



PART:2

LOSERS

HARLEY LAROUX

Losers: Part II

Losers Duet, Volume 2

Harley Laroux

Published by Harley Laroux, 2022.

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Editing: Zainab M. at Heart Full of Reads Editing Services

Cover Design: Ashes and Vellichor

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Content Note

Some content within this novel may be disturbing or triggering for some readers. Reader discretion is advised.

Subjects include mental illness, trauma, childhood abuse (physical and emotional), body shaming (by a parent to their adult child), parental rejection, bullying, instances of homophobia/biphobia, and discussions of suicide. This book contains graphic sexual scenes, intense sequences of BDSM, graphic violence, and strong language.

Any character depicted in a sexual scene is at least 18 years of age.

This book should not be used as a reference or guide for safe BDSM practices. Some activities depicted herein contain significant risk of injury and bodily harm. While all sexual scenes depicted are consensual, some scenes depict consensual non-consent (CNC) roleplaying. Other kinks include erotic degradation and humiliation, bondage, electrostimulation, domestic discipline, impact play, knife play, bodily fluids (including blood and pissplay), public play, pain play, voyeurism, breeding/impregnation related kinks, and pet play.

*For those looking for a place to belong.
You belong here.
You always will.*

1 - Manson

High School — Senior Year

Silence had fallen. The quiet was eerie; I wasn't used to it. The house was always creaking, groaning, breathing. Like something lived in the walls, dragging its nails down the old boards, pressing its shoulders against the underside of the floor.

As a child, I believed this house was haunted. Now I knew better, but I still heard things that weren't there — phantom noises in the silence. Was I losing my mind? Had something in me finally cracked?

Considering I was seated on the floor with my back beneath my window, facing my door as I flipped my butterfly knife between my fingers, maybe I was right. Maybe my brain had broken.

It was scary how calm I felt.

The stairs creaked with footsteps, and I stiffened. Boots pounded down. There was the sound of a belch, and the refrigerator door squeaked as it opened. Glass clinked; there was a hiss and the *tap-tip-tap* of a bottle cap hitting the floor.

It was seven in the fucking morning. There was no food in the fridge, but there was a 24-pack of beer and a handle of whiskey. Dad had been gone for nearly six months and I'd been foolish enough to think he would actually stay away this time.

There was no getting rid of him unless he was dead.

The footsteps moved back toward the stairs, but then they passed them. They came down the hall, and a shadow moved under my door. His breathing was heavy, grunting and huffing with drunkenness.

Come on, motherfucker. Try me. I fucking dare you.

There were scratches on the floor from where I used to shove my dresser in front of the door to barricade it. But it wasn't even locked now. I should have left it wide open to make my invitation a little clearer.

I dare you to try it. Try to hurt me. See what happens.

The heavy boots shuffled and stomped away, and I exhaled slowly. The knife's handle dug into my palm as I gripped it tightly. I'd been ready. I would have done it. I would have killed my father...sliced open his throat and severed his jugular...stabbed him until his chest caved in...strewn his guts around the house like a goddamn work of art.

Dropping my head into my hands, I gripped my hair until it hurt. I didn't want to hurt anyone. I didn't...

Fucking hell, but I *did*. After so many years of being afraid, cringing every time I heard him speak, ducking my head around him, keeping my voice down — it had been a long time coming.

But why bother now? I was a snake with its head cut off, twisting and writhing in the dirt, dead jaws still snapping. Why keep fighting? Was it instinct, primality demanding I survive? The easiest solution would have been to let myself die years ago, *but I was still here*.

That social worker, Kathryn Peters, said I just needed to hold on a little longer. Part of me didn't believe she'd do a goddamn thing. No one in my life had ever bothered to help me, so why should she? She claimed she would find me housing, a job. She said she would find someplace safe. I was too old for the foster system; I didn't qualify for youth shelters. She said she might be able to find a room for me in Memphis; but if that fell through, she'd have to look even further away.

I'd told her I wouldn't go if it meant leaving them.

Lucas, Jason, Vincent...I couldn't leave them. We stuck together, always. I could give up everything else but not them. And not...

Her.

Why the hell did I think of her?

I meant nothing to her. Less than *nothing*. She should have been the last thing on my mind.

The thought of getting up and going to school, when seconds ago, I'd been ready to murder my dad, seemed ludicrous. But I got up, grabbed my backpack from the corner, and hauled it over my shoulder. Mrs. Peters — she insisted I call her Kathy, like she was trying to be relatable — said I needed to stay out of trouble, and that meant continuing to attend high school despite it being a complete shitshow.

Dad may have gone back upstairs, but I still wasn't going to walk out the front door. I shoved open my window and dropped my bag out, then swung my legs out after it. My boots crunched in the dry weeds as I trudged across the yard toward my SUV. Discarded beer cans, cigarette butts, and piles of junk were strewn everywhere, and the entire place smelled faintly of rotten food. It was probably the overflowing garbage piled next to the garage, which was similarly filled with junk.

Luckily, my Bronco started on the first try. It was having issues again, and Lucas and I intended to look under the hood that weekend to figure out what was up. Hopefully, whatever part needed to be replaced wasn't too expensive, or we could try rummaging around for whatever we needed at the junkyard again.

The parking lot at Wickeston High was nearly full when I pulled in. The bell hadn't rung yet and many seniors were hanging around their cars, shouting to each other over the loud music playing from multiple vehicles. My tires screeched as I whipped the wheel around, pulling into an empty spot near the back corner of the lot next to a black El Camino.

Lucas loved that car, rusted out and thrashed as it was. He claimed he'd make it into a beast one day, a drag racer that couldn't be beat. I was just glad to hear him talking about the future.

Lucas, Vincent, and Jason were seated in the El Camino's bed, and Lucas raised his arm in greeting as I got out of the Bronco and climbed in with them.

"Thought you would be late again, fucker," he said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. He wasn't supposed to be here on campus, but being told not to do something had never stopped him before. He took a pack of American Spirits out of his jeans and offered me one, and I lit up gratefully. The burn of tobacco hitting my throat and a quick hit of nicotine soon made me feel a little more human.

Vincent was high as hell, one arm around Jason, as the blue-haired boy's fingers flew over the keys of his laptop. I tapped Jason's foot with mine but he barely looked up, his bloodshot eyes focused solely on the screen.

"AP Physics is going to kill me," he said as Vincent rubbed his back reassuringly. I leaned my shoulder against Lucas as I smoked, sighing heavily when I noticed Principal Lector coming across the parking lot toward us with a security guard behind him.

The others spotted him right after I did. Vincent hurriedly removed his arm from Jason's shoulders, then the two of them climbed out of the bed. I stood up, dragging my backpack with me as I hopped out.

Lucas took his time.

Principal Lector stopped at the back of the car and tapped his pen against the metal. I had no idea why he was carrying a fucking pen out here;

maybe he thought it made him look professional, like his annoying-as-hell habit of referring to all of us by our last names.

“Mr. Bent...” he began, but cut off when Lucas stood up. He hopped out of the El Camino’s bed, crushing his cigarette under his shoe.

“Don’t touch my fucking car again, Michael,” he said, and the principal blinked repeatedly at the careless use of his first name. “If you want me to leave, then get the hell out of my way.”

We all moved back, and I gave Lucas a wave as he started his engine and threw the car into reverse. It lurched out of the parking space, the tires leaving a trail of burnt rubber on the asphalt as he peeled out of the parking lot.

Principal Lector’s accusatory gaze was on me, but I really couldn’t care less. Staying out of trouble wasn’t all that simple when trouble simply existed around me and I was caught in the crossfire.

“You’ve been warned before about smoking on campus, Mr. Reed,” he said. Vincent and Jason were lingering, waiting for me to join them so we could walk together. I clenched my jaw, keeping back words that would have only made this worse. “That’ll be detention for you. Again.”

I smiled tightly. “Sick. Cool shit. Can I go?”

The principal sighed, as if I’d exasperated him already. “Language, Mr. Reed. Don’t be late.” I turned to go and had only caught up with Jason and Vincent when Lector called Jason back. Vincent waited for him, throwing up a peace sign as I kept walking. I only caught what the principal was saying, but I heard, “...concerned. I would hate to see your future suffer because of a poor choice in friendships. You’re clearly dealing with some confusion...”

My hand tightened on my backpack’s strap as I dug my nails into my palm.

You’re confused.

You’re rebelling.

This is a stage you’ll outgrow.

You’re a fucked-up disappointment.

Pussy. Fucking freak.

After a while, they all sounded the same. People disguising bigotry and judgment as concern.

I hated them all. I hated this entire fucking town.

My shoes squeaked on the linoleum floors as I headed to my locker, shoved and jostled by the hundreds of students crowding the hallways. I put in my earbuds and turned my volume up, blasting Night Bird's "Born to Die in Suburbia" loudly enough to drown them all out.

Most people ignored me. I had my group of friends, and I was on good terms with the school's other rejects. The jocks and the privileged popular fucks had better things to do than harass me — most of the time. They'd gotten used to the mohawk and the dirty clothes; I was no longer the most entertaining target to go after.

At least, I wasn't for most people. Some individuals couldn't get enough of making me their personal punching bag.

Turning the corner toward my locker, I grimaced. Kyle Baggins and Alex McAllister were there, crowding around the locker next to mine, waiting for Kyle's girlfriend — or ex-girlfriend now, since he'd cheated on her. I hung back, hoping they'd leave so I could get my shit. But they weren't going anywhere, and the last thing I needed was to be late again.

Kyle didn't move as I approached. He shifted around, turning to face me and blocking my locker with his shoulders. He said something and Alex laughed. My earbuds blocked it.

"Move," I said. The words were too sharp but also not sharp enough. I wasn't trying to start shit, but my intentions didn't matter. These fuckers knew they could overpower me without a problem.

I wasn't even scared of them anymore. I was numb, as if my chest had been hollowed out and all that remained was a vast, cold, dark space.

Alex yanked my headphones out of my ears. The motion pulled my phone out of my pocket, sending it flying through the air as the headphone jack disconnected, and it fell to the floor.

"Late again, freak?" Kyle laughed as Alex kicked my phone and sent it skittering toward the stairway. I forced myself not to react. It was just a phone. It didn't matter. Better than my face.

"The fuck do you need your books for?" Alex said, pocketing my earbuds as if he needed the damn things. "Studying for your bright future?" They chuckled at each other — a gross cycle of reinforcing their own piss-poor jokes.

Kyle had moved enough for me to get into my locker. It forced me to stand right between them.

Kyle's eyes were boring into my side as he stared at me. "What are you wearing?"

Don't react. Books in the bag. Head up, no eye contact.

A heavy hand slammed against my back, banging my head on the edge of the open locker. I sucked in my breath as something warm trickled down the side of my head, but I didn't wipe it away. My jaw clenched as Kyle got in my face, but I was determined not to say a damn word.

"I said, what are you fucking wearing? Prancing around here in a skirt like a goddamn pussy?"

But I wasn't paying attention to him anymore. Over his shoulder, I saw her coming and allowed myself a cocky, self-indulgent smile as she came up behind him.

"It's a kilt, Kyle; he's wearing a *kilt*. God, you're such a dumbass. Move out of my way."

Jessica shoved Kyle aside to get to her locker. Her blonde hair was pulled into a ponytail, silver glitter shimmering around her eyes. She was wearing her cheer uniform, the one with long sleeves and a short skirt. She stood up on her tiptoes to reach the top of her locker and I couldn't help staring as her shirt rode up, baring her stomach for a moment.

It physically hurt how beautiful she was. How untouchable.

"The fuck is a kilt?" Alex said. Kyle was frowning deeply, as if he was trying to figure out the same thing.

Jess barely glanced at me as she got her things, slamming her locker shut and stuffing a notebook into her bag. Kyle was clearly trying to think of something to say to her, then began, "Hey, babe, you know that I —"

"Shut. Up." She whirled around, glaring at him. "Save your excuses. You're not going to talk your way out of this one. You wanted to be with Veronica so damn badly...Well, now you've got her. Have fun, asshole."

She marched away, and I stared after her. All was not well in Popular Kid Paradise. I couldn't imagine having a woman like that and cheating on her. Hell, I couldn't imagine cheating on someone in general. Lucas and I had come to the conclusion pretty easily that the intimacy between us didn't require monogamy; just respect. We'd already agreed that we'd be fucking other people too, but that was different than sneaking around and hurting each other.

Jess deserved better than that. She was a stuck-up bitch and a spoiled-rotten brat...but shit, maybe she wouldn't be if she wasn't constantly around

such awful people.

Alex and Kyle were still talking, as Kyle whined that it wasn't his fault. "She stopped putting out, man. What the hell did she expect? That I'm just going to wait around until her cunt thaws out? She's been a fucking bitch lately."

I slammed my locker far too hard. I wasn't shocked in the least that Jessica had stopped having sex with him. She'd probably get more care from a literal rock than this meathead. I'd seen them together, watched them make out, watched them fuck. That made me sound like such a creep, but it was hard not to see it when they'd have sex in Kyle's truck right after a game. What was I supposed to do — avert my eyes?

Kyle had the emotional range of a toothpick. The fact that he blamed Jessica for that enraged me.

Another hard shove knocked me against the locker again, but this time, Alex kept his hand against my back as he snarled, "What do you think you're staring at, Reed? Perving out at Kyle's girl?"

Kyle's expression was livid as he cracked his knuckles. He wanted to take out his anger on someone. Big fucking surprise.

"Pretty sure she made it clear she's not his girl anymore," I said. Alex gripped my jacket, wrenched me back and slammed me forward again. It knocked the air out of my lungs, and I laughed. "You lost the hottest girl in this school because you can't keep your dick in your pants and *I'm* the perv? Fucking pathetic."

Kyle's face darkened. Alex shoved me to the floor, but I caught myself as I went down. I was back on my feet in an instant and sprinting down the hallway, dodging around the few students still lingering outside of classrooms. Kyle and Alex were right behind me, shoes smacking loudly on the floor as they ran. I turned down the next hall and kept going, while people stared at me in confusion.

So much for not being late to class.

I had to find somewhere to hide. I burst through the first door I saw — the women's bathroom, *shit* — but it was my only option. The door swung shut behind me, and I retreated to the furthest stall, closing the door and perching on top of the toilet so my shoes wouldn't be seen. At least it was empty in here. I didn't need more trouble.

I waited for what felt like an eternity, but no one burst in. Kyle and Alex must have lost me, or they were waiting outside the door for me to emerge.

But I could wait them out. I was skipping one class already; what was the harm in skipping a few more?

Graduation didn't matter at this point anyway.

I reached into my jacket and pulled out my one remaining cigarette. I usually bummed them off Lucas and tried to make them last, but damn it, I needed this. Once the adrenaline and anger faded away, anxiety was all I had left, and it fucking sucked.

I lit up, blowing the smoke out the narrow window above the toilet. It would still stink up the restroom, but whatever. The numbness in my chest was spreading to my limbs, my head; I was running out of fucks to give.

I cared far too much, but I also didn't care enough. The encroaching apathy scared me, the strange feeling of disregard for my own well-being bringing me back to my thoughts from earlier that morning.

Was I losing it? Was my mind cracking? Kathy claimed she was going to help me but part of me felt like it was too late. I didn't have a future...didn't need one either.

But I was still fighting. On instinct, driven by survival, my primate brain demanded that I *try*. I was just so goddamn tired.

The restroom door slammed open, and I stiffened as feet tapped across the tile floor. One of the sinks turned on, the rush of trickling water not enough to cover the sound of a shaking sob. I stepped down from the toilet and peered through the gap in the stall.

It was Jessica. She was hunched over the sink, gripping the porcelain with her head bowed. Tears dripped down her cheeks in the mirror, her lips trembling as she drew them together and then exhaled slowly.

She composed herself. Straightened up, dabbed her reddened eyes with a tissue and delicately blew her nose. She sniffed again, and in the reflection, her eyes narrowed.

"Who the hell is smoking in here?" she snapped. Any hint of sadness was gone from her voice as she whirled around. Her green eyes were livid. Her posture made it clear she was ready to make someone's life a living hell for daring to see her when she was vulnerable. I didn't say a word as she stomped out of my sight, and one of the stall doors violently slammed open. "Who's in here?"

With a sigh, before she could get to my stall, I stepped out.

For a moment, she looked confused. I carefully stubbed out my cigarette, not wanting to waste any of it before I tucked it away.

“What are you doing here?” Her gaze darted up and down my body, her eyes lingering in places they shouldn’t. I’d never understood why she looked at me like that. As if she was about to ask for something but couldn’t figure out how to do it.

“Avoiding your boyfriend,” I said, and she rolled her eyes.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she said sharply, “anymore. He’s Veronica’s boytoy and she can have him, for all I care.” She walked back to the sink, pulling a makeup wipe from her purse and swiping the cloth beneath her eyes. “Were you sitting in here watching me? That’s so creepy, Manson.”

I wandered over to the sink next to her, washing my hands before I put a piece of gum into my mouth. Nothing like being around the hottest girl in school to make me suddenly self-conscious.

She couldn’t have been more my opposite with her pink acrylic nails and sparkling makeup. Like a ray of fiery sunshine that could either warm you comfortably, or burn you to a crisp.

“Well, I’m sorry about the breakup.”

“You’re *sorry*?” She scoffed. “No, you’re not. Don’t give me that bullshit.”

Thank God. I sucked at fake sympathy anyway. It always sounded sadistic and I wasn’t trying to freak her out like that.

“Okay,” I said. “You’re right. I’m not sorry you broke up with your dickhead, dumbass boyfriend. I feel more like I should congratulate you on finally dropping two hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight, but it’s a little difficult to congratulate someone who’s crying.”

“I’m not crying.” She flicked mascara onto her lashes, opening her eyes wide. “Why should I? Kyle is missing out and I have *plenty* of other options.”

She had her pick of the school. Who would turn her down? Vincent and Jason were constantly egging each other on to flirt with her, like it was a game to see which of them could score first. As if *either* of them had a chance. Even Lucas, who swore he hated her guts, wouldn’t deny himself the opportunity to get with her. And I...

I wouldn’t turn her down. Hell, the thought of being with her like that...

It was ridiculous. I wasn’t one of her “options.” I didn’t qualify. Maybe if I traded part of my brain for a little more muscle, but even then, I wasn’t good enough for her.

There was a barrier between Jessica and everyone else, an impenetrable glass wall as if she were an exhibit in a museum, meant to be observed but never touched. That wall felt like a challenge, as if there was a trick to getting around it if I could just figure it out.

She reapplied her gloss and it shone on her lips, her mouth irresistibly drawing my eyes. She could say mercilessly heartless things and I'd forgive every one of them; she had before and she would again. What confused me was that no matter how cruel she was, no matter how often she acted disgusted by me, she didn't avoid me.

It felt like it was the opposite. She could have requested that her locker be moved away from mine, but she hadn't. She could tell me to fuck off at any time and I would. I wasn't *trying* to be a creep, despite her accusations.

"What happened to your head?" she said. I'd already forgotten the cut was even there, and I dabbed my fingers over it to check if it was still bleeding.

"That was the toll for getting into my locker," I said. Her mouth twitched, as if in a vague attempt at sympathy. "So, who's your lucky rebound? I assume you're already plotting how to make Kyle's life jealousy hell?"

She smirked as she leaned against the sink. "Of course I'm plotting. He needs to learn a lesson."

The sound of the door opening made me flinch. I turned as a mousey brown-haired girl stepped into the bathroom and spotted us. I wasn't sure who she was, but Jess snapped her fingers, getting the girl's attention instantly.

"Restroom is occupied, honey," she said, and the girl practically tripped getting back out the door. I shook my head as Jess went back to her makeup, still musing about her revenge. "Maybe I'll date Alex. I know he'd go for it. He's always trying to flirt with me when he thinks Kyle won't notice. That would ruin his friendship *and* make him jealous."

"Has anyone ever told you you're diabolical?" I said. Lucas would have an aneurysm if Jess ended up dating Alex. Frankly, for the sake of Lucas not ending up with a murder charge, I hoped she didn't follow through with that method of revenge.

She thought about it for a moment. "No, they haven't. But I like that. Diabolical..." Her smile widened, as if the idea tickled her. "It's what he deserves."

“And what about what *you* deserve?”

Her expression faltered, and she glanced over as if I’d said something that made no sense. “What *I* deserve? What do you mean?”

“I mean that maybe this is your opportunity to date someone who actually gives a shit.” I had no idea why I was bothering to tell her this. The hollow numbness inside me was void of fear, absent of the boundaries that usually held me back. “Someone who isn’t just trying to make you their arm candy.”

Her frown deepened. “Um, yeah, I don’t...that sounds so *serious*, Manson.” She laughed, putting her makeup away and straightening her ponytail. God, there it was again: the wall. Did she think it hid her emotions? Did she believe I couldn’t read her? Maybe that glass barrier was made of brick in her mind. Perhaps she thought it sheltered her from being perceived.

But I could see right through it. The sadness that lingered on her face, the hurt in her jovial tone, the way she picked apart her own reflection in the mirror. I saw it all.

“Right, I forgot everything that happens in this hellhole is a joke,” I said. I backed up, then turned and headed for the door. I didn’t bother to say goodbye to her. I’d see her again. But staying there, alone with her, was asking for trouble. It gave me too many ideas.

