salivates at the thought of all the things I could do with her. I can almost feel Caron's rage at the loss, without ever having seen his face.

Cynthia walks with a middle-aged man with dark ebony skin, his perfectly tailored suit impeccable, the quality obvious even from a distance. Maybe the CEO of whatever Praetorian is. He exudes that kind of air as they carry on an intense discussion on their walk toward the parked cars. Two men follow several steps behind. Their gazes shift and roam, their eyes restless. I keep my binoculars trained on the group as I ask Siri to place a call.

Samuel picks up on the second ring.

"Bria."

"Uncle."

"How are you?"

I don't answer that question. If I do, it's the clue that something is wrong. It's part of our phone code. *Great?* I'm safe but I'm with someone.

*Headache?* Law enforcement trouble. *Fine?* Leave everything and run. *Been better?* Someone's trying to kill me.

Instead, I get straight to the point.

"I think I've got something. Praetorian. Possibly a security firm. Cynthia Nordstrom is exiting the premises now with someone important."

"Leave it with me."

Samuel hangs up just as Cynthia slides into the back seat of a blacked-out BMW sedan. One of the two men who had been trailing behind her gets into the driver's side and I lower my binoculars, watching as they drive away down the curving road. The CEO man leaves with the other bodyguard in a similar vehicle, heading in the opposite direction.

Even though I'm itching to follow Cynthia, I know I can't. If I'm right and this is a professional security firm, there's a strong chance I would be spotted. They would lead me all over the city before they'd ever bring her to a place where I could get close.

I wait for twelve minutes, and then I drive to my deserted road, switch my plates, and head back to the condo.

When I'm back inside my condo, I get changed and take some time to meditate on the living room floor and place the key details of my observations in safe places within my memory palace. I spend a little time in this world I've created, visualizing my trophies, picking up my conch shell to listen to Nick Hutchinson's voice, his pleas forever answered by the snick of my blade. But a bubbling rage still simmers beneath my skin, tempering my enjoyment of the memory.

What did I miss? Why would Kaplan dismiss my work like he did?

He must have a reason beyond his sabbatical. If my project was as good as I thought, he would have been willing to support me in some capacity, despite his absence. He and I both know a sabbatical doesn't last forever. I'm sure he'll be back well before my doctorate is finished.

I open my eyes, frustrated at myself for losing focus.

The only thing I can do now is keep running.

There's no one in the hallway or the elevator as I exit the condo, heading back in the direction of the campus. But instead of crossing the road to join the pathway that snakes through the quad, I veer left, crisscrossing a few quiet streets until I'm heading down Temperance, running beneath the outstretched arms of the solemn elm trees that line the wide stretch of asphalt. This is where many of the faculty live, in older

houses of character that show their prestige with their manicured gardens or semi-circular driveways or gaudy granite lawn ornaments that are supposed to be “art.”

My steps slow until I’m walking. There are no other pedestrians. The moon is no more than a sliver in the blanket of night.

Motion flickers ahead and I slow to a stop. The window of a car door catches the lamplight as it opens. I pull out my AirPods and pocket them, standing in the shadow of a tree.

“...don’t think he’ll be too happy that I didn’t bring treats,” a woman’s voice says. It’s rich and warm with affection.

“Duke? Are you kidding? He’ll be thrilled to see you.” It’s Kaplan. He steps out of the passenger seat of a Volvo C40 and closes the door. He doesn’t notice me down the sidewalk in the dark. I’m standing perfectly still and his attention is focused on the woman I can’t see, her body obscured by a thick elm.

Kaplan digs in the pocket of his tweed jacket as he waits for the woman. Fucking *tweed*. I wonder if he does it to be ironic, or if he’s really just that sad. A thirty-one-year-old professor in a tweed jacket and Converse. I fold my hand into a fist as I imagine ripping the jacket off his broad shoulders and strangling him with the arms, winding them tight around his throat. But then, inexplicably, the vision changes. I see those tweed sleeves tying him to a bedpost as I ride his cock and he screams my name. An unwelcome warmth spreads through my core and dampens the apex of my thighs. “Besides,” he says, snapping me out of my daydream as the sound of the woman’s footsteps fills the space between us, “I always have extra treats.”

A beautiful woman steps into view, long, golden-blond hair cascading past her shoulders to the center of her back in scrolling waves. I see her bright red lipstick in profile beneath the lamplight as her smile stretches and she takes the offered dog biscuits. “You’re such a softie, Kap. I bet you give dog treats out to every mutt you see. I’m surprised you have any left for Duke at the end of the day.”

“That’s why I have an extra stash at the front door,” Kaplan says, and the blonde woman tilts her head back and laughs.

The two walk toward an arts-and-crafts era bungalow with pale yellow plaster and Roman-style roof tiles in a shade of rich green—not that I can appreciate those colors in the dark. But I’ve seen them numerous times. This is Dr. Kaplan’s house, after all. I’ve run and driven past it before. I’m

not interested in looking at it now, however. All I want to do is run. Run and snuff out this new burning ember that's scorching my heart. Some kind of fury I've never felt. Maybe the failure from today has triggered a deeper darkness within me. It could become fuel, or I could turn to ash beneath the flame.

I put my headphones in and double back, heading home as fast as my legs and lungs will take me.

There's no hiding anything from Kathryn Fletcher.

I can tell she wants to ask what's bothering me the entire time we stop at my house. We let Duke out and Fletch plays with him as I get changed. Her need to pepper me with questions is palpable, the energy of it permeating my house like the scent of a cooking meal. But she has the good grace to leave it alone, at least until we Uber to The Monarch Restaurant and I have a drink in my hand.

"So are you gonna tell me about your shitty day, Kap? Or are you just going to keep shooting murderous looks at the food all night?" Fletch asks as she scrapes a piece of torn sourdough through the artichoke dip.

I groan, dragging my hand down my face, scratching the stubble on my cheek. My meeting with Bria has been gnawing at my guts like a trapped rat, and I'm anxious to let it out. "I did something dumb."

Fletch snorts a laugh. "Shocker. The stupidest smart man I know did something stupid. This is about a woman, I presume?"

"Yes..."

"You met someone new?"

"Kind of."

"And then you fucked it up."

"Definitely."

Fletch sighs, her eyebrows climbing before she focuses on tearing another strip of sourdough from the loaf. "You've always called me the most epic cockblocker on the planet, but it's really *you*. You block your own cock. Any woman that has even the faintest whiff of relationship material



and *poof*, you do something monumentally stupid to push her away so you can stick your dick into someone who is either the antithesis of permanent or downright fucking crazy.” Fletch gives her head a solemn shake and reaches across the table to pat my hand. “I’m afraid I have terrible news, Kap. You have ‘Self-Sabotaging Dick Disorder.’”

“Jesus Christ. Not pulling any punches today, are you?”

“Nope. Punching is the only viable treatment regimen with the severity of your disorder. Blake will back me up. She’s seen a few cases at the hospital. None as bad as yours, though. Maybe she can use you as a case study.”

A huff of a laugh passes my lips, but it does nothing to dispel the guilt and embarrassment and dismay that lie in a tangled knot at the center of my chest. I gulp down a long sip of beer and tear off a strip of sourdough, pushing it through the dip even though I’m suddenly not so hungry. “I might deserve a few punches. It was a multifaceted fuckup.”

“How so?”

“I went to Deja Brew to work on a few things before going to my office for a meeting with a prospective doctoral student. I’d read the summary of her proposal and it seemed like it would be solid work, but I’d been procrastinating from reading the whole thing due to the sabbatical. I guess partly I didn’t want to get too invested, you know?”

Fletcher shrugs. I can tell she doesn’t think it’s a good enough explanation, but she doesn’t call me out. “Okay. So did you read it?”

“No.” Fletcher sighs and opens her mouth to say something, but I keep going. “I was going to, but then this woman came in—”

“Fucking hell, Kaplan. What are you, twelve?”

“—and something about her was just captivating. I couldn’t focus. I was...highly unproductive.”

“Shocker.”

“When I decided to talk to her, she vanished.”

“She’s a magician?”

I groan and run my hand through my hair. “Well, she certainly reappeared in an unlikely place. My office.”

Fletch guffaws, her head tilting back with delight. “She was your appointment? The one whose proposal you didn’t read?”

“Yeah...” I trail off, looking down into the dip as though I can divine some spell from the wilted leaves of warm spinach to alleviate this terrible

feeling. “It did not go well. She called me out.”

“As she should. I love her already. Did you ask her on a date?”

“Did you hear the words that just came out of my mouth, Fletcher? The part where I said it didn’t go well, that was not an exaggeration,” I say, then try to drown the rising guilt by draining the rest of my beer. It doesn’t work. “Besides, she’s a student.”

“But not *your* student,” Fletcher says, her voice rich with amusement. She loves getting into an argument with me about women. She’s the pushy sister I never had, and she scents out my turmoil like a bloodhound.

“I am not hooking up with a student. *Any* student. I don’t care what department they’re in. And she’s in ours.”

“You won’t even be here in a few months.”

“It’s not like I’m leaving forever, Fletch. I’ll be back before she’s finished her program.”

Fletcher shakes her head and sits back, pushing the decimated artichoke dip to the edge of the table as our server whirls past in a flurry of motion, dropping another two pints of Bozeman Hopzone IPA in front of us before she drifts away with the plate. I raise the glass to my lips and double my efforts with the booze. The knot in my chest will dissolve eventually... right?

“If you’re worried about a nasty breakup resulting in the reputation of “Kinky Kaplan” spreading around campus, don’t be.”

Beer catches in my throat and shoots back up my nose. I hack a cough into a napkin as Fletcher cackles. “What the *fuck*?”

“What? It’s not that hard to figure out. There’s gotta be some reason you hardly ever date women in the same city as you, let alone the same campus,” Fletcher says with a shrug. Her eyes spark with delight as I continue to cough and sputter. “Plus I totally saw your bed last week when you got me to take Duke out for a walk.”

“*Fletcher.*”

“There’s nothing wrong with you for liking things a little spicy, Kap.”

“Jesus *Christ* this is not happening to me,” I moan, dropping my head into my hands as my cheeks burn. When I straighten, I gesture wildly between us. “This? This conversation right here? This is exactly why I follow my own rules.”

“You are so uptight about the most whack stuff, and so not uptight about other shit. How’s the street racing going by the way? Acquired any new

bikes lately? I'll warn Blake if so, for the inevitable day when someone scrapes you off the pavement and brings you in for her to put back together."

"Don't start with the bikes, for the love of God. And regarding Bria, it's not just for my protection. It's for hers, too." This is where the full impact of my error and piss-poor judgment really punches me in the guts. "After she left, I read her full proposal. It's good, Fletcher. It's really fucking good. How would it look for her if she was dating some professor in her own department? The work wouldn't stand on its own and you know it. But it should."

Fletcher taps her finger on the edge of her glass, her gaze drifting across the room as she thinks about it. She knows this is true. Perception can derail an academic career as quickly as shitty data or substandard work.

"And now we arrive at that point in the evening where I ask for a favor," I say. Fletcher's eyes dart to mine. Her head tilts as she pins me with a glare.

"I bet I'm going to love this," she replies with heavy sarcasm.

"Read the proposal. Consider taking on the student."

Fletcher gives a dark laugh that has a bitter edge before taking a sip of her beer. "You think you're going to feel like any less of a shitbag by getting me to take her on?"

"No. This is purely from an academic standpoint. I know it wasn't professional of me to not look at her work thoroughly when I should have. But when I did... I'm not kidding when I said it's good. It's exceptional. And I hate the thought of her turning to someone like Dr. Wells instead. If she's with you, she'll get the support she needs."

Fletcher gives me a long, flat stare, her nails tapping metronomically against the glass. She huffs an irritated sigh. "Fine. Send it to me. If I like what I see, I'll take her. But you'll owe me. Like, for real. A tangible owing, not a fake, meaningless owing."

My eyes narrow as hers seem to sparkle with devious plans. The server drops off our mains and still we regard one another with suspicion and evil intent. "Owe you what, exactly? An organ?"

"Pfft no. Yours are too steeped in alcohol. Something reasonable of my choosing."

I snort a laugh, waving my fork in Fletcher's direction before cutting into my steak. "You? Reasonable?"

“That’s right, my friend. And when I come collecting, you shall pay. As long as her work is as good as you say it is.”

“It is,” I say with a tinge of resignation coloring the flavor of meat on my tongue. “It’s better.”

Fletcher and I move to other topics, but I still feel the hooks of this day embedded beneath my skin. I didn’t just let my eagerness for a break from academia get the better of me. I wasn’t just unprofessional, leaving an eager and capable student without the time, focus, and attention they deserved. Fletch is right. I self-sabotaged, and I can’t help feeling like I’ve hurt someone deeply in the process. And that person isn’t me.

When the meal is done and we’re both sufficiently buzzed, we Uber to our respective homes, Fletch to a wife who’s as brilliant and forthright as she is, and me to a dog and a dark house. That’s never bothered me before. Duke is great company, and when I need more, I find it. Preferably from far away. Definitely not on the campus. Even if it feels like I’m closing my eyes to the aurora borealis, or burying gems beneath the sand. I’ve never felt like this before, particularly not from a brief encounter in a coffee shop or an abysmal meeting that I totally fucked up.

I pour myself a glass of bourbon and sit in my office, starting up my laptop. I send Bria Brooks’ proposal to Fletcher and then spend some time hunting Ms. Brooks on the internet. Dean’s list student here at Berkshire for her bachelor’s degree. Contributions to several papers while completing her masters degree in New York. No social media accounts. Only a grainy photo from a conference where she presented a poster, her eyes locked to something to her left, her expression stoic. There’s nothing that tells me about who Bria Brooks really is aside from being a dedicated student.

I’m about to shut my computer down about an hour and two drinks later when an email comes through from Fletcher.

KAP:

HOLY SHIT. THIS IS PROMISING. SET IT UP ASAP BEFORE WELLS GETS HOLD OF IT. I WANT TO TALK TO HER.

-FLETCH

PS YOU’RE AN IDIOT, BUT I STILL LOVE YOU ANYWAY.

PPS PULL YOUR HEAD OUT OF YOUR ASS AND ASK HER ON A DATE.

PPPS YOU OWE ME.

I respond and file the email, and then I shut the laptop down, finishing the dregs of my drink. When I finally make it into bed, I stare at the ceiling for what seems like hours, rolling those final moments with Bria through my mind like driftwood caught in a relentless tide.

The next day passes in a bit of a blur. I head to Deja Brew, trying to convince myself I'm not hoping to see Bria there again. That would be a lie, of course. I wonder more than once if I should have gone to Uncommon Grounds or Grindstone, but I push those thoughts down as fast as they bubble up. While in the coffee shop, I send Bria an email, apologizing for my lack of professionalism during our meeting and noting that Fletch would like to meet her. By the end of an agonizingly long day, there is still no response.

The following day, I wake with a feeling akin to dread infusing my veins. Dread that Bria will turn to Dr. Wells, or even that she'll find a way to transfer universities, somehow vanishing as quickly as she did two days ago. That thought lodges a block of ice in my guts, and when there's still no reply from Bria in my inbox, I decide to hunt her down and do what I should have done yesterday. Speak to her in person.

I find her in her office, a space on the fourth floor that she shares with two other new students, their names listed on sliding placards next to the door.

*Tida Ng.*

*David Campbell.*

*Sombria Brooks.*

The door is ajar. Bria is facing away from me, writing on a notepad. Her attention flits between her screen and her pen. Further in the room is another student, her back also to me, her dark hair piled high on her head and the ball of curls stuffed beneath the band of her headphones. Her head nods to a beat I can't hear.

I knock on the door. Neither woman moves.

I step into the room and say Bria's name. She still doesn't respond.

"Ms. Brooks," I repeat, and my fingertips graze her shoulder blade.

Bria erupts from the chair as though electrocuted.

I take a long step back as Bria spins, knocking over the chair with a shocking crash of sound. Her arm follows her motion, her palm flat, her finger pressed tight together like she's about to drive the heel of her hand into my nose. She seems to register it's me and her hand relaxes just a little,

the other coming up to join it as though imploring me to stay back. Her expression is blank except for her eyes. The look she gives me is nothing short of lethal.

“What the *hell*,” the other woman, presumably Tida, hisses from across the room as she wrenches her headphones down. Her gaze bounces between Bria and me and she stands, walking over to join Bria’s side. She’s a full foot shorter than Bria but pins me with a fierce, combative glare.

“I’m sorry, *I’m sorry*,” I say, holding my palms open toward them both, my gesture mirroring Bria’s. I lower my hands and Bria pulls out her AirPods, her brows drawing together as she assesses me with a scrutinous sweep of her eyes.

My chest constricts when I really take her in.

Bria is still stunning, with her faint freckles dusting her nose. Those dark eyes are still sharp, her plump lips still beckoning me for a taste. But she looks exhausted. Her sun-kissed skin has lost its radiance and the dark circles inhabit the flesh beneath her thick lashes.

*This is your fault, you dickhead.*

Judging by the murderous gleam in her eyes, I’m willing to guess that thought doesn’t just rattle in my head, but Bria’s as well.

I bend to pick up the wayward chair before extending a hand to Tida. “I’m Dr. Kaplan.”

The small woman’s glare softens but doesn’t dissolve. “Tida Ng.”

“Pleased to meet you, Tida.” I offer a weak smile and then turn the full force of my attention to Bria. “Do you have a moment?”

It looks as though the word “no” climbs up her throat, but she swallows and it comes out as “yes.”

The two women glance at one another, Tida looking at Bria in a silent question. Bria smiles and that seems to be enough to satisfy Tida, though she still squeezes Bria’s arm and shoots me a final, wary look before returning to her desk and settling her headphones over her ears. When I turn my attention back to Ms. Brooks, she darts her eyes toward a free chair and I pull it closer to her desk.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Bria shifts in her seat as though my phantom touch lingers uncomfortably on her skin. She glances down, her expression troubled for just a fleeting blink, and then she’s focused on me once more.

“What can I do for you, Dr. Kaplan?” she asks, even though I’m quite sure she already knows what I’m going to say.

I lean forward, resting my forearms on my knees, lacing my fingers together. My brows draw together as I take in her reserved stoicism. “First, I wanted to apologize in person for not reading your full proposal. I’m sorry for not being adequately prepared and for wasting your time the other day.”

I’m not sure what I expect her to say to this. I’ve already seen enough of her to know she won’t mince words. She’s not the type to give a spineless “that’s okay, professor. I understand.” Possibly there will be an “I accept your apology,” which at least acknowledges my wrongdoing.

But nothing comes.

The silent pause stretches on. I resist the urge to fill it. Bria doesn’t move, her expression doesn’t change. It takes me that long moment to realize that I didn’t actually respond to her statement, *what can she do for me*. Bria gives no shits about my apology, and she has no desire to waste words on it.

I actually find that...refreshing. She’s unlike anyone else. So unique. She must seem off-putting to many, when she wants it to be. Or maybe she makes the effort to put on a mask for most people, like Tida, who shoots the occasional worried glance at Bria over her shoulder. But I get the feeling she’s not hiding who she is from me. She’s not trying to disguise the force of dark magic by wrapping herself in pretty layers.

Bria is testing me. I think she wants to see if I will keep up. And she knows what she’s worth. What she’s owed from me.

“Did you receive my email?” I ask.

“Yes, I did,” she says. It looks like it’s a struggle to grit out the next two words. “Thank you.”

“Dr. Fletcher is new to the department. Her primary focus is in parasocial interaction and cultish behavior, but she has significant experience in memory as well, mostly related to the effect of digital media on memory recall. She’s read your proposal and can see many synergies with her recent work in patterns of criminality among charismatic authorities based on witness testimony. She has some free time to meet tomorrow afternoon. Are you available?”

Bria’s eyes narrow a fraction, the only minute change in her placid yet unsettling expression. Her head drops a few degrees to the right and she stares into me as though drilling right into my brain.

“I have a meeting with Dr. Wells tomorrow,” she says. My heart plummets into my guts. Dr. Wells would be the absolute worst choice for an advisor. He’s about three heartbeats away from either retirement or death, and he gives few shits about quality anymore. He’s a dinosaur in a modern world, clinging to research from thirty years ago and the height of his career. “Other doors are open, Dr. Kaplan.”

I swallow, my throat drying as though I’ve eaten ash. My eyes dart toward Tida before I lean a little closer to Bria. “Please, Bria,” I whisper. “Not Wells. Your work will never get anywhere if you go with him. Just meet with Dr. Fletcher. Let her convince you.”

And before I can stop myself, I reach out and touch her.

My fingertips graze her delicate wrist. This can’t be appropriate, not with the way the touch sets off a flurry of gooseflesh skittering up my arm, nor the way my cock hardens at the mere whisper of her skin beneath mine. I quickly withdraw my hand but Bria doesn’t move, her eyes following the motion before meeting mine again.

Bria’s eyes bore into mine, but this time she gives something away. I can see it in the flicker of movement in her brows and the way her hand folds into a fist. It’s not anger. It’s confusion. “All right,” she finally says. My heart pulls itself out of my intestines and starts beating again. “I will send her an email and schedule something for tomorrow afternoon.”

“Great. I’ll let her know you’ll be in touch.”

I keep hold of Bria’s gaze for a moment longer and then stand, and she does the same. Somehow it feels too close, yet not close enough. But it has to be. That one simple touch, my fingertips on her bare wrist, there can never be more than that.

I back away toward the door, our gazes still locked together until I reach the threshold and force my feet down the hall.

I need to keep my eyes on my horizon, a place where this woman will never fit, no matter how enigmatic or intriguing she is. And I need to focus on my work now, my *future*, satisfied with the knowledge that I’ve set a broken bone.



“**Y**our girl is brilliant. She also hates me,” Fletcher says as she enters my office and drops into one of the two chairs on the other side of the desk. I log out of the secure files on Caron Berger and Legio Agni, then shift my focus to my best friend and the biggest pain in my ass. Fletcher picks up a bobblehead of soccer player Harry Kane. Her nose wrinkles as she taps Harry on the forehead and his head wobbles. “What is this?”

“A bobblehead.”

“I see that, dick-for-brains. But *why*?”

“It’s a conversation starter.”

“Is it though? It’s ugly as fuck.”

“Well, we’re talking about it, aren’t we?”

“Actually, no. We’re talking about your girl hating me.”

“First of all, Fletcher, she is not my girl,” I say. Fletcher gives a derisive snort and I yank Harry Kane from her fingers. “Secondly, she hates my guts too. Probably more than she hates yours.”

“Debatable.” Fletcher sits back and looks at me through narrowed eyes, a determined gleam shining through shades of sky blue. She rests her elbows on the arms of her chair and taps her fingers against one another.

“Why are you giving me laser eyes?”

Fletcher shrugs, a grin igniting across her vibrant red lips. “Oh, you know. Just thinking about you owing me. I’ve already got plans to cash in.”

I huff a laugh and close my laptop. “With your non-existent segue, I’m assuming this has something to do with a certain doctoral student.”

“Indeed,” Fletcher says, her smile brightening with delight. “You seem to have forgotten that you owe me not only one, but *two* favors, Kap.”

I pack my laptop into my satchel and slide on my jacket as Fletcher stands, that grin of hers still firmly in place. “What the hell are you talking about? I don’t recall a second favor.”

“Tsk-tsk, oh-Kap-i-tan. You’re conveniently forgetting about that time I accompanied you to your parents’ anniversary party so they wouldn’t set you up with that stuck-up bitch Mackenzie.”

My hand drags down my face. *That party.*

“Oh, that’s right, Kap. I had been crushing on Dierdre for two years. *Two fucking years.* And she thought I was with *you* thanks to that stupid party. You ruined my chances. You got me vagedted by the hottest lesbian at UCLA. Who’s the cockblocker now, hmm? Spoiler alert: it’s you. You’re a clam jammer, that’s what you are.”

I bellow a laugh. “A *clam jammer*?”

“Jesus fuck, Kaplan. You’re thirty-one, not eighty-one. Take off the tweed and get with the times. A taco blocko. A fanny fencer. A muff rebuffer. You are all those things. And hence, you owe me.”

“Wasn’t it literally a week later that you met Blake?”

“That is completely beside the point.”

We walk down the hallway, passing a few students as we make our way to the stairs. A brief, unwelcome thought scurries around my skull: *I wonder if Bria is in her office.* If I went upstairs, would I feel her gravitational pull from down the hall? Something about her is as inescapable as an imploding star. The more I try to avoid thinking of her, the more she’s there in my head, and the more I’m convinced she’ll destroy me if I get any closer. And maybe that makes the lure of her even stronger. Maybe I want to be shredded down to the last atom.

*No.* I don’t need any of that. Now that I’ve made things right, or at least closer to it, I need to stay the hell away.

Though I’m pretty sure Fletcher has other ideas.

I glance at Fletcher as she smirks. She’s enjoying every second of claiming a payback, and I am confident I’ll hate everything that’s about to come out of her mouth. “So what exactly do you have in mind, dare I ask?”

“Well, Bria’s research in memory and eyewitness interviews could really benefit from, you know, *doing some interviews.*”

“No—”

“And I just happen to know someone who is gearing up to do some interviews.”

“No, Fletcher.”

“And that person happens to owe me two nonnegotiable favors or he will enter the organ trade.”

“All I ask is that you take my kidneys first. Where do I sign?”

Fletcher sighs, her amusement dissolving. It’s only so long before our joking around turns into a cutting argument. With Fletcher, one thing is a given. She will play the long game and make me pay for every minute of it. “I’m not taking your organs. I already told you, they’re too saturated with bourbon. Stop trying to weasel out of this. Bria is an exceptional student. This department needs students of this calibre. The field needs it. You have no idea how much work she’s already done, Kaplan.”

“If taking Bria to interview with me is cashing in a favor, what do you need the other one for?” I ask, my tone both wary and resigned.

“Take her to dinner. Smooth things over.”

“What the fuck, Fletcher. Absolutely not. She is a *student*.”

We arrive at the landing on the ground floor and Fletcher pushes the handle of the door with more force than is really necessary. Crisp mountain air floods my face, cooling the burn from the irritation bubbling beneath my skin. The door bangs shut behind us like the hammer that’s hitting the final nail in my coffin.

Fletcher turns on me, leaning into my face. She’s nearly as tall as I am, and the difference of a few inches between us is negligible compared to her ferocity. But I’m pretty pissed too. I don’t like being pushed on my rules, and this feels more like a body check than just a gentle shove.

“She is a flight risk, Elijah. She could go anywhere, to any university in the world, and they would snap her up. And if she leaves it is *your fault*,” Fletcher says, punctuating her last two words by poking her finger into my chest. “One apology and setting her up with an alternative advisor, even if that person is clearly a superior option, ain’t gonna cut it.” Fletcher gives me a wink, but her face is still stern. If she believes Bria is a flight risk, then it’s true. Fletch is the kind of advisor who goes to bat for her students. She cares deeply for them. She knows when something is off.

“These aren’t just run-of-the-mill interviews, Fletch. They are witnesses to criminal behavior of powerful people. The risk is low, but there’s still an inherent risk to Bria,” I argue, and the thought twists my intestines. Even if

we have every safety measure in place, the thought of her being in danger is suddenly unbearable. “I can’t put her in that position.”

“Well guess what, Kap. This is what our field demands if we want to step away from academia. That is Bria’s decision if she wants this life. Not yours.”

A deep sigh courses through my lungs. I know she’s right. *Of course* she’s right, even though the thought of anything endangering Bria still coats my veins in flame. But Fletch is satisfied. She backs down with a glint of triumph in her eyes. “I need permission to take her to any interviews. There’s no guarantee it will be given,” I say with weary resignation.

“I understand.”

“And not a word to Ms. Brooks until I have confirmation.”

“Got it.”

“And dinner might be Sonic or Chick-fil-A.”

“Fuck off, Kaplan,” Fletcher says. She pivots on her heel and strides toward her car, leaving me on the walkway. “Someplace nice that *she* would like.”

“Fine. Panera,” I call after her, and Fletch throws her middle finger at me over her shoulder without looking back. She gets into her car and pulls away with a wave. I watch until she’s disappeared around the corner and then run both hands through my hair, gripping the back of my neck, looking to the sidewalk as though it might swallow me into a more favorable location.

When I accept defeat that I will not, in fact, wind up in an alternate dimension, I walk to the Palladium building next to the Engineering section of the campus where I have a meeting room reserved. The modern building is both sleek and imposing, the steel and silver stone meeting in sweeping, curved lines against hard, jagged angles. The Palladium houses two grand halls for academic symposia, but also smaller meeting and conference rooms like the one I’ve reserved for myself and Marta Espinoza, who waits outside the entrance looking every inch the FBI agent with her aviator shades and her suit and her black hair tied back in a low bun.

“Dr. Kaplan. Good to see you again,” she says, her hand outstretched as I approach. Her handshake is just like the rest of her. Strong. Direct. Assertive.

“And you. I hope the flight was okay.”

“Smooth sailing,” she says as we turn into the building and start across the foyer, heading to a hallway where the meeting rooms line the left of the structure. “I wish I could say the same about other matters related to my visit.”

My heart jumps as a thousand questions scatter through my skull. The one that’s loudest is the one I fear the most. *Did we lose Caron Berger?*

“Don’t worry, professor,” Agent Espinoza says, and I think for a moment that I voiced my concern out loud. “We’re still forging ahead. We might just need to rethink a few things.”

We walk the rest of the way to the meeting room in silence. We don’t speak again until the door to the soundproof room is closed and Espinoza has set her files open on the glossy oval table. She doesn’t bother with one of the swiveling executive chairs, preferring instead to lean over the papers with her hands splayed across the wood.

“What’s going on?” I ask, taking a seat at the end of the table.

“An individual intimately connected with Caron has disappeared. Tristan McCoy,” Espinoza says, passing me a file. There are photographs of a tanned, wealthy-looking man. He’s handsome enough in a carbon copy Ken doll kind of way. He looks professional. Pristine. One photo is a headshot from an accounting firm or a law office. “Investments,” I check as I skim his details. “Lamb Health.” “Mr. McCoy handled the investments for Lamb Health for just over five years. He didn’t show up to work a few days ago. His boss alerted local authorities and they performed a wellness check at his home, but nothing was amiss. His car was still in the driveway.”

“Phone? Credit cards?”

“His phone did turn up yesterday. It was behind the counter at The Consulate Bar. When we asked around, one of the bartenders remembered seeing him with a blonde woman, but they couldn’t give a description or even say what time he left or if he left alone. When we searched the security cameras and local CCTV, there was nothing. It’s as though he just vanished.”

I continue looking through Tristan’s details. Something interesting jumps out on the third page. “He was defrauding Lamb Health?”

“It seems so,” Agent Espinoza says. “In the last six months, he started siphoning money into a secret, off-shore account. We believe Caron might have become aware of the theft. And we believe Tristan’s disappearance might be connected with another missing person. Nicholas Hutchinson,”

she says, sliding the next folder to me. “He was the creative director at an advertising agency called Bowery, based in New York.”

“Let me guess, he was connected with Lamb Health?”

“Yes, though not for about a year prior to his disappearance. There was some furor about one of his campaigns on social media two years ago.”

“I remember,” I say absently, flipping through the pages of Nicholas’s file. “The thing about the cancer treatment claim.”

“That’s right. When we followed up around Bowery, the staff were adamant that the wrong files had somehow been placed in the ads, and that true files contained no efficacy claims about Lamb Health’s supplements. But Lamb fired Bowery regardless, and moved to a competitor agency in Boston.” Espinoza points to a paragraph in the middle of the page I’ve just started skimming. “The circumstances of the disappearances are very similar. No signs of forced entry at Hutchinson’s home. Left his office on a Wednesday evening and just...ceased to exist. Our profilers think Caron is finding the trash and taking it out. Maybe we got him wrong. He might be more dangerous than we thought.”

I stare down at the papers in my hands. Nothing that we worked through about Caron Berger and his motivations or the nature of his criminality with his cult add up to murder. Caron Berger believes his role is to save people. Save them from ill-health with his snake oil potions and crystal-infused herbal remedies for sale to a mass market, all the while funding his extravagant yet secretive, godlike existence. He offers a remedy from loneliness with his support groups and members-only communities. And most of all, he believes he saves a very particular kind of woman, offering a sanctuary to those who are most in need of a place in the world.

What they don’t know, of course, is that he takes everything from them in the process, isolating them from society and thriving on their servitude and devotion.

But one thing that’s never fit with Caron Berger is murder. In his mind, he is the shepherd, not the wolf.

“We’re going to accelerate the project as much as possible once we have those interviews done next month,” Agent Espinoza says.

My cheeks heat as Bria’s face swirls to the surface of my thoughts. I take a deep breath. “About those... I have a doctoral student who is specializing in memory recall, and she’s building a database of

physiological responses of eyewitnesses during interviews. I would like permission to bring her along.”

Espinoza eyes me but her expression remains unreadable. “I’ll make the request to Robert and let you know. She will need to sign an NDA and submit to a background check.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.”

“I know I don’t need to say this, Dr. Kaplan, but there are lives on the line now. I’m not opposed to bringing in additional experts to assist, but we need to be sure we can trust them. Cynthia Nordstrom is endangering her life to help us, and this could also expose your student to risk.”

A sense of dread catches in my throat. *It’s Bria’s decision if she wants this life.*

“I understand.”

**T**he only thing that's been keeping my sanity loosely stitched together today is the knowledge I'd be right here.

In front of Dr. Elijah Kaplan's home.

He apologized, which for most people would be sufficient. But I'm not most people.

Besides, he went on to open his mouth. He didn't realize I was a flight above him and Dr. Fletcher as they descended the stairs.

*All I ask is that you take my kidneys first. Where do I sign?*

My leather gloves squeak as I fold my hands into tight fists.

Kaplan is about to do some kind of eyewitness interviews, and he would do virtually anything to prevent me from coming along, even though this is directly related to my dissertation. Dr. Fletcher had to pull in more than one favor for him to even consider it.

What the fuck?

I need to know *why*. Why would he offer up his organs to get out of providing me with an opportunity to do my research? Why would he rather throw me to Dr. Fletcher like a scrap of meat to a stray dog? As soon as I received his email, I looked her up, of course, and I recognized her instantly as the woman I saw entering Kaplan's home with him two nights ago. I didn't like the unexpected swell of relief I felt when I found pictures of her wife, a surgeon at Vangrove Hospital. But that relief quickly drowned when I realized one more potential reason for his dismissive behavior had been swept away.



The more I think about it, the more I believe I'm still missing something. And whatever it is, it's in this house.

I walk up to Kaplan's door with the confidence of someone who is meant to be there. I don't do any of that "checking over my shoulder" shit that you see in movies. That just looks suspicious. If I look like I'm meant to be here, I am.

I push the pin of my snap gun into the tumbler lock and the door pops open. Kaplan's dog lopes across the floor on the other side, his nails clacking on the hard surface, his deep bark bouncing off the walls. I say some calming words and slip inside. The German shepherd flips his guarding switch to an excited greeting as he recognizes my voice and scent. It's the first time I've been here, but I've met Duke before, in anticipation of needing to break in at some point. Getting a temporary job at Snyder's Doggie Daycare certainly helped. I spent as much time as I could with Duke one-on-one, even taught him a few special tricks. The chopped steak in my pocket does wonders too, much better than the shitty commercial treats that Kaplan gives him. Duke may be a retired police dog, but even he can be won over. I smell and act like I'm meant to be here, and so I am.

I take in the space around me as Duke follows my silent footsteps into the darkness. Kaplan doesn't have cameras or a security system. He relies on a dog and simple locks for that. It's obviously a shortsighted approach.

There's a night-light in the hallway, but it's still dark enough that it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. There are art prints and photos of adventures with friends and family lining the entryway. Kaplan with a group of guys in motorcycle racing gear. Kaplan and friends at the beach. Kaplan shirtless, holding a fish. I roll my eyes and proceed down the hall, tossing Duke steak bites as I go.

After a cursory glance, I bypass the living room with its "monochrome man" interior. There's a lot of grey and black. But I'm pleased by the white bookshelves that are jammed full of books of every size and color. I don't take more than a moment to peruse his reading tastes. The interesting pieces of a person's inner life are rarely in a living room. They're in the darker recesses, in shadowy corners and private spaces.

I give Duke another piece of steak and issue my own command to lie down and stay in the living room where he can see the front door. He does as he's told. If Kaplan can use him as a security alarm, so can I. This is

Kaplan's soccer night with his "dude bros". He doesn't miss it, but who knows when he could pull a hammy and show up home unexpectedly.

I drift down the dark hall. The bathroom is first. Nothing of much interest aside from a basket of cheap toothbrushes and toiletries in unbroken packaging under the sink. There's a box of tampons behind it, the cardboard flap covered in a thin film of dust. *How thoughtful*. He likes to be prepared for his lady guests.

After the bathroom is a bedroom across the hall. I enter and use the flashlight on my phone as the heavy curtains are drawn. The dim pool of light flows across the hardwood floor, then a grey rug, a pair of men's slippers. The black stained wood of a simple nightstand. The matching platform of the bed. The headboard and a post that rises from it.

A silver grommet.

"My, my, Dr. Kaplan," I say, bending to look more closely at the stainless steel ring. Scratches dull its surface. I stand and follow the line of the post, another grommet fixed to the top, close to where it joins a crossbeam. The four planks of black wood above me each have a grommet in the center and where the horizontal beams join the posts. At the foot of the bed, the platform extends beyond the mattress, a cushioned mat laying across the end.

Dr. Kaplan enjoys a bit of bondage, it seems.

"Who'd have thought it would be a fish guy."

I notice drawers along the base of the bed and open each one. There's a drawer for bedding. Boring. There's one for restraints. Slightly more interesting. The dildo drawer doesn't disappoint with its selection of sizes and shapes. There's a whole separate drawer for strap-ons and anal toys. One small drawer for lubes. The last one I check is long and narrow.

My heart doubles its pace.

Whips. Spanking paddles. Floggers. I lift a coiled leather belt with my gloved hand. Acid churns in my stomach and climbs my throat. The scars on my back seem to heat and crawl within my skin. They whisper memories from the desert. Memories that have nothing to do with games.

I replace the belt and slam the door shut, folding my hands into fists as I steady my breathing, trying to recapture my self-control. My eyes press closed and I focus on releasing my tension. There is no one to punish me now. *I* am the one who punishes. *I* control my destiny. Whatever I wish to give or take, the power is *mine* to decide.

I rise from the floor and turn off my light as I leave the room, drifting further down the hall. There's a guest room on the left side, the bed pushed against the wall, some weights and workout equipment waiting in the open space. On the other side of the hall is Kaplan's home office.

I close the blinds of the window before turning on the desk lamp, checking my watch before I sit. Twenty minutes before Kaplan's match finishes, another ten at least for him to get home. Maybe more if there are post-game beers, which is never a guarantee.

I open his laptop and pick up a photo on his desk as I wait for the computer to start up. His parents, I assume. Young Elijah Kaplan in the front, maybe twelve or thirteen, lean and gawky, but with a smile like he's tempting a dare. And an older brother, their father's hand on his shoulder. He's angelic. Light brown hair, blue eyes, and pillowy lips in a faint smile that doesn't reach his eyes. The boys look so different in some ways, Eli's features darker and more intense than his brother's, where there's a certain kind of tortured reserve in the other Kaplan child. But I can see some similarities too. Strong jaws and high cheekbones. Expressive eyes. Dimples. A sharp intelligence that permeates a static moment captured from the grip of time.

I place the photo back on the desk and examine another. Kaplan smiling wide and with Dr. Fletcher, her blonde hair flowing in a strong wind, a younger Duke sitting between them with his tongue lolling to the side. Another more recent photo with his dad, the two men shirtless at a beach house, his father looking a lot older than in the other photo. His eyes seem dimmer somehow, the lines of his face harsher. There's an exhaustion buried deep beneath the skin, dragging it down.

My attention snaps back to the screen as the laptop finishes booting up and prompts me for a password. I pull out my phone and open my most recent text from Samuel, which would look like gibberish to anyone else. But to me, it's a well-rehearsed code of scrambled letters. Our own pseudo-language. He's listed Kaplan's potential passwords, generated by keylogger software that was embedded in the file of my dissertation proposal. Like most people, Kaplan doesn't use a vast array of passwords to secure his private life. The second option works.

*DukeKaboom@Kap!*

For a man who is already a tenured professor at thirty-one, he really does some dumb shit.

“Did you think you were untouchable from the shadows in life, Dr. Kaplan? You entitled prick,” I whisper, opening his Outlook. “Well it’s touching you now, isn’t it. I’ll shove my finger so far up your asshole I’ll be working your mouth like a puppet.”

Kaplan’s email is rife with ass-kissing messages from students wanting to get the jump on class syllabi and assignments. I see my read message halfway down his inbox and scowl at the screen, the rage from his dismissal pulling my veins tight beneath my skin. But the one that catches my eye is a new email, one from Marta Espinoza. I open the thread and read from the bottom.

FROM: MARTA ESPINOZA  
TO: ELIJAH KAPLAN  
SUBJECT: INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION  
HI DR. KAPLAN,

PLEASE FOLLOW THE ENCRYPTED LINK FOR THE FILES YOU REQUESTED ON LEGIO AGNI AND USE YOUR LOGIN ID. WE HAVE APPROVAL FOR THE FIRST TWO INTERVIEWS TO TAKE PLACE IN OGDEN, SO PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR AVAILABILITY FOR OCTOBER AND I WILL ARRANGE THE DETAILS ON OUR END. WE NEED TO SECURE FURTHER DATES FROM THE LAST WITNESS. I’LL KEEP YOU POSTED.

HAS BERKSHIRE APPROVED YOUR SABBATICAL? I’LL LET ROBERT KNOW IF SO. WE’RE EAGER TO MOVE THE TIMELINE FASTER, IF POSSIBLE.

LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED ANYTHING ELSE.

BEST REGARDS,  
MARTA ESPINOZA  
SPECIAL AGENT, FBI

FROM: ELIJAH KAPLAN  
TO: MARTA ESPINOZA  
SUBJECT: RE: INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION  
HI MARTA,

THANKS FOR SENDING. SECOND OR THIRD WEEKEND IN OCTOBER IS FINE, WHICHEVER WORKS BETTER FOR THE INTERVIEW SUBJECTS.

BERKSHIRE HAS APPROVED, START DATE EFFECTIVE DECEMBER 20TH.

DO YOU HAVE FURTHER DETAILS ON CARON BERGER THAT YOU'RE ABLE TO SHARE? ROBERT MENTIONED SOME EARLY ONLINE ACTIVITY ON DISCORD BEFORE HE PULLED BACK FROM PUBLIC PLATFORMS. WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO SEND IF SO? I WANT TO ENSURE I HAVE ALL AVAILABLE INFORMATION BEFORE WE MOVE TO PHASE 2.

THANK YOU,  
DR. KAPLAN

And then today's new message:

FROM: MARTA ESPINOZA  
TO: ELIJAH KAPLAN  
SUBJECT: RE: INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION  
HI DR. KAPLAN,

UNDERSTOOD. WHEN I SPEAK TO ROBERT NEXT WEEK, I'LL SEE IF THERE'S ANYTHING FURTHER ON BERGER, AND I'LL ASK HIM ABOUT THE INTERVIEW SUPPORT WE DISCUSSED. I'LL SEND ONCE RECEIVED.

I'VE ADDED THE FILES REGARDING MCCOY AND HUTCHINSON TO THE LINK, IN CASE YOU NEED THEM. I'LL KEEP YOU POSTED ABOUT ANY PROJECT ACCELERATIONS. IF BERGER IS CLEANING HOUSE, WE'LL NEED TO MOVE QUICKLY.

BEST REGARDS,  
MARTA ESPINOZA  
SPECIAL AGENT, FBI

I sit back in the chair, placing my fingers to my temples.

Shit.

Shit.

*Shit.*

My instincts about his evasions related to his sabbatical were correct. There was something he didn't want to share. Something big. Something *very* secret.

Kaplan is coming after my target. He's coming for Caron Berger, and he has the FBI behind him.

A heavy darkness settles into my chest. A cult like Legio Agni was always going to garner the attention of authorities, but I wasn't prepared for an active operation from an organization that also enjoys hunting individuals like me. Ones with my proclivity for killing. And the fact that Tristan has already shown up on their radar is somewhat disturbing, though the one silver lining is that they seem to believe his disappearance was Caron's doing. The measures Samuel has put into place to cover our tracks must be working.

I don't click on the encrypted link. As tempting as it is, I can't be sure it won't set off some kind of alert. And I highly doubt his login for super-secure FBI files is "Duke Kaboom." I mark the message as unread and then start rifling through his OneNote and saved documents, transferring anything that looks potentially useful to my phone.

And then I find an interesting folder.

It's entitled "Past Tax Records," and I open it intending to snoop through Kaplan's annual earnings from Berkshire.

But that is not what I find.

*At all.*

Most of the files are still shots of a woman in black lingerie on Kaplan's bed. In some, she's chained by cuffs on her wrists and ankles, in others she's free. She's beautiful and sexy with hunger or pleasure or power or even desperation in her eyes. A few of the files are videos. I click on the first one.

The woman starts the recording and slinks away from the camera with a playful smirk. Music is playing at a low volume. Kaplan is naked in the background on his knees, adjusting a DSLR camera. The woman crawls toward him. "Take my picture, Eli," she says in a husky voice.

Kaplan raises the camera and the woman begins posing, lifting a shoulder, pushing her breasts together, leaning toward the camera, lacing her fingers through her hair. The digital shutter clicks as Kaplan takes photo after photo, and then his voice spreads through the sounds of music and rustling bedding. "Pull down your bra and show me those gorgeous tits. That's right, baby. Now spread your legs for me. Pull your thong to the side and show me that pussy."

Everything Kaplan asks, the woman does eagerly. She plays with her nipples. She bends over and points her ass to the camera, caressing her skin as she looks back at her photographer with a playful grin. And when she's

had enough, she straightens her lingerie and turns, crawling to the center of the bed, holding out her hands in an offering to Kaplan. He sets the camera on a nightstand and takes a chain from each side of the suspended frame, clipping them to the links on her black cuffs on her wrists.

“Pull them hard three times if you want me to stop,” Kaplan says as he demonstrates with the slack of one chain. The woman nods, her gaze trained on Kaplan’s movements as he takes a condom from the nightstand and tears the foil of a condom wrapper open with his teeth. He spits the ripped end off the side of the bed as he pulls the latex out of its pouch and then rolls it over his erection. They look at one another for a long moment as Kaplan strokes his long, hard cock. I can’t see much of his face, but I can see hers, and it lights with a ravenous grin.

And then it begins.

They kiss with fiery heat. Kaplan lowers the cups of her bra and her generous breasts spill out. He licks and sucks them as she moans. He teases her with his fingers, dancing them across her ribs and up her thighs. She laughs when his touch tickles. And when it finds her center to rub her clit and delve into her pussy, she moans. Kaplan fucks her with his fingers and sucks on her breasts until she’s writhing.

“So wet, baby. Tell me what you want.”

“I want your cock. I want *you*,” she whispers, and Kaplan growls with desire as he withdraws his fingers to taste her.

“I can tell,” he says.

I watch as he pulls her thong to the side and holds it there, wrapping his free arm around her back. And then he slides into her.

The woman moans and gasps and squirms in her chains as the rhythm builds. But it’s not the woman who interests me. It’s Kaplan who I’m riveted to. There’s an energy in him that swims beneath his skin. He moves with the fluid grace of an animal. He has a beast to unleash, but he’s holding onto it tight.

I wonder if he’ll let it go.

I lean back and keep my eyes on Kaplan’s broad back and his tight ass, his muscles rippling as they power him through each thrust. I pull the glove from my hand and slide my palm beneath the waistband of my leggings. My fingers slip through the arousal gathering between my thighs and I draw them back up to my clit, circling the bundled nerves as I watch the couple on the screen.

The woman's moans grow louder as Kaplan's pace quickens. That beast of his is coming closer to the surface. It's in the tension of his back and the way he whispers and moans, like it's determined to claw its way out. But he's still not ready to let go.

Pleasure curls low in my belly. I want to see what he can do.

"I'm gonna come," the woman says. Her voice is tight as her hooded eyes find the camera and she looks right at me over Kaplan's shoulder.

"Oh you like that, do you? You like the thought of me watching this over and over, don't you, baby," Kaplan says. She nods playfully, but her motion is jerky as her muscles clench with the orgasm that tears through her. She keeps her eyes on the camera as long as she can, until her head rolls back and pleasure consumes her. Kaplan works her through it, slowing his strokes. He reaches to one of her cuffs and releases one chain and then the next. She grips his shoulders and he lies her down on her back. She's boneless and sweating as he stays buried within her. "Good girl. But we're not done yet," he says.

Kaplan brings her wrists together above her head and clamps them both to a single chain that's waiting from the head of the bed, lying like a snake across the sheets.

"Tap your hands on the mattress three times if it's too much," Kaplan says, waiting until she nods her consent before he starts his thrusts again. His palms flow across her stomach and worship her skin. They glide to her breasts and explore their softness and the tight peaks of her nipples. Then they come up to her neck and fold around her throat.

Yes.

I can see it, that beast within him right there at the surface, finally getting what it wants. I edge closer to an orgasm as Kaplan squeezes the woman's throat, his rocking thrusts railing into her with so much power and grace. The woman gurgles a moan and Kaplan's grip tightens as he growls.

And then she taps out.

Kaplan's fists immediately release from around her throat and she clears her discomfort with a quiet cough. He asks her if she's okay and she says she wants to keep going, but I can see the tension in Kaplan's body. He's wrestled that demon deep beneath the surface. When he places his hands back around her throat, it's only for show. All the tension that should be in his hands is now in his back and his shoulders. I feel the loss of that



freedom through the screen. I feel it in me. The powerful orgasm that was building just moments ago has fled.

I let out a frustrated sigh and slide my hand out of my leggings as I watch Kaplan and the woman orgasm together. I put my glove back on and close the file, covering my tracks as I go. I'm just shutting the computer down when I hear Duke's claws on the floor, scrambling toward the door.

Kaplan is home early.

*Shit.*

The dog bounds down the hall as the lock clicks open and Kaplan enters his house. He gives Duke an enthusiastic greeting as I turn off the lamp and open the blinds I closed earlier.

I tiptoe toward the hallway. My heart thrums in my chest. I bend down at the door frame, squatting low, shifting to the edge so I can look down the corridor. If Kaplan glances this way, it will be less likely that he'll see me watching when I'm not at eye level.

He doesn't look in my direction as he passes the mouth of the hallway, heading for the back of the house with Duke at his heels. I hear the sliding door to the fenced yard unlock and open as he lets the dog outside.

I get up and drift silently to the guest room across the hall, and then I shimmy myself under the bed until I'm up against the wall.

There's only a half-inch of space between my face and the bed frame. I close my eyes and take a deep breath but my chest touches the metal slats.

My eyes shoot open and the bed feels like it's pressing down on me. There isn't enough air here. My heart is hammering so loudly that I can barely make out the sound of Kaplan rummaging in the kitchen. It feels like insects are crawling beneath my skin. All I want to do is scramble out of this place before it closes in around me. I try pressing my eyes shut again and slowing every breath.

*Accept your punishment. It is God's will.*

I fight the memories away, but I can still feel it. The pebbles of the desert earth against my scars. The metal box closing around me.

*Think about your wickedness and repent.*

I swallow. I try to calm the storm brewing in my chest. I've practiced for moments like this. I need to do what I have trained for. To overcome.

*You are not Ava anymore,* Samuel's voice calls as I search for my safe place in my mind. *You are Sombria. You must not let the circumstances*

*around you dictate your success. Turn that which you fear into your armor, Bria, and it will protect you.*

I'm safe here. I can get out if I need to. There is no lock. There's no one to forget me in a box I can't get out of. I'm not trapped. I chose this hiding place.

*My choice.*

I'm safe. *I'm safe.*

I hear the distant voices warbling from the television in the living room and I keep repeating these affirmations to myself, Samuel's guidance hovering in the distance of time. *Turn that which you fear into your armor, Bria.* My breathing deepens and my heart rate slows as I focus on those early lessons with Samuel as he whittled away my layers like a knife through green wood. He found every fear and gave me the weapons to kill it. Now I just have to apply what I've learned.

Time slows down. The television drones on. And I wait, still, silent, deadlier by the second as I gain control and force myself to embrace this little fortress of shadow.

*This is a keep. I am the dragon of my castle.*

A few hours pass. Kaplan turns off the TV and heads to the bathroom. Moments later, he pads across the hall to his bedroom, Duke's claws ticking along behind him. The light clicks off, the covers shift. I check my watch. And with the gradual passage of time, silence.

When fifty-five minutes have passed, I start to slide out from under the guest room bed. This should be enough time for Kaplan to be in Stage Three: deep sleep. Dreamless and hard to wake from. If he does, he'll be groggy, and I will steal any precious seconds I can if I need them.

When I'm free of the shadows of the bed I stand, stretching my tight muscles, and then I wait, listening. No sound comes.

I pull the capped syringe of succinylcholine from my jacket pocket and creep from the room, pausing before I enter Kaplan's bedroom.

Duke's head lifts and his tail thumps against his cushioned dog bed when he sees me. "*Lehni. Zustan,*" I whisper. He lays his head back down, his tail still swishing softly. I smile, pleased that the commands I taught him have stuck.

And then I turn to Kaplan.

His back is to me, his breathing heavy and even. He's in deep sleep, just as I'd hoped. The blanket lays across his shoulder, his jugular exposed. My

eyes have adjusted sufficiently to the darkness that I'm confident I can stick him with enough accuracy that I'll be able to escape his reach before the paralytic sets in.

Death whispers from the dark corners of the room. *Succinylcholine*, it says.

Yes. *Succinylcholine*. Known affectionately to certain people like me as SUX.

I drift closer. A lick of desire curls across my heart. I uncap the needle.

I should take this chance. I might not get another. The postmortem will find the triple dose of SUX. The medical examiner will know it's murder. The investigation will begin. No forced entry. They may find my hair under the bed, but no prints. The tread of my shoes through the house, but that would only tell them my estimated weight and height. I'm not on any system, so there will be no DNA match if I leave anything more substantial behind. No reason to suspect me and every reason to believe that Legio Agni caught up with an expert witness for the FBI and decided to take him out. Computer forensics won't tell them much either. If they find the keylogger software, it will lead them on a wild goose chase. Samuel is too precise to bring them back to us.

I can do this. I just have to inject and run; stay hidden for forty-five seconds as the drug takes effect.

I place one knee on the mattress and poise the tip of the needle over Kaplan's jugular.

Death tightens its grip on my hand. *Succinylcholine*.

Kaplan's slow, gentle breath rolls across the pillow. His scent rises up to me. Bergamot. Bay rum. Rich and lush. It feels almost like a sin. Not to kill the man, but to take the essence of something darker that sleeps beneath the surface. When I watched that video, I saw a creature not all that different from me.

I bring the needle a little closer.

*Is this how Samuel felt when he first found me?*

That sudden thought hits me like electricity. My hand jerks away from Kaplan's neck.

Aside from Samuel, I've never met anyone even remotely like me. Kaplan's darkness is different, yet it feels familiar. He has a cache of shadows too. They beg to be let out. I can almost hear them, like the vibration of an engine on the other side of a window pane. When I was a

child, the Disciples of Xantheus said the soul radiates essence. Mine never radiated anything at all, or so they told me. But looking at Kaplan, seeing the darkness that was ready to tear free of his skin in that video with the woman, I wonder if the DOX pseudoscience bullshit was onto something after all. Because his essence calls to mine. Could he have sensed it too when we met? And did it frighten him? Maybe he saw that my soul is a shade too dark.

I slump a little. The tension of anticipation dissolves from my arm.

I despise him for standing as a barrier between me and my work, and now my justice too. I hate the feeling he gave me of not measuring up.

But I can't kill him. Not before I'm sure what I felt was real, at least. And if he is like me, with a soul of shadows? Maybe I'll spare him for good, just to know another like me is nearby.

I cap the needle. I back off the mattress and pocket the syringe. It takes a long moment before I turn away and walk toward the bedroom door.

The rustle of fabric stops me on the threshold. "Bria," a groggy voice says behind me. My blood freezes and drops into my stomach like shattered crystals. I grip the syringe and prepare to strike.

Kaplan's still asleep. He's turned over, facing me, but his eyes are closed and the cadence of his breath is unchanged. Adrenaline surges through the chambers of my heart and a tremor shakes my lungs.

He's passed into REM sleep. Just a dream.

I watch for one moment longer, and then I back away with slow and careful steps. I walk out the front door, leaving it unlocked behind me. He'll wake up and wonder if he forgot. He'll be sure he turned the lock, but he'll pass it off as a blip, nothing more than his imagination.

I stride into the night, thinking about how much I liked the sound of my name in his dreams.

And how much I hate it when he says it in the light.

Despite being physically exhausted from days of sleeplessness and punishing workouts, my mind is still wide awake. After I return home from Kaplan's house, I toss and roll across the sheets. Even imagining the flakes of flesh peeling from Tristan's body in the bleach and counting them as they drift toward the filtration unit doesn't help.

At three thirty, I give up. My limbs feel heavy as I pull on a navy one-piece swimsuit and head to my favorite room in the house, the pool room. In this room, I was reborn. I remember the first days of Samuel teaching me how to swim, the newest marks on my back still bright red slashes beneath his steady palm as he told me to lean back and let my body drift away from my mind. My head was still shaved. I was gangly and weak. But the water gave me something to focus on, a way to channel my rage until I was ready to tackle someone other than myself. The water was where I became my own woman. It was a baptism into a new life.

I'm turning these bright memories over in my mind as I switch on the swim trainer and the current whirls into action, rippling the surface with licks of white water. I pull on my swim cap and goggles and then I slip into the water's cool embrace, starting my strokes. My body sways with the motion of reaching into the current and the kicks of my legs. I fall into the steady, familiar rhythm. *One. Two. Breathe. One. Two. Breathe.* I let my thoughts drift away.

But they drift right to where I don't want them to go.  
Kaplan.

I see that image of the woman in black lingerie, her long blonde hair swept to one side as she starts the recording. Every second of it replays in my mind. The way Kaplan's muscles coiled as he prowled up her body. The pace of his thrusts. The sound she made when she came the first time. His voice when she looked at the camera. *You like the thought of me watching this over and over, don't you, baby?* And then his hands around her throat, and the way she tapped out within mere seconds. The tension that flooded every one of his motions that followed. His effort to hold back, and the way he didn't want to.