Very, very bad ideas.

I fantasized about her all the time but those fantasies were impossible, and daring to think otherwise was foolish. Being in the same room with her had given me a chubby; my mind filling with visions of bending her over the sink and trailing my fingers under that little skirt.

Christ, I needed to get off. If I hadn’t lost my phone, thanks to Alex, I would have called Lucas to come back and pick me up. The thought of his mouth on me made my cock even harder.

I’d developed a habit of edging for days at a time; something about the careful exercise of control made me feel more centered, even if it wasn’t satisfying. But I always hit a point where I couldn’t handle it anymore, days of pleasure without release leaving me slightly feral.

I’d only taken a few steps down the hall when her voice made me turn.

“Manson! Wait!”

I faced her. She stood outside the restroom, rubbing her wrist repeatedly as she looked at me.

“Do you think that...I mean...” Her voice faltered, and she licked her glossy lips. “Were you saying that, like...you think I deserve someone who cares about me?”

She dragged out those words as if they’d come straight from the pits of hell. She sounded disgusted, insulted...and sad. She sounded so damn sad.

“Of course I do,” I said. The hallway was quiet now, so I lowered my voice. Being out here with her made me nervous, the back of my neck prickling. If Kyle, Alex, or any of his other friends saw this, they’d beat me to a pulp. “Maybe if you were with someone who wasn’t such a dick, you’d actually be happy and act like less of a bitch.”

I didn’t say it to be mean; I was being honest. Again, faux pity didn’t work well for me. Jess rolled her eyes, like I expected her to, and said, “I’m perfectly happy. Why wouldn’t I be?”

I closed the gap between us, and she didn’t step back. She let me stand right there in front of her, close enough to touch.

“A sad person knows what another sad person looks like,” I said. I dared to reach out, brushing my fingers along her cheek to tuck a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear. Goosebumps prickled over her arms, and my eyes widened. “I hear it in your voice. I see it in your eyes. I feel it when I look at you. You deserve to be happy, but you’ll never find it with the people you’re choosing.”

She was staring at me as if I’d slapped her. Certain that I’d fucked up, I drew back from her. Her heat was too much for me; I’d flown too close to the sun and caught fire.

But if you try to force a plant to grow in a dark room, it will reach for the sun. Even helpless and rooted, with no hope of ever touching the warmth, it will reach because it has to.

She grabbed my jacket, pulling me with her. I stumbled after her in stunned confusion as she tugged me back into the bathroom and shoved me against the wall. Her eyes were so bright and wide with wonder. She was still gripping my jacket, and she was so close...too close.

“What are you doing, Jess?” I said. My palms were sweating, my mind running in chaos. She was pressed up against me, her beautiful lips slightly parted merely inches — just *inches* — from my mouth.

She smelled like sweet strawberries and cream. I was supposed to control myself, but the more something was forbidden, the more I wanted it. Candy tasted sweeter when you stole it.

I wanted to grab her, dig into her. I wanted to see what her skin looked like, reddened and bruised. I wanted to hear the sounds she made when she was lost in bliss. I wanted to find every point of pleasure and pain on her body and use them.

“Promise not to tell?” she whispered.

“I promise.”

Her eyes kept sliding between holding my gaze and staring at my mouth. Her intentions seemed obvious but she couldn't possibly want what I was thinking. No, it made no sense.

This beautiful goddess of a woman couldn't want me.

But I *knew* that look in her eyes, and it roused the monster inside me out of sleep.

I grabbed her arms and reversed our positions, pressing her back to the wall. She exhaled softly, the air between us so charged it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I was panting like I'd just run a mile, my heart hammering against my ribs.

She dragged her lower lip through her teeth and said, “Kiss me.”

I blacked out for a moment. It was only a second and then I was kissing her like it was the last damn thing I'd ever do. It might be — the school reject making out with the quarterback's ex-girlfriend was a recipe for murder.

But I didn't care. Goddamn, I didn't care at all. If I died tomorrow, I'd die happy because this was heaven. Her lips tasted like cherry and her mouth was soft and sweet. Her entire body moved with me, every perfect inch of her, and it was like fireworks shooting off in my head. We gripped each other frantically, fingers digging into flesh, pushing, pulling, biting — Fuck, I couldn't stop.

I put my hand on her throat and squeezed, and she moaned into my mouth like I'd just given her what she'd been craving.

God, I could destroy her. I wanted to. I *needed* to. I didn't just crave her perfection, her unattainable beauty. I wanted her filth. I wanted the messy, disgusting, fucked up parts of her. I wanted to rip her open, pick her apart, find the things that made her tick.

I wanted to make her mine from the inside-out. Shatter her to pieces before I put her back together. These were dangerous thoughts and I was riding an edge I'd never dared to touch.

When we parted, breathless, it was as if we were suspended outside of time. Her lips were red, slightly puffy, her cheeks flushed. She was breathing hard, and for a moment, I imagined myself pulling up her skirt and fucking her right there against the wall.

But then she let go of me hurriedly, her eyes widening in horror.

As if she had realized what she'd done.

"I...I, um..." She shook her head, and I let go of her, stepping back and giving her space. She moved around me, backing toward the door. "That was..." Her fingers brushed over her mouth, trembling slightly. A tiny smile curved her lips, but it vanished in an instant. She paused as she reached for the door, giving me that look again.

As if she wanted to ask for something. As if she could fall to her knees for me.

Then she was gone, vanishing out the door. I stayed where I was for a long time, too long, leaning against the wall with the taste of her in my mouth.

2 - Manson

We packed our things into the Bronco and the WRX early in the morning, while the sky was still dark and the cool night air was damp. We had dropped off the dogs with Vincent's family the previous day, and his dad had agreed to come by the house over the weekend to check on things. It had been ages since we all left town, even longer since we'd had a proper vacation. We needed it now more than ever.

It had been almost two weeks since my father had shown up at my gate after months of being gone. The last time I'd seen him, he'd threatened to kill me, and this time hadn't been any better. I'd believed he was dead and would have preferred he stayed that way, but all we could do now was try to avoid him.

It took me back to my childhood in a way I didn't like. Tiptoeing around, hiding. But things were different now than they were back then; I didn't only have myself to worry about.

I had to think about my boys. And Jess. It was my responsibility to make sure they were safe. Besides, we all needed the opportunity to have time together. Not worrying about work, or parents, or nosey neighbors. Just us, together, committing whatever debauchery we damn well pleased.

Jess still owed us a debt. Her BMW was sitting in our garage, waiting for her new engine to be delivered. She wasn't paying for that repair in cash either; she'd offered us something I considered far more valuable.

Herself. Her body and her time.

Playing with intimacy was risky; I knew that. When this was over, when her car was repaired and her debt was "cleared," we wouldn't be able to let her go. I wouldn't be able to brush this off like it was nothing and watch her walk out of my life again.

I needed her to stay. I wanted her to. But the choice was hers and the only thing I could do now was show her this was where she needed to be.

I needed to show her the possibilities, give her an experience she would never forget.

She'd admitted that her ultimate fantasy was to be snatched away, used and dominated, with nothing to worry about, except being a good, obedient girl for us. She wanted to submit completely, to relinquish the control she so carefully clung to.

I adored that about her. Once her fears of being rejected and judged were assuaged, Jess was insatiable, ravenous. But between the four of us, we could sate her.

We'd talked about it over the past few days, discussing what she imagined she would like and wouldn't like, things she wanted to try or things to avoid. We knew each other's boundaries, we had a safeword, but the more we got her talking about what she wanted, the better.

I wanted to blow her mind. I wanted to show her what life with us could be like, if she wanted it.

We picked her up early, before her parents were awake, when the sun was still creeping over the horizon. Her mom thought she was spending the weekend with some girls — friends that weren't even talking to Jess anymore, since she'd decided to keep company with us. She threw her luggage in the back of the Bronco before she climbed into the front seat, her tiny denim shorts riding up her thighs as she sat between Lucas and I. She gave Jason and Vincent a wave through the back window, since they were riding together in the WRX.

"Please tell me we can stop for coffee," she said, laying her head against Lucas's shoulder with a dramatic groan. "I think I'll die if I'm not caffeinated soon."

We *all* needed our hit of caffeine. Lucas would get grumpy without it and the last thing any of us wanted was to be trapped in a vehicle with him in a bad mood. Once we had our espresso, we got straight onto the highway. We turned the stereo up and kept the windows down, and it wasn't long before I couldn't stand to have Jess sitting right beside me without touching her, kissing her, *enjoying* her.

Locking my arm around her waist, I shot Lucas a grin as I dragged her onto my lap so she was straddling me, facing toward me.

Lucas groaned, "Come on, man, is this why you wanted me to drive? *You're* the one who likes to watch! Are you switching with me after this? Hey! Manson!"

But Jess was kissing me, and I couldn't answer him with her tongue in my mouth. I didn't even intend to fuck her yet. I wanted to feel her, enjoy her taste, savor her body. I smacked her ass as she lifted slightly off my lap

and she moaned into my mouth, before she whispered, “Mm, spank me harder, Master.”

“Fucking *hell*.” Lucas let off a string of curses, tapping his palm repeatedly against the wheel. He was trying so hard to watch us more than he was looking at the road.

“Pay attention to your driving, puppy,” I said, reaching over to shove his face forward. The furious growl he gave me was enough to make me chuckle as I smacked Jess again, and she gasped, grinding down on my lap. I turned her, pushing her head down and to the side so she was lying across my lap. Her head was on the seat toward Lucas, and her legs were bent against the door, her white sneakers untied.

“You want it harder?” I said, rubbing my hand over her thighs, then over the round globes of her ass. Although partially hidden by her shorts, the faint red lines of my name cut into her skin were still visible. It was healed; I hated to see it disappear. I needed a permanent mark on her, something that wouldn’t fade away.

She gave me a cheeky look over her shoulder, clutching her hands around Lucas’s thigh. This was *torturing* him. She wiggled her butt, and I spanked her again, continuing until she was gasping and her thighs were red.

By the time we pulled into the next gas station, Lucas was coiled so tightly with tension I was surprised he managed to stand up.

We all got out, stretching our arms and legs. We’d been on the road for hours and had a little further to go before we were into the mountains, but we could see them ahead of us now through the trees. We’d traded farmland for forests, and the gas station we stopped at was old, with only one pump and a debit card slot out of order.

“I’ll go pay the cashier,” Jess said, plucking the cash from my fingers that I was about to walk inside with. I watched her through the dirty window as she sauntered up to the counter, her midriff bare in the red cropped shirt she wore.

“She looks too good to be out in public,” Lucas said, arms folded as he leaned against the Bronco with the gas cap open. Jess was speaking with the man behind the counter, an old guy with a wide smile who resembled a backwater Santa Claus in overalls. Hell, I’d be smiling that wide too if one of my few customers of the day looked like that.

When she came back out, she had a lollipop in her mouth. Lucas pumped the gas, and she distributed the soda she'd bought. She ran one of the cold cans over the back of her neck, sighing as the condensation dripped down her skin.

"What flavor?" Vincent said, and she popped the lolly from her mouth to offer him a lick.

"Blue raspberry," she said, sticking out her blue-stained tongue as Jason came in for a lick too. Vincent was admiring her reddened thighs, grinning at me as he lifted his eyebrows suggestively.

But that little spanking was nothing. That was to get her hot and squirming before the best part.

She wanted to be taken captive. She wanted to feel helpless, ravaged, used.

Far be it from me to deny her that.

We got back on the road, and Jess was enjoying being a tease. She put herself back on my lap, swirling her tongue around her candy. She subtly moved her hips, grinding on me, an innocent look on her face all the while.

We endured for about half an hour before Lucas pulled over at a vacant rest stop. The WRX drove in behind us, and Jess frowned, sitting up on my lap as she looked around. The rest stop was nothing more than a picnic bench and some restrooms, hidden from the highway by a line of trees.

"Bathroom break already?" she said. I chuckled, grabbed her face and pulled it toward me for a kiss. She whimpered softly as Lucas touched her from behind, trailing his fingers down her arms before he held her wrists and then —

"Hey — What?" Jess jerked at the sound of duct tape, but Lucas and I were too quick for her to wriggle away. He secured her wrists behind her, taping them together before he did the same to her ankles as I restrained her.

Jess had known this was coming, but I had to hand it to her — she fought hard. She struggled and thrashed, cursing at us as if this was all against her will. We hustled her out of the Bronco, Lucas carrying her over his shoulder toward the WRX.

"I've had enough of your damn teasing," he snarled and dumped her in the trunk as Vincent popped it open for him. She squirmed, staring up at us with wide eyes. "It's our game now, fucktoy."

"Three days in the mountains where no one can hear you scream," I said. "And trust me, you'll be doing plenty of screaming."

I left my cell in the trunk with her. Part of our past discussions had been how she would be able to communicate with us if we locked her up like this, and the cell phone was what we'd settled on. She'd be on a call with Jason the whole time, with his end muted. If she needed to call her safeword for any reason, we'd hear it.

I reached down, gently stroking my fingers through her hair. Then I gripped the long blonde strands, holding her in place for Jason, who tied a blindfold over her eyes.

"All ours to play with," he said, tracing his fingers over her lips. They parted slightly, and he pressed two digits into her mouth, sliding them over her tongue and deep into her throat until she gagged. "That's it, baby, choke on it. Get your throat loosened up, you're going to need it."

The sight of her bound and blind, lying in the trunk, turned me on so much I couldn't see straight. I should have put a camera in there so I could watch her, but it was too late for that now. I didn't know how the hell I would manage to wait until we got up the mountain.

But I'd find a way. Waiting made it sweeter.

"You're all ours for the next few days," I said, bracing my hand against the trunk as I looked down at her. "Enjoy your alone time while you can."

Then I shut her in the dark.

3 – Jessica

Most people didn't consider being duct-taped and locked in a trunk to be a great start to their weekend. I wasn't most people, though.

Yeah, okay, so it was a little unhinged. It was the exact opposite of everything Mom wanted for her sweet little girl. It was not something my father would approve of. Hooking up with these guys had bombed my reputation and cost me a few friends.

But honestly? My "reputation" sucked. Being known as a stuck-up bitch wasn't fun, and constantly pretending to be better than everyone else had only earned me some well-deserved hatred. I was over it. I didn't want the drama.

I had to figure out who I was without all the bullshit, without the mask and haughty attitude.

What better way to get to know myself than with a kidnapping fantasy? It wasn't always easy to accept what I wanted without harshly judging myself. Relinquishing control required some soul-searching, and I had plenty of time for it during the drive.

I lay there, thinking about what they could do. What they *would* do. Due to the blindfold, my other senses were heightened. The rough carpet against my back made my skin tingle, and my fingers twitched restlessly in their bindings. Jason and Vincent were playing electronic music, the heavy beat pumping through the speakers. The rhythm was dark and sexy, lulling me into a state of quiet acceptance.

I was theirs. Their toy, their slave. Their willing little victim.

When the car finally came to a stop and the engine turned off, my heartbeat quickened. Anticipation raced through me as the trunk opened. Fresh air rushed in, cooler than I expected and sharp with the scent of pine. Birdsong filled the air, and a soft breeze rustled the trees.

"Goddamn, look at this little thing."

I recognized Vincent's voice, but there were multiple feet moving around the trunk. Boots crunched on gravel, shuffling in the dirt and crisp leaves. Someone grabbed my leg and pulled, repositioning me so I was bent over the bumper with my upper half resting in the trunk. The duct tape around my ankles was swiftly cut, as if with a knife. Fingers brushed

through my hair, pinning my head down. Someone pulled down my shorts, hands gripped and squeezed my ass.

“I want to feel that gorgeous pussy.” My panties were shoved aside, fingers thrust into me. They pumped inside me, the slick sound making my face heat. I whimpered as they withdrew and the smooth head of someone’s cock — Vincent’s? — pressed against my entrance.

He pushed inside me, rough and careless as he thrust his hips against me. Not knowing who it was, being unable to move or see, was so erotic I was groaning with abandon almost at once.

“Fuck, she feels so good.” It was Vincent. I knew it now without a doubt.

“Give it to her hard, Vince,” Manson said. “She takes it so well, doesn’t she?”

Lucas spoke from somewhere beside me, saying, “Let’s hear her moan for it. Use her like a whore.”

Vincent’s pace was brutal, and my toes curled, my clit aching to be touched. This was what I’d asked for: to have all my choices and worries removed, leaving only pleasure. My voice shook with desperation as I whimpered his name, begging him to please, *please* touch me.

“Let me come, Vincent, please, please, please!”

A smack on the ass was my answer. “Shut the fuck up. Do you think we care about your orgasm, girl? Do you?”

“Shut her up,” Jason said. “Give her something to suck on.”

I was maneuvered out of the trunk. Vincent grasped my hips, holding me bent over as someone shoved their cock into my mouth. It wasn’t pierced, and wasn’t as long as Jason’s but thicker...

Manson. His taste was indescribable, but I recognized it immediately.

He fucked my throat as hard as Vincent fucked my pussy. He growled as he used my mouth, gripping my hair. Vincent changed his angle, his cock hitting that perfect spot inside me that instantly made my knees weak.

“That makes her moan, Vince,” Manson’s tone was deliciously gritty. “I think she likes it.”

“Desperate little slut.” I got another smack on my ass, and I wiggled my hips back, eager to please. Vincent hissed, then swelled inside me. He jerked my hips back in violent thrusts, and I was impaled on either end, choking and aching as they used me.

The snarl Vincent gave as he came inside me pushed me so close to the edge. He pulled out of me, but Manson wasn't done with me yet. He held my head down on his cock until I gagged. Saliva trailed from my lips to his swollen shaft when he finally pulled out of me.

He straightened me up and gripped me, forcing me to walk forward. When I reached a set of stairs, someone else lifted me from the ground. It was Lucas; I could smell him. I recognized the roughness of his hands. A door opened, slightly dusty air rushed in my nose, and I was put back on my feet and shoved to my knees.

“Let's see how badly the little fucktoy wants to come, shall we?”

4 - Jessica

Their shoes pounded heavily as they circled me, and suddenly my blindfold was tugged down. I blinked rapidly in the light as I looked up at my captors.

The four men stood before me in the living room of a large cabin. The walls were polished wood; there was a stone fireplace to my left, and a sectional brown leather couch to my right. The mounted skulls of deer and moose hung on the walls. Light spilled in through the glass double doors ahead of me, which led out onto a wooden deck surrounded by pine trees.

“Welcome to your new home,” Jason said, pacing around me. “It’s time to break you into the obedient little cumslut you’ve always wanted to be.”

Those words felt like an electric bolt shooting straight through me. He tugged up my blindfold again, fitting it securely over my eyes and surrounding me in darkness.

“Cumsluts don’t need to see,” he said, patting my cheek. “You go where your masters tell you and you’ll be just fine.”

Another set of footsteps came closer. They walked past me, stroking their fingers through my hair as they tipped my head back.

“Open your mouth, angel.”

With a shiver, I obeyed. Manson’s fingers probed my mouth, pressing on my tongue and deep into my throat.

“Don’t pull away.” He gripped my hair to ensure I stayed in position, his voice firm when I gagged. “Learn to control yourself.”

He pressed two fingers into my throat and held them there. Tears welled in my eyes and dampened my blindfold as I tried to resist the urge to cough. Only when I got myself under control, managing not to gag on his fingers for nearly twenty seconds, did he let me go.

“That’s better.” He released my hair, circling me. “That’s a good slut. Your throat should always be ready for me, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Master,” I said, my voice hoarse.

“A toy like you is only good for pleasing her owners, is that understood?”

Nodding rapidly, I choked out, “Yes, Master.”

“Then you’re going to take whatever we give you, aren’t you? You’re going to spread your legs and let us use your pussy, your ass, your mouth.

You can scream all you want, angel. But you're going to be a good girl for us and take it."

My deep breaths were making my head light. "Yes, Master. I'll be a good girl and take it."

Then, Manson gave a command.

"Strip her down."

Hands grabbed me from all sides, pinning me to the floor. Someone gripped my shirt, and I gasped as it was ripped apart. Cold metal tapped against my chest, nudged under my bra strap, and with one quick tug, my bra was cut off. They pulled off my shoes, my socks, then my shorts and panties, too.

I was turned onto my stomach, and the blade that had cut my bra sliced through the tape around my wrists before it was peeled away.

"Spread her legs," Manson said. "I want to see her beautiful pussy dripping for us."

My ankles were grasped and spread. I lay there on my stomach, the cool air kissing over my flesh, exposed and helpless. Fingers probed me and spread my labia apart. Someone smeared Vincent's cum over me and fingered me as if to push it back inside.

"Jason, eat her. Get your tongue inside her."

Manson had barely finished issuing the order when Jason's mouth closed over me. He stroked me with his tongue, eating me as enthusiastically as he would a five-course meal. My legs were held apart all the while, my hands grasping desperately on the smooth floor for something to hold on to.

"Oh God, that feels so good!" His tongue kept flicking my clit and it made my restrained legs twitch every time.

"You're making her shake, J." God, Vincent sounded so damn sexy. The usual humor was clear in his voice but his tone was low and thick with desire. "Do you like how I taste inside her?"

"Yes, sir," Jason moaned the words against me, and I almost lost it. Every inch of me stiffened in desperate pursuit of the orgasm hovering out of my reach.

"Don't let her come," Manson said, and Jason's tongue left my clit to trace teasingly around my entrance. I groaned, nudging my hips toward him, as if that would convince him to go against Manson's orders.

“Such a desperate girl,” Jason said. It was like his mouth was draining brain cells out of me. I could barely speak. I could hardly think. “You can wiggle around all you want, but I’m not letting you come until Manson says.”

There was no way to convince him otherwise. I knew there wasn’t. But I still debased myself even further by whining, “Manson, please! I’ll be good, I’ll be such a good girl, I promise —”

“Of course you will,” Manson said. The sound of ice clinking into a glass put me on high alert, memories of Lucas holding me down and pushing ice inside me making me shiver. But it was followed by the trickle of pouring liquid and a subtle spicy scent in the air. “You’ll be good whether I let you come or not, won’t you, angel?”

“Yes, sir.” I wanted it so badly I could have cried. But I grit my teeth. My suffering was worship, and I wanted to show my respect, my desire, my longing in the only way I could.

Jason continued to tease as I gave up struggling. It was like he had a roadmap to my body that was frighteningly correct, focusing in on the spots that made me squirm the most. Every time I gave a reaction, he’d slow down and repeat whatever motion had gotten a noise out of me.

“Let her go.”

The moment Manson issued the command, I was released. Shivering as I lay there on the cool wooden floor, I didn’t move a muscle until he ordered me to do so.

Something tapped repeatedly in front of me, something heavy. “Crawl, angel.”

I got onto my hands and knees, but a heavy foot pressed me back down.

“Crawl on your fucking belly like the pathetic little creature you are,” Lucas said, removing his foot only once I’d whimpered an obedient, “Yes, sir.”

I squirmed forward, my stomach against the floor as I crawled toward Manson’s voice. Vincent was somewhere beside me, his voice a sadistic whisper as he said, “I can’t wait to make her ride your cock while I pound your ass.”

He was talking to Jason, and imagining his cock sunk deep inside me while Vincent fucked him — oh, God, yes, I wanted to experience that.

My head was buzzing, my body felt electric. I reached out and encountered a smooth leather toe, a thick sole, tight laces.

Ice clinked as Manson sipped the drink he'd poured for himself and told me, "You know what to do."

God, yes, I did. I traced my nose along his boot, inhaling the rich scent of leather and the subtle chemical smell of polish. I kissed the toe, and my belly pinched, humiliation and desire squeezed into one strange feeling. I ran my tongue along the edge of his sole, brushed my nose against the laces.

Curled up at his feet, I was at his mercy. But I felt secure, safe. My trust for them didn't leave any room for fear in my mind.

I trusted them more than anyone I'd ever met.

Manson shifted when I gasped softly, his tone immediately dropping from careless authority to concern. "Are you okay, Jess?"

Not lifting my head from where it was pressed against his boot, I nodded. "I'm okay. I'm better than okay." A rush of emotion choked up my throat. Someone gently massaged my back, and I knew from the long fingers and absence of rings, it had to be Vincent. "This makes me feel so good. It makes me feel like I'm safe. Like I can just..."

God, it was so hard to put this into words. It was embarrassing, yes, but also the concept was still so new. Why did being controlled and overcome make me feel like everything was okay?

Vincent said gently, "There's our good girl, that's it. You can talk to us."

That openness was part of what made this so amazing. I didn't feel vulnerable because I feared being injured or hurt. I was vulnerable because I'd allowed myself to be. I'd told them what I wanted and they had chosen to fulfill that for me.

"I want to obey you," I whispered, my lips tracing over the leather. "I want to worship you and let you use me however you want, sir. Please. Please use me."

There was a smile in Manson's words as he said, "I'm proud of you for saying that, angel. I like to hear you being honest with me." There was a clink of ice on glass and another spicy whiff of whiskey. "Do you want to come?"

"Yes, Master, I do. Please."

Something brushed my back. Something soft but heavy, with multiple trailing tassels that felt like leather.

"Sit on my boot and ride it. Grind on it. Try to come."

Tingles burst out all over my skin. Pushing myself up to my knees, I wrapped my arm around Manson's leg and drew myself closer. I couldn't see him, but I could imagine him standing over me. Fully clothed while I was naked. In perfect control over everyone in the room.

I sunk down, grinding on the leather. The toe was smooth but the laces were rough, and it was hard to get the perfect angle, but I wanted it so badly. I rested my cheek against his leg, groaning as I bucked and rolled my hips.

Fuck, it did feel good. Rubbing my clit on the leather, my own arousal making it slick. I moved faster, gasping, chasing the pleasure.

"Get her ready."

I wasn't sure who the order was meant for, only that it wasn't for me. A hand grasped the nape of my neck and a slick finger, covered with lubricant, probed against my anus.

"I'm going to fuck you right here," Lucas said, close against my back as he pressed his finger past the tight ring of muscle. I cried out at the intrusion, and he repeated the motion; drawing his finger all the way back out, then in again.

"Keep grinding, angel," Manson said. "I didn't tell you to stop."

But now, grinding down on his boot meant also grinding on Lucas's finger in my ass. He added a second finger, stretching me open, and I shuddered at how good it felt.

"Oh my God..." I kept moving, grinding back and forth, arching my back to get him deeper inside me. "More, please...please..."

"Yeah?" Lucas growled, teeth grazing my neck. "Does the little slut want more?"

A third finger squeezed in. I'd had anal sex before; enough to know I enjoyed it. I liked the slow stretch, the subtle ache — hell, I even liked the sharp pain of trying to stretch too big, too quickly.

Lucas pressed his fingers in deep, and Manson's hand stroked over my hair affectionately.

"Do you want to fuck her ass?" Manson said.

Lucas's growl was ravenous this time. His teeth clamped down on my neck, and he scissored his fingers inside me, unlocking his jaw only when I groaned at the pain.

"Yes, sir." Lucas's drawl was thick as he spoke against my neck. "I want to fuck her tight ass and make her beg for mercy."

I shivered from head to toe. There was a slick repetitive sound close by, followed by a shuddering sound from Jason. I wished so badly to see what they were doing.

“You have my permission, pup. Fuck her.”

Lucas shifted around behind me, slowly withdrawing his fingers and grasping my hips. He pulled me up higher on my knees, giving himself a better angle. His cock pressed in slowly, the metal of his jewelry still apparent through the thin latex of a condom. He wrapped his arms around me, and I felt small, so fucking small.

A toy for their pleasure.

“Make her scream.”

Lucas thrust all the way inside, biting down on my shoulder at the same time. I cried out — in pleasure, pain, stimulation, submission. He pounded into me, and I grasped tightly onto Manson’s leg, clinging to him as bliss washed over me.

I gasped, “Please don’t stop — Oh, God —”

Manson pulled my head back, forcing it up. “Look up at me when you address me. I don’t care if you’re blindfolded. Do you understand?”

God...yes, he’d told me that before...God and Master. I leaned into his hand. “Yes, Master, I understand.” My voice trembled and I sounded so damn weak, but it didn’t matter.

I could be weak. I could hand control over to them, let them take me and use me because *I* wanted them to. I could indulge my fantasies in exactly the way I needed to, no matter how ugly, offensive, shocking, or repulsive. There was no judgment here, no fear. Shame was just another toy we could play with, not a weapon.

Every jolt of Lucas’s hips made me gasp. We were kneeling at Manson’s feet, fucking like animals as he watched, and my pleasure was growing so swiftly that I couldn’t hold back.

“May I come?” I said, riding the edge. “Please, Master, may I come?”

Lucas groaned viciously against my back, his length throbbing inside me. I kept begging, “Please, please, please...” because I didn’t think I could stop myself, but I needed permission. I *needed* it.

“You can come, angel.”

I sobbed with relief. The orgasm hit me so hard I couldn’t breathe or move. Lucas fucked me mercilessly through it, every stroke prolonging the ecstasy.

He came with a guttural snarl, nails digging into my flesh. Leather tassels brushed against my side, a gentle tease before it disappeared. Then there was a swish of air, a crack. Lucas tensed, his cock twitching inside me. There was another swish, another crack, and he groaned.

“Thank you, sir.” His whispered words sent shivers over my skin. He pulled out of me and away. The leather tails of a flogger caressed my shoulders as Manson laid his hand on my head. There was movement beside me, as if someone was kneeling near his other foot.

“Get me a chair.”

Whoever had knelt beside me — Lucas, I guessed — vanished. His footsteps returned, then came the heavy but restrained sound of something being put down, and Manson shifted. He sat, and I was between his legs, shaking, as I tried to catch my breath.

I bowed my head as the flogger trailed over my back.

“Do you want to suffer for me, angel?”

I nodded my head quickly, without hesitation. “Yes, Master.”

This time, when the swish and crack came, it fell on me. The flogger he used was heavy, stinging in a million little bites.

“More, please.” I bowed my head even lower, almost to the floor. “Please hurt me, Master.”

Crack, and the sting bloomed. I sucked in a breath, but it came out as a cry. Again and again, he whipped the flogger across my back, until my flesh was burning all over, ignited with heat, my muscles twitching.

“What does a good little slut say?”

I swallowed hard and sniffed. “Thank you, Master.”

Manson lifted me from the floor, maneuvering me easily. He settled me on his lap with my back to his chest, my pussy impaled on his cock.

“Oh, *fuck*...” I couldn’t get the words out without groaning. My legs were splayed over his lap and he felt so thick inside me.

The palm of his hand slapped against my thigh. “Start riding, slut. Put in the work.”

My toes were barely touching the ground and my legs were weak, but even if I could barely move, I wanted to obey. I braced my hands on the arms of the chair he was seated in — it was soft fabric, like velvet. I slid up and down on his length, loving every inch. Someone came closer, and hands caressed over my chest, squeezing my breasts and tweaking the piercings through my nipples.

“Jason...” He gave a satisfied hum before he kissed me, the cold touch of the rings on his fingers making me shiver. He kissed me deep and slow; that skilled tongue overtaking mine and snatching the air right out of my lungs. He parted from me, and there was a pause, then Manson pushed me forward and the smooth, warm head of Jason’s cock brushed my lips.

I stroked my tongue over him, salivating as I bobbed my head. It was a struggle to get his entire length inside as I took him deep into my throat, sucking him to the same rhythm I rode Manson.

“Good girl,” Manson said. “You’re taking his cock so well.”

Manson’s praise spurred me on. Jason gripped my hair, guiding my head on his shaft. He forced me down, as deep as I could take it, holding me there until I coughed. I was gasping when he allowed me to lift my head again; my strength depleted. But although I was faltering, Manson wasn’t.

“I don’t think sluts need air, do they, J?” he said. I whimpered desperately with need as Jason laughed.

“No, I don’t think they do.” He pressed my head down again until he filled my throat, trailing one finger lightly over my cheek. “Stay with us, beautiful girl. Remember to tap if you need to.”

I nodded before his fingers pinched my nose. My air supply was cut off entirely, and Manson’s finger dug into my hips. His hips bucked up brutally against me, fucking me hard. My throat convulsed, the desperate need for air overriding my determination not to struggle.

But I didn’t tap. I knew my limits of endurance.

“Squirm all you want.” Vincent’s voice circled us. “The only thing you’ll be breathing is cock.”

My lungs ached, they *burned* for air. But the feeling of perfect surrender washed over me. I was under their control, their protection, their dominance. I was safe even though it was so, so hard.

Jason finally released my nose as he pulled out of my mouth, stroking himself to orgasm all over my face. I licked the drips from my lips, thanking him even as I gasped for breath.

Then Manson’s arms wrapped around me, pulling me back against his chest.

“Tell me what you want,” he said.

“Your cum please,” I gasped, as his movements grew harsher. “Please come inside me, sir, please fill me up, please.”

He groaned roughly as he came. I was left limp and dazed with bliss, too far gone from the world to do anything. I lay there silently on his lap, thoroughly fucked and filthy.

I couldn't think of a better way to start the weekend.

5 - Jason

Jess was splayed out in the jacuzzi tub, eyes closed, her limbs relaxed as they floated in the water. My arm hung over the edge of the tub, resting against the wall as I sat on the floor opposite Manson. He was positioned mirroring me, leaning on the side of the tub with one hand trailing in the water, the two of us watching over our girl as she drifted back down to earth.

Our girl. Ours. It sounded so right, it *felt* so right. Whether or not it was true didn't matter, at least not for now.

Despite what came after all this, Jessica was ours for the weekend, and I intended to savor that.

She opened her eyes, smiling sleepily as she looked around. The bathroom was spacious, connected to the cabin's primary bedroom. A large frosted window over the jacuzzi tub let in natural light, and there was a walk-in shower big enough for all five of us to fit inside with a little crowding.

Like nearly everything else the Peters family owned, their cabin was luxurious. There were four bedrooms, but we only planned on using the primary one with its massive bed. At home, we had our separate spaces, but whenever we were all away, we usually slept together. It was comforting, easing unspoken anxieties and silent fears. Like surrounding ourselves with the feeling of home.

Because really, our home wasn't a house. It was each other.

Jess inhaled deeply. "Do I smell food cooking?"

"Lucas and Vincent are on the grill," Manson said. "Are you hungry?"

"God, yes." She gave a satisfied groan and stretched, sitting up in the tub. She looked even more beautiful after what she'd just endured. Her eyes were tired and her expression was soft, as if she'd just awoken from a long nap.

As I traced my fingers across her shoulders, goosebumps prickled over her skin, and I smiled.

"How do you feel?" I said. She'd drawn up her knees and rested her cheek on them as she looked at me.

"Amazing," she said. "Like I don't have a care in the world."

“Good, because for the next two days, you don’t have to care about a single thing except being a good girl for us,” Manson said.

The water sloshed as Jess inched closer to the edge of the tub, trying to get as close to us as possible without getting out.

“I can do that,” she said. “Especially if you keep fucking me like that.” She bit her lip. “I’m going to get turned on again if I think about it. You killed my pussy and then raised it from the dead.”

“Mm, zombie pussy,” I said, and she snorted with laughter.

Manson got up, grabbing a towel from the cabinet and holding it open for her. She held on to my offered hand as she stepped out of the tub and Manson wrapped the towel around her, taking his time to dry her off. She could have done it herself, but we didn’t want her to have to.

She’d endured flogging, fucking, and being tied up in a trunk. Now she deserved to feel like the princess she was.

Jess dropped her towel as she walked over to the bed, her naked silhouette framed by the glass doors in front of her. The doors opened onto the back deck, beyond which Lucas and Vincent were tending to dinner on the grill. Smoke drifted through the yard, carrying with it the savory scent of meat and vegetables.

Jess unzipped her suitcase, rifling through her clothes until Manson intervened. I wrapped my arms around her, caressing her soft skin as I reminded her, “You don’t have to care about a thing, remember? We pick what you wear...or don’t wear.”

Manson selected a thong and a short blue sundress, laying them out on the bed for her.

“No bra?” Jess said, and he chuckled.

“Why the hell would we want you wearing a bra?” He grasped her breasts as I held her from behind, squeezing them tenderly. “Frankly, the second we get back inside, I’m taking these clothes right back off you.”

There was a knock on the glass doors. Vincent stood outside, holding a large pair of tongs as he looked at Jess and made a “chef’s kiss” motion with his hand. She giggled as she slipped on her dress, and his expression changed to one of devastated sadness.

He’d always loved to tease, and how easily he got Jess to laugh had quickly become one of my favorite things. We’d kept to ourselves for so long. I’d never gotten to experience watching the others fall for someone in their own way.

Vincent opened the door, poking his head inside. “Aw, don’t cover up! What’s wrong — afraid the trees will see your titties?”

Jess sauntered over to him, swatting his hands away when he clicked the tongs at her. “Sorry, sorry, they got confused.” He chuckled. “You’re looking like such a snack, they thought they were supposed to pick you up.”

She shrieked as he wrapped an arm around her and lifted her straight up off her feet. He carried her across the deck, her arms and legs swiftly wrapping around him. The evening air was cool, the smell of smoke and cooking meat making my mouth water. The Peters family owned the acre of land the cabin sat on, so we had the entire space to ourselves with no concern about nearby campers.

I glanced over at Manson as he leaned against the doorframe. He’d retrieved his whiskey from the bedside table and was sipping it slowly. He looked calm, albeit a little tired. But Manson didn’t ever relax. He was like Lucas that way; there was a part of his brain he was incapable of shutting off.

Especially after seeing his father again, he’d been losing himself in his head more often lately. He’d fallen out of the habit of making regular appointments with his therapist, but I’d overheard him scheduling a session before we left for the weekend.

The burden of feeling responsible for all of us was heavy on his shoulders. We didn’t have a leader per se; it was more like Manson was the head of the household, guiding decisions rather than always having the final say. He’d never tell us he was struggling unless we pressured him to. He kept those thoughts to himself, clinging to the act of being the calm, cool, collected one.

It was a good act; I’d admit that. But it *was* an act.

“Hey.” He glanced over at me. “Are you doing okay?”

He nodded right away, and my eyes narrowed. “I’m good,” he said, but when I didn’t look away, his jaw tightened up. “Just have a lot on my mind.”

Leaning against his side, I nudged my shoulder into him, jostling him until I got him to laugh. “I get it. But your asshole old man isn’t out here, dude. Just us.”

“Yeah.” He took another slow sip, then offered me some. I didn’t like whiskey; I was more partial to beer. But I took a sip anyway, enjoying the burn. “I’m not going to want to go back, J. I can tell already I...” He sighed,

watching Vincent carry Jess across the yard so she wouldn't hurt her bare feet. "We need to get out of that fucking town."

"We will," I assured him. "We could list the house for sale as it is, you know."

"We need to finish that last room. The downstairs bedroom." He scrubbed his hand over his face, his next sip far heavier than the last. "When we get back, we need to clear it out."

The downstairs bedroom — his childhood bedroom — had stayed locked since we moved in. Even glimpsing the interior of that dirty old room affected him. It was a haunted space, a grave in our own house. Too many bad memories inhabited it.

"Sounds like a plan," I said. I stepped around him and snatched the drink out of his hands, holding it up like a carrot in front of a horse as I walked backward across the deck. "Come on, come on. Come and get the nice spicy whiskey. Don't brood."

He pressed his lips into a thin line, a look that made my stomach knot up with enjoyable apprehension as he strode toward me across the deck. He snatched his drink back and slung his arm around my shoulders, grinning as he said in a low voice, "Careful with your teasing, or Jess and Lucas won't be the only ones I put on their knees this weekend."

As if that was a deterrent. Frankly, this was exactly the right weekend for misbehavior. I generally knew how far I could push Vincent, but Manson was trickier to read. The calculated risk made it fun.

Vincent and I were closest, intimately, but that didn't mean I wasn't interested in Manson and Lucas too. I'd been deeply in denial when I met them, intimidated by their intensity, terrified of making the wrong move and destroying the best friendships I'd ever had. I'd also been unbearably, oppressively horny. The moment I'd decided to stop stifling my sexuality, all the desire inside me exploded and I couldn't get enough. It had been a careful balance of wanting to fuck everyone and trying not to lose myself in rabid experimentation.

Having Jess around and watching her thrive in submission did, admittedly, make me crave it myself. I liked to switch; I found fulfillment whether I was topping or bottoming. But sometimes, I really fucking needed to be held down and overtaken.

Manson let go of me, swinging his legs over the deck railing so he could sit atop. Lucas was at the grill, his phone hooked up to a nearby Bluetooth

speaker, playing Black Sabbath. Vincent set Jess back on her feet next to the grill, where the dirt was soft and powdery so she wasn't likely to hurt her feet.

"More fresh meat for me," Lucas said, grabbing her and squeezing her ass. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been kidnapped and ravaged by four wicked villains," she said. "In other words, I feel fantastic."

Most people wouldn't have considered the slight curve of Lucas's lips to be a smile, but it was obvious to those of us who knew him well. He held her close for a while, showing off what we'd soon be eating for dinner. Thick steaks, grilled asparagus, and Vincent had potatoes boiling on the stove inside. I was ready to pig out and spend the rest of the evening being lazy.

"The Peters own this place?" Jess said, taking a few tentative steps across the dirt to peer into the trees. It was a beautiful area, isolated and mountainous.

"Yeah, it's their vacation house," Manson said. "Or one of them, anyway. I lived with them for nearly three years and it still surprises me sometimes how much damn money they have." He snickered suddenly. "The first time I came up here, it was just me and Daniel. We were still getting to know each other. I thought he would be a dick the whole weekend, but it turned out we got along."

Daniel Peters was Kathy's son, and one of the few popular kids at Wickeston High that hadn't been a complete asshole. He worked for UNICEF now; we hadn't seen him since Manson moved out of their house. But he was a good guy, kind-hearted.

"He convinced you to go boating and you nearly drowned," Lucas said, jabbing his spatula in Manson's direction with bitterness in his tone.

Considering I was a safe distance away from him, I said, "Sounds like Lucas still has nightmares about it." He turned his narrow-eyed glare at me, brandishing the spatula in a far more threatening way than he had at Manson.

"You," he hissed. "Better watch it." I just gave him a wink and a grin that promised more trouble.