I let myself glide on the current to the shallower end of the pool. I tear my goggles and swim cap off and throw them onto the pool deck. My fist smashes the surface of the water in a hit that feels woefully unsatisfying.

I wouldn't have done what she did. I wouldn't have tapped out.

I walk to the infinity edge of the pool and grip it as I look to the windows where the arboretum is blanketed in shadow. Peering into the darkness, it's intriguing trying to imagine what it would feel like to put my trust in a man like that. I wonder what would happen if I let him wrap his hands around my neck and take me as far as he wanted.

Maybe it's not him I don't trust. It's me. And he must have sensed it the first moment we met. His instinct told him that I would kill him if he tried.

I turn around and rest my back against the cool tiles, sliding down until my head lays on the edge. When I close my eyes, those images are still burned there. This time, however, I grab hold of them. I make them into something new. I imagine that it's me starting the recording, me backing up on the bed with lust-filled eyes as Kaplan crawls up my body like a starving leopard, ready to devour me in his lair.

My hand drifts down my body, over my stomach, pressing on my pelvis in anticipation before my fingers slide beneath the elastic hem at my thigh. I rub my clit in a slow circle and lean my head back as I imagine Kaplan's weight settling on my body as he pulls down my bra and sucks on my breast. He shifts to make room for his hand and he dips his fingers beneath my black panties, and he fingers the swollen bud with the same gentle pressure as I do now.

I imagine Kaplan sliding his fingers through my glistening folds. I push two fingers into my pussy as I hear his low voice, so rich and warm with approval. *Wet and ready to take my cock. Do you want it?* And in my fantasy I nod, pressing my palms into his muscled shoulders.

I work my clit in harder circles and pump my fingers into my sheath as I imagine Kaplan sliding his erection inside, gliding in steady strokes. But in my fantasy, he thrusts harder than he did in the version I saw. He rails into me in my dream. He fucks me raw. And I beg him to put his hands around my throat.

“Tap your hands on the mattress three times if it’s too much,” he says, just like in the video. But there’s no way. I won’t stop.

My fingers are thrusting into my pussy and bearing down on my clit and I’m so close. I imagine Kaplan squeezing. Praising. Thrusting. *Good, Bria. Take it like a killer. I will fuck you exactly how you need me to. You’re so perfect, Bria.*

I drift away from the edge of the pool and take a deep breath and submerge myself. I rub and pump and circle and grind my fingers until my lungs burn. And I come hard. I come imagining Kaplan squeezing my throat until I’m desperate for air, until my vision darkens and pleasure coils in my belly as tight as a striking snake.

I burst from the water and suck in a heaving, cleansing breath of air. My heartbeat drums in my ears. I stand for a long moment in the water, waiting for my muscles to cool and my lungs to settle, hoping my mind will calm down too.

But it doesn’t.

By five o’clock I’ve slept only a fitful hour or so. When I open the random picker app on my phone, it picks number one.

Breakfast.

Goddammit.

I progress through my routine. Running. Yoga. Meditation. Shower. Feed cat. *Breakfast.*

I open the app again and it chooses the number five.

Oatmeal.

...Disgusting.

I sit in my robe and scowl through every bite.

When I’m done, I make my coffee and get dressed while it brews. It’s another sweater and jeans combo, and I top it off with minimal makeup. And then it’s off to Cedar Ridge to get my shit back on track.

Music flows from the common room, deft fingers dancing over the keys of a piano. I know the piece. I know the player. Samuel, and his favorite composition of his own creation. The beat is a little slower than it used to

be to make up for the weakened left hand, the melody of those bass notes simplified from how I remember the piece from years past to compensate for the damage inflicted by his stroke. But Opus #139 is still as rich and haunting as the first time I heard it.

I wait behind Samuel as he finishes the last notes, then lay a hand on his shoulder. His glare softens a little when he realizes it's me.

"What are you doing here? Don't you have class?" Samuel asks as I wheel him to his preferred table near the window, the only one that's empty. I wonder if he kills off any old folks who try to take it from him, and that's why it's always free. It would not surprise me. *At all.*

"No class today, Uncle," I say, giving a kiss to each of his cheeks before positioning his wheelchair where he can watch the entrance behind me. "I'm going in later for a meeting, however."

"Kaplan?"

"No."

We fall into silence as I set up the backgammon board. I win the roll-off and start the game.

"You look unwell," he says.

"Define unwell."

Samuel shifts his gaze across my skin, gathering information, analyzing. "Like you haven't slept properly. And your blood pressure is high," he says.

I press the squiggly vein on the side of my forehead. I know that's what he's seen.

"What's going on," he says. It's not a question, it's a demand.

"Kaplan. He's going on sabbatical at the end of the semester. It hasn't been announced. My meeting today is with Kathryn Fletcher. She's replacing him during his leave. I've met with her once already. She's going to be my advisor."

"Fletcher...the one from UCLA?"

"Yes. She presented that paper last year at the Contemporary Issues in Forensic Psychology Conference last year. The one on charismatic authorities expanding their membership base by using divisive topics to mobilize their followers as agents within online subcultural communities."

Samuel nods and hums a tone of agreement. "I remember. It was a good paper. Her reputation is strong, her research that I've seen is solid. She should fit you well as an advisor." His eyes narrow as he rolls his dice and



moves his checkers across the felt. “But Kaplan’s sabbatical is not the only issue, is it. What else.”

“Kaplan is working as an expert witness for a certain federal organization and we don’t want to play in that sandbox. He has ex-Legio Agni followers lined up to interview. He’s going for my prize.”

Samuel’s gaze snaps to mine. I hold his unwavering stare and his expression darkens. “His time frame is slower than yours. His sabbatical doesn’t start until the semester is finished. If Kaplan’s conducting interviews and research now, they won’t move to final pursuit until early next year. You can capture your prize faster.”

“I know. But there will be more eyes on Legio Agni, including one who knows me now.”

“There were always going to be eyes on Legio Agni. You know how to camouflage. If you do what you do best, he will never know. And speaking of which, I found the information you were looking for on Praetorian. Log in and it will be there.”

I nod, adding it to my mental to-do list to access our shared, secured server and retrieve whatever coded information Samuel has sent later tonight.

I win the game and we set it up again, rolling our single die to establish the first player. Samuel starts the play and we roll dice and shift checkers in silence. His words repeat through my mind, a confirmation of my own thoughts.

“Are you having a crisis of confidence regarding your plan?” Samuel asks.

“No.”

“No,” he agrees. “Such a challenge normally excites you. So what is the problem? There’s something else.”

I press my molars together and glare at the board. If I don’t spill more, Samuel will probably find a way to sneak out of Cedar Ridge and break into the house. He’d happily dose me with amobarbital while I’m sleeping to wrench the truth out of me. When I look up, I can tell that’s exactly what he’s thinking.

“Kaplan. He was dismissive of my work. Of...me.”

“Why does that bother you so?”

I shoot a questioning glare at the old man. Why *does* it bother me? Partly because my work is superior. It’s the best. And Kaplan made it feel

substandard. Made *me* feel substandard. I don't accept *anything* substandard from myself. And neither does Samuel. He expects me to be recognized for the quality of everything I produce. Even the things which are only for his ears and the shelves of my trophy cabinet.

And it's not just that. It's what I saw in the video. Something about Kaplan's hunger and the way it wasn't satisfied. It called to me. I saw the same need in him, the deep chasm that can't be filled. I thought somehow that his darkness would find its likeness in mine. But maybe Kaplan saw a glimpse of a beast in me whose claws are too jagged, whose teeth are too sharp. One whose needs are too deviant for his tastes. Maybe his beast wants a tamer creature. Or maybe I'm missing something that everyone can see but me.

"I wonder if he saw something that is lacking in me, something I'm blind to."

"No, Bria," Samuel says as he smacks the table with his palm. I don't startle. I saw this coming. Maybe I wanted it to. Samuel leans forward and pins me with those cloudy blue eyes that veil so many shades of darkness. "Do not nurture the seeds of self-doubt. My legacy will not be corrupted by an inferior man and his shortsighted intellect and dysfunctional cock. Cut the dead weight. Stay focused on your prize. Your victory will be all the sweeter when your trophy is in your hand."

We're locked in a stare-off when I see a set of powder-blue scrubs moving toward us from the other side of the room. I lay my hand over Samuel's and give him a gentle smile as I let go of some of the tension in my back and shoulders.

"Everything okay here, Samuel?" Nurse Tory asks with her no-nonsense warning tone. I'm convinced she would still use it even if she knew who he is and all the things he's done. "Do I need to take you back to your room for a rest?"

Samuel grumbles something unintelligible, suddenly looking like a frail old man and not a competent killer.

"I'm so sorry. My uncle was just reminding me that a man who so callously dismisses me and my work is not worthy of my time. Uncle Sammy just gets a little passionate about his favorite niece sticking it to the patriarchy," I say with a saccharine smile as I squeeze Samuel's hand. He chews his lip as though he might be in trouble and gives the nurse a sheepish smile.

She melts.

“Oh my days, Sammy. What a good uncle you are, looking after your niece. Let me go get you some more tea. How about some of that chocolate cake to go with it? I think I can slide you an extra slice,” Nurse Tory says as she winks and lays a caring hand on his arm.

“That would be just lovely, dear. Thank you,” he replies in his most frail old man voice as he pats her hand with his. She doesn’t notice the steadiness in those fingers of his, how strong they still are. How capable. She just grins down at him and then heads off to the kitchen as Samuel’s gaze turns to me, his smoky blue eyes searing me like ice.

“*What?* I just got you extra cake. You’re welcome.”

Samuel huffs and jangles the dice in his cup, spilling them across the felt. A flash of a moment from childhood comes back to me, something that exists in the desert behind my memory palace. I feel the echo of pain in my gums, the phantom taste of blood. I remember spitting two of my bloody milk teeth into the dust when the back of Donald Soversky’s hand hit them free of my mouth. I feel Samuel watching, *seeing*.

“You know where you need to go, Bria,” he says. I nod. I need to go to my most sacred place. A place I love and fear. One that lives only in my mind. I need to return to the place that changed my life.

“Yes. I understand.”

“And you know I won’t always be here to counsel you. At some point, you will have to do this on your own. If you can’t, you will fail.”

I roll my dice. I push my checkers across the felt. “I know, Uncle. But even when you’re gone, your voice will live on in my head. I will not fail, because you will always be there to guide me.”

When I meet Samuel’s eyes, it’s with the flame of determination burning brightly through my veins, reflecting back at me in a milky sea, a subtle nod.

I will not fail.

## 9

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BRIA

I sit on my meditation mat, facing the pool and the atrium beyond, the water trickling down the infinity edge. My eyes drift closed and I focus on the sound, clearing my mind of all my thoughts and concerns. I take a deep breath in, and then out. In and out. Again and again, until the road to my memory palace is clear in my mind.

But instead of going toward it, I turn and face the other direction, and I walk into the desert.

The path leads to a white shipping container that's been converted into an office. Three metal stairs lead to the door that's been cut into the steel wall. I open it and enter, closing it behind me. There's an old office chair, covered in desert dust, sitting in the middle of the room. I walk over to it and take a deep breath before I lower myself onto it and close my eyes.

When I open them, I'm fourteen again.

I'm bound to the chair. My eyes are sticky, my throat raw with thirst. My muscles ache with bruises and dehydration. A headache fills my skull with knives.

A plastic straw enters my murky field of vision and I blink up at the man holding it. He's older, maybe in his sixties. He must be my height or perhaps a little shorter. He's sinewy but strong. Despite the dusty office we're in, he looks well-dressed, his white hair combed with precision. His skin is marked by the sun but not heavily lined, as though he rarely frowns or smiles. His expression is unreadable. He pushes the straw into my mouth and I drink. I want the whole glass of water but he only gives me enough to speak.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Ava,” I reply, my voice tight and grating.

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“How did you arrive at my dumping ground?”

“I was dumped there. I guess it’s everyone’s dump,” I say, and the man appears neither amused nor enraged, though I get the sense that his anger could be easily stoked. I know it already, without needing to ask. This man is a predator. It lingers in the air between us like the scent of musk on his skin. He waits for me to elaborate. “My...community. They abandoned me there.”

“Why?”

I say nothing at first. I look around the room. There’s a desk with papers in neat, ordered stacks. A low lamp sheds light across the surface where there are drawings on blue paper. On the opposite wall are topographic maps. When I look at the man once more, his eyes have darkened. I don’t know what this dumping ground is to him, but it’s obviously something he feels compelled to protect. I work out every option for how to proceed, and I’m left with only one. The truth.

“I killed someone.”

This seems to surprise the man, but not nearly as much as it should. His head tilts a degree on its axis and his eyes narrow. “Why?”

“I was meant to be paired to him. He was our leader’s son. I didn’t want to. I felt...compelled.”

The man regards me in silence. He seems intrigued by me, like I should be acting some other way. That’s something I’m used to. What I’m *not* used to is the way he’s acting in return. *Like me*. He’s not afraid or repulsed. He’s just observant, like my reflection in a mirror.

“You’ve killed before,” I say.

“Why do you think that?”

“Your reaction when I told you. You weren’t disturbed by me.”

The man seems to consider my observation before he presses the straw to my lips and permits me another small sip of water. It feels as though he’s rewarding me, though I think the true reward is that I’m still alive. “How did you kill him?” he asks. “Did you plan it?”

“Yes. As much as I could in three days.”

“Tell me what happened.”

I keep my eyes on the man even though the recent past overlays the present like a film over this stranger. “I had gone to steal a book from our leader Xantheus’s collection. He never let us read from his private library. He had secrets hidden among his books. I liked to sneak in and take them. Not just the books, but the secrets. Like his real name. Donald Soversky.”

The man’s eyes narrow just a fraction. I worry for a moment that maybe he knows Xantheus and will deliver me back there, even though they cast me out. But before I can ask, he offers the straw and I take another drink. “Continue,” he says.

“When I arrived, Xantheus was already at his home. He was having an argument with his son, Xanus, so I listened beneath his window. Xanus said he wanted me. He’d always hated me when we were younger. He was four years older than me and there were other girls closer in age that he got along with, so I didn’t know why the sudden interest. Xantheus was arguing that it wasn’t a good idea, but what Xanus wanted, he usually got, so eventually his father agreed, promising to make arrangements for the marriage ritual to occur in three days’ time. So I went straight away to the storage barn for rope and an ax. I hid them in the temple room where I would have to bed Xanus after the ceremony. That night, after everyone was asleep, I siphoned diesel from the tractor and took candles from the pantry. I hid those in the loft of the storage barn. The next night, I timed how long it took to burn a candle down to its base. Before the ceremony, I set up three candles to burn down to rags soaked in diesel. When the ceremony was over and I was led to the bed chamber with Xanus. We were alone for only a few moments before the fire took off in the barn. Everyone rushed out of the temple to put it out. He was going to go too, but I hit him with the blunt edge of the ax and knocked him out. I tied him to a chair with the rope I hid. Then I waited.”

“Waited for what?”

“Anyone. Everyone.” I shrug. The motion pulls at the weeping scabs and sunburn that streak my skin.

“Why?”

I smile, remembering the hours I spent alone with Xanus as the others tried and failed to keep the storage barn from turning to cinders and ash. He spent an hour unconscious, and then two hours more vacillating between pleas and curses. When the others finally realized that we hadn’t come and something was wrong, they burst into the room as though an unstoppable

prophecy was coming true. The sense of triumph I felt was all-consuming, like being struck with lightning and trapping the power of the storm. “I didn’t just want to kill Xantheus’s son. I wanted to mark their souls with something that would scar them forever. Just like they’ve scarred me.” I roll my shoulders. This man must have seen the blood and slashes across my shirt, possibly even the old scars through the holes in the dirty cotton.

“How did you kill him?”

“When I heard footsteps and muffled voices, I cut off his hand. His father burst into the room, and I threw the hand at him. He always called Xanus his right hand, so it seemed fitting to give him his son’s as a token. Then I hacked at his neck before they tackled me.”

My faint smile fades as I slip away from the memory, avoiding everything that came after that glorious moment. The merciless beating. Falling unconscious. The unforgiving sun as they dumped my broken body hours from the compound and left me to rot. I blink those thoughts away as I take in the man’s unperturbed expression.

“Why did they not kill you for taking the son’s life?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they thought a long death in the desert would be more fitting. Or maybe because they were afraid they’d enjoy it just like I did, and their house of straw would tumble away.”

“Would you do it again?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. I look past him to the door, unsure I’ll ever walk through it. “I would kill them all, if I could.”

“Why didn’t you just try to escape?”

“I did try. It nearly worked once.” I close my eyes, remembering that beautiful night when a rare storm blanketed the commune when I was twelve. I snuck out and bolted into the rain. Lightning streaked across the sky and thunder boomed around me like drums. Freedom poured into me with every drop of water that pelted my skin. I’d hoped I could get far in the cool, wet weather, but I hadn’t counted on the flash flood through the creek bed. I couldn’t swim.

I open my eyes to the memory of hands around my arms, pulling me from the fast-moving water. “They put me in the Sinner’s Box for punishment,” I say, trying to repress a shudder at the thought of being encased in the narrow iron coffin. “But it was worth it.”

I meet the man’s eyes and he watches me for a long moment before he steps away and turns around, setting the water glass on the desk to his left.

He then walks to the opposite wall and studies one of the topographic maps.

“Do you know what I meant when I said you were in my *dumping ground*?” he asks. He doesn’t look at me. His gaze seems trapped within the swirling lines of topography on the thin paper. I wonder if that’s where his dumping ground is, somewhere among those hills and valleys.

I think for a moment before I answer. My head is still buzzing and my muscles tighten with cramps. Working out a problem feels like trying to lift my feet free of deep mud. “It was your third question, but the most important to you. The only one that sounded like an accusation. Is it a hiding place?”

“Of sorts,” he says. He turns to face me. A knife glints in the dim light, clutched in his hand.

The man steps toward me. These might be my last breaths. I’m still and quiet, watching as he draws closer in the small, narrow space.

The man steps around me and cuts the zip ties that bind my wrists.

“Come with me,” he says as he takes my arm in a firm grip.

The man neither rushes nor coddles me as we leave the office. The cool night air is a relief on my sunburnt skin. We’re in some kind of industrial building site where the land has been leveled by the dozers parked on the perimeter and temporary structures dot one edge of the space. We head toward a canvas dome building and enter through the scuffed white door.

The man turns on a single row of overhead fluorescents and the unintelligible sound of a muffled, desperate voice fill the wide space.

“She said you were the Devil,” the man whispers to me as we stop at the edges of the light. A woman is bound to a chair that lies on sheets of clear plastic. Her mouth is covered by duct tape. I recognize her wild eyes. She’s from the community that just abandoned me to the merciless desert sun.

“Zara,” I breathe. My heart riots, blood humming through my ears. Zara squints into the shadows, struggling against her bonds. A channel of blood paints a crimson stain across her face.

The man leans close, his voice low in my ear. “She said she was sent to make sure you were dead, and to kill you if you weren’t. When I found you, she was trying to convince herself to crush your skull with a rock. She begged me to help her cleanse your corrupted soul from the world.”

They must have wanted to test her loyalty. Zara’s not the type to level accusations, though she never would have stood up for me either. She’s not the first one to volunteer to lead prayers. She doesn’t sing hymns with the



most feeling or speak in tongues. She's not the first on her knees to praise Xantheus.

But she does still drop. She does still sing and lead prayers and sway with her hands reaching for the heavens in worship.

When they're not reaching for a rock, it seems.

I step forward into the light.

Zara's eyes widen. I see every thought in them. Every emotion. Recognition. Relief. The spiral into realization. Fear and hopelessness. Desperation and terror.

I'm motionless as I consume them all.

"This is a test," I say to the man as he stops by my side.

"Yes."

"And if I fail, I die."

The man nods in my periphery.

I will not fail.

"May I please have the knife?" I ask, holding out my hand. The man presses the warm wooden handle into my palm.

Zara struggles in the chair. She tries to scream and thrash as I approach the edge of the drop cloth with the blade in my hand. But I don't go to her. Instead, I bend down and cut a large square from the edge of the thick, clear plastic.

I stand, the sound of Zara's distressed cries following me as I stop in front of the man, handing him the knife by the handle. "The tape, please," I say as a brightness infuses his eyes. He nods toward a table to my right.

I pick the tape up from the table and walk over to Zara, the plastic fluttering in my hand. She shakes her head, pleading sounds and cries trapped by the adhesive stuck across her lips, tears sliding across its silver surface.

I lay the plastic over Zara's head like a shroud. "I should thank you," I say as I hold it in place on her crown. My teeth grip onto the frayed edge of the tape and I pull a few inches free, sticking it to the bottom of the polyethylene veil. "I've had an epiphany out there in the desert. Isn't that what you were chasing all these years? Lightning strikes from God? Though how Xantheus would be able to interpret them, I have no idea. Did you know that's not even his real name? His real name is Donald Soversky."

Sweat and tears streak the dust on Zara's neck. I can almost hear her pulse flooding her body with adrenaline.

I hold the taped end of the plastic to the back of Zara's neck, lifting the front over both our faces as though we're two best friends sharing secrets beneath the sheets. "I've discovered what I want to do with my life. I want justice for the scars you've given me. I want to kill everyone I can find like you, until I find the biggest. The worst. But I have to start somewhere. For today, the bottom will do." The scent of fear drifts from Zara's skin, caught between us. I lean a little closer until there's nothing for her to see but me. "Tell Donald Soversky Jr. that Ava sent you, when you get to hell."

Zara tries to scream as I press the plastic to her face and wind the tape around her neck again and again, staring into her eyes as her desperate last breaths mist the surface with condensation. I leave the roll of tape dangling from her throat like a necklace as I press the plastic against her skin, looking into her eyes as she struggles and slowly dies between my hands.

When Zara's muscles slacken and her heart stills, I climb off her body, the pain of my injuries dulled by the release of a need that's been sated. After one long, last look at the success of my efforts, I turn toward the man.

His eyes are vibrant. A smile ghosts across his lips.

"Did I pass?" I ask as I stop before him.

"My name is Samuel," he says. "I will teach. You will learn. How to camouflage. How to hunt and never be caught. And from this day onward, you are not Ava. You are Sombria. My shadow. My legacy."

Euphoria fills my veins. God might be blind to me, but the Devil isn't, and now that I've embraced my demon, he's given me a gift. A chance to be who I was always meant to be. "I will not fail."

I open my eyes to the present, holding onto that moment of a new life beginning. And then I go to my room, burrow under the covers, and fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.



I fucking hate these things.  
*Usually.*

The annual meet and greet is a department tradition, a chance for grad students to suck up to faculty, and for faculty to strut around with self-importance. Tradition includes canapés that are either too small to be filling or too gross to be edible. Sometimes both. Cheap wine will be *almost* flowing, but just enough for everyone to have a glass or two without getting a decent buzz. There's no music or entertainment to fill any awkward silence. The entire event seems carefully calculated to result in a maximum amount of suffering.

I should be dreading every moment leading up to this event. But as much as I want to convince myself otherwise, I'm hoping to see Bria.

It's been four days since I last saw her. I've been dreaming about her, even waking up in a sweat the first night with cum in my boxers like a fucking teenager. I kept an eye out for her that day and the next, scanning the crowds between classes and listening for her voice in the halls. I've even made unnecessary stops to all three coffee shops. It wasn't until yesterday that I found some dumbass excuse to walk past Bria's office, but her desk was empty. Only Tida and David were there and I didn't linger, not with Tida scowling at me and David the bearded and burly lumberjack hipster sizing me up like competition.

With every day that's passed, I've grown increasingly concerned. Is Bria sick? Is something wrong? Is she scouting new campuses to transfer to? Is she using espionage-level tactics to skillfully avoid me? These

questions bump around in my head like irritating flies, and I have nowhere to direct them for answers. It's not as though I can ask Fletcher, because she'll never shut up about it if I do.

I need to see Bria, even though I shouldn't. I should be trying to avoid her as much as she might be trying to avoid me. But that's not at all what I *want* to do.

I run my fingers through my hair, watching my reflection in the mirror by the door as hope and desire twist my guts like rope. Hope that she shows up to the worst event of the academic year.

Fletcher's Uber driver pulls up to the curb with a honk, setting Duke off on a barking tangent, and I shush him before locking the door behind me to join Fletcher in the back of the vehicle. She passes me a silver flask as I close the door.

"Well, well. I see you're going for the 'Kaptain Hot Prof' look tonight," she says as she waves a hand at my leather moto jacket and black jeans.

I shrug and take a sip of bourbon from the flask, relishing the burn that I hope will short out the current of electricity humming in my veins. "Maybe I want to start my midlife crisis early."

Fletcher casts me a devious smile. "Could you be hoping to see my favorite student at this little soiree, I wonder?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Have you asked her to dinner yet to smooth things over?"

I drag a hand down my face and take another sip of bourbon. "Fletcher —"

"She's coming tonight. Sort it the fuck out."

I glare at Fletch even though a flare of both relief and anticipation burns in my cheeks. Fletch cackles and takes a long pull from her flask. "I love you," I say, "but I also hate you in the most comprehensive, all-consuming way."

"Lies. Speaking of sorting it the fuck out, any word from you-know-who on a certain approval for a certain student to accompany you on some interviews?"

My heart lurches. Fletch has been waiting for me to confirm any approval from Agent Espinoza about Bria providing support for the interviews. It just came through this morning, but I haven't had a chance to tell her. Not that I need to, she can see it in my torn, wary expression. Her smile lights up the space between us as she happy claps.

“Not a word, Fletcher. Not *one*,” I say. “Let me see if I can smooth things over with her first. *Maybe*. She gives me murder vibes.”

“It’s your own damn fault, you know.”

“Yeah. I know.” And I’m pretty sure it would be better if I left it that way.

We fall into other topics as we wind through the streets bathed in late afternoon sunlight. Usually, the annual meet and greet is held on campus, but this time Dr. Takahashi arranged to rent Windsor Station, a small bistro-slash-art gallery on the corner of a quaint, tree-lined street that’s home to upscale spas and antique dealers and boutique jewelers. When we arrive, quiet music and voices flow from the open door. A group of several students chatter and laugh on the front patio with plates of food and drinks in tall glasses.

“Are those Bellinis? I thought you said this party sucks,” Fletcher whispers as we pass the students.

“Yeah, it...”

Words die on my tongue as we enter the room.

Arching above a table of desserts is a massive balloon garland of muted grey, cream, and metallic gold, interspersed with tropical fronds painted in the same hues. There’s a bar along the wall to the right where one bartender mixes cocktails as the other pops the cork from a champagne bottle. Servers drift through the room with trays of hors d’oeuvres that would satisfy even my mother’s discriminating party tastes. There’s a DJ. Tall tables with candles. Fairy lights. *Floral arrangements*. Students and faculty chatting and laughing. *Actually* laughing, not fake laughing.

*What the fuck?*

“This has to be breaking some kind of faculty code of conduct,” I say as we steer toward the bar.

“Shut your mouth, rules boy. I’m buying.” Fletch sidles up to the bar and orders a Bellini and a bourbon. When the drinks are finished and Fletch slides the bills across the polished stainless steel, the bartender shakes his head. *Free bar*.

“What is this alternate universe?” I ask as Fletch’s smile beams and she stuffs ten dollars into the bartender’s tip jar.

“I dunno, Kapitalicious, but I like it.” Fuck sakes. It’s never a good sign when she breaks out the outlandish nicknames. I’m about to tell her as much when her bony elbow jams into my ribs, expertly missing the edge of

my jacket for full impact. “Hey, there’s your girl. See? Told you she’d be here.”

*Not my girl.* I’m about to say it. I really am. But then I follow Fletcher’s line of sight through the gap in the crowd.

My argument evaporates the second I see her.

Bria Brooks. Equal parts beautiful and fierce, like a fallen angel who relishes the kind of freedom that only comes with the absence of wings.

She’s wearing a loose-fitting, sheer black top that’s just transparent enough for her dark bra to show through, but her black blazer covers most of her torso. I can make out the lines of lithe muscle in her legs beneath her faux leather leggings. She stands perfectly balanced on thin stiletto heels, one ankle crossed in front of the other, a clutch in one hand and a drink in the other. Her dark hair is piled in a loose bun, her smoky eyes firmly latched onto Tida who’s in the throes of an animated story.

Bria is nothing short of gorgeous.

David the bearded hipster lumberjack thinks so too, that fucker. He casts continuous glances at Bria, and I watch as he offers to fetch her another drink when hers is empty. She gives him a grateful smile, but even from a distance I can tell it doesn’t reach her eyes. I tamp down the sudden urge to smash my fist into his face and pull my attention away before she catches me watching.

“I take it back. You can’t go for her. The two of you together would be too much hotness. You’d either burn my retinas or cancel each other out, and I’m not sure which is worse,” Fletch says.

“I think Bro Lumberjack has it covered,” I reply in a low voice as David weaves through the crowd toward the bar behind us.

“Nah, she’s not interested.”

“Why do you think that?”

Fletcher turns toward me with a shit eating grin. “Because of the way she’s looking at you.”

I glance at Bria and our gazes collide. She assesses me with the calculating eye of a falcon, as though she’s determining how quickly she could rip my throat out. I’m sure my own expression is nearly as dark and heated, though for an entirely different reason. It physically pains me to break the connection and tear my gaze away.

“It’s only because she clearly wants to slice my skin off and wear it like a mask.”

“Christ, you’re so dramatic,” Fletcher says. I roll my eyes, but rather than argue, I focus on the sound of David’s voice behind me as he orders a lager and a grove and tonic. I have no clue what a grove and tonic is, but I commit it to memory nonetheless.

David passes us with his drinks just as Dr. Takahashi steps to the center of the room and taps his champagne glass with his fork. The DJ turns down the music and the crowd hushes into silence.

“Thank you all so much for coming to the annual Berkshire University Psychology Department meet and greet,” he says in his kind yet authoritative tone, his accent warming the vowels of each word. “This is an opportunity for us to welcome our new graduate students and to celebrate the achievements of those who are continuing and finishing their studies. For those who have attended before, I’m sure you’re aware that this is not our usual venue or style of event. However, it is a momentous occasion, as I both have the pleasure and the unfortunate occasion to announce the upcoming retirement of our longest serving faculty member, Dr. Edward Wells.”

*Holy shit.*

There are murmurs and claps and a couple of gasps, maybe even one from my own lips. I was beginning to think the old man would die on campus. I even threw a bet into Dr. Strom’s pool, which I’ve just officially lost. Dr. Takahashi continues with an abridged history of Dr. Wells’s long-standing tenure in the department as I scan the crowd for Dr. Strom, but instead my eyes catch Bria’s. She leans her arm on the edge of one of the high tables, stirring her drink as she watches me. I catch the brief glint of something in her expression, a fleeting tug at the corner of her lips before she raises her straw to her lips.

*She already knew.*

How the fuck could she know? I didn’t know, and I’m faculty. Maybe because I’m going on sabbatical? Did Takahashi leave me out of an internal communication? I break my gaze from Bria’s and search out the other faculty members, but they all look as equally surprised as me.

I’m about to shift my gaze to Bria when Dr. Takahashi finishes his spiel about Dr. Wells and turns toward me. “Also leaving us at the end of December, albeit temporarily, is Dr. Eli Kaplan, who will be starting an eighteen-month sabbatical. Dr. Kaplan will be pursuing some external opportunities during that time, and potentially a bit of travel. Do I have it



right that you have an off-road motorcycle adventure planned in South America?”

Heat infuses my cheeks as I feel the weight of everyone’s eyes on my skin, Bria’s heaviest of all. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Just come back in one piece, yes?”

I smile. “I hear Dr. Strom has a pool going for which limbs I’ll break, so I’ll do my best to make sure he loses all his money.”

A peel of laughter flows through the room. “Very good, very good. Now I’d like to introduce Dr. Kathryn Fletcher, who joins our faculty from UCLA, where she has specialized in the areas of memory, specifically the impact of digital media on memory recall. Dr. Fletcher will take over Dr. Kaplan’s class schedule next semester in addition to expanding our graduate course offerings from next year.”

Fletch gives a wave to the crowd, which from anyone else would look awkward, but Flawless Fletch makes it look effortlessly graceful.

“Now that the announcements are over, I’m sure you’re ready to get back to the party. Please ensure that you have safe transportation home. If you have any concerns whatsoever, please speak with me or another member of the faculty. Have a wonderful evening,” Dr. Takahashi concludes with a bow of his head as a round of applause encircles the room. He heads in our direction as other faculty members surround Dr. Wells.

“Quite the party,” I say as he stops next to us. “You’ll have to convince Dr. Fletcher here that it’s out of the norm.”

Dr. Takahashi smiles and we turn to get in line for the bar before it becomes too crowded. “Yes, don’t get used to it. This all was a gift from Edward’s friend Samuel.”

“That’s lovely. I guess we’ll have to find some other friend of Samuel’s to retire next year in that case,” Fletcher says, and the two strike up a conversation about the social calendar for the next few months as I scan the crowd for Bria. I catch a brief glimpse of her with Tida and David before a master’s student approaches me and strikes up a conversation about motorcycles as Fletch pushes a fresh drink into my hand. And that’s the way the next hour and a half goes. Random conversations. Appetizers. Stolen glances at Bria Brooks. A growing buzz as Fletch brings fresh drinks, likely trying to force my already tenuous grip on my rules to loosen.

Not that I need the help.

Something dark and demonic is roiling beneath my ribs, clutching and scraping at my heart with every glimpse I get of David's increasingly forward behavior toward Bria.

At first, it's a hand on her arm. Later, I notice his fingers coiling around her wrist as he leans close to whisper something in her ear. My veins fill with lava when his palm on her mid-back causes her to flinch, and the idiot doesn't notice. Her eyes dart to mine but flick away just as quickly. She downs her drink and says something to David and he takes her empty glass, wobbling a bit as he heads for the bar with a cocky smile. Bria then turns to Tida and another student who's joined their group and says a few words before she leaves them, heading to a side door that leads to a small patio.

The swell of my need to follow her climbs my throat as though it will drown me. I try to swallow it down.

But I can't.

I stride to the side of the bar, skipping the line as the students at the counter are distracted by their conversation, and get the attention of the bartender with forty dollars rolled between my fingers. He nods as he shakes a cocktail. I order a bourbon on ice and a grove and tonic, which he tells me is a nonalcoholic spirit. Interesting. So Bria is stone cold sober. This is probably a terrible idea, but I am *not* sober, and therefore I'll worry about it tomorrow.

While David is caught in the line at the bar, I head across the room with my drinks in hand, dodging the gazes of students and faculty who might want to talk shop until I make it to the side door.

Bria leans against a railing with her back to me, lit by the dim patio lights strung overhead. Flowers cascade from hanging baskets above her, twisting in the warm breeze. She's looking down at something in her hands. I can tell from the tension in her shoulders that she knows she's no longer alone. Something about that makes my heart burn a little hotter.

"Escaping?" I ask as I stop at the railing, keeping a wide berth as I extend the drink toward her. "Grove and tonic, correct?"

Bria pierces me with one of those long, unnerving looks that gives none of her thoughts away as she accepts the drink with a nod of thanks. I notice she doesn't change her position to mirror mine. She doesn't make any gestures to welcome me, nor to push me away. Everything is locked beneath impenetrable layers. A growing part of me is desperate to take a hammer to them. "What would I be escaping from?" she asks.

I shrug and give her a dimpled smile, which she seems to find infuriating, judging by the way her eyes narrow. “Small talk. Political posturing. Social conformity. Or just a handsy lumberjack hipster.”

A faint smile passes across Bria’s lips as she twirls a white bloom between her fingers. “Says the tweed-turned-rebel professor hipster.” Bria’s gaze drifts down to my leather jacket, the flower still spinning in her grip as she takes a thoughtful sip of her drink. “Social conformity,” she echoes, dodging the subject of the touchy-feely lumberjack. “Do I not...conform?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“No. Not like you do.” Bria’s gaze seizes mine, dark and consuming and full of secrets. Her interest in my answer seems genuine, though I feel a thread of malice in it too. “Or do you, Dr. Kaplan? Maybe it’s all an illusion. Maybe you like to follow the rules on the surface, and break them all when no one is looking.”

The dimming light of dusk hides the blush that flares up my neck. I take a sip of my drink, the blurred warmth of my buzz making me bolder as I step closer to Bria. “What kinds of rules do you think I would break?”

Bria lets out a low chuckle that comes from the depths of her chest. “I don’t know, why don’t *you* tell *me*?”

My cock strains against my jeans. I ache to push her backwards until her spine is flush with the wall and whisper all the rules I’d love to break with her. I want to slide my hands over her body. I want to know if her pussy is wet, to know the sweet, hot taste of her arousal.

I swallow, my grip on my glass tightening. “You knew about Dr. Wells’s retirement,” I say instead. Bria turns her gaze away when she gives a single nod. “You were never going to meet with him about being your advisor, were you.”

“No. Only about being his TA for his Abnormal Psych class.”

I replay the conversation in her office, trying to recall Bria’s exact words. She didn’t lie, but I realize now that she must have used the opportunity to gauge how sincere I was with both my apology and the comments I’d made about her work. If I hadn’t really cared about either, I wouldn’t have implored her to steer clear of Wells.

“My uncle knows Dr. Wells,” Bria offers before I have the chance to inquire further. She looks pensive as she raises the flower to her nose and inhales the scent. “I knew before anyone else. But I meant what I said. Other options were open.”

I lean against the railing and tip my glass from one side to the next, the clink of the ice cube filling the silence. "I'm glad you went with Fletcher."

Bria looks up at me then, a darkness fleeting across her face. It's not the lightless, inhibited anger that I've seen in her before. No, this burns like a flare before it snuffs out. It looks more like...starvation. She swallows, nodding once before looking away. And then her expression shifts, and everything is neatly back in place as though a wave has just swept her thoughts clean. She drains her glass and straightens. "Thank you for the drink."

Bria turns on her heel to start toward the door, but my hand darts out to stop her. My fingertips halt just shy of her wrist but I swear I can feel her warmth on my skin. She looks down at my hand and back up to my face as I clear my throat and level her with a serious gaze. "I wanted to ask you if you'd join me for dinner. In a professional capacity, of course." Bria doesn't move, doesn't blink. I'm not sure she even breathes. "To discuss your work. And as an apology for the other day."

Bria chuckles. The sound is a low, husky rumble in her chest, more like a growl than a laugh. But this is not the sound of amusement. Her eyes are lethal, capturing all light and devouring it.

"I'm afraid I must pass. I'm ever so sorry, Dr. Kaplan," Bria says, her voice dripping with sarcasm through her saccharine smile. She drifts toward me, a shark slicing through the twilight gloom. She leans in close, her lips nearly flush to my neck. I fold my hand into a fist to stop myself from touching her. "I guess you'll have to enter the organ trade after all. I'm sure your bestie Fletcher will start with a kidney. But if it were me, I'd go straight for the heart."

Bria slides the stem of the flower behind my ear, and with the slightest graze of her lips to my cheek she leaves me standing alone in the growing dark.

I don't think I've ever felt such desire and darkness, such regret and rage. I've never wanted to drag someone into the fire with me, to let the heat of it conquer and consume us both. Not like this.

...At least not until the moment Bria walks by the patio, her arm looped through David's. She blows me a kiss when he's not looking, and then fades away into the shadows between the lamplight.

I leave the party without another word, an inferno burning my blood to ash.



Well. Last night was more fun than I expected.

No, not David. I took him to a club and promptly ditched him there. He's a good-looking guy, in a wannabe survivalist kind of way. I'm sure he made out fine. Better than he would have if he'd stuck with me, anyway. I was starting to fantasize about ripping off his hands and shoving them down his throat.

But Kaplan?

Now *that* was fun.

Seeing him across the room was like standing on the edge of a chasm filled with things I've never felt. Electricity resonated in my chest every time I met his gaze. My core coiled and ached whenever we caught one another in a stolen glance. There was murder in Kaplan's eyes when David touched my back where my deepest scars rest. I'm not sure why I looked at him then, or why warmth flooded my veins when he saw me flinch and his grip tightened on his glass. And then our brief encounter outside? My heart rioted behind my ribs. I warred between wanting to spill his blood or tear off his clothes and fuck him right there on the patio.

And I think he felt the same.

Maybe part of him does want me after all. I still can't quite connect the pull I thought I felt between us at Deja Brew with the abysmal meeting a few short hours later in Kaplan's office. I've replayed it so many times in perfect clarity, and yet I still can't identify what I misunderstood. Since I revisited the first time I met Samuel, I've been able to reset and distance myself from obsessing about it. But last night, I'm sure I saw his darkness

come to the surface, the veil between it and the real world thinning with every drink he took. That beast is hungry. Wild. Maybe even protective of what it thinks is his, though Kaplan's rational mind keeps it pinned in a cage.

And nothing will rattle that cage more than denial and jealousy.

I smile as I replay blowing a kiss to Kaplan, savoring the aromatic steam of my espresso as I sit by the window in Grindstone. Conveniently, the coffee shop is just across the street from the upscale Mosaic Nail Salon, where Cynthia Nordstrom has an appointment in eighteen minutes. I glance at the entrance before turning my attention back to my laptop, rereading the information on her upcoming appointments. In keeping with his usual computer wizardry, Samuel has gained access to the Praetorian client calendars and retrieved Cynthia's information. "More to come. Trying other systems. It will take time," his message said. I'm excited to see what else he will dig up, but for now the calendar is a significant win.

So here I am, waiting in a blonde wig, drinking what I can confirm is the best espresso in town. Kaplan is right about Grindstone. How irritating. It irritates me more that my thoughts keep pulling back to him, when I should be focused on the notes I stole from his laptop the other night. There isn't much here I didn't already know about Caron Berger aside from a detailed list of the many criminal offenses Legio Agni is under investigation for—from counseling its members to commit crimes to tax evasion and a host of liabilities in between. Kaplan's theories on Berger's motivations are buried in the margins. Probable childhood trauma. Feelings of isolation. A savior complex intertwined with narcissism that's worsened by his ability to surround himself with people he can manipulate. He's adept at using his charisma to create a sense of community and false safety. But the information I was really hoping for isn't here. I want to know who Caron Berger truly is—the real man, not the phantom. He stays so well-hidden only a handful of people in his innermost circle even know what he looks like.

And Cynthia Nordstrom is one of those people.

A black SUV with tinted windows rolls to a stop outside Mosaic and I text the plate number to Samuel in code, though as the passenger door opens, I already know the thread will lead back to Praetorian. I recognize the man who steps out as one of the bodyguards I saw leaving the building on Tropane. His gaze shifts around the street before he moves to the rear of

the vehicle and opens the door for Cynthia. Her perfect blonde bob lifts in the breeze, a Birkin bag tucked tight against her body as she walks into the nail salon. I drain my espresso, pack my laptop, and head across the street.

I've taken great pains to get the right look today that will appeal to Cynthia's discerning eye for a little lamb that would fit with Caron's flock. I call today's mask "Melancholy Moneyed Lamb Chop." My makeup is light and fresh, but I keep my expression a little subdued. I've got a low-calorie wheatgrass smoothie in a transparent reusable cup with a silicone straw because I'm both health conscious and environmentally responsible. I'm in new activewear and my Coach bag is expensive, because this lamb chop might be lonely but at least I've got money. I look nonthreatening because I'm often labeled as "too thin," which people seem to synonymize with "sad" or "weak," when in reality that's just what happens when you spend the first fourteen years of your life malnourished in a desert cult. And now it plays well into my long-game disguise to keep it that way. *Bria Brooks? She couldn't possibly kill a man with a single punch.*

Looks are, indeed, deceiving. And hopefully my looks today will deceive Cynthia.

I pass the bodyguard who's stationed himself outside the door and enter Mosaic, the scent of nail lacquer and acetone wafting on the steady whirl of the air filtration system. Cynthia is at the reception counter, and another woman is waiting in line between us. The space beyond them is pristine, with rose-gold accents and muted floral arrangements adorning the quartz counters of the manicure stations. Quilted white chairs line the walls, several women scattered among them receiving pedicure treatments. I resist the urge to shudder. I'm not looking forward to being touched by strangers but I'll roll with it for a chance to get close to Cynthia.

Another receptionist joins the desk and takes the details of the next client in line as Cynthia is directed to a manicure station at one of two long, narrow tables. As I check in, I watch her look at the other women in the room. Some are here with friends; others don't fit her target demographic of potential new recruits. I avert my gaze as her head turns in my direction.

After I'm checked in for my mani-pedi, a nail tech then leads me to the seat next to Cynthia. I set my bag down and settle in my chair before catching her eye with a polite smile. I've never been this close to her and my heart trills with excitement, though I keep my sweet, melancholy mask in place. Cynthia gives me a quick scan with her green eyes and grins.



“Good morning,” she says in a smooth, honeyed voice. “My name’s Cynthia. Looks like we’re going to be station buddies. What’s your name?”

“Nice to meet you,” I say. “I’m Neriah.”

“What a pretty name. I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

I cast my eyes down with a demure smile. “Thank you. My father was an evangelical preacher. It’s one of those old-school biblical names that you don’t hear around very often.”

Cynthia’s smile grows a touch warmer. “Really? What does it mean?”

“*Lamp of the Lord*,” I say with a little laugh. “Maybe he forgot to change the bulb.”

Cynthia laughs in reply. “Didn’t stick with the church?”

“Not so much, no.” I mix a little sadness into my smile and turn away as our nail techs ask details about what colors and designs we’d both like. When they start working on our hands, I turn my attention back to Cynthia. “What are you going for today?”

“Kind of a seasonal, early autumn theme,” she replies, using her free hand to bring up a photo on her phone of a complex design of flowers in fall colors. “You?”

“Just short and crimson. I’d love to do something like yours but I teach yoga and I’d probably end up stabbing myself in the eye.”

A light laugh flows past Cynthia’s lips. “You teach yoga? I’ve always wanted to try it but I also don’t want to look incompetent in front of people who know what they’re doing.”

“Let me let you in on a little yogi secret. *No one* knows what they’re doing. Like, *ever*, inside or outside the studio. We’re all just faking it ‘til we make it.” I smile and give her a little shrug. “Though I don’t know about you, you look like you’ve made it.”

Cynthia blows out a long breath, her eyes brightening with the compliment. “Well, I don’t know about that. It’s been a process, that’s for sure. But I’ve been lucky to have a lot of support from other women.” I nod, looking down at my nails as I cultivate an expression that says *I’m such a lost and lonely little lamb, Cynthia*. “What does your preacher father think of you being a yogi?”

My groan carries an edge of bitterness. “You’ll be shocked to hear he hates it. But it’s helping me to find some peace, you know?”

“Yeah,” Cynthia says. “I get that.”

The thrill of being so close to my newest prize is the only thing that keeps my irritation at bay for having to suffer through this small talk and nail situation as our manicures progress. I ask Cynthia a few questions about her line of work, and she describes her role as the senior VP of a health and wellness company, but I don't ask anything too prying that would get her hackles up. I give her some fake details on my history when she asks, pulling from the backstory I've created. Wealthy parents. Hints of religious trauma. A sprinkle of shaky confidence as I describe wanting to take a break from undergraduate studies to "find myself." Every tiny detail is like a drop of paint on a canvas. If I add too much color, Cynthia might spot the story as a lie. But if I give her just enough, she'll fill in the picture and paint me into the person she wants to see. Hopefully one who's the perfect fit for Legio Agni.

Eventually, we move along to the pedicure chairs, which is a new kind of torture, but my suffering is thankfully rewarded later when we both pay at reception. A caring smile lights Cynthia's feature as she takes her receipt. "You know what Neriah, I think you might enjoy my women's group."

*Fucking finally.* "Oh? What is the group for?"

"Basically, it's a community of like-minded ladies who encourage and empower each other to live our truths through health, well-being, and mindfulness," Cynthia says, almost as though she's reciting corporate propaganda.

"You know, I think that's just the kind of thing I need. And if you want, I'd be happy to teach a beginner's yoga class. Just to like...contribute."

Cynthia beams as we head toward the doors. "That would be wonderful. Here, let me give you my number." I open up my contacts on my burner phone, already loaded with fake numbers just in case, and I hand it to Cynthia. "We usually meet at six every second Saturday, and the location often changes. I'll text you the details," Cynthia says as she taps out her contact information.

"Awesome, thanks so much. As long as I don't have a conflict with classwork, I'll be there. I can send you some guidance for what to wear, but I'll bring the mats," I reply as I send her a message with my fake last name to complete the exchange. When she invariably looks me up later, she'll find everything she needs to fill in the painting of Neriah Cameron, Melancholy Moneyed Lambchop, and potential new recruit.

We say our goodbyes as Cynthia's bodyguard gives me a quick dismissive glance, and then she's off, speeding away to her three o'clock meeting with a supplements distributor. I watch with a farewell wave before I head to my condo with a triumphant smile. After a quick change, I walk to campus to pick up my car and then head directly to Cedar Ridge where I find Samuel reading in the common room.

"Bria."

"Uncle."

"How was the party?" he asks as I kiss his cheeks.

"Lovely. Edward appreciated the gesture. You didn't have to go to such lengths."

"Bah," he says with a wave. "Edward is the only one who smuggles Pont Neuf in when he comes, unlike some visitors."

I smile and his eyes glint beneath the film of age. "You're not supposed to drink wine."

"I'm an old man. I can do as I please."

"You always have."

"Indeed," Samuel says as he motions for me to bring his wheelchair closer. "How was the nail salon?"

"Very productive, thank you. I even made a new friend. I've been invited to a women's group, which will help me 'live my truth,'" I say with air quotes as Samuel rolls his eyes with a snort. "It's been a good day."

Samuel's expression turns diabolical. "It's about to get better."

"Is that so."

"Yes. We're going to have a pillow fight."

I laugh as I take hold of Samuel's elbow, lowering him into his wheelchair. A murderous glimmer reflects in his smoky eyes when I give him a dark grin. "A pillow fight. *Really.*"

"Yes. We haven't had such a game for a long time," he replies as I wheel him toward the polished floor of the empty hallway leading to his room.

I lean over Samuel's shoulder to whisper in his ear. "That's because your little game might land us both in jail."

"Nonsense," Samuel grumbles, waving a hand in my direction to shoo me away. I notice the slightest tremor in his fingers. He's tired. His age is creeping in. I know I'm powerless to stop time, but I still loathe the evidence of its inescapable grip.

We turn into Samuel's room and I push him toward his desk, knowing this is where he'll want to go. "Who is it?"

"Richard Piston"

I bark a laugh. "Dick Piston? Are you serious? He deserves it for that name alone. What did he do?"

"He stole my shoes."

"Doesn't that happen daily in places like this? Do you kill everyone who steals your things?"

"Yes."

"Fair point."

"He also said I shouldn't be playing with computers. *Those are for kids.* Ageist prick."

"Yes, that's a little uncalled for." I sit on the edge of the bed and watch as Samuel logs into his computer and starts typing, his fingers moving with a musician's precision. There's no need to ask what he's doing, I already know, and we don't waste words between us. He's taking over the security cameras, and likely creating a diversion with the front desk computers to occupy the staff.

"Room eighteen. He always naps at this time. He's asleep now." Samuel locks his computer screen and pulls open a drawer in his desk, reaching in to release a hidden compartment. He removes two pairs of leather gloves and a pre-filled syringe of SUX, stuffing the capped needle under his leg. He lays his phone in his lap, the cameras feeding through on its screen, then motions for me to come forward as he slips on one pair of gloves. "I'll inject, you keep him quiet. The dose will paralyze but he'll remain awake. I want him to hear me. Then you will finish it."

I let go of a deep sigh as I cross my arms and we stare at one another. "This seems reckless. What happened to 'kill every risk that would kill you first'?"

"The risks have been mitigated," he replies, waving his phone in the air as though it's a sufficient explanation. My eyebrows climb and he fixes me with a hard glare. "I can set off any alarm, any piece of critical equipment to divert staff away. Besides, they'll be busy preparing for dinner and the evening medication dispensary."

"Perhaps being at Cedar Ridge isn't so good for you after all, Samuel. It's as though you've suddenly discovered fast food and now you're addicted. We're not exactly going for cheeseburgers, you know." Samuel's

glare turns brutally cold. A reminder of who we both are, and the roles we inhabit. Two predators in the same territory. A careful balance we've always tread. I can push, but only as far as he'll let me. My arms drop to my sides and I shake my head. "Fine. But if I'm discovered and sent to prison, I am taking you with me."

"Psshhh," he hisses. His eyes soften to their resting level of cutting intensity. "Do not fault an old man for wanting to spend quality time with his favorite niece."

"I'm your only niece. And technically not."

"Irrelevant nonsense," he grumbles. "Now get on with it. I don't want to be last in line for the lasagna."

I smile before I duck behind him, taking up the handles of his wheelchair. A buzz of excitement skitters through my skin as we exit his room and head down the hall to room eighteen. It's not the same swirling rush I feel when I spring a carefully laid trap around my prey. That's different. Transformative. Like I'm a bottle filled with lightning. Like I could shatter and this power would explode around me, consuming everything it touches.

No, it doesn't feel like that.

But it still feels pretty good.

We drift in silence down the hall, Samuel watching his phone where he can spot any movement on the hacked security cameras. Nothing comes. We stop outside the closed door of room eighteen and Samuel checks the camera hidden within, confirming that Dick Piston is still asleep with one decisive nod.

I pull on my gloves and turn the handle, sweeping the silent door into the room.

The old man is sleeping on his back, his mouth gaping, a gentle snore rumbling in his throat. He's tall and lean. He looks strong for his advanced age. I dart a glance down at Samuel as I halt his wheelchair next to the head of the bed. He seems unconcerned that his rival could be capable of self-defense. His focus is consumed by his prey.

Samuel reaches beneath his leg and withdraws the syringe, uncapping it as I walk to the other side of the bed and prepare to hold Richard down. I meet Samuel's gaze and dart my eyes to the phone. He gives the cameras a final check and nods.

Then he slips the needle into Richard's jugular and depresses the plunger.

Dick Piston doesn't move. The cadence of his snore remains uninterrupted. He doesn't even twitch.

I look up at Samuel and he at me. He shrugs.

"What the—"

I never finish my sentence.

Richard erupts from the bed with a right hook as I'm distracted with Samuel. I twist away but he still connects, catching my cheekbone. The old fucker is *strong*. It's like being hit with a brick. My cheek burns. The punch hurtles me through time and into memory. Into a red mist. Into the unforgiving desert sun.

I fall back, then launch with a rebound of rage. I jump onto the mattress and wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze. I feel the pulse in my palms. Mine or his, I don't know. It hammers at my skin. I grip tighter and the old man gasps and flails with rapidly waning strength as the drug starts to take effect.

"Bria, *no*," Samuel hisses with a note of desperation. "You'll break it."

*The hyoid.*

I'll break the wings of the fragile bone in his throat. A telltale sign of murder.

I force my fingers open. The old man takes a heaving breath in and I clamp my hand to his mouth before he can scream. My teeth are gritted so tight they could break. I stare into his eyes, ready to pinch his nose shut as his weakening hits pummel my shoulders. My cheek pulses with a steady beat.

"*You*," Samuel growls next to Richard's face. The old man's eyes are wide as they shift to meet Samuel's. His body is going slack as the SUX courses through his bloodstream. His arms quake and drop to his sides, his muscles shuddering. "First you steal my possessions. Then you insult me. And now," he says as he pinches Richard's nose shut, tears leaking from the corners of the old man's eyes, "*now* you dare to strike my Sombria? If only I had given you less succinylcholine. I would take my time. I would make you *suffer*."

The old man struggles to take a breath that will not come. My hand stays pressed across his mouth. Samuel's fingers grip tight to his nostrils. And the drug ensures that no strength is left to lend to the fight.

Richard's chest convulses. It becomes a rhythmic pulse of spasming muscle. His eyes drift away from us, the fear within spiriting away like a gas. The convulsions continue as his gaze becomes glassy, as his heart slows. Death unravels like a spectrum. This is my favorite part, the mystery of possibility. If I move my hand away now, will he take a breath and live? Will his body continue to shut each door to life? So many options are at my fingertips. The choice belongs to me.

And I choose death.

Samuel and I wait, locked in our joint effort to hold Richard still until the convulsions stop and there is no coming back to tell tales and spill secrets.

When Richard is gone, we look across his body at one another. My heart drums a slowing percussion through my chest and up my neck and beneath my skull, settling in my cheekbone. I let my hand slip away from the old man's slack mandible as his final, saturated exhalation drifts into the room.

"Thank you," I whisper.

Samuel gives a single nod. He looks down at the body and then to the phone in his lap, checking the cameras. "Come."

I walk around the edge of the bed and grip the handles of Samuel's wheelchair, pushing him toward the door. He gives a final glance to the video feed and then we exit the room, closing the door behind us.

We don't speak as we pass down the hall like wraiths. I push Samuel into his room, wheeling him to his desk before backing away to sit on the edge of the bed, my cheekbone hot and throbbing against the weight of the tense air between us. I resist the urge to touch it, keeping my hands folded in my lap as I wait for Samuel to switch the security system back to the primary feed. He locks the screen and wheels himself away from the desk, pivoting to face me.

These are the moments with Samuel that I enjoy the most. The acceptance of his wisdom, coding it into my memory. He helps me to sculpt my skill. He hones my expertise, like cutting the facets of a diamond. Even on nights like tonight, when I have fallen short of flawless, I feel one step closer to indestructible.

Samuel looks at me for a long moment. I say nothing. I know to wait, to remain still and polite. "Your rage, Bria. Your inability to separate the traumas of your past from the needs of your present. You react quickly to protect yourself, but you don't stop on your own. It is your greatest

weakness. If you can listen to me enough to stand down, you can find it within yourself to do so. You *must*.”

I give him a single bow of my head. “Yes. How do I conquer this?”

Samuel wheels a little closer. His eyes scour my face like steel wool, narrowing when they land on my throbbing cheek. “You have been killing your past. Perhaps you must embrace the memories that won’t die.”

My heart shrivels behind my bones. He’s probably right. He’s *always* right. Even when I hate the sound of it.