We ate our dinner on the back deck, around a large table with a firepit in the middle. We'd brought enough food for the weekend to keep in the fridge, as well as liquor and beer. Vincent and Manson enjoyed the whiskey, while Lucas, Jess, and I drank the beer.

As the sun sunk toward the horizon, dusk set in quickly beneath the trees. The shadows lengthened, and several eager crickets chirped.

"Manson and I are waking up early tomorrow to take the Bronco on some trails," Lucas said. With his meal finished, he'd slouched in his seat, his beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "You should come with us, Jess."

"We *insist* you come with us," Manson clarified. "Ever been off-roading before?"

Jess leaned forward on my lap so she could grab her drink from the table. The moment she'd finished eating, I'd snatched her up from her seat and moved her to mine instead. It was hard to keep my hands off her, especially when she kept idly trailing her sharp nails along my arm. The soft scratches were soothing, leaving my skin tingling.

"I've been a couple times," she said. "I get to drive, right?"

Manson's eyebrows shot up, disappearing under his loose hair. "You want to drive the Bronco? On the trails up here?"

"With us in the car?" Lucas added, as if that little detail made it even more unbelievable.

"I won't crash," Jess said, laughing at their surprise. "I'm a good driver; I'm just bad at maintenance."

Considering that she'd neglected her BMW's engine until it literally couldn't function anymore, "bad at maintenance" was an understatement.

"Mm, a good driver, right," Lucas said. "We'll see about that."

But Manson was smiling as he sipped his drink. "All right, Jess. Yeah, we'll see what you can do."

She pumped her fist excitedly. "Hell yes. Get ready for the ride of your life, boys."

"Might be the final ride of my life," Lucas muttered, and she waved her hand at him disapprovingly.

"I'm afraid we'll be missing out," Vincent said, propping his feet up on the table. "But waking up with the sun two days in a row is simply not on my itinerary."

Jess made a face, pouting her lower lip. “Oh, fine. What about you?” She glanced back at me. “Are you staying in bed tomorrow morning or coming along?”

Waking up early had gotten easier since I’d started going to the gym with her. But I really wasn’t a morning person, and it must have shown on my face.

She kissed my cheek before I could give an answer. “That looks like an *I’m-staying-in-bed* face.”

“I don’t want my head to leave the pillow before noon,” I said, and she nodded in understanding, running her fingers through my hair. God, I loved when she did that. The way her nails scratched my scalp almost made me purr.

“Okay, okay, I *guess* you can sleep,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Sounds like you’re just scared of me behind the wheel.”

“Testy little thing, aren’t you?” I said. “You better be careful tomorrow; Vincent and I will have all morning to plot what we want to do to you once you get back home. For your sake, I would try to make sure we’re in a good mood.”

Our conversation made time slip away. Soon, the darkness around us was deep. The view of the night sky was phenomenal, twinkling stars and glowing planets creating a glittering kaleidoscope above our heads.

“I need a shower,” Manson said, rising from his seat with a groan. He gave Lucas’s shoulder a subtle tap as he headed inside, and Lucas immediately rose from his seat to join him.

“Well, while they’re getting busy, I could go for a hot toddy and a movie,” Vincent said. “It’s getting a little chilly out. You two going to join me?”

“In a minute,” I said. Jess was settled so comfortably on my lap, with her head resting on my shoulder as she gazed up at the stars. I wanted to prolong the moment a little longer.

For several minutes after Vincent had gone inside, she and I sat there in silence. The fire had dwindled down, a few flames still licking over the smoldering coals. It had gotten significantly colder, but between the fire and our shared body heat, I was comfortable.

So comfortable that I didn’t want to get up. I could sit out there with her for hours staring up at the stars. Her fingers traced down my arm and over my hand, over the rings I was wearing.

“These are the same rings you made in high school, aren’t they?” she said. “In metal shop?”

I’d been obsessed with my metal shop class. All my other classes were AP, requiring hours of studying and piles of homework. But in metal shop, I could have fun. I could create whatever I wanted.

What I’d created were rings thick enough to be weapons. I hadn’t been a good fighter back then; I was on the smaller side, and I was damn timid. But I’d tried to emulate Lucas, because he was easily the toughest guy I knew. The way he carried himself, like no one in the world could frighten him, was admirable. I’d wanted my presence alone to be enough to intimidate people, like it was for him.

I wasn’t successful, but I’d gotten attached to wearing the rings. I liked the weight of them on my hands — my little suits of armor.

“Most of them are the same.” I pointed out the silver band on my ring finger, simpler than the other rings. “That one is from Vincent. He made it himself.”

She picked up my hand, holding it closer so she could inspect the ring in the firelight. “I didn’t know he could make jewelry. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, considering he has so many random talents.” When she lifted her eyes again, the firelight was reflected in them. “Is it an engagement ring?”

She said it with a small smile, as if she was trying not to sound too excited without knowing for certain. Her enthusiasm made me happy.

“Not exactly,” I said. “Marriage isn’t something we’re really thinking about, at least not in the traditional sense. The ring is more like...a collar that I can wear anywhere. It symbolizes devotion, love, loyalty.” Her smile widened. “So I guess it’s similar to an engagement ring, in its meaning at least.”

“Do you want a real collar someday?” she said. “Like one of those metal ones?”

“Have you been doing research into collars, Jess?” I said, and she lowered her eyes, a little blush tinting her cheeks. “Do you like the metal ones?”

She nodded. “I saw one that was rose gold. It was thin and delicate and so pretty.” Her words trailed off, and her eyes wandered too. As if she’d remembered something she didn’t like, something that made her fall silent.

“I think the ring suits me best,” I said. “I fidget too much with necklaces. They distract me.” Her hair had fallen into her face, and I

brushed it back. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s just...” She took a deep breath, squeezing her hands together on her lap. “I remembered things I said to you in high school. Things I never should have said.” She lowered her head. “You remember too, don’t you?”

Insults used to roll off Jess’s tongue as easily as casual conversation. My fashion sense by the end of junior year had been stuck between “preppy private school” and “freshly-hatched punk,” which practically invited people’s comments.

“I try not to dwell on the past,” I said. I caught her chin with my fingers so I could get her to finally look up at me.

There was fear in her eyes. I hated to see it, but I couldn’t let her worry stop me from being truthful. These conversations were never meant to be comfortable, and since she’d brought it up, I could only assume she wanted to talk about it.

“I sneered at you,” she said. “I was so mean, and I barely knew you.” Her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard, looking down again. “I’m so sorry. For the things I said *and* did. For the way I made you feel. You’ve been a lot nicer than I deserve, Jason. You’ve done so much to protect me, and you really didn’t have to.”

Her words left me staring in disbelief. During all my hours with her at the gym, I felt as if she and I had developed a particular comradery, a bond that was just ours. The past was best left alone; the painful things that happened, the awful things that were said — I tried not to let them matter anymore.

But I’d also learned not to expect apologies.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Jess.” I wanted to be gentle with her, I did. But if she was bothering to apologize, to confront how uncomfortable this was, then I had to do the same. “A lot of the shit that happened in high school fucked me up. It made me insecure. It made me hate parts of myself. It wasn’t solely you that led to that. I had worse bullies than you. But...”

“But I was still a part of it,” she said. “I hurt you.”

She was choking down a lot of emotions, clearly. Tears were wavering in her eyes as if they could fall at any moment. But she held them back, keeping her voice calm.

She wasn’t trying to make this about her. She was doing everything she could to avoid making me feel like the bad guy.

“You did hurt me,” I said, and it felt like releasing a massive breath to say it. “It sucked. And for a while, I didn’t know if I could forgive you. But then...I saw you with your mom.” Her head jerked up, and she looked at me with uncertainty. “You were at a parent-teacher conference with her. I was there with my dad. You were both dressed up. I remember thinking you both looked so damn glamorous for walking around a high school. But at one point, your mom picked up your hand and scolded you about your nails. She said you were embarrassing her. That she couldn’t believe you’d go out looking like a mess.” She winced, closing her eyes for a moment. “Sometimes, hurt people end up hurting people too.”

After I’d seen that, things made more sense to me. How a girl could be so beautiful and so cruel. So confident but so terrified. How easily those insults came to her mind, as if picking apart the appearance of those around her was simply normal.

In her world, it *was* normal.

“I’ve worked through a lot of shit since then, and I think you have too,” I said. She nodded, and I shifted my position so I could cradle her closer.

I could see Vincent’s silhouette through the glass doors in the living room, waiting for us to join him. But I didn’t want to rush this.

This was important.

“I forgive you, Jess,” I said. “When you first came around, honestly, I didn’t think I could. I didn’t think I wanted to. But you surprised me. You fit in with us better than I thought you would.” I grazed my fingers along her jaw and was almost left breathless by the look in her eyes. The emotion, the hope in them, tugged at my heart. “I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad that we get another chance at this, because this time, it’s going to be different.”

“Different,” she murmured, echoing me. “How?”

It was my turn to look away, a little surprised at myself. I tried to be careful with my words, but sometimes I told her things without a second thought.

“Well,” I said, “I have a hard time letting go of things I want.”

Our gazes met again. Every beat of my heart was like a hammer banging against my ribs. My brain was running a million miles an hour, and I couldn’t have plucked out a cohesive thought if I tried.

“I want you,” I said. “So if you still think this is all going to wrap up neat and tidy once your car is fixed, I’m sorry to break it to you, but you’re not getting rid of me that easily. Any of us.”

She'd drawn in her lips, as if she was trying to suppress a smile. "I'm moving out of town, you know." I nodded. "And my mother is awful. She doesn't like any of you." I nodded again, and the next few sentences spilled rapidly out of her. "I've really fucked up before, and I'll probably fuck up again. And I don't always know the right things to say, and sometimes I blurt shit out. I'm insecure and petty. I can be selfish, rude, and sometimes I act angry because I get nervous —"

I put my finger over her lips. Her shoulders sagged, tension deflating from her.

"I know all those things, princess," I said. "I expect nothing less. I *want* nothing less." I moved my finger and kissed her, cupping the back of head. Her kisses were so sweet, and the way she clung to my shirt to pull me closer drove me wild.

When we parted, she sat there looking at me for a moment, tracing her fingers over my face as if she was memorizing it.

"I'm glad it's different this time," she said softly. "I want it to be different."

She didn't need to say anything more; that was enough confirmation for me. She felt the same. She wanted this to work, even if she didn't know yet.

But to make sure she was thoroughly convinced, I kept kissing her until she was shaking, wide-eyed and breathless. Only then did I carry her back inside to join Vincent on the couch, snuggling her between us.

Right where she belonged.

6 - Lucas

Jess's scream pierced the quiet morning air, accompanied by the rumbling roar of the Bronco's engine. She sped down the narrow dirt trail, the suspension creaking with every bump and dip, the massive tires kicking up plumes of dirt.

I hadn't held on to the seat this hard since the first time Jason took me drifting.

Manson couldn't stop laughing as we careened wildly around a sharp turn. Apparently, staring death in the face was funny to him. Hell, I liked risky business too, but if I was going to die, it needed to be on my terms.

Trusting that Jess wasn't going to send us flying off the side of the mountain felt a lot like gambling with my life, but damn, the adrenaline rush was wild.

Jess cackled like a mad woman as we drove through the creek, splattering mud all over the doors and windows. A bump was coming up on the trail, but she didn't slow. She put the pedal to the metal and sped up, sending us flying over the crest with all four wheels off the ground.

"Jesus Christ, woman, you're going to murder us," I said, sliding across the seat when she wrenched the wheel hard to the left.

"How am I supposed to jump if I don't go fast?" she said, yelling over the music we had blasting from the stereo.

She finally brought us to a stop. She was laughing breathlessly, her hair disheveled from the wind whipping through the cabin. Her denim shorts were unbuttoned, her bikini top deliciously close to baring a nipple. She turned in her seat to look back at me, as did Manson. They both had similar expressions of wicked amusement on their faces.

"Did I scare you, Lucas?" she said, giggling when I wrenched open the door. I stepped out, pacing as I appreciated being back on solid ground for a few moments.

"I guess she can drive, huh?" Manson said, getting out of the passenger seat. He wasn't wearing a shirt today and hadn't bothered to fix his hair, leaving it to dangle in his face. He looked so happy that it was impossible not to return his smile.

"Yeah, I guess she can handle herself," I admitted as she came around the front of the Bronco.

Manson swept her up into his arms to kiss her. I wasn't much of a voyeur; I got too impatient, too eager to participate. But the two of them together were just so damn sexy, it was impossible to look away.

"It's beautiful out here," Jess said. She came to my side once Manson let her go and reached up to scrub dirt off my cheek with her thumb. I hadn't expected her to touch me there, but I surprised myself and didn't flinch.

Every time she touched me, it felt like she left a mark on me. My skin felt hot, almost electric, anytime her fingers came in contact.

"Is that a dock?" She suddenly jogged back down the trail, toward the water. The creek widened into a river here, and there was an old wooden dock that extended into the water. Jess walked out onto it, the boards creaking as her shoes thumped across it.

"Too bad there isn't a boat," she said as Manson and I joined her. "I could go for a lazy float down the river."

"It gets less lazy about a mile downstream," Manson said. "That's why there isn't a boat anymore."

"Damn foolish," I said, shaking my head as I remembered the story he'd told me about that death-trap boat. "That's what happens when you go places without me. You suddenly lose your sense."

"You would've been right there in the boat with us. Don't lie," Manson said, reaching over to shove my shoulder playfully. "I didn't even have a scratch on me."

"Ooh, I'm sensing a juicy story here," Jess said. She turned toward us, motioning for us all to sit down. "What happened?"

Already knowing the story, I pulled out a cigarette and lit up while Manson explained.

"Remember how I told you that the first time I came up here, it was just me and Daniel?" he said. "Well, Daniel wanted to try acid. We got a couple tabs from Vincent. We took 'em, spent an hour wandering around looking at shit. Then Daniel came up with this idea that we'd float down the river in the damn boat." He rolled his eyes, as if he'd been innocent in the whole situation.

"It may have been Daniel's idea, but you agreed," I said. He'd never be allowed to live that incident down.

"I'm a stupid fucker when I'm tripping," Manson admitted. "But yeah, we got in the boat. I don't know if you've ever floated down a river tripping

balls, but it's fantastic. Until we hit the rough part."

Jess's mouth formed a silent "Oh" of surprise. A far more subtle reaction than I'd had when I first heard about it, but I'd gotten better since then about not flying off the handle with my temper.

"So that was the end of the boat," he said.

Rolling my eyes at how simply he'd wrapped up the story, I said, "You forgot the part where the boat splintered to pieces on the rocks and you nearly drowned. Daniel is lucky I didn't fucking strangle him for that."

"It's sweet that you were worried for him, Lucas," Jess said, and I sputtered in protest.

"Ain't a damn thing sweet about it. This fucker nearly gave me a heart attack. Almost drowning in a river that can't be more than five feet deep." I shook my head. "So damn foolish you could throw yourself on the ground and miss."

"So, what *I'm* hearing is that a wooden boat isn't durable enough," Jess said. "But if we had a few swim rings..."

Manson nodded, holding his arms out as if to say that Jess was thinking in exactly the right direction. "That's what I'm saying. We need some floaties."

"You're both out of your damn minds," I muttered.

Jess got to her feet, and I didn't realize what she was doing until she flung her bikini top onto my lap. She took a running leap off the end of the dock, cannon-balling butt-naked into the water.

Cold water splashed toward Manson and I, splattering across the dock. The moment Jess surfaced, gasping for breath, she let out a shriek.

"Holy shit, it's cold!" she said. The water was deep enough to come up to her shoulders with her feet flat on the ground. She ducked her head down, and when she surfaced again, she spat a stream of water at us. "Come on, get in! Unless you're scared of getting wet."

Manson and I exchanged a look, but we were too slow for her. She cupped her hands and splashed the water toward us, showering us with cold droplets.

"Oh, you're in for it now," I said. Springing to my feet, I discarded my clothes and leapt in after her. She was right — the water was frigidly cold. But after a few moments, the temperature became bearable. I swept my arm through the water and splashed it over her face, leaving her gasping.

“Rude!” she cried, splashing me back. I ducked beneath the water so she couldn’t get me, swimming over to pull her down. She struggled and squirmed, laughing as we broke above the surface. “Manson, help!”

He was grinning as he stood up and pulled off his pants. He leapt off the edge of the dock, turning in mid-air before he splashed into the river beside us. He surfaced, and while I held Jess’s back against my chest, he crowded close to her front.

“You don’t look like you’re here to help me,” she said, as he grinned wickedly down at her. She swiped her hand through the water, catching him by surprise and drenching him with the splash.

“Is that how we’re playing, then? You brat.” He pushed his dripping hair out of his face, and Jess tried to flee.

But I held her captive so he could splash her. Her skin was so slick as she struggled that she slipped away from me. She swam away beneath the water with Manson in pursuit, surfacing with a scream as he grabbed her ankle. They wrestled for a moment; Manson easily overcoming her to lift her from the water.

“Let me go!” she said, splashing as she kicked.

“If you say so...” He launched her into the air, her cry comically cut off as she plunged back into the river.

Manson and I exchanged a look as she flailed to the surface. He grinned, and I immediately plunged under the water. It was murky beneath, but I spotted Jess’s legs and swam up behind her.

Grabbing her around the waist, I lifted her up. She was slippery in my arms, almost impossible to hold on to. But her strength was diminishing. She was breathless, cursing at me and laughing in the same breath.

“There’s my vicious little fucktoy,” I said, unable to resist biting tenderly at her neck. Manson came up beside us, and her breath hitched as he traced his fingers over her skin.

We held her between us; touching, kissing, savoring her. The warmth of our naked skin pressed together in the cold water was uniquely pleasurable, and my cock hardened as I ran my hands over Jess’s body.

“If you’re going to keep fighting your masters, then we’ll have to teach you a lesson,” Manson said.

Jess whimpered as she reached her arm back to grasp at him. Her chest was against mine as I held her, my cock poised so damn close to sinking inside her. Subtly moving my hips, I rubbed my length over her clit. She

lifted her eyes, and they were so full of need that I couldn't resist any longer.

Manson caught my eye over Jess's shoulder and said, "I think she wants to be punished, pup." Jess groaned softly, gyrating her hips against me, the slick feeling of her flesh making tingles of pleasure prickle up my back.

We dragged her over to the dock and lifted her partially from the water. Her chest rested on the dock's old boards as her legs dangled into the water, the river coming up to her mid-thigh. I was able to stand without needing to tread water. I grasped her hips, squeezing her as I leaned over to kiss her beautiful ass; one kiss on each cheek.

"What do you want, fucktoy?" I said, grazing my teeth over her skin before I smacked my hand down and spanked her. She gasped, the sound heavy with pleasure.

She looked back at us, her pupils dilated, her beautiful lips forming the words. "Please punish me, sir. Punish me for being a bad girl."

7 - Jessica

The things Lucas and Manson were doing with their tongues were making me see stars.

They were taking their time, Manson sucking and lapping at my clit as Lucas rimmed my ass with his tongue. My legs dangled in the cool water as the breeze kissed over my damp skin, but when I shivered, it wasn't from the cold.

My eyes were closed in bliss, but they flew open again when one of them smacked my ass. My head jerked up, the cracking sound of their hand made even louder by the water on our skin.

"Bad girls get spanked, don't they, angel?" Manson said, and I looked back, right as he smacked his palm down again. As he continued, Lucas joined him, and when the two spanked me in unison, I cried out with complete abandon.

It was a dizzying combination of stinging pain and building pleasure. They paused after several smacks to eat me again, until my legs were shaking and I was clawing at the dock. Then they were back to spanking me.

"I think we have a problem, Manson," Lucas said as he sharply smacked his hand down again. "Our fucktoy enjoys being spanked." Another hard smack made my toes curl. "How are we supposed to keep this little brat in line if she likes being punished?"

"Our toy is a slut for pain," Manson said. "I think mind-numbing pleasure will remind her of her place. It's hard to rebel when all you can think about is how desperately you need to come...and the fact you won't be allowed to."

He spanked me again, and I yelped, but my alarm wasn't from the sting. *Won't be allowed to*. Shit. I really should have known better than to ask them to punish me, because the prospect of orgasm denial was horrifying. I began to squirm, and Manson laughed.

"Well, well, a little worried now, are you?" he said. "I think we should edge you until you're sobbing, then I'll fuck your ass, and Lucas will fuck your cunt. At the same time."

They were both grinning at me when I snuck a glance. Those smiles made me instantly weak, and despite the looming dread of not being

allowed to come, I still wanted it. I *craved* it.

“Fuck me,” I said. “Please use me for your pleasure, Master.”

“I’ll go get the lube,” Manson said and gave Lucas a rough, messy kiss before he got out of the water and walked back toward the Bronco. Lucas buried his face against my pussy again, and my eyes fluttered closed. I was already aroused, my clit swollen. Every stroke of his tongue brought me closer to the orgasm I was going to be deprived of.

Manson returned, but he didn’t get back into the water. He strode across the deck and passed the lube down to Lucas. Lucas squeezed a generous amount onto his fingers, and as I watched, he pressed one digit inside my ass.

My fingers clenched into fists, and I gasped, “Thank you, sir...that feels so good...”

“Getting spanked and having your ass fingered is making you so wet,” he said, probing into me. “Such a dirty girl. You just want to be used, don’t you?”

“Yes, please...oh, *fuck*...” I groaned as Lucas added a second finger and more lube. Manson crouched down beside me, clicking his tongue as if in disbelief.

“So noisy,” he said. “All that whining won’t do. Open up.”

My obedience was immediate; I didn’t even check to see what he was holding before I opened my mouth. He stuffed something inside, a bundle of cloth too large for all of it to fit. It was Manson’s briefs, the soft dark fabric filling my mouth and muffling my desperate sounds.

It was debasing and gross to have his underwear in my mouth. But holy hell, it turned me on *because* it was disgusting, because it was so damn degrading.

“Let’s have a look at you,” Manson said, tipping up my chin. “There’s our good girl. Can’t fit anymore in your mouth, can you? Don’t worry, we’ll fill up your other holes instead.”

Moaning with abandon as Lucas slowly stretched me open, my head rested in Manson’s hands. He soothed me, praising me and scolding me.

This is what happens to naughty girls. I needed to learn my lesson.

When Lucas withdrew his fingers, Manson pulled me from the water. He lifted me up, my legs trembling as he held my dripping wet body close to his. My cold skin against his warm chest was such a luxurious pleasure, I almost melted in his arms as he kissed me. Lucas climbed out of the river,

water streaking down his chest, his hard cock lined with swollen veins. He wrapped my hair around his hand as Manson guided me to my knees, the two of them putting me on all fours.

“I’m going to fuck your ass,” Manson said as he knelt behind me. “And Lucas is going to fuck your pussy.” He leaned over my back, trailing kisses up my spine. Lucas kept a tight hold on my hair as Manson lined his cock up with my puckered entrance, his thick head sliding over me. “And we’ll keep using you until we’re satisfied. Understand?” After I nodded in understanding, he added, “Tap three times to call red. You’re doing so well.”

It was a losing battle as I tried to keep my breathing slow and measured. Anticipation tingled through my veins as Manson entered me slowly, giving me time to adjust to his size. Lucas grabbed the bottle of lube off the dock and flicked the cap open, reaching back to squeeze more of it onto Manson’s shaft.

My ass was still sore from being fucked yesterday, but I didn’t care. I wanted Manson inside me so badly that I pressed back against him, pushing him deeper.

Lucas patted my cheek as he said, “Good girl, take it nice and deep.”

Manson entered me fully, pressing in those last couple inches as he groaned, “Fuck, you’re so tight.”

His first thrusts were slow, easing me into the sensation. Lucas kept a grip on my hair, then he squatted down beside me and said, “That’s it, let him use your ass, girl. Relax for him.”

The desire to be good, to make them proud, overwhelmed all other emotions. I arched my back, even though it made the ache inside of me intensify. Manson hummed in pleasure, his fingers tracing a soothing trail over my reddened cheeks.

“Very good,” he said, his hips moving in a rhythm that made my clit throb with excitement. “God, that’s so sexy. You take it so well.”

The wave of pleasure that overwhelmed me at those words of praise almost sent me into another dimension. My head sagged, and Lucas cupped his hand under my chin to relieve the strain on my hair, which was still wrapped around his palm.

“There you go, sweetheart,” he said. I could barely see his face through my half-lidded eyes. It was impossible to focus on anything other than the sensation of Manson fucking me. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Whimpering into my gag, I nodded. Wave after wave of ecstasy was building inside me, until my body felt so tight it was dizzying. My pleading words couldn't be understood, they were nothing more than muffled sounds.

But Lucas could see the desperation on my face.

"Does the poor little fucktoy want to come?" he said, giving my head a shake. When I nodded, he laughed harshly. "Well, that's just too damn bad."

"Sorry, angel, that won't be happening," Manson said. "I told you we're going to deny you, and I won't go back on my word."

Manson wrapped his arms around my chest and eased me back, and Lucas helped him reposition me. Manson held me on his lap as he sat back, keeping his cock sheathed inside me. He spread his legs, forcing mine to spread with them. He leaned back on one arm to brace himself and kept the other wrapped around me.

The result was that I was sitting impaled on Manson's cock, my back to his chest. Lucas lined himself up with my pussy, his pierced head entering me slowly.

God, it was shockingly, *stunningly* tight. It seemed impossible how full I felt.

"You can take it," Manson said, his voice hoarse. His breathing had deepened, his chest heaving against me. His cock twitched as Lucas thrust deeper.

Slowly, inch by inch, Lucas filled me. I saw stars and gasped for breath. The fullness of them both inside me was overwhelming.

"Fuck her good, Lucas," Manson said. "I want her to need to come so badly, it breaks her."

It was a good thing I was gagged, because I couldn't control my volume as Lucas fucked me. His mouth jerked into a quick, eager smile as he watched me fall apart.

"What's wrong, huh? That too much for you?" he crooned.

It was too much and yet I still wanted more. The feeling of them both inside me was completely mind-shattering. It wasn't just the pleasure of it — it was the feeling of complete ownership. Complete control.

"I can feel him fucking you," Manson murmured, his voice thick with pleasure. "Goddamn, that's so good..."

Lucas made a sound, a groan strangled with need. He slowed down, as if he was trying to pace himself, and I could hear the sadistic smile in

Manson's words as he said, "Getting tired, puppy? I didn't tell you to stop."

Lucas lifted his eyes. He was looking past me, toward Manson, but I still got a clear look at the desperation on his face. He was past his endurance, trying to be obedient, but he was on the very edge of orgasm, struggling not to come.

I had to make that struggle a little more difficult for him. It was only fair since they weren't going to let me come.

Lucas's eyes widened as I clenched, as if I was doing a kegel. He went still, exhaling heavily, a tremor going through his arms. Manson chuckled in my ear, whispering, "You naughty little brat. What a mean thing to do, trying to make Lucas disobey me."

When Lucas lifted his eyes again, he looked like he wanted to rip me in half. He was still taking measured breaths to control himself, but Manson didn't seem to be in the mood to afford him any mercy.

He reached up, and as Lucas tried to get his breath, he caressed his fingers down the other man's cheek. It seemed so tender, at first, an affectionate gesture, but then Manson gripped his jaw, jerked his face forward and said, "I didn't *fucking* tell you to stop."

"I can't..." Lucas barely squeezed the words past his clenched teeth. "I'm gonna come, Manson, I can't —"

"You're not going to come without my permission. If you do, I'll edge you for a week and won't let you come at all."

Lucas snarled under his breath, letting off a string of curses. When he slammed into me again, it was as if he was trying to prove a point. I cried out his name, and Manson roughly reached up and shoved the gag a little deeper into my mouth.

Orgasm was so close...so painfully, desperately close. My eyes rolled back as I submitted to the pleasure, focusing on it, relishing every pulse of heat deep inside me. Manson pinched one of my nipples between his thumb and forefinger, tight enough to hurt.

"Control yourself, angel," he said. "Prove you can be good for me."

I could have shed tears from how badly I wanted to come. But even more than my own pleasure, I wanted to obey. The satisfaction of pleasing him, obeying him, would be far greater than a few seconds of bliss.

But I wasn't the only one struggling. Lucas's desperation grew, his words running together as he said, "Fuck, Manson, please let me come, please, I can't fucking take it."

Manson's laughter at Lucas's begging made me shiver as I floated in a daze. Manson's cock throbbed inside me, swelling. He shuddered, groaning as he came with short, jerking thrusts inside me.

Lucas's eyes were squeezed shut, his lips moving in some silent mantra as he barely maintained his self-control. Clenching my teeth around the cloth filling my mouth, I tried to turn my mind to something else — *anything* else — that would keep me from coming.

But it was impossible to ignore how they felt. My nails dug into Manson's arm as I gripped him, sobbing his name even though he couldn't understand me. Lucas met my eyes for a moment, and I saw my own desperation mirrored back.

When Manson spoke, his voice was tired, words coming slowly. "All right, pup. You can come."

Lucas almost sobbed in relief, as if Manson's permission alone had been holding him back. His cock pulsed inside me, throbbing as he pumped me full. He curled over me, resting his forehead against my shoulder. His heart was pounding, as was Manson's; I could feel them beating almost in unison as they held me between them.

"Good girl," Manson said, kissing the side of my face as he pulled the gag from my mouth and tossed it away. "Such a good girl, Jess. Lucas." The other man barely raised his head, turning it just enough to look at Manson. "Good boy. You did so well. I knew you could keep going for me."

Lucas buried his face against my neck and shoulder with a softly murmured, "Thank you, sir." I gently scratched my nails over the back of his scalp, and he sighed at my touch. My body was pulsating with desire, shaking from how close I'd ridden the edge of oblivion.

But I'd been a good girl. I'd been obedient. And that satisfied something far deeper than physical need.

8 - Vincent

I didn't open my eyes until 10am. When I did, it was only so I could roll over, reach for Jason lying beside me, and drag him closer so I could go back to sleep.

My natural state was laziness. I firmly believed humans were meant to spend their days lying in the sun, eating fruit, drinking booze, and fucking. It broke my little anarchist heart to be twirling along like another cooperative cog in the system, working long hours and paying taxes. But my primary system was my family and that was what I was invested in. I worked for them, for a better life for us.

A life where we did lay around all day, eating fruit, drinking booze, and fucking.

When I woke again, it was because Jason had flung his shirt at me as he dressed.

"Wake up, you lazy bastard! Come on." He smacked my ass, and I groaned but didn't move, continuing to lie there with his shirt over my head. "Dude, we'll miss the whole day if we sleep anymore."

"That's okay," I mumbled. "Sleep is worth it."

But I still sat up. We didn't get to come out here together often, and as much as I loved to sleep, I'd regret missing out if I stayed in bed. A few hours off-roading in the WRX would wake me up. Hopefully, Manson, Lucas, and Jess were still out on the trails.

I left Jason's shirt draped over my head as I trudged to the bathroom and did my business, scrubbed my face, and tied my hair up into a bun. It got wilder the longer it grew, but there was no way in hell I'd ever cut it. It was a part of me now; I'd been growing it out for years. Besides, Jason would lose his shit if I cut it off.

When I came out of the bathroom, a text from Manson was waiting for me. **Hey, bring a pair of briefs out to the trails for me, yeah?**

Snickering, I responded with, **Was Jess's driving really so bad, you pissed your pants?**

Haha, very funny. Actually, Jess ate my other pair.

I wasn't even going to ask.

We warmed up some frozen breakfast burritos in the microwave and ate them in the car as I drove the short distance up the road. Dirt trails wound

through the trees, some so narrow that only bikes could get through them.

It didn't take me long to spot them, considering the Bronco was parked sideways across the trail with the back open and three pairs of dirty bare feet sticking out.

Parking beside them, I howled and slapped my hand on the side of the Bronco as I walked up. "Ah-yoooo, wake up, ya' fuckin' hippies!"

Poking my head into the back, I found them all lying side by side, naked, with Jess between the two men. Their hair was still damp, as if they'd all gone skinny-dipping. Jason came around the other side, grabbing Lucas's feet as they dangled over the edge of the SUV.

"Is this you volunteering to rub my feet?" Lucas said, barely opening one eye. He lifted his leg so he could poke his foot toward Jason's face. "Come on, you know you want these dirty toes."

Jason laughed, swatting him away. "You wish. You're going to have to try harder than that if you want me at your feet."

Jess sat up, reaching out for me so I could help her out of the back. Satan, have mercy, she looked like a feral goddess — smudged with dirt, ruddy-cheeked, her hair wild. She smelled like sweat and sex as I held her close and kissed her.

"Damn, look at you," I said. "I love that just-fucked look on your face. So sexy." I leaned down so I could close my mouth over her breast, sucking her nipple between my teeth until she gasped.

"Looks like you wore these two out," Jason said.

Lucas sat up, smacking the back of Jason's head as he got out of the SUV. He wandered toward the water, where their clothes were discarded on the old dock.

"We're just catching our breath," Manson said, scratching his fingers through his disheveled hair. "This girl doesn't go down without a fight." He got up, wrapping his arms around Jess from behind and kissing the side of her head. She tipped her head back to look at him and her expression could have melted the glaciers.

I loved that shit. I wanted to see my people happy. I wanted them to *thrive*. The world was a goddamn mess but as long as we were together, we could handle whatever life threw at us.

I wanted Jess to be a part of "us." In so many ways, it already felt like she was. As she'd sat with Jason last night, quiet words passing between them, I'd seen the sincerity on her face. Jason hadn't told me everything she

said. I hadn't asked him either, nor would I. He'd told me she apologized for the things that had happened before, and that was enough for me.

It made me so damn proud of her; she was brave enough to have those conversations.

But these things took time. Trust took time — more time for some of us than others.

“All right, my turn behind the wheel,” Manson said, after he'd dressed and dusted the dirt off his clothes. “I'm getting you back for that wild ride earlier, Jess, just you wait.”

The WRX could whip through the trails far faster than the Bronco ever could, but Manson still kept shockingly close behind me as we sped through the trees. Every time I let off the gas to get around a curve, Jess's screams of excitement carried through the air and made me laugh.

We were all dripping sweat and covered with dust by the time we made it back to the cabin that evening. The WRX looked like it had been buried and dug up again, but I wouldn't have been satisfied with anything less. A day out in the woods wasn't proper unless you looked like a wild creature when it ended.

Lucas and Jason made sandwiches, and we sat on the floor in the living room to eat, too filthy to sit on the couch. We sprawled out on the cool hardwood, the back and front doors left open to allow the breeze to flow through.

Jess stretched her arms as she finished eating, sighing tiredly. “Ugh, I need a shower.”

“I think you look sexy covered in dirt,” Manson said, and she rolled over to kiss his cheek before she got to her feet. Jason and I followed her in unison, and she tweaked up an eyebrow at us in question.

“They got their turn,” I said, motioning to Manson and Lucas. “Now we get to clean you up and help you relax.”

“You're in for a good time, then,” Lucas said, his head resting on Manson's legs as he lay on the floor. “Manson didn't let her come earlier.”

When I looked back at Jess, she gave me a smile that made my stomach turn to jelly before she disappeared down the hallway. I glanced over at Jason, but he was too busy staring at her ass to notice. We followed her to

the primary bathroom, and she turned the shower on, the heat quickly steaming up the glass.

We stripped down and stepped in. Dirt and sweat washed away as we soaped each other up, our skin slippery as we teased with lingering touches and long kisses.

“I think Manson needs to call you a demon instead of an angel,” I said, as Jess ran her fingers through her wet hair. “Because this water is so hot, you’re going to scald my skin off.”

She laughed, reaching for me and drawing me into the stream so she could kiss me. “Suffer for me,” she whispered against my lips, and fuck it, the shower was done. I picked her up, wet, dripping, and giggling in my arms, and Jason turned off the water as I pushed open the shower door.

Carrying her to the bed, I dumped her unceremoniously on the mattress.

“I’m all wet!” She tried to protest, but I climbed on top of her, giving her a kiss that was slow and tender and made all the tension go out of her limbs.

“I don’t care if you’re wet,” I said. “I don’t care if you’re dirty or clean, or what you’re wearing or not wearing. You’re fucking beautiful and I can’t keep my hands off you.”

Her fingers tangled in my hair, pulling it lightly as she kissed me. Suddenly, she gasped into my mouth, her body rising up toward me. Pausing, I glanced back and found Jason rubbing her feet. He moved his thumbs carefully, massaging her heel and arch before he took her toes into his mouth and sucked.

She gasped again, softer this time, and her eyes widened at the new stimulation.

“That feels good,” she said. She giggled a little, clearly surprised that she liked it. “No one has ever sucked my toes before.”

“Then they’ve been missing out,” Jason said. His lips and tongue were fantastically skilled, and as he enjoyed her feet, I caressed my fingers over the rest of her.

She shivered with pleasure, leaning into my hand. She kept her fingers tangled in my hair, her grip tightening when she gasped. I’d rolled a few joints earlier, and I grabbed one of them from the bedside table along with my lighter.

“Do you want to smoke?” I said. “You don’t have to. No pressure, baby.”

She nodded, her head on the pillows as Jason worshiped her feet.

“I want to,” she said, sighing softly as she relaxed. I lit up the joint, the skunky scent wafting around the room.

Jess sat up, her gaze softening with pleasure as she watched Jason. I loved the way she looked at him. Like she longed for him, as if it turned her on to see his face. I mean, I understood. Jason was hot as hell; it turned *me* on looking at him. But it was different to watch someone else with the person you loved, to watch someone else desiring them, appreciating them, treasuring them, while also respecting the bond they had with you.

It was happiness, to put it simply. It was joyous, a celebration of who we were both together and as individuals.

A few puffs on the joint had me feeling mellow, and I passed it to Jess.

“Have you smoked before?” I said, as she took the joint between her fingers. She didn’t struggle despite her acrylic nails — evidence of experience. But I asked anyway; better to be safe than sorry.

“Of course.” She gave me a sly smile as she closed her lips around it and inhaled. “I wasn’t a very good girl in college.”

The clouds of smoke that poured from her lips made me chuckle. “Goddamn, you’re perfect.” I cupped her face, catching the smoke in my mouth and drawing it in, breathing her air like it was life itself. She was exquisite, soft and warm as I kissed her. She was a world of contrary things, all wrapped into one — a puzzle of desires. I parted from her mouth as she brought the joint to my lips, and I inhaled. She held it out to Jason next, and he leaned forward, his intense blue eyes watching her as he took a hit.

She drew us closer, irresistibly. We kissed, tongues twining, one of my hands squeezing her breast as the other tangled in Jason’s hair. Their tastes, the two of them together as one, were perfect. It was everything I wanted, a unity of sensation.

We passed the joint around, taking our time to talk and laugh as we explored each other. The other shower in the house was running, so I knew Manson and Lucas had found a way to occupy themselves. We had hours of the evening ahead of us before dinner, and I didn’t want to rush.

“Fuck, I want you,” Jason said, the words breathless. His eyes were on me as his hands roamed over her. I pulled him closer and laid him down beside Jess, moving slowly as I dragged my nails down his chest and left kisses and bites over his abdomen. She twined her fingers through his, and he laid his head on her thigh as I took his cock into my mouth.

He smelled like soap and clean skin. The taste of his flesh made me salivate, and I plunged him into my throat. His thighs tensed, the fingers of his free hand playing in my hair. He and Jess passed the joint between them, heads leaned back, eyes closed in relaxation.

I paused and grabbed the bottle of lube from the bedside table. I got my fingers slick with it and spread Jason's legs around me, stroking the lubrication over his ass before I carefully pushed a finger inside.

He groaned, and Jess leaned down, kissing him deeply. I probed him, finding his prostate and massaging over it. I didn't want to heighten the stimulation too quickly. I wanted him to savor every sensation, indulge in the experience.

His cock jumped as I moved my finger. I grasped his balls, squeezing just enough to make his shuddering breath catch. He took a hit as Jess's nails traced down his cheek, her eyes darting between watching his face and watching me.

"You're so sexy together," she said. She traced along the shell of his ear, toying with the neon green plugs he was wearing today. "I like watching you."

Jason made a quiet sound, eyes closed as he floated through bliss. I squeezed a second finger inside him, and his breathing deepened. He reached back, and Jess spread her legs so he could massage his fingers over her clit.

"They fucked you hard earlier, didn't they?" he said. She nodded, moaning softly as he fingered her, finding all her sore spots and making her whimper. "I think your pussy has been used hard enough, but I want to make you come. God, I want to make you come so bad."

His toes curled as I pushed deeper inside him, burying my two fingers past the knuckle. He took long slow breaths, drawing Jess down toward him as he said, "Sit on my face, princess. Let me moan into that sweet pussy while he fucks me."

9 - Jessica

As Jason growled those words in my ear, he lit the fuse for my arousal to explode. His kisses alone were breathtaking, but when I straddled his face and saw the wicked gleam in his bright eyes, I swear my pussy quivered with anticipation.

My arousal had calmed since we'd gotten home, but the two of them had brought it back with a vengeance.

He grasped my hips and pulled me down, holding me there as he ate me out. I tipped my head back and slowly inhaled the joint. My body felt both light and heavy, as if I was floating but swaddled in a weighted blanket. My mind was calm but still aware, and all my thoughts slowed down.

Jason's grip on me tightened as Vincent thrust his fingers into him, his eyes fluttering open for a moment to gaze up at me.

It was one of the sexiest things I'd ever seen, his eyes locked on me from between my legs as he shuddered.

Vincent moved behind me, his breath warm on my bare back as he kissed my shoulder. He trailed his kisses up to my neck, and for a moment, Jason went still beneath me, groaning as he held on to me.

"He's so fucking tight, Jess," Vincent growled in my ear. "He feels so good squeezing around me."

Jason resumed eating me with a renewed vigor. Vincent plucked the joint from my fingers, and I glanced over my shoulder to look at him. His hair was wild, drying into thick waves. Jason's legs were splayed around him and Vincent's cock sunk between them. Jason was hard, precum dripping from his slit as Vincent pressed even deeper into him.

He bottomed out inside him and paused to take a slow drag on the joint. I'd never experienced anything like this, but Jason's groans of pleasure as he ravenously stroked his tongue over me were sending me plummeting toward release. I wanted to watch Vincent fuck him, but for the next few seconds, all I could do was brace my hands on the headboard as my orgasm crashed over me.