I don’t know how to do that. Maybe it’s because I don’t really want to. Killing anything that reminds me of my past has felt therapeutic, even if the lives I took weren’t directly related to DOX. Finding individuals connected with cults like the one I was raised in? That has been enough to keep my past where it belongs, in the desert sands behind my memory palace, trapped beyond the walls I’ve built in my mind. Most of the time, anyway.

“I will find a way,” I say to Samuel. We remain unmoving as we watch one another, and then he finally nods. I stand before him. “I’d better get you to the lasagna line.”

“Stay.”

“Of course.”

I wheel Samuel from his room and into the dining hall where we wait in line for lasagna and salad, then sit apart from the other residents at a table for two next to the window. After a while, the ambulance shows up, no siren to fill the silence between us. But the lights flash their metronomic beat across Samuel’s face. He watches as they load Richard’s covered body into the vehicle.

“One day soon enough, that will be me,” Samuel says, his eyes fixed to the ambulance. “You must learn to do this on your own.”

I watch Samuel’s face, but he’s not looking at me. He’s looking into the future as it rolls away into the shadows of cedars and pines.

“I know,” I say.

I just don’t know *how*.





**T**he weekend has been a waste.  
The problem?

If you'd asked me on Saturday, I would have said Bria Brooks. *Emphatically*. But I've come to realize the problem is *me*.

After the departmental meet and greet, I woke up Saturday morning with no hangover but a mood sour enough to make up for it. I packed up my camera and Duke for a day hike and got some shots of the mountains that were fine. Just *fine*. But there was no interesting wildlife, no dramatic sky, nothing really compelling. The best shots I took were of Duke, and I have no fewer than ten thousand better photos of him anyway. Everything felt dull and uninspiring.

When I got home, I called a few of my soccer friends and hit up several bars that night with the full intention of finding someone to go home with. A woman who would be up for some no-frills fun. Someone to take my mind off of the constant catastrophe that seems to surround me whenever I have a run-in with Ms. Brooks. I flirted, bought a few drinks, but after some half-hearted conversations with a couple of women, I just couldn't make myself dive in and go for it.

So I got drunk instead.

The hangover that was missing on Saturday? It came in full force on Sunday.

While I was bemoaning my life choices with a Gatorade and a bag of barbecue chips, I had an epiphany.

Bria stares into the darkness, but she's not looking for light. She's looking for the deepest shadows.

I've gotten the sense before that she interacts differently with me than other people. Not just because I fucked up our first meeting and she now gives no shits about playing nice, but because she seems to see more to me beneath the surface, and she's disappointed, even *angry*, when I lean into the mask rather than the man beneath. Case in point, our conversation on the patio. She seemed pleased when I made note of the handsy lumberjack David. It's as though she appreciated the boldness of my comment. Then I swept that away by inviting her to dinner when she knew I didn't want to, though she doesn't know the reasons why.

She's disappointed. She claps back when I succumb to the man I present to the world, and not the one she somehow knows who lies buried beneath. And honestly, I'd like to put that mask aside, just once in a while.

I wonder what would happen if I did.

Resolving to get my shit together, I drag myself to the shower and then walk Duke, before settling into my home office to conquer some work. It's a bit of a slog at first, but once I get into it, I manage to type out my lecture notes for my classes next week, prep some topics for upcoming midterms, and start compiling folders of past essay topics for Fletcher.

After a solid few hours, I turn my attention to Caron Berger.

I log into the link Agent Espinoza sent and review the files on Tristan McCoy and Nick Hutchinson. Something about attributing their disappearances to Caron Berger still doesn't sit right with me. He certainly has the means to make people vanish. In a sense, I guess he does it all the time. The vulnerable women of his innermost circle gradually erase their identities with every tier of discipleship they ascend. But it seems to have started innocently. First with health and wellness. Then closed online communities. Those became focused on mental health, especially religious trauma, though no professional psychologists or counselors were permitted to join. And suddenly there were festivals, then retreats, and then one retreat just never ended, becoming a commune. And now? Now there are four remote communes that we know of, the largest right here in Montana, the Vellera compound at the edge of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

Caron Berger isolates these women. They are dedicated to him. They give him their money, their worship, their devotion, and in exchange he

protects them from the outside world. All the while, he believes he saves them. Even as he slowly consumes their souls.

But would he be involved in making people disappear for defrauding his company or causing a social media uproar that probably resulted in more sales in the long run? I don't know for sure, but my gut says *no*.

I call Agent Espinoza to talk through my thoughts, hoping to catch her on a Sunday. She answers on the second ring.

"Dr. Kaplan. I'm glad you called. I was going to give you a shout later today," she says.

"Good timing in that case. I've been thinking more about the disappearances. It just doesn't add up for me. I'm not convinced Berger is to blame."

Agent Espinoza sighs, the sound of shuffling paper rustling in the background. "I'm afraid you might be right. Cynthia Nordstrom was in touch today. She said Berger is growing increasingly paranoid about safety. He's contracted a security firm called Praetorian and is providing protection for his closest and most trusted supporters. He had Cynthia extend an offer to Tristan McCoy shortly before his disappearance. McCoy was scheduled to have a meeting with Praetorian, but of course he never made it. Cynthia didn't know anything about the defraudment and it appears Berger didn't either."

"So we have another player on the field," I say as my blood chills in my veins.

"It seems possible, yes. I'm working through the relatives of cult members at the moment. There don't appear to be any known enemies of Berger, so a family member seems plausible, but honestly, it's a shot in the dark. If it's not Berger himself, we're essentially chasing a ghost."

My heart sinks. She's right. If someone else is involved, we have very little to go on. "You said Tristan McCoy was last seen at a bar with a blonde woman, correct?"

"That's right. We're looking into it again, but last we checked, there was nothing. The staff didn't even notice McCoy leave the bar." Agent Espinoza takes a deep breath. "I'll send you anything else I can. Anything you can do to help uncover a motivation or help build a profile of another potential suspect will be very helpful. Cynthia Nordstrom has been a wild card from the beginning, and I'm afraid that this will spook her into hiding. We'll need to work quickly."

“Of course,” I say, trying to keep the worry from my voice. “I’ll see what I can get about it from the interviews as well. Perhaps one of the women heard something from Caron that could shed light on who else could be involved. In the meantime, I’ll work with whatever you’ve got.”

“Great, thank you, Dr. Kaplan. And you should know, there could be other disappearances related to Berger that we haven’t uncovered yet. Other connections. And you should be vigilant.”

“I will.”

As we hang up, my worries encompass not only the progress of the investigation and my own safety. Other people are at risk too, like Cynthia Nordstrom. Is she in even more danger than taking the risk to betray Legio Agni? What if she’s the next target? She’s due to be a key witness against Caron, and if she goes missing or decides to run, we might lose our chance to find him. And what about Bria? If I take her to these interviews, will it put her at risk? If someone else is indeed involved with hunting down Caron’s associates, would they see me and Bria as their allies, or as rivals for a prize? Until I start to build a profile of this potential phantom, these questions will remain.

I drag my hands down my face, feeling like my flesh is crawling beneath my skin. My thoughts are as diaphanous as smoke. I can’t hold on to a single one. So I close my laptop. I grab my keys. And then I drive to the secured, heated garage where I store my motorcycles. When the BMW S 1000 RR roars to life with a rumble, I feel my mind already begin to calm. And for the next few hours, I take the winding roads through the foothills and the bending mountain passes. The clarity I hope to find is there in the sound of the engine and the adrenaline of speed and balance.

When I make it back home, I feel reset, ready to start a new hunt.

My first class on Monday doesn’t start until eleven, but I’m on campus before eight to pick up a coffee from Deja Brew and head to my office. By nine thirty, I’m feeling pretty well-prepared for not only the day, but much of the week ahead. I make my way to the fourth floor to check in with Dr. Strom before my first class, paying the fifty dollar bet I lost about Dr. Wells dying on campus before he’d retire. After he gets me up to speed on the rest of the party gossip, which mostly centers around Dr. Wells falling asleep on a chair next to the DJ, I leave Dr. Strom’s office with thirty minutes to spare before my next meeting.

It’s precisely 10:32 a.m. when my day implodes.

I check my watch as I stalk down the empty corridor toward the stairs, intending to ignore Bria's office looming ahead when she strides into the corridor. Her attention is on her phone but she registers my presence and looks up, meeting my eyes for only an instant.

A glance. That's all it takes.

With one sharp breath I pin Bria to the wall next to her office door. I capture her jaw in a gentle grip and tilt her cheek toward the light.

A swoop of purple curves beneath her eye. Her cheekbone is swollen and stippled with colour.

Bria glares at me, batting my hand away in a swift strike, but I only replace it with the other. "What the fuck—"

"Who did this to you?" I snarl.

Bria's brows pull together. Her faint scent floods the space between us as I press closer to her, my heart galloping as rage floods my veins. "I fell on my face doing yoga," she says in a cool and even tone. "It happens."

I take in every minute detail, but Bria's fierce expression gives little away. The only change is a tiny, squiggly vein pulsing near her temple. "You're lying."

"I'm not—"

"Was it the lumberjack?"

Bria gives a derisive snort. "Oh, *please*—"

"*Was it the fucking lumberjack*," I repeat.

"No."

"Hey Bria, I got you an espresso—" David's voice grinds to a halt to my left. I let go of her face and turn, putting myself between them. "Dr. Kaplan?"

"Did you do this to her?"

"Of course not. *No*."

I take a step closer to David. His blue eyes widen but he stands his ground, his knuckles bleaching as his grip on the coffee cups tightens. "I saw you leave the party with her on Friday, and now Bria shows up Monday morning with a bruise on her face. Do you not find that a little coincidental?"

David's gaze darts over my shoulder with a pleading look at Bria. "Bri—"

"Don't you fucking look at her."

Bria let's out an exasperated sigh behind me. "Dr. Kaplan, I already told you, I fell in yoga."

"And I already told you, I know you're lying," I hiss, glaring at her over my shoulder.

"Dr. Kaplan, I would never do that," David says, his voice thin and stretched. I don't break my gaze from Bria. She has no reaction to David's words, only a look of defiance in the firm set of her shoulders and the fierce gleam in her eyes.

"He didn't hit me," Bria whispers. She takes a step closer and touches my tight fist, her fingertips cooling the fire burning beneath my skin. Bria's gaze dips down to my mouth. A hint of a devious smile lifts one corner of her lips, but her eyes are black with rage. "If you keep this up, you're going to get yourself in trouble, and you like to follow the rules, remember?"

My molars grind together. Christ, how I want to prove her wrong. I want to slam my knuckles into David's jaw until it shatters. And once his face is broken in a thousand places, I want to crush my lips to Bria's and fuck her with my tongue in every conceivable way.

I manage to rip my eyes from hers and turn back to David. "If I find out you're lying, I will have you kicked off campus, and the instant you leave these grounds I'll be there, waiting. Are we clear?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Are you admitting you did it?"

"No," David says, the coffee jostling as he emphatically shakes his head.

"Then you have nothing to worry about, do you." He nods and I jerk my head toward the door of their office. David ducks inside with a nervous glance at Bria. I wait until he's out of sight before I face her once more.

And she is *not* happy.

But neither am I.

"Cut the shit, Ms. Brooks. Tell me who did this."

"Why the fuck do you care? You hate me."

Her words are like a direct hit to my sternum, but I swallow it down. Bria's always a few steps ahead, and this time, I intend to keep pace. "Tell me who did it and I'll answer your question."

A flicker of interest sparks in Bria's eyes before she sweeps it beneath her malice. "An old man at my uncle's retirement home punched me in the

face.” A flash of a wicked smile crosses her lips. “Some of the old folks are a little violent, it seems.”

That...that is not the answer I expected.

Bria cocks one eyebrow and takes a step back as she crosses her arms.

“Why didn’t you say that in the first place?” I ask.

“Because it’s none of your fucking business. I don’t owe anyone an explanation for anything I do, least of all a man who would rather carve out his own organs than have dinner with me.”

That hit didn’t just strike the bones of my chest. No, Bria reached right inside with a set of talons and raked them across my heart. She doesn’t look hurt, not with the malevolent glare she pins to my face, but she must be to bring it up. Hurt, or at least confused.

“I’m sorry for what you overheard. It’s not true,” I say, my voice little more than a whisper.

“Clearly. You’re standing here with both kidneys as far as I can tell.”

“I’m trying not to break the rules, Bria.”

My words feel too close to a confession. That same starved look that she gave me the other night on the patio is back, darkening her eyes for an instant before she wrestles it away. “We all have rules, Dr. Kaplan. How well are yours serving you?”

It feels as though we’re locked together, two links fused in a chain, unable to separate. The urge to pull her into me is so strong I have to fold my hands into tight fists and press my nails into my palms.

“Dr. Kaplan,” Dr. Strom says from down the hall. If he notices anything odd about the tension in my shoulders or my proximity to a student, he doesn’t let on. “I’ve gotta head down to the first floor, I’ll buy you a coffee on your way to class since I’m fifty bucks richer, if you want.”

I give him a tight smile and a nod before my gaze shifts back to Bria. Her expression seems calm and aloof on the surface, but I know enough of her to believe there’s a deep sea of secrets beneath it.

I nod toward her office door behind me. “If I find out it was David after all, I’ll break his fucking neck,” I whisper.

Bria’s face lights in a smile that’s both frightening and fierce, but wholly beautiful. “Don’t you think I could take care of it myself?”

“I don’t care. I’m calling dibs.”

With a final glance, I move around her, and follow Dr. Strom down the hall.



Bria's question follows me, haunting every step.  
How well are my rules serving me?  
Not very well, I'm starting to think. Not very well at all.



I watch as Dr. Kaplan stalks down the hall, catching up with Dr. Strom in a few long strides. He doesn't look back when they head toward the elevator at the far end of the corridor, nor as he waits for it to chime its arrival. Even when the doors open and he slips inside, he keeps his gaze locked away from mine.

It's not until the elevator closes and the gears whirl with its descent that I let out a long breath and lean against the wall.

My core aches with emptiness. Dampness and heat are gathered between my legs. I press my palm to my chest as my heart sings with excitement and I try to reason it back to a steady rhythm. *You hate him. He's a dick, remember?*

My heart doesn't listen. It only hears the echo of Kaplan's voice. *I'm trying not to break the rules, Bria.*

I lean my head against the wall. The look of pain in Kaplan's expression haunts the shadows of my closed eyes.

Why should I care? I *don't* care. I don't care that he was enraged, not at me, but *for* me. I don't care that he stepped between me and David with his fists balled tight. Sure, I noticed the way his muscles bunched and coiled beneath his shirt, and the way he pinned me with a ravenous stare when we were alone. That was hot as hell. He's beautiful. So is a sculpture. Or a sunset. I'm simply appreciating it, that's all. That darkness I saw skimming his surface and peeking through his eyes is just very appealing to me, like catnip.

I need to do what Samuel told me. Cut the dead weight. Stay focused on my goal. I don't need Kaplan or anyone else aside from Samuel. Even despite Kaplan's proximity to information on Legio Agni, he could wind up being more of a dangerous distraction than a source of useful information. I don't get the sense he's the kind of person who will risk sharing details anyway, and what I've retrieved from his computer wasn't that helpful. I'm close enough to the FBI, I don't need to be sitting on their laps.

I open my eyes and push away from the wall with newfound determination. This energy I sense between Kaplan and me is only diluting my focus. It's making me confused. It's fucked with me enough. *Just let it go.*

I stride into the office as casually as I can manage. David looks up as I drop into my chair and comes over with my coffee.

"You okay?" he asks as he leans against my desk. I want nothing more than to put my headphones in and ignore him, but this is the social game I'm forced to play if I want to stay hidden in the world.

"Yeah, you?"

David nods as he scratches his cheek at the edge of his beard, the bristles crunching beneath his fingernails. I try to keep my eye from twitching in irritation. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you and Dr. Kaplan were a thing."

"We're not."

"I'm not sure he agrees."

"It's not just up to him," I say with a shrug, trying to look nonchalant. "Besides, I think he'd do the same for anyone."

David chuckles as he pushes himself from the desk. He tips his cup toward me in a salute. "Nah, Brooks. He wouldn't. The man has it bad."

I watch as David winks and turns away, then I put my headphones in and resolve to push those thoughts aside.

The day picks up momentum and passes in a blur. I have a few classes and several meetings scattered throughout the day. I work into the late evening, spending a few hours immersed in literature review before turning my attention to working up some viable essay topics for Dr. Halperon's undergraduate Learning and Memory course. I check my email one more time just before I shut my computer down, and a new message comes through from Dr. Halperon.

BRIA,

CHRISTINA SENT ME A MESSAGE—DIGITAL MEDIA AND CULTURAL MEMORY BY ASPERSON AND DAHL IS NOW IN THE LIBRARY. SHE SHELVED IT BEFORE SHE REMEMBERED TO LET ME KNOW. THE IRONY! CAN YOU PLEASE SNAG IT AND WE'LL PULL OUT SOME ESSAY TOPICS TOMORROW A.M.?

THANKS,

DR.H.

I scowl at my watch as though it should become a time machine. It's 9:28 p.m.. The library closes in thirty-two minutes. Dr. Halperon is scatterbrained enough to have forgotten about this all day, but she's also sharp enough to know I'll still be working on campus. The cathartic image of ripping her glasses off her face and shoving those fuchsia acetate frames down her throat pops into mind before I pack up my laptop and stride down the hall toward the library.

I look up the book details on my phone as I walk between buildings, headphones in, the hood of my coat up against the drizzling rain in a windless storm. By the time I make it into the warmth of the library, it's 9:43 p.m. The two students staffing the reception desk shoot me a warning look, but I glare back and their eyes shift back down to the papers they shuffle across the worn desk.

I don't see a single student on my way up to the third floor. I drift through the tall shelves until I make it to the row I'm looking for. Naturally, I find *Digital Media and Cultural Memory* on the shelf that's just beyond the reach of my fingertips, even while standing on my tiptoes. My teeth grind together above the sound of the music filtering through my headphones. Fuck it, I'll scale these shelves like a goddamn monkey if I have to. I'm not going to search for one of those round stools that are as rare as gold dust on the third floor.

I grip the edge of a shelf like I'm about to go bouldering when a large hand appears over my head and pulls my textbook off the shelf. A scent invades my nostrils. Bay rum. Bergamot. The slightest hint of spearmint.

My eyes narrow.

*Kaplan.*

I turn slowly and hold his deep brown eyes in a menacing stare as I pull one headphone free and then the other, pocketing them. He's much closer

than I anticipated in the aisle. I can feel his warmth in every breath that fans across my face.

My eyes slide to the book he holds aloft in his hand. An ascending tone echoes through the speakers mounted on the walls. Kaplan's eyes shift upward as though he might see something in the recorded message warning that the library will be closing in ten minutes. I'm not sure if it's a social convention or just...stupidity. For some reason, I catch myself hoping it's the former. An unbidden ache coils low in my belly, and I loathe myself for taking a deep breath of the intoxicating smell of a man who might be looking around for a recorded voice from a stationary speaker.

When the message is over, Kaplan's eyes drop to mine. There's a brief flash of surprise when he finds me staring back at him with a look that can only be described as lethal. And then the hint of a cocky smile lifts one corner of his lips, bringing the shadow of a dimple out in his cheek. My ache becomes a burn, torching my chest with anger and my core with need.

"That's my book," I say.

He turns it to read the spine. "Asperson and Dahl. I don't see *Brooks* there."

"Give it to me."

Something darkens in Kaplan's eyes. His throat bobs as he swallows. His smile fades as his gaze flicks down to my lips before fusing with my eyes once more.

"Are you going to give me that book?" I ask.

"I haven't decided."

"Does it always take you this long to work something out?"

"Only when you're involved, it seems."

He leans a fraction closer and I stand my ground, but it takes more effort than it should. Not to keep from backing away, but to stop myself from moving closer. I've never felt a need this strong before, its pull overpowering me as though I'm nothing more than a metal fleck in the path of a magnet. The need to kill. The need to fuck. They're like two planets crashing into one another, destroying the walls and barriers that hide my darkest desires. I feel like I'm struggling to keep hold of the beast that prowls behind them. "Run off with it then, why don't you," I challenge, squaring my shoulders. "Put it in your hipster leather satchel to go with your equally predictable tweed jacket and scurry off."

Kaplan's smile grows, the dimple deepens. His eyes drift across my face like he's memorizing the smallest details, lingering for only a moment on the bruise beneath my lashes. He leans a little closer still, his nearness and heat radiant in the space between us. "Are you always so vicious?"

"You have no idea."

There's a long moment of utter silence. My heart claws up my throat and drums in my ears. My breath grows shallow as Kaplan's smile dissolves and his rich brown eyes fuse to my lips. A coldness creeps up my arms, crawling, scratching, gooseflesh leaving a trail behind a phantom touch as though my skin is begging for his hands.

Kaplan's grip tightens on the book. He leans closer. That scent of bergamot, I can almost taste it. My mouth waters as my eyes drop to the pulse that pounds in his neck.

"Maybe I want to see it," Kaplan says, his voice low. He edges a step closer, his chest grazing mine with every inhalation. "Maybe I want to taste all that ferocity. Straight from the source."

He takes another step forward. I let him push me to the shelves. My back is as rigid as the spines of books beneath it as Kaplan presses in closer, his eyes still soldered to my lips, his free hand caging me in as he grips the shelf next to my head.

The warning tone ascends above us. The recorded message drowns the sound of my pulse burning its quickened rhythm through my brain. *The library will be closing in five minutes. Please proceed to the reception desk to check out any books. Thank you.*

Kaplan meets my eyes. His gaze filters through mine, bounding between my blown pupils. "Just one taste," he whispers.

An electric tingle skitters up my arms. I don't move as he draws closer. Every shallow breath I take is flooded with his scent. It feeds the ache to touch, to be touched. But I keep still as my vision stays locked on his mouth.

Dr. Kaplan's lips meet mine, a gentle press of warmth. Soft and silent, as though this moment is stolen, forbidden. His tongue runs across the seam of my lips, leaving behind the taste of sweet mint.

He pulls away.

"Is that what you thought poison would taste like?" I ask, the faint trace of a tremor in my voice that I've never heard before.

“No,” he says, a crease appearing between his brows as though his beast is chewing at his bones. His gaze traces the curve of my lips. The trail of his tongue’s caress hums in my skin. “It tastes one hundred times sweeter.”

Our eyes meet. I take one breath.

Then I grasp the collar of his jacket and crush his lips to mine.

A torrent of heat unleashes in my chest. I punish Kaplan with my kiss. He devours me with a desperation that meets mine. Our teeth clash. Our tongues invade each other’s mouths. Our lips mold and form together. We fight for air. We fight one another. A loud smack startles me and I pull back, but it doesn’t phase him. It was the book. He cast it to the floor so he could grasp my waist with firm fingers. He dives for my neck, layering searing kisses to my surging pulse.

“I feel compelled to tell you that I hate you,” I breathe as he bites and sucks on my skin. I start tugging the collar of his jacket off. “Just like I hate your leather satchel and your hideous tweed jacket that looks like it came from the hipster reject pile. If I could feel secondhand embarrassment for anyone, I would feel it for you.”

Kaplan’s dark laugh heats my skin as he nips my earlobe and a moan escapes my lips. “Good. I’ll wear it every fucking day. I’ll even sew suede patches on the elbows.”

I tug on the strap of Kaplan’s satchel and he pulls it over his head to drop it on the floor before pressing me into the shelves. He consumes me with his kiss. His hands flow under my sweater, the pads of his fingers tracing my ribs, the curve of my waist, the lace edge of my bra. He growls against my lips when I cup his erection as it strains against his jeans.

The overhead fluorescents flick off with a snap. The only light around us is the emergency exit at the end of the aisle and the lamplight filtering through the tall windows.

“They’re not going to check that we left?” I ask as we stare at one another. Kaplan’s eyes flash in the dim light.

“I guess not. Thank fuck.”

I grip his hair and pull his mouth to mine. He frames my face with heated palms and kisses me like he’s searching for the soul he’ll never find. Searching with his plundering tongue. With a bite that draws blood. With his heart pounding against my chest, begging for secrets from mine. I’ve never been so feverishly consumed. I’ve never devoured like this in return,



molding my lips to his, pressing my body to his, desperate to be closer. Desperate to burn.

I shrug my jacket off as Kaplan tugs on the hem of my sweater and breaks the kiss to pull it over my head, cursing as he takes in the sight of my black lace bra in the minimal light, pulling the cups down to expose my tight nipples to the still air that's scented with paper and glue and time. He covers my flesh with kisses as I rake my hands through his dark hair. He sucks one nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue, circling the bud while caressing my other breast. I moan as the ache in my belly tightens like a fist. The need clenches deep inside, an emptiness that demands to be filled. *Now.*

Our kiss heats to an inferno as I undo Kaplan's belt. "I'm clean. I have an IUD," I whisper when I pull away. Kaplan's breath is a ragged stream of sweetness, his palm hot against my breastbone. "Are you clean?"

"Tested last month. I haven't been with anyone since," he grits out as I tear the button free of its hole and lower his zipper.

"Then fuck me, Dr. Kaplan. Fuck me like you despise me as much as I hate you."

A fierce intensity flashes through Kaplan's eyes and then he dives at my neck, covering it with kisses and bites. I kick off one boot and then the other as he unfastens the button of my jeans and pulls them down my hips with rough and desperate tugs. I slide them off and when I straighten, he crushes me with another kiss, pushing my body harder against the shelves. One of his hands twines into my hair and the other travels down my body, tracing my breastbone, circling the small peak of my breast. And then it keeps going down, pressing the heat of his calloused palm against my ribs, down my stomach, lower, following the sharp edge of my hip bone, the firmness and softness of muscle and womb, down to the edge of my black lace thong. One finger follows the wavy hem to the soaked fabric, tracing a line across the cotton and pressing over my clit in a slow circle.

"Do you always get this wet for people you hate?" Kaplan whispers against my lips as his finger dips beneath the fabric and slides across my silken folds.

I swallow a moan as he circles my clit and nips my jaw. "Maybe I do."

"Hmm," he hums. His finger slips between my folds and into my pussy, and then his touch is abruptly gone. For a breath I feel bereft with need. But then I watch with predatory interest as he draws his finger up to his waiting

tongue and licks the glistening arousal from his skin. “Funny. It doesn’t taste like hate. It tastes like *lies*.”

My heart rams against my chest. A wicked smile lifts the edge of Kaplan’s lips. I can just make out that dimple in the dim light.

“But don’t worry,” Kaplan whispers, his voice full of sex and seduction as he lowers his open jeans and his black briefs. He grasps the base of his erection, and then pumps once along the long, thick shaft. Precum glistens on the velvety tip. His other hand glides down my hip and to my thigh and he presses in close, raising my leg to rest behind his back as he centers his erection to my sex and pulls my thong to the side. “I’ll still fuck you like it’s the truth, even if I know it’s not.”

He grips my waist and slams into me to the base of his cock with one brutal thrust. A whimpering moan escapes me, some sound I’ve never made. My flesh stretches around him as he glides to the tip and thrusts in again, pushing my back up against the books. He does it again, a burst of pain and pleasure igniting my nerves with the invasion. He grips my ass and I hook my other leg across his back and he slams into me again, even deeper, filling me with thick heat. Another thrust and I cry out, his hand folding across my mouth.

“Shh, Ms. Brooks. You’ll scream for me, but not this time.”

Kaplan rails into me, unrelenting, untiring, slamming my back against the bookcase with every thrust, my legs tightening around his waist as he punishes me with pleasure. He takes one of my hands and guides it between us in a silent request to touch myself, and I press swirling circles to my clit in a rhythm that blends with his thrusts. I hold on to his neck with my other hand and worm my fingers under his collar to dig my nails into his skin and he hisses with approval, taking his palm away from my mouth to grip the shelf above me. Books fall to the floor around us and he draws my head to his chest, protecting it from the heavy texts that fall to the floor like broken birds.

And those thrusts, they keep coming, like waves in a vicious storm, pushing me closer to coming undone. Every time he glides to his crown, I mourn the emptiness. When he fills and stretches me, I ache for release. He touches places that feel like they’ve never been truly touched, and my swollen channel clenches for more, fluttering around his length. His body burns with mine, the scent of mint and rum and bergamot warming with his

heat, invading my senses. He kisses and bites and thrusts and this need, this magnetic need, it consumes, turning thought to ash. Turning me to flame.

I'm so close, every thrust pushing me to the precipice I'm ready to beg to fall over. I pull one of Kaplan's hands from the shelf and place it around my throat, and he draws back without slowing the rhythm of his thrusts, a question in his hooded, lustful eyes.

"Like you mean it," I whisper, squeezing his hand. "Fill me with darkness. With you."

Kaplan's eyes flash as they dart down to my neck and back up again. He takes a deep, ragged breath. "Tap me on the shoulder three times if it's too much."

I glare at him through a menacing smile and tighten my grip around his. "I can take what you have to give, Dr. Kaplan."

An equally wicked smile flickers across his lips. "Oh I know you can, sweetheart. Just look at how well you take me," he says, and pulls out to the tip of his erection. He thrusts in hard, burying his cock as deep as it will go. "*All of me.*"

I shudder a moan that slips beneath the vice waiting to tighten around my throat. I let my hand fall from his. "Then don't hold back. Do it like I know you really want to. Like you're going to kill me."

I've just opened the cage of the beast behind his bones.

He growls. He squeezes his hand. There's no hesitation, no tentativeness in his grip. He compresses his fist around my throat and the air constricts to a thin stream, my lungs burning after only a few strained breaths. His thrusts become wild, vicious, like he was holding back before.

"Say my name with the last of your breath," he whispers against my ear as his grip tightens.

My core clenches, my orgasm within reach as my vision darkens at the edges. He thrusts, my back bruising against the books. "Kap—"

"No," he grits out, squeezing harder. A choked sound claws itself from my throat.

"Eli," I wheeze. It sounds both hateful and beseeching. "*Eli...*"

Kaplan thrusts deeper, faster, squeezes harder. He whispers into my ear like a wraith, following me into darkness, bewitching me, imploring that I say his name until there's no air left, and still his voice is in my mind, demanding *again, say it again.*

My orgasm tears through me. It burns my nerves. It claims control of my muscles, bowing my back against the shelves, tightening my core around Kaplan's cock as he pulses and spills surges of cum into the depths of my sex. My pussy clenches his girth and pleasure unravels up my center and through my hips and down my legs and up my arms and under my skin and *everywhere*. Just everywhere. My eyes water and the tears stream down my cheeks. Kaplan opens his hand, my lungs sucking in a deep breath in a baptism of air.

Kaplan leans against me, his shirt damp with sweat. I wish I could feel his skin, every inch, with nothing left between us. We only truly touch where we're joined at the center, his cock still twitching inside me, and where his forehead rests on my shoulder, where his hand rests on my breastbone, his palm capturing the quieting beat of my heart.

We stay like this for a long moment, and he doesn't ask if I'm okay. I'm glad for that. I think it would feel less real if he did. A beast feels no guilt for what it takes. It doesn't doubt itself, or ask for forgiveness. I told him what to take and he took it, without hesitation or apology. And I don't feel like I lost something in this moment. I feel empowered by letting go of my control.

I'm not sure how much time passes with me pressed up against the bookshelf when Kaplan slips out of my sex and I unwrap my legs from his waist to stand on my own once more, his hand still resting on my sternum as though asking me to stay. He steps away and looks around at his satchel and jacket, my clothes, and the books littered on the floor. His eyes drift back to his jacket and he gives me a strange expression that I've never seen, like amusement and resignation and desire rolled into some intoxicating warmth. "Stay right there," he says, and pulls up his briefs and jeans. He sweeps the tweed jacket from the floor and gives me a meaningful look, keeping hold of my eyes as he tears the paisley lining free. He drops the woollen shell and kneels before me, balling the fabric in his hand and starting to clean away the mess gathered at the apex of my thighs.

"This is both a fitting and horrifying end to that atrocity of fabric," I grumble, glaring down at the top of his head as he huffs a laugh, wiping the cum and arousal that drips down my thighs.

"I paid a small fortune for this jacket, I'll have you know."

"That's a depressing thought," I say as he lifts my leg, placing my foot on his thigh. The fabric in his hand slides gently across my swollen sex, my

thong pulled to the side with his free hand. "My uncle could have hooked you up from Cedar Ridge. They'd pay you to take their old man clothes away."

Kaplan laughs.

"I'm being serious. They've got bags of tweed. Not that I should be encouraging your erroneous clothing choices."

"I don't think my clothing choices have ever been described as erroneous before."

"That's because everyone has been *lying* to you."

Kaplan laughs again. The sound flows from him easily, the breath it coasts on warming my skin. He places a kiss on my hip. His shoulders rise as he inhales and pulls away to continue his reverential strokes. It feels... sacred...in this place, in the quiet and the dark, surrounded by the scent of paper and ink.

"No one's ever done this for me before," I confess as he wipes my other leg.

"What, ripped apart their favorite jacket for you? I would suspect that's not an everyday occurrence for anyone."

"No. Taken...care...of me. Like this."

Kaplan stills and looks up. I search those liquid pools of deep brown warmth in his eyes. There's surprise there, and I think sadness too. It's hard to tell in the dim light. I swallow and hold my shoulders straighter. My skin pebbles with the cooling sweat and the unexpected scrutiny in his eyes.

"Don't start thinking I like you any more than I did twenty minutes ago. I don't," I say.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Positive."

"Okay then."

I narrow my eyes at him and Kaplan has the audacity to smirk. The urge to smash his face repeatedly with the heavy textbook of *Memory: The Extended Definition* rises, and I slowly pull my leg from his grip. I shoot him a final warning look and drift away to gather my clothes, pulling them on as he slides his ravaged tweed jacket onto his shoulders and makes a half-hearted effort to gather the scattered books. When I've shrugged on my coat, I scoop *Digital Media and Cultural Memory* from the floor and look down at Kaplan amidst the texts, a flicker of wariness creasing the space between his brows.

“That was fun. See you around, Dr. Kaplan,” I say, and surge forward to stride past him down the aisle.

“Fun...you’ll *what?*” I smile as I hear Kaplan’s satchel drag across the floor and his footsteps approach behind me just as I turn toward the stairs.

“What the *fuck?*”

“What? I’ve got to get home.”

“Let me walk you to your car at least,” he says, quickening his steps until he meets my stride.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s dark.”

“I have functioning eyes. I noticed. But thank you for confirming they still work.”

“It’s not safe, you know what campuses can be like.”

“Yep. About the same as retirement homes.”

“Precisely my point. Let me walk with you.” I ignore Kaplan as we draw close to the stairs. “Bria—” he says, and grabs hold of my arm.

Instinct ignites my nerves.

I grasp Kaplan’s hand and wrench it backwards and *twist*, my grip merciless. There’s a tiny pop beneath my palm as a tendon sprains. He lets out a cry of pain and surprise and drops to his knees as I keep his hand turned back toward his arm.

“Bria *what*, exactly? *Bria, it’s dangerous?*” My head tilts as Kaplan looks up at me, pain etched across his features. I twist his wrist back a little further and smile when he squirms. I lean in closer, taking in one last breath of his scent. “You look good on your knees for me, Dr. Kaplan,” I whisper next to his ear.

“Bria—”

“Be careful out there in the night. You never know when you might run into someone *dangerous*.” I shove his hand away and stalk toward the stairs. When I look over my shoulder, Kaplan is still on his knees, holding his injured wrist to his chest.

“Better put some ice on that,” I call up the stairs as I descend out of view.

I turn from the front desk when I reach the main floor, bypassing the locked doors as I stride toward the nearest emergency exit. I pull the red handle of the alarm on the wall and then press the long, straight bar of the unused door. Sirens blare around me, muffling as the door closes in my

wake, the silver mist of my breath rising around me in the cool rain as I hurry from the library, smiling into the dark.





“Jesus, Kap. What happened to you?”

I look up from the sink in the Psych building’s faculty break room with a sigh and a weary glare. The ice burns its cold sting into my skin. I wince as I press it harder to my wrist. “I went to the library.”

Fletcher scoffs. “And what, battled a velociraptor? You look like shit.” She leans against the counter and takes in the disheveled sight before her. The mussed-up hair. The shreds of the jacket’s lining hanging below its hem. My guilty-as-fuck expression. *I fucked your grad student in the library*, my thoughts blare on repeat. I scowl down at my wrist.

“Oh my god,” Fletch says. “You had sex.”

“What the fuck?”

“Who was it?”

“How did you—”

“It was Bria, wasn’t it?”

“*What the—*”

“Holy shit. It was Bria. And she ate you *alive*.” Fletcher cackles a delighted laugh. She slaps her thigh and I shoot her a glare. She only laughs harder. I groan and lean down to rest my forehead on my arm. “See? I told you she doesn’t hate you.”

“No, she definitely hates me,” I grumble without looking up.

“Not that much if she screwed you in the library.”

“But enough to pull the emergency alarm afterward and leave me to deal with campus security.”

Fletcher bellows another laugh. She laughs and laughs and *laughs*. I can almost hear the tears sliding down her skin. When it finally subsides, she lays a hand on my shoulder. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

She chuckles and it fades to a long pause of silence before Fletcher squeezes my shoulder and passes behind me. I hear the fridge door open and I lift my head to watch as she opens a random carton of almond milk. She gives the contents a sniff and takes a long swig. My stomach churns. “I’m happy for you,” she says, the amusement in her voice coated with a thick smear of processed nut juice.

“Don’t be.”

“Why not, because you bent and broke a few rules in one night? Bria’s not your student. Maybe it’s not celebrated as the paradigm of morality, but *come on*, Kap. You’re both consenting adults and you’re not her supervisor. You’re not even going to be here next year. And fucking in the library? Yeah, that’s probably forbidden if you read between the lines of the rules that are posted on the wall. But who hasn’t had that fantasy? And more importantly, who were you hurting?”

“I don’t know, campus security’s budget? Those dickhead undergrads that never bothered to check if we’d left?”

Fletcher snorts. “Stop trying to live up to your Marvel namesake, Kap,” she says as she leans back and looks at my butt. “That *is* America’s Ass. Though maybe not anymore. It might belong to Bria the Velociraptor now.”

Fletcher cackles as I sigh dramatically and shift my gaze back down to my wrist. I still feel guilt twisting my guts like braided rope. This isn’t me, bending my rules so far that they fray and break. But it felt good. *Really* good. Like all this pressure to conform to rigid standards was released for a few precious moments. I took what I wanted, and in the absence of the voice of reason was music. The sound of Bria’s desperate moans. The rhythm of her back slamming into the books. The cadence of my breath and the heartbeat that deafened me.

I groan and lay my forehead back down against my arm, turning Fletcher’s question over in my mind. *Who am I hurting?* Me. Me and my sanity. Because there’s no way one stolen moment with Bria will ever be enough, but she might never let me close to have a second chance at capturing that feeling again. And that thought is like a blade carving out my soul.

Fletcher laughs as though she can see my pathetic thoughts. I turn my head and watch as she takes another long drink from the carton. “Whose is that?”

“No idea. I’m living on the edge, Kap.” I snort a laugh and Fletcher pats my shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go get a real drink.”

We head to Fletch’s house on Oak where she and her wife, Blake, manage to wrestle free a few details about my eventful evening. Yes, it was scorching hot. Yes, it surpassed every library-sex fantasy I’ve ever had—and I’ve had many. Yes, Bria most definitely still hates me. I think.

Bria is there in my mind even when our conversation moves to other topics. She’s a scar across my thoughts. Her gentle scent is still in my nostrils. She wasn’t wearing perfume. It’s just her, a faint flowery note in her skin. But her taste...it exploded on my tongue. Sweet and hot with a hint of salt. I want to bury my face between her thighs, to devour her, to stroke the flesh inside her as she pulls my hair and rides my face and I—

“Kap. Have you heard a word I said?”

“Boy’s got it bad,” Blake agrees with a smirk around the lip of her wine glass.

“He barely survived one round. I don’t know if we should be trying to push them on that trip together,” Fletcher says. “He might wind up a bunch of bleached bones on the roadside.”

I glower at Fletcher and take a sip of my bourbon. “Trip? What trip? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your trip to Ogden, dumbass. Interviewing eyewitnesses. You know, part deux of the favor you owe me.”

I run my palm down my face. “Absofuckinglutely not. I am not taking Bria with me to Ogden. I couldn’t even get her to go to dinner as per your request. Are you on crack?”

Fletcher cackles like the evil villain in basically any movie ever. “Oh come on, Kap. I’m willing to bet your dinner invitation was half-assed at best, but look at you now! You’ve well surpassed that by fucking her in the library. You’ve exceeded my wildest expectations.”

A loud groan resonates from my chest.

“Besides,” she continues, “she’s a talented student. We’re lucky to have her. She could have gone anywhere. Literally *anywhere*, and she’s here at Berkshire. And you’re going to deny her the chance to go test her methods

of interviewing in the field because, what...you're worried you're going to fuck her? Spoiler alert, Kap—you *already did*.”

“And you will again,” Blake pipes in as Fletch snickers beside her.

“I hate you both.”

Blake’s onyx eyes warm with empathy and she tosses her long black braids over her shoulder, leaning forward to rest her forearms on her knees. “In medicine, you might spend the first few years learning in the classroom, but you become a true doctor in the process of clinical rotations and residency. You know, by *doing*. Putting your training into practice.”

“There are dangerous people involved. Bria could get hurt.”

“There are dangerous people everywhere. You can’t shield her from the career *she chose*. She’s far from stupid. She knows there are risks,” Blake counters. “You know I try to stay neutral between you both, but I’m with Kat on this. Give Bria a chance to do this.”

I sigh, leaning back in my chair as I take a long sip of my drink. Fletcher smiles and the long glance we exchange makes me think that if I let it linger, the decision will be made for me.

When I eventually Uber home, it’s with the determination to sort my shit out and maybe lay off the bourbon for a few days.

So that’s how I vow to spend the rest of my week. Eating clean, head down, working hard. I resolve to avoid the fourth floor. No trips to any coffee shops. When I have lunch with Fletch on Wednesday, I promise to talk to Bria after the weekend about coming along to the interviews. Until then, however, I stay focused on my own shit, no matter how taxing that becomes.

But now, it’s Friday afternoon, and the momentum I felt at the beginning of the week has slowly died. I’m supposed to be grading assignments for my second year Introduction to Cognition class. But I’m not. I’m looking up restaurants in Ogden, Utah, compiling the most promising options on my OneNote. My thoughts seem to be drifting everywhere they shouldn’t go. I started the week strong, but as it’s progressed, everything has begun feeling like an effort to get to a destination that eludes me. When I’m supposed to be thinking of lecture topics, I’m wishing I were doing more mundane admin tasks. When I’m trying to grade papers, I’m thinking about interviewing former cult members and plans for taking down Caron Berger. When I should be thinking about research papers, I think about Bria, and invariably my dick

thinks of her too, and that leads to me having to jerk off multiple times a day in a futile effort to get my brain back on track.

I'm about to give myself a stern talking-to when there's a soft knock at my open office door. I look up as it drifts open a little wider.

Bria's formidable energy takes up the empty space like a dark star.

"Dr. Kaplan," she says, her voice clear and precise, yet alluring and full of mystery. "Am I disturbing you?"

"No, not at all," I reply. I want to stand but my dick is already hard and straining against my zipper at the mere sight of her. She's wearing a dress today, not her usual jeans and sweater combination. Her hair is long and loose around her shoulders, the waves tumbling over the strap of her bag as she spins and closes the door behind her. "Have a seat."

I gesture to the chair across from me and she stays standing, eyeing my hand as though she's calculating how quickly she could rip it off. I realize after a moment that she's not looking at my hand but my wrist, and my focus drops to the faint purple bruise. When I meet her eyes, she's staring back at me with the mirage of a smile in her deep brown gaze.

Bria lets the bag slip from her shoulder and sets it down on the floor next to her as she takes a seat. She says nothing as she folds her hands in her lap. It seems she's comfortable sitting ramrod straight and completely silent. Me...not so much. The silence stretches on as she watches me, her faint smile unwavering as she absorbs all the energy in the room.

"Can I...do something for you?" I ask. Bria's smile widens as though I've just confirmed some hidden joke. It suddenly dawns on me she was doing it on purpose, playing me to the simplest of human behavior, the need to fill the awkward silence. *Why* though, I have no idea. Maybe just to throw me off-balance. Maybe just because she could. Maybe to remind me she can think circles around me, which I don't need much reminding about lately.

"Actually, Dr. Kaplan, it's about what I can do for you."

Holy Christ, my dick loves the sound of those words. I clear my throat and take a sip of my lukewarm coffee that I haven't touched in the last hour.

"Go on," I manage.

"I heard you're going to interview next month. In Ogden."

My brow furrows. Fletcher went ahead and told her. Bria smiles as I smooth my expression. "That's right."

“I wanted to offer my assistance. To go with you. It’s mutually beneficial. I can support with the interviews, and in return I can use the experience toward my dissertation.”

“You realize this comes with risks, correct? The interview subjects are from Legio Agni, which is run by some powerful, wealthy, well-connected individuals.” I swallow, a burst of heat flooding my chest as I think about the weight of my next words. “While the risks are low, I can’t guarantee your safety anymore than I can mine.”

“I understand,” Bria says, seemingly untroubled.

“And you will need to sign some forms. Liability waivers, NDAs...the FBI also requires a background check.”

Bria’s eyes darken but she gives a single nod. “I figured that would be the case. It’s fine.”

We stare at one another for a long moment. This is a terrible idea. I both loathe and love it. “All right,” I finally say, and I catch the brief flash of pleased surprise in Bria’s eyes. “Do you have the funds from your grant to pay for the trip or do you need it covered by mine?”

Bria laughs, and the room fills with magic. It’s unbidden and joyous. Musical. I’m utterly spellbound.

“I can cover myself, Dr. Kaplan,” she says on the heels of a giggle. A wicked grin flits across her full lips and it takes everything in me to tear my eyes from them. Stripping my attention away from the memory of her kiss is like ripping off a Band-Aid.

“The plan is to leave early on a Friday, come back the following Monday evening. The drive is about eight hours. Seven o’clock start work for you?” I ask, for some reason eyeing her with skepticism even though I’m sure she won’t protest.

“Of course,” she replies, the echo of her earlier levity softening the usual sharp edges of her voice. “Send me a list of anything you need me to bring. I like to be prepared.”

Now that is no surprise. I’ve already gleaned that she has every eventuality planned out. I’m sure any item I give her on my list will already be on hers, but I’ll do it anyway. “I will.”

Bria smiles and we sit in silence, and though the moment could be strained by the lack of conversation, I take the chance to just look at her. I memorize every detail, from the bow of her full lips to her wide brown eyes to the smattering of freckles that dusts her nose. There’s a tiny scar near her

hairline, a fallen black lash on her cheekbone that I would give anything to dust away. But there's the expanse of her, the inimitable force of her, the depth that lies beyond what I can see. That's what draws me in. It's the impossibly fierce mind at work behind those eyes.

This moment that feels so sacred stretches on like pulled taffy, longer and longer until it thins. And still we sit in silence, and I keep trying to work her out, wondering what she's waiting for, until it occurs to me. I have a chance to push her. To see where she will go if I give her a shove.

"Is there anything else, Bria? Or are we done?"

There's a flicker in her eye. It's so brief I could have imagined it. Nothing else about her expression changes. Just that wink of a star, and then it's gone.

"I don't think so, Dr. Kaplan." Bria rises from her chair and gives me one last smile before she turns toward the door.

*You fucking idiot, Kaplan.*

In an even more idiotic move than dismissing her callously, I race around the edge of the desk and come up behind her just as she reaches for the door handle, pressing the front of her body to the wood as I cage her with my hands.

"Are you sure there's nothing else?" I whisper next to her ear as the sound of the conversation of passersby drifts beneath the door. It sets my heart battering against my ribs. "There wasn't something else you wanted?"

Bria lets out a long breath as though trying to steady herself. "Well, I was going to fuck you but it appears you're not interested."

I swallow a groan and grind my pelvis against her ass, showing her *exactly* how interested I truly am. Bria's breath hitches and I bite down on her earlobe, pressing into her again. I hear the click as she turns the lock on the handle.

"Get on the desk, Ms. Brooks."

I move back just enough to let her pass. Her gaze collides with mine on her way toward the desk. I know that look. It's anticipation. Desire. And a little bit of rage.

I follow as close as a shadow as Bria stops at the desk with her back to me, doing something on her phone. A breath later my voice is playing at a conversational volume. My lecture from last week's Intro to Cognition

class. Bria sets the phone on my bookshelf and turns toward me as she backs to the desk until her ass hits the edge.

“I wouldn’t want people to get the wrong impression,” she says with a wicked smile.

“How did you—”

“I have skills you don’t even know about, Dr. Kaplan.”

My chest burns with the urge to claim this woman in every way possible. With my mouth. With my hands. With my words and promises. And most definitely with my cock that strains against my pants.

“On the desk. *Now.*”

Bria smiles sweetly but her eyes are twin black flames, ready to absorb my soul. She rests her palms on the edge of the desk, shifts her weight onto her hands, then hops up onto the thick wooden slab. She raises one eyebrow as if to ask what’s next.

“Open your legs.”

Bria shifts one knee and then the other until her legs are spread wide, the fabric of her dress dipping between her thighs. I stalk closer until I take up the space there, and I lay my hands on her knees, gliding my palms up her skin without ever taking my eyes from hers. My hands consume every inch of her creamy smooth flesh, the muscle beneath my fingers lithe and strong, and finally I reach her hips.

“Ms. Brooks,” I say in a low, quiet, chastising voice as my recorded lecture prattles on in the background. “Did you come here without underwear?”

A half smile claims Bria’s face as she slowly nods. “Convenience. Your lecture only lasts forty-four minutes. Who wants to waste time with unnecessary fabric?”

I growl as my dick twitches and strains, begging to be fit into her tight, hot sheath. I grip Bria’s hips and pull her with a rough tug to the edge of the desk. “Don’t you make a sound,” I demand.

She makes a zipping motion across her lips, tossing away an invisible key.

I push Bria’s dress up to her hips and spread her legs wide, taking in every inch of her glistening pink flesh. I kneel before her, my grip tightening on the soft skin of her thighs as my eyes take their fill of the moisture gathered on her folds, beckoning me to have a taste.

And then I descend.



I feast on her like a starving man. I run my tongue through her lips and up to her clit and down again, plunging it into her pussy. Her silky slick arousal floods my mouth and smears my lips with salty sweetness, the taste so delectably Bria. I kiss and suck on her sensitive bud and she releases her grip on the edge of the desk to twine her fingers into my hair, pushing me closer as she gasps.

Bria tells me what she likes without ever making a sound louder than a breath of air. She grinds against my face when I work her clit in circles. She pulls my hair if I suck a little too long and she bucks with surprise when I scrape her sensitive bud with my teeth, pushing me closer for more. I learn everything she loves and commit it to memory.

And then I push two fingers into her pussy and curl them upward, stroking the sweet, sensitive flesh as I worship her clit. I pump my fingers and Bria leans back, grasping one of her breasts as she grips my hair in a tight fist. I whisper filthy things into her flesh. Dark fantasies. Devious desires. *I want to tie your legs open so I can devour you when I please. I want to fall asleep with my cock still buried in your pussy and wake you up by thrusting into you. I want to fuck your mouth until you choke on my dick.* And Bria loves every filthy thing I say. I feel it inside her. Her most sensitive muscles clench around my fingers until she bites down on her hand to keep from crying out. Her channel constricts and flutters around my touch, her body pulling me in, trapping me in a place I never want to leave. She writhes and pants and I work her through it, wringing out every last burst of pleasure until she starts to relax.

When Bria's quivering aftershocks subside, I wipe my chin with the back of my hand and climb up her body. And then I kiss her deeply, sharing her taste onto her tongue. Her scent and her flavor are seared into my brain like a brand. My need for her only burns hotter, a bottomless pit of flame, and I kiss her like I want her to know it. She kisses me back like she does.

I curl my arm beneath Bria's back and lift her from the desk, not breaking the kiss as I hoist her into my arms like she weighs nothing. For someone so strong and capable of putting me on my knees, she's very slight, almost birdlike in her sinewy grace. But as I learned quickly, this is a deception, an illusion. I may be able to carry Bria to the other side of the desk with very little effort, but if she didn't want to be exactly where she is, she would put me on my ass.

When we get to the other side of the desk, I set her down on her feet, turning her to face away from me and pushing her torso down across the desk, maneuvering her hands to grip onto the opposite edge. I lay my palm on her back and lean close as the lecture recorded on her phone drones on in the background. "Do not move," I whisper, and she makes no motion to do so. "And remember to tap three times if anything is too much."

I dig in my pocket and take out the key for my desk drawer, unlocking the top right side where I've recently hidden a few surprises in the wildest hope that this second chance with Bria would come, never thinking it actually would. I pull out a bottle of cherry lube and rifle through my options until I find what suits my mood.

"What are you up to, Dr. Kaplan?" Bria whispers, her tone bemused and curious as she glances over her shoulder before I gently push her back down. "*Dr. Kaplan...* Do you have a naughty drawer at work?"

"I do."

"How very filthy. I thought Berkshire University was meant to be a fine upstanding center of academic excellence."

"Aside from my cock, there is nothing upstanding about me when it comes to you. And now that I've had a taste of that sweet pussy of yours, I will do literally anything to stay exactly where I am. I don't care who I have to rob or kill," I say as I uncap the lube and push Bria's dress up over her hips. Bria laughs, that musical sound enriching the space between us like a rare, magical phenomenon.

"Dr. Kaplan, you are speaking my language."

I rub my hand across Bria's ass as I drizzle lube down the center of her crack and then set it aside. I separate her cheeks and watch as it slides over the puckered hole, down to her glistening pussy that's slick and begging for my cock. Then I take the beaded toy and run it down through the lube, all the way to her swollen clit, coating it in moisture.

"One day soon you'll take my cock here," I promise as I roll the round head of the toy over her ass, massaging the pleated rim. I take my time loosening it, pressing, molding, testing the resistance, massaging some more. "Relax, Bria."

She takes a deep breath in, and on the exhale I push the first bead in past the tight rim. I slowly guide it further until the second, slightly larger bead reaches the resistance, and I press on it gently, waiting until she exhales another deep breath before pushing that in also.

“Good girl. Four more,” I whisper, then I use my other hand to start circling her clit. Bria shudders and stifles a moan as I guide the next bead in and the next and the next until we reach the last one, the biggest that’s attached to a stem of almost the same width, and then a handle. “Last one, Bria.”

I slowly guide the toy to its full length and Bria presses her forehead to her arm, her pussy throbbing as I lean back and take in the sight of the black toy resting deep in her ass and her sheath pulsing with need for my cock. I undo my zipper and lower my pants and briefs, lining up with her pussy while being careful to avoid the end of the toy. And then I push my way in.

“Christ, Bria. You are so tight. You are every fantasy I could never have imagined, come to life,” I whisper as I slowly glide to my hilt and back again. Bria shudders with pleasure, her knuckles bleaching as she grips the edge of the desk. “I can’t guarantee I won’t fuck you six ways to Sunday every chance I get on this trip.”

“I’m counting on it, Kaplan.”

Her words spur me into a steady cadence of smooth thrusts. I know the excitement of that possibility, and what I could do with her is going to keep me with my dick in my hand for the next few weeks. But right now I’m entranced by the sight before me, her dress pushed up to her waist, those delicate but strong hands holding onto the sharp edge of the wood, the blush on her ass cheeks, the bounce of the toy with every pulse of my hips. I keep the rhythm as steady as music, a slow, almost imperceptible build. A crescendo of pleasure that’s nearing its peak with every stroke.

Bria’s muscles grow tense and a sheen of sweat starts to film her skin, and I know she’s as close as I am to coming undone. So I slow my rhythm and I grab hold of the toy, working it out and back in just an inch or two. And then I turn on the vibration.

“Fucking *Christ*,” she hisses, the sound almost enraged as she lets go of the desk with one hand to fold it into a tight fist. For a moment I worry she’s going to deck me with it, but she just curls it tighter and bites her lip.

“Too much?” I whisper, stilling the motion of both my hand and my cock.

“*God* no. I told you I could take what you had to give, Kaplan. I didn’t tap, so you do not stop,” Bria orders, shooting me a glare over her shoulder. I give her a wicked smile, one I know will bring my dimple into view. She shifts her fury to where it rests in my cheek.

“As you wish, Ms. Brooks.” And then I pick up the pace without holding back. I thrust into Bria’s tight channel. I work the toy clenched in her ass, its vibration blanketing my cock with pleasure. I circle her clit with the pads of my fingers. And then I feel her sheath grip my erection and I watch as she starts to come apart. My own release comes like a current up my spine, my balls tightening before the cum races through my cock and fills Bria in pulses that threaten to buckle my legs and send me to my knees. It feels like it will never stop, like I’ll just keep coming until I die from an exploding heart.

When our orgasms do finally subside, I switch off the toy and then wait for a long moment as we both recover our breath. I stroke Bria’s skin and watch as her breathing returns to a more normal rhythm. But I don’t talk to her. I just observe. For some reason, I just know she needs to come down in her own time, in her own way. And so I give her that time.

When she’s ready, I pull out, searing the sight into my brain of her swollen pussy dripping my cum and the black toy still lodged to the hilt in her ass. I stare at it for a moment longer than is probably necessary, but I swear it’s one of the greatest things I’ve ever seen, so when I pull the toy out I do it slowly, just to savor the view. I pull my pants and briefs back up and then I clean her with a soft terry cloth from my drawer, making sure every drop of lube and our arousal is wiped free of her skin before I lift her from the desk and right her on her steady feet.

“I enjoyed seeing you on your knees for me more this time than I did the last,” Bria whispers as she takes her phone from the bookshelf and turns it off at a break in my monologue.

“Me too,” I say.

“Have a seat.”

Somehow, it seems completely natural that Bria would order me around in my office so assuredly, and that I would do exactly as she requests. I sit, putting the toy and lube away before double-checking that my drawer is locked. Bria drifts toward the door and unlocks the latch on the handle, listening for movement on the other side before she opens it wide enough that anyone can see the both of us if they walk by. When she sits, it’s with that same rigid posture as before. But as the sound of voices grow louder from down the hall, Bria shifts just a little, shimmying ever so slightly in her seat before she gives me a wink as if to say *our little secret*.