Orgasming while high was a transcendental experience. My mind blissed out, nothing remaining save for the exquisite, shuddering pleasure.

"Oh my God...Jason...please..." He kept licking me, nudging the tip of his tongue against my clit as he sucked it. He was entirely lost in sensation

when I looked down at him. His eyes were half-closed, glazed with pleasure, his arms wrapped around my thighs.

When he finally paused for air, he gasped out, "Fuck, you taste so good, baby." His lips glistened with my arousal and he was grinning like a drunk.

Vincent stroked his hands through my hair and pulled me back. He held the joint to my lips for one final puff, then whispered, "Put this in the ashtray, then sit on his face again. But I want you facing me this time."

After I'd discarded the roach, I turned, but paused to admire the sight before me. Vincent curled over Jason, stroking his hand over the other man's face with an expression I could only describe as awe. Jason closed his eyes for a moment as he leaned into the touch, inhaling deeply as Vincent moved his hips and thrust into him with long, slow strokes.

After a moment, Vincent lifted his head to look at me and smiled, reaching out his hand for me. "Come here, baby."

Jason groaned contentedly when I straddled his face again, pulling me demandingly back onto his tongue. I was facing the other way this time though, effectively smothering his entire face with my ass.

"Can you breathe, Jason?" I said, giggling softly as he hummed in the affirmative.

"If I die, I die," he said, before his mouth was on me again. Vincent gyrated his hips to hit the right spot, and Jason's cock twitched, his sounds of pleasure muffled against me. I spread some of the lube on my hand and stroked him in unison with Vincent's thrusts, until he shook.

"Fuck, ah...God..." Jason's words were choked with need. I leaned down and took him into my mouth, and Vincent paused so he wouldn't bump into me. Jason gasped sharply as I popped my lips off him, his cock twitching in my hand as I spat on him and continued to stroke.

"That's my good girl," Vincent crooned, as I lifted my head. "Let's blow his fucking mind."

He kissed me, his tongue playing with mine as he increased his pace, fucking Jason hard. Jason hadn't stopped eating me, nuzzling his face into me like he couldn't get enough. But now he was shuddering, struggling to keep going. He was swiftly losing control, and I could literally *feel* him melting into ecstasy beneath me.

"I think he's going to come," I said, smiling as Jason squirmed.

Vincent grinned. "Not until he makes you come again." He dragged his nails along Jason's thigh, leaving reddened scratches behind as he said,

“Hear me, boy? Make her come again before you do.”

Jason nodded, muttering the words, “Yes, sir,” against my pussy. My body felt so good and my mind was free, soaring without a single worry as I fell apart on his tongue. Vincent bent forward, taking my breast in his mouth as I moaned my release.

All of it at once — it was so much — it was overwhelming. I grabbed Vincent’s hair, pulling it as his teeth bit down on my nipple. That little spark of pain made it perfect, cutting through my bliss like a shock of heat.

Jason was gasping, shaking. But neither Vincent or I let up as he said desperately, “Please...God, please, I’m so close...fuck, I’m gonna come...”

His cock swelled and twitched, cum spilling out over my hand. I let go, licking the pearly white drops from my skin. Vincent grasped my wrist and pulled it toward him, sucking two of my fingers into his mouth and licking them clean.

Then with his hand on top of mine, he curled my fingers around Jason’s cock again.

“Keep going,” he said, grinning wickedly. “Make him squirm. I’m almost there.”

He moved my hand with his as Jason shook with overstimulation, his pleading growing more desperate. “Fuck, I can’t — can’t — Vincent, please —”

Bringing Jason to desperation was such a heady feeling. No wonder he loved overstimulating me, because doing the same to him made me feel like an all-powerful goddess. It was so damn sexy to see him writhing beneath us as Vincent came, his head tipped back and his eyes closed in bliss.

It was perfect.

We lay there in silence, blissed out and comfortably tired, our limbs tangled together as we sprawled on the bed. The scent of marijuana hung in the air, and I felt a little more sober now than I had a few minutes ago. But I was still relaxed, the tension melted out of my body like butter.

I sighed and stretched, enjoying the simple feeling of clean sheets on clean skin. Although I was a little dirtier now than when Vincent first carried me out of the shower.

“How do you feel?” he said, his long fingers stroking gently through my hair, over my scalp.

“Fantastic,” I said, opening my eyes. He was lying on one side of me, and Jason was on the other, his eyes still closed. “What about you?”

“Feeling like the luckiest man alive,” he said, sitting up and leaning against the headboard. He reached over, grasping Jason’s arm. “What about you, babe? You still alive?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jason gave us a messy smile, nuzzling closer to my side. “Feel so fucking good. Tired. High.” He laughed. “That was great.”

I giggled at him, tracing my fingers over his colorful chest. “The two of you together blew my mind. That was...damn, that was so hot. I really liked watching you fuck him, Vince.”

“Yeah?” Vincent smiled widely, leaning down to kiss me. “We’ll have to do that more often than, with you.”

That promise made my belly shiver with excitement. It was still new...this concept of love and intimacy being so free-flowing. But I liked it; I felt like it fit me far better than how I’d been trying to make relationships work before.

Not that this was a *relationship*...exactly...

God, who was I kidding? This whole thing may have started with my foolish mistake and the debt I incurred because of it, but I couldn’t deny there was something here. Lust, crush fulfillment, more longing and attraction than I knew how to handle. We weren’t dating, per se, but I couldn’t keep denying we were damn close to it.

And the thing was, I enjoyed these “not-dates.” I enjoyed them more than the “real” dates I’d been on. I didn’t feel under pressure to perform — hell, I hadn’t even put on makeup today. Dating had always felt like a drawn out test, where both parties were searching for something wrong in the other. It was awkward and tiring, a constant dance of saying the right thing and acting the right way.

But it wasn’t like that with them.

“What’s on your mind?” Jason drew me out of my thoughts with his soft words. He was resting his head on my stomach, his face turned toward me.

“I was curious...have all of you ever...I mean...” I bit my lip as I tried to figure out the best way to ask, and I settled on being blunt. “Have *all* of you ever had sex? With each other? Like obviously, you and Vincent fuck. And Manson and Lucas. But...do all of you...?”

“Manson and I tag-teamed Jason once,” Vincent said, and Jason chuckled in a way that told me he still hadn’t recovered. “Manson is a damn good kisser, but he and I are a little too set in our ways as tops to be compatible sexually. And Jason is afraid of Lucas.”

“I’m not *afraid* of him,” Jason grumbled. “The dude has a fucking metal bar through his dick. Excuse me for being a little hesitant about putting that in my ass.” But he smiled, shuddering slightly. “Lucas would fuck me up.”

“Hey, *I* took his dick in my ass,” I said proudly, and Jason made a face as he mockingly mimicked my words. “It felt fantastic.”

“All right, Miss Anal Queen, you clearly have the superior ass.” Jason rolled his eyes. “What kind of plumbing you got down there, fucking steel pipes?”

I laughed until I was breathless. It had been a while since I’d smoked. I’d almost forgotten how much funnier it made things. “Sorry if that was a weird question.”

“Asking questions is good,” Vincent said. “That’s the best way to figure out what you need to know. Ask and listen. I was raised in an environment where polyamory was normalized, so this has always been second-nature. But I understand it can be difficult for some people to understand, especially when you’re used to monogamy.”

“There’s a lot more to love than most people think,” Jason said. “I used to think I was supposed to settle down with one woman, not have sex until my wedding night, and be loyal to my one and only forever. One person was supposed to fulfill everything for me, and I was supposed to do the same for them. I didn’t fit into that mold, though.” He twined his fingers through mine and brought my hand to his mouth so he could kiss it. “It’s impossible to compare the way I love Vincent to the way I love Manson, or the way I love Manson to the way I love Lucas. Intimacy can involve a lot of sex or a little sex, or none at all. Love is the same way — there’s no specific mold it has to fit. We’ve found what fulfills us.”

The way he looked at me as he said that, and the way his eyes moved to Vincent, gave me a warm feeling in my chest.

Vincent reached over me to grab his phone, bringing it back to bed. “Want to see something funny?” he said, the twinkle in his eye catching my interest.

“Are Jason’s nudes on there?” I said, snuggling closer as Vincent scrolled through his phone. He stopped his scrolling for a moment and

clicked on a photo, opening it to show Jason in all his glory, naked and flexing in front of a mirror.

“You’ll have to excuse the fuckboy stance,” Jason said dryly, but I wasn’t complaining.

“God, you’re hot,” I said, and Jason made a choked sound as Vincent nodded in agreement.

“He’s hot as hell. We need to get him to wear sluttier clothes around the house.”

“Maybe some cut-off denim shorts?” I suggested, and Vincent nodded even more enthusiastically.

“Okay, okay, focus on the funny video instead of me,” Jason said, although I could see the smile trying to break free on his face.

“Oh my God, wait — is this *the* video?” I said excitedly. “Is this the video of Lucas getting his dick pierced?”

Vincent nodded, and I almost squealed. “Yes, show me!”

“All right, troublemakers, playtime is over!”

The bedroom door flung open and Manson sauntered in, grinning at the sight of us with Lucas right behind him. Both he and Manson had showered and changed, with Manson wearing comfortable gray sweatpants and Lucas in only his boxers.

“Enough hogging the fucktoy all for yourselves,” Lucas said, flopping down on the bed beside me. He squished Jason in the process, who grunted in pain at the sudden weight. “God, I thought y’all just showered. You’re filthy.”

“Still a lot cleaner than when we started,” Jason grunted, huffing as he tried to get Lucas off him. They wrestled for a moment, their arms locked with tension as neither could force the other to move.

“Hey, hey, don’t bully him,” Vincent said, winking at me as he watched the shenanigans. “You’ll make him come again.”

“I bet he would,” Lucas said. “I bet — Hey! Wait a goddamn second, what is that video?”

He tried to snatch Vincent’s phone, but Vince was too fast, even high as a kite. His long arms easily held the phone out of reach as he leapt off the bed, almost colliding with Manson.

“Aw, come on, Lucas, I want to see it,” I said, before I squealed as Lucas grabbed me by the arm and dragged me beneath him. He covered my throat with bites and kisses that sounded far more vicious than they felt.

“You smell like weed,” he growled, mouth against me. “And dick.”

“Two of my favorite things,” Vincent said. He plucked at Manson’s shirt jokingly, saying, “Hey, bro, you’ve got a little something on your shirt.” But as Manson glanced down, Vincent flicked his nose before hurrying away to the kitchen, and Manson snorted. I held my hand out for him from underneath Lucas, and he joined us on the bed, taking my hand but offering no help.

“He’s crushing me,” I whined, but Manson just shook his head.

“Yeah, he does that,” he said, settling onto the pillows beside me. “Don’t struggle, it encourages him.”

“I like when you struggle,” Lucas said. He pushed himself up, finally allowing me the relief to breathe without his weight on my chest. “You look high as shit, girl. Did these assholes drug you?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, stretching my naked body across the blankets. Everything felt so much more luxurious when I was high; the softness of the sheets, the smell of the room, the sexy men lying around me. “I’m so helpless and vulnerable right now.”

“Perfect,” Manson said, his fingers stroking through my hair. “Just how I like you.”

“Everybody, get comfortable!” Vincent said as he returned, arms full of snacks from the kitchen. He tossed bags of chips and cookies at us before turning his attention to connecting his phone to the room’s smart TV. “It’s family movie night, starring Lucas’s penis.”

Lucas groaned, “You’re all going to be the fucking death of me, I swear.” He collapsed on top of me again, squashing me into the mattress in retaliation for daring to laugh at him. Manson chuckled at my air-deprived face before he got off the bed.

“We should get a fire going, make it a little cozier in here,” he said, heading for the door that led out onto the deck. “I’ll go get some wood. Be right back.”

10 - Manson

As I closed the door behind me, the others' laughter and conversation were muffled. It was late in the evening, still a few hours before sunset. But the light was dim beneath the trees and full of shadows.

The wood pile was heaped up beside an old shed full of gardening tools. Cobwebs were strewn all over it, so I took a cautious look for spiders with every log I picked up.

Today was perfect. All my people were together and happy. Jess was smiling so big, I knew she was enjoying her time here. Her time with us.

It made me never want to leave. All my life, I'd wanted to run away, and although I was no longer trapped in the same ways I had been as a kid, I still got that same urge to disappear. To take my people and *go*, hide us all away somewhere where no one and nothing could touch us.

My therapist said it was part of my need for control, because control made me feel safe. I could acknowledge these things; I could understand how certain feelings and urges extended from trauma. But even understanding didn't give me the control I needed.

Control over myself. Over my brain, my fear, my doubts.

I wanted to live in the moment, *this* moment. Yet I couldn't. I was incapable. Instead of treasuring what was right in front of me, I was too distracted by the inevitability of its end.

Jess's new engine would be delivered within days of us arriving back home. Once we'd fixed her car, our agreement for her "debt repayment" would technically be at an end. Paying us with sex, with time, with company...*that* would end. It was supposed to. The only reason she agreed was because there was no permanence to it. She could experiment with no expectations.

Leaning one arm against the side of the shed, I closed my eyes for a moment. It couldn't be that simple. These past few weeks, I'd seen Jess grow happier, freer. I'd watched her embrace being who she wanted to be. The thought that all that could change, that it could simply vanish...

Fuck that. I'd tell her the truth: I wanted her to stay with us so badly it felt like it would rip me apart. It would probably scare her off. I'd sound obsessed. I'd sound sick. But it was too damn late in the game to worry about that.

I had to tell her how I felt. How I'd felt for so damn long.

A twig snapped behind me, and I flinched, abruptly turning around. My heart sped up, a sickening feeling of adrenaline flooding my veins. The light was dim, and I'd taken my contacts out already, so distant shapes were blurred.

The forest wasn't a quiet place. It could have been an animal or the wind. But my heart wouldn't stop pounding. My hands were sweating.

Snap.

This time, I was ready. My hand snapped to my back pocket as I dropped the wood, my blade out and ready in the second it took me to turn toward the sound.

"Woah, man!" Vincent put his hands, taking a few hurried steps back. He hadn't been very close, thank God, but still.

"Shit." My hand was shaking as I hurriedly put the knife away. "I'm so sorry, Vince...fuck..." That had been too close. Far too close. Brandishing a weapon in one of my best friend's faces because I couldn't get it the fuck together. "I didn't hear you come out. I...You scared me."

"Yeah, I can see that." He caught my arm as I tried to turn away, and I winced as I looked at him. "Are you okay? You look pale and sweaty. Like a dead fish."

"Gee, thanks." I sighed heavily as I leaned against the woodpile, and he leaned beside me, spiders be damned. "I was just spooking myself. Jumping at shadows."

He nodded, and I appreciated his silence. Vincent had never been pushy. It made it easier to talk when I didn't feel obligated to do so.

"I haven't felt right," I said, staring off into the trees. "Not since I saw *him*."

"Your dad," he said. He didn't need to ask.

"It's like part of me went into hiding that day," I said. "The good part. The happy part. I can't...I can't figure out how to snap out of it. It's like cold pressure filling my chest." I looked down at my hands, flexing my tingling fingers. "I feel disconnected. From my body, from my brain. Like I'm falling apart."

I was glad the others were still inside. I didn't want them to hear this. It was important to be honest, it was crucial. But they didn't need my struggles put on them. We'd come up here to relax and unwind. The last

thing I wanted to do was dump all my fears on their laps and demand they deal with it too.

They wouldn't look at it that way. They'd want to help, but I really didn't think they could. All the comforting words in the world wouldn't convince my sick brain to stop being sick. It didn't work like that.

"I get it," Vincent said. "You've barely given yourself time to process it. No wonder you're struggling."

I frowned, looking back at him. "What do you mean?"

"Dude, your abusive father burst back into your life like the goddamn Kool-Aid man, and you dusted yourself off and kept going like it was nothing. This is the first time you've taken more than a day away from work in...shit, I don't even know how long. You're burning yourself into the fucking ground."

Damn. He was right, but my first instinct was to tell him he was wrong. I could handle myself, and if I couldn't, then I needed to figure it the fuck out and get my head on straight.

"Well, I can't exactly afford downtime," I said.

"You know our savings are fine. We have enough money set aside —"

"It's not about money." I shook my head. "With my dad poking his nose around, Alex causing trouble, a town full of assholes looking for an excuse to villainize us...that shit doesn't just stop and wait for me to get it together. I can't afford to not be okay, Vince. I need make sure we are okay. I have a business to run, a goddamn house to sell —"

"And you've got a family who has your back for all that shit," he said gently. "Seriously, believe it or not, you don't have to do it all. We're big boys, you know? We can handle things too."

"I know you can. But I *should* be able to do it. The fact that I can't..." It made me sick I couldn't. Made me feel like a failure.

"You're so mean to yourself, Manson." He chuckled, softening the sting of his words. "You're a human being, not a god. Regardless of what Jess tells you in the bedroom." That got me to laugh, releasing a little of my tension. "Tomorrow, I want you to relax, man. Let me be the boss for a day. I promise I won't manage to burn the cabin down."

"You know it's not about me not trusting you," I said. "It's my brain. I can't turn it off."

"That's what restraints are for," he said, waggling his eyebrows cartoonishly. "You can't be the boss if you're tied up."

It had been a long time since I'd let Vincent tie me. Restraints were hard for me to tolerate, but when he'd first learned how to work with rope bondage, I'd let him practice on me a few times. It actually was soothing, once I moved past the sickening terror of barely being able to move.

Entrusting myself to someone else's control was one of the hardest things I'd ever needed to do. It made my hands shake again thinking about it. But I needed the release, the safety, the intimacy of letting go and *trusting*.

"No pressure," he said. "I'm only offering, if you think it would help. It might snap you out of that dark headspace." He paused, watching the side of my face. "I want to help you, Manson. I hate seeing you like this."

For all the bad luck in my life, my fortune was blessed when it came to my friends.

"All right, all right," I finally said. "You can take the lead. I'll try to chill tomorrow."

"You'll *try*." He rolled his eyes, and held up his hands as if he was framing a shot for a movie. "Just picture this: you, like a bound Greek god, naked and glistening. Jess, the innocent mortal who's stumbled into your realm — guided by me, of course."

"I'm imagining you as a tall Satyr for this fantasy," I said. "Also, why am I glistening?"

"Excellent. Just call me Pan. And the glistening is for effect. Girls love things that glisten. We got some cooking oil in the pantry and I can drive into town to grab some craft glitter — Ah, well, to judge by your expression, I'm guessing it's a *no* to glitter?"

"If you tie me up and pour cooking oil on me, I swear to God..."

We collected the wood I'd dropped and headed back inside. Jess was snuggled up between Lucas and Jason as they waited for us. Somehow, she'd convinced Lucas to tell her the story of how he'd ended up with that piercing through his dick.

"Then this motherfucker tells me I'm too scared to do it," he said, giving Jason a playful kick. "So I went and got it done that same day. I wasn't going to have some church boy calling me scared."

Jason laughed, as Vincent and I got the fireplace lit. "Church boy? There's some fucking nostalgia. Haven't heard that name in a while. And you were scared as shit, don't lie."

Lucas scoffed. “As if you wouldn’t be. Let me down there with a needle, then we’ll see who’s scared.”

Vincent lit up another joint and passed it around once we settled down. We crowded together onto the bed, and as everyone got comfortable, Jess crawled onto my lap.

She brought her lips close to my ear, gently kissing my neck.

“Are you okay?” she said, her voice low, just loud enough for me to hear.

“Of course.” I smiled, leaning back so she could rest her head against my shoulder. “What made you think I wasn’t?”

“I know you,” she said. She said it so casually, so easily, she couldn’t possibly know the impact those words would have. They cracked my chest open, breaking straight through the cold shuddering pressure that suffocated me day and night. She reached through the cracks she’d created, let herself in, and brought all her warmth with her.

Wrapping my arms around her, I kissed her forehead and said, “I’ll be fine, angel. I’ve got the best people making sure of it.”

11 - Jessica

The next morning, I was the first one awake. The sun was just beginning to peek through the trees when I got out of bed, squeezing myself out from between the boys. They were all still snoring, the sheets and blankets partially kicked away, limbs sprawled everywhere.

When I lived in the dorms, I'd done a lot of cooking for myself and my sorority sisters. I had fallen out of the habit since I'd moved back home, but I really enjoyed cooking. Luckily, the cabin was already stocked with cookware, and the boys had brought plenty of food for the weekend. I whipped up some pancakes, bacon, and eggs, soon filling the kitchen with delicious smells.

There was a footstep behind me, and Lucas wrapped his arms around my waist. The stubble on his face was rough against my skin as he kissed my cheek, saying, "You're up early."

"I wanted to have enough time to make breakfast for all of you," I said. He nibbled my ear, sucking and biting as a coil of heat tightened inside my abdomen.

Despite still being sore from yesterday, I was eager for more.

Insatiable. That was how I felt. Desperate, needy, aching.

"Do I smell bacon?" Jason's voice was husky with sleep as he padded into the kitchen. Lucas pulled my back to his chest as he leaned against the counter, resting his chin on my shoulder. Jason was only wearing his boxers as he came to stand before me. He gripped my hips, leaning in for a kiss that sent a zing of electricity all the way down to my toes.

"Why are *you* up early?" Lucas said, speaking to Jason as the two of them crushed me between them.

"Because Jess has trained me to be," Jason said. "Besides, it's hard to sleep with this food smelling so good."

I didn't have anything on the stove at the moment, which worked out perfectly. Lucas's hard cock nudged against my ass, and he lifted his arm from my waist so he could wrap his fingers around my throat. His arm shook slightly, as if it took a great effort for him to be gentle.

"I'm here to serve, sirs," I said. Reaching down, I grasped Jason's bulge and stroked my hand over him, grinding my ass back against Lucas at the same time. "Use me."

“What a good girl you are this morning,” Jason said, caressing his fingers along my jaw.

“I think we should give her what she wants then, J,” Lucas said. “Let’s use that pretty little mouth.”

Before they could order me to do so, I sank to my knees. Jason’s tongue traced along his lower lip as he watched me, and Lucas came to stand alongside him. Neither of them were wearing more than their underwear, but they stripped down to stand naked before me.

They looked so different, and yet so alike. Jason was bright while Lucas was dark; light and shadow standing side by side.

Grasping one cock in each hand, I stroked them in unison. They were in charge, but their pleasure was in my control. I knew exactly how to make them weak for me.

“Ahh...fuck...” Jason exhaled slowly as I closed my lips over him. I bobbed my head, giving him long, slow strokes with my tongue as I used my hand on Lucas. Then I switched, turning my mouth to Lucas and stroking Jason in my hand.

“God, that tongue,” Lucas murmured. “You’re too damn good.”

Lucas’s fingers tangled in my hair as I turned back to Jason, taking him deep into my throat. I used my thumb to press lightly on Lucas’s piercing, moving the bar like I knew he loved.

“Fucking hell,” Lucas growled, tugging my hair. I dragged my nails down Jason’s thigh as I popped my lips off him and closed my mouth over Lucas again. He gripped my hair with both hands, shuffling his feet as if he couldn’t bear to stay still.

“Gonna come already?” Jason teased. He smiled as he said it, eyes half-lidded with pleasure. Lucas’s face twitched as I clenched him in my throat.

“I can last longer than you,” Lucas said, but his voice was fraught with a dangerous amount of pleasure. He allowed me to lift my head, and I paused for a moment to extend my tongue and swirl the tip of it over his jewelry.

“You can’t last,” Jason said simply, with that blissful, cocky smile. A sigh escaped his lips as I went down on him again. “You hate edging; I do it all the time. So, good fucking luck.”

They had a competition going among themselves, but I was competing too. I was determined to sabotage both of them simultaneously; I wanted to see how fast I could make them come.

I popped my lips off Jason for a moment, looking up at him sweetly as I rubbed his cock over my lower lip.

“Am I doing good, sir?” I said.

“Fuck, baby, so good,” he said, guiding my head back down. Lucas looked like he was doing mathematics in his head, his brow furrowed with concentration. But his thighs shook every time my fingers stroked over him.

There was movement in the doorway behind them. Manson came up silently and leaned against the frame as he watched. The small, sleepy smile he gave me inspired me to try even harder. I loved putting on a show, and now that I had an audience, I was truly in my element.

I guided Jason and Lucas closer together so I could take them both into my mouth at once — or try to, at least. I had to open wide as I slid my tongue between them.

“I want your cum please,” I murmured. “Please...”

“Oh my God...fuck...” Lucas sounded furious, but I knew better. He was about to come all over my face. But Jason was holding out, and Lucas *hated* to lose, probably as much as I did.

But sometimes, being a loser could be very, *very* good.

“I knew you’d come first,” Jason ground out the words so tauntingly I almost laughed, but that was impossible with both their cocks needing my attention.

“Shut the fuck up, you little shit,” Lucas said, his voice hitching so much he could barely get the words out. I kept my eyes on his face as I took him deeper into my throat, my clenched hand following my lips as I stroked him. “I swear to God I’ll put you on your fucking knees if you keep — fucking talking — shit — Goddamn it, Jess —”

He came deep down my throat, spurts of cum nearly making me choke. Jason took slow, deep breaths, pacing himself as the muscles in his abdomen tightened and flexed. I swallowed Lucas down, smiling as I pulled my mouth off him and switched to Jason. He groaned as my lips touched him, so close to giving me what I wanted.

Lucas stepped back, inhaling slowly as if to steady himself.

Then Jason said, “Tapping out already? Weak.”

The teasing, the taunting, the incessant games they played with me and with each other — it drove me wild. Lucas had a murderous look on his face.

“You want to ask me that again?” he said, his tone low with warning, and Jason’s cock *throbbed* on my tongue. “You’re suddenly really fucking brave with that bratty mouth, J.”

Jason shivered, biting his lip and dragging it through his teeth. He grasped his hand around the back of my head, holding me there as he fucked my throat. He didn’t say a thing, but he didn’t need words for his response.

He cursed softly as he came, looking at Lucas with a mixture of uncertainty and longing. Behind them, Manson was stroking his thumb along his jaw as he watched; the expression on his face one of intense concentration.

I swallowed Jason’s cum, every drop of it.

“Apparently today was the day to wake up bright and early,” Vincent said, having come to join Manson in the doorway while I was distracted.

“Apparently,” Manson echoed. “Looks like someone woke up feeling like a *very* good girl this morning.” He helped me up from the floor, cupping my face as he kissed me. “Mm, I love that taste, angel. Did you do all this?”

He motioned to the food, and I nodded. The pancakes, bacon, and eggs were all kept warm with the tinfoil I’d wrapped over their plates. I was hungrier than ever now.

“I felt like doing something nice for all of you,” I said. “You know, as a thank you. For the orgasms.”

“All the more reason to keep you feeling appreciative,” Vincent said, also greeting me with a good morning kiss. “This looks fantastic, baby. Thank you.”

“Well, come on then!” I said. “Let’s get this food on the table. Who wants coffee?”

12 - Vincent

If love languages were a thing, then mine was a language centered around food. My mom had always been a passionate cook, so I attributed my appreciation of it to her. There was a lot of love in a home-cooked meal, and it really didn't matter how simple or complex a recipe was. Even the simplest dish could be elevated if it was made with care.

The fact that Jess had cooked for all of us gave me a massive heap of fuzzy feelings. Since I always slept in so late, breakfast wasn't usually on the menu for me. But the big plate of syrup-covered pancakes she set in front of me made me reconsider always skipping the first meal of the day.

Jason and Lucas cleaned up the dishes once we'd finished eating. From my comfortable spot on the couch, I could hear them arguing over the clatter of dishware, their voices rising with increasingly potent threats and taunts. It made me snicker, getting the attention of Manson and Jess as they snuggled on the other end of the couch.

"I think those two need to fuck it out," Jess said, surprising us enough that Manson burst into laughter.

"I agree with you," I said. "But when Jason wants a particular reaction, he's going to keep pushing until he gets it."

Manson shook his head. "These damn brats and their terrible communication methods."

Jess looked like she was winding herself up to protest that assessment. Lucky for her, Jason came out of the kitchen just then, and spoke up before she could.

"That was a damn good morning, Jess," he said, leaning over the back of the couch to plant a kiss on her forehead. "Are you down to go for a run with me? I'm going to fall into a food coma if I don't get some blood flowing."

"She'll be staying with us," I said. "After all, she still has duties to fulfil for her master." Jess gave me a wide-eyed expression, and I grinned when she turned those beautiful eyes toward Manson.

"I'd hate to neglect my duties," she said with such a sweetly demure look that I could barely resist snatching her off his lap for my own nefarious purposes.

But I'd made Manson a promise that I'd handle things today. Not that there was anything particularly serious to be in charge of; we were on vacation after all. It was symbolic power more than anything else. Manson needed a way to convince his brain to chill, and I'd do whatever I could to give him that.

We weren't at our best when one of us was struggling, but we wouldn't let each other struggle alone.

"Suit yourself," Jason said. "I guess you'll be *hanging around* today, huh?"

Lucas came out of the kitchen, wiping his damp hands on a towel that he twisted up and snapped toward Jason's ass.

"How about you leave the terrible puns to Vincent," he said, when Jason yelped and leapt back from the towel's bite. "Stick to being our resident gym brat."

Jason rolled his eyes as he rubbed his ass. "Pretty sure this gym brat can lift more than you can."

"I don't care what you can lift, buddy," Lucas said. "I only care how fast you can run. Come on. You want to go for a jog, I'll go with you."

"All right, you're on. Let me get my shoes."

They were still taunting each other when the front door slammed behind them a few minutes later. Manson groaned contentedly, leaning his head back on the couch as he snuggled Jess closer. She trailed her fingers over his bare chest, tracing the tattoos he had inked there. She followed the lines of his collarbone, then went lower, her fingers lingering on the small patch of dark hair low on his belly.

Watching her gentle touches gave me shivers, especially when she started kissing her way down his chest.

"Enjoying yourself, baby?" I said, and she nodded her head. Manson's eyes were still closed, his entire body relaxed — except for the tension straining in his sweatpants. His eyes opened briefly when I got up off the couch, and I said, "Keep making him feel good. I'll be right back."

My supplies were packed away in my bag, so I went to the bedroom to grab them. I was generally a pretty goofy guy, but when it came to bondage, I took it seriously. Obviously, I'd still do it all with a smile, and I couldn't resist cracking a good joke. But some things were far too important to be lax about.

Being a rigger had, in many ways, forced me to mature. I'd developed an interest in rope early, and I'd been lucky enough as an adult to meet people with far more experience than I had, people who were willing to teach me and put me on the right path.

Typically, I cringed away from anything I had to take too seriously, but this was different. Bondage could be subversive, it could be healing. Playing with power dynamics and control could be the most freeing thing some people would ever do.

I grabbed my duffel bag from the bedroom and returned to find Jess and Manson had moved to the floor. He was lying on his stomach, his arms folded beneath his head as Jess scratched her nails soothingly along his back. He looked like he could fall asleep at any moment, which was perfect. I wouldn't be doing a damned thing unless he felt calm enough.

Jess lifted her head curiously as I unpacked my supplies. I had several long coils of well-used hemp rope, as well as a few shorter lengths. I also had a pair of EMT sheers, a backup cutter that I left in my bag, and a first-aid kit.

When I looked up, Manson had opened his eyes and Jess looked excited. "Am I getting tied up today?" she said.

"I am," Manson said, and she looked down at him in surprise.

"The rope is for you?" she said. "But your list said restraints on yourself were a limit."

He nodded, pushing himself up to a sitting position. "They're a soft limit."

"Perhaps more of a medium firm limit," I said, and he grinned. "Manson doesn't get off on being restrained like you do, Jess. It's a platonic interest." I stood, uncoiling the rope. "Why don't you undress him, baby?"

She didn't have to be told twice. He didn't have much on to begin with, but she pulled his sweatpants off him, kissing and caressing him as she did. She paused before taking off his briefs, a question in her expression.

"You can leave the underwear on," he said. "Vince doesn't need my giant dick swinging in his face."

"That's exactly the kind of environment I thrive in," I said. "Or have you forgotten who I'm usually tying up?"

"Fair point." Manson inhaled deeply, holding it for a moment. His shoulders were tight with tension and I grasped one of them.

“Let me know when you’re ready,” I said. “Nothing happens until you say.”

He still had control; I needed to remind him of that. It wouldn’t help for me to suggest he stay calm, or relax, or any other advice regarding his feelings. How he felt was personal; it wasn’t up to me to decide that. I could only provide him with the environment to explore it safely.

He needed the opportunity to feel however he needed to, without worrying about how it would affect other people. It wasn’t about me, or Jess, or anyone else. It was about him, and for a man who liked to be called a God, he wasn’t nearly selfish enough.

Jess spoke to him softly. “Are you scared?”

“Not scared. Not exactly.” He took a long look at the rope, as if it was an unwanted companion he was trying to be polite with. But slowly, after several deep breaths, the tension on his face melted away.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m ready.”

Art couldn’t be rushed, and rope was no different. I had to know the body I was working with. I had to know pressure points, nerves, arteries. I had to know my supplies too, the strength of my rope, the density, the pressure. Every knot was made with purpose.

Kneeling behind Manson, I took my time as I pulled the ropes taut around his chest. Jess sat in front of him, cross-legged, her hands on his legs. He kept his eyes closed, at first; taking slow breaths in a timed cadence. I bound his arms behind his back, arranging the ropes around his chest like a harness.

Every loop around his chest was like a hug, slowly crushing all that anxiety and tension out of his body. At least, that was the way I preferred to think of it. If I wasn’t so focused, I would have been more talkative, but that was why I needed Jess there. While I was tying him, she kept Manson engaged in conversation.

“Have you let him tie you up before?” she said. She kept touching him, and I wasn’t sure if she realized how much it was grounding him. I noticed, but I’d also been around Manson enough that I could pick out his little tells: the way his breath got a bit shorter and faster, how the tightness in his muscles relaxed.

“A few times,” he said. “I let him practice on me when he was learning.”

“Did it scare you then, too?”

Manson made a soft sound, something between a scoff and a growl. “I never said I was scared, angel.”

“I know,” she said. “You didn’t have to say so.”

He shifted a bit, and I paused. “Too tight?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. You’re good. Jess keeps giving me goosebumps with her nails and I’m hard as a fucking rock, so...gotta adjust a bit.”

I snickered. “She’s going to have to do something about that soon.” I peered at Jess over his shoulder. “Why don’t you go rummage around in my bag? See if you find anything in there you’d like.”

She gave Manson a slow, ridiculously sexy kiss before she leapt to her feet and dashed over to the bag.

“Holy shit, you brought so many toys!” she said when she saw all the goodies I had packed away. “How did I have no idea you brought all this?”

“I tend to come overprepared,” I said. “I may not end up using 90% of the shit I packed, but I still want to have it just in case. It’s the worst when you go on vacation and realize halfway through that you forgot your favorite paddle, or didn’t pack enough butt plugs.”

“Or the time you and Jason went camping and you forgot the poppers,” Manson added. His eyes were still closed, but he smiled as he reminded me.

“My point exactly,” I said. “Never be caught unprepared. Always pack your poppers.”

As Jess continued to hunt for toys, I completed my last knot. It wasn’t as restrictive or as extensive as the ties I usually liked to do. But the point wasn’t to construct an elaborate predicament of bondage. I gripped my hand around the nape of his neck, and he leaned into me, stretching his back and rolling his shoulders.

“How does that feel?” I said.

“Good,” he said quietly. “It feels good. It’s tight.” He took another deep breath, and I rubbed my hands across his shoulders, stimulating the circulation in his back and arms. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” I said. “I enjoy this too, you know. It’s like meditation.”

Tying someone up didn’t have to be a purely sexual experience, or even an arousing one. Sometimes, it was simply intimate. It was another way I could connect with the people I was close to, a way that didn’t require words. The process of creation, of making *something* out of essentially

nothing, was such a vulnerable act. Rarely did the recipient of that creation, the observer, have the opportunity to be vulnerable as well.

But with rope, every participant had that opportunity, whether they were tying, being tied, or observing.

I stood Manson up, walking him over to one of the two square wooden columns supporting the vaulted ceiling. Pushing him back against the column, I said, "Stand there, and don't move. Keep your head up."

His gaze was as hard as steel when he met my eyes. Defiant, as if he wanted to be sure I knew he was only doing it because he wanted to, not because I'd told him. Which was fine with me; this was by no means a power trip.

"Find anything you like?" I said, glancing back at Jess as I used another length of rope to bind Manson to the column. I secured his ankles, tightly, slightly spread, enough to maintain that feeling of vulnerability in his position.

"Yes, sir," she said, and I paused to have a look at what she'd chosen. She was holding a vibrator and a string of anal beads. The beads swung from her hand as she came closer.

Now that Manson was fully restrained, I stood up and drew Jess close to me, examining the toys she selected. Manson watched us, his hard-on rather comically obvious.

"Not too bad a predicament for a voyeur," I said, unable to resist giving him a sardonic grin. "I'm going to make our fucktoy worship you, as she should. You won't be able to touch her, of course." I pulled her forward, so she was in front of me and close enough to touch his chest. Being the little tease that she was, of course she leaned against him, running her fingers along the ropes keeping him in place.

"My, my, how the tables have turned." She giggled. I wrapped my hand around her throat, carefully pulling her head back toward me.

"Be careful," I warned. "Manson left me in charge while he's restrained. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'll be lax." I kissed her cheek, gently, before giving her ass a sharp smack. "Get your clothes off. Make him wish he could touch you."

Putting on a show came naturally to her. She stripped as I stepped back to observe. Every inch of skin she revealed was stunning; it really didn't matter how often I saw her naked, or how much we fucked. She took my breath away every time.

Once she was naked, she sank to her knees, leaning her head down to kiss his feet.

“Stay just like that, Jess,” I said. Picking up the vibrator, I flicked the switch to ON and knelt behind her, teasing the toy between her legs. She twitched when I ran it over her clit. “You’re already so wet, baby. Which part turned you on? Was it sucking off Lucas and Jason this morning, or watching your Master get tied up?”

“Both,” she said, her little giggle dissolving into a moan when I held the vibrator against her again. She lifted her head, just enough to look up at Manson as he gazed at her. She trailed her fingers up his legs, his hips, over his abdomen. He shivered as she did it, his eyes widening as she brought her mouth even with his cock. She kissed the head through the fabric of his underwear, with a question in her gaze. “May I use my mouth on you? Please?”

“Fuck...of course you can, angel.” Manson sucked in his breath as she pulled down his briefs and stroked her tongue over his head. Putting the vibrator aside for a moment, I picked up the anal beads and the bottle of lube.

“Focus on your Master,” I told her as I circled a lubricated finger around her back entrance. She groaned as I pressed inside, thrusting past that tight ring of muscle. I could only imagine how sore she was by now. It was day three and we’d barely stopped fucking since we got here.

“Do you like how that feels?” Manson said, and Jess whimpered as she nodded. After giving her a few moments to adjust to my finger, I inserted the beads instead. They started small, barely an effort to fit inside. But each bead was bigger than the last.

She gasped as I pressed the last bead inside. Her cheek rested against Manson’s thigh as she stroked his cock with her hand.

“Mm, that’s better. Fucktoys should always have their holes stuffed full, shouldn’t they?” I said softly.

“Yes, sir.” She gasped with pleasure, and I wrapped her hair around my hand, giving myself control of her head.

“Now, you’re going to serve Manson with your mouth. You’re going to do everything you can to focus on his pleasure. Is that understood?”

Manson’s breathing had quickened, his cock leaking precum that Jess eagerly lapped up.

“There you go, baby,” I said, easing her head down on his cock. “Keep your eyes on him, you’re doing so good.”

She gagged softly as he hit the back of her throat. But she quickly adjusted. The muscles in her neck tightened as she bobbed up and down on him, her cheeks hollowed as she sucked.

“Goddamn, look at you,” I said. I released her hair, allowing her to set the pace. Manson’s legs were soon trembling, his every breath slow and deep. I had no doubt he could control himself to make this last, but I did enjoy seeing him struggle.

“Good girl, Jess,” he said, tensing against the ropes as if he was instinctually reaching for her. He clenched his teeth, pressing his head back against the column. “Your mouth is fucking sinful. You feel so damn good.”

Jess was so aroused that she’d dripped on the floor. Picking up the vibrator again, I wrapped my arm around her front to hold it against her clit. At the same time, I squeezed two fingers into her pussy.

She moaned, grinding herself down on my fingers. I pumped them into her as she squeezed around me, her walls throbbing

“Please your Master first, Jess,” I said. “Then you can come, baby.”

She lifted her head, continuing to stroke him with her hand. “I understand, sir. All I want is Master’s cum.” She looked up at him, her expression so sweet and pleading. With a face like that, she could have anything she wanted.

She buried her mouth at the base of his cock, lapping her tongue over his balls. Manson’s entire body strained against the ropes; muscles clenching, his breath shuddering, limbs trembling.

“Fuck, Jess...” His teeth were clenched, but a strangled moan of ecstasy slipped out anyway. “That’s going to make me come, angel.”

“Please,” she said. “Come on my face.”

Manson came with a guttural cry, ribbons of cum streaking across her face. She smiled widely, mouth open, tongue extended. She swallowed every drop that landed on her tongue, she licked him from her lips. When he stilled, she kissed the head of his cock and whispered, “Thank you, Master.”

It was fucking impossible to resist her any longer.

Roughly, I shoved her down onto her back. She was still trying to catch her breath, legs shaking, her clit swollen. Cum was smeared across her face, her cheeks were pink, her skin so hot.

She was perfect. Beautiful beyond words.

“Don’t move,” I said. I stood over her, and she lay trembling as I stripped off my clothes. Manson looked dazed, as if he hadn’t fully come back to earth after that orgasm. I grabbed his face, giving it enough of a shake to bring some clarity back into his eyes. “Hey, hey, don’t go floating off in your head. You’re going to want to watch this.”

Sinking down over Jess, I pinned her to the floor with one hand around her throat. Her toes curled as I guided my cock into her. The beads were still inside her too, and I couldn’t wait to feel her break apart on my cock when she came.

Fully inside her, I picked up the vibrator again and clicked it to life. The moment I pressed the toy against her and thrust into her, her wide eyes rolled back.