And then, like nothing at all has happened, Bria launches into a discussion about ritualizing behaviors in digital cult settings.

I nearly die.

My brain is still caught on the image of my milky white cum dripping from her pussy and Bria's already ten steps ahead, covering both our asses with a prim and proper academic discussion. Dr. Strom and the head of the department, Dr. Takahashi, stroll by, and Takahashi pokes his head in briefly to remind me about a departmental meeting tomorrow morning. I nod and say something vaguely affirmative in a blur, and then Strom and Takahashi are gone. Bria resumes her monologue until their footsteps disappear around the corner and she cuts herself off.

"I should go," Bria says as she stands, pulling her bag up with her. My heart plummets. Though I know I'd get nothing done with her here in my office, even if she were sitting as straight and silent as a blade, I still don't want her to leave. "Thanks, Dr. Kaplan. That was fun. I'm looking forward to interviewing with you."

"I...right..."

Bria pauses at the door and turns, her hair falling across her shoulder as she eyes me with a subtle, wicked smile. "Unscented lube next time," she whispers. "People will wonder what's up with the cherry smell, Dr. Kaplan."

And then she's gone, and all the energy is sucked out of the room, following her down the hall like the tail of a comet.

It's only once she's left that I realize. When she first went to the door before I cornered her, she'd left her bag by the chair.

She was going to lock it anyway.



“He agreed,” I say, sitting in Dr. Fletcher’s office. “I don’t think he was particularly happy about it, but he came around.”

Fletcher doesn’t bother trying to control her grin. I know she’s pleased about this opportunity opening up for me, but the way her eyes spark with amusement only confirms that she knows I’ve fucked Kaplan. She probably thinks I’ve persuaded him with sex. She would be wrong. I obtained his approval *before* I had sex with him again. I just gave him a cookie for it, that’s all.

I shift a little in my chair to ignite the delicious soreness left behind by our encounter. *Fine*, I gave myself a cookie too.

“Did he provide dates yet? Any information?”

“No, but he said he’ll confirm shortly and he’ll send a list of anything I need to bring.”

A whisper of a smirk passes across Fletcher’s lips before she manages to subdue it. Yes, she *definitely* knows. “Excellent,” she says. “I’m sure you’ll need to sign some confidentiality documents and submit to a background check. Are you comfortable with that?”

Fuck no. “Yes.”

“Great. I’ve already reached out to Dr. Li. He said he’ll provide a comprehensive list of equipment used in his analyses so we can ensure continuity with your interviews. He should have this to us by the end of the day. We’ll set up some time for training with him so you can learn how to use the devices.”

I already know he used the BIOPAC EDA 1000C Electrodermal Activity Amplifier to measure stress and emotional excitement, and the Meditech MD9015 Multiparameter Patient Monitor for vitals, including ECG, respiration, and blood pressure. I bought them weeks ago so I could familiarize myself with the equipment. But I don't have to tell Fletcher that. "Great, thank you."

Dr. Fletcher leans back in her chair and regards me for a long moment with a gentle smile. "I'm glad this has worked out, Bria."

"It will be a great opportunity for my research. Thank you for helping to push it forward."

Fletcher shrugs. "I didn't do much. Kaplan just needed a little nudge. He was worried about your safety, primarily."

My head tilts. I think we both know it wasn't his *primary* concern, but it's interesting news nonetheless. "Why?"

"There are powerful people involved, and you never know if they might want to target those connected to the case. But this is the career path you chose. The risk to your safety is low, but if you want to change your mind, no one would blame you, least of all Kaplan. I'm sure he'd be relieved, quite frankly."

I smile. I would like to see Caron Berger try. If only he would step into my web so boldly. "I'll be fine," I say with confidence. "Like you said, it's the career I chose, and I understand it comes with risks. While I enjoy academic life, I might want to pursue other avenues once my doctorate is complete." Like, I don't know...revisiting my search for Donald Soversky Sr. and drinking margaritas from his bleached skull.

Dr. Fletcher's eyes narrow as she assesses me with a smile I can't really understand. It has a nuance that eludes me. "What were you thinking about just now?"

"A beach holiday."

Fletcher laughs almost as though she's relieved, and I resolve to be more vigilant with my expressions in her presence. She leans back in her chair and seems more at ease as she swivels from side to side. I try to mimic her posture and settle further into my seat, but it feels performative and unnatural.

"What lured you to the profession of forensic psychology anyway?" Fletcher asks, her voice a hint too smooth and polished. I suddenly feel like I'm not the only one performing.



*Tread carefully*, I hear Samuel's guiding whisper in my head.

"Memories," I answer with a faintly wistful smile. "At first, I wanted to know more about how they were made and forgotten. My interest evolved as my studies progressed. Eventually, I wanted to understand how they could be measured more reliably to determine their accuracy in criminal cases. And I need to know how we can ask better questions or deliver interviews in a way that will help witnesses to remember their experiences more vividly, with less noise."

"You *need* to know," Fletcher echoes. "Sounds like your interest is not just a career, but a vocation."

I huff a bemused laugh. "Absent of the religious connotation, I suppose it is. I have an...unusual memory, so I guess I'm uniquely qualified." Fletcher's head tilts and her brows pull together in a silent request for me to elaborate. "I'm what my uncle Samuel likes to call an 'accidental mnemonist.' I developed the method of loci without knowing what it was when I was a child. I made a memory palace from my community. When I came to live with Samuel, he realized what I was doing and helped me hone my ability."

Fletcher smiles as though a unicorn just walked through her door and shit a rainbow on her desk. "Seriously?"

I nod and smile. This is more information than I like to give, but it's like a "get out of jail free" card. Not only does it explain away any of my inherent weirdness, it's gold dust to someone like Fletcher who specializes in the field.

"I won't ask if I can test your memory, but you know I want to," Fletcher says with a sly grin.

"Yes, of course. Perhaps after the interviews are done?" I offer, rising from my chair and pulling the strap of my bag up my shoulder.

"That would be great," Fletcher replies. "I'm glad it worked out with those interviews. I have full confidence in you, Bria."

I give her the warmest smile I can manage despite loathing the idea of sitting for memory tests like a lab rat. "Thank you," I say before heading to the door.

"Oh, and Bria?" she says just before I pass over the threshold. I turn and raise an eyebrow in question. "Try to keep Kap in one piece, okay?"

Heat rises to my cheeks as Fletcher smiles and looks down at her papers. I leave without another word.

Well. That didn't take long to get around. Not that I think Fletcher will send the information through the campus that Kaplan and I have hooked up. She's not the type. I can't say I care too much anyway. My work is strong enough to stand on its own, and if I had to, I could always transfer. It wouldn't be convenient, but I could manage. Besides, it's not like Kaplan's my advisor. He doesn't teach any of my classes. I'm not his TA. He won't even be here in four months. If anything, it would probably do my cover some good to be romantically associated with him. I wouldn't look like so much of a recluse. But I already know *he* would care. He doesn't like the idea of tarnishing his polished surface, no matter how much he wants to break the rules when no one is looking.

Which will make it even more fun to push him.

I'm imagining my plans for our next encounter when there's a buzz in my pocket. It's my burner phone. I've been checking it multiple times a day, but it's taken ages for Cynthia Nordstrom to finally contact me. My heart rate spikes with excitement from seeing her name on the screen.

HI NERIAH! I'M SORRY IT'S TAKEN ME A WHILE TO GET IN TOUCH, THINGS HAVE BEEN SO BUSY AT WORK. I KNOW IT'S SHORT NOTICE, BUT WE'RE HAVING A WOMEN'S GROUP MEETING TOMORROW NIGHT AS I'LL BE TIED UP ON THE WEEKEND FOR OUR USUAL TIME. ANY CHANCE YOU CAN MAKE IT? NO PRESSURE WITH THAT YOGA, JUST HAVING YOU THERE WOULD BE GREAT!

Electricity hums in my veins. I notice no location is listed yet, which doesn't surprise me. Cynthia Nordstrom is no fool. She's careful with her details, and she won't send anything until I bite. *With enthusiasm.*

HI CYNTHIA! IT'S SO GREAT TO HEAR FROM YOU. YES, I'M FREE AND I'D LOVE TO JOIN YOU! AND I CAN ABSOLUTELY TEACH A YOGA CLASS TOMORROW NIGHT IF YOU'RE STILL INTERESTED, PROVIDED THERE'S SPACE. IT'S NO TROUBLE AT ALL. HOW MANY ATTENDEES DO YOU ANTICIPATE? I'LL MAKE SURE TO BRING ENOUGH MATS, JUST LET EVERYONE KNOW TO WEAR COMFORTABLE CLOTHING THAT ALLOWS THEM TO MOVE FREELY. LOOKING FORWARD TO IT!

As soon as I send the message, I see her typing a response. I stop and lean against the brick wall of the hallway, waiting for her reply.

FANTASTIC! WE'RE MEETING AT OSMON BALLET STUDIO WHICH WILL HAVE LOTS OF SPACE. THERE SHOULD BE FOURTEEN OF US, YOURSELF INCLUDED. LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU AT 8:00 P.M. TOMORROW!

Yes. Yes, yes, yes. If I'm lucky, I might be able to stick a tracker on her and figure out where she lives, which seems to be a tricky thing to nail down. Cynthia doesn't tend to stay in one place for long, constantly darting between cities near the various Legio Agni remote compounds, presumably staying close to Berger. If I can get to her now, I might be able to flush Berger out of hiding.

My watch dings with a message from my primary phone, and I switch devices, pocketing the burner.

UNKNOWN SENDER: YOU WERE RIGHT.

A grin pulls at my lips. My heart trips a beat with suspicion of who it might be. I quickly add the name into as a new contact into my phone before typing my reply.

ME: ABOUT MY RECOMMENDATION TO EMBRACE THE REBEL PROFESSOR LOOK?

KAPLAN: I DON'T THINK YOU RECOMMENDED THAT.

ME: IT WAS IMPLIED.

KAPLAN: NOTED. BRB, PUTTING A REMINDER ON MY PHONE TO DESTROY MY MOTORCYCLE JACKET AS I THINK YOU MIGHT ACTUALLY LIKE IT.

It takes me a moment to realize I've been smiling down at my phone like an idiot. I put in my AirPods and bring up a playlist I made the other day against my better judgment. *Tweed Academia*. I press play on "Deep End" before responding.

ME: I WOULDN'T GO THAT FAR. HOW DID YOU GET MY  
NUMBER ANYWAY? FLETCHER?

KAPLAN: YES.

ME: WOW, ANOTHER BROKEN RULE. I'M IMPRESSED. SO  
WHAT WAS I RIGHT ABOUT?

KAPLAN: DR. HALPERON STOPPED BY MY OFFICE.

ME: YOU DIDN'T SHOW HER YOUR DRAWER, DID YOU? I'LL  
BE HIGHLY DISTURBED IF SO.

KAPLAN: THANKS...THAT IMAGERY IS NOW LIVING RENT-FREE  
IN MY HEAD, BUT NOT IN A GOOD WAY. MORE LIKE IN A  
"RACCOONS SQUATTING IN AN ABANDONED BUILDING"  
KIND OF WAY.

ME: RACCOONS ARE SUPPOSEDLY CUTE.

KAPLAN: SOMETIMES ALSO RABID. ANYWAY, DR. HALPERON  
HAD A COMMENT ABOUT MY NEW INCENSE DIFFUSER. SHE  
WANTED TO KNOW WHERE I GOT SUCH A NICE CHERRY  
SCENT.

ME: CHRIST. I'M NOT SURE I'M HAPPY TO BE RIGHT THIS  
TIME.

KAPLAN: WELL, I JUST THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT  
IT'LL BE UNSCENTED NEXT TIME.

ME: YOU THINK THERE'S GOING TO BE A NEXT TIME?

I don't know why, but my heartbeat doubles in rhythm and my face feels too hot while I watch those three dots bouncing on my screen as Kaplan taps out his reply.

KAPLAN: OH I KNOW IT, SWEETHEART.

I reread that message before sliding my phone into my pocket, pushing away from the wall. My smile might be controlled on the surface, but the heat of it explodes in my chest.

I guess I'm not the only one who's right today.



**M**y lecture on neurodegenerative diseases and their impact on cognition is the last of the day, and a few students are starting to flag by the end. It's early in the term. Some pupils are still finding their feet with the flow of classes and assignments and the turbulence that this stage of life can throw their way. But most remain attentive, and there's a good discussion near the end about the next essay assignment before I dismiss them.

When the last student has gone, I start gathering my laptop and notes into my satchel, then check my phone for messages. One from Fletch. She loves her memes. A message from my motorcycle buddy Simon about an upcoming street race, the Autumn Adder, the last race of the season. Adrenaline surges through my veins with the thought of it, but I hold off on replying. Another message from one of my old trysts putting the feelers out for a hookup next weekend while she's in town for a conference. I fire off a quick response to say I'll be busy, but the truth is I'm just wholly disinterested. That's it for messages. Not sure what else I was expecting, but for some reason, a sense of dismay and disquiet settles into my chest.

But that feeling is wiped clean with three simple words.

"Afternoon, Dr. Kaplan."

My eyes dart up to the second row of terraced seats where Bria stands, leaning against the end of the long, curved table, her arms folded across her chest. I didn't even hear a sound.

I release the tension from the strap of my satchel, leaving its weight on the table. "Bria."

A smile as dark as the shadows of hell stalks across Bria's face and I want nothing more than to dive into the flames that chase it.

Bria pushes her weight into the hip leaning against the sharp edge of the laminated wood to right herself. She takes her time to drift down the steps. "Neurodegenerative disorders and their impact on cognition. What's next on your syllabus?"

She heard my lecture.

"You're here to talk about my syllabus?"

Bria pauses on one step as her smile broadens. "No."

"Didn't think so."

Bria slowly ascends the stairs to the stage, rounding the table to stop just out of reach. She rests a hand on her hip, her shirt pulling open where it's been unbuttoned low on her chest, revealing her black bra. My dick hardens at the sight of that patch of exposed skin and the knowledge of how much more I've already seen and felt, and want to feel again.

"Questions about the interviews?" I ask.

"Not at present."

"Cognition?"

"No."

"The history of tweed?"

Bria snorts a derisive laugh. "Fuck no." She takes a single step forward and starts unfastening the next button on her shirt. "I don't have questions about the library hours, or the university student union, or which coffee shop is the best in town either."

Christ, I want to fuck her right here, and a thousand options scroll through my mind. I could lay her on the table. She could straddle me on one of the seats. I even glance at the podium while my desires war with the worry that someone could easily intrude. My eyes dart to the doors before I meet Bria's gaze once more, and she regards me with a knowing smirk as though she can see every thought in my head.

"What are you going to do, Professor? Hide me in the lectern?" Bria looks down at the empty cabinet built into the podium and folds her arms across her chest. "I don't think I'd fit." Her eyes slide back to mine. The edges of her lips curl with a dark smile. "Maybe you do hate me if you're willing to stuff my body into a little box and fuck my mouth like I'm a dirty secret you regret keeping. But you just can't help yourself, can you?"

My jaw is clamped so tight it's ready to snap. I want to tell her she's wrong. Except she's not. I do want to fuck her pretty mouth until she's gagging on my cock. But damn straight I would push her into that lectern if I heard as much as a footstep from the hall or a click on the door handle.

"You've got that right, sweetheart." I stalk forward and twine my hand in her hair, gripping it tightly. I pull with gentle, steady tension, Bria flashing a triumphant smile as I bow her backward and she drops to her knees, licking her lips. "You'll be drinking my cum like it's fucking lemonade. But I regret to inform you that you're dead wrong about one thing," I say as I release my zipper with my other hand and free my erection, gliding the glistening tip across her waiting, wanting lips. Her eyes turn black with my words. I hold her gaze and lean closer. "I won't hide you away because you're my dirty secret. I'll hide you away because I'm the only one who gets to see you on your knees, Bria."

The flare of surprise in her eyes turns to ravenous need.

I lean back, my cock nearly touching her lips, so close I can feel their heat. "Tap three times if it gets too much."

"Tug on my hair three times if it gets too much," she replies, darting her tongue out to swipe at the precum beaded on the head as I swallow the moan already climbing my throat.

"Doubtful."

"We'll see."

"Indeed." My grip on her hair tightens and I add my other hand. "Now take it like a good girl and make me come."

I plunge into the hot, wet heat of Bria's mouth and hit the back of her throat. And then I do it again. And again. And again. Rhythmic gagging and garbled groans vibrate through my cock as she sucks and chokes down every thrust. Her eyes flood and dampen her lashes, tears slide down her cheeks. But she never breaks the connection of her dark gaze. She glares at me with a mix of desire and loathing so potent it sets my blood on fire.

Bria tugs my pants and briefs down and wraps her hand around the base of my cock, adding sensation to what I can't shove down her throat. I watch as she grips and strokes with strong fingers, her nails painted a dark crimson so perfectly Bria that it makes my dick impossibly harder. She scrapes those nails across my balls and I shudder, pounding into her mouth with no restraint.



“You are fucking perfect, Bria Brooks,” I grit out as I tug on her hair. She moans and hums in satisfaction. Lightning skitters up my spine. “Pretend to hate me all you want, but your mouth says otherwise. I think you love the taste of my cock. You can’t wait to have my cum filling your throat.”

Bria whimpers and her glare intensifies, as though she’s angry at herself for the needy sound that just escaped her control. It’s like tinder for the flame within me. I fist Bria’s hair and thrust mercilessly as pleasure winds through my nerves and my heart rages.

Her devious, dark smile wraps around my erection as Bria passes a finger through the saliva glistening on my cock, then keeps going, tracing the underside, past my balls to the rim of my ass. She watches for my reaction as she tests the resistance and I give her nothing but heated want and desperate need in return. Bria pushes her finger in, that teasing smile encircling my cock once more.

My balls tighten. I growl.

Bria adds another finger and sinks a little deeper, humming with approval when she finds the perfect spot. She massages with her fingertips and strokes with her other hand and sucks with that beautiful mouth. Pleasure rolls through me. I tip my head back, shuddering a desperate breath.

And just as I’m about to shoot my cum into Bria’s mouth, she pulls back.

Bria’s hand is still gripping my cock as I spill down her chin and across her collarbones, dripping down her chest. The cum pulses in ropery spurts on her face as she works my shaft. She holds out her tongue to catch some, then runs it across her wicked smirk, coating her wet, swollen lips. I glare down at her in a lecherous rage, realizing she’s just replicated in me what I think she must feel when we collide.

“Now, now, Dr. Kaplan,” Bria chimes, her voice such a sweet contradiction to the strength of her grip around my cock. She sweeps her tongue from her bleached knuckles to the tip, licking the cum and saliva as she blinks up at me with feigned innocence. “I know you wanted me to drink you down like lemonade, but I have a yoga class to teach tonight and I wanted to take your scent with me.”

The thought of marking her with my cum sends a greater thrill up my spine than the idea of it sliding down her throat. Now that the idea is there,

I'll never get rid of it. I want her to spend the next few hours with this secret on her skin. I want her to go home tonight and touch herself, feeling the evidence of what we've done right there on her flesh.

Bria licks again, a slow, languorous pass of her hot tongue, and keeps licking until every inch of my cock is clean. After wiping her fingers with a tissue she stands, holding my gaze as she smears the mess across her chest and then buttons up her shirt. "Our little secret," she says with a wink.

"Until you pull a fire alarm and campus security arrives," I reply. Bria huffs a laugh as she turns toward the table and picks up my second-favorite tweed jacket. She pivots in my direction with a wicked grin. I sigh with resignation, trying to hide how bewitched I am with every move she makes. "Not that one too."

Bria's smile grows. "Erroneous clothing choices deserve consequences," Bria says, then uses the lining to wipe the cum and tears from her face in slow passes. "Like I said, Dr. Kaplan. Our little secret."

Bria holds the jacket out for me to take, and if it means our mixed scent of sex and tears will linger in the threads, I might never launder it again.

I slip it on and Bria watches my movement with keen interest. As soon as it's in place on my shoulders, she turns to stride away across the stage. I catch her wrist before she can gain momentum.

"Wait," I say, trying to keep any urgency from infusing my voice. "What time is your class?"

Bria doesn't try to wrench away from my grip or twist my arm into a pretzel. Her expression is oddly blank. "Eight," she replies.

"Come to Deja Brew with me. We can get a coffee."

Bria's eyes narrow.

"Tea," I offer.

Her head tilts.

"I can get a coffee and you can get whatever you like. We don't even have to sit at the same table." I lean a little closer, keeping my eyes on Bria's, closing in until my lips nearly touch hers. "You can even spend the whole time glaring as though you hate me, even though I know you don't."

A faint smile finally passes across Bria's lips. "I can't really refuse an opportunity to openly loathe you, can I."

"I was hoping you'd see it that way." I lean back and give her a grin that brings out the dimple in my cheek. She gives it the evil eye as though it's her mortal enemy. "You hate that dimple, don't you?"

“I really do. Truly.”

With a final, heated look between us, Bria and I leave the lecture hall side by side. We walk to Deja Brew. I order coffee, she gets a kale salad. We sit at the same table. We talk about politics. University. Traveling. I even earn one of her rare laughs.

And though I promised Bria that she could pretend to hate me, she doesn't.



Yoga with Cynthia last night was two hours of life I'll never get back. First, we had a group discussion that involved an introduction, or rather indoctrination, to some of the Legio Agni terminology. A lot of it makes sense on the surface, if you think you know about science but actually don't. Cynthia talks about the vibration of elements within foods and supplements to promote healing and well-being, slowing cellular breakdown to homeostasis. She weaves in trauma and religion and the need to align ourselves to our higher purpose. She talks about the "clinical trials" on the Lamb Health website, which I've already read at home and which caused me to roll my eyes so many times that I might have caught a glimpse of my orbital sockets. Altogether, it sounds ridiculous, but I'll hand it to Cynthia; she was masterful at drip-feeding the information to keep it from overwhelming us.

After talking as a group about this bullshit for about forty-five minutes, I started the yoga class, but there was no way I could put a tracker on Cynthia, not with her bodyguard lurking. It's a woman this time, the same one I saw leaving the Praetorian building, and her cutting gaze missed nothing. I couldn't take the risk. So I played the role of Melancholy Moneyed Lamb Chop and seethed internally instead.

I've now progressed through my morning routine, spending time on a meticulous braided updo—as the random picker has declared it's hair day—with the hope that the focus required to execute the precise design will take my mind off last night's irritation. It does not. As I leave my house for the

campus, I realize what might *actually* help is to let off some steam, and there's only one thing as effective as killing for that.

Dr. Kaplan.

Though it's not the most original idea I've had, after a short and unproductive session of literature review at my desk, I decide to head to Kaplan's office and perhaps seduce him into a repeat of our last encounter there. Sure, I'm a little curious about what other toys he might have in his locked drawer. I've considered breaking in to see for myself, but that would ruin the surprise of what he might come up with, and I can't help but try to find out.

I descend the stairs to the third floor, passing a few students as I round the corners toward his office, the sounds of friendly chatter filling the corridors as several pupils take advantage of open office hours with faculty. Kaplan's door is ajar down the hall and I stride toward it, stopping silently at the threshold. He's working at his laptop and looks up as I knock, surprise and desire flashing across his face. Wariness too. And then a faint, wicked smile as I fold my arms across my chest and glare at him.

"You fixed it," I say.

"Actually," Kaplan replies as he twists his arm to display a new suede patch sewn onto the elbow of his formerly ruined tweed jacket, "I *improved* it."

A long beat of silence passes between us during which his smile only grows. "Sure. Let's call it that. What about those?" I ask as he removes a pair of tortoiseshell glasses. They're sexy and they suit him and I *hate* them. I want to grind them into the floor with my heel.

"These?"

"Those. Do you actually have a prescription or is this purely for professor hipster aesthetic purposes?"

"Does it matter? Or will you lie and say you despise them regardless?"

"I'm not—"

"Ah, there she is."

My mouth snaps shut around my words as a familiar voice interrupts from down the hall.

I execute a slow turn on my heel to look at Samuel, dressed in an impeccable suit, with a mahogany cane and his free hand looped on Dr. Takahashi's arm. "My beloved niece, Bria," he says.

“Uncle.” I try to keep the wariness beneath a smooth veneer as I step into the hall, the two men slowing to a halt before me. My surprise is etched into a smile that feels wooden and fake as I kiss each of Samuel’s cheeks in our customary greeting. “What are you doing here?”

A devilish gleam shines in his eyes. I hear Dr. Kaplan’s chair scrape across the floor and then his footsteps as he approaches. Samuel doesn’t take his eyes from mine, but I know it’s not me he’s watching. “I’ve come to take you for lunch.”

“Did we have plans I forgot about? I’m not supposed to pick you up until four o’clock. Does Cedar Ridge know you’re here?”

Samuel chuckles as though he’s the sweetest, gentlest old man to ever walk the earth. “My darling, Cedar Ridge is not a prison. Can an old man not take his favorite niece for a birthday lunch?”

We eye one another, me with suspicion and Samuel with devious amusement.

“Dr. Kaplan,” Dr. Takahashi says, oblivious to the silent exchange between us as Kaplan stops just behind me. “I’d like to introduce Professor Emeritus, Samuel Brooks. Professor Brooks was dean of the College of Engineering. He retired a year before you joined us. Professor Brooks, this is Dr. Elijah Kaplan, one of our faculty members specializing in Forensic Psychology.”

Kaplan’s surprise seems to vibrate in the space between us. “Professor Brooks, it’s such a pleasure to meet you. Your illustrious reputation precedes you. I didn’t realize you and Bria were related,” Kaplan says as he shakes Samuel’s hand.

“Yes. Don’t let that tarnish your opinion of my dear Bria,” Samuel replies with a smile as Dr. Takahashi laughs warmly beside him.

“I believe you were noted as being harsh but *fair*,” Takahashi says as he pats Samuel’s arm.

“That depends on who you ask.”

Dr. Takahashi laughs again, his attention on my uncle as I give Samuel an admonishing lift of my brow. “I must go, I have a meeting,” Dr. Takahashi says. “It’s been a treat to catch up, Professor Brooks. Thank you again for contributing to Edward’s party, he had a wonderful time.”

“My pleasure.”

With a nod to each of us, Dr. Takahashi continues down the hall, leaving me caught between a snake and its prey.

“Uncle.”

“Bria.”

“Shall we?”

Samuel’s grin widens. “No need to rush, Bria. I’ve hardly gotten a chance to know Dr. Kaplan.” Samuel shifts to face the man next to me with a thud of his cane on the floor. “In fact, why don’t you join us for lunch, Dr. Kaplan?”

“I couldn’t possibly intrude.”

“Dr. Kaplan’s very busy, Uncle. He has students to see,” I say, taking Samuel’s free arm as I send Kaplan a death glare.

It does not have the intended effect.

“Actually, you know what? I do have a few hours free, if you’re sure it wouldn’t be an imposition.”

Samuel beams, ignoring the daggers I imagine driving into his brain. I’m starting to think it’s not Kaplan who’s the prey for the old serpent, but me. “Not at all,” Samuel says, his voice so sweet there’s not even a hint of venom in its depths.

“Don’t you have classes to teach?” I ask as Kaplan’s dimple flashes in his dark stubble. “Or jackets to sew?”

Kaplan pulls his glasses from the interior pocket and inspects one of the new suede patches as I roll my eyes. “Seems to be holding up well, from what I can see.”

I bite my lip to keep from smiling as Kaplan gives me a rakish grin. When he sees me trying to subdue it, his face lights up in the most irritating, spellbinding way. He enjoys getting under my skin just as much as I enjoy burrowing under his. Though I want to loathe him for it, it seems as though there are moments when it’s becoming harder to try.

I sigh, letting my gaze fall across the fabric with disdain. “I apologize in advance if something *accidentally* stains it irreparably.”

“I’m sure you would feel horrible.”

“So horrible. I’d never forgive myself.”

“If you collect fine tweed, Dr. Kaplan, one of our residents who recently passed away at Cedar Ridge had some jackets that might fit you,” Samuel says as we make our way to the elevator. I give Kaplan a piercing look and he smiles as though this is the best news he’s ever received. “Richard was smaller than you but wore clothes that were too big. Likely overcompensating, you understand.”



“No—” I say at the same time as Kaplan emphatically says *yes*.

The two men make arrangements for Kaplan’s possible acquisition of Dick Piston’s wardrobe, and before long we’re on our way to a farm-to-table restaurant in the Buena Vista neighborhood where there’s a mixture of expensive condos and upscale restaurants and designer shops. Blue Stone Kitchen is not the usual kind of place Samuel would take me, with its rough limestone walls and original beams holding up a low ceiling from which greenery sways in the air conditioning. It’s got too much character and warmth for his taste, but he seems pleased as the hostess leads us to a worn plank table and sets up an extra place for Dr. Kaplan.

I give Samuel a quizzical look. His only reply is a dark gleam in his eyes.

Samuel gestures for me to take the seat that gives me the best view of the entrance and the seating area, while he claims the spot to my left where he’ll have a similar view, and Kaplan the seat to my right. We order a bottle of wine and appetizers to share and the conversation flows easily. Samuel is charming and funny, regaling us with tales of Berkshire’s faculty and gossip from Cedar Ridge, of which there’s plenty. He tells stories of residents that can reel a person in, and before long you care about what happened to Rachel Kennedy’s false teeth or how Clyde Masterson the former studio musician, and Eliza Mancini the retired opera singer have struck up a passionate romance. Through another lens, this moment could tell its own sweet fairy tale. An elderly uncle, putting his niece at ease by charming the man at her side.

But that’s not what this is.

Movement at the door catches my eye as a powerfully built man walks in, removing a pair of sunglasses as he scans the room. I avert my gaze to Samuel before the man’s eye can catch mine.

Praetorian.

I recognize him as one of the men I saw leaving the building, but not the same man who escorted Cynthia to the nail salon. The hostess directs him to a table for two at the window. She removes a place setting.

Kaplan is talking about a conference he went to with Dr. Wells and the server is placing our appetizers on the table, but Samuel and I are having a silent conversation in the glances between us.

*Watch the server.*

*Check the time.*

13:08.

*Did you see that?*

*You're a sneaky old man. Possibly a wizard.*

*Just you wait.*

Samuel distracts Kaplan with conversation while I get a better look at the interaction between the server and the bodyguard. There's affection. Familiarity. But some kind of barrier. They're not together, but they want to be. He's here to eat by himself so he can talk to her. He's wearing a suit. His pants look freshly pressed. His tie is neatly knotted.

He's coming up on a shift change.

I take a breath and close my eyes. There's so much distraction with the music and conversation. Even the scent of the food makes it harder to focus, and I need to see the details clearly. I placed the most important appointments of Cynthia's schedule this week on a series of missing person posters on the fence surrounding my memory palace. I'm looking for an appointment at two o'clock, but there are gaps in her calendar.

There are gaps...

*Holy shit.*

She's at home. This bodyguard is going to complete the shift change at her home.

I take a sharp breath and meet Samuel's eyes, catching the spark of death beneath his cataracts as he watches me come to this conclusion. *Happy birthday*, his little smile says.

A warm hand on my elbow pulls my attention away.

"Are you okay?" Kaplan asks, bending his head to catch my eyes. "Headache?"

"Just for a second," I lie, bringing my hand to my temple as I realize how it must have appeared as I shut myself off from the world. "Gone now."

Kaplan removes his hand but keeps his gaze on me, even after I give what I hope is a reassuring smile. I glance at Samuel to gauge his reaction but he's watching the server as a bell sounds from the kitchen and she heads in that direction. "Excuse me," he says, rising from the table and steadying himself with his cane. He shuffles away in the direction of the bodyguard and I watch his slow yet expertly timed progression until my chair slides to the right with a lurch.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask as Kaplan tugs again, drawing me to the corner of the table and almost to his side. He looks deep into my eyes, undeterred by the lethal glare I try to give him.

“Checking.”

“For?”

“Damage,” he replies. He reaches up, his thumb grazing my cheekbone where the bruise has now faded into a faint yellow smudge. My breath hitches. A tingle of warmth hums down my spine with his gentle caress.

“*Damage*,” I repeat and he nods. “What kind of damage?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t have a chance to thoroughly check you over recently.”

I snort a laugh and he smiles. “I think you checked enough,” I say.

“No. I definitely did not.”

Heat erupts in Kaplan’s eyes and is answered by a coiling ache deep in my belly. I want to press my cheek into the warmth of his hand as his fingers trace the curve of my face. I want to leave and go somewhere, *anywhere*, where we can be alone, where I can rip this jacket off his shoulders and crush his lips to mine.

But I tear my eyes away and they stop at Samuel. He’s arrived next to the bodyguard’s table where the server has just delivered his food. The server motions toward the bathroom with a warm smile. Samuel shifts the hooked handle of his cane to his forearm as the bodyguard and server are distracted by something he says. He lets a handkerchief fall from his hand. As the bodyguard bends to pick it up, Samuel pulls something from his interior pocket. And when the man hands Samuel the handkerchief, Samuel pats his wrist in a grandfatherly gesture, right at the buttons.

He’s deposited a GPS tracker.

“Come out with me tonight,” Kaplan says, pulling my attention back to our table as Samuel heads in the direction of the bathrooms. “I didn’t realize it was your birthday. I’ll make you dinner.”

“I thought you were trying not to break the rules, Dr. Kaplan.”

“I think I’ve already broken those ones. No harm breaking them again,” he says. I give him a dark, skeptical look, but he’s undeterred. “If it’ll make you feel better, I’ll cook something you hate, and I’ll be the worst company.”

“You already are.”

“Good, then I’m halfway there.” Kaplan lays his hand next to mine, his palm facing upward in an invitation. I trace the creases in his skin, wondering what a palmist would claim they mean and which line I would fit on, if any. “Come have a terrible time with me.”

I smile, and truthfully, as much as I’m excited to edge closer to Cynthia Nordstrom’s private life, I’m a little disappointed to decline. “I can’t, I’m sorry. Samuel and I have a birthday tradition. I’ll be away for the weekend.”

Kaplan’s fingers curl around mine. “It’s okay. Another time. It’ll give me the opportunity to prepare something truly awful.”

As though it’s the easiest thing in the world, Kaplan leans forward and kisses my cheek, and then slides my chair back into place just before Samuel rejoins the table. The old man says nothing, shows nothing. But I know he sees it all, even what I try to hide.

When our meal is done, Kaplan takes us all back to the university in time for his afternoon classes. I drive Samuel to the house and we pack, then pick up his bag from Cedar Ridge on the way to his lakefront cabin at Lake McDonald where our usual birthday rituals play out across the weekend. A swim in the cold water, in which he times me against the distance buoys he placed in the lake years ago. A present, always a weapon, this time a custom compound bow with a package of targets that I set up on the pebbled beach near the dock. And stalking prey, both of us hovering over our laptops as we work out where Cynthia Nordstrom lives. The signal from the GPS drops repeatedly at 656 Toyah Avenue, the address where there just happens to be a luxury condo high-rise.

And though I stay focused on every task, never wavering in my commitment to my exercise or work or mapping Cynthia’s movements, I feel Samuel’s scrutinous eye on me, always. But he only gives one warning, just before bed on Sunday night. *Be careful, Bria. We are not like everyone else. We don’t feel what they feel, and it is deadly to try.*

I make my promise in reply, the one I always keep. *I will not fail.* And yet, for the first time, I wonder what I really mean before I shove that thought aside.

Monday morning, I arrive at the Psychology building before David and Tida, when the halls are still quiet and the campus holds on to a sacred kind of solitude. The music on my headphones muffles the echo of my footsteps as I climb the weathered stairs to the fourth floor. The automatic lights snap

to life when I step into the corridor and unlock my office door. I stop dead when I flick on the overhead light and it illuminates a box on my desk, covered in wrapping paper of a familiar pattern. Tweed.

It takes me a moment to realize I'm smiling.

I set my bag down on my chair and my keys and coffee on my shelves, then I turn to the box, lifting a sealed card from the top.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY. IT REMINDED ME OF YOU. I HOPE YOU DESPISE IT.

There's no signature to accompany the clean, unfussy penmanship, but of course it doesn't need one. I set the card aside and lift the lid of the box.

I pull out a bonsai cherry tree in full bloom, the delicate pink flowers a beautiful contrast to the dark wood of the miniature trunk and the carefully trimmed branches. A strong scent of cherries infuses the air around me as I set the ceramic pot on my desk and run my fingers across the feathery blooms. I lean closer to smell them but the scent of the flowers is faint. But the box? That's *strong*. I flip over the lid to smell the fragrance, and find there's a note written on the interior.

UNSCENTED NEXT TIME.

My smile grows sore within my cheeks as I set up my laptop and open my Outlook.

*DEAR DR. KAPLAN,*

*KUDOS, YOU'VE OUTDONE YOURSELF. I DETEST IT. ESPECIALLY THE BOX.*

*MY UNKINDEST REGARDS,*

*BRIA*

I press send and run my finger over the mottled trunk and silken petals.

Warmth blossoms in my chest. At first, it seems just as delicate as one of those little pink flowers. I could pick it apart, or starve it of light. But I don't. I just let it be.

And to my surprise, as the day unfurls, through classes and meetings, through my solitary dinner with Kane at my feet, all the way to when I

close my eyes, it stays rooted behind my bones.



“I asked Samuel Brooks’s niece if she had money to go to Utah. And I fucked her. In the library. And on my desk. And in a classroom.”

“*Jesus Christ, Kaplan,*” Fletch hisses as she tosses an ax toward the target. “I don’t know whether to be proud or disgusted.”

“Both,” Blake chimes in. “Have you ever thought of maybe taking her to a hotel room? Or like, your house?”

Fletch snickers and elbows Blake. “That would be too tame for our friend here. Haven’t you heard his nickname? K—”

“Shut it, or I’ll tell Blake *your* nickname.”

Blake huffs a laugh. “What, Farty Fletchy? I already knew that.”

Fletch grins as I pass her to take a turn with the ax. “Who’s Samuel Brooks anyway?” she asks.

“Essentially, the most renowned Berkshire faculty member in recent years. He was the dean of Engineering for over two decades. He contributed a huge donation toward the Palladium Building on campus. His name is on a plaque at the door. He retired just before I started, but I’ve heard about him.”

“Anything in particular?”

I shrug and toss the ax, and it smacks into the target near the bullseye. “Not really. He’s a bit reclusive, apparently, though he seemed very engaging when I met him. Wildly brilliant. Intimidating. From what I understand, he’s not one to suffer fools. But he also did a lot to advance the department, and pushed the good students to become great ones.”



“Sounds like Bria comes by her nature honestly, from what you’ve both told me about her,” Blake says as she takes her shot with the ax.

“Wonder if that includes her murderly vibes,” Fletcher chimes in.

“She doesn’t have murderly vibes,” I retort, crimson heat crawling up my neck.

“You’re the one who said it in the first place in the Uber to the party. And then you said she was going to make a mask from your skin.”

“I was wrong,” I snap. Fletcher’s brows climb and a knowing smile crosses her face. “*What?*”

“Nothing.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to go for her, and now that I’m trying, she’s a murderer? What the fuck is that?”

“I didn’t say she *is* a murderer. I said she gives murderly *vibes*.”

“What kind of murderly vibes are we talking about here?” Blake asks. “Does she go off on people at random or threaten other students?”

Fletcher shakes her head. “No, not at all. She’s very composed. Almost...*too* composed, like she’s trying too hard to keep a mask up. And for a brief moment, once in a while, it’s like she goes dark and the mask slips.”

“She’s exceptionally intelligent, you know that. It probably takes work for her to fit in,” I say. I let out a heavy sigh and take up the ax, throwing it with too much frustration. It bounces off the target and lands with a thud on the floor. “She’s unique, that’s all.”

“She certainly is that.”

“*Fletch—*”

“I meant that in a good way, I swear.” Fletch balks a little when I give her a skeptical glare. “*Smart* unique.”

“Right.”

“Speaking of which,” Fletch says, sounding like she’s trying to dig her way out of a hole, “did you know she’s a mnemonist? She said she developed a memory palace naturally as a kid. She’s going to let me test her when you’re back from Ogden.”

“What’s a memory palace?” Blake asks as Fletch takes a turn with the ax.

“It’s a strategy to memorize and recall information through visualization of a location,” I explain. “In simplified terms, you place the details you want to remember at different places along the route you take within the

palace. Normally, this strategy is taught. For Bria to have developed it naturally as a child is pretty unusual.”

“So she can remember anything she wants to?”

“Possibly,” Fletcher says.

“What about the stuff she wants to forget?” Blake asks, and I see the spark of scientific inquiry glow in Fletcher’s eyes. “What happens to that?”

Fletcher kisses her wife’s cheek. “What a great question, babe. I’m going to try to find out.”

“No,” I say in a tone that brooks no argument. I know so little about Bria, but with the threat of someone prying into her past, certain pieces of her seem to emerge and slot together. The way she jolts or winces when someone touches her back unexpectedly. The way she’s never elaborated on her family aside from Samuel. Even her words in the library. *No one’s ever taken care of me like this.*

“No,” I repeat. “It’s one thing to test the limits of her capacity to remember. It’s another to delve into her past.”

Fletcher’s initial surprise to my response quickly wanes to irritation. “I want to inquire about her ability to forget, not root through her past.”

“And if she can’t easily forget whatever battery of information you give her to remember, how will you test that? Unless you plan to carry this out over months or even years, the distant past is the only place left to go. You don’t know what you might open up,” I say. Fletcher looks like she’s about to say something but stops herself as she considers my words. “Let me speak to her about it. She’ll tell me if she can’t elaborate on that question.”

“Yeah, Kap. Of course.” Fletcher smiles reassuringly as she hands me an ax. We assess one another with a long look before I turn away and align myself to the target.

My grip tightens on the handle. I don’t understand this urge I have to protect a woman who doesn’t need anyone’s protection, but it’s an instinct I’ll follow.

The ax lands in the heart of the circle.

Though we move on to other topics, my interest in hanging out starts to dissolve. After another thirty minutes, we leave and head to our respective homes, where I spend a little time working on the new profiles we’re building for the source of the missing individuals from Berger’s circle. The person responsible must have resources, both time and money. Potentially military or police experience. It’s an individual with advanced computer

skills. Maybe even more than one person. But their motivations? That's tougher to nail down. Maybe a distraught parent looking for their daughter, or someone whose loved one was harmed by Lamb Health's pseudoscience bullshit. But none of it seems to make sense. A family member would be more likely to try for Caron directly. This seems more like a calculated effort to cause upheaval within his organization. It's as though they're not just after Berger, but Legio Agni and anyone who contributed to building it.

In that case, the best fit is someone who has left Legio Agni and wants revenge for everything that was stolen from them.

I click on the secure link to all the documents Agent Espinoza has uploaded for my review, and start compiling potential questions for the interview subjects that might illuminate whether someone they know might fit this profile. It's a long shot as there are several compounds run by Legio Agni. They might not know of anyone who has these capabilities, but it's at least a place to start. I then make a list of questions for Agent Espinoza. Has anyone left the cult who would be skilled enough to exact revenge? Have any other cults on the FBI's radar experienced a similar takedown pattern in the last several years? If so, can we quickly line up interview subjects?

I open my email and send a quick message with these questions to Agent Espinoza, requesting a call for tomorrow to run through my theory. Once the email is sent, I catch up on my inbox. There are a few faculty notices and some student questions about assignments, but nothing urgent. Bria's message from yesterday lingers in my inbox and I reread it, grinning at her response to my gift. She hate-loved it, which is a success, and I try not to dwell on Fletcher's words earlier as protective anger bubbles up in my chest. Without really thinking about it, I pick up my phone.

ME: ON A SCALE OF 1–10, HOW MUCH DID YOU HATE THE  
TREE?

The dots of Bria's reply start bouncing immediately.

BRIA: 20.

ME: EXCELLENT. IN THAT CASE, I THINK YOU SHOULD COME  
WITH ME TO GRINDSTONE TOMORROW BEFORE CLASS. WE

CAN START PREPPING FOR INTERVIEWS.

BRIA: I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND THE CONNECTION  
BETWEEN THE TWO...

ME: THERE IS NONE, BUT IF IT MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER, WE  
CAN ALSO MAKE A LIST OF THINGS YOU DESPISE AND I'LL  
DO EVERY ONE OF THEM.

Bria takes a long moment to respond, and I tap my fingers on the edge of the phone as I wait. Only a minute passes, but the weight of it feels like five.

BRIA: WHAT IF SOMEONE SEES US AND STARTS ASKING  
QUESTIONS?

ME: WE'LL HAVE PAPERS AND COMPUTERS AND SHIT. AND I  
WASN'T PLANNING ON FUCKING YOU ON THE TABLE. I  
THINK IT'LL BE FINE.

BRIA: DAMN, I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE SECOND PART  
☺. OKAY, WHAT TIME?

Shit. My dick jumps to attention with her reply. I already know there's no hope of getting that imagery out of my head now, so I close my laptop and head to the bathroom to shower and jerk off to yet another fantasy of Bria Brooks.

ME: EIGHT?

BRIA: SEE YOU THERE.

I smile at the phone and set it down on the counter as I start the water, stripping my clothes off as I wait for it to heat. When I check my phone one last time, there's another message from Bria.

BRIA: THIS IS HARD.

Her honesty steals the air from my lungs. It's refreshing but there's sorrow in it. It's vulnerable but it's a weapon too. It disarms me. I might not have many walls to maintain, but when she says something like this, I rush

to destroy the last ones standing. The bravery it takes to throw these thoughts out into the world cements my conviction that Bria Brooks is the most formidable person I've ever known.

ME: YEAH, IT IS, BUT IT WON'T BE HARD FOREVER.

Bria doesn't respond, and I don't expect her to. I get into the shower but my fantasy has suddenly changed, and all I see is Bria waiting for me at a table with a coffee in her hand, bathed in the morning light.



I wait in the dark on a chair at the end of the hall, my legs crossed at the ankle, my hands folded in my lap. Duke lies at my side. Like me, he's also watching the door at the end of the hall, his head resting between his front paws. We both hear the car park in the driveway and Duke's tail starts swishing. I remind him to stay down and he follows my command.

I've been fantasizing about this moment. Since Wednesday, Kaplan and I have met every morning at Grindstone and then texted throughout the day. It's all been very proper. No fucking on his desk or trysts in the library. But the need for more has grown between us. The first day, he held my hand at the table. The next was a kiss on the cheek. Today, Kaplan showed up in his motorcycle jacket and flashed that dimple as he walked in and I couldn't help it, I stole a heated kiss before he even had a chance to sit down. He stole one in return when he walked me to my office, the hallway silent and empty.

But I'm burning for more than an arm around my shoulders or a stolen kiss in a quiet corridor. I hunger for something...cataclysmic.

Duke's tail whispers across the floor as a key slots into the lock of the front door. The tumbler turns. The handle twists and the door opens, letting the moonlight slide down the hall as it frames the tall and familiar figure on the threshold.

"Duke?" Kaplan says with a worried, wary tone, closing the door behind him. He's used to the dog bounding down the corridor as soon as he gets home. He can't see us here in the shadows with his eyes not yet adjusted to the interior darkness.

He flicks on the hallway light and I smile.

“Good evening, Dr. Kaplan.”

He startles. But it takes only an instant before the surprise turns into a heated longing as his gaze trails down my body. A purple lace bodysuit hugs my skin, closing high on my neck but with a wide keyhole at the top of my breasts and stomach, leaving swaths of exposed skin while covering my back. I make a show of uncrossing and recrossing my legs so he can see the two ribbons at the bottom of the bodysuit with no fabric obstructing his view of my pussy. I can almost hear Kaplan’s heart pulsing in his chest, sending blood to the growing bulge in his jeans.

Kaplan slides his satchel down his arm and I watch with predatory interest as he sets the bag on the floor next to the door. Duke’s tail swishes furiously across the hardwood and his muscles tense with the desire to race down the hall toward his master. “*Zustan*, Duke,” I say, and the dog flattens to the floor.

“Did you teach my dog Czech?” Kaplan asks. My smile blooms. Kaplan’s eyes darken, but not with anger. “Let me guess, skills I don’t even know about, right?”

I lift a shoulder. “*Pust.*” The dog gets up and rushes to Kaplan’s side. He gives Duke some scratches but keeps his eyes on me, as though I might either launch an attack or disappear. I think it’s the latter he fears most. “You should get him better treats. The ones you buy are little more than flavored cardboard.”

Kaplan swallows as he straightens. “Duly noted.”

We watch one another for a long moment. To his credit, Kaplan doesn’t ask why I’m here or how I got in. I think both are pretty fucking obvious. He takes off his motorcycle jacket and sets it on a small table next to the door. Then he unbuttons one sleeve of his black shirt, rolling it over the tanned skin of his tense forearm. He stops at his elbow and does the same to the other, his eyes never leaving mine.

“What game are we playing, sweetheart?”

My heart rams against its bone cage. I bite my lip and the iron tang of blood threads across my tongue. “Hide and seek.”

He chuckles. “In my own home?”

“Indeed. If I stay hidden for more than five minutes, I win. If you find me before my alarm goes off, you win.”

“What do I get if I do?”



“Anything you desire for the whole night. You can take what you want when you want it. If I’m asleep, you can wake me. You can tie me up a thousand ways. You can fuck me any way you want to, but on two conditions. No impact play unless I say so. And my little ensemble here stays on unless I take it off,” I say, pointing my gaze down my body before locking it to Kaplan’s once more.

His energy is another dimension at the end of the hall. It’s like an aura that vibrates. An essence. The beast surfaces in his eyes and it can’t wait to consume me. “And if you win?”

My eyes dart to where his leather bag lies in a heap on the floor. “Do you have a sentimental attachment to that ugly bag of yours?”

“Only inasmuch as I know you despise it.”

A wicked smile crosses both of our lips. “If I win, I get the same prize. I can do what I want with you for the entire night. Only difference is, I get to cut the strap from that repulsive satchel and tie you with it.” I stand, my motion slow and careful as my muscles brace with anticipation. “Do we have a deal, Dr. Kaplan?”

“As long as you know that when I win, I’m going to tear you apart. I will not be gentle, Bria. I will not be kind. Unless you tap out, I am going to make you suffer in every moment of your pleasure. You’ll beg, Bria. I promise you.”

Kaplan’s eyes are that of a killer. A tiger in the shadows. A wolf in the woods. A falcon, plummeting from the sky.

I hope he can keep his promise.

“Turn around, Dr. Kaplan, and count to twenty so I can hear you. I’ll start the alarm on my watch as soon as you’re done counting.”

Kaplan’s eyes narrow in suspicion. “No cheating by setting it too early.”

“No cheating by using the dog to find me. Duke, *lehni. Zustan.*” The dog drops to the floor and Kaplan slowly turns, his eyes still fused to mine with a ravenous fire burning in his gaze until he’s forced to look away.

“One...two...three...”

I take off toward the living room, keeping my footsteps light but loud enough that he can hear, then I turn to the kitchen where there’s a small pantry. I open the door and close it softly, hoping it’s just enough to reach his ears.

“Seven...eight...nine...”

My steps become silent as I backtrack across the house. When I pass the mouth of the corridor to the front door, I only take a step when he counts to lessen the chances he'll notice.

"Eleven...twelve..."

I dart down the hallway to the bedrooms and enter the guest room, lying on my back beside the bed so I can shuffle into my hiding spot from the last time I was here. Working my way to the wall, I press my side against it, my heart rioting in my chest not because I'm panicking, but because I fucking love this game. I want to win. But I also don't.

"Eighteen...nineteen...*twenty*," Kaplan calls from the front door. "Ready or not, sweetheart, here I come."

I set the alarm on my watch and slow my breathing, straining to listen for any sound. There's nothing. I don't even know if he's left the door. There's no way he wants me to win, though I'm sure he would enjoy what I have in mind if I do. But that beast inside him is a hunter. It doesn't just want to run me down. It thirsts for victory.

I check my watch. One minute and twenty-six seconds have elapsed. I'd love to believe that my trick worked and he's simply at the other end of the house, looking in the kitchen cabinets or the pantry. I'm just not that naive.

There's no sound. *Nothing*.

Maybe he thinks the silence will spook me into giving up my place? He's wrong, if so.

Two minutes and ten seconds.

I hold my breath and listen, but all I hear is my heart thrumming in my ears.

Two minutes and thirty-eight seconds. Over halfway there.

I'm just letting my breath out in a slow stream when two hands grip my ankles and pull. My legs buck on impulse and I squeal, hitting my knees hard on the metal frame. My bare legs and ass squeak on the hardwood floor as Kaplan slides me from my hiding spot with a vicious tug.

"There's no point in fighting," Kaplan says as I claw at the bed frame. I nearly get my fingers around the slats before Kaplan tugs again and I'm laid out on the floor, free of my cover. I could kick him off, and I squirm like I want to, but I don't.

Kaplan pins one of my arms with his knee and the other with a large hand. He smiles down at me, triumphant. Hungry. Feral. He leans his face closer to mine. "Hello, sweetheart. I told you I would win, and I am very

much looking forward to my prize. I made a promise, Bria. Are you ready to beg?"

My breath comes in pants. My core clenches with an empty ache that yearns to be filled. I press my thighs together as arousal dampens them. "Yes," I say, glaring at Kaplan's smug grin.

"And you're going to behave yourself?"

"Yes."

"Good girl," he says as his smile widens. He whips a hemp rope from the floor and knots it around the wrist he traps in his hand, then binds it to my other one. Then he hauls me over his shoulder with a grunt and carries me to his bedroom, tossing me down on the mattress like a prized stag he's shot down in the woods. I scramble to my knees and he tugs at my wrists. "Don't move."

Kaplan rummages in drawers as I kneel in the middle of the bed. My blood boils and foams in anticipation. A thin line of sweat dots my hairline, but a cold chill sluices down my spine. The distinctive sound of metal links forces gooseflesh skittering across my arms and legs. When Kaplan straightens, he deposits chains and ropes and cuffs beside me.

"Ankle," he commands, his voice as rough as tires crunching across gravel. I twist my body and offer a leg. He slips a leather cuff around my ankle and attaches a chain to the metal ring before demanding the next one. When both cuffs are buckled, Kaplan secures the other end of the chains to the posts at the foot of his bed. He tightens them until there is no slack from where I sit, my legs spread wide and open for him. He looks at the glistening, pink flesh between them for a long moment before he tears his gaze away and starts working one of the knots free on my wrist.

"One day, we'll do this properly," Kaplan says as he unleashes my other wrist and then twists my hand behind my back. He bends my elbow so my hand rests between my shoulder blades. A softer rope winds between my thumb and forefinger and then across my arm. He passes it over my chest and to my back again, securing my other hand with the first. By the time he's finished, my hands are immobilized in a web of ropes. The soft strands press into my arms and chest, my breasts still covered by the purple lace of my bodysuit but framed by the twined hemp.

Kaplan surveys his work and then meets my eyes. "You won't be able to tap out, obviously."

“Do you think I would anyway?” I ask with a daring smirk. His pupils blow wide beneath his hooded lids.

“No. But I need you to pick a safe word.”

“Done. Tweed.”

Kaplan barks a laugh. “Fine. Tweed it is.” He shifts backward until he’s able to stand at the foot of the bed. He looks down at me, my arms subdued, my breasts trapped between rope, cuffs and chains spreading my legs wide so he can see all the evidence of how much I want him. Kaplan keeps his eyes on me as he undresses, scouring my body with his scorching gaze.

When he’s done, Kaplan goes back to the drawers and opens one, pulling out a bottle of lube and a purple vibrator that’s nearly the same shade as my lingerie. Then he climbs up onto the bed and sets the toy and bottle down next to him as he kneels between my thighs. His hand flows up my body to rest at the back of my neck and he pulls me closer. His eyes bound between mine as he pushes me down onto the bed.

“Don’t forget to beg,” he whispers.

“Don’t forget to make me.”

There’s a beat of time that seems to last an eternity, and then Kaplan’s mouth is on mine in a kiss that’s brutal and unforgiving. Our teeth clash. He bites and nips. He fucks my mouth with his tongue. And his hands roam my body, tracing the lines of the ropes against my skin, pulling the lace to the side to pinch my nipples, drifting lower to press my clit in hard circles.

When he breaks the kiss, Kaplan bites and nibbles and sucks on my neck, not caring where he leaves a mark. I’ll be covered with bruises. He means to claim every inch of my skin and takes his time with both sides of my neck and then the flesh of my breasts. He sucks hard on my nipples and scrapes them between his teeth when he lets go, and when I cry out the second time, it only spurs him to bite harder.

Kaplan carves a torturous path of longing down my body, cutting a trail of tooth marks and bruises in his wake, until eventually he gets to my pussy. The chains rattle as my legs squirm with the need for friction, my arousal slipping down my ass to dampen the sheets. My arms and shoulders burn beneath my weight, but the discomfort only adds to my desire.

When he finally rests between my thighs, Kaplan blows a thin stream of cool air onto my flesh and I whimper with desperate need. “You need to come so badly, don’t you, sweetheart,” Kaplan says as one of his fingers traces a line through my slick folds and circles my clit. “*Don’t you.*”

“Yes,” I say in a breathless whisper.

“Such a shame you haven’t started begging then, isn’t it? What if I don’t *let* you come?”

He blows another thin stream of air across my core, the coolness of it only reminding me further of how much I burn for his touch. “Please,” I say. It sounds so foreign coming from my lips, but yet it’s *right*, somehow. “Please make me come.”

“Tsk-tsk, baby,” he purrs, then circles my clit with a stroke of his tongue that is far too gentle. My nerves spark like misfiring fuses. “You can do better than that.”

“Please, Eli. I *need* you to make me come. I’m begging you.” My throat tightens as he swirls my clit with more pressure. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “*Please*. You’re the only one who can.”

Maybe he’ll think this is part of the game. Something to bolster his ego. But it’s not.

It’s the absolute truth.

There’s a fraction of a pause. I don’t open my eyes to see what his reaction might be, and he doesn’t let the suspended moment linger. “Good girl. That’s better.” And then he dives at my flesh, feasting like a starving man.

Kaplan parts my folds and licks every bit of my pussy. His fingers work my clit when he fucks me with his tongue. When I look down, his face glistens with saliva and arousal. His eyes narrow as he meets my gaze across my body and he bites my clit with the perfect mix of pleasure and pain.

“Make me come, please. *Please*,” I beg with the reminder he intended with his bite. His tongue soothes the pain and then I feel my reward, the tip of the vibrator pressing to my opening. “Eli, please,” I say again, and then he slips it into my sex and turns it on.

Kaplan keeps a rhythmic pace with the toy as he works my clit, his free hand coming up to pinch my nipple as a constant stream of pleas flows from my lips. I chant his name. I beg him for relief. I pray for release over and over until the coil of pleasure deep in my core implodes, taking all thought and reason and control with it. My legs shake and strain as Kaplan pushes them wider, not missing a second of the orgasm as it rages through every one of my nerves and muscles.

But it’s only just begun.

Kaplan casts the toy to the side and laps at my arousal as he unclamps one of my ankles and then the other with a swift and practiced hand. He only breaks his mouth away from my flesh when my legs are free, and then he hauls me up to a sitting position by the ropes across my chest.

When we're eye-to-eye, the beast is staring back at me, desperate and dark and nowhere near done.

Kaplan squishes my cheeks between firm fingers. My skin tingles from the pressure and the heat of his fiery, wild gaze. "Open up," he snarls.

I pop my lips open and he spits in my mouth.

"Do you taste that?"

I nod. It's the flavor of my arousal, mixed with his own distinctive essence of mint and bourbon, and other things I can sense but can't define. Elements that swirl together in an elixir on my tongue.

"You're like a drug that never fades," Kaplan hisses, his eyes gripping mine with desperation so consuming it looks painful. "Your flavor. Your scent. The sound of your cries. The way you beg. The way you take everything and ask for more... You invade my thoughts and you don't let go." An unsteady breath passes his parted lips as his gaze drills into mine. "If only you knew how badly I want to ruin you like you've ruined me."

I don't smile. There's no cocky attitude in my expression when I look into his eyes. My voice is sincere when I speak. "I'm begging you to try."

"This may have started as a game, Bria, but it's not anymore. I want you to feel the way I feel."

"Don't you think I already do?"

There's a single, shuddering breath between us. Kaplan's eyes are the deepest lightless night.

"I don't know. But I'm sure as fuck going to find out."

Without another word, Kaplan grips the rope around my chest and flips me over onto my front. He pulls my hips up so that my ass is in the air and then pushes my cheek down, pressing my face into the mattress. He digs his fingers into my hips. "Do not move."

I hear the sound of straps and the cap of the bottle of lube. The liquid drizzles across my ass, sliding over my slick pussy and dropping to the mattress, leaving the scent of salted caramel behind. A whispered curse passes my lips, longing already coiling low in my belly like a deadly, insatiable snake. I want to taste that lube mixed with his cum so badly that my mouth waters.

“What’s your word, Bria?” Kaplan growls as he slides his cock through the lube and positions it at my entrance. Another pressure meets the tight resistance of the pleated rim of my ass.

“Tweed.”

“Good girl.” He works the head of the strap-on past the clenched muscle and guides it deeper. It’s not as thick as the toy from his office, but my heart thunders in anticipation nonetheless. I know he won’t be gentle this time. As if reading my thoughts in the pattern of my breath, he stills when the tip of his cock breaches the entrance of my sex.

“I’m ready, Eli. I want you to ruin me for anyone but you.”

As soon as the words pass through my lips, Eli grabs onto the knots of rope encasing my bound hands and slams into me. I cry out with the invasion and the discomfort and the pleasure, the utter perfection of a fullness my body never knew it hungered for. He glides to the crown of his cock and the tip of the toy and I cry out again, this time at the loss of that feeling of taking everything he can give. I squirm, trying to push my ass closer but he evades me.

“Eli...” I raise my head and he presses my cheek back into the mattress with an unforgiving hand. “Please,” I whisper beneath his palm.

He thrusts into me again. I cry his name into the sheets.

Eli picks up a rhythm, a slow crescendo of thrusts, just like music singing in my flesh. *Adagio*: slow but powerful strokes. *Andante*: a steady pace, the friction building and pushing me closer to a cliff I can’t come back from. But it doesn’t stay so kind. Just like he promised, Eli wants to make me suffer. The music is only meant to lure me into a hell of mindless, never-ending need, into the twisting, symphonic madness of pleasure and pain, desire and release. So he pummels into me. He thrusts and grips and pushes and slams. When I cry out, he only pushes harder, delves deeper. The sounds I make just feed the demon that claws every scrap of ecstasy from us both and demands one thing in return.

*More.*

By the time I come, I’m breathless and aching and screaming Eli’s name, shuddering and boneless.

But he’s still not done.

“Again,” he demands. Eli slows his pace just enough that I catch my breath, but as soon as he seems sure my heart won’t explode, he picks up a punishing cadence once more.

“I can’t,” I whisper. He doesn’t stop. He doesn’t even falter a beat in his rhythm. If anything, he grips the rope at my back tighter and fucks me harder.

*Thank God.*

*This.* This is what I want. This is what I *need*.

“I can’t.”

“*Again, Bria.*”

My thoughts start to spool away like threads on a loom. “Stop. *Please, Eli...*”

“Are you using your word?”

I bite my lips closed. That’s not what I want. Not at all. I shake my head beneath the pressure of his hand.

“Are you ruined yet?”

“I... I don’t know,” I grit out.

“Then the answer is no. You’re not done.” He slams into me with metronomic precision, both my pussy and my ass aching as I crawl closer to another orgasm. I haven’t said the word, and he won’t stop unless I do. And I feel something I hardly ever feel for anyone. Something so elusive and so precious that it lives at the very core of me, like the sun that shines into the windows of the palace in my mind.

Gratitude.

So I beg. I beg him to stop. I use every word in my arsenal except the one that will make Eli go still. And he thrusts into me with the discipline of a man who will respect my promises, and who will honor the ones he makes to me in return.

When I come apart in a hymn of begging and pleading, a sheen of sweat misting my face and dampening the purple lace of my lingerie, Eli praises me and caresses my skin. One hand still grips the rope at my back, but the other glides over the globes of my ass and the tense, trembling muscles of my thighs.

But he still hasn’t come.

The realization finally burrows into my bones, settling into my soul with a fire that seems to cauterize an old and festering wound.

I am already ruined for him. And I’m not only the most vulnerable I’ve ever been, but the most indestructible too.

Eli pulls out of me completely but keeps me in the same position with one hand as the other removes the strap-on. I hear it thud onto the floor, and



then a heartbeat later he flips me onto my back, pulling my legs up against his chest. He lines his cock up to my pussy and glides back in with a moan as he starts circling my clit with his finger. I whimper and writhe, but he just grips my legs tighter, uncaring.

“I said I would tear you apart. I vowed to make you suffer.” Eli leans over me and stares into my eyes as he thrusts from crown to hilt. He looks right into my soul. And for the first time in a long time, I see another beast that doesn’t hate what it finds when it stares into the dark.

Eli smiles, and I smile in return.

“Suffer with me,” he whispers, and with a kiss of fire and promises, Eli Kaplan drags me deeper into hell.



When I open my eyes, the room is still dark, but the earliest light of dawn filters through the cracks between the curtains. The scent of sex and salted caramel lingers in the air.

My first thoughts are to replay how we even managed to fall asleep. Both of us were too stubborn to put a stop to it. Bria never used the safe word and I don't think she ever will, not with how hard I pushed her last night. I untied her only to chain her and fuck her. Then I tied her again. Then untied her for a second time and I think maybe I fell asleep still inside her? Christ, I don't even know. At some point I was just mindless. Time and reality became trivial concerns for the rest of the world to worry about.

The only thing I don't like is that I didn't properly care for Bria afterwards. That thought burns like a hot ember on my skin. When I really take her in, I realize she must have gotten up to do it herself at some point, because she's no longer wearing her lingerie.

Bria's back is facing me. Her ribs rise and fall. The blanket covers her from the chest down, leaving her shoulders bare. My cock twitches remembering her words, *take what you want when you want it*, and I already want it. I start to move closer when my shifting motion pulls the blanket down and I notice something I haven't seen before.

A long, straight scar, the skin puckered and slightly raised. The start of another scar crosses beneath it, heading down at an angle, hidden by the blanket.

Crystals of ice dance beneath my skin. My heart pounds. My breath catches in my lungs.

I pull the blanket down slowly, revealing scar after scar, crisscrossing her skin all the way down to her mid-back. Interspersed with the long slashes is the occasional circle or small jagged mark. Whip marks. Cuts and Burns.

*No impact play unless I say so*, she said last night. I didn't think much of it. I just assumed it was something she didn't like.

I press my eyes closed for a long, shuddering breath. Bria trusts me enough now to let me see. She doesn't just accept the darkest parts of me, she embraces them. And now she's giving me the chance to do the same for her.

It makes me want to not only protect her from her own past, but rip the fucking flesh from whoever did this with my bare hands.

Fury climbs my throat. My finger trembles when I touch one of the lines. I have never felt such a mix of anger and sorrow as when I touch that scar and imagine the myriad of horrors that must have been inflicted on this woman. My thoughts scatter like chunks of mud flying from a spinning wheel. Why? When? With what? Over a day? Many days? *Years*? How long did they take to heal? Who the fuck would do this? Where are they? I'll kill them. I'll find them and bind them and *kill them* for what they've done.

I whisper a curse as I trace another line, my eyes stinging as they land on the widest mark. Bria stirs and her body tenses. She raises the blanket and turns over to face me.

"Hey," she whispers.

I swallow, trying to keep the flame in my throat from choking my single word. "Hey."

"You were sleeping so peacefully. I didn't want to wake you. I should have. I should have told you last night, so it wouldn't be a shock," she says, her voice even and untroubled for all my rage, like these are just superficial marks and their history no longer hurts. I don't know how that could be possible. I doubt it is.

"You don't owe me any explanation, Bria."

"You can ask."

I try to temper the rage that's burning my guts and setting fire to my blood. I want to know, even though I don't. But more importantly, she's giving me permission to learn. "When did this happen?"

"When I was a child."

"Did Samuel do this to you?"

“*God* no,” she says emphatically, and I feel a slight measure of relief that I don’t have to march down to Cedar Ridge and murder the old man, though the urge to kill whoever caused these scars still twists my organs into painful knots. “It was long before that, with my original family. Let’s just say they didn’t like an overly inquisitive child. They liked a subversive one even less. But they did enjoy punishing me for it.”

I don’t say anything. I just shift the hair away from her face with gentle strokes and wait. I know she’ll divine my questions again in the prophetic way she always does, and will take them only as far as she’s willing to go.

“Samuel found me when I was fourteen, after the last ties with my family were severed,” Bria says, casting her eyes down. I think I feel the slightest flash of a smile beneath my fingertips as I trace the skin of her cheek, but when her gaze meets mine again there’s no softness in the memory. “Samuel’s never hurt me. Not once. He cares for me. He...”

I wait again for Bria to continue, but it’s as though she’s stuck in a lightless room and can’t find her way out. Her eyes leave mine and she looks beyond me, searching and stumbling in the dark.

I stroke Bria’s hair, bringing her back to me. “He loves you?”

“I... I don’t know if it’s that straightforward.” She pauses for a long moment, her eyes glinting as they shift and take in my face.

“How do you mean?” I ask.

Bria lifts her uncovered shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know,” she says. “I guess it depends on how you define love. What is it?”

My caress lurches to a halt on the sweeping line of her jaw. The bluntness and sincerity of her question crushes me, adding another surge of flame to the rage still boiling my veins. “Are you asking because you don’t know?”

“I’m asking because I want to know what it is to you.”

I take a deep breath. How do I describe something so expansive? One feeling that has so many facets, that’s imbued my life with both meaning and pain, how do I distill that into a few words that come even close to capturing it?

How do I describe to Bria what she already means to me?

My heart ricochets off my bones. *Fuck. Fuck.* It’s true. I am falling in love with her. There’s no one in the world like Bria Brooks, and every moment I spend with her just crystallizes this knowledge deeper into my

brain, sinking into every cell. I am falling in love with her and I can't stop myself. Nor do I want to.

I clear my throat and try to calm my pulse, resuming the caress of my fingers across her skin. "As a feeling, for me, it's like a warmth, even a burn in my chest, something so bright it feels like it could destroy me and I would welcome it. Sometimes it's a desperate need to be around that person, or to care for them, or to spend time with them. Some love is calm and comforting. Or it can be a raging sea that I just want to jump into. But it's somehow fragile too. It gets tangled up with fear. It's a feeling I'm afraid to lose, because that warmth is like fuel. Like I could live off it. For it."

"I don't know if Samuel has ever felt any of those things," Bria says plainly.

"Well, I don't think it's just a feeling, or a collection of emotions. Love is action. Love can be in the smallest details, like trying to make someone laugh, or comforting them when they suffer. It's putting the effort in to make things right when they go awry. Love is about taking action to make the other person's life happier or more joyful, not just once but consistently. In little ways. In big ways. Love is empowering someone, putting their well-being first. And sometimes it's having the bravery to let go when you know you can't. That doesn't mean giving up when things get a little rough. It means trying to be a better person so you can be a better partner. I guess love is wanting to enrich someone else's life, and in the process, you enrich your own."

Bria is silent for a long while. It's already on my lips to tell her how I feel about her. It's a confession I'm burning to let go of. I want to, desperately. But I'm afraid it will run her off. A thought occurs to me then, and once it's there I know it won't ever leave. *Maybe she's never been told.*

"Samuel taught me how to swim," she says into the dark, jarring me from my thoughts with her abrupt statement. "I took to it quickly. I wanted to swim competitively, but Samuel said no, because of the scars."

I swallow a sudden dryness in my throat, trying to keep up with her when I'm still caught on thoughts of confessions and love. "He was worried about you being bullied?"

Bria huffs a laugh. "Something like that, I guess," she says, her cheek moving beneath my fingertips as she smiles. After a long moment, her smile fades. "Samuel installed the swim trainer in the house so I could

practice against the current. Once a month he'd rent the public pool or he'd take me to his cabin during the summer where he put distance buoys in the lake, and he'd time me. He learned how to coach me to dive more efficiently at the pool, or how to do drills or improve my strokes. By the end of my second year, I was beating the state's best times for girls my age. I could have entered any state championship and won."

"Didn't you have the urge to defy him and try? Go to a coach and show them what you could do?"

"No. I learned the logic of Samuel's philosophy on life and purpose very quickly. He taught me to balance what would benefit my progress versus what would only benefit my ego. I learned that there would be instances where cultivating the positive opinions of others wouldn't hasten my progress toward my goals. Some accomplishments, the ones that meant the most to me, had to be for me alone. So I only swam for him and myself." Bria's fingertips ghost across my chest, unaware of the fire she lights beneath her touch. Her eyes follow the movement as she slips into distant memories. "The first time I beat the championship record, Samuel made a fist and said, 'Yes, Bria.' That night, he took me to my favorite restaurant. We went to a movie. I felt like I had made him proud. What did it matter if anyone else knew?"

I trace a line down Bria's neck and warm her shoulder with my palm. "Why do you think he went to all that effort?"

"Maybe to ensure I could stick to something and not give up until I was the best. Or maybe to teach me those lessons about hubris so that I could learn to enjoy my success without putting it on display for everyone to see. But now I think maybe it was also the closest he could come to loving me. Maybe he can't feel it, but he can live the actions of it." Bria's eyes flash as they reflect the dim light from the window, bounding between my own. Her voice is quiet when she speaks again. "Do you think that's enough, to live the actions of love even if he can't feel it the same way other people do?"

I know without asking that Bria is peeling back a scab to show me a bloody wound. A piece of her suddenly falls into place. *Bria is afraid.* Everything about love is foreign to her. It's a painful mystery. She believes she's never had it, isn't capable of it, can't feel it or see or sense it, not in herself or others. She knows she doesn't understand, and it scares her. "Is it enough for you?" I ask, bringing my hand to her face to trace her bottom lip with my thumb.

Bria is still and quiet for a long moment. “Yes. I think so. It’s the best thing I’ve ever had.”

“Then it’s enough, Bria,” I say as I draw her against my chest. “It’s enough to be love.”

Bria says nothing more, just nestles closer until she presses her ear against my heart. After a while, her breathing slows. I have so many questions, but they dissolve with every breath that warms my skin. I fall back to sleep with Bria’s warmth tucked into mine, dreaming of everything I feel but have left unsaid.





When I wake a few hours later, Bria is still asleep. I don't think we moved at all. I slide myself from her warmth and draw the blankets up around her shoulders. I watch her for a moment then back off the bed.

Looking around, she's already straightened up everything from last night. The toys and chains and cuffs are all cleaned and back where they belong. When I go to retrieve a pair of pajama bottoms, I find her purple lingerie draped on my dresser next to a folded button-up shirt and a pair of jeans, a black backpack leaning next to them. *Christ*, one look at that lace and my dick tents my flannel. I scrape my hand down my face and cast a hungry look in her direction.

"Fuck," I whisper. Duke's gentle whine from his dog bed is the only thing keeping me from climbing back onto the sheets and driving into her. "Come on, boy."

I let Duke out in the backyard before I head to the bathroom. On my way back to the kitchen, I set the automatic ball-throwing machine on for him. He lopes around the garden as I put on some music and start the coffee and wash strawberries. I set out whipped cream and butter and syrup as I make batter for pancakes. I'm adding another to the growing stack that's keeping warm in the oven when Bria appears.

"Hi," she says from behind me. I turn and she's standing on the other side of the kitchen island, her hands in her pockets, the top buttons of her shirt undone to reveal a bra of nude lace with gold piping. Bruises pepper her neck and chest. She smirks when I meet her eyes after imagining what

this lingerie might look like without the clothes. It reminds me of the look she gave me in the coffee shop that first day. *Caught you.*

Except this time, there's no one around to judge me if I pounce. The only thing that stops me is the scent of burning batter.

"Shit," I whisper, whirling back to the oven, the sound of her giggle chasing after me. I ditch the burnt pancake onto a plate for Duke and then start another. "Coffee?"

"Please," she says, and I hear her slide onto one of the barstools. I pour her a cup and set it down on the island. She pulls the mug toward her with a smile. "How did you sleep?"

"Aside from our brief conversation? Like the dead," I say as I flip the pancake. I'm relieved when it lands in the pan as intended and not on the floor. "How about you?"

"Well, I don't think I've ever fallen asleep with a cock still in my pussy, so that was a first."

"Christ, I wasn't sure I'd dreamed that," I reply and she laughs. My heart nearly climbs out my throat and dumps itself into the frying pan. *Fuck.* Since when did a woman's *laugh* make me feel this way? Why do I know I've earned something rare and precious?

I finish one last pancake and pull the stack out of the oven, laying out two plates on the island. Bria looks at the food as though a spaceship has landed on the granite countertop. I wait for her to take a pancake but she doesn't, so I plop one on a plate and drizzle it with syrup, then a dollop of whipped cream, a square of butter, and a handful of strawberries.

"It's called a pancake," I say, pushing it toward her as she draws her coffee cup closer to make room for the plate.

Bria scoffs. "I know what a pancake is, Eli."

The sound of my name on her lips echoes in my head. She's never called me anything but Kaplan outside a moment of intimacy. A blush warms my cheeks but I try not to let it show, which isn't hard as Bria's still eyeballing the food with endearing wariness. "Generally, they're for eating. Sometimes for throwing. Or burning to use as dog food. I'm just getting a jump on your request to find better treats for Duke."

She looks up at me as though I've just thrown her into prison. "It's...a lot of sugar."

"What's wrong with sugar?"

"I can't eat that much."

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Special occasions only,” she says evasively with a grin of secrets.

“Ah. So it’s *won’t*. Does breaking into my house and being fucked all night until you fall asleep with a cock in your pussy not count as a special occasion?”

Bria clamps her lips between her teeth, a laugh begging to be let free in the shimmer of her eyes. She’s the most unusual combination of regimented and reckless. She’ll sneak into my house and wait in the dark in her lingerie with my retired police dog, but she won’t break what is clearly a self-imposed rule and eat a pancake lathered in syrup.

“You didn’t answer my question, sweetheart,” I say as I cut into a piece of her pancake with my fork and push it around in the syrup. She leans back as the fork makes a sweeping pass close to her lips before I put it in my mouth. I give her a mischievous, lopsided smile and her gaze darts down to my dimple. My eyebrows climb in an unspoken request for her to answer the question.

Bria shrugs, grinning around the lip of her mug.

*Insolent woman*, my darkness whispers deep within.

I slowly set my fork down and then pull the coffee cup from her fingers. She looks at me like she can hear the whisper growing louder in my thoughts. It tempts me with all the things I could do to her. I keep hold of her gaze as I grab the end of a strawberry and roll it through syrup and whipped cream. “I think you just made a critical error, Bria Brooks.”

“Did I?” she asks, amusement laced in her voice. I sense her muscles tensing. My mouth waters.

“You did.” I stand straighter and take my first slow, careful step toward the end of the island.

Bria shifts on her stool, her eyes sparkling as she places one foot on the floor. There’s no move she can make that I won’t notice. “And what mistake was that?”

I take another step, the strawberry poised between my finger and thumb. Whipped cream and syrup drip down my hand. Bria slides from her stool.

“You thought the games were over.” With one more step, I’m at the end of the island. Bria’s grin is the most vibrant shade of wicked I’ve ever seen. “*Run*, sweetheart.”

Bria squeaks and takes off toward the living room, leaving a wake of laughter behind her. It’s like blood on a game trail. I want to devour every

sound that comes out of her mouth.

Bria bolts for the hallway to the bedrooms but I catch her around the waist and she squeals. There's no doubt in my mind after the library that she could lay me out on my ass if she wanted to, but she only squirms, making my impossibly hard dick even harder. I haul her off her feet, the strawberry still in my raised hand, and carry her to the sectional couch in the living room where I dump her onto the cushions.

"You remember your safe word?" I ask as I pin Bria's thighs open my knees and push her chest down with my free hand. She nods, that devious smile still lighting up her face. Her tangled hair spreads across the grey upholstery, her skin is flushed and glowing. A dark giggle bubbles past her lips when she squirms in my grasp. She's never looked more beautiful.

"Good. Now come on, baby. Open that pretty mouth and let me give you something sweet."

Bria absolutely cackles and my heart splits in two with the overwhelming need to make her do it again. I chase her mouth with the strawberry as she tilts her head in every direction. The whipped cream and syrup drip onto her skin and leave a trail across her cheek that I lean down and lick off with a slow pass of my tongue.

"You are a terrible influence, Eli Kaplan," Bria says as I manage to swipe a streak of whipped cream across her lips. I don't miss the hitch in her breath when I lick it off. "And coming from me, that's saying something."

"I guess you might as well just give up now in that case." I take a bite of the strawberry and hold it on my tongue as I lean in and press my lips to hers. The flavors of Bria's coffee and toothpaste swirl with sweetness as I convince her to open for me. When she finally does, I push the piece of strawberry into her mouth and she sighs with delight.

"Good girl," I say when I pull back and she smiles. I'm riveted to the movement of her lips as she chews and swallows. She sticks out her tongue for another piece. When I move to put the rest of the berry in her mouth, she shakes her head and trains her gaze to my lips. "I take that back. *Wicked girl.*"

A guileful grin sweeps across her face. "Give me another bite and I'll be good."

I let out an incredulous laugh. "Something makes me think you haven't been good a day in your life."

I take another bite of the strawberry and lean down, kissing Bria with increasing force until she relents, letting me pass her the fruit. But the kiss has already ignited the inferno burning between us. There's no stopping this time.

I toss the rest of the berry somewhere across the room. I break our kiss to press my lips to her jaw and my fingers into her mouth. She licks the syrup and cream from my skin. When she sucks on my fingers, I bite her neck and she only sucks harder. "I thought you said you'd be good," I whisper before I nip her earlobe, my fingers working at the buttons of her shirt.

"My mistake," Bria says through a moan as I kiss her neck.

"Not only did you just lie, but you've worn this damnable shirt with a thousand tiny buttons. What the fuck." I give up fumbling with the shirt and lean back to rip it open, buttons pinging across the hardwood to reveal a cream-colored lace corset with gold piping. It dives below her jeans in a tantalizing display of craftsmanship that I want to tear apart with my teeth.

For a moment I can't move.

The most stunning, most cunning, most beautiful and brilliant and brutal woman I've ever known is lying trapped beneath my flannel-covered knees. She plays every game and wins. And now here she is the next morning, as sweet as syrup, and she's wrapped herself up like a fucking goddess. I drag my hand down my face and cover my mouth to keep my confessions from tumbling from my lips. "Jesus fucking Christ, Bria. What are you doing to me."

"Only what you're doing to me, Dr. Kaplan," she says with a smile that fades as quickly as it appears, leaving only heat and want in its wake. "Letting me out of my cage."

A sharp breath fills my lungs.

I lose myself in the next beat of my heart.

Bria's fingers pull at my waistband in desperation as I undo the button of her jeans and tug them down her legs, revealing a gold pattern of ribbons holding the corset in place with no obstructions to her sex. I pull her pants off and throw them to the floor as she grips and strokes my erection, lining me up to her silken folds.

My hands frame Bria's face. I watch every change in her expression as I push inside her. Need. Desire. Longing. Pain and pleasure.

“This,” is all I can manage to say as I run my hand down the fabric encasing her body. I trace the line of decorative piping that skims her hip as I glide within her. “Yes.”

“Unnecessary fabric,” she agrees with a nod, following her words with a breathless moan as I thrust in steady strokes, pushing deeper and deeper until she takes all of me. If she’s sore from last night she doesn’t let on. Her eyes close and a crease appears between her brows and it’s only bliss that I see, bliss and a need to be filled with everything I can give, no questions asked. So I do. I rock in long, gliding strokes and devour every inch of her skin that I can with my lips.

“Touch yourself,” I whisper as I guide one of her hands down between us. She starts to circle her clit and I lean back enough to watch, memorizing the pressure and motion she uses. I want to know what she likes the most, committing it to my memory. With every swirling, spiraling touch, I push closer to oblivion. My muscles already shudder with the need to spill into her. Something about Bria in the morning light touching herself in this ridiculously sexy lingerie just throws me right to the edge. She locks her eyes to mine and bites her lip with a whimpering moan. “Close?”

Bria nods.

“Thank fuck. Come, baby.”

The crease between Bria’s brows deepens. Her fingers press harder into her flesh, the movement losing its fluidity as her muscles start to spasm. Her eyes glaze, but they still hold on to mine. Her back arches beneath me as veins and tendons thrum and strain in her neck. I fight to hold back as every fluttering contraction of Bria’s orgasm grips my cock and begs me to release. When I’m sure she’s had every second of pleasure that she can take, I pull out and haul her up to a sitting position, straddling her on my knees so my glistening erection is close to her lips.

“You’re not going to make some terrible joke about giving me my breakfast, are you?” Bria asks as her palms coast up my thighs. I hold the base of my cock with one hand and slide my other into her hair.

“Not anymore.”

Bria laughs and I swear I almost spill across her face from the sound. She grips her hand over mine and runs the tip of my cock across her lips. “I’ll let you know if it’s too much,” she says, then sucks her bottom lip into her mouth with a moan. “But it won’t be.”

*You fucking lucky sonofabitch, Kaplan.*

I plunge my dick into Bria's mouth and bottom out at the back of her throat. She gags and I feel her swallow, adjusting to the intrusion before I pick up a rhythm. Saliva and tears spill down her face and I grasp the back of the couch with the hand that had been gripping my cock, my head bent so I can watch as I fuck her mouth, every thrust a little wilder until I'm stripped to the core of my darkness, just like she wanted. She hums with approval, sending a shockwave of vibration through my dick that goes straight to my balls. They tighten and I thrust my cock as far as she can take me, spilling into the hot, wet heat of Bria's throat. She swallows it all with a moan, as though it's the best thing she's ever tasted, and when I'm finished and empty I pull out against the sensation of her sucking hard, a devilish gleam peering up at me through her wet lashes.

"Better than pancakes," Bria says as her bottom lip folds beneath her teeth.

God, I want to tell her how I feel. I lean back and look at her, all swollen lips and streaked skin and wild hair still gripped in my fist. My heart pounds with the aching need to confess, like I've committed a damnable sin that I can't keep buried any longer. I just can't bear the thought of scaring her away.

"You're mine, Bria Brooks," I say instead, leaning closer until my lips are just the width of a thread from hers. "Tell me you're mine."

But she doesn't. She lets go of her lower lip and her eyes break from my gaze, down to my mouth, up the slope of my cheek, and back again. "Why?"

*She doesn't know what this is, I remind myself, throwing a life raft to my drowning heart. "Because I don't share. I want you to myself." My words only scratch the surface of what I really feel. You're everywhere, in everything. I don't want anyone else. I can't bear the thought of another man touching you. I want to know if you feel anything close to what I do.*

*I'm falling in love with you.*

"You don't know me well enough to want that, Eli," she whispers, as though she can read my thoughts through my eyes. "You only see what you want to see."

Her pragmatism isn't meant to sting, but it does, even though I know she's right. We barely know each other. Anything I feel is swept up in a tsunami of lust. And yet, I know I can't stop how I've already started to feel. The awareness that Bria is unique and incomparable is instinctual. I



know I'll never meet another woman like Bria Brooks and I'm already burning with the need to hold on to her.

Bria's fingers graze my cheek with a tentative softness, as though she's never touched me before and isn't sure if she should. "But I can promise you there's no one else. I'm here."

I nod and kiss her deeply, tasting us both on her tongue. It's a long moment before I can let her go, and not before leaving a kiss to the faint freckles that span her nose. "Come on, Pancake. Let's find something you'll eat."

Bria snorts a horrified laugh. "*Pancake?* Dear God, *no.*"

"You heard me."

I hold a hand out for her and she takes it. When I've hauled her up on her feet I wrap her in my arms, breathing in the subtle scent of her hair as I hold her in my embrace. Her muscles are stiff at first, like she's not quite sure what to do. And fuck if it doesn't burn like a blade of fire in my heart. What happened in her life that a hug is foreign to her after everything we've shared? Why is gentle intimacy too much to bear?

I squeeze and she relaxes a fraction, and then I let her go enough to take her hand. "Have a seat in the kitchen. I'll get you a fresh coffee and find you a shirt. What about eggs?"

Bria's hand grips mine just a little tighter. "I'd like eggs. Thank you."

Bria pulls on her jeans as I head to my bedroom to retrieve a white dress shirt that I know will look incredibly sexy on her, even though she'll swim in it. She slips it on as I dump her lukewarm coffee and pour a new cup, and she sits at the island to watch as I place slices of bread in the toaster and start the eggs.

"*Non es ad astra mollis e terris via,*" Bria says, reading the script tattooed on my back in scrolling black ink. "*There is no easy way from the earth to the stars.*"

I glance at her over my shoulder with a bittersweet smile. "Why am I not surprised you know Latin?"

"Like I said. My education with Samuel was nothing if not thorough," she replies with a shrug. "What's the meaning for you?"

I turn back to the pan as I crack an egg on the edge. "My older brother, Gabriel. I got it for him." I crack another egg and spill the contents into the pan, the smell filling the room with the aroma of home, and bringing with it memories of my early childhood with Gabe. Times when we'd cook

together with my parents. Times when we'd laugh at the table. All memories of a distant, submerged past. "Gabe was a brilliant kid. Truly brilliant. But he was unruly. He questioned everything. Questions became challenges. Challenges became arguments. When your parents are big into their Evangelical megachurch and cultivating the perfect family image, it's not a great mix. The more they pressured him to conform, the less he wanted to. Eventually, he found other kids who shared his views. It just so happened, they also shared a love of partying and drugs, and that lifestyle swept him away."

Bria is silent behind me for a long moment. The only sound between us is the sizzling of eggs in the pan. "He died?"

I nod, a familiar tension creeping into my chest. "My father caught him stealing Mom's jewelry when he was sixteen. It had already been years of broken curfews and terrible arguments. Gabe had come home drunk and high more than a few times. But that was the last straw. Dad kicked him out. Gabe couch surfed for a little while and we managed to stay in touch for a few months before he disappeared onto the streets. By the time I caught up with some of his old friends, they told me he'd fallen in with rougher groups. He'd gotten into increasingly dangerous situations. He owed people money. He'd disappear for weeks at a time. Then he overdosed. I'd spent two years looking for him, and all the while I'd been chasing a ghost."

I flip the eggs as the toast pops, then I put everything onto a plate before I place it on the island and slide it to Bria. When I look up, she's watching me, those dark eyes lifting away every layer she sees. She places her hand on mine, but like the hug, the action seems foreign to her. She looks down at our joined hands for a long moment before meeting my eyes. "I'm sorry," she says.

"It was a long time ago. It feels like a lifetime," I reply as I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles. When I let her go, I motion for her to eat before I pull a few cold pancakes on to my plate and warm them in the microwave. "My brother was the catalyst for both my work and my freedom from the church. He always talked about how cultish it was, how the church used language and ritual to modify and control the behavior of the community. He talked about how it manipulated members and how damaging it could be. I didn't really start paying attention until shortly before he left. Whereas Gabe funneled his need to break free into risky

behaviors, I funneled mine into academia. When he was kicked out of the house, I started to understand how much of his unraveling was related to his religious trauma. Over time, everything shifted in me, and my work became my way to stay connected with Gabe, in a way.”

“And your parents?”

I shrug as the microwave dings. “They’re still in the church. They don’t see it the way Gabe and I did. Though it took some time, our relationship is okay now. But the grief and the guilt they feel has definitely taken its toll.”

Bria nods and looks down at the island, lost in thought. When she meets my eyes, she offers a faint smile. I don’t know what she’s experienced of grief and guilt, but I’m guessing the scars below the surface have seen a lot of both.

“Thank you,” she says.

“For what?”

“Sharing with me. And breakfast, of course. But mostly sharing.”

Warmth spreads through my chest and hums down my arms. I ache to ask her about her past, but I somehow know I need to give her the time to come to me with whatever she’s comfortable sharing. Her trust is as fragile as spun sugar. If I tap it too hard, it will shatter. If I heat it with frustration, it will melt. I just need to be gentle with it. Sooner or later, she’ll let me get closer.

“Can I tell you a secret? Something shocking?” she asks.

Well, that was sooner than I thought. “Of course.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Bria gives me her most innocent doe eyes, but there’s still a wolf beneath the mask. “I don’t hate you.”

My loud laugh breaks through the memories that seem to float through the room like phantoms. “You don’t say. I’m shocked.”

“I know, right? No one is more surprised than me, I can assure you.”

I beam at her like the love-drunk, sexed-up fool that I am. I just hope it comes out as a cocky smirk with full dimple appeal rather than heart eyes. “I’d venture a guess to say you actually *like* me, Pancake.”

Bria scoffs and scowls at her half-eaten eggs, pushing a piece of toast through the runny yolk. “Keep calling me Pancake and we can go right back to hate, if you prefer.”

“I’m definitely not going to stop in that case.”

Bria sighs and glares at me as I take a slow bite of a strawberry, my grin widening. “Why are you so hard to despise?”

“Sex appeal.”

“Jesus Christ.”

I top up our coffee as she takes her last bites of egg and pushes the plate to the side with a word of thanks. I’m about to ask her to spend the day with me, which I secretly hope turns into the rest of the weekend, when an incoming call dings on her watch. The moment she looks down at the caller ID, I know.

The light leaves Bria’s eyes, and I know it’s bad.



“**H**as he been conscious?”

“Yes, he was awake on arrival. We’ve given him TPA, and the stent was successful in removing the clot.”

“NIH Stroke Scale score?”

“Thirteen.”

*Thirteen.* That number knocks the air from my chest with a whoosh. A moderate ischemic stroke, on the brink of severe.

Samuel’s chest rises and falls beneath the thin, striped blanket. I make a mental note to bring him something warmer from home. It’s the only thing I can think of to do. Otherwise, all I feel is helpless. Adrift.

We’ve been planning for this. After the first stroke, I felt the grains of sand slipping through my fingers. It was only a matter of time until there was another. This was inevitable.

Last time, I was there. We were sitting at home, eating salad and grilled chicken. Kane was winding around Samuel’s ankles in a cloud of white fluff. We were talking about music. “Sweet Apocalypse” by Lambert was playing. Samuel wanted to see an upcoming piano concert on campus. He slurred the word “summer.” When I looked up, the left side of his face started to droop. I called 911. I kept him awake. I rode with him in the ambulance. I did what I could until there was nothing more to do. This time, I’m just a spectator. Will he wake up? And who will he be if he does?

These questions are caught up in my mind as the neurologist runs through the possible permanent damage and the recovery process. Potential

cognitive impairment. Potential loss of speech. Potential loss of ambulatory abilities.

All I hear is potential loss of personhood.

When the doctor leaves and the nurses have checked Samuel's IV and documented his vitals, it's just me, standing in the room, looking down at the man who saved me. Day after day, he saved me. From the world. From myself. He nurtured a darkness that would have consumed my life had he not taught me how to feed and care for it.

I pull one of the chairs with its pink vinyl cushions and worn wooden armrests to the side of Samuel's bed and take his hand. I wonder if he can feel it when I squeeze his fingers. We've never been affectionate. It's not really in our nature, which shouldn't come as a surprise, all things considered. Maybe that means he'll feel my touch. Maybe he'll know that I'm here.

A long breath fills my lungs as I turn Samuel's hand over in mine. I trace his life line, wondering if any palm reader would ever guess how many deaths have been absorbed in that crease of skin. My eyes drift closed as I remember the gentle work of his hands on my back when he cleaned and dressed my wounds each night after he'd found me in the desert. It felt like a privilege. I had been chosen. I was being cared for. *Finally*. Some would say it came with a price, the weight of fulfilling a legacy of death and destruction. But that's not how it feels to me. Nothing I wanted in life came without pain. At least because of Samuel, that pain is someone else's burden to bear. It just comes from my hand.

Despite being so still and quiet, with only the beeping of monitors and the squeak of nurses' shoes down the hallway, I don't notice anyone enter the room until the first words pass Eli's lips. "Hi, sweetheart."

My heart stirs like some creature washed up on a muddy, desolate shore, struggling to come back to life. I open my eyes and Eli is standing next to me, a coffee in each hand. Something in me must not look right, because he doesn't ask questions or even pass me my drink. He sets the coffees the bedside table and squats at my side, reaching up to sweep hair back from my shoulder.

"Hey there, Pancake," he says with a gentle smile.

I've suddenly lost all will to fight this horrible nickname Eli insists on pursuing. In fact, it feels oddly comforting. "Hi."

"He's stable?"

I nod. Eli searches my face as though trying to find something I'm missing. Some key that will fit into a lock. "What do you have on for the weekend? Anything that needs to be taken care of at home, or at Cedar Ridge for Samuel?"

He's not asking inane, annoying questions. He doesn't want me to regurgitate information for his benefit. He's asking me something useful. Something meaningful.

My heart does that thing again, squirming in the oily mud. Part of me wants to fight Eli's kindness, just to be able to pull the release and let some of the pressure free from the reservoir of rage and confusion trapped behind the dam. Another part of me wants to burrow into him and hide from the world. I swallow and Eli passes me the coffee, and I take a long sip as I run through the mental list shoved into the back of my brain.

"I need to call Cedar Ridge to keep them updated on Samuel."

"Leave that with me. I'll speak to Blake, she's Fletcher's wife. She's an orthopedic surgeon here. She can get the update and make sure it's provided to Cedar Ridge. What about home?"

"My cleaner, Amy. She's coming tomorrow but I'll ask if she can swing by this morning to feed Kane."

"What about classes? Do you have anything due on Monday?"

"I'm caught up on coursework. The only thing I haven't done yet was suggest some essay topics for Dr. Halperon's midterm exams."

"Okay, let me talk to her. What else?"

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. I can do it. I just need an hour or two."

"Bria, let me handle it. Dr. Halperon has done enough last-minute shit to everyone else in the department. She can dig up some old essay topics and repurpose them, she doesn't need you to do that."

I let out a long sigh and press my fingers to my temple where a headache starts to throb. "Everyone will know, Eli. If you get involved, they'll talk about why."

"Do you care?"

No. I don't. "You do," I say. It feels like casting a barbed hook into black waters.

"I don't give a shit what they think," Eli replies, his hand resting against my cheek. His thumb strokes my skin with slow and careful grace. "Actually no, I take that back. I do care. I want everyone to know that you're mine. Halperon. Takahashi. Even the grouchy custodian guy, Dale."



“Not Dale.”

“Yep. Dale.”

*Christ.* Why does this simple touch on my cheek feel so good? Why does everything that Eli says seem to slice through shadow like the summer sun? I should be working harder to drive him off. I don’t want to hurt him, even though it feels inevitable whether I let him closer or push him away. We’d both be better off apart. Eli would be safe from me, and I would find another outlet for the helplessness I feel. Swimming. Hunting. Running until my heart explodes. They all have their appeal, but something feels hollow about every option but him.

“Hey,” he says, and I don’t realize my gaze has drifted away to the corner of the room until his voice pulls it back. Eli stands and tugs on my hand to lift me from the chair, taking my place before pulling me back down to sit on his lap. I’m not quite sure what to do with myself. I’ve never been held like this before. I feel like a rigid plane of wood until he takes my coffee and sets it down next to his. Then he wraps his arms around me and leans back, tying me into an embrace against his chest. His heart drums a steady percussion beneath my ear and I close my eyes.

“You don’t need to stay, I’ll be fine,” I whisper, my irritation flaring for my weakness as I press myself closer to Eli’s warmth.

“I know you will.”

I squirm a little as this new vulnerability gnaws at my mind. Eli only increases the strength of his hold and I lose all fight when his hand drifts through my hair. “I’m sure you have other things to do today.”

Eli presses a kiss to the top of my head. “I was going to try to convince you to spend the day with me and then sneakily turn that into the whole weekend, so no, I don’t.”

I let out another sigh as I resign to give up the battle against myself, at least for today. I’m suddenly too tired to fight it, but I know it will linger, ready to cause turmoil. Is this what it would be like if I let myself be with him? Would I always have to war my innermost darkness if what I had with Eli wasn’t just sex, but something more?

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily, Pancake,” he says, as though I’ve spoken my thoughts out loud.

“I can try if you keep calling me Pancake.”

Eli’s smile warms my head as his arms tighten. “You can try, but you won’t succeed.”

We fall into silence. Silence falls into sleep that's neither deep nor restful. A new routine seems to grow around us like vines. Nurses check Samuel on their rounds. Eli leaves the room to place calls or retrieve food or coffee or water. Machines beep. Voices pass in the hall. The scent of latex and sanitizers drifts through the room. And all the while, Samuel lies still, the only proof of life being the rise and fall of his chest.

At eight o'clock, the visitor hours are over, and I know there's nothing more to be done but wait for news. Eli doesn't remind me that they'll call if anything changes, or that I need to get some rest. I give Samuel a kiss on each cheek and Eli simply takes my hand and we leave. The only thing he asks is where I want to go.

"Home," I say. "Let's just go home."



The gates open as we draw near. We follow the sweeping curve of the driveway and Eli casts me a glance as the house comes into view. Its dark, sharp lines collide with sweeping curves in harmonious balance, deriving its inspiration from contemporary Japanese architecture. Between its size and its style, it's not your average home in Montana. But Samuel has never been your average man. I still remember the first time he brought me here when his project in Nevada was finished. *An oasis*, I'd said. Yes, he'd replied. *The perfect place for snakes to find cover*.

I don't ask Eli to stay, and he doesn't ask if he should. It's what we both want. He simply parks in front of the garage to the left of the house and we enter to the scent of Fabuloso cleaning spray and a fresh bouquet of maroon and yellow lilies in the vase on the kitchen counter. Kane chatters a mewing greeting as I reset the security system and Eli takes in the space.

"It's beautiful," he says, entering the living room where he looks at the paintings Samuel has collected over decades of investment. Samuel's beloved Fazioli grand piano sits at the end of the room, framed by two tall, narrow, north-facing windows whose gentle light never scars its lacquered surface. I watch as Eli tours the room and stops at the fireplace, examining the row of photos on the mantle. Samuel at his retirement celebration with the chairman of the university. Me with two other students in our caps and gowns, graduating with our master's degrees in New York. Eli picks up the only photo that doesn't feel like it's part of a staged show home. "How old were you?" he asks as he points to the image.

“Sixteen,” I reply, uncorking a bottle of Malbec and pouring two glasses. The photo shows me holding Kane as a kitten, sitting on the steps of the back deck of the house. I’m smiling with a shit-eating grin. Samuel is watching me in the background, trying not to scowl. “It was taken by one of my tutors. Samuel was a bit chagrined that I’d suckered him into keeping a stray cat.”

“How did you manage that? He doesn’t seem like the type of guy to give in easily.”

A dark laugh huffs past my lips as I join Eli in the living room, handing him a glass of wine. “He’s not. But he lost a bet. And when it comes to games, he’s fair.”

“What kind of game?”

I try to dampen the triumph I still feel at winning that particular little bet. It’s one of my favorite trophies to visit in my memory palace. “Samuel thought I couldn’t punch as hard as I knew I could. We tested it out. I exceeded his expectations.” Samuel didn’t think I could kill a man with a single punch, but I had good aim and I went for the throat. It took a minute or two for Malcolm Thompson to choke on the blood that filled his ruptured trachea, but I still succeeded. Of course, I conveniently leave that part out. “As soon as I won the bet, I marched right outside and grabbed the scraggly kitten that had been hanging around for a week. He was pretty easy to catch since I’d been sneaking him bits of ham. Samuel felt a little better when Kane scratched me to high hell for giving him a bath.”

Eli smiles and looks closer at the photo, the scratches visible on my arms. And I look at it too, wondering if I see a little pride in Samuel’s expression, or if it’s just imagined. I haven’t noticed it before. It confuses me, because I’ve never tried to make more of Samuel than what he is. A savior, yes. A partner as well. But a monster too. Just not *my* monster.

“I’ll be alone when he’s gone,” I say, immediately astounded that those words just left my mouth. Why would I say that, even if it’s true? I *will* be alone when he’s gone. It’s just a fact. There are other serial killers in the world, of course, but it’s not like we have a club and it’s not one I’d be keen to join. Besides, I doubt there are many like Samuel and me who break the mold.

Eli sets his glass down on the mantle and pulls mine from my hand, setting it next to the photo. “You won’t be,” he says as he takes my hand and reels me into his warmth.

“I don’t mean it the way you think,” I grumble against his chest as the scent of bergamot drifts from his skin.

“Ah, you meant he’s the only one you let close, and when he’s gone, no one will understand you? Yeah, I think I got it just fine.” I pull back to look into Eli’s warm brown eyes, his dark lashes crinkling together at the edges as he smiles. He brushes hair back from my face, his grin widening as I raise a skeptical brow. “It’s not like I hadn’t noticed you’re a bit secretive. You don’t talk about any close friends. I don’t see you with anyone aside from Tida and David, not that it really counts since you share an office. You don’t even have any social media presence.”

“Yes, I do, you stalker. My Insta handle is @kanethekillercat. It’s mostly cat pictures—you’re not missing much. They’re artsy though. He’s highly photogenic.”

“Why haven’t you added me?”

“Because I hate you, remember?”

“Now, now, Pancake. We both know that’s not true.” I scowl but Eli remains unfazed. He kisses me on the nose as though my murderous glare is adorable. I could punch him in the throat, or spike his drink with enough tranquilizer to flatten a horse, or kill him with the twenty different weapons hidden in this room alone. But no. He just grins with that stupid fucking dimple, teasing and cocky at first, but then it becomes something warmer. Something that looks heartfelt and hopeful. He frames my face in his palms and searches my eyes. “I want to understand you, Bria. I think I get a bit, but I know there’s a lot you’re not ready to share, and I won’t push you.”

“Have you considered what would happen if you found something you didn’t like? Maybe there are things you wouldn’t want to know.”

“I *do* want to know, actually. In case you hadn’t noticed, I like that you’re not all unicorns and cotton candy. You broke into my house and played sexy hide-and-seek, and it’s not like I was calling the cops, was it,” he says, and another kiss finds my skin, warming my cheekbone. “You embrace the hidden parts of me. You let them free. I want to do the same for you.”

I close my eyes and try to force myself to pull away. Every time I resolve to, there’s another kiss that stops me. On my eyelashes. On the bridge of my nose. On the corner of my lips.

I grip Eli’s wrists. Part of me wants to shove his hands away and rage at him. He’s rippling the surface of the waters I hide beneath. Things are

stirring that I don't have names for. Emotions I've never felt and I don't understand. Fear most of all, the worst kind of fear, the kind I've so rarely had. Fear for someone else.

"Why are you doing this?" I whisper. My voice comes out strained. My chest burns with every press of Eli's lips. I keep hold of his wrist with one hand and lay my palm above his heart with the other. It thunders beneath my touch. I take my first step backward toward the hallway that leads to the bedroom, pulling him with me even though I'm desperate to push him away.

"Kissing your face? I like kissing your face."

"No. This," I say, gesturing between us as though that can explain the way I feel. More kisses pepper my skin, one for every freckle, for every step I can't help but take toward my room. "You're supposed to not like me. It's...easier. I'm not..."

Words flare and die on my tongue like embers in the dark. Each step we make is a battle in my mind. I let out a strangled sound I've only ever made when I pushed my bloodied body from the desert floor, or when I ran until I couldn't run anymore. The same sound I made when I tried to swim in the flood, the shore so close yet unreachable as I was swept away by the current.

But it doesn't scare Eli away.

"You can let me in, sweetheart," he whispers. "I'm not trying to hurt you."

I shake my head. Something burns in my throat when I swallow. "It's not me I'm worried about."

Eli doesn't stop the spread of kisses when he sweeps his arms across my back and lifts me from the floor. "Let me worry about myself. Just tell me where I'm supposed to go in this enormous house. I understand now why you laughed when I asked if you needed help paying for the trip to Ogden."

When I try to smile, it feels like I'm forcing the wrong piece into a jigsaw puzzle. I point down the hall and lock my legs around Eli's back and my arms behind his neck. My heart feels like it's liquifying, dripping between my ribs. I'm too hot. *Burning* hot. This thing in my throat feels like a squeezing fist.

Eli stumbles when I catch his lips with mine and kiss him back, and he knocks into the wall, breaking the press of our lips with a whispered curse. We weave down the corridor until we finally make it to the bed. Eli hauls us

onto the mattress with one arm still braced around me until my head is on the pillow, and when it is, he spends a long moment just hovering over me, brushing strands of hair from my face, taking whatever he sees and filling it with warmth.

When I look into Eli's eyes, I don't see the same man as the one in the coffee shop who stole glances like a leopard stalking in the shadows. He's not the man who stoked my rage in his office the first time we met, or the one who teased me in the library, or the beast who consumed me in his bed. He's so much more. He's generous and funny and kind. And he looks at me like I could be all of those things too. I wish I could be. I've never wanted it until this moment, and now that I see it, it's as distant as a star. I could try for a thousand years and I know I'd never get there.

"What are you doing to me?" I whisper, an echo of his question last night.

"Taking care of you," Eli says. I'm about to argue when he taps my lips with an index finger. "If it helps to not weird you out, I can claim to have an ulterior motive. If I do a good enough job looking after you, you might not gut me when I introduce you as my girlfriend."

*Girlfriend.*

That tightness winds around my throat once more. It slithers into my chest, pulling at my bones. The breath that passes my lips is unsteady, and a faint smile lifts the corners of Eli's mouth when no argument follows it. Just a breath. An admission in a simple thread of air, that maybe I want that too.

The faint smile that was there on Eli's face dissolves, melted away by the heat in his eyes. It's not the same desire I've seen in him before. It's longing, not need. I can't decipher everything I see in his expression. There might be fear or hope. Or resignation or resolve. The emotions I see blur together like paint in turpentine. "Tap my shoulder three times if you need me to stop," Eli says, and before I can ask why, his lips meet mine.

This kiss is slow and deep. There is no rush. No brutality. Just gentle pressure and languid strokes of our tongues. When Eli's fingers trace the lines of bone or the curve of sinew and flesh, the touch is purposeful. He paints my skin with tingling caresses. Long, sweeping streaks of goosebumps follow in his wake.

I try to memorize every detail of Eli that I can. The way his stubble scratches at the swirling ridges of my fingerprints. The pulse of his heart as it drums against my chest. My touch follows coiled muscle and ridges of



spine. I break the kiss only long enough to pull Eli's shirt up, and then his weight settles on me once more like a blanket of warmth.

Eli doesn't try to undress me. He doesn't push or demand anything. I take off each piece of clothing in my own time. When I unbutton my shirt, he kisses my collarbones. His palm curves around my shoulder. When I squirm out of my jeans, Eli's hand flows down my leg, all the way to my ankle and back up again. I'm still in the cream-colored corset, and when I take it off with the hope that the constriction in my chest will get better, it doesn't. There's just an ache that burns inside me, growing hotter with every kiss and touch, consuming me when there are no clothes left and it's just skin, just Eli's broad shoulders and corded muscle and the weight of his body on mine.

It's me who reaches between us. Me who folds my hand around his erection as he pulls away to look at me, that pained expression returning to his eyes as they shift between mine. "Am I hurting you?" I ask, loosening my grip until his hand finds mine and squeezes. Eli shakes his head and gives me a faint smile, but his brows draw together as he centers himself to me.

"No, Bria," he says, the crown of his cock pressing to the dampness gathered at my folds. He glides into me with a slow stroke, my flesh stretching around his girth, his eyes still fused to mine, watching my reaction as pleasure replaces the emptiness. When he's fully seated, he stops to press his lips to mine before falling into a gentle rhythm of thrusts, and then I'm trapped in his eyes once more, his hands framing my face. "I have to tell you something. I want you to stop me if it's too much."

My heart folds in on itself like origami. Confusion churns in my guts with a sudden wave of nausea. My voice echoes in my head in a melody tuned to the steady pace of Eli's strokes. *What are you doing to me?*

I swallow and nod.

Eli traces my cheek and my jaw, the pace of his thrusts slowing. "I want to know everything you're comfortable sharing with me. And I meant what I said, I won't push you for more. I don't expect anything in return, but I need you to know." His eyes follow the path of his thumb across the edge of my bottom lip. "I love you, Bria Brooks."

Air flees my lungs.

I search every memory, but I don't find it anywhere. I already know it was never there.

No one has ever said that to me before.

I shake my head. My eyes sting and burn. “No,” is all I can manage to say.

Eli’s smile erupts with a laugh, as though this is endearing and sweet and not monumental and tectonic. “Yes.”

“You can’t.”

“I can. I *do*. Sorry, not sorry.”

My breath is unsteady. Eli kisses the bridge of my nose and I press my fingertips into the firm muscles of his arms, willing myself to hold on and not tap his shoulders. He doesn’t know me. He thinks he knows enough but he doesn’t. And yet he seems so sure. Is this how it works? Do people really just feel some kind of magic and they put it out into the world and it’s real? I want to ask how. I want to understand the alchemy of it. But I’m afraid. I’m afraid that if I ask, it will vanish, nothing more than a mirage on the horizon.

Eli searches my face. His knuckles graze my cheek as he glides into me with deep, rocking strokes. Pleasure floods my core as I wrap one leg around his hips. And it’s not just the steady rhythm or the way he fills and stretches me or the friction of his body against mine that drives me closer and closer to coming undone. It’s just *him*.

My palms slide up his arms and over his shoulders. I lace my fingers together around the back of his neck and I hold his gaze with mine.

“You’re mine,” I whisper. “And I’m yours.”

When the surprise and relief dissolve from Eli’s face, there’s only the deepest longing left behind. No more words. No more admissions. Just his kiss, like a promise of dawn after night.

Maybe he does love me. Maybe I can let him. I can try.



I wake before Eli and leave a little note on the pillow. *Downstairs at the pool.* When I've meditated and had a swim, I replace that note with another one. *In the shower.* When I've dried my hair and gotten dressed, I change notes again. *In the kitchen.* I make omelets and keep them warm in the oven, then decide it's probably best to wake Eli before Amy arrives and they both experience a bit of a shock.

Eli doesn't stir as I climb onto the mattress, but as soon as I lay my weight onto his body, his arms fold across my back and he traps me in a strong embrace.

"What time is it?" he asks, his voice still thick with sleepiness.

"Seven-fifty. Amy will be here any minute."

"Mmmm."

"I made breakfast. Also coffee."

"Hmmm."

"Those aren't really words, Professor," I say into his chest. He tightens his grip when I try to push away, but the driveway alarm beeps before I can sink further into him.

"What the hell is that," Eli says as I squirm away to check the tablet on the wall.

"Amy. She comes to clean once a week."

Eli sits up, running his hand through his hair as he watches me disarm the front door for Amy. "Pretty state-of-the-art system."

"Yeah, Samuel is big on security."

"Have you had break-ins? Should I be concerned?"

I laugh, warmed by his earnest response. “No. But you should be worried about Amy finding you in bed. She’s already going to have a thousand questions.”

Eli stands in all his naked glory and my blood instantly heats. He gathers his clothes then wraps an arm around my back, pressing his lips to mine before letting go to head for the ensuite. “Can’t wait for the introduction, Pancake,” he says with a wink over his shoulder. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

The bathroom door closes just as the front door opens. I straighten out the rumpled sheets before heading out to meet Amy at the entrance. Her expression betrays her every thought. Surprise. Excitement. Intense curiosity.

“There’s a man here,” I blurt out before she can even say hello. “He’s in the shower.”

Amy’s smile widens as she sets her supplies down by the door. “I figured there might be a guest given the unfamiliar car in the drive.”

“He spent the night.”

“Okay...that’s—”

“I like him.”

What the hell is wrong with me? It’s not like Amy is a friend, but she’s been coming here since before I was in my undergrad, when the house still belonged to Samuel. She’s never seen me here with anyone other than him.

“I figured,” Amy says, swallowing a giggle. She picks up Kane as he winds through her legs and gives me a long, assessing look. “Was he with you at the hospital yesterday? How’s Samuel?”

“Yes, he was. I haven’t heard any updates yet but I’ll head there soon.”

Kane’s purr fills the silence between us as Amy watches me. “I’m glad, Bria. You should have someone with you. You don’t deserve to go through that alone. No one does.”

I’m not so sure about that. If she knew all the things I’ve done, she’d think differently. I’m the last person who deserves someone like Eli. Most serial killers would probably believe otherwise, because to them, they’re always owed things they never earned. If they want something, they take it. But I’m not like them. At least, not completely.

I already know I’m not worthy of this.

How can I try to let Eli love me when his words from the other night still play in my head? I don’t really know anything about love, but I

understand the logic of what he said, that sometimes love is having the courage to let someone go when you know you can't be what they deserve. As natural as this feels to be with him, and as much as he seems to be happy, I haven't earned it, and I know I never will.

"Hey, you okay?" Amy asks. She lays her hand on my arm.

"Yeah... I..."

"She just needs coffee and sugarless food," Eli says.

I turn to watch him approach from the hall, his hair damp, that dimple still visible in his unshaven cheek, his eyes bright with his smile. He's gorgeous and charming and kind and thoughtful and *no*, I definitely don't deserve him. But when he stops next to me and presses a kiss to my cheek, I want to pretend that I do.

Eli extends his hand before I have a chance to make the introduction. "You must be Amy. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Eli, Bria's boyfriend," he announces as I nearly choke on my saliva. "Thanks for stopping in for Kane yesterday."

"Of course. Anything for my first and favorite client," she says with a grin. "I owe her a thousand times over. Feeding Kane is nothing."

"You don't owe me anything," I say, but Amy just waves me off.

"Bria's the one who convinced me to start my own business. I used to work part-time at Berkshire University in Custodial Services, but I couldn't get the full-time hours."

Amy leaves out the part about her shitty abusive husband, Ronald, who refused to let her take full-time hours. He experienced a "totally unsuspecting, completely accidental" death that Samuel and I had *nothing* to do with... As far as Amy is aware, Ronald drank too much, slipped on the ice, and cracked his head open on the walkway to their house.

"It's been seven years now," Amy says as she turns away to pick up her supplies. "Samuel built me my website that first year. I started in this very house and now I have five employees and I'm fully booked, looking to hire more."

"That's impressive growth," Eli says.

"I work hard," Amy says with a shrug. "I just needed a little nudge." She turns to me with a smile. "If you're stuck at the hospital or... whatever...and you need me to feed Kane, just let me know. I can swing by any time."

"Thank you, Amy. I appreciate it."

She pats my arm and starts down the hall as Eli heads toward the kitchen, already looking like he belongs here in my home. Amy turns around on her way and catches my eye, fanning herself as she mouths the words “hot as fuck” before she winks and continues down the corridor with Kane trotting after her.

“What’d she say when my back was turned?” Eli whispers as he finds the cupboard with the mugs and pours two coffees.

“*Hot as fuck.*”

“I like her.”

“I’m sure.”

Eli grins and I gesture for him to have a seat as I bring over the food and sit at the head of the table next to him. “Any word from the hospital?” he asks as he makes a start with his omelet, humming with satisfaction.

“Not yet. Visiting hours start at ten, so I’ll head over there soon.”

“Okay. I just have to take Duke out for a walk and I can come back to pick you up. Is there anything else I can take care of? Anything I can bring?”

I shake my head, losing interest in my food as I stare down at it. “You’ve already done so much, Eli. You don’t have to waste another day over there.”

“Hey,” he says, laying his hand on mine. He squeezes and I meet his eyes. “I’m not leaving you there on your own.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will. But you’ll be *more* fine if you have some moral support. Unless you need to be alone?”

Do I need to be alone? I should say yes, but I can’t bring myself to. Everything feels easier with Eli around. He was right, that this process of getting to know one another wouldn’t be hard forever. Now it’s the thought of letting go that seems impossible, even though I know that the longer I leave it, the harder it will be.

“No, I don’t want to be alone,” I whisper. I don’t know if Eli takes my words for what they really are, that I don’t just mean today. He leans close to rest a kiss on my cheekbone and I squeeze his hand.

“It’s settled then.”

We eat in silence, our hands joined together. I don’t feel the need to fill space with forced words. For once, I’m not plagued by the nagging worry

that I'm missing something, or that I should be playing a part I don't feel like playing. Eli makes everything seem so easy.

When breakfast is over, Eli leaves for his house and I set up my laptop on the dining table. I go through my inbox before logging into the secure server I share with Samuel to retrieve the files on Cynthia's calendar for the upcoming week.

But what I find is a treasure trove.

Folders and folders of information from Praetorian. Contracts. Calendars. Accounts payable records. Client backgrounds.

And a message from Samuel, the timestamp from 6:57 a.m. yesterday morning. It must have been right before his stroke.

SEE FOLDER MONTANA COMPOUND.

I find the folder and open it.

A blueprint of the compound. Photos of the layout. Exits, the placement of cameras, stairways, common spaces.

And photos of the people who live there.

I scroll through face after face, all young women in their early to midtwenties, all pretty, all serene, no light in their empty expressions. There seems to be a haunted quality about them, but maybe I just see what I want to believe, that deep down they're ready to leave, but feel powerless to do so. I look through every photo and it's not until I'm near the end of an archive folder that I see it.

A man, reflected in a mirror behind a woman, the name on her file Abigail Ramos. She looks exhausted, her eyes hooded and dull. A butterfly rash spans across her cheeks. The man's face hovers over her shoulder like an angel.

I zoom in on the photo.

My blood chills. Goosebumps flash up the backs of my arms. He's watchful, like a shepherd. It's almost as though he's looking right through the photo, staring at the wolf that hunts him.

I know it's Caron Berger. *I know it.*

But I also know that face. I've seen it before.

I close my eyes. Deep breaths. Count to five. Try to slow the thunder of my heart.



I walk down the road toward my memory palace, passing the missing person flyers that flutter on the fence, showing Cynthia's schedule beneath her smiling face, just as it looked at the nail salon. Entering the wrought iron gates, I turn left rather than enter the palace, heading along a path that leads to a new element I constructed last week. An aviary.

Tropical birds of every size and color greet me with songs as I enter the glass dome. A macaw guards a list of everything Eli and I said to one another in the library. In a group of dahlias is a box where I keep the memory of our disastrous first meeting, which has lost its sting in recent days. A flock of finches bounce through a flowering cherry tree on my right, its branches sheltering a small table with a record player. "I love you, Bria Brooks," it plays as I pass by.

I walk further along the path, stopping at a group of photos that hang from the roof on thin wires. The picture in my hands is the one of Caron Berger. I raise it up, holding it next to the photo from Eli's desk, the one of his family.

It's not Eli's face I linger on, but his brother, Gabriel's. That angelic, serious, beautiful face.

I stare at him. I stare and stare, trying to believe I could be wrong. But there is no doubt.

Gabriel Kaplan is Caron Berger.

My eyes shoot open as a hundred thoughts hit my skull at once. I've been after Caron for almost two years. Two years of tracking a phantom. But I can't kill him knowing who he is. Eli has no idea. He believes his brother is dead, and I won't be the one to take him away again. I won't let *anyone* hurt Eli. Especially not me.

That doesn't mean the hunt has to end.

I might not be able to kill him, but I *can* catch him. I can catch Caron and bring him home. Eli will have the peace and closure he deserves. And if I do so, maybe I'll have earned the love I've been given. At least a little bit.

I trawl through every folder as quickly as I can, trying to find Caron in the information present and everything in between. There's no record of his calendar, no details on his location. There's no obvious coded language. His data must be kept separately.

There's one person who knows how to find him. One person who could draw him out.

It's time to reel in Cynthia Nordstrom.



**I**t's Monday. The weekend feels like it was seven days long with all the ups and downs Bria and I have faced together. This morning, she received word that Samuel has awoken and is able to speak, albeit slowly. She insisted I go to campus, so I check my texts between classes and receive sporadic updates as the day rolls on. She says Samuel's comprehension seems good, but he doesn't remember the stroke. His left side is weak. Rehab will start immediately and he should be back at Cedar Ridge within a few days.

My classes end mid-afternoon and I'm at my desk catching up on emails when a call comes through. At first, my heart speeds with anticipation that it's Bria, but it's Agent Espinoza's name on the screen when I swipe to accept the call.

"We've been looking into your question about other cults who have experienced similar patterns of dissolution," she says after a brief greeting. "It's been difficult to nail down. If they're not engaging in illegal activity, they aren't really on our radar. There have been a few that have come and gone, but so far I haven't found anything to indicate a similar pattern. The one potential exception is Disciples of Xantheus. Are you familiar with them?"

"Yes, I know of DOX," I reply. "Religious cult. They were based in Nevada for some time before they disappeared."

"That's right. They just up and left. They turned up in Mexico for a short time before continuing south. They wound up in Bolivia."

I let out a long sigh as I lean back in my chair. "No extradition."

“Exactly. But we do have a woman who recently left the cult and was repatriated. She’s in Washington at the moment. She’s been in the hospital, so we haven’t had the opportunity to fully interview her yet, but she stated the catalyst for the cult’s movement from Nevada was a murder and two disappearances.”

A chill flows down my arms. There had been rumors about something cataclysmic occurring within the reclusive DOX community, causing them to pull up from their little oasis and disappear. There wasn’t anything they were doing wrong on the surface of things. It was just a small community that kept to themselves, and no one left. They never got into trouble. It never made sense why they would suddenly leave.

“Is there any chance I could interview her?” I ask. “It’s a long shot, but if there have been disappearances, perhaps they chose to run from someone.”

“One step ahead of you, Dr. Kaplan. Sara should be up for release from the hospital tomorrow, and I’m hoping she’ll agree to head to Ogden while you’re there. I’ll keep you posted, but the details we have so far are in the folders for you.”

I log in while we finish our conversation and pull up the limited information on Sara Monroe, a forty-five-year-old woman who was found wandering on a deserted Bolivian road, badly injured and alone. Reading into the limited information, it seems like she’s a woman with a wild story that she’s reluctant to tell. And at this stage, I’ll take any scrap of information I can get.

It’s four thirty when another text comes in, this time a reminder from Simon about the last race of the season. The Autumn Adder is tonight, and the weather is perfect. I’m craving that rush of adrenaline. I want to lose every thought to the machine beneath me and the dips and curves of the road... And I bet there’s someone else I know who would benefit from some time away from the weight of the world.

I pack up my things and send Bria a cryptic text before I head home to change, and within the hour I’m parking at her house.

“I see you’re finally embracing your rebel professor alter ego,” she says as she stops beside me, eyeing my motorcycle leathers and my purring bike with a sly smile.

I reach out and take her wrist, pulling her toward me until I can wrap my padded arm around her back and kiss her. Every time I’m away from

Bria, even for a few hours, it feels like a deepening chasm is gnawing at my chest, consuming me. The only relief is her touch. Even seeing her at a distance is not enough. I need to feel her warmth, to let her fill that emptiness, not with light, but with the substance of her shadows.

Bria presses her palm to my face, tracing her thumb across my stubble. “What are we up to?”

“I’m taking you to something fun. It’s a little bit naughty though. It’s not what you’d call a ‘sanctioned event.’”

Her smile brightens as I pass her the spare helmet. “The Autumn Adder?” she asks.

*This woman.* It started with a voice in a coffee shop, a busted glance, and a bombed meeting. And now here she is, grinning like there’s not a secret she can’t excavate from me, and all I want to do is carve out my heart and give it to her. “How the fuck did you know about that?”

Bria shrugs as she walks around to my left side and swings her leg over the bike, settling in behind me with her arms around my waist. “I already told you. I have skills you don’t even know about, Dr. Kaplan.”

With a gentle squeeze she lifts a hand and closes her visor, and then we’re off, speeding toward the foothills.

The location of the Autumn Adder changes every year. I’ve been coming since I moved here four years ago, and every season it’s grown. When we arrive at the location Simon provided as a dropped pin, there are bikes filling the cracked asphalt parking lot of the abandoned gas station and lining part of the road. Music plays from someone’s speakers. People are laughing and talking, the excitement palpable as they check out each other’s machines and chatter about the upcoming ride. Not everyone will race, but there are many contenders, some of whom I’ve faced before.

I park and Bria gets off first, bewitching me as she takes off her helmet and her loose hair tumbles over her shoulders. She can’t see my face through my mirrored visor but she smiles like she can, that same cocky “caught you” look lifting the corners of her mouth.

“Pancake,” I say, lifting my visor. “If you keep looking at me like that, you’re going to throw me off my game.”

Bria saunters closer, a leopard in a leather jacket. I pull my helmet off and she wraps her arms around my neck. “If you changed your mind and don’t want to race, I’m sure I can make it worth your while.”

“Good luck convincing him out of it,” a familiar voice cuts in just as I’m about to kiss Bria. I draw back and watch as Simon approaches, running a hand through his sun-bleached hair. “Kap has a track beef. He came in second two years ago and swears Wilson cheated.”

“He *did* cheat,” I argue. “He kicked me and tried to touch my brake.”

“Wilson is the new Romano Fenati, apparently,” Simon whispers to Bria with a wink.

I roll my eyes and lean closer to Bria. “Romano Fenati pulled an opponent’s brake—”

“At the San Marino GP,” she interjects. “He was dropped from the Marinelli Snipers and had his racing license revoked.”

Simon grins, his clear blue eyes dancing between us as I try to wrangle my dumbfounded expression. I shake my head in disbelief and swallow. “Simon, this is my girlfriend, Bria. Bria, Simon.”

The two shake hands as Simon’s gaze rakes over Bria’s face in a way that makes me want to rip his skin off. “Racing fan?” he asks.

“No.”

*God* I love this woman. She doesn’t elaborate. She just lays it out there, no explanation or apology given.

Simon is enchanted, and I notice every obvious sign. The way he holds on to her hand for a heartbeat too long. His dilated pupils. The particular curve of his lips. “Have we met before?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Maybe you’ve been to The Consulate Bar? I’m a bartender there.”

“I haven’t,” she says and shrugs. “I must have one of those faces.”

Simon turns on his most charming smile. “I doubt that.”

“Time to move along, asshole,” I say, my tone joking enough that Simon laughs despite my growing urge to tear out his throat. “She’ll flatten you faster than you can blink.”

Simon bellows another laugh and slaps me on the shoulder. “Okay, Kap. You’re up in ten. Bria, it was a pleasure.” Simon gives us a little salute before he shifts past us, Bria’s eyes following his movement. Her face is empty of emotion, an untouched canvas. Except for her eyes. They glitter with malice, like she’s planning a hundred different ways to flay Simon alive.

“Murderly vibes,” I say, pulling her closer.

Bria's expression flashes as though my words are a lightning strike, burning through the darkness. "What?"

"You looked like you wanted to kill him." I kiss Bria's freckled nose and when I pull away, her eyes are locked somewhere near my heart.

"I did?"

*Shit.* Bria has not taken this as a joke. She looks confused, possibly even disturbed. Maybe I crossed some line without realizing. There are moments when I'm so focused on the present with her that I forget about the terrible past she keeps shuttered away. I don't know what's in that box, or what she's suffered or been witness to.

I fold my arm around Bria's back. "Hey. I'm sorry."

Bria's confusion only seems to deepen, a small crease appearing between her brows as she meets my eyes. "What for?"

"The joke about murderly vibes. If it's any consolation, I had an urge to kill him too, if that's what was going through your head. Nothing to be ashamed about. It's not like you acted on it."

Bria tries to smile but it looks pained, and a sting of guilt burns in my heart. I pull her closer until she climbs onto the bike in front of me, her legs dangling over mine. And I don't care who's here or what they think or who they know. I hold Bria's waist with my gloved hands and kiss her like we're the only two people in the world. Her subtle taste of mint covers my tongue as she explores my mouth. Her nails scrape through my hair and the back of my neck. Bria sinks into me and the sounds of music and voices fade away until she's the only thing that's real.

And she is. She's the only thing that's real. The only person who feels authentic. She fills the empty spaces with mystery and wit and humor and beauty. No one has ever fit like she does.

When the outside world crashes in, it's with the sound of a horn and a responding whoop of whistles and cheers. We look to Simon, the source of the sound, standing in the center of the parking lot with a folded note in his hand.

"Welcome to the Autumn Adder!" he bellows, and another cheer rises from the group. "We've got a lot of contenders this year for the Snakehead Trophy."

"It's the ugliest trophy of all time. Not sure why I risk my neck for it," I say in a low voice to Bria as Simon raises the hunk of brass in the air to the hollering crowd.

“We’ll do four heats of six. The top two riders from each heat will enter the finals,” Simon says, looking down at his note. “First up are Kaplan, Alvarez, Carter, Yu, Wilson, and Ness. Make your way to the starting line, my people.”

Clapping and voices surround us as engines roar to life. Bria presses her palms to my cheeks and I’m caught in the gravity of her deep brown eyes. Whatever she feels is buried so deep I can only see the most diaphanous evidence that worry swims beneath the surface. It’s in the heartbeat pulsing in her neck. It’s the way her gaze filters between my eyes, her lips pressing together. I kiss the bridge of her nose where her freckles concentrate.

“Be careful,” she says when I pull away. Those faint traces of worry disappear and a stern darkness settles in her skin. “I don’t want to inherit your wardrobe.”

I laugh as Bria grins and climbs off my bike. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ve left it to Duke.” I pull on my helmet and nod to the hill behind the gas station. “If you head up the path, you’ll see us come around the second curve.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Pancake,” I say, then cover her mouth with my gloved hand. She glares at me and I give her a lopsided smile. “I love you.”

Bria’s glare softens as I pull down my visor with my free hand and start the engine. I don’t take my palm from her lips until I’m ready to take off, and I don’t look to see if she tries to answer. I just rev the engine and head to the starting line.

I roll into place next to Alvarez and we knock fists as the others fan out next to us. Simon’s brother gets into position with a flag. Adrenaline floods my veins with every hammering beat of my heart.

And after seconds that seem to stretch too long, the flag drops and we’re surging ahead. The initial stretch is straight and the pack stays together as we reach the first curve, leaning into the sweeping bend. Another short stretch and I’m pulling into second place. We round the curve behind the gas station and I pass Alvarez, hoping Wilson is at the back of the pack. And then I concentrate on keeping my balance, accelerating through the snakelike curves, speeding down the straights. The race ends where there’s a flat stretch just before a bridge over a gorge and I keep my position, with Wilson just behind me.



We turn back after the positions are confirmed and head to the abandoned gas station where I find Bria chatting with Alvarez's wife Beth, who's due to race in one of the later heats. I shut off my bike and pull off my helmet and gloves as Alvarez parks next to her, his expression a mix of rage and worry.

"Fucking Wilson," he grits out, his eyes tracking Wilson's bike behind me as he enters the parking lot. "He nearly knocked me off on the fifth turn."

"I told you. That guy is a cheating prick."

"I believe you, man. It's Simon who needs convincing. They go too far back." Alvarez sighs and shakes his head, turning his attention to his wife. "If you win your heat, I think you should consider calling it a day, babe. It's not worth eating asphalt because of that asshole."

Beth crosses her arms but says nothing. She just stares across the lot at Wilson as he turns off his Honda. Her glare turns into a deadly smirk as she catches Wilson's eye and he saunters toward us. Instinct propels me off my bike and in front of Bria, who looks disquietingly at ease.

"Julio," Wilson calls to Alvarez as he draws closer. "Better luck next year, I guess."

"Fuck you, man."

Wilson laughs and runs a hand across his buzzed blond hair. "Ouch. Sore loser, eh? What about you, Beth? Will you congratulate me when I win, or are you gonna be a little bitch about it too?"

Beth bursts forward to scrape his eyeballs clean out of his skull, but Alvarez manages to wrap an arm around her waist before she can reach him. "Don't turn your back, asshole," she snarls, spitting at Wilson. She misses his face but hits his jacket and he laughs.

"*Uh oh*, Bethie. You know threats aren't allowed. *Simon says* and all that."

"What about cheating?" Bria interjects, her voice calm and even. I turn toward her but she's looking down at her phone. "What does Simon say about that? Perhaps we should ask him."

Bria ignores Wilson's proclamation of innocence and whistles before yelling Simon's name, still not looking up from her phone. Simon registers the tension among our group and walks over, his gaze bouncing between us.

“What’s up, my people?” he asks in a cheery tone that fails to disguise his wariness.

“Simon, what’s your policy on cheating?” Bria asks, her eyes glued to her screen. Wilson shifts on his heels, irritation and fury rolling from his tense shoulders.

“Immediate disqualification, but there has to be proof.”

“Hmm,” Bria says, nodding thoughtfully. “I thought you might say that. What about this?”

Bria turns her phone to show us the screen.

A video of the race at the fifth corner plays in slow motion, as clear as if it were taken on a racetrack. I go by first and Alvarez is in second, Wilson in a close third. And then it happens. Indisputable proof. Wilson kicks out, Alvarez swerves, and Wilson surges into second place.

Alvarez and Beth whoop in astonished triumph. Simon glares at his friend and tells him to pack it up for risking lives. Wilson yells a string of obscenities and tries to argue with Simon. And Bria? Well, she just smirks. My little demon, always ten steps ahead.

“You fucking *cunt*,” Wilson growls. He pushes past Simon and swings to knock Bria’s phone from her hand.

My fist meets his face before he can ever make contact.

In a single breath I’ve got him trapped beneath me on the pavement. My vision narrows to a pin of rage. All I see is my knuckles slamming into Wilson’s face, over and over. His cheek tears open and blood spatters across the asphalt. The scent of hot leather and splitting skin lifts from the ground. My heartbeat dampens the sounds of pain from Wilson as I pummel him with blows. I get in two final hits before Simon and Alvarez manage to pull me off, but I struggle against them. I want to fucking *kill* him. I want to wrap my fingers around his throat and feel him choke beneath my hands.

“Don’t you fucking *look* at her,” I seethe as Wilson spits out a broken tooth. “I’ll fucking *kill* you, you sonofabitch.”

When they’ve dragged me back far enough, Simon and Alvarez let me go and I turn, my wild gaze colliding with Bria’s calm, unflustered expression. She lifts her hands to my cheeks and her gentle smile sweeps away the rage still burning in my veins. I push her back a few steps, wanting to get her further from Wilson before I shift stray strands of hair from her face. Something about the sight of my bloody knuckles next to her unblemished skin is deeply satisfying.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my heart still hammering through quick breaths.

“I’m fine. Are you?”

I nod, closing my eyes and pressing my sweat-slicked forehead to hers. “I’m sorry.”

“For what, beating the shit out of Wilson?”

“No,” I say with a heavy sigh. I’m not actually sorry for that at all, and I push aside what that could mean as my hand flows down Bria’s back. “I’m sorry if I brought up any memories that you wanted to keep in the past.”

“Eli, *no*,” she whispers as she wraps her arms around my neck and draws me into her embrace. I inhale her light scent, resting my head on her shoulder. “That’s not how it works for me.”

I pull back to kiss her, to tell her I love her, but the blare of a warning horn stops me.

“Police incoming!” Simon shouts. “Pack it up!”

Bria’s eyes go wide as I grab her hand. “Come on, Pancake. Time to go.”

We pull our helmets on as and Bria slits her phone into the mount with a route to Lake McDonald. We weave through rushing spectators and revving bikes as we take off up the road in the direction I just raced. We speed through curves and pass other bikes and Bria follows every leaning movement. We never hear the sirens, but we ride as though they’re right behind us. An hour and two near misses with deer later, we’re rolling down a secluded gravel driveway that opens to a massive log cabin on the shore.

The sun is setting when I park next to the stairs leading to the wraparound porch. It’s another impressive structure, with no decorations on the walls and sleek details mixed with the rustic warmth of the wood. Bria heads for the kitchen with its polished granite countertops and shining steel appliances, and pulls a first aid kit from a drawer next to the gas range.

“We’d better stay here tonight,” Bria says as I text Fletch to see if she can take Duke out. She replies almost immediately with a thumbs up.

“Yeah. When’s your first class tomorrow?”

“Not until one. You?”

“Eleven.”

Bria nods and gestures for me to sit on one of the stools at the island. She pours two glasses of bourbon before sitting next to me. I watch the precise work of her delicate fingers as she prepares bandages with antibiotic cream and unpackages a gauze pad, soaking it in rubbing alcohol.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I shouldn’t have taken you there,” I say. She presses the saturated pad to my bloody knuckles and wipes away the dried blood, the biting sting seeping into the wounds.

“If I didn’t want to go, I wouldn’t have gone,” she replies with a nonplussed shrug.

“And I’m sorry for my reaction to Wilson. I wouldn’t blame you if you felt less of me.”

The motion of Bria’s hand slows and she blinks at me. “Why would I think less of you?”

“Violence? Breaking a man’s teeth, maybe?”

Bria huffs a laugh and resumes her work. “I don’t think less of you.” She’s silent for a long while, and she does something I’ve never seen her do. She starts chewing at her lip, her brows furrowed in concentration. “Would you think less of me? If I was...violent...with someone?”

“No, Bria.”

“I have been.”

“It still doesn’t change how I feel.”

Bria nods. She keeps nodding, an almost imperceptible, metronomic bobbing of her head. She goes back to gnawing at her bottom lip, the crease between her brows deepening. I feel like she’s on the edge of something, some question or feeling she can’t contain. But I don’t ask. I just wait, hoping she’ll get there on her own.

“What if I said I’d done worse?” she finally asks.

“Define ‘worse.’” I wait for her to elaborate but she doesn’t. Her face smooths of all expression as whatever this is sinks beneath the surface. “Are we talking kicking puppies here?”

“No,” Bria replies with a momentary look of disgust. The silence descends once more as she bandages my split knuckles. When she’s done, she repackages the unused contents of the first aid kit and gathers the garbage in a tight fist. She starts to stand as I fold my fingers around her wrist.

“Hey,” I say. Bria tenses as though she’s ready to pull away, but she doesn’t. “It wouldn’t change how I feel. I love you, Bria. I get you’ve been through some shit. I understand you aren’t ready to share. But when you are, I’ll still love you.”

The way Bria watches me, I know I just got so close and then fucked it up. I never should have asked her to qualify ‘worse.’ In truth, her answer

wouldn't have mattered. I love her. I envision a life with her, and that picture gets clearer with every second that passes.

Bria gives me a faint smile and pulls away. I promise myself that next time, I won't make the same mistake.



**T**he week following the failed Autumn Adder event, I'm at Mosaic Nail Salon, changing my color from deep crimson to black, waiting for Cynthia Nordstrom to make an appearance. If I've timed it right, she should show up just as I'm leaving. I keep my eyes from drifting too frequently to the door, because *Neriah* isn't waiting for anyone. In her Melancholy Moneyed Lamb chop world, this is merely a coincidence.

My nails are finished and I'm paying at the reception desk when Cynthia walks in with her Bulgari shades and Gucci trench, as polished and poised as ever. She sees me and a bright smile claims her face.

"Neriah! It's so good to see you. It's a shame we won't be station buddies this time," she says.

"It is. I have to thank you again for inviting me to the women's group meeting the other night. It was really inspiring." Lies. All lies.

She beams and shifts her blonde hair from her face. "We'll have another next week, if you're interested? And that weekend there's a brunch, only a few people attend but I think you'd be such a perfect fit."

Ooh. If Neriah was planning on sticking around, she'd already be climbing the ladder to lambhood. Too bad she's got other plans. "Definitely," I say, shifting my bag further up my shoulder. "I have to run, but I'll see you next week?"

"Absolutely."

We head our separate directions, Cynthia to the reception desk and me to the door. Her bodyguard is stationed on the other side and I pass him without a direct glance, heading toward the back of the Praetorian SUV to

then cross the street toward Grindstone. But not before surreptitiously sticking a GPS tracker to the bumper.

I have an hour.

I start the timer on my watch for sixty minutes and head to one of my vehicles parked around the corner from Grindstone, an Audi A6 Allroad, and I head toward 656 Toyah Avenue. I stop where I know there are no cameras and check the GPS tracker on my phone to confirm Cynthia is still at the nail salon. Forty-nine minutes.

When I've taken over the cameras for the parking garage of her condo building, I head inside. I park as close to her assigned spot as I can, then I gather my equipment and wait.

Forty-four minutes.

Those minutes pass agonizingly slowly. I pull on my tactical vest with my equipment and strap on my Beretta, checking my watch and the tracker repeatedly. My heart thunders. I don't think I've done anything this ballsy since I set the storage barn on fire and chucked Donald Junior's severed hand at his sham of a father. The excitement has me nearly giddy.

The alarm vibrates on my watch. Forty-four minutes are up.

I keep my eyes on the tracker. A few minutes later, it's on the move, heading in my direction.

I open my iPad and arm the locks on the doors that access this parking lot, including the vehicle entry. The cameras I installed earlier this week show every access point and the street in both directions. When the Praetorian SUV shows up on Toyah Ave, I'm ready.

I unlock the vehicle entry door. It's set to relock as soon as it closes.

As the door rolls open, I climb out of my car, staying low and out of sight as I lie on my back and shuffle beneath the car next to Cynthia's assigned spot.

The engine of the SUV echoes against the concrete walls and pillars, its tires squeaking on the sealed floor. The door rumbles to a close behind it. The smell of oil and rubber assaults my senses as I wait, my limbs nearly vibrating with anticipation.

The SUV slows as it turns into the spot next to me. I'm rolling beneath it as the tires grind to a halt.

Time stretches. Every second feels like a minute. I absorb every detail. The click of the locks opening. The sound of the hinges as the driver's door opens. The tension in my honed muscles as I roll from under the vehicle



when the bodyguard's back is turned and I fire my taser. It hits him right in the ass and thigh and he goes down with a pained groan. I'm on him before he can recover, injecting enough propofol into his neck to knock him out but not kill him.

Cynthia bolts for the door with a terrified screech but I hit her with my second taser. She screams and drops to the pavement. I inject her with propofol, again enough to keep her from moving but not enough to halt her breathing.

I take Cynthia first, dragging her to my vehicle where I manage to hoist her into the back seat. I remove her phone and purse, setting them on the front seat of the Praetorian vehicle. I pat her down but find nothing else of concern.

The bodyguard is harder. He's probably double my weight, so I sit him up against the side of his vehicle and pull a note and a burner phone from my tactical vest, laying them on his lap. When I pull the tracker from the bumper, I'm ready to go.

Within ten minutes, the whole thing is done. I disarm the garage door, park in my spot down the street, disarm the remaining doors, and switch over the cameras. Then I'm on my way to Lake McDonald.

The cabin is not my favorite place for this kind of thing. While it's set up for murder, it's not as comfortable as home. Everything is still more geared to Samuel's preferences than mine. And the deconstruction chamber is really more of a cramped utility room. It performs the same function, but it's just not as well-appointed.

I set Cynthia up in the living room where I've pushed the coffee table aside and set up a chair on thick plastic. And honestly, I'm not so disappointed about the location, because this is such a huge win. I snatched her right from under Caron's nose, and now I just have to lure him out of hiding.

I'm watching *13 Going on 30* when she finally comes around, and it's been a painful wait. I've been starting to regret dosing her with another hit of propofol on the way home.

"I think I've lost brain cells," I say as Cynthia groans and the cast dances to "Thriller." "I thought this was supposed to be a romantic comedy."

A muffled "mmmm" in the rising tone of panic comes from Cynthia's taped mouth.

“I realized something. My uncle never taught me about love. Seduction, sure. We had conversations about that. But not *love*. And it’s not like I learned anything about it in the desert. Did you know we weren’t even allowed to use the word ‘love’ unless it was toward Xantheus as he was the self-proclaimed messenger of God?”

“MmmmmmmMmm,” Cynthia whines.

“So I thought I should watch some rom-coms for educational purposes. This one seemed popular... *Why* though?” There’s a long pause as I watch the cast continue to dance. “I don’t get it.”

I sit up from where I’ve been lying on the couch and observe Cynthia’s tear-streaked face and wild eyes. A melody of wordless pleas streams from beneath the duct tape. I enjoy moments like this, trying to discern the thoughts of prey. Some individuals are desperate and narrow-minded. Some are furious and defiant. Some are creative, even hopeful. Cynthia Nordstrom has navigated the whims of a phantom cult leader for years, rising to the top of an organization whose public face hides a reclusive and duplicitous private existence. I’m so curious to see what she’ll come up with that I waste no time in ripping off the tape.

“*Please*, Neriah, let me go,” she begs as soon as her lips are free. “I won’t tell anyone, I swear, *I swear*. Please.”

“Begging will not have the intended effect,” I reply as I remove my blonde wig and the cap beneath it. I smooth my hand over my pulled-back hair and sigh with relief. “You have something I want.”

“Anything, I’ll give you anything you want, I promise. Just please, *please* don’t hurt me.”

I sit on the couch and lean back. Cynthia is not so well put-together as she was earlier today. Her blonde bob is knotted. Her coat is streaked with dirt and oil from where I dragged her across the parking lot. The pulse surges in her neck. Death waits in the shadows with a whisper.

“I want Caron Berger,” I say.

Cynthia’s eyes press closed and her head drops. “You’ll never make it into the compound. It’s heavily guarded.”

“I know. I want to draw him out, and you will do it.”

“He might not come for me.”

“He will. Something makes me think that Caron Berger doesn’t like being on the losing end of anything.”

I stand and approach as Cynthia trembles against her bonds. She's crumbling apart next to me, the stress of this encounter eroding her mosaic of success. She begs me not to harm her as I tape her mouth and head to the dining room to set up my laptop. When it's booted up, I type my message for the burner phone I left with the Praetorian guard.

I HAVE CYNTHIA NORDSTROM. CARON BERGER WILL CALL THE NUMBER I SEND IN ONE HOUR OR CYNTHIA DIES. CONFIRM AND THE NUMBER WILL BE PROVIDED.

When the message is sent, it takes five minutes before I receive an affirmative response and provide the number for a landline that will forward the call to a burner phone in my possession.

I set a timer on my watch and return to the couch to watch the rest of *13 Going on 30*, though I'm ready to gouge out my own eyes. I'm partway through *Friends with Benefits* when the alarm goes off and I return to my laptop to open the text-to-speech program. By the time the burner phone rings, my heart is hammering nearly as hard as when I attacked Cynthia in the parking garage.

I accept the call.

"This is Caron Berger." His tone is smooth, calm. Deep and rich, not anything like his appearance.

I type my response.

"How can I be sure?" the computer-generated voice says in reply from my laptop.

"You can't."

"There is one way, Gabriel. Tell me your real last name."

There's a long pause on the line, the silence between us filled with Cynthia's whimpering. "Kaplan," he finally says.

"Tell me your brother's name."

"Elijah." There's no delay this time when he answers, but there is a drop in the pitch, a darkness in it. He's irritated. *Good*.

"Do you want Cynthia Nordstrom back, Gabriel?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll meet me in ten days, alone. I will provide the address. If you attempt to track this number, Cynthia will no longer remain unharmed."

“What do you want in return?”

“Abigail Ramos,” I reply. I don’t really give a shit about Abigail Ramos, I just know it’s a name he’ll recognize.

I hang up the phone.

And now I wait.

I watch the rest of *Friends with Benefits* as Cynthia whimpers and whines. I try to learn something from it, but honestly, it’s a fucking challenge. Really, I just want to finish up here. I’m leaving for the interviews the day after tomorrow and I took extra time off to “clear up some loose ends” before the trip, or at least that’s what I told Eli. But does it mean I want to stick around here longer than I have to? Not really.

I shouldn’t complain. The timing of this couldn’t be better. I’m a little nervous doing something this big without Samuel in the background, so heading out of town for a few days is wise. If I mess something up, I’ll know. I’ll be watching from a distance, and it’ll give me time and space to regroup. The thought lingers on the periphery that I could run, if I had to. I could disappear. But I know I can’t leave Eli behind, just as much as I know he wouldn’t leave with me if I asked.

...Shit.

That realization is like being hit in the face with Dick Piston’s fist.

Eli loves me, or he thinks he does. But would he give up everything to be with me? Would I want him to? Would I even deserve to ask? After all, I’ve got Cynthia here, tied to a chair, with the full intention of using her to get close enough to catch a ghost. I’m going to enjoy it too. I always do, always will. It’s who I am, and I’m not sure I can change that and still be me.

Maybe I can try. Maybe when I catch Gabriel for Eli, I can become someone else.

I’m flicking through these thoughts and worries when the alarm sounds from my laptop.

My adrenaline spikes. I rise from the couch with a little happy clap.

“This is going to be so great,” I say to Cynthia as she wriggles and cries in her chair.

I bring up the screen for the cameras aimed at another of my lairs, a small, rundown farmhouse set back in the woods away from any roads and neighbors. A Praetorian SUV parks on the long driveway a distance from the house and three bodyguards exit the vehicle, guns drawn. One of the

men I recognize, the one from the restaurant. He and his colleagues fan out and stalk toward the building.

“I might be able to change once I catch him,” I say to Cynthia, finishing my earlier thoughts as I ready a phone I’ve labeled with a red number four. “But today is not that day.”

The men creep closer to the house, checking a vehicle I’ve left near the entrance as a decoy. There’s nothing there for them to find aside from some fake papers belonging to another alias I’ve created.

They continue on to the house.

One man heads to the back, checking the windows as he goes. The other two creep up the front porch. The man from the restaurant turns the handle of the front door, slowly, carefully, then pushes it open. They enter at the same time as the bodyguard at the back.

I told him not to trace the phone. Caron and I aren’t off to a trusting start here.

When all three men are near the center of the house, I use Phone Four to detonate the hidden charges. The cameras surrounding the structure vibrate with the explosion. All I can see is fire and smoke and dust.

I text the burner phone I left with Cynthia’s bodyguard.

I TOLD YOU NOT TO TRACK THE PHONE. NOW I’M OWED A POUND OF FLESH.

I watch the dust settling on the cameras and laugh. I’m having a blast. A *blast*, get it? I’m still giggling as I sit back in my chair and look toward Cynthia.

*A pound of flesh.*

I take Phone Four and open the web browser.

HOW MUCH DOES A HUMAN HAND WEIGH?

Average is 409.6 g or 0.9 lbs. Close enough.

I get up and head outside to the wood pile, returning a few moments later with the hatchet which I clean in the kitchen sink. I don’t want Caron’s crew thinking I won’t take care of my hostage. It astounds me, quite frankly, when I really stop and think about it. *I have a hostage*. I suppose it

shouldn't be all that different from taking someone like Tristan back to my house with the intention of never letting him go. But it *is* different. And at this stage, I need to go big and drive Caron out where I can catch him. I can't leave that to the FBI. They've made a shitshow of hunting cults in the past, and the irony that he's got a better shot at living through being caught by a serial killer than the feds is not lost on me.

I *will* catch Caron. I *will* bring him to Eli, and Eli can decide what he wants to do with his long-lost brother.

But that doesn't mean I can't punish Caron or anyone who's helped build his empire on the backs of vulnerable women.

"They fucked up, Cynthia," I say, my eyes locked to her wrist. She fights her bonds and screams into the unrelenting glue stuck to her mouth. The handle of the ax bounces against my palm. "I'm just taking what's mine."

My weight shifts to my back foot. My shoulders roll, my back twists. The ax swings in an arc over my head and comes down in a clean strike just above Cynthia's wrist. Her hand flops to the floor, blood pattering like rain across the plastic sheets. Cynthia wails and screeches in distress.

I strap a belt around her forearm in a quick tourniquet before taking a recycling bag from the kitchen to pick up the severed hand like a dog shit. I bring it to the island next to my laptop. After double-checking the location privacy settings on my photos, I position the hand so it gives the viewer a middle finger, then I send the picture to the bodyguard with a simple message:

SEND THIS TO CARON. FUCK UP AGAIN AND I TAKE HER HEAD. TEN DAYS, WE MEET. ALONE. REPLY TO CONFIRM.

It's less than a minute before I receive a reply.

CONFIRMED.

I destroy this phone.

Cynthia is still wailing, her cries weakening as her blood leaks across the floor with the galloping beat of her heart. And here's that moment, that magical moment, distilled to its purest essence. The moment when life and

death cling to a choice, where all the possibilities fit in the palm of my hand. I could wrap up Cynthia's stump and apply a better tourniquet to keep her alive. I could let the belt go, let her bleed out, maybe even take her second hand to hasten the process.

Honestly though? As much as I'm enjoying myself, I also just want to go home. I want to go on this trip to Ogden and come home and catch Caron and *live*. Be a student. Be a girlfriend. Be loved. Give love, if I can. Maybe be someone different than I've ever been, at least for a little while.

I stop behind Cynthia, staying close to her chair, so close she feels my breath and shudders. Death calls in shadowy corners, lurking beneath tables, whispering on the draft from the empty hearth. *Hatchet*, it says.

I glance at the ax lying on the rumpled plastic, but I don't pick it up.

"This is kinder, Cynthia," I say as I brace my arm across her forehead to keep her head in place. My free hand slides across her face, following the slick surface of the tear-streaked tape. She whimpers in wordless pleas as I pinch her delicate nose shut. "And you're not worth the effort. You're just a speed bump on my way to Caron. Nothing more than a little rise on the road to my grand destination."

Cynthia's throat strains. She begs with her last breath. Her lungs spasm in metronomic desperation. I reach over with my free hand and loosen the belt around her injured arm, letting the blood tumble to the floor.

"When you get to hell, tell Donald Soversky Jr. that Bria sent you," I whisper with the last beats of her heart.

When it's all over, when Cynthia's life has ebbed away, I start the process of cleaning up the mess. It takes a few hours to ensure every step in my process is complete, from rifling through Cynthia's belongings to setting the pit to start the decomposition of her body. It's getting dark when I pull away from the cabin in the Audi A3, leaving the A6 I brought Cynthia here with in the garage, just in case. Eli calls while I'm on the way home and I tell him I finished everything early, and he sounds so hopeful when he asks if I can come over that there's no way I'd say no.

I'm so tired by the time I arrive at Eli's, so relieved and satisfied, that I fall asleep on his couch as we watch *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. I wake for only a few moments as he carries me to the bed and we undress, sliding under the covers to fall asleep in each other's arms.

*I can be someone else*, I think as I nestle into his warmth and close my eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

*Just not today.*





“I meant what I said,” I growl as Bria writhes against the seatbelt. Her chest heaves with unsteady breaths as I thumb her clit and pump two fingers into her hot, slick pussy. “I promised I would fuck you every chance I got on this trip.”

Bria moans, straining against the restriction of the seatbelt, her short skirt bunched up around her hips. “I meant what I said too, that I’m counting on it.”

The GPS chimes the upcoming turn and I increase the pressure of my thumb and the speed of my thrusts, trying to keep at least some of my attention on the road. My dick is painfully hard against my jeans and I’m desperate to get to our lodgings. “Come for me, sweetheart. We’re nearly there.”

“Where’s there?” she asks in a breathless, strained whisper.

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise.” Bria whimpers and opens her mouth to protest but I pinch her clit in warning and she gasps with pleasure. “I said, *it’s a surprise.*”

Her dark laugh is swallowed by a moan as Bria squirms to increase the friction against my hand. “What if I don’t like surprises?”

“That’s exactly what I’m counting on, sweetheart. I think you’ll loathe it.”

Bria’s pussy constricts around my fingers and her muscles tense, her hand clutching my thigh across the center console. Her head tilts back and her eyes close and her breath catches in her lungs. Her other hand grips my wrist as I slow the motion of my fingers, letting her down from the orgasm

just as we make it to the turn. When I withdraw my fingers from her panties, I hold them up to her lips, her slick arousal glistening in the sun.

“Have a taste,” I say as my dick strains with my words. Bria’s flushed face beams with a wicked smile as she grasps my wrist with both her hands and turns toward me. She folds my index finger down so just my middle finger remains.

“That’s what I think of surprises.”

“Perfect.”

Bria grins and keeps hold of my eyes as the car slows to a crawl on the dirt road, and then envelops my finger with her mouth, sucking hard on my flesh. She lets it go with a pop and runs her tongue across her lips.

“I am going to destroy you,” I say as a growl climbs my throat.

Bria’s mischievous giggle is as dark and daring as it is sweet and innocent. “I’d like to see you try.”

I must give her some kind of wild, ravenous look because that always seems to thrill her the most, and she’s radiant with excitement when I lurch to a stop at the caretaker’s house. “I’ll be right back,” I say.

Bria waits in the vehicle as I check in with the elderly couple who runs Rock Creek Chalets, retrieving the keys before following the winding gravel driveway to a clearing where five well-spaced log cabins rest on a hill with a view of the hills and forests. The vehicle rolls to a stop but I don’t kill the engine.

“Pick one,” I say. Bria’s eyes narrow as a slow smile stalks across her face.

“Pick one?”

“You heard me, Pancake.”

“You rented all five?”

I open my hand to display the five keys that had been warming within my fist. “I don’t want people to think I’m committing murder when I keep my promise to destroy you.”

Bria laughs, her eyes dancing in the afternoon light. “These are hardly university-approved lodgings, Professor,” she says as she takes in the rustic logs and private hot tubs. “Who signs off on your grants, exactly?”

“You’re right, it’s not really university protocol. But neither is me being arrested for making you scream in some cookie-cutter hotel room. Hence, I’m paying separately from the grant. *Pick one.*”

Bria points to the chalet furthest up the hill and her devious grin has my dick begging for relief.

“Good choice,” I say, and we park in front of the log home.

We get out of the car and head to the trunk to retrieve our bags. Bria’s packed light with just a backpack in addition to her equipment, but she grabs the shopping bags of food and lunges for the smaller of two duffels before I catch her wrist and push it away. She gives me a knowing giggle that ricochets through my heart.

“What do you have in there, Dr. Kaplan?” she teases as she lunges for it again.

“Hands off, Pancake.”

“Maybe I should stay in the first cabin and you take this one,” she says, her fingers now darting for the keys shoved into my back pocket. I manage to swerve before she can snag one, but she sets down the shopping bags and launches an attack of grabby fingers. “Wouldn’t want to appear improper, Professor. Section seven of the Berkshire University Travel and Expenses Policy states that *faculty shall not—*”

“Pancake,” I say, sweeping Bria over my shoulder and trapping her bare legs against my chest. “I don’t give a fuck what the policy says. Now give me the key for number five while you’re down there.”

Bria’s rare, musical laugh follows me as I grab a few of the bags with my free hand and head toward the cabin. She pulls the handful of keys from my back pocket and when we get to the door, I set her down so she can unlock it, unveiling a rustic, welcoming interior of handmade rugs and antique decorations. An old pair of vintage rawhide snowshoes hang above the mantle of a stone fireplace in the living room to the left, a small kitchen and breakfast nook spread to the right, with a set of stairs to the bedroom and bathroom straight ahead.

“I hate it even more than the cherry tree. Show me the upstairs so I can determine the full depths of my disdain,” Bria says.

I set down all the bags aside from the small black duffel and turn to her slowly. Her grin is so full of cocky mischief that my bones turn as hot as molten steel with just a glance of her smile.

“I am going to fuck that attitude right out of you, woman.”

I toss Bria over my shoulder once more and stomp up the stairs to the sound of her laughter, feeling like I just won all the lotteries in the world having her trapped in my embrace. All the ideas of what I want to do to her,

with her, swirl in my head until they blind me to anything else, as though the outside world has fallen away.

And I meant everything I said. I will destroy her. I will fuck her until that sharp tongue of hers can't form a single word.

The bed creaks and groans as I toss Bria down on the mattress and drop the duffel to the floor with a muffled thud. "Get this off right now," I order as I straddle her narrow hips and work the zipper of her skirt down with trembling hands. My need for her overwhelms all reason and it takes the last of my sanity to not tear her clothes apart. I need to taste her, to fill her, to hear her crumble at my touch.

Bria shimmies her hips as I pull her skirt and underwear down, her black panties damp with her arousal, my mouth watering with her scent. "What are you going to do to me, Professor?" she asks in a honeyed voice as though she's a retro movie ingenue, the tone rich with seduction.

I lift her back off the bed and pull her shirt off, leaving her black bra on. "What am I *not* going to do to you is perhaps a more appropriate question."

"Okay, what are you *not* going to do to me?"

"Nothing. There's literally nothing I wouldn't do to you," I say before leaning down to devour her neck with desperate kisses. "I'm going to fuck your mouth. I'm going to fuck you with my tongue. You're going to ride my face. You're going to ride my cock. I'll use toys. I'll tie you up any way I want. And that tight little ass of yours? It's *mine*, Bria. Before this night is over, it's going to be dripping with my cum."

Bria shudders as my hands caress her breasts and I pinch her nipples through the fabric of her bra. I bite her skin and suck on her flesh, capturing her salty, floral flavor on my tongue. She writhes beneath me, trying to find friction to satisfy her need, but I press my hand down on her stomach and keep her in place, determined to take my sweet time.

And I do exactly that. I take the time to explore her skin with my lips and tongue, to trace every valley of flesh with my fingers. I mold and shape her body in my palms. I catch her moans with kisses and let them hum in my mouth. When she's here in the present with me and the outside world is nothing more than a dream, I carve a path of nips and bites down her body, wrapping my hands around her calves and pulling her to the edge of the bed where I kneel in worship to the most formidable woman I've ever known.

"Open your legs for me," I say, sitting back on my heels. Bria keeps hold of my gaze as she lets her knees part, dropping them slowly to the

mattress. The soft, pink flesh of her center shimmers with moisture. She shudders as my palms skim the inside of her thighs. "I'll never get tired of seeing you like this."

"Like what?" she whispers through a faint smile.

How do her questions always cut right into me? She asks things other people don't. She demands that I strip away all my layers so she can see inside. She doesn't want to fill in the gaps for herself. She could just imagine an answer, like most people would. *He means with my pussy exposed*, or, *Like I'm waiting for him*. But those speculations? They wouldn't be accurate.

"Vulnerable," I reply, and her smile brightens with my honesty. "Like you trust me."

"I do trust you."

"Well then, Pancake," I say as I push her thighs into the mattress. "Let me show you how much I deserve what I've earned."

I lower my head and I feast on Bria Brooks.

I run my nose through her folds, inhaling her scent, dragging my tongue through her arousal before worshiping her clit. Everything she's ever showed me she liked is seared into my memory, so when I press my tongue to her clit in swirls and circles, it's with the perfect pressure. When I leave it to thrust into her pussy, it's only long enough to increase her want and not her frustration. I make a slow pass through her folds and nip at her sensitive bud enough to make her squirm and moan, but not enough for true pain.

"Why are you so good at this?" she whispers, and my answer is to lift her legs from the bed, to bury my face between her legs and capture her hooded gaze with ravenous fire in my eyes. No matter how much I get of her, it's never enough. I want more of her moans, more of her taste slipping across my tongue, more of her squirming desperation. I want more of my name passing through her lips like a prayer.

I hook one of her legs over my shoulder so I can push two fingers into her pussy and stroke her most sensitive flesh as I caress her swollen clit with my tongue. Bria bucks and clenches around my fingers. She grips the sheets and closes her eyes. She whimpers as I draw her orgasm out, and it might not be a scream, but the sound is delicious all the same.

I lay my hand across Bria's chest to catch the thundering beat of her heart. With my other hand, I unbutton my shirt, and I let her go for only an instant as I take off my clothes. The relief of freeing my cock from the

restraints of clothing is temporary, the need to bury myself in Bria nearly as painful.

I pull Bria with me as I lie on the bed, guiding her to straddle me as I grip the base of my erection. With her hands on my chest, she slowly lowers herself down, and I groan as pleasure wraps me in a warm embrace.

“You know, Dr. Kaplan,” Bria says as she picks up a steady rhythm, rolling her hips to find friction as she scrapes her freshly manicured black fingernails down my chest. “If you intend to keep your promise and put it in my ass, maybe I should put it in yours first. You know, dish it out before I take it.”

My hands go still at her waist and my heart thuds heavy beats that ring in my ears. “Pegging?” Bria nods. “You would do that?”

Bria giggles and it’s the most charming, most sexy sound I’ve ever heard. “Yes, I wouldn’t suggest it if I didn’t want to try.”

“Jesus Christ,” I whisper, dragging a hand down my face while trying to think of every unsexy thing I possibly can. Curdled milk. Toilet brushes. Duke when he eats grass and pukes it up on the lawn. None of it works, not with Bria grinding on my cock with a devious grin. “If you don’t come this instant I’m going to blow my chance.”

Bria winks. She runs her fingers down her tongue and brings them to her clit. “I think that can be arranged.”

It takes everything in me not to release inside her as she rolls her hips and circles her sensitive bud until she comes apart, sweat-slicked and shuddering. When her orgasm subsides, she slips away from me and shifts to the end of the bed, her eyes darting between me and the black duffel in a question as I fist my cock with languid strokes.

“Go on then, open it and pick one.”

Bria’s excitement is nearly palpable as she whisks the bag from the floor with the speed of a striking snake and deposits it next to me. I watch as she opens it and rifles through the carefully packaged contents until she’s pulled out three strap-ons designed specifically for this purpose.

“I’ve never done this before. When was the last time for you?” she asks as her gaze shifts between them.

“About two years ago, but don’t let that affect your choice.”

Bria takes that for what it is and selects the largest of the three strap-ons, dangling the harness from a finger with a wicked smile. “Safe word?”

“Strawberry.”

“Done.” Bria’s smile ignites and she slips the soft straps up her hips and tightens them, the two-tone purple and clear dildo already centered in the yoke. “I didn’t just pick it because it was the biggest,” she says as she runs her fingers along the lavender satin and black lace of the harness. “It’s the prettiest too. How do I look?”

My dick twitches in my hand at the sight of her, with those dark, fierce eyes and her fists resting on her hips. “Like a fucking goddess.”

Bria’s grin turns feral. She could just as easily rip out my throat as fuck me blind. “Over there,” she says, pointing toward a vanity table without taking her eyes from mine. I’m caught in her gaze, wanting to remember her exactly as she looks right now. Willing to try anything. Ready to play. “Come on now, Eli. Over there. Put your hands on the vanity and wait for me.”

I do as she says, shifting off the bed with my dick still in my hand and my heart racing with anticipation. Bria rummages in the bag and I watch in the mirror as she saunters over with a bottle of lube, the curved dildo swinging with her motion. When she’s behind me, she takes my hips between her cool hands and moves them backward until I’m leaning at the angle she wants.

“Keep your eyes on me,” she says, her voice rich and seductive as she looks over my shoulder and meets my heated, lustful gaze in the mirror. The cap of the bottle snaps open. Bria breaks her stare away to watch as she drizzles it onto the crack of my ass and then the toy, and when she looks up my eyes are there, waiting. She smiles, clearly pleased that I’m following her instructions. She slides her fingers down the space between my cheeks and finds the hole, massaging it with lubed fingers. “Is there anything I shouldn’t do?”

“No,” I whisper on a shuddering breath. “Aside from going easy on me, I don’t think there’s anything you could possibly do that I won’t like.”

“Oh good,” she purrs. “Because I had no intention of going easy on you, Dr. Kaplan.” Bria slides the slick head of the toy over the clenched rim of my ass for several passes before massaging it, waiting as the intimate muscles start to give to the sensation. She asks me to take a few deep breaths and I do, and with one final lungful of air, she pushes the toy in on the exhale. It’s a hint of discomfort at first, the foreign feeling of fullness, but it rapidly dissolves into intense pleasure.



“*Eli*,” Bria says in a sharp voice. My eyes snap open as she slides the dildo further in. “Eyes on me. I want you to watch me as I fuck you.”

“Christ,” I hiss. She slowly pushes the toy in, inch by inch, taking her sweet time to enjoy my growing desperation to be fucked, stopping only when she reaches the yoke of the harness. She stills for a moment, looking down between us as a moan escapes my lips. “You are going to be the death of me, woman.”

A flash of something unexpected passes over her face, so brief and fleeting that it’s gone by the time her gaze rejoins mine in the mirror. “I hope not. For you, I’d rather be the life. Only for you.”

Before I can ask her what she means, Bria starts to pick up a rhythm and any thoughts or questions become lost in euphoria. She takes long, steady strokes and grips my shoulder for leverage, using her free hand to follow the lines of bone and muscle in my back. She traces my tattoo. She grips my waist. And she watches me in the mirror as I grit my teeth and moan, trying to hang on to every second of pleasure.

Before long, Bria picks up more momentum. Glides become thrusts. She reaches in front of me and grips my cock with one hand, her other sliding across the sweat trailing down my throat until it clamps beneath my jaw. My heart nearly sets my bones on fire with furious beats. There’s a question in her eyes.

“Do it,” I say.

“Then say my name with the last of your breath,” Bria whispers, reciting my words from the library with a wink. She grins at me in the mirror and tightens her hand around my throat with surprising strength. She watches me, enraptured. She strokes my cock. She rails me with thrusts.

A tingling sensation zips up my spine. My legs feel numb and I press the heels of my hands on the edge of the vanity. My balls tighten and my muscles tense as the orgasm builds through me in waves, cum shooting across the mirror as I roar Bria’s name. My arms quake as pleasure rolls and rolls through every nerve, the cum still trailing in spurts across the wood. It feels like it might never end. I wish it never would.

When I’m utterly spent, my heart raging deafening beats in my ears, Bria slides out of me. Her eyes are still on mine in the mirror. She steps to my side and leans forward, her movement slow and predatory, and drags her tongue through the cum sliding down the polished surface. When she turns to face me, she swallows it down, humming with approval.

“Let it be known, Dr. Kaplan,” Bria says as she trails a hand down my neck and onto my chest, “you screamed for me first.”



“I can’t,” I say, sitting back a little from the fork that Eli holds aloft as he waits for me to cave. Chocolate drizzles from the molten cake, steam rising through the space between us where his eyes hold on to mine. He catches a syrupy drip on his thumb and licks it off with a heated gaze before he relents and slides the fork past his lips.

“Can’t, or won’t?”

“Both.”

That wicked smile pulls his dimple into view as he savors the chocolate. I glare in reply, but it only serves to spark the mischief in his eyes.

Eli stands and drags his chair to my side of the table, stopping to my right. He lays his phone on the surface by the candles and pulls the dessert plate in front of him, resting his arm across my backrest. His fork glides through the rich molten cake and he turns toward me.

“Some people claim that chocolate is better than sex,” he says, then lifts the fork to his lips.

“So I’ve heard. Is that what you believe?” I watch his throat bob with a swallow. He huffs a quiet chuckle.

“I think we’ve established that’s a firm *no*.”

“I don’t know. Your expression is pretty...ecstatic. Unless I’m getting your reactions mixed up.”

“I’m just trying to convince you that a little taste is worth it. Maybe you should break one of your rules. I’ll even make it worth your while.” Another bite of cake hovers near my lips. The scent of cocoa and vanilla

fills my nostrils. The rich brown depths of Eli's eyes shrink as his pupils consume the color, his gaze locked to my mouth. "Open up, sweetheart."

I press my lips together and suck them between my teeth and shake my head, a smile creeping through my face before I can hide it. But Eli sees it in my eyes, and it only fuels the fire in his gaze.

Eli turns the fork to his lips and gives me a devious grin as he lets the chocolate melt in his mouth. He tugs my chair closer and then opens his phone to an app. His finger presses on a circular dial. When he turns the force of his attention on me, the rest of the room dissolves like sugar on the tongue.

My lips slide free from the grip of my teeth as Eli draws closer, inch by inch, until his kiss warms my skin and the scent of sin fills my senses. His tongue runs across the seam of my mouth. I hesitate. He strokes my lips again, beckoning. Teasing. Beseeking. When I open for him, a burst of flavor fills my mouth with the languid sweep of his tongue. Dark chocolate and heat, cream and butter. A taste of Eli beneath it, the burn of bourbon. His hand flows into my hair and down the back of my neck, holding steady on my bones.

And then I'm filled with vibration.

I gasp against Eli's lips and my thighs press together as he turns the dial on the app to control the vibrator filling my sex. He smiles against my mouth as my breath hitches, pressing another kiss there before pulling away. The vibration is still low but I already feel my arousal dampen the narrow fabric patch of my thong. A groan slips past my lips as I shift in my chair.

"Shh, baby. You wouldn't want to make a scene, would you? I told you I'd make it worth your while," Eli says in a voice like smoke and secrets. He takes up another bite of cake and drags the fork across his tongue, his dimple winking through the dark stubble peppering his skin. And then he kisses me again, gripping the back of my neck, coating my mouth in chocolate as I sigh with pleasure.

Eli turns the vibration of the toy up higher and starts to back away, but I grasp his shirt and keep him locked to me. The kiss deepens with heat. With need. I lean into him and he turns the vibration up higher when I bite his lip and suck it into my mouth. My hand drifts up his thigh and over the hard bulge that strains against his zipper. A low moan rolls from his chest, barely audible above the ambient music.

“We need to leave,” he says as he pulls away with a strained breath and hooded eyes. “Right now.”

The toy is still buzzing quietly as Eli motions to the server and places a few hundred dollars onto the table, more than enough for the bill and a generous tip, and then he grasps my hand and stalks toward the exit.

As soon as we’re out the doors, Eli lurches to a halt, scanning the dark road and the closed businesses around us.

“Keys,” I demand, lifting my palm. He places the key in my hand and I walk toward the parking lot, Eli following like a specter in the night.

“Where are we going?” he asks as I start the car. “Not far, I hope.”

A smirk lifts one corner of my lips. “It’s not.”

The car surges through the parking lot and I steer us in a wide curve, slowing as I reach the shadows of the empty far side of the lot. I park across three spaces beneath the reaching bows of tall, thick pines, the passenger side sheathed in darkness. I turn the vehicle off and slip out of the driver’s seat before Eli has even opened his door, pulling a small bottle from my purse as I stride around the front of the car.

“You can use cherry this time, Dr. Kaplan. Mixes well with the scent of chocolate, don’t you think?” I squeeze between Eli and the car, resting my hand on his chest with the lube in my grip. Radiant heat burns beneath his shirt, in his gaze as it scorches my skin. Desire simmers in my veins. The toy is still buzzing within me, but it’s not enough. What I need is *him*. “And I already know the drill,” I say as he pulls the bottle from my fingers, his eyes not leaving mine. “Tap three times if it gets too much. But it won’t.”

Eli’s expression is ravenous. Lethal, even. A look like one I’ve felt in my own eyes so many times before.

“Get on your knees, Ms. Brooks,” Eli says as he opens the rear passenger door for me. “Lift up that pretty dress and show me what’s mine.”

My heart hammers up my throat and in my ears as I climb just far enough onto the seat that Eli can stand at the open door and see me in the dim light. I pull my dress up at an agonizing pace, the hem grazing the backs of my thighs, Eli’s fingers trailing after it in a gentle caress, up, and up, slower, and slower, almost stopping where my legs flow into my glutes. And then slower still over the swell of my ass, unveiling my deep green thong, finally stopping once it reaches my waist.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Eli hisses as his hands trail over my ass cheeks, his fingertips as soft as a whisper on my skin. One of his palms slides up my back to push my chest down toward the seat, and then he firms his grip at my hips and lifts them higher. His hands mold around my ass and pull my cheeks apart. “Bria...you are soaking wet.”

Eli hooks a finger through the ribbon of fabric and pulls it to the side, cursing again as he takes in my hidden toys. The vibrator, still buzzing in my channel. The black silicone anal plug with its jeweled handle. There’s a moment of stillness and then the vibration is turned to its full strength. I hear the cap of the bottle open as he tugs my thong down my legs and I bite back a shudder of anticipation.

“Do you remember what I told you in my office?” he asks as his fingers fold around the edge of the plug and he starts to pull. I don’t answer except to nod. *Of course I remember*, I think as the plug slips free. A breath later and I feel the head of his lubed cock rub against my ass, heating my exposed skin. “I told you that you would take my cock here. And I always keep my promises, Ms. Brooks.”

Eli circles and teases, presses and withdraws, all the while caressing my skin, the backs of my thighs, the swell of my ass. The toy in my pussy radiates pleasure through my core, and yet it’s not enough. But the anticipation is fuel on the fire that surges through my veins.

“Deep breath in, Bria,” Eli says, his voice thin with the strain of holding back. I feel him poised at my entrance, waiting as I inhale. “Now let it out, nice and slow.”

The air passes from my lungs through my pursed lips as Eli presses against my rim, not letting up or pulling back this time, pushing with steady pressure until he slips past the resistance. I cry out with pleasure that’s spiced with a hint of pain.

Eli stays still for a long moment, letting my body acclimate to his girth. “That’s it, baby. Good girl. Just relax. You take my cock so well, don’t you.”

I don’t answer. I’m too focused on the pleasure, the fullness. The toy’s vibration curls through my body in waves as Eli pushes further in, whispering curses and praise as he gradually fits his full length into my ass. When he’s lodged to the hilt, his hips resting against my ass cheeks, he waits, breathing hard.

“I want to take my time with you,” Eli says as he pulls back an inch and then pushes in, rolling his hips and groaning as the vibration shifts in my pussy. He pulls back again, a little farther this time, and then pushes in with a faster stroke. “I just don’t know if I can.”

“I don’t care about time, Dr. Kaplan. I want you to fuck me until you think I can’t take it, and when I do, I want you to fuck me harder still,” I toss over my shoulder. I meet his eyes in a fleeting glance with a wicked smile. The burning, ravenous look he returns fills me with need. I turn ahead once more, reaching down between my legs to grab the end of the toy and start working it within my tight channel, the fullness of Eli’s cock giving it a stronger burst of pleasure with every pass.

“You have bewitched me, Bria Brooks,” Eli hisses behind me as he builds a rhythm of deep and steady strokes. “For every fantasy you breathe to life, you make ten more to take its place.”

“Tell me what they are.” Eli doesn’t answer for a moment, but his thrusts grow stronger and his grip on my hips tightens, though I can feel the restraint in his motion. He’s holding back. “*Tell me, Eli.*”

Eli growls and thrusts with the full length of his cock, pulling back immediately to do it again. With every stroke he hits a little harder, lets go a little more. He finally picks up a punishing pace, thrusting until his balls slap my pussy in a metronomic cadence.

“I want to fuck you in a club,” he grits out. “Right there on a packed dance floor. I want to lift your dress and fit my cock in your ass and bite down on your neck until you scream my name, surrounded by sweat and music and the bodies of strangers. I want to take you in a church and lay you on the altar and hold your legs on my shoulders as I rail into you, then spray my cum all over your tits. I want to take you to the movies and sit in the back of the theatre so you can take my dick in your pretty mouth and swallow every last drop of my cum.”

Sweat coats my skin. Eli’s thrusts grow more desperate. My body shudders as the images of Eli’s fantasies slip through my mind. My free hand scrabbles to find purchase on the leather seat as I call out his name. And then I come apart in a burst of stars, my nerves shredding down to the last atom as I cry out. The torrent of pleasure sucks me into a dimension where I can’t think or feel anything other than my bursting heart and the release that grips me and tears me apart. Eli thickens and spills into me, my name ringing through the air like bells. *Bria... Bria... Bria...*



Eli braces on the frame of the open door and we both go still as we try to recover in the boneless, breathless aftermath. It's a long, silent moment. There's only my heartbeat. The sound of cars in the distance. The quiet of deepening night. The soft buzz of the toy gripped in my hand.

Eli pulls away and I stay as I am, bare ass in the air and the toy still humming until he turns it off. He goes to the front seat to rummage in the center console and returns with soft, dry cloths to wipe us both clean. I take one from him and do the same for the toys as he completes his careful, almost sacred ritual of reverential strokes across my skin. Eli asks me to stand when he's done as much as he can in this position, and places a gentle kiss on my hip as though the beast within him is satisfied, its thirst sated for a while.

But that is a lie. It's one he tells himself. That the beast can be caged behind bone. The truth is, he is mine as much as I am his. And his beast now answers to me.

I back off the seat. I stand and turn to face him in the darkness. He moves to finish cleaning me now that gravity will pull our arousal down my legs, but I rip the cloth from his hand and toss it behind me onto the back seat of the car.

"So where are we going first?" I ask as I lift the hem of my dress so he can watch me insert the vibrator back into my pussy. I take the anal plug next, and turn to bend over so he can watch my slow and teasing little show. I know how much he loved a similar view in his office. He took his time. So I take mine, sliding the pointed silicone tip through the cum gathered at the entrance. I push it in, gently, carefully, oh so slowly, until it's lodged to the jeweled handle. Then I slide my thong back into place and straighten, letting my dress drift down as I face Eli once more. "I suggest we find a club."

Eli stands motionless in stunned silence, a dark hunger rising to the surface in his eyes. "Who *are* you?"

"Haven't you figured it out yet, Dr. Kaplan? You may think you have a demon in you..." I say as I step toward him. I place my hands on his chest and rise up on my tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "But I'm the devil he worships in the night."



ELI

**I** f Bria Brooks is the devil, I will gladly burn in hell.

That's my first cohesive, post-caffeine thought as I sit at the little round table in our cabin with a cup of coffee in my hands, probably looking as harried as I feel. I've never felt this mix of satisfaction and need before. It's as though the euphoria of release fights with a coiling knot of desire in a constant push and pull. And Bria puppets these sides of me around like I'm pieces on a chessboard. I've never been so torn apart by a woman. Never so ready to both fall at her feet in worship and tie those ankles wide on my bed and fuck her until I die.

Except those feet are...not here.

When I woke, there was no Bria. Her side of the bed was cold. Just a note on the pillow. Direct and no fluff, just like the woman who wrote it.

RUNNING. BACK SOON.

I check my watch. Seven. A needling worry twists in my guts. We didn't fall asleep until nearly three. After the parking lot we did find a club, which was surprisingly packed, though I guess it's not that shocking as the selection is limited in a city the size of Ogden. But the dance floor was dark, the music deafening. No one noticed as I lifted the hem of Bria's dress when she was grinding into me. No one saw me pull my zipper down and slide my rock-hard cock into her ass. No one heard her say my name as I bit down on her neck. Funny what people don't see when it's right in front of them. Or if they do, they never say a word.

Christ, the thought of last night makes me hard.

But the realization that Bria is gone and has been for a while sends the blood rushing back up to my brain. I stand and look out the window. Nothing but trees and more trees. I check my watch again. Only five minutes have passed, but it feels like thirty. Time crawls at an agonizing pace and my worry only grows.

Ten minutes later, Bria breezes in, her skin pink with a dewy glow. Her expression is blank and unreadable until she meets my eyes and smiles, pulling out her AirPods. I feel like I can breathe again, and I realize how hard my heart has been pounding in my chest.

“Hi,” she says simply as she tilts her head and scrutinizes my features. She seems to work out that I’m relieved. “Did you not see my note?”

“Yeah. But I was getting worried.”

Her head tilts the other way. With her piercing intellect shining through her cool gaze, it brings back Fletcher’s words from the faculty kitchen. *Bria the Velociraptor*. She can and does eviscerate me. And I like it, when it’s not my heart she’s shredding.

“You could have been eaten by something,” I say, moving to the kitchenette to pour her a coffee.

“Eaten? By what?”

I shrug. “Bears.”

“That’s why I went on the road. Bear avoidance strategy.”

“That’s even worse, Bria. Some lunatic could have picked you up.”

Bria laughs, the sound so wonderfully exotic in this simple cabin that I halt the motion of passing her the cup just to watch and listen. “At this time? On a Saturday morning?”

Good point. But still. “Possibly. Do lunatics operate by limited hours? Do they have morning curfews?”

Bria takes the mug and raises it to her lips, blowing across the steam with a devilish gleam in her eyes. She doesn’t even blink when her hand snaps out, quick as a viper, and grasps my wrist. “How’s the hand, Professor?”

I’m riveted, spellbound as she gives me a charming smile and raises my hand, pressing my knuckles to her lips. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Kiss? Well, I was thirteen, and there was this boy—”

“No,” I say, rolling my eyes as Bria’s smile turns teasing. “The self-defense. It didn’t come from some overpriced class at a gym. Your reaction

time is too fast. It's a martial art, isn't it? Which one? Is it karate? Krav maga? Jiujitsu?"

"Yes."

I blink back my surprise. Bria's expression hardens, just a little, like armor shifting into place. That teasing smile is still there, but there's no softness in it. "That was an either-or type of question, Bria."

Bria's eyes hold on to mine with a clinical curiosity, as though I'm a specimen in a lab. "I'm aware."

"You know them all? How?"

"Like I said, Samuel valued a well-rounded education," she says after a shrug. I wait for her to elaborate. My eyebrows climb in an unspoken request to give me more. But she doesn't. "I'd better shower. We have to leave in forty-five minutes."

Bria walks past me, her hands curled around her mug as she heads to the bathroom. I watch as she closes the door.

I just stand there a while, watching that door as though it might give up some revelation about the woman behind it. And in a way, it does. I realize now just how much she closes herself from view. What do I really know about her? What has she given up? Very little, really. Even on the long trip here, when I reflect on our conversations, the little anecdotes, the questions and responses, none of it gave me much insight into who Bria Brooks really is. If anything became too deep or invasive, she would redirect the questions to me. I knew she was doing it, but I didn't want to scrape beneath those scars. But those brief glimpses into her shadows only make me want to cloak myself in her darkness.

Maybe it's time to reach a little further into the absence of her light.

"How" is another question entirely.

That question haunts me as we eat breakfast. It follows me as we drive to the Hilton where a small meeting room has been reserved for the next three days. It drifts through my thoughts as Bria sets up her equipment and we review our notes. It only leaves when our first interview subject arrives, escorted by Agent Langille.

Theresa is our first subject. She's quiet in a keen, observant kind of way. Bria walks her through the measurements she wants to take. She shows her how the devices work, what she will and won't record, and how the data will be stored and used. Theresa asks questions and Bria answers each one

succinctly. When the consent form is signed, Bria places the leads on Theresa and opens her laptop, and then the interview can begin.

I start Theresa off with standard questions. We discuss her first encounters with Legio Agni, when she was a new resident of New Jersey where she'd taken a job as a Food Processing Technologist at an industrial bakery. She describes her initial loneliness, and how relieved she was when another young woman at her gym befriended her, inviting her to a women's "networking support" group. From there, she was quickly absorbed further and further into the insular subculture of the Legio Agni cult. First it was their meetings. Then their supplements. Their closed online groups. Their retreats. Their aspirations. Their crusades. If there was an enemy, a threat to Caron's empire, it became *her* enemy. *Her* threat to crush.

We lay all the groundwork, and Theresa answers each question, with as much detail as she can pull from her memory. Bria and Agent Langille remain silent, Langille taking notes and Bria tracking the metrics from her instruments while she types observations. After an hour of discussion, we take a short break before moving on to questions specific to Caron.

"When did you first meet Caron Berger?" I ask after Bria has reattached the leads to Theresa and nods her confirmation to continue.

Theresa pulls at wispy strands of red hair that escape the loose bun at the base of her neck. "Not until after I was done working at Catalyst. I had to prove my commitment there first."

"What's Catalyst?" I ask as Agent Langille scribbles notes from his seat along the wall.

"It's a lab. Epsilon Health and Wellness outsourced some of their product testing and quality control to Catalyst."

"What did you mean you had to 'prove your commitment' there?"

Theresa twirls and untwirls a strand of hair as her gaze drops to her glass of water. "Cynthia. She arranged for me to speak on the phone with Caron directly. He said he wanted me to join the Lana compound. He said that first, I had to get a job at Catalyst. He wanted me to steal samples of Epsilon's products that came in for testing, as well as any lab reports or other documentation I could find related to the company."

Agent Langille and I exchange a glance. If Bria thinks anything about this revelation of industrial espionage, she doesn't let on. She's focused on her laptop as the readings tick along across the screen.

"I know it was wrong," Theresa offers. Her gaze remains on the glass as tears fill her eyes. "But Caron said Epsilon was endangering people. He said their products were impure, not like ours. He promised I would be helping people. And I wanted to belong. I wanted to run away from the world, honestly. I wanted to live at Lana and be...special. Protected."

"Did you provide Caron with what he asked for?" I ask as Theresa wipes her eyes with the edge of her thumb. I push the box of tissues toward her and she takes one.

"Yes," she replies.

"Did you go to the Lana compound?"

"Yes."

"What can you tell us about your first face-to-face meeting with Caron Berger?"

Theresa takes in a deep, tremulous breath, letting it out slowly as she looks to the ceiling and into her memory. "I remember thinking he was super hot," she says with a huff of a laugh. "Isn't that crazy? I'd been stealing for months for a man I'd never met, and I'd never stolen before in my life. My first thought wasn't to be worried about it catching up with me or that what I was doing was wrong. It was just *wow, he's really good-looking*. And then I felt so much gratitude. I was grateful to be accepted into the community, to have a chance to leave the outside world behind."

"Did you take any photos during your time there? Any of Caron?" I ask, knowing it's a long shot of a question.

Theresa shakes her head emphatically. "No. We weren't allowed to bring any phones or cameras. Once you're in the compound, there's no access to technology at all without approval and supervision."

"Whose supervision?"

"Only someone in the uppermost levels. Caron. Cynthia. One of the top-tier girls. There were a few." Theresa's gaze darts to Agent Langille. "I don't want to get the girls in trouble," she says.

"It's fine, you don't need to elaborate on them," I reply, reassuring her with a faint smile. "It's Caron I'd like to know more about. Did you have the opportunity to speak with him frequently? Did he tell you anything about himself?"

"Not much," Theresa says as she runs her thumbnail along the veins of dark lines in the wooden table. "He wasn't there often. One day he'd appear and he'd be there for a week, the next he'd be gone. But the first night I..."

I wait, silent and still. Bria's presence looms to my left, though nothing about her has changed. When we prepared for these interviews, it was a suggestion she made. *Wait for them to fill the silence.* And after a long moment, Theresa does.

"The first night I slept with Caron, he told me a little about his past. He said he had a very religious upbringing and saw the harm it did to others. He said his family didn't want him. They abandoned him. There was a night when he nearly died. When he woke up, he said that's the day he decided to do everything to change his life and build a safe place for people like him. Specifically women. He wanted to protect women who had been hurt, or abused. Neglected. He wanted to make a safe community for us. And it was. It was a beautiful, safe place. Until it wasn't anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I got sick." Theresa says. "I have Lupus. I was in a long remission before I went to Lana. I thought maybe it was gone for good. After about six months at the compound, I had a really bad flare-up. I needed medication. Corticosteroids. But they didn't like that. The others...they thought I should be able to manage with Lamb's anti-inflammatory detox. It didn't work."

"What happened when it failed?"

"One of the other girls, she took me to the hospital. You're interviewing her tomorrow."

"Did you try to go back to Lana once you recovered?"

Theresa shakes her head, another tear rolling from her lash line to streak across her cheek. "No. We knew they wouldn't let us come back. Once you're there in one of the compounds, you can't ever leave. But Sienna told me it was dangerous anyway, that we'd left in time."

"Why?"

"Because someone is coming to kill Caron, and whoever it is, they don't care who stands in their way."





Well, *shit*. I guess Gabriel-slash-Caron knows that Ava-slash-Bria's hostage demands might be disingenuous, thanks to my fuckup with Abigail-slash-Theresa.

I've been kicking myself the last thirty-two hours since the first interview. I should have seen the giant red flag that Abigail's photo was in the *Archive* subfolder Samuel pulled from Praetorian. Fucking sloppy. Samuel would be disappointed. *I'm* disappointed. It was an amateur miss.

Not only that, but the FBI is now on the same page as Caron and me in our little game of house cat versus feral cat, thanks to Abigail-Theresa's revelation of Caron's awareness of another player on the field. I was hoping to keep that between the cult and me, but it wasn't meant to be. The next day's interview subject, Sienna, went into more detail about what she overheard from a discussion Caron had with Koffi N'Doli, the CEO of Praetorian. As it turns out, they'd had their suspicions before Tristan went missing. They'd already figured out someone was on their tail.

So, all in all, the interviews have been great for my doctoral research, but a little shitty on a personal level. I try to remind myself of Samuel's sage advice from years ago. *One day, Bria, you might make a choice you regret. You cannot allow yourself to be limited by the confines of frustration or dismay. You must endeavor to find the hidden benefit your choice unveils.*

It's hard to mine any gems from such a careless error. I've been thinking about it continuously, all through the second interview, through dinner with Eli as we compared observations, even in my dreams. The only temporary

reprieve was sex with Eli on the couch of our cabin...and then the breakfast nook table...and the kitchen counter. But other than that, my error consumes me, and as hard as I try, I can't make anything good come from it.

And it's not like I want to keep all this from Eli. I don't want secrets between us. I know there can't be any if I want to hold on to this new life that seems to be growing around me. I just wish I knew *how*. How to tell him without scaring him away. How to open myself up.

I'm tumbling through every future option as I watch him pace by the entrance of the coffee shop, his phone pressed between his shoulder and ear as he holds our espressos. He paces when he's excited or agitated, and the fleeting hope that Caron has turned himself in to the FBI passes through my thoughts. It amazes me that a few short weeks ago, that would have been my worst nightmare. But now, catching Eli's dimpled smile as he hangs up the phone and walks to the car, I can't think of anything I'd want more, all because it would make him happy.

"What's up?" I ask as Eli enters the vehicle with our coffees.

"Good news, actually," he says as he starts the car. "Before we head back, there's one more woman we can interview, and she's all yours to question."

"Really? That won't pose any problems?"

"No, not at all," Eli says as we pull away from our spot and prowl through the parking lot. "She's not part of the active investigation. She's not from Legio Agni. She's from another cult."

The sensation of spiders scuttling beneath my skin tingles down my back. "Another cult?"

"Yeah, it's one that disappeared about twelve years ago. They were called Disciples of Xantheus, or DOX. They had a small, remote community in Nevada, and one day they just up and left. Turns out, they made it to Bolivia. This woman, Sara, she was with them in Nevada and might have some knowledge of some disappearances that caused them to leave. It's a long shot, but maybe she can shed light on what's happening to Legio Agni."

I'm sure the car is hurtling into another dimension as we accelerate onto the road, heading for the Hilton. My heart constricts in a tight cord of adrenaline. "She's...from DOX?"

“Yes,” he says. I fall silent, mentally calculating my chances of survival if I jump from the moving vehicle. Eli glances over, registering the unease creeping through my bones. “You okay?”

“Of course,” I say around the block of wood that’s mysteriously become lodged in my throat. “I...you said her name was Sara?”

“That’s right.”

I don’t know a Sara from DOX, so I’m betting it’s another instance of someone-slash-someone else. “Do you have more information you can share in preparation?”

“Only a little. We’ll have a bit of time to review the files the FBI are sending over before she arrives. According to Agent Espinoza she’s just recently left DOX, so our information is not comprehensive. Sara’s been reluctant to participate in interviews. She was badly injured.”

“In...injured?”

Eli’s expression turns grim and then drifts away from me as his gaze follows our left turn. “Before they cast her out, they blinded her.”

I exhale an audible lungful of air in relief which Eli mistakes for empathy.

“Yeah, she’s still adjusting,” he continues. “She was found wandering on a remote road. Someone brought her to a hospital. She had no ID, of course, but the embassy arranged for her transport when she told some of her story and they contacted the FBI. She’s been in Washington ever since.”

We fall into silence as we speed past businesses and vehicles, the streets beckoning me. I want to get out and run. I want to lose myself in the anonymity of this city and forget my past. I don’t want to face it. I just want it to die.

“You sure you’re okay?” Eli asks as he lays a hand on my forearm. He feels like fire. I feel like ice. All the warmth has been sucked into the core of me, like I’m imploding, a black hole sucking everything in, powerless to stop the destruction.

“Yeah,” I lie as we enter the parking lot of the Hilton.

*I’m not okay, I think as we glide to a stop in a parking space. I’m about to lose it all.*

And it would be now, wouldn’t it. It would be right this instant when I realize the star I thought I would never reach is right here in my grasp. It

has been all along. I've been propelled into an unreachable destiny by an inescapable past.

*I'm in love with Elijah Kaplan.*

I would do anything for Eli. I would even go against my own nature. He's the hearth in my darkness that gives it warmth and light. I've never wanted to be anything other than a better version of what I am. More ruthless. More lethal. Until I met Eli.

Maybe I'll never want to stop hurting other people, but the thought of harming Eli disgusts and saddens me. If he can't love me because of what I am, I will do whatever I can to release the rage that fuels me. And if I have to embrace my past to succeed, I'll find a way. If I have to tell him every truth, I'll do that too. Starting with the most important one.

I'd never thought about what it would be like to fear a few simple words, or how they could be so insufficient yet immense, both at the same time.

"I love you, Eli," I whisper.

There's no sound. No movement. I look straight ahead at the unremarkable bricks of the building in front of us through the bug-spattered glass as though I didn't just try to conjure magic. My throat closes around a tight knot of everything I wish I could say but just can't.

Eli turns in my periphery. I feel the weight of his gaze on my skin.

"What?" he whispers. He brushes the hair from my face. My eyes sting. "What did you say?"

"I love you."

The air feels heavy and thick between us as Eli lays his hand on my cheek. He turns me to face him, a shine glassing his eyes in the overcast light as he looks right into the heart of me. "Bria..." he says, letting my name linger. "I love you too, sweetheart."

Eli leans forward and envelops me in the strength of his embrace. He holds me tight. He whispers it again, his breath and promises warming my neck. "I love you too, Bria Brooks."

When Eli pulls away, he traps my face between his palms. The pain in my throat won't let up, not with the way he looks at me, a tide of apprehension rising in his eyes. "What's wrong, Pancake? Something's not right. Is it the interview? If you're worried about taking the lead—"

I shake my head and press my eyes closed.

"Then what's going on?"

I take a breath. I'm about to step into my past and drag him with me. Eli's own past is right behind it. I have to tell him, about DOX, about me, about Gabe and Cynthia, but there's never been anything I feared more than losing him. It's just like Eli promised when he spoke of love.

"Eli, I—"

Three knocks rap at the driver's side window. Agent Langille waits as Eli breaks away. Worry still hangs heavily in his eyes as he gives me one last glance before he rolls down the window.

"Sorry we're early, Dr. Kaplan," Langille says with a flick of his glance to me. "We have to take an earlier flight back to DC, so we don't have as much time."

Eli nods but looks at me, taking my hand with a gentle squeeze. His brows draw together as he surveys my face. "You don't have to do this," he whispers.

But I do.

Samuel was right, as always.

I've been killing every person who reminded me of my past. If I want to get beyond its hold on me, I need to turn around and shut a door that was never closed.

"It's okay," I say, squeezing back with a faint smile that seems to do nothing to allay Eli's concerns. "I'll explain later."

Eli nods and we exit the car, gathering my equipment before following Agent Langille into the hotel. I walk by Eli's side as we cross the foyer and take the stairs to the meeting room. My adult body feels discordant with the part of my mind that vividly remembers life in the desert, this latent self that emerges like a neglected twin bent on revenge for the Ava I left behind.

Agent Langille knocks twice before we enter the room.

The coarse whispers of a grainy desert wind blast my thoughts clean as I take in the woman before me.

She sits at the table, sunglasses obscuring her missing eyes, hands curled around a glass of water, their skin weathered and speckled with marks from the sun. She's in her mid-forties, but she looks older, her face lined by a life spent outdoors. She's still beautiful in a harsh way. A defined yet feminine jaw, a birdlike grace that seems unsure as her head swivels in our direction.

Maybe her real name is Sara Munroe. But I knew her as Sunniva.

My mother.

“Bria?” Eli whispers as his hand wraps around my bicep. He pulls back as though he means to talk to me in the hallway but I rest my hand on his and shake my head.

Agent Langille introduces us as we enter the room. Eli sets my equipment down on the table and asks a few questions of Sara that barely register in my thoughts as I set up my monitors and laptop. He takes a seat next to Agent Langille along the wall as I describe my research to Sara in a way that feels mechanical. She doesn’t ask any questions, just consents. I have to fold her fingers around the pen and guide her hand to the paper for her to sign the consent form. A simple touch evokes so many images of destruction. My hand trembles when I slowly pull the pen from her grasp, forcing myself not to plunge it into her flesh. I think about how satisfying that would feel as I attach the leads to her skin and start my machines. But as I sit before her, I realize she’s also the keeper of the blind spots in my history.

And for the first time in a long time, I need her.

“I want you to think back to the first moment you met someone from Disciples of Xantheus,” I say, keeping my voice gentle and calm. “Try to imagine your surroundings. Try to place yourself back in that moment. Think about what you heard or felt or sensed around you.” I give Sara a pause as she takes a deep breath. “Where were you?”

“I was at a bus stop,” she says. Her voice is more like I remember as she slips into memory. A little smoother, but still just as meek. “There was a hot wind that blew the dust around. The cicadas were singing. I remember thinking how I’d like to be one of them. I’d not have to worry about where I was going or how much money I didn’t have. I’d just sing. I was sitting on the bench wishing I had a different life when these two women came from down the street and sat next to me.”

“Do you remember their names?”

“Hannah and Grace.”

I swallow with the mention of Hannah’s name, Xantheus’s favorite wife and the mother of Xanus. She meted out many of my worst beatings and enjoyed each one. “What happened when they sat with you?”

“We got to chatting. I was pregnant and showing so they asked about the baby. I’d just turned eighteen, hadn’t been to the doctor, and didn’t know where I was even going. I told them I wanted to make it to California

and maybe get a job in a restaurant while I took some classes. I wanted to be an actress. I knew I didn't have enough money to make it to LA, so I'd go as far as I could and work my way there. When the bus came, they sat across the aisle from me and talked about their community. They said they had a little town around a spring. They said I could work there and help tend to the gardens and animals in exchange for a place to live and a chance to get on my feet." Sara fidgets with her fingers, twisting her skin across her knuckles. "It didn't take me long to agree. It sounded so perfect the way they described it. They were so nice, and I didn't have anyone."

I check the readings coming through my laptop, the scene she describes connecting the untethered ends of my history in loose knots. "Describe for me what you felt and experienced once you agreed."

"I was relieved, at first. It was like I made a wish and it came true in an instant. But you know what they say about wishes..." Sara exhales a long breath and bows her head. Her fingers twist and unravel in constant motion. "It was good, at first. I met Xantheus and he welcomed me, explained the rules of the community. It didn't take more than a few weeks before I'd settled in. I was praying in the temple like I'd been doing it all my life. I was helping with the garden even though I'd never had a green thumb. It felt good being part of a community, even if it was a little weird."

"Weird in which ways?" I ask, curious about what she saw as strange from her vantage point as one of Xantheus's chosen favorites.

Sara shrugs. "They hardly ever left the community. Only Hannah and Grace were allowed to go. I had to be blindfolded when they took me in. Then there were the prayers, the speaking in tongues, all that stuff. Before long, though, it didn't seem so weird. It became normal. Even comfortable, because Xantheus liked me. I became his fifth wife before the baby was even born. I worked hard to stay in his favor."

"Were you worried about not being in his favor?" I ask.

"Yes."

"What made you feel that way?"

Sara bows her head again. Her shoulders fall. "He would find excuses to...punish...anyone who fell out of it."

I resist the urge to shift in my seat. Discomfort pulls at my skin. My scars feel like living creatures on my back, squirming and scratching, desperate to be seen. "Punish how?"



“Beatings. Whippings. Burning. Isolation in a metal coffin he called the Sinner’s Box. Falling out of favor could have terrible consequences,” she says on a shaky breath, gesturing to her sunglasses. “He’s the one who took my eyes, after all. He told me it was my fault things had fallen apart over the years. He said I’d never look upon the beauty of God’s creation again.”

I glance at Agent Langille but he doesn’t look up from his notes. Eli’s presence next to him is heavy with the weight of interest and curiosity, but I don’t meet his eyes.

“Why did he think it was your fault, Sara?”

Sara’s chest shudders with uneven breaths. Her lip quivers. She sniffles and reaches out, tapping her hand across the surface of the table. I push the box of tissues into the path of her wandering fingers and she takes one. Tears streak down the left side of her face when her head tilts forward.

“Because Xantheus thought I birthed the daughter of the Devil.”

I feel the spike in curiosity from Eli and Langille like an electrical current in the room. But this isn’t news to me, of course. I’d heard it from Samuel’s encounter with Zara. They’d told me similar things in my childhood, that I had the influence of darkness, or that I allowed the Devil’s whispers to guide me astray.

I glance at Eli. He gives me a reassuring flicker of a smile, a nod to continue. There’s no way I can stop now. My brows draw together. An apology rolls across my tongue but never passes my lips.

“Why would he think that?” I ask, refocusing on Sara.

“Ava wasn’t...normal. I mean, everything *seemed* normal in the beginning, I guess.” Sara bows her head and wipes the tears that weep down her left cheek. “At least, that’s what the others told me when Ava was little. The children were raised communally and I wasn’t around as much as I should have been. I just...wasn’t ready.”

I look at my laptop as though I’m checking important data, but I’m not really seeing the screen. It’s only the desert compound and my earliest recollections of my mother, her quiet, detached demeanor little more than a shadow in my memories.

“They told me she was advanced. ‘Gifted by God,’ they used to say,” Sara says without prompting. “Ava learned to talk young. She could read and solve math problems long before the other kids. And she could remember anything she wanted and never forget it. One day, when she was just four or five, she was walking with Grace and stopped next to the metal

gate of the garden. She closed her eyes and recited a passage we'd read at the last prayer service. When Grace asked her how she remembered it, Ava told her she memorized things by imagining them around the commune, and she'd put the whole passage right there at the gate."

The air around me changes. I don't look away from Sara, but I catch Eli's movement in my periphery as his hand covers his mouth. Agent Langille whispers something inaudible to him and Eli replies that he's fine, but leans forward in his chair and rests his arms on his knees.

I swallow and clear my throat. "When did they start thinking she was... *evil*? What changed?"

"I think it started with the questions. If something didn't make sense to Ava, like in the scriptures, she'd say as much. She'd challenge the teachings. No one did that, and she quickly found out why," Sara says as she dabs her damp skin with fresh tissues. "But beating her didn't deter her. It just made her...darker. She became even more defiant."

"What do you mean?"

"She'd fight with the other kids. She'd destroy things. She had a fit of rage once when she was seven and ripped up all but two of the tomato plants before anyone caught her. She got thrown in the Sinner's Box for a whole night for that," Sara says as she twists her knuckles and one of her joints cracks.

I can still feel the cold steel against my bloody hands. I can taste the dust, smell the piss when I'd had no choice but to go in the metal box. No one was there to let me out or check on me. They just left me in darkness. Screaming. Screaming until I couldn't scream anymore.

I glance at Eli. There's so much sorrow in his eyes that I nearly get up and cross the room to sink into his embrace. But I know his sorrow will only last as long as it takes him to figure out the rest of me, and then it will be gone. He mouths my name but I look away.

I refocus on Sara, determined to exhume the child I left behind in the sand. "Is this why they thought you brought the Devil among the community? Because of a defiant child?"

Sara shakes her head. "No, no. I know it sounds crazy when I describe it like that, but other things started happening. Strange things they could never prove Ava did, but she was never affected by them. She sometimes seemed to enjoy them."

"Like what?"

“One day, Xantheus was going to do a reading for the weekly praise service, but the pages in his bible were in the wrong order. It’s not that they were loose, they were still bound in the book, but not in sequence,” she says. I have to catch myself from smiling at that memory. I’d made glue from bitumen and spent all night carefully detaching pages of Xantheus’s bible and gluing them back out of order. “There were strange smells of rotting flesh in some of the houses but no one could find the source. People would find symbols drawn beneath their beds in chalk or strange packages of herbs and sticks. One night, several members of the community hallucinated and saw dark figures and phantoms.”

It was always me, of course. Me, finding dead lizards or rotting meat or eggs to hide in walls or beneath floorboards. Me breaking in to draw random, meaningless symbols under beds. Me who found drugs among the books in Xantheus’s library and spiked their ritual tea. I tried everything I could to make them think they were going crazy. They thought I was the devil, so their devil is who I became.

If only I had known then how it would culminate in the life I have now. Everything I’ve gained. Everything I’m about to lose.

My voice is barely more than a whisper when I ask, “What happened to Ava? Why did you leave the desert?”

“Ava was supposed to marry Xantheus’s son, Xanus. As soon as the ceremony was over, the storage barn caught fire. Just out of nowhere. It was suddenly this raging inferno. We all ran to put it out but it burned to the ground. When we got back to the temple, Ava...she killed Xanus. She had an ax. And she...she...”

I remember the horror on my mother’s face when she pushed through the doorway with the others. It was just a glance as I swung the ax. And then I looked away, consumed by rage as Xanus’s blood sprayed from the blade, spattering across my face.

“They beat Ava until she passed out, and then they dumped her far from the compound. They wanted her to suffer a long death out there in the desert. I tried to tell them no. I begged them not to do it but they threw me in the Sinner’s Box and didn’t let me out until the next morning when they’d already done it. Hannah convinced Xantheus that morning to make sure Ava was dead. She made him believe Ava could find her way back and kill us all. He sent Zara to do it. Hannah and Grace went with her to make sure she got rid of the evil once and for all.”

“And did she? Did Zara kill Ava?”

“No,” Sara says, wringing her damp tissue with trembling fingers. “It took them a while to find Ava. She’d walked and crawled some distance and must have passed out trying to reach an old mine shaft that was several yards away from where they found her. Hannah and Grace said they told Zara they would leave and come back that evening, but they wanted to be sure she’d keep her word to get it done, so they hid behind a rocky outcrop to watch. Zara had struggled, they said. She cried. She didn’t want to kill anyone, even after what Ava had done. Ava was still just a child, after all. She was only fourteen.”

God, the searing heat. The delirium. The pain. I remember finding that mine shaft, unsure if it was an illusion in the distance, a well of darkness that would save me from the sun. I tried so hard, but I just couldn’t make it there.

“They said Zara picked up a rock. She was standing over Ava, trying to make herself do it when a man showed up out of nowhere. They said he walked over the rise with a bag in his hand. Well-dressed, like he’d been plopped down from the city. When Zara saw him, she just lost it, they said. She started begging this man to help her. She told him everything, that Ava had killed someone, that she was the devil, that she needed to get rid of Ava’s evil. They said he seemed caring at first. He approached and laid a hand on Zara’s shoulder. But suddenly he struck her in the back of the head and knocked her out. They said he tossed her to the side and hovered over Ava, checking her wounds. Then he said, “I hope for your sake that what she said is true, young one”. He picked Ava up and carried her away. Hannah and Grace ran before they could find out what happened to Zara. They came back to the commune hysterical, saying the devil had found his daughter and we needed to leave before they killed the rest of us. Within twenty-four hours, we were gone.”

“Zara never rejoined your group?” I ask. I still feel the pull of satisfaction in my chest as I remember sitting in the dome structure with a glass of cool water, watching as Samuel wrapped Zara’s lifeless body in the plastic from the floor.

“No,” Sara replies. “We took what supplies we could and left. Xantheus had money hidden away from those of the community who’d come with some and given it all to him. When we left the desert, we bought an old bus and a van, and we started heading south. For a while, we were all bound

together with the fear of this man and Ava finding us. But eventually, it gave way to resentment and anger. I was the next one in line to blame whenever anything went wrong.”

Sara sobs through her tale of her final weeks with DOX, describing how the group was crumbling with infighting and Xantheus’s waning control. I barely pay attention as she talks about Xantheus blinding her and setting her loose to the forest before the rest of the group packed up and left. The ever-present rage that simmers deep within me boils closer to the surface as she weeps, my armor hardening to contain it. Sara finishes her story when she stumbles upon the roadway and I stare at the laptop readings, folding my fists tight beneath the table, pressing my nails into my palms.

My mother was defined in my childhood by her absence, her aloof presence when she was there, and her inaction in my abuse. And now she cries for the suffering *she* endured?

“What kind of mother am I?” she whispers, interrupting my fury. “I thought it would be a safe place for us. If I hadn’t gone there, maybe Ava and I both would have been different. And now I have no idea where she is or what happened to her. What if she’s dead? What if she’s still alive and her life is even *worse*? What if the man who took her was a madman? I’m here with protection just for telling my story and where is she? I should have fought harder, like Ava did. I should have told her I loved her even though we weren’t allowed. I did, I did love my daughter, I just didn’t know how to do it right. It’s torture, not knowing where she is. And I deserve it, for everything I didn’t do for my daughter.”

I slowly sit back in my chair, watching Sara for a long moment as guilt and regret pour into the space between us. There’s only one question I can ask now, the one that solders the past to the present.

“Do you believe Ava would have the skills and ability to pursue other cults similar to DOX?”

Sara thinks on this for a moment, her expression hardening into something that almost looks like fear streaked with pride. “My daughter never spent a day in the real world,” she says. “But I will tell you this. If anyone could learn and overcome that world, it’s Ava. And she would destroy it.”



I feel like my soul has been pushed sideways, hanging halfway out my body. Bria wraps up the interview and starts packing the equipment as I discuss next steps with Agent Langille, even though I'm not fully engaged with anything that comes out of my mouth. I just want to get Bria into the car and get the fuck out of here and figure out what this all means. I just want answers, even though it feels like I'm drowning in them.

Agent Langille guides Sara by the arm as we leave the meeting room and take the elevator. I stand between Sara and Bria, trying to shield Bria from this woman. Bria glances up at me but I don't take her hand.

We keep it brief at the vehicles. I watch Bria's expression but she gives nothing away as she says goodbye to Sara. There's neither pain nor malice nor sorrow, just a glossy, clean surface, void of any marks. I set the equipment in the trunk as Bria gets into the car. My heart pounds, thrumming in my ears, and I grip the edge of the vehicle for a steadying breath before closing it and sliding into the driver's seat.

The silence grows heavier by the second as we coast through the parking lot and turn onto the road to head back to the rental cabins.

"Are you okay?" I finally ask, my voice low and quiet.

"Are you?"

Fair point. "I don't know. Just like I don't know what you're feeling. You hardly ever let me in. Were you ever going to tell me who you were, Ava?"

"Don't ever call me that," she snaps back, though her expression remains placid. "I am not Ava."

I sigh, running my hand down my face. This isn't how I wanted to start this off. "I'm sorry, Bria. I'm just... I'm confused as fuck. It's a lot, and a strange way to find out."

"I know," she says as she watches through her passenger window as the shops pass by. "I'm sorry."

"So am I." And I am, for so many reasons. I'm sorry I put her into that position. I'm sorry she couldn't trust me to tell me this sooner. I'm sorry I'm angry and that I'm already not going about this the way I wanted to, even though I know I have a right to feel this way. There's a lot that she's still keeping from me. "Did it really happen the way she said?"

"You mean the killing, I presume," Bria replies. She looks straight ahead once more, and even with a glance I can see the impenetrable forcefield growing around her as she sinks back into her ferocity. "Not really."

"How do you mean?"

Bria snorts a dark, derisive laugh. "The barn didn't just spontaneously combust, for one." She rolls her eyes as though she's replaying the recent conversation with Sara. "As for me killing Xanus and the beating I received in recompense, she hit most of the high points."

I take a deep breath that does nothing to calm the alarm rolling through my heart. "What about the man who found you? Was that Samuel?"

"Yes," Bria says, the edge in her voice softening. "He took me to a safe place and helped me heal."

My gaze darts between Bria and the road. "What about Zara? Did you kill her too?"

Bria turns to me then, her expression darkening, the mask gone. I see both rage and sorrow swimming in her eyes. My heart cracks at the sight of raw pain in her eyes like I've never seen in her before. "Why are you asking questions you don't want the answer to?"

Bria's hand feels cold and fragile beneath mine when I lay my palm upon it. I feel like our words are unraveling everything around us, like each one spoken is a hook pulling apart a tapestry. I need to get control of this conversation before all we're left with are threads on the floor. "I'm trying to understand. What you've been through is far beyond the worst I'd imagined when I first saw your scars. I'm asking because I *do* want to know."



“Then yes,” she says, not taking her eyes from mine as she speaks. “I killed her too.”

A call comes through on Bluetooth, Agent Espinoza’s name flashing on the dashboard screen. I reject the call and try to keep my attention on both Bria and the road, desperate to get out of this car where we can focus on figuring this out. We fall into a long, tense silence as we pass the city limits and speed toward the cabin.

“Are you the one who’s responsible for the missing individuals related to Legio Agni?”

Bria could call me out on the fact that I’ve never mentioned missing individuals to her, or that it didn’t come up in the preparation or the interviews. But she doesn’t. She just slides her hand out from beneath mine as my organs seem to curl in on themselves. “What would you do with that information if I said yes, Eli? Would you drive me to Washington and dump me on the FBI’s doorstep?”

Would I? No. *Should* I? Yes. If it’s true. “No.”

Another call comes through as we’re nearing the turn for Rock Creek Chalets. It’s Agent Espinoza again. “Just take it,” Bria says, facing away to look toward the forest.

I press the button to accept the call as we turn up the gravel drive.

“Dr. Kaplan, I have some urgent updates,” she says. I notice the nearly imperceptible stiffening of Bria’s hand against her leg, her nails pressing into her jeans.

“Okay...”

“First off, Cynthia Nordstrom has been reported missing.”

My blood seems to rush away from my limbs. Bile churns in my stomach.

“She was last seen at Mosaic Nail Salon. She had several meetings and appointments the following day, but missed all of them. We received the news anonymously yesterday and have found nothing of her since. She’s just *gone*.”

Bria’s fingers fold into a fist, her fresh black manicure hidden against her leg.

“We’re not yet sure if she ran, or if something has happened to her,” Agent Espinoza continues as we roll to a stop in front of the cabin. “But she did manage to send through a package to us by hardcopy before her

disappearance, which arrived just now. It contains photos of Caron Berger. I'm sending pictures to you now."

I grab my phone from the center console but Bria's hand curls around my wrist. "Eli," she whispers with a faint shake of her head. There are tears in her eyes.

"Did you get them?" Agent Espinoza asks.

Bria shakes her head again. I pull my hand away as her first tear falls, shattering my heart as it streaks down her face.

I open the message and stare into the eyes of a ghost.

"Dr. Kaplan?"

"I... I got them," I say, my eyes welling as I flip through photos of my older brother. Most are grainy pictures. Gabe from afar, Gabe in low light. He smiles in one, his dimple winking in his cheek. He looks healthy. Older. *Alive.*

"Everything all right, Dr. Kaplan?" Agent Espinoza asks.

Something cold presses to my neck. I slide my eyes from the screen and look at Bria. She's holding a large hunting knife, her hand trembling, tears still falling across her skin. She raises her index finger to her lips and shakes her head. The tip of the blade nudges my skin, not enough to cause pain to me, but it looks agonizing on Bria's face.

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry," I say, not taking my eyes from Bria's. "I was driving. Just parked."

"Okay great. We'll have a look through, I'll send any other details via the link and we can chat when you're settled. I'll keep you posted if we hear anything about Cynthia."

"Thanks...." I say, and Agent Espinoza ends the call.

I reach forward slowly and turn the ignition off, and we sit in a moment of taut silence as Bria lowers the blade with a careful hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"For what part, exactly," I reply. My voice sounds menacing even to me. "For clearly knowing Caron Berger's real identity and his relationship to me, yet keeping it secret? For probably planning to kill him? For being involved in the disappearance of our key witness? Or for threatening to slice my jugular? Or is it for all those things?"

I glare at Bria for a moment that feels hours long, and then I burst from the car, slamming the door behind me.

“I wasn’t going to kill him, Eli,” she says behind me as I stalk toward the cabin and fumble with the keys.

“Sure, just like you didn’t pretend to fall in love with me so you could get closer to information about my brother. Do you do that every time? Fuck a guy like me to get closer to your target? Even better, fuck the target?”

“No, Eli. That’s not what happened,” she says as I pause on the threshold, glaring down at her. “I love you, Eli. I didn’t know who Gabe was until just recently, and I would never kill him knowing it would hurt you. That’s not what I was trying to do.”

“How can I believe anything you say? *Jesus Christ*, Bria. You just confessed to me that you murdered two people, and then you whip a giant knife out of who-the-fuck-knows-where and hold it to my neck as I’m literally on the phone with the FBI, looking at photos of my *dead fucking brother*, alive and well. And you knew it. You fucking knew all along.”

“I was trying to stop you from telling them his identity and fucking up your options,” Bria says, her voice carrying an edge of desperation. She follows me inside as I storm into the cabin. “I can catch him for you, and you can decide what to do with him. But if the FBI takes him, he might not make it out alive, and if he does, he’ll be behind bars for decades.”

I whirl on Bria and she takes an unsteady step backward. “That’s what’s *supposed* to happen. That’s how it’s *supposed* to work. Those are the fucking *rules*.”

“I don’t care about the rules—”

“Clearly—”

“I want you to have the opportunity to *save* him.”

“The only one he needs saving from is *you*, Ava.”

Bria’s jaw clamps shut in absolute and consuming rage. Her fist tightens around the handle of the blade but it stays down at her side. But even through her fury I can see her heart breaking, tears still gathering along her lashes to fall across her freckled cheeks. I’ve never seen her cry. Not even close to it. Not even at her lowest point at the hospital with Samuel. But then I think about my brother and all the secrets she’s held on to and I push those observations aside.

“Did you kill Cynthia Nordstrom?” I ask.

Bria swallows. “I didn’t know she was working with the FBI.”

“That wasn’t my fucking question.”

“The answer is yes, Eli. Yes. And others like her. Others who hurt people like me. Who profited off people like me. They abused people like me. Did you know Cynthia tried to recruit me for their fucking flock of lambs? It was *justice*, Eli. Justice for all the girls who have invisible scars that cut just as deep as mine. I’m saving girls like me.”

I run my hand down my face, disbelief settling its weight in my bones. “So this is what you do?” I ask, glaring down at her. “You’re a fucking serial killer?”

Bria’s lip quivers. She shakes her head and looks at me like she would give anything for relief from whatever turmoil is raging inside her. “You wanted the truth. You wanted my past and my secrets. You said you’d love me anyway. And now that I’m letting you in and you’ve seen what you wanted to see, you’re rejecting me. I guess I’m not the only one who lied,” she whispers, taking a step back, her hand still gripped tight around the handle of the blade. “You’re nothing but a voyeur, are you. You wanted to look into the heart of darkness. You wanted to see where the limits were. And then you found none. Like a child, playing with fire. You stamped it out while I burned the whole barn down and set myself free.”

We stare at one another. The silence is suffocating. The pain of watching Bria fall apart beyond my reach is just as agonizing as the betrayal that’s come from her endless secrets and clandestine games. My soul feels like it’s shrunk to the size of an atom.

I have to get out of here. I need to process everything that’s sucking me down and drowning me.

I turn away and walk up the stairs, Bria’s quiet footsteps following behind me. The wordless moments build between us in a monument of anger and loss.

“Say something,” Bria whispers from the stairs behind me as I toss my bag onto the bed, shoving unfolded clothes into its depths.

“I don’t know what to say to you right now, so how about I just use one of your favorite tricks, hmm? I’ll wait for you to fill the silence, Ava....”

Even in my fury, a tinge of regret leaks from my broken heart when those words make it past my lips. I feel the pain in Bria when they hit their mark, but I still don’t turn around.

“Maybe Samuel was right,” she says, her voice soft and unsteady. “I can’t love anyone. But if I could, I would love you. I would have loved you forever.”

Neither of us says anything more.

I don't turn around until I'm done packing and ready to go. But when I do, Bria isn't there, and a surge of worry grips my heart even though I don't want it to. I walk down the stairs, too angry to call out her name but still expecting her to be standing by the kitchen island or sitting cross-legged on the couch with a book balanced in her lap. But she's not in any room.

The door is open, the car parked where I left it. Her bags are still upstairs.

But Bria Brooks is gone.



BRIA

I sit in the aviary. The glass above me is shattered, littered around my feet. The birds are gone. I don't hear their calls and songs beyond the shards still clinging to the ribs and spines of metal above me. There's no rustling of their wings among the flowers slowly dying. There's only one sound, one I can't turn off and don't want to just yet. Maybe I never will. It's the record player beneath the limbs of the cherry tree where the flowers have scattered across the path.

"I love you, Bria Brooks," Eli's voice says on a loop.

Something grazes my leg in this illusion and I look down, a dahlia bloom tumbling next to me on a low-lying breeze. I pick it up, examining the petals whose conical edges have browned from a once-vibrant white. I set it back down and it blows away.

The breeze picks up, bringing with it the whispers I try to fight but can't. How do you subdue a specter? How do you fight your own mind when you can't even sleep?

*Do you do that every time? Fuck a guy like me to get closer to your target?*

*But if I could, I would love you. I would have loved you forever.*

When I open my eyes to the real world, my lashes are wet and cold in the autumn air. I sit cross-legged on a yoga mat, the gentle waves of the lake lapping at the dock. Usually, I find peace with the rhythm of the water, even when it's too cold for a comfortable swim. I find relief in the autumn sun that doesn't remind me of the scalding desert. I find peace here. But today, there is none.

It wasn't here yesterday either. Or the day before that.

I haven't felt peace since the morning my world fell apart. Not since I woke up in Eli's embrace. I can still hear his heartbeat beneath my ear. I can feel his warm skin on my cheek and the weight of his arm across my back.

No, I haven't felt peace since then.

When I left the cabin at Ogden, I took my laptop bag from the trunk and waited in the shadows of the pines until I heard the car leave. I didn't look at Eli. I couldn't bear it.

I stayed hidden as he checked out with the elderly owners and drove away. Then I walked back to Ogden. It took well over an hour, though I lost track of time. I found a Suzuki dealership and bought a motorcycle and helmet on the spot with my credit card, got it added to my insurance, and drove straight here to Samuel's cabin on Lake McDonald.

That was four days ago.

I slept an hour or two that first night out of sheer exhaustion, waking long before dawn. With a short text exchange, Amy happily agreed to feed Kane. I emailed my supervisors with yet another lie, telling them I'd contracted mono and would be out for an unspecified period of time. The fake doctor's note from the template Samuel stored on our server years ago did the job, and after receiving kind messages of well-wishes in reply, I went back to bed and tossed on the sheets until I gave up.

With my interviews recorded to the laptop, I've managed to get some analysis done during my time here, though it's taken me longer than it should. My thoughts have been scattered and unfocused. And honestly, even though I went as far as going to the university on the second night in an attempt to jumpstart my interest, the desire to put effort into my work has waned. I took a backpack and grabbed a few books from my office as well as my bonsai tree. I even snuck down to the third floor, not expecting anyone to be there given the late hour. I just needed to be close to a space where Eli's presence lingered. I didn't expect his office door to be open and the light to be on. The pull to go toward that light was so strong it felt like my heart would melt through my ribs and crawl toward it without the rest of me. But I caged it inside, then turned around and left.

Since then, I've barely slept.

I stand and roll up my yoga mat, looking down at the little cherry tree I bring with me every day as my companion. And each time I do, I try to convince myself to throw it in the lake and let go of the illusion that any of



these feelings were real. But every day I can't. So this time, I leave it to the side at the end of the dock, hoping that some space away will give me back my harder edges and my practical mind.

When I head back into the cabin, I sit on the couch, listless and irritable. There's a vial of ketamine and a syringe on the table, and I resume the war I've had with myself over the last thirty hours. On one hand, I desperately need sleep. It's only a few days before I'm due to meet Caron Berger and I need to be on my game. On the other hand, I've never taken any drugs and I don't like the thought of being completely knocked out, especially not knowing for sure if Eli could send the feds my way. But I need sleep. Desperately. I just don't know what else to do.

I roll my sleeve over my shoulder and pick up the syringe, withdrawing 0.6 cc of ketamine from the vial before hovering the needle over my flesh. It only takes the return of my whispering thoughts to prompt me to plunge it into my deltoid.

Within fifteen minutes, I'm asleep on the couch.

When I wake in a daze sometime later that afternoon, it's to the sound of alarms.

My mouth feels packed with cotton as I roll off the couch and stumble toward the tablet, tapping it to bring up the security cameras.

A Praetorian SUV is creeping up the driveway.

"Shit. *Shit.*"

I turn in a circle, trying to gather my discordant thoughts. Disarm the alarm first. Close the laptop, shove it under the couch. I push the ketamine and syringe under there too. Those fuckers don't need to know I'm still half out of it. Not the best spot to hide things but they're here for me, not my tech or drugs.

Grab the phone. Take the tablet. Get the weapons and run.

I bolt out the lakeside door to the boathouse, bringing up Samuel's number on my phone with the desperate hope he'll be able to answer.

"B-bria," his calm but unsteady voice says on the other end as I pull the quietest weapons I can find from their hiding places.

"Uncle," I whisper. I pause to check the security cameras. The SUV rolls to a halt down the driveway as I watch. "I've been better," I say.

Our code.

*Someone is trying to kill me.*

“I’m going for fifty-six fifty,” I say, pulling the quiver over my shoulder for the arrows of the compound bow. It’s another code, my swim time for the 100 m freestyle. He’ll know I’m going to escape by swimming to a hidden bug-out stash across the lake. “If I make it, it’ll be Honeycomb.”

“Honeycomb,” he says. It’s a feature of a small house on the east side of town, yet another lair. It has hexagonal tiles in the hallway, a detail only he and I will know.

I take a shuddering breath. I didn’t think my heart could be crushed more than it already is, but the sound of Samuel’s slower, slurred speech as he repeats the word “honeycomb” a second time breaks its final shards.

I check the cameras. Four men are stalking toward the cabin, guns drawn. I can’t stay here for more than a minute. It’s little more than a storage shed for our kayaks and canoes, with no space for me to hide. I won’t be safe.

I press my eyes closed and take a deep breath.

“Uncle, I...you were right. What you said. We’re not like other people. I tried. I thought I could be...different.” I swallow, tears glassing my vision. I wipe them away with the back of my hand. “I just...I want to thank you. For giving me this life. For choosing me. You might not think it’s true or feel it too, and that’s okay. But I love you. And if I fail this time, I just wanted you to know.”

“Bria—”

“Goodbye, Uncle.”

I hang up the phone to the sound of Samuel shouting my name.

After grabbing the tablet and my weapons, I sneak out of the boathouse, tossing my phone in the lake before creeping into the woods.

This is our home. Our sanctuary.

And I’m going to kill these Praetorian motherfuckers.

I crouch at the treeline behind a rocky outcrop and key the security system to disable the other tablets and any outside access, including Samuel. It means he will never know the details if I don’t make it. He doesn’t need that, not when he’ll only feel powerless to find vengeance. I can’t do that to him.

The nocked arrow warms beneath my fingers.

When the first man appears at the lake side of the house, my head is already swimming with the combination of ketamine and adrenaline. He follows the path leading to the lower door that sits below the deck as a

second man passes him, heading toward the boathouse. I check the tablet and the two remaining men are at the front of the cabin, one checking the windows while the other stalks toward the garage.

The first man tries the door, finding it open. I direct the security system to lock the door as soon as it shuts. If he tries to shoot his way out of the downstairs, I'll know, but I'll be safe. The glass is bulletproof.

Once the first man is further inside and away from the windows, I check on the progress of the others. The man headed for the front door enters the house, and just as before, it's set to lock him in. The man in the garage is the one I can't trap behind glass. When I'm satisfied with his proximity from the garage doors, I focus on the guard headed toward the boathouse. His attention is honed on the door of the structure, the gun poised between his tensed hands, his finger hovering over the trigger. I'm going to have to hope for the best.

As he takes one hand away to reach for the door, I let my arrow fly. It strikes through his neck.

With a garbled, gurgling growl, he falls, dropping the gun.

I keep low as I run toward him. He's dying fast. I take his Glock and the earpiece when the first shots ring from inside the house.

"Bentley is down. I see her. North side. It's bulletproof glass," a voice says over the earpiece. There are more shots. "*Fuck.*"

I run back to the tablet where I left it at the rocky outcrop. The man in the garage rushes to the door. I take my belongings and run into the woods, joining a hidden path that leads to a door on the north side of the house. I unlock it and creep inside.

The first man is still shooting the glass. It's starting to crack with the repeated shots to the same weakened section. He doesn't see my reflection in the damaged glass as I approach behind him. I shoot him in the head, blood and brain and bone splattering across the chipped window.

"Simmons? Simmons!" The voice of the man upstairs crackles in my earpiece. His footsteps thud above me. "*Fuck.* Simmons is down. She's in the house."

"Copy," another voice says.

The man upstairs creeps across the room. The one from the garage closes in on the house. He passes the locked front door without trying the handle, continuing on to the north side.

I head back to the door I used to enter the house and open it just a crack, then backtrack into the house to the laundry room. From here, I can see part of the hallway and the entrance of the den where I just killed Simmons.

After hiding my bow and quiver in the closet, I open the cupboard door beneath the counter next to the sink and climb inside, careful not to tip over the few bottles resting inside. The man outside creeps closer to the open north-side door, his movement cautious as he reaches for the edge of the thick steel and pulls it open. His gun is ready but he finds nothing there on the other side. He enters and leaves it open behind him.

“What’s your position, Reid?” the man asks. I hear him both in the earpiece and at the entrance of the hall.

“Upstairs, south side.”

“Copy.”

The man close to me arrives at the entrance of the laundry room and sweeps the barrel of the gun across the open space. I keep my Glock pointed toward the cupboard door just in case, but he doesn’t linger in the room. He turns and continues toward the den.

As soon as his back is turned, I push the cupboard door open and fire.

The first shot hits him in the ass. The second shot tears through his skull as he falls.

“Toric! Shit...*shit*...” There’s running above me as Reid heads toward the stairs. I close my cupboard door. I watch on the screen as he descends to my level, keeping his gun ready as he takes the last step and enters the hallway at the far end. He spots Toric and takes careful steps toward him. I see him look up toward the open door. Chances are, he’ll think I’ve run.

I wait until Reid starts to step over Toric’s body to open the cupboard and fire, counting on imbalance and distraction to work in my favor. He fires back and misses, but I don’t. My bullet passes through the side of his throat.

Reid’s legs are working like he’s trying to walk out of his pain as I exit the cupboard. Gurgling, desperate sounds rumble from his throat. He presses his hand to the gushing wound in a futile attempt to stop the flow of blood.

“Seems to be neck day,” I say as I approach, kicking his gun away. The blood trickles between his fingers in rivulets, coating the floor. “You’ve made a fucking mess.”

He blinks up at my expressionless face, his eyes a mix of pain and loathing and fear as he watches me withdraw my hunting knife and kneel next to his writhing body. I observe his struggle for a moment, wondering if I'll feel that same mix of emotion when I die.

"When you get to hell, tell Donald Soversky Jr.... Tell him I'll be seeing him soon, I think."

I plunge the knife into Reid's temple, holding it steady until his limbs stop twitching against the floor.

Rage and satisfaction twine together in my chest as I withdraw my blade and wipe it clean on the dead man's chest. I survey the mess around me. My molars grind together. Caron Berger is making it really fucking hard for me to want to keep him alive.

At least now that I've killed these Praetorian fuckers, I might have a chance to take the bike and make it to Honeycomb House. I grab my tablet and check the security cameras where the SUV is still parked in the driveway, then I check the cameras down the quiet road in both directions.

Two blacked-out SUVs speed toward the cabin on the camera that's ten miles out.

"Shit..."

I turn the tablet off and toss it into the cupboard along with my sweater, pants, and shoes, and then I *run*.

I bolt out the north door, running toward the lake, gaining speed down the hill. My foot touches the wooden planks of the dock when I hear a bang. Pain burns through my arm on delay.

*A fifth man.*

I fall on the dock, landing on my knees with my hand around the wound as another bullet screams past, pelting into the wood. I push myself up and run, shots hitting the planks behind me.

The last thing I see before I'm sailing through the air is that little cherry tree sitting at the end of the dock, its petals sprayed with a crimson rain of blood.



“**Y**ou look like dog shit,” Fletcher says as she plops down in the chair across the desk from me.

“Thanks,” I reply, watching my pen as I tap the paper with dots of ink. “I *feel* like dog shit, so it’s probably fitting.”

It’s been four days since Ogden. I haven’t seen or heard from Bria since. I’ve hardly been able to get out of bed. I’ve barely eaten. Every hour that passes scours my soul raw.

It doesn’t get better. It only gets worse.

Fletcher is the only person who knows we imploded. I guess she’s the only one who really knew anyway. She knows there was a fight and we haven’t talked, that Bria disappeared, and that I drove away and left her there in the woods or wherever the fuck she went. I fucking *left her there*. With *bears*.

The rational part of my brain says that Bria did reveal herself to be a *serial fucking murderer*, and she’s probably just fine.

But the larger, louder part of me, the man who’s still in love and heartbroken, drowns in a well of guilt that only seems to deepen.

*You abandoned her, I berate myself. You promised you’d love her. You promised she could trust you. And the first chance she did you fucking left her.*

*You’re no better than the people who raised her.*

I drop my pen and drag my hands down my face as the same cyclical thoughts play round and round in my head. It’s a battle of secrets and lies. Truth and love. Fear and hope and loss. I don’t even know which sides are

which, or who's fighting who, or if any of them are winning. I only know I'm fucking miserable, and no matter how hard I try to push it down and rise above it, I feel at the core of me that it's wrong. It's wrong to be without Bria.

"Why don't you call her?" Fletcher says as I rest my forehead on my palms and stare at my desk.

"No."

"Why the fuck not?"

"*Because*," I say, sitting back to look at Fletch as a frustrated sigh billows past her lips. I would give anything to tell her what happened, but I can't. The thought of Bria being arrested or possibly killed because of the words that come out of my mouth makes me physically sick. But I at least have to get closer to telling her the truth. I need someone to set me right, because I've been trying without any success. "There are like...laws—"

"Oh my fucking *God*, Elijah. Fuck the rules. Jesus—"

"We're talking about *serious* rules, Fletcher."

"Sure," she says with a dramatic eye roll, pinning me with her crystalline glare. "What, she didn't cross at the crosswalk? Boo fucking hoo. *Call her*."

"It's more serious than that."

"What, she sacrificed babies to Satan?"

"No—"

"Committed war crimes?"

"Fletch—"

"Just. Fucking. Call. Her."

"Don't you care? If she was like, I dunno, running around stealing cars or robbing banks or killing people, wouldn't you draw a line there somewhere?"

"Not really," Fletch says with a shrug, shaking her head. "Actually, if she does any of those things, I'll probably like her more. She'd be a super hot car thief."

I groan and toss a crumpled piece of paper at Fletch, which she catches and whips back at me, pinging it off my forehead. "I work in the field of *forensic fucking psychology*, Fletcher."

"Ohhhh, I see. I get it. You're pissed you didn't spot some rule-breaking, law-fucking behavior earlier, Mister Fancy Forensics Man. But you seem to be missing something critical."



“What’s that, oh sage one?”

“The *why*.” Fletcher sits forward in her chair, regarding me with a long, fierce look. “And don’t give me some shit that she duped you. That’s bull. I think she showed you *exactly* who she was all along. She showed you she was dark. Bold. Smart. Ruthless. And you love it. You love her. *All* of her.” A faint, melancholy smile passes Fletcher’s lips as she watches my internal struggle dance across my face. “Let me put it to you simply. Are you miserable because of whatever rules Bria has broken?”

“I’m not thrilled about them,” I admit, “but no.”

“Are you miserable because you want to be with her, but you’re not?”

I nod. We sit and watch one another in silence as I process Fletcher’s words and everything I feel. She’s right, as much as a small part of me hates to admit it. Bria did show me who she was. I did choose to love her not just despite her darkness, but because of it. Is what I have with Bria perfect? No. Can I live without her?

I’ve been trying, but I don’t think I can.

I let out a deep sigh. “I don’t know how to fix it, Fletch,” I whisper.

“Pulling your head out of your ass and talking to her is a good start. *Call her.*”

My phone vibrates facedown on my desk and we glance at one another, Fletcher’s eyebrows rising in question. It would not surprise me *at all* if Bria’s been listening to us on some hidden camera this entire time, and when I flip it over, I expect to see her name on the screen. But it’s an Unknown Caller.

I swipe to accept the call.

“Hello?”

“B-bria,” a vaguely familiar voice grits out on the other end.

I meet Fletcher’s hopeful eyes and shake my head. “I’m sorry, I don’t know where—”

“*B-Bria*,” the man says, his voice insistent. Maybe even desperate.

“Samuel? How did you get this...never mind. I’m sorry, I haven’t spoken to her in a few days.”

“In t-trouble,” Samuel says. “C-cabin. B-berger.”

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

*I’m going to lose her.*

I burst from my chair and whip my jacket from the coat hanger, Fletch matching my pace as I stride from the office. "I'm on my way. Send me your number. I'll call you when I get close."

Samuel disconnects as Fletch and I jog down the hall. "What's going on?" she asks.

"I don't know," I reply as we start down the stairs. Dread is spilling down my spine in a cold wave. My ribs absorb every unrelenting hammer of my heart. "Something's happened at the cabin. I need to get to my bike."

"I'll get you to the garage," Fletch says.

A moment later we're bursting through the door, running to her car.

Fletch takes the streets as fast as she can, weaving through traffic as she quizzes me about what could be wrong. The honest answer is, I don't know. No details come from Samuel except for a dropped pin and his number. I save it to my contacts and within fifteen minutes of leaving the campus we're at my garage, saying our goodbyes.

I ride harder than I ever have before. And still it feels too slow.

The BMW leans around curves and zips through the straights. I duck in and out of traffic. I even pass a cop who knows better than to bother trying to follow. He probably just hopes he won't have to be the one to scrape me off the asphalt.

When I'm getting close to the cabin, I call Samuel on my helmet Bluetooth. He answers on the first ring.

"I'm a minute or two out," I say.

"P-prae...t-torian g-gone," he says. "Can't s-see her."

He must be looking at security cameras.

"Did you see what happened?"

"N-no. Bria s-stopped...m-me..." Samuel lets out a frustrated growl on the other end. "T-took... l-long...to g-get...b-back in."

"It's okay, I think I've got you. She shut you out of the system?"

"Y-yes."

My heart plummets. Bria didn't want him to see because she didn't think she'd make it.

I turn down the gravel drive with a fist lodged down my throat, choking off my air. I slide to a stop and pull off my helmet, switching the call to my phone as I pull it from the mount. "I'm here. Where do I go first?"

"G-garage."

I run to the building and open the door slowly, listening for any sounds. It's still and silent. There's a Suzuki bike and an Audi, with no signs of Bria.

"Go t-to the...s-shelf. S-second...d-drawer. On l-left."

I'm there in a heartbeat, pulling open the drawer to find a Beretta handgun, a tactical-looking pistol with extra ammunition stacked in the drawer.

"D-do you know?"

"How to use it?" I ask, checking the gun before gathering a handful of magazines and stuffing them in my pockets. "Yes."

"G-good. H-house."

I leave the garage and run toward the house, entering with the gun raised and ready to shoot. I check every room, but there's nothing out of the ordinary upstairs. But that all changes when I get downstairs.

The far end of the hall is covered with blood, the door to the outside left ajar. The blood is smeared across the floor, spattering up the walls in crimson streaks and dots. But there's no body.

"Where are they?"

"P-prae-t-torian. T-took them. I w-watched."

"You didn't see Bria when they did?"

"N-no."

I stop at the pool of blood and look through the door toward a den that faces the lake. There's more blood in that room, the glass stained with it over a series of impact marks.

"Bulletproof glass?" I ask as I walk toward it.

"Yes."

I look through beyond the cracks toward the trajectory of the phantom shots. "The boathouse."

"G-go."

I'm already running back toward the hallway and the open door before he even finishes the instruction, barreling toward the narrow shed. There's a patch of blood on the ground, but again, no body. I open the door and check inside, calling Bria's name this time, but the only answer is the waves lapping against the pillars.

"Nothing," I say, frustration and fear burning in my throat.

"The d-dock."

I head back out of the boathouse and jog toward the dock. Just beyond the first planks is a speckled streak of blood. There's a bloody handprint next to it. I kneel down, laying my palm next to it. The print is just the edge of the palm and the little finger, but I can already tell it's hers.

"Bria was here," I say, following the dotted trail of blood across the planks. Some of the boards are freshly marked with bullet holes. I look up toward the water and lurch to a stop near the end of the dock, unable to move.

Tears sting my eyes and crest my lashes, spilling down my cheeks. I press my hand to my forehead, wishing I could crush this moment right out of my skull.

My birthday gift to Bria, the cherry bonsai, sits at the end of the dock, coated in a spattering of blood. I can see the spray from where she must have been shot when she was almost to the lake, the line of it pointing toward the open water.

"D-do you s-see her? K-kaplan?"

I swallow, shaking my head even though he might not be watching. "No. But she's been shot twice. Once at the start of the dock and again at the end."

"D-do you see her? In w-water?"

"No, no. I don't see her," I say, scanning the water for irregularities on the rippling surface. There's nothing. No scrap of clothing, no hand reaching out for help, no body bobbing on the waves.

"Then s-she m-might have m-made it."

I glance back down at the end of the dock and rein in a sob as I turn in a circle, looking for any sign of Bria in the forest or on the shore. "It's a lot of blood, Samuel. I don't know—"

"You d-don't k-know Bria. S-she can m-make it. S-she w-won't...give up-p. S-so *you* don't give up-p," he says, his voice dark and menacing. I hear the killer in him. The man without the mask. But I hear the mentor in him too. The protector. He's done what no one else has, what I thought I couldn't do. He's stayed with her no matter the darkness. And this time, he won't be the only one.

I wipe my eyes and take a deep breath. If he's right, every second might be the one in which she's dying. I need to move.

"Send me a pin," I say.

I cast a final glance toward the lake, then run to my bike and leave.



I wake up disoriented and in pain, unsure of where I am and struggling to remember how I got here. It takes me longer than it should to realize I'm not at Honeycomb House anymore. I'm at Rose Cottage, a little fifties-era bungalow with a stained glass rose in the window of the door. I turn off the alarm on my watch. I've slept for four hours.

"Fuck," I whisper, sitting up with a groan.

First thing's first, morphine.

I give myself a shot, just enough to take the edge off the throbbing pulse of pain. Then I stand and hobble my way to the bathroom.

I let the water run as it heats for my shower, taking a long look at myself in the mirror as condensation slowly accumulate on the polished glass. Predictably, I look like shit. I'm pale with blood loss and exhaustion, my skin scratched from the branches when I hauled myself out of the water on the far side of the lake and limped to the hidden bug-out bag. My hair still has broken twigs and leaves stuck in the knots. My lip and forehead are cut from when I passed out and hit my face on a fallen log. Fortunately, I guess, that hit kept me awake.

After I made it to the shore following the worst swim of my life, I used the emergency medical pack to keep myself together. I cleaned my wounds and injected myself with penicillin. I bandaged my arm where the bullet tore through muscle but missed the bone. But my leg has been more of an issue. Though the bullet passed through my *biceps femoris* without hitting anything critical, it still tore shit up. I lost a fair amount of blood in Lake McDonald, and who the fuck knows what's now swimming around in my

bloodstream. After flushing the hole clean, I stopped the bleeding with QuikClot, but the pain is intense and now that the swelling has set in, I can barely move my leg.

I push myself away from the sink and carefully maneuver into the shower, tilting my head back in the water, letting the hot droplets pelt my face. I'd love to stay right here but I can't. I have to move. I might not be safe.

Far too soon, I'm stepping out of the shower. I've already been here at Rose Cottage longer than I'd hoped. I need to keep moving. I only stayed at Honeycomb long enough to arrange an express courier to deliver a letter to Samuel at Cedar Ridge. His phone is too risky. So is our server. In the end, the only option was a handwritten note. With shaky strokes of the pen, I detailed my plan and requests, my final wishes.

I check my watch. Samuel should have received my courier two hours ago.

Time to get to work.

If I don't get Caron now, I'm afraid we'll all lose our shot. But I'm under no illusions about my chances to succeed.

I change my bandages, my leg bruised and swollen, the flesh purple and red, angry and raw. For a moment, I close my eyes, leaning my chin on my knee as I remember the feeling of Samuel's fingers as he cleaned the wounds on my back every night after he'd saved me in Nevada. There was pain, of course, but there was deliverance in his gentle touch too. There was salvation in his words. *I cannot promise you a life free of pain, Sombria. But I will give you the tools to fight back.*

I open my eyes.

It's time to fight back.

When my skin is clean and I pull fresh workout clothes over the weeping wounds, I leave Rose Cottage in the Jeep that was hidden near the bug-out cache at Lake McDonald, heading west to the outskirts of town.

I park on a gravel road bisecting fields of harvested corn, sliding out from the driver's seat as I take out a new burner phone and text the mobile I left with Cynthia's Praetorian bodyguard.

SEND A MESSAGE FOR CARON TO CALL ME IN FIVE MINUTES.  
CONFIRM AND THE NUMBER WILL BE PROVIDED.

After a brief moment, the response comes. I send my number.

Another moment later, the phone rings. Like last time, it's forwarded through a landline to keep this number safe.

"Hello, little wolf," Caron says, the amusement like a bright star that lights up his voice. "I was hoping you'd drowned."

There's no laptop to disguise my voice; no point in hiding it anymore. "Surprise, motherfucker."

Caron chuckles. I desperately want to fold my fingers around his throat and squeeze until it snaps. "I should thank you," he drawls, taking his time with each word. "You got rid of Cynthia. Well done, taking out an informant for me. How very kind."

"I'm nothing if not generous." I pull a mask over my malice as I examine a chip in the black polish of my manicure. "What are you wearing right now?"

A scoff of a laugh crackles through the phone. "Isn't that a question you should be asking my brother?"

My heart crumples behind my bones for Eli. All this time mourning the brother he'd lost, and Caron must have been there, watching from afar, indifferent to his suffering. I swallow my rage on Eli's behalf. "Humor me, Gabe. Caron. Whatever. Actually no, I bet I can guess. You're in a robe, lounging by a pool. Some brainwashed, traumatized woman is next to you, hoping you'll fill whatever void some asshole carved out in her life, though you have no intention of doing so. You're probably sipping a margarita, imagining it'll only be a matter of time until I'm dead of sepsis and you can go back to your life of manipulating people because that's the only way you can make *friends*."

"So close, little wolf. It's a matcha latte with Lamb Health's ethically-sourced coconut milk."

"Of course it is. My bad." I turn, looking at the frayed stalks of harvested corn, the sun sinking toward the horizon in the distance. "I guess you've been enjoying yourself too much to notice."

"Notice what?" Caron asks, arrogance thick in his voice.

"Isn't it a little...quiet...where you are? A little *too* quiet?" There's a long pause, then a rustle of fabric on the end of the line. "Don't you feel like something's...missing?"

Fabric shifts and a woman says something unintelligible in the background. I imagine Caron sliding from his bed or rising from a lounge



chair, his matcha latte forgotten as he comes to realize something's not quite right.

A smile warms me from my very core.

"Ruh-roh, Raggy. Did you forget to give your Praetorian guard dogs their Scooby Snacks?" More movement crackles across the line before it goes completely silent. "Are you on mute, my Little Bo-Peep? I was really hoping to hear the sound of your epiphany."

Another long pause.

"You—"

"They're all gone, Caron. And they snuck a bunch of your devoted flock out with them. Everyone has a price, you see, even Koffi N'Doli, and sometimes it's not the dollars you have that gets the job done."

I can almost hear Caron's thoughts stacking up like blocks, one realization teetering on the next until they all come tumbling down.

Samuel has done it. He's found a way to pull Caron's security. No one is there to protect him. And we stole his lambs from under his watch.

There's no greater sound than Caron's quick and quiet breathing between us, and I relish every moment, ready to store it among my trophies. "What do you want," he finally demands.

"To meet. In person. *Alone*. And no, I don't want to kill you. I would have done it already. If you do not agree to meet, or if you show up with *anyone*, Praetorian will be instructed to release all of their information on you to the FBI."

Another muted pause. I imagine him having a little tantrum in the background, like a chastised child.

"Where," he grits out.

"52 Fuller Place. Midnight," I say, checking my watch. It should give him just enough time to make it from his Vellera compound, if he leaves now.

I hang up the phone.

My heart bangs an excited song on the walls of my chest as I lean against the Jeep. I'm one step closer. I toss the burner into the ditch and drive away.

I head to the abandoned gas station where we gathered for the Autumn Adder, parking where I have a view of the edge of the city beyond the rolling foothills. It's quiet here. There's no wind when I exit the Jeep. I limp toward the spot where Eli fought Wilson and look down at the drops of

blood still clinging to the cracked asphalt in a dark stain. The broken tooth is there on the ground. I balance on my good leg and bend to pick it up, rolling the jagged edges across my palm.

I wonder what Eli felt in that moment when he pinned Wilson down and pummeled him with blows. I wonder if he feels guilt now in the aftermath when he looks back on what he did. I know what I would have felt. Excitement. Enjoyment. A deep sense of satisfaction, that my physical self and my darkest desires were aligned. Definitely not guilt. Not for something like that.

I tilt my hand, letting the tooth roll off my palm to drop onto the pavement with a quiet tick. I'm staring down at it when I realize I feel something I've never felt before.

Regret. *Guilt.*

For hurting Eli.

I should have told him everything sooner. He could have made up his mind about us before he'd put so much of his heart into it. He's the one person I wanted to protect, and I failed.

I know I'll never get back what I've lost. Not with him. Not with *anyone*. There's no one like Eli. What he said about love was true, all of it. I know I can't be the person he deserves. I can't become someone else. The best version of myself will never fit in his world, with his rules. But there is one way I can make it right for him.

With a heavy sigh, I hobble back to the Jeep and bring up my iPad, checking the cameras at Fuller Place as dusk settles around me. Fatigue descends with it, draping over my shoulders like a cloak. I take off my watch and put an alarm on both it and the iPad. I use my teeth to help secure a zip tie to bind my wrists together, then lean back into the driver's seat and close my eyes.

It feels like I've only blinked when my alarms go off. The pain is blaring in my leg and arm. My head pounds in solidarity with the rest of my body. I didn't bring anything stronger than Ibuprofen, so I take two pills and start the Jeep, heading for Fuller Place.

52 Fuller Place is a former cannery on the outskirts of the industrial area of town. Surrounded by overgrown fields, it lies abandoned, yet in solid shape, the bricks and windows still in good repair, the structure bordered by a high, chain-link fence. I park a distance away behind a power utility shed set back from the road and check the cameras one last time, then I exit the

vehicle with my plastic bag of limited equipment and start the slow process of hobbling to the cannery.

After picking the lock of the gate with the snap gun, I shuffle down the cracked driveway to the unlit building. The moon is bright enough to light my way but I still stumble a few times. A low rumble of nausea swirls in my stomach. I'm not sure if it's the anticipation, or the drugs I've taken over the last day, or if it's the inception of an infection. Whatever it is, I'm starting to feel pretty rough.

"Doesn't matter," I tell myself as I make it to the door and pick the lock. With my wrists still bound together, I turn and throw the snap gun into the grass, then enter the darkness of the factory, the creaking metal door closing behind me with a reverberant thud.

I turn on my flashlight, retrieving a handful of glow sticks from my back to break the first one and toss it on the floor, leaving a little trail of breadcrumbs for Caron to follow. Pigeons flutter overhead with my intrusion. Other than their rustling wings and their quiet calls of alarm, the building is silent as I limp ahead into the open space.

Cracking more glow sticks as I go, I fumble my way up the stairs where the loft stretches toward tall windows that face the moon. Since I left my watch in the Jeep, I can't be sure what time it is, but I estimate I have thirty minutes before Caron shows up.

I take an overturned wooden chair and drag it toward the wall where a camera is bolted beyond my reach. With my bound hands pressed to the rough bricks of the wall, I take as much weight as I can off my injured left leg and step up onto the seat of the chair with my right.

"Sorry old man," I say, though Samuel won't be able to hear me, if he's even watching. "I don't want you to see."

I'm yanking on the camera when a pain so bright it's blinding crashes into my right leg and I fall backward from the wall, hitting the floor with a deafening smack.

My eyes peel open as water tainted by the scent of rust splashes across my face.

"Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey," Caron says, his voice swimming behind me. A throbbing pulse echoes in my head. Ten times that pain radiates from my lower leg. "I said, *wakey, wakey.*"

Caron nudges my leg and I scream. My vision collapses into a narrow black tunnel. More water splashes over my face.

“Hey now, little wolf. Stay with me.”

Footsteps and a deep, echoing thud circle around me until Caron is standing in my field of vision. The head of a sledgehammer rests next to his boot. He grips the handle in one fist, a rusted metal container clasped in the other.

“So sorry,” he says, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “I don’t think this water is up to the purity standards of Lamb Health.” Caron spits in the container before splashing the rest of the water onto my face.

“No worse than the rest of your shitty products,” I grumble past a cough. Caron grins as he squats down to get a closer look at my face where I lie in a patch of moonlight, then prods my leg with the metal pot. I cry out in agony and rage.

“I don’t think my supplements are going to help that.”

“You don’t say.” I drag my head across the floor to look down at my leg. Blood pools across the dust and debris, shattered bone jutting through my torn yoga pants. “I thought you were supposed to be some kind of gentle shepherd, caring for your flock. Blah blah.”

“Yeah, well... As the proverb goes, ‘An easy shepherd makes the wolf void wool.’” Caron stands and turns away, walking to the wall where the chair lays overturned. He grips the handle of the sledgehammer and swings it in an arc, hitting the camera. It explodes in shards of plastic and glass. Chips of brick rain down on the floor.

Caron turns to me and smiles, his dimple both sweet and menacing. My heart aches for how much he reminds me of his brother in some angles of the moonlight. His light brown hair looks darker. His features become more intense, like Eli’s. I blink my painful imaginings away, focusing on the real man before me as he tilts his head. “What’s with the bound wrists?” he asks.

“I like a bit of bondage.”

Caron laughs. He steps closer, the hammer thudding next to his boot like a heavy cane. I shift my head, hissing with discomfort as I watch him draw near.

“I’m not trying to kill you,” I say. He laughs again.

“Clearly. You’re on the floor.” Caron swings the hammer like a pendulum, just a gentle tap that hits my knee, but the reflex forces my leg to jerk and sends pain shooting up to my hip. I scream, tears gathering in my eyes. “I don’t think you’ll be doing much of anything.”

“I was trying to bring you back,” I say. I swallow the bile that climbs my throat. I can’t seem to get enough air in my breath as it grows shallow. “The FBI is coming for you. I wanted to bring you back for him.”

Caron taps my knee again with another swing. A desperate, aching sound erupts from my chest when my leg moves. The room swirls like I’m swimming in a raging sea.

“I don’t want to go back to some shitty, unimportant life with parents who always belittled my views and forced their religious manipulations on me, or a brother who never took my side. What would make you think I would want to reconnect with him? Eli never stood with me when I struggled with our parents or battled the demons that piled up around me. He barely even listened. He just let me slip away. Where was Eli when I hit rock bottom, hmm? *Nowhere.*”

“He was a child.”

“*So was I,*” he says with another hit. I bite my split lip to keep from begging him to stop. “I was a child when they kicked me out of the house. I was a child when I overdosed in a friend’s decrepit apartment that smelled like piss and mold. I was a child when I rose above my circumstances, *alone*. I built my empire from *nothing*. And now I help people. I help *so many* people. And anyone who thinks otherwise is just holding me back from doing *good* in the world. Just like my family held me back. Just like they suffocated my vision of what a meaningful life could be.”

Caron knocks my knee again, harder this time. I scream as my leg grates against the one beneath it. The wet heat of blood soaks through my pants. Black spots creep through my vision and I know I can’t stay awake much longer. There’s no air in this wide-open room. I can’t claim any of it for my own.

“You’re doing so much...good in the world now...torturing me...aren’t you...” I whisper through panting breaths as he leans closer.

“Nothing less than what you deserve, *serial killer.*” Another knock, another scream. Tears crest my lashes and stream across my face. Caron sighs, his hands tightening around the handle of the hammer as he stands. “But you’re right. Best to get this over with.”

That’s when I hear it. The first siren. And then the distant, beating thrum of a helicopter.

“Do it...” I say. “You’ll only...rot in jail...forever...”

A flash of panicked rage ignites in Caron's eyes. He strides a few steps toward the window, looking toward the moon as the sound of the helicopter grows louder. He and I both know there's no running now. Not for either of us.

"All I have to do is tell them you're a killer," Caron says as he stalks toward me. "You murdered Nick and Tristan and Cynthia and God knows who else. You lured me to your building and I just managed to subdue you."

I smile, my eyes full of malice. "Not...my building... It's...yours..." I whisper, success warming the erratic beats of my heart as I jostle my bound wrists in his direction. "And your story...isn't super...believable...all things...considered."

Caron scowls down at me, his face lit with fury, his movements jerky and distressed. I just need to push a little harder, stay awake a little longer. "If I go down, I'm bringing you with me," he grits out. "You'll never walk free again."

*I know.*

If he survives, he'll ensure I go to prison too. He'll pin those deaths and more on me. But if he kills me, he'll never get out. His whole empire will crumble away.

He just needs to believe in the possibility he could fail.

"I've...made sure...that they'll think...it's you. Where...do you think... the bodies are? I'll give you...a hint. They're not at...*my* house."

I let out a triumphant laugh as Caron's furious, feral growl floods the empty space. It echoes up the walls. The pigeons flap above us and my scream follows their hidden wings as Caron hits my leg hard with the hammer.

And then I see the moment. The decision in his eyes.

Time slows down. Caron's murderous glare is pinned to me like it's hooked in my skin. His shoulders roll. He sweeps the sledgehammer behind him in an arc. I look away to the window and the silver moonlight, the blades of the helicopter rattling the weathered panes of glass. Then I close my eyes and think of my aviary, of the record player beneath the bows of the cherry tree, birds singing in the cover of the scented blooms.

*I love you, Bria Brooks.*

A shot pierces the cool air and the world all falls away.



S ometimes when I close my eyes and remember the first time I saw Bria Brooks, I think of everything I would have done differently. I would have read her thesis proposal in advance, for one. But if I'd gotten up to buy her lunch in Deja Brew, what would have happened next? Maybe she would have found some clever way to shut me down with a cutting remark and a dark smile. Maybe she would have accepted and come to sit at my table. Maybe I would have broken every rule from the start, and things would be different. *Everything* would be different.

Or maybe we'd still end up right here.

Me, powerless to do anything but watch and wait. Bria, still and silent, bruised and broken. A Grade 2 concussion. Five hours of surgery, plates and screws drilled into her broken bones. Units of blood. Infection. Antibiotics. Tetanus prophylaxis. CT scans, IV bag changes, morphine.

Samuel must be wheeling down the hallway somewhere, pressuring doctors to re-review Bria's CT results or check for blood clots or give her more pain relief, because a harried nurse enters the room early to administer Bria's next dose of morphine and check her vitals.

When the nurse leaves and it's just me and Bria again, I take her hand. I close my eyes. Every time I do, I hear her scream. It's a terrifying, desperate sound of distress. A fresh burst of panic rises in my chest. *You're too late*, I remember thinking so clearly.

I hear their voices, Bria's and my brother's, as I rush to follow the glow sticks on the floor. Bria laughs. A furious growl climbs the walls. She



screams again as I rush up the stairs. And then it's that horrible moment, suspended in time.

My brother, with such rage and malice etched in his skin, swinging a sledgehammer, ready to bring it down on Bria's face as she lies unmoving on the dust and debris.

I don't hesitate. I just shoot.

Gabe crumples. He's already dead when he hits the floor.

I rush toward them. Blood flows from a wound in Gabe's temple. His eyes are open but unseeing. Bria is unconscious, her breathing shallow. Her beautiful face is serene. It seems impossible after the sound of those screams filling the desolate darkness.

I open my eyes, trying to push away the memory of her broken bone illuminated by moonlight.

When I do, she's looking back at me.

"Bria?"

She doesn't say anything, just shifts her eyes from my face to our joined hands to her suspended leg with its pristine white cast, then to her other hand, twisting her wrist. She looks at the bedrail on that side, then the door. And finally back to me.

"I guess they know I'm not running," Bria says, pressing the button to raise the head of the bed. I pass her a cup of water and realize she must have been looking for handcuffs or an officer posted at the door.

"You're not in trouble. They'll want to speak with you later, but only when you're ready," I explain. Bria shifts again, wincing before she settles. The pain in her eyes doesn't fade. "Do you need more morphine? I can get the nurse."

Bria's brows furrow as she regards me. "No," she says, her gaze falling away, the agony still heavy in her eyes. "I'm fine. Is Samuel okay?"

"Considering he's threatened to kill me twice since nine o'clock, yeah... I'd say he's in top form."

"What about Gabe? Did they catch him?"

My heart sinks deeper into my chest as her question echoes in its chambers. I shake my head and swallow the spike lodged in my throat. "No... Gabe is dead, sweetheart."

A long silent moment stretches between us. Bria squeezes my hand as she watches me, hopelessness and regret settling in the tears that glass her

eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I tried... I didn't... I wouldn't do that to you..."

"I know it wasn't you. It was me." A beat of guilt drums in my chest. But every time it hits, I see the hammer swing behind him and the destruction twisting Gabe's features into a man I barely recognized. That moment of regret dissolves in an instant. "He was going to kill you, Bria. I love the brother I knew. I've mourned the boy I grew up with for years. But the man I saw...that wasn't him."

Bria's bruised lip quivers. Her eyes press closed and she bends her head, wiping her cheek with the back of her free hand. It shatters my heart to realize it's not relief I see in her face. It's failure.

"Bria..." I lean closer, gripping her hand tighter when she makes a weak effort to pull it free. When I slide my thumb over a tear on her cheek, she shakes her head. "It's okay, sweetheart."

"It's *not*," she says, her eyes snapping open as she shakes her head again. The rage in her glare is glazed with a patina of sorrow. "I'm just... I'm so sorry, Eli. I wanted to give him back to you. He was supposed to *live*."

"If he had, he would've done everything he could to drag you down with him."

"That's how it's *supposed* to work, Eli. Those are the *rules*."

Though she's firing my words from our argument back at me, I can tell by her face it's not with the intention to cause hurt. She believes that's what I wanted. Maybe at one time it was. And she would have done anything to give it to me. She was genuinely ready to fall with Gabe, if that's what it took. But in doing so, Bria was trying to fit into a box that she can never mold to.

"Maybe some rules don't serve us well," I say, sweeping more tears from her cheek. "Some people are just meant to break them."

"Yeah, by like, fucking the patriarchy or something. Not by *killing people*," Bria says. She looks at me for only a heartbeat before her attention strays to the corner of the room as she makes every effort to shut her emotions down. It's a battle she doesn't win. "Thank you, Eli," she whispers, flicking her gaze in my direction without meeting my eyes. "I'll never forget what you did for me. But you should go."

"No, I don't think so, Pancake."

A deep, shuddering sigh fills Bria's lungs. The agony in her face is excruciating. "Eli, I can't be the person you deserve. I can't change who I am in the ways that matter. You said love was about letting go when you know you can't be what the other person needs. And I do love you, so much more than I thought I could. Saying goodbye is me loving you the best way I can. It's the right thing for both of us."

I keep hold of Bria's hand as I shift closer until she has no choice but to look at me. "I also said it's about fighting harder when things get tough. You didn't put yourself through all this to give up now," I say, my thumb making a careful pass over her split lip. "And I didn't race over half the county in a blind panic thinking you might be dead just to let you go when I've got you back. I've never been as terrified as when I stood on that dock and expected to catch sight of your body out there in the water."

Bria's brow furrows in confusion. "You went to the cabin?"

"And your bug-out cache, and Honeycomb House, and a farm you apparently blew up... I even went back to the cabin to see if you'd returned for supplies. That's when Samuel received your instructions about railroading Koffi N'Doli into pulling his people from the Vellera compound. I guess he'd much rather abandon his Lamb Heath contract than suffer the wrath of your computer wizard uncle and all his fail-safe backup plans."

I sweep the hair from Bria's forehead, watching as she takes in my face, her gaze lingering on my cheek. I smile enough that her eyes narrow at my dimple. My heart nearly bursts when she reaches a tentative finger up to trace it across my skin. Though there's still so much hesitancy in her weary expression, that one simple act is enough. I catch her fingers and bring them to my lips.

"We didn't go through all that to let each other go. So here's what we're going to do. We're going to make our own rules. Ones we can both live with. Such as, I won't leave you in the woods with wild animals after an argument. And you won't kill FBI informants. We'll trust one another to share our secrets so we don't wind up here again. Sometimes it's going to be hard, but we'll find our own middle ground, one day at a time."

I lean closer, my movement slow and careful, our gazes still soldered together until I place a gentle kiss on the faint freckles I've missed so much over these last few days. Bria's breath hitches as her eyes drift closed.

“I can’t stop what I do, Eli,” she whispers as I place another kiss to her nose.

“I’m not asking you to.”

“What if I fuck this up?”

“We’ll both fuck it up sometimes,” I say, a kiss lingering on her tear-stained cheek. “That’s what makeup sex is for, Pancake.”

Her laugh is lost in a breath of longing as I warm her skin with my lips. “What if I find out your glasses weren’t prescription and they somehow wind up broken? Or a rogue tiger mysteriously enters the house and shreds all your tweed?”

I frame her face and smile, the first genuine smile I’ve felt in my face in days. A glimmer of relief brightens in Bria’s eyes as she watches me. “Then I’ll go to Cedar Ridge and steal all the bifocals and tweed I can find, and when I get home and you give me the evil eye, I’ll know you really love me.”

Bria’s palm warms my face. It’s just a simple touch, but it looks like it means everything to her. “I do really love you,” she says. “And I’m sorry.”

“I know, sweetheart. I’m sorry too.”

A faint smile rises in her face and the cracks that have been aching in my heart stitch back together as Bria presses her lips to mine. Her taste and scent flood my senses, cementing the first truth between us, the one I’ve known since the second I thought I’d lost her.

*We belong to one another.*

We just need time. With every touch, with every secret spoken or truth shared, we’ll grow and bind together.

And that’s what we do.

Just like healing Bria’s broken body, day after day, we get stronger. Splintered pieces pull together. Sometimes it takes rest and reflection. Other times it takes effort, just like Bria’s rehab. She works through pain to make her leg stronger. We work through hurt to make our relationship better. Some days are great. Others aren’t. But even on the days when it’s not, we’re still twining together. Learning to trust one another. To rely on one another.

Like today.

It’s been almost six months since Gabe passed away. And this afternoon was the memorial service for Samuel Brooks.

Bria has been preparing for this day from before I even knew her. On the surface, she's handled it with strength and poise. To anyone else, she would be the reserved, efficient, resilient niece who planned out a beautiful event to celebrate the life and contributions of her beloved uncle. But there's so much more than that beneath her shimmering surface. She doesn't say it, but I know she feels adrift without her greatest ally. The more I've gotten to know Bria, and the more she's come to terms with herself in ways she never expected, the more she's struggled to understand her relationship with Samuel through different lenses. Now that he's gone, she's not just mourning the man who saved her from the desert. She's grieving for a history she might never understand.

I'm watching Bria as she takes a stack of records from Samuel's belongings we gathered from Cedar Ridge, examining the handwritten titles on their dust jackets. There are still boxes from my house in the corner of the room next to Samuel's piano. Kane sits on the highest one, glaring down Duke. They've established a truce over the last week since I moved in, but the suspicions still run deep for both parties. In a tactic oddly reminiscent of Bria, the cat likes to use his murder mittens on Duke's nose when no one is looking.

"Any old-school gems in there?" I ask, patting the top of Duke's cat-scratched head as I bring over two glasses of wine, stopping at Bria's side.

"Not really. These are all Samuel's," she says, setting the records down on the coffee table to pick up a sealed document envelope we retrieved from Samuel's safety deposit box on the way home from the service. She peels the flap open, glancing up at me with a look that says "this is serial killer stuff you might not enjoy." "His pieces were his...trophies..."

"Ahh. I might not listen to them the same way again," I say, but with a smile and a kiss to Bria's temple as she withdraws a thick leatherbound notebook from the envelope. In the life we're building together, revelations like Samuel's musical trophies have come to make sense. Part of the reason Bria and Samuel have been so successful in staying hidden is their ability to avoid patterns of behavior the rest of us believe are typical for their kind.

"Me neither..." Bria whispers, her voice trailing off. She flips a page in the notebook, reading the careful, scrolling penmanship on the yellowed pages. "He wrote lyrics for his pieces... I never knew..."

"A different kind of trophy?"

"Yeah...seems like it."

I pick up the stack of records, ready to flip through them. “Which piece was his favorite?”

“Opus #139,” Bria says.

I shift to the middle of the sequentially-ordered stack and pull out Opus #139, placing it onto the vintage Thorens turntable on the sideboard. I turn up the volume and set the needle. A warm crackle precedes an evocative piano melody, filling the room with a haunting atmosphere.

“It’s not here,” Bria says, her voice full of disappointment as she flips back and forth between pages at the center of the book. I stop in front of her as she gives me a melancholy smile. She passes me the book and picks up her glass of wine. “It’s a shame. I would have liked to have known.”

Bria moves away to the hearth as the music swirls around us. I watch as she picks up the photo of her younger self and Kane. But I think it’s Samuel she’s looking at, trying to divine his thoughts from a moment caught in time.

I open the book, reading snippets of lyrics as I turn the pages. They’re poetic, atmospheric. Nothing is shocking or gruesome. Without knowing the man or the truth of his dark double life, the words would never cause suspicion. Understanding him now from what Bria has shared, I can see the trophies for what they are in the descriptions on the page. The color of a woman’s hair, a man’s eyes. The reflection on a blade or the glint of a metal wire in dim light. These lyrics are a history of small details that stood out in his mind for each life he claimed.

I flip to the end of the lengthy book, past the empty pages that will never be filled, to the very last one.

OPUS #139.

I read through the first stanza, my breath catching in my lungs. When I glance at Bria, her back is still turned toward me as she stares at the photo in her hands.

*“Daughter of the Devil. God grants no mercy in the desert sun.”*

Bria’s back stiffens. She goes impossibly still. I can’t even see her breathe.

*“Flower in the dust. In the darkest night you bloom.”*

There’s a tremor in Bria’s fingers as she sets the photo on the mantle.

*“I thought that I would teach you. It was me who learned from you. Things I’d never known. Things I thought untrue.”* I pause as she turns so slowly, tears gathering in her eyes. It’s the hope in them that breaks my heart. *“Yet I find that when I watch you, swimming for the shore, these things I thought untrue, I can deny no more. Flower in the dust. In my darkest night you bloom.”*

I lay the book on the coffee table and stride toward Bria, gathering her into my embrace. A sound of the deepest loss passes from her lips. And I think right now, as she lets the last of her armor down, she’s the strongest she’s ever been. The most whole.

“It was real,” she says into my chest as we sway together in the current of the music.

“Yeah, sweetheart,” I say, laying a kiss on the crown of her head. “It was real. And this is real too.”

We stay like that for a long time after the music has stopped. But then we play other songs. And we dance. We make the steps up as we go. I dip her and even earn a laugh. To some it might sound macabre, dancing to the trophies of a killer. But Bria and I, we make our own rules.

And now, as I lie in bed with Bria’s head on my chest, her breathing deep and even, I cherish the quiet moment for my nightly ritual. Careful not to wake her, I reach toward the nightstand and pull open the drawer on my side, retrieving a black box from its depths. I tighten my arm across Bria’s back and open it.

Diamonds glitter in the dim light, and I imagine every moment of how I’ll ask her to marry me. I’ll get down on one knee and promise to love her until my last breath. I’ll promise to show her so she never doubts the truth, even though not so long ago she would have thought it was impossible.

This is real.

## **EPILOGUE**



**M**y hands are tied together behind my back. A dildo hums a gentle vibration in my pussy. I'm blindfolded, positioned on my knees, my face pressed by Eli's hand into the mattress. I shudder as an ice cube trails a lazy path down the sweat misting my spine.

"I don't hear you begging," he says as the ice cube trails over my ass cheek and down the back of my thigh. It comes up again, passing through the arousal gathered on my folds, then down the other side. "Don't you want to come, Mrs. Brooks-Kaplan?"

My heart grows so big with those words that it might burst through my bones. "Yes," I whisper as the ice cube carves its tingling burn up my inner thigh, back to my pussy. "*Please*, Eli. I need you to fuck me."

The ice cube circles my clit and I gasp. Eli leans over my back, his breath caressing my neck as he presses the cold block to my sensitive flesh. "Then you'd better start using the right word," he says, his voice teasing in my ear.

I smile as he leans back, his free hand still pressing my face to the mattress. "I need you to make me come...husband."

The hand leaves my face to trace a line down my body as the chip of ice swirls across my clit. "That's a good girl, sweetheart," Eli says as the intensity of the vibration in my pussy increases before he turns on the second dildo in my ass. The ice cube leaves my flesh and then its cool caress is back as he glides it over my clit with his tongue.

Eli grips my legs and worships my bud of nerves, the warmth of his tongue and the coldness of the ice mixing in sensations that push me toward

the cliff edge of pleasure. The toys fill me with vibration and he starts to work the dildo in my pussy, pulling it out to the tip before pushing it back in. He builds a rhythm. A circle with his tongue. A swirl of ice. A pulse of the toy. And before long I'm crying out his name as he presses a frozen kiss to my clit and fucks me with the dildo, draining every second of my orgasm until I'm shaking on my knees.

When I'm still coming down from this latest round of honeymoon euphoria, Eli pulls off my blindfold and removes the dildo from my pussy. He doesn't untie me, but flips me over onto my back, settling between my legs. He leans down and kisses me deeply, passing what's left of the melted ice cube onto my tongue as he pushes his erection into my slick, hot sheath.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Eli says as I crunch the ice with a devious smile, the taste of my arousal coloring my tastebuds with salt and sweetness. He pushes to the hilt of his erection, the toy in my ass sending vibration wrapping around the fullness of his cock. He takes a moment to settle into the pleasure before starting to slide in deep strokes. "How did I get so lucky to have the hottest wife on the planet?"

"I think it was the cherry tree that sealed the deal," I reply with a grin. "That's my favorite gift I've ever received."

Eli brushes my hair from the sweat filming my forehead. A spark lights in his eyes. "Just wait until you see your wedding present."

My smile grows wide and I curl one leg around Eli's back. He moans and I lock the other in place, the fullness of Eli's cock and the vibrating toy hurtling me toward another orgasm. "A wedding present," my breathless whisper repeats as he starts to pick up a punishing pace. "I thought being fucked senseless was my wedding present."

"Only part of it," he grits out, and then the beast in him takes over, railing me with hard thrusts. He bites my shoulder and sucks on my neck as he pounds his cock into my pussy until I'm screaming his name into the palm he folds over my mouth. I come undone in an explosion of stars, clenching around Eli's erection as he spills into me with a growl.

We're both unable to move for a long moment as we recover in the humid jungle air, a fan slowly circling above us while failing completely at making us any cooler. When our chests aren't heaving for breath, Eli slips out of me and carefully removes the toy before untying my bound wrists, kissing their delicate skin. "Come on," he says, holding out a hand. "We have to get going. I don't want you to miss your present."

Eli leads me to the shower where we stand together in the cool water and he takes the time to wash my hair, massaging my scalp. Then we pack up our bags and grab a breakfast of fruit and cheese downstairs before we check out. I haven't used my picker app once during our three weeks of travel, and I'm not sure I will when we eventually get home.

I watch Eli in the lobby as he pays for our room as I think back to that first time I saw him up close in the coffee shop. It's so hard to believe it wasn't even a year ago. I guess to some people looking at us from the outside, our evolution to this point must seem pretty fast. But when he asked me to marry him shortly after Samuel passed away, there was no reason to wait. Not after everything we've been through. Since he was going on sabbatical and I felt like I needed some time off from my research, the timing felt just right. Unsurprisingly, it's pretty easy to get approval for a twelve-month deferment when everyone believes you survived a kidnapping and attempted murder. So after our elopement on a beach in Costa Rica, we've made our way into Panama and now Colombia on our trail motorcycles, living a new adventure.

When Eli has finished paying, we check the bikes over and pull on our helmets, Eli reeling me in for a kiss like he does before every ride. "I love you, Pancake. Ride safe."

"I love you too," I say, and then we're off.

I follow Eli on the roads, weaving past the occasional vehicle as we head through dense forests and patches of cleared farm lands. After a couple of hours and a few top-ups of gas, Eli motions for us to turn onto a dirt road that seems more like a rarely used trail. We stop for a moment without turning off our bikes as he brings up his GPS, waving it around without actually showing it to me. "Won't be long, Pancake," he says with a grin.

I nod and we set off, riding for nearly an hour over the challenging terrain. It's a constant dodge of puddles and potholes, and I'm starting to feel the soreness creep into my leg when Eli pulls over and cuts his engine. I follow suit, grateful for the break but excited about whatever he's got planned.

"Feeling okay?" Eli asks as he walks over and squats next to my bike, taking my lower leg in his hand. He rubs gently, warming my scar through the denim.

"Yeah, I'm good."

He nods toward a narrow footpath behind him that cuts into the woods. "You're okay for a bit of a hike?"

"It'll do it some good," I say with a nod, and Eli beams a smile at me in reply.

"Good. Come on."

I get off the motorcycle and follow Eli into the thick jungle. The path seems to be used frequently as it's well-worn and there are no obstructions. It heads up a gentle incline and then veers to the right, and we follow it until we reach bifurcation, taking a lesser-used trail on the left. We hike in silence and I spend most of the time cycling through all the ideas of what this present could be. Some kind of waterfall, maybe, or an animal that frequents the trails. I'm thinking about jaguars when we reach a rise that seems to open beyond a rocky outcrop and Eli turns abruptly before I can see what's on the other side.

"Okay, sweetheart," he whispers, grasping my upper-arms. "I know we agreed a while ago to no secrets, et cetera, but I had to keep this one under wraps so I could surprise you."

"Okay..."

"And if you don't want this present, that's totally fine. We can turn around and just continue on to Paramillo, or maybe head up the coast to Rosario and San Bernardo."

"Okay..."

"So just...yeah..." Eli trails off and an excited grin brings his dimple to life. "Just...see for yourself and you decide. No pressure, okay?"

My eyes narrow with confusion. "O...kay..."

Eli's smile widens and he passes me a set of binoculars before taking my hand and leading me to the rocky outcrop.

When we get to the top, the space beyond widens to display a valley and a river. And along the river's edge, a small community of ramshackle buildings that look cobbled together from scavenged supplies, people toiling in a garden that stretches along its perimeter.

"Look there," Eli says, lowering his binoculars to point toward the largest of the structures. From this distance, I can see a man descending its uneven steps.

I raise the binoculars and gasp.

*Donald Soversky.*

A chill tingles in my limbs and races all the way to my fingertips as I smack my hand on the rock. “No fucking way,” I whisper.

“Yes fucking way.”

I watch as Soversky makes his way over to the garden, the gait of his stride still so familiar after all these years. “How did you do this?” I ask, unable to take my eyes from Soversky.

“Samuel and I worked it out before he passed. It took a while as Soversky seems to move around fairly frequently. There are whispers that he’s getting ready to move again. Maybe he thinks the devil’s still at his back.”

I lower my binoculars to beam a wide smile at Eli. “Maybe she is.”

“You like your present?”

“I love it.”

“Better than the tree?”

“Yeah,” I reply, glancing through the binoculars once more. “Better than the tree.”

“Then here,” Eli says, nudging my elbow. He passes me a small black bag. “You’ll need this.”

I unknot the drawstrings and pull the garrote from the bag. I stare down at it in disbelief before clutching it to my chest. “Seriously?”

“Samuel had said it was your favorite.”

My heart erupts with excitement and gratitude. I barrel into Eli, wrapping him in a tight hug. “This is amazing, Eli. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now go—the path down to the village is at the turn where we went left. Just go as though heading to the right instead. Take this,” he says, passing me a second GPS device.

We watch one another for a long moment before I press my lips to Eli’s in a searing kiss. I love this man. I love him more completely than I thought possible. And every day, it only grows.

When we part, Eli takes off his pack and sits on one of the rocks, pulling out his lunch and a book. “I’ll be here...not watching.”

We exchange a dark smile and then I turn away, striding down the path, a walk that becomes a jog.

*The Devil’s daughter is at your back, Donald. And she’ll send you straight to hell.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you SO MUCH for taking the time to read Black Sheep! Please consider leaving a review; not only will it help Black Sheep to reach more readers, but it will add some sunshine to our day! Unless you hate it, which is also totally fair, just please... don't tag us haha!

Please also feel free to reach out to us on social media! We LOVE to hear from readers and are always open to questions!

Instagram:

@alexa\_harlowe  
@brynne\_weaver

TikTok:

@alexaharlowe  
@brynneweaverbooks

### **ALEXA**

Honestly, this book came together in such a wild way. One day Brynne and I were joking about writing a book about a female serial killer who hunts cults (obviously, because there aren't enough books with FMC serial killers). And then we were like "haha, that's a funny joke... UNLESS" and now fast forward like four months later, this book is done.

I can honestly say co-authoring a book was definitely NOT on my 2022 bingo card, but this kinda just happened.

Thank you to Brynne, this could not have happened without you. We make one hell of a team, and I enjoyed every second of this process. It's not everyday I am able to work with one of my favorite authors and create this beauty.

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Thank you to all of our ARC readers, reading your reviews and reactions made me indescribably happy. It warms my heart that you love Black Sheep and all the characters as much as Brynne and I do.

### ***BRYNNE***

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## ***Alexa Harlowe***

Alexa Harlowe started her obsession with reading as any young millennial did, with *Twilight* of course. That is when the vampire obsession started. As a teen, she read anything with vampires, werewolves, witches, etc you name it. Then college happened and reading for funzies stopped altogether (dark times, lol). Fast forward to 2020 when everyone and their parents started reading again, Alexa discovered this nifty thing called Kindle Unlimited, she is a huge fan of it and a lot of indie authors she's been introduced to because of it. Over half of the books she's read in the past three years come from Kindle Unlimited. She reads a wide array of genres from cute fluffy romcoms, to dark romance and anything and everything in between.

When Alexa is not reading, or (unfortunately) working (gotta fund the reading obsession somehow), she's either watching movies/shows while crafting/drawing/painting, or working out.

*Black Sheep* is Alexa's debut novel, she appreciates you reading it and hopes you enjoyed it.

## ***Brynne Weaver***

Brynne is a fan of velociraptors, the *Alien* movies (well, most of them), red wine, and wild adventures. She can relate nearly anything you say to a line from the movie *Hot Fuzz*. She has been trying unsuccessfully for years to convince her husband that they should acquire a pet mink to add to their menagerie of animals (what could possibly go wrong with that plan?!). Brynne has been everything from an archaeologist to a waitress, a deep-sea core analyst to an advertising account executive. For the last several years, she has been working in the field of neuroscience clinical research.

Brynne has been writing since childhood and has published a non-fiction book under her real name, but she won't tell you what it is unless you provide a live, fully trained velociraptor. When not busy at her day job or writing, Brynne can be found working with her husband and their son on their family farm in Nova Scotia, Canada, or enjoying her other passions which include riding horses & motorcycles, reading, and spending time with family and friends around a raclette and a bottle of wine. *Black Sheep* is her fourth novel.

## **ALSO BY BRYNNE WEAVER**

### **The Shadow Realm Series**

[A Shadow In The Reaping](#)

[A Heart Of Bitter Poison](#)

A Queen Of Broken Realms (coming 2022)

### **The Diviner Series**

[The Diviner](#)

The Elysian (coming soon)

The Resurrectionist (planned)