“Oh my fucking God...” She gripped my arm, nails digging in. She growled the words like an animal, her body torn between pain and pleasure as I fucked her hard.

“You look gorgeous, Jess,” I said, curling over her, pushing her leg up for a deeper angle inside her. “Wet, needy, and covered in cum. Just how I like you. Filthy little thing.”

Her pussy convulsed around my cock, and she cried my name as she came. The sound of her sweet voice breaking tipped me over the edge. I came inside her, my vision blurring for a few perfect seconds as my body was gripped with ecstasy.

13 - Jason

The morning air was crisp and fresh as I stepped off the porch. I stretched my arms, my back, and then my legs, savoring the ache of my muscles releasing their tension.

That orgasm had left my head feeling fuzzy, and I bounced on my toes as I tried to wake myself up. This was why I usually reserved playtime for *after* a workout, otherwise I was too lazy to function. But I could make it work.

“Are you sure you want to come with me?” I said as Lucas put in his earbuds and scrolled through his phone, deciding on what to listen to. I’d listen to music if I was in the gym, but out here, I wanted the sounds of the forest around me. “It’s not exactly going to be a light jog.”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “I’m not afraid of a little exercise.”

“I dunno, man. You were huffing and puffing from playing paintball with Jess.”

He made a dismissive sound. “Whatever. Just lead the way, I’ll keep up.”

Lucas had always hated running. It was weird, because he struck me as the kind of man that would benefit from using exercise as an outlet. Personally, working out helped me feel calm. I could zone out to a physically demanding session and let my brain wander. It gave me a good opportunity to think.

And that morning, I had a lot on my mind.

Ever since that first night, when Jess had whispered her apology to me under the stars, I hadn’t been able to put it out of my mind. The way she’d looked at me, how full of hope and fear her eyes had been — I’d never expected to see that kind of sincerity from her.

It had been obvious she was making an effort to change, of course. The last few weeks had proven that much. But Jess was a prideful person, and I’d never thought she would put that aside for the sake of making amends.

She’d surprised me. My feelings for her had already been in a confusing place; hovering on the edge of something that felt too serious, yet not serious enough. But after that conversation, something had changed.

How I felt had changed.

Like a door that had previously been locked tight was suddenly cracked open.

Falling into a rhythm as I ran, I let my thoughts run idly. Lucas was keeping pace with me, running behind me as we wound along the path through the trees. There were miles of hiking trails around the cabin, and I didn't have any particular destination in mind. I kept going until my legs began to ache, and I finally had to stop to catch my breath.

Only once I'd stopped and stood there for several seconds did I realize Lucas had fallen behind. It only took him about thirty seconds to catch up, but it took every shred of my self-control not to laugh. He doubled over, hands on his knees as he panted.

"Don't you *fuckin*g laugh," he snapped, and I shrugged innocently.

"I didn't say a word. Don't die on me now. I don't want to have to carry your ass back."

"Oh, shut up."

We walked on, taking our time so he could catch his breath. The path carried us along a sheer rock face for the next hundred yards before curving back down the mountainside, but I didn't feel like returning yet. We'd been running on an incline — no wonder Lucas was having such a hard time.

Plant life was growing out of massive cracks in the rock face, and water was trickling down the smooth stone in a thin, cascading fall. Partially hidden amid the thick plant life was the narrow opening of a cavern in the rock, carved out by centuries of flowing water.

"Did you know there were caves up here?" Lucas said, nodding toward the opening. It wasn't much of a cave really. The space within was lit by a shaft of sunlight falling through the rocks above, creating a space that was damp and cool but full of life. Tiny frogs sat on algae-covered stones near the flowing water.

"You've been here before, don't you remember?" I said, but he shook his head.

"I was wasted as hell the last time we were up here, J." He gave me an accusatory look, and I laughed.

"Just because it was my twenty-first birthday doesn't mean it was my fault you drank too much," I said. "I can't help it that I have a high tolerance, or that you're so damn competitive you had to try to keep up with me."

He snorted as he brushed past me to enter the cavern, and I followed him. Smooth pebbles crunched under our shoes as we wandered around. There was a large boulder in the middle of the cave, sitting directly under the shaft of sunlight spilling in from overhead. I climbed on top of it and sat with my legs dangling off the side as the sun warmed my face.

Lucas wandered over to where the water was trickling down and stripped off his shirt. He let the stream pool in his hand and then splashed it over his shoulders, trickles running down his back.

It was hard not to stare. For a guy who didn't give a fuck about self-care of any kind, his physique was ridiculous. When I'd first met him, he'd intimidated me so much I could barely manage to say a word to him. Back then, I hadn't been sure if I wanted to be him or fuck him.

I still wasn't sure. And he still intimidated me, as much as I hated to admit it.

I'd really been lacking in role models when I'd met him. The men I'd once looked up to — my father, uncle, leaders in my family's church — had all turned their backs on me. But Lucas had been everything I wished I was. He was bold, he didn't seem to care what people thought. He wasn't trying to please anyone. He was living his life the way he wanted it.

At least, that was how I'd thought of it back then.

It had taken me a while to see past Lucas's bravado, but once I did, it was clear how much he struggled. His assertion that he didn't care what anyone thought was a lie. He wasn't bold so much as he lacked the self-control to manage his anger, so it spilled out of him constantly.

I still looked up to him, but it was for different reasons than before. He was admirable because despite all his flaws, despite how hard it was for him to maintain relationships and care about other people, he still *tried*.

"What's on your mind?" he drawled, snapping me out of my daydreams.

"Besides your strip tease?" I said. He rolled his eyes at my remark, slinging his shirt over his shoulder "What makes you think I have something on my mind?"

"You're brooding." He shook the water off his hand and strolled toward me. "Staring off into the sky all twitterpated-like. What are you thinking about?"

I leaned back on my hands, kicking my feet against the stone beneath me. "Her."

He nodded as he fished around in his pocket for his cigarettes. But he must have forgotten them, because he sighed heavily and began to fidget with the thin silver chain around his neck instead. “You’re not alone there. It’s been hard to think about much else.”

Bringing a new lover into the group was bound to shake things up. But this was different, and I think we all felt it. Despite our relationship with Jess having a time limit on it from the start, it didn’t feel that way anymore.

She had me thinking far further into the future than merely how long it would take Manson and Lucas to get her engine installed.

“She apologized,” I said. Lucas’s eyes widened, then swiftly narrowed.

His tone was cautious as he said, “For what?”

“Everything.”

She’d meant it, too. That was why I kept replaying that conversation in my head again and again. I wanted to give her a chance. I wanted this to work.

Lucas rested his palms against the stone on either side of me. His dark eyes looked more like caramel when the light hit them. It made them softer. Warmer.

“How did that make you feel?” he said.

“We’re talking about feelings?” I said. “Really? Have you been taking notes from Manson’s therapist?”

He hopped up on the boulder to sit beside me, giving my shoulder a shove as he scolded, “Watch your mouth. Vincent isn’t out here to save you.”

“As if I need saving.”

The look we exchanged shouldn’t have felt so damn intense. But Lucas was intense without even trying.

“It made me feel...hopeful,” I finally said, after mulling it over. “Like things are brighter. Like something has gone right.”

We sat in silence for a while. Lucas had struggled with Jess getting involved, but I couldn’t blame him. What had shocked me wasn’t that he’d been hesitant about it; it was that he’d tried so hard not to fight it too much. He could have put his foot down if he really wanted to.

“I think she’s really trying,” I said. He was plucking at a loose thread on his jeans and his fingers stilled at my words. “I think...I don’t know, I think she wants to stick around.”

“Yeah?” His fingers tightened. His nails pressed hard into the denim for a moment before they relaxed again. “I guess you’re right. She’s changed...still trying to change too, I think.” He took a deep breath, releasing it with a sigh. “It isn’t easy to rewire your own brain.”

“Takes a lot of effort,” I said. “But I managed it. I think she can too.”

“You’re different.”

“Not really. You hated my guts when you first met me. You should have seen me during freshman year, when I was still enrolled at that private school.” I shook my head. “I was Mr. Morality Police.”

“I *should* have met you back then,” he said. “I would have punched you in the damn mouth and set you straight.” He snickered. “*Straight* probably isn’t the descriptor I should use.”

Another few moments of silence passed. Faintly, I could still hear music playing from Lucas’s phone; it sounded like Hozier, and it melded into the sounds of the trickling water and rustling leaves.

Then, he said, “I’m proud of you, Jason.”

Hurriedly reaching over, I laid the back of my hand against his forehead. “Are you sick? You must have a fever.”

He swatted my hand away, laughing at my teasing. “I’m serious! You better fucking appreciate how nice I’m being, because it ain’t natural for me. I’m going to have to start a fight with someone to balance this shit out.”

Lucas had a hard time being nice, but I had an even harder time accepting that niceness. I probably would have wept if he hadn’t been looking at me.

“I appreciate that,” I said, clearing my throat so hard that I coughed. “Thanks. I...it’s, uh...thank you.”

Lucas shook his head. “You’re even worse at accepting a compliment than I am. Jesus Christ, just accept it in silence.”

So that was what I did, although I wasn’t able to keep myself from smiling like an awkward fool.

“You didn’t think I had it in me,” I said. “Back when we met. You thought I’d bail on the group.”

“Would’ve been smart if you did,” he said simply. “I knew you had it in you, J. I wasn’t underestimating you. I didn’t want you to *need* to have it in you. That make sense?”

He’d never put it like that before. I moved a little closer, so we were seated with our arms touching. “That makes sense.” Then, after another

long pause, I said, “I love you. Don’t forget that.”

“I love you too, you little shit.”

14 - Lucas

High School — The Summer Before Senior Year

Jason's hair fell around him in clumps as I moved the clippers over his scalp. His brown hair was so soft, it could have been from a rabbit or some other small, quivering animal. It almost made me regret shaving it off.

Jason had walked into my trailer that morning with Manson and Vincent in tow, looking as if he'd arrived for his own execution. He had, in a way. The Jason Roth who existed before today — the made-up version, the polite, straight, God-fearing boy he'd been for his parents — was dead.

I'd helped kill him. Today was our method of hiding the corpse.

Turning off the clippers, I tossed them onto the kitchen counter. The trailer was hot as balls even with all the windows open, so I was walking around in my boxers and nothing else. Manson was mixing bleach powder and developer in a bowl, while Vincent was preoccupied sniffing the bright blue hair dye Jason brought with him.

"Smells like Jolly Ranchers," he said, frowning at the bottle before sniffing it again. He was too high to function, as usual, but I loved him for it. That scatter-brained clown could actually make me laugh sometimes, and that was saying something.

"Try not to inhale this," Manson said. He used his gloved hands to smear the bleach over Jason's head. Jason sat there silently, although his leg began to bounce impatiently after a couple minutes.

"Is it supposed to burn?" he said.

"Yep. It's going to itch like hell too, but don't touch it."

He didn't have much hair left, so the bleach didn't take long to work. He sat there shirtless, his chest freshly covered with the lines of an unfinished tattoo. I'd hooked him up with someone willing to do it, considering he wouldn't turn eighteen for another few weeks and most reputable shops would turn him away. But he hadn't wanted to wait, and I didn't blame him.

He'd already waited long enough.

"Do you have any beer?" he said as Manson finished up and dropped the bowl of bleach into the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. I wasn't a messy person, but I fucking hated doing dishes. With my Pops dead and gone, I really couldn't be bothered. Now that I no longer had to worry about

fighting someone about it, I'd let the dishes overflow if I goddamn felt like it.

"Fresh out," I said.

What I didn't mention was that "fresh out" included *everything*. Beer, food — hell, even toilet paper was pretty much gone. My income from working at the tire shop barely covered bills, even in this shithole trailer park. Paying to cremate my father had been a complete waste of the very little money I had left, but Mom had insisted she wanted the ashes. She was getting so much worse living on her own, with no one to look after her. The little affection I had left for her demanded that I at least give her a proper chance to mourn her shitstain of a husband.

But I wasn't about to bring all that up and have the boys feeling sorry for me.

Then again, maybe it would be better if I did. Because Jason was looking at his own future, and he needed to at least know the truth.

Being true to yourself was all well and good, but there were consequences. Heavy ones. That was why he'd shown up here, looking like he was about to die.

His parents didn't accept him, and they wouldn't. They'd given him an ultimatum: give up dating Vincent or get out. Adhere to their rules, repent for his "sins," and pray to be forgiven. They'd given him pamphlets for conversion therapists, as if he was hooked on drugs and they were trying to get him into rehab. They told him they loved him, and in the same breath, called him disgusting.

Never in my life would I have thought I'd advise someone to keep their head down, but I'd told Jason to do exactly that. He was a smart kid, he had a future, he had potential. He could get somewhere in his life. He had a chance.

But he was giving it up. For us. For Vincent. For himself. He was brave as fuck and foolish as hell. I couldn't decide if I wanted to cheer him on or tell him to get it together, but I didn't have a leg to stand on. The things I'd give up for Vincent and Manson included my life, so who was I to tell him that he should keep trying to placate his parents?

"Sounds like we need a beer run, then," Manson said, clapping Vincent's shoulder. "Come on, let's go to the gas station. I've got my fake with me. Rinse that bleach out in a couple minutes."

Vincent lurched to his feet, leaving the blue dye on the counter and leaning down to give Jason a kiss before he and Manson left.

Jason's hands were clasped in his lap, his leg still jiggling rapidly. He stared at a spot on the wall without blinking, his jaw working as if he were chewing on his own anxiety.

"Where do your parents think you are today?" I said.

"They don't know," he said. "I just left. Didn't tell them anything. I packed a bag." He swallowed, reaching a hand up to scratch his head before abruptly remembering he wasn't supposed to touch. "I figure when I go back like this...that's it. So I already got what I needed. Packed up everything that's mine. I have most of the receipts so they can't say I stole shit."

He rattled off his plan like it was nothing out of the ordinary. He was a smart kid, far smarter than I could ever hope to be. He thought things through, but that didn't mean his thought process was flawless. He was scared, but he was angry too. Fury gave him courage, but it also made him reckless.

The desire to protect him made me reckless too. He was too good, too pure. He didn't deserve this shit; he didn't deserve the hateful bigoted vitriol the world was going to throw his way.

"You scared?" I said. The way he was rubbing his palms together made it obvious. It was moments like this that made me wish I was capable of being comforting. I wanted to say something gentle, something that would help. But I had nothing.

He nodded quickly. "Yeah, I'm..." He twitched, sucking in a deep breath. "I'm fine. I talked to Vincent's parents. They'll let me stay with them. They were so damn nice..." His fingers tightened on his lap. "I'm going to pay them. They already don't have much room."

If I could have, I would have offered to let him stay here with me. But I wasn't going to be able to hold on to this place for much longer. I was barely scraping by with payments as it was. Within a few months, I'd have nowhere to go either.

Jason flinched, pulling his cell out of his pocket. The incoming call was from his mom, and he stared at it for several long seconds before he sent the call to voicemail.

"Fuck 'em," I said. "You know what you want, and it's none of their goddamn business. Let them fuss over it if they want. They can't control

your whole life.”

Empty words. Food and shelter, when leveraged, could absolutely give his parents control. But by the look on his face, I didn't think he cared anymore. There was fear in his eyes but not in his voice.

“Fuck ‘em,” he murmured, scratching his cheek because he couldn't scratch his scalp. He bowed his head, glancing at his watch as he said, “I think I need to wash this bleach out.”

“I got you.” The sink was too full and the bathroom only had a standing shower, so I led him outside. The lot was all dirt, a few crunchy weeds sprung up here and there. The scent of cigarettes and bacon fat wafted from the neighbor's place as I turned on the spigot, then picked up the hose and urged Jason closer. “Bend over, close your eyes.”

He squatted down, squeezing his eyes shut and bending his head forward. Pouring water over his head, I scrubbed his scalp with my hand as I washed the bleach away. It ran into the dirt, muddy as it pooled around his shoes.

“Don't be afraid of them,” I said. “This is your life. Your choices. This is you.” I rubbed some crusted bleach off his neck and paused, my fingers splayed over his skin. He didn't move; he stayed exactly as he was with his head bowed.

When Pops died — *it had been three months already, holy shit* — I hadn't grieved for him. There had been no sadness when I woke up one morning and found him dead in the shower, killed almost instantly by a heart attack. If anything, it was a relief to have him gone. Even though it left me in an impossible position trying to afford our bills, I didn't care.

But doing this, helping Jason crack open the shell he'd lived in for so long, felt like a process of mourning. It was full of sadness for who he'd been, while clinging to hope for what he could be. It was a death, but it was a rebirth too.

His experiences were so different from my own. His upbringing had been gentle. It almost made what his parents were doing even worse. At least with Pops, he'd always been an asshole. I knew what to expect from him. My father had operated on the assumption that he could control people through fear and intimidation, so when I stopped being afraid of him, there really wasn't much he could do. When I got strong enough to fight back, to *hurt him back*, things mellowed out around here.

None of that mattered anymore. With my father dead, my ties to my family were all but severed. The only one who remained, the only one who mattered, was Benji. But he wouldn't be out of prison for years.

As I turned off the hose, I noticed movement beneath the trailer. A young cat, no more than six months old, watched me from the shadows. She meowed, sauntering closer when she recognized me.

"No, no, get out of here." I snapped my fingers and flicked my hand at her, trying to discourage her. But she trusted me; I'd fed her and her littermates more than enough times for her to know that I was a safe person.

But it wasn't safe for her here.

"Get!" I raised my voice, stomping my foot toward her and slapping my hand on the side of the trailer. It was sufficient to send her scrambling, tail puffed up as she fled.

"I thought you liked those cats," Jason said.

"I do. But there's an old man a couple trailers down that tries to shoot the strays that come through. He thinks it's funny." There was a cat I'd trapped and taken to the vet a couple weeks ago that had multiple BBs lodged in him. Seeing it made me sick. I'd happily beat that old man's lights out if it wouldn't send me to prison. But I was on my last strike with the cops around here as it was. One little peep out of me and they'd gladly lock me away. "I gotta scare 'em. I hate to do it, but it's not safe for them here."

I'd never understood why some people had such a loathing for cats. There were dozens of strays who made their home around the trailer park, living off scraps and sheltering in discarded trash. Cats were moody, mischievous, independent little creatures, and humans tended to like animals that fawned over them. They tended to like people who did that too. The moment a creature wasn't instantly submissive, obedient, and compliant, humans called it a "problem."

"You're just trying to protect them," Jason said. "I get it. If they could understand...they'd be glad."

He stood up, staring at his warped reflection in the trailer's windowpane. His short hair was now a pale yellow-blond. He ran his fingers over it, touching it lightly, uncertain.

I hoped he understood that I was trying to protect him too. Because I'd seen the cruelty, I'd felt the pain. Every day, I got up and told myself that it

was worth it to fight. To survive. To raise a proverbial middle finger to the world and say, “You haven’t fucking killed me yet.”

He’d need to be strong enough to do that. Looking at him now, at the hardness in those blue eyes, I knew that he was. He was strong. He’d survive.

But damn, I wished he didn’t have to do all of that.

Where the hell was there room for the soft boys of the world? Where was there safety for gentleness? Why did we all need to become warriors, to be soldiers, when we were still barely more than kids.

We had nothing but each other. And maybe we could make our own space for gentleness, maybe we’d have to fight every day and we’d never know what “safe” meant. But we had each other.

I slung my arm around his shoulders, directing him away from his reflection and back inside. “Let’s get that dye on you, kid. Come on.”

15 - Jessica

We spent our last night in the cabin watching movies on the couch. Manson and Jason both voted for a horror film, Vincent wanted comedy, and Lucas just wanted beer. My vote decided the matter, and we settled on a marathon of the campiest 80s horror films they could possibly think of.

“We’ll start with *Sleepaway Camp*,” Jason said. “Then *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*.”

“Then *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark*,” Manson said.

“Pay attention, Jess. This is going to be Manson’s very roundabout way of convincing you to dress as Elvira for Halloween,” Vincent said, ducking out of the way before Manson could smack him.

“Hey, Elvira is a beautiful, iconic lady,” Manson said. “She also happens to have amazing tits, which is irrelevant to my appreciation of her.”

“Right, right, we’ll check in with your dick halfway through the movie and see how *irrelevant* it is,” Lucas said. Jason had returned from the kitchen with beer for both of them, and Lucas dragged him onto his lap instead of letting him take a seat on the couch.

“Need a cuddle buddy so you won’t be scared?” Jason said, as Lucas got comfortable and cracked open his beer, then popped open Jason’s too.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Lucas said dryly. “I need someone to squeeze *really fucking tight* at the scary parts.”

He proceeded to give Jason a hug tight enough to squeeze all the air out of his lungs. Jason wheezed, “Damn, you are scary to cuddle with.”

Manson had claimed me as his cuddle buddy already, the two of us curled up at the corner of the big sectional couch. Even hours later, the impressions of the rope he’d been bound with remained on his skin. My finger traced the reddened imprints as I snuggled against him, saying softly, “These marks look so sexy on you.”

“You’re gonna make me blush,” he said, shivering when I kissed his chest.

As much as I’d learned over these past few weeks, watching Manson with Vincent today had opened my eyes even more. It was intimidating to be trusted with someone’s well-being; their mental health, their feelings, their physical safety. Especially when that person already had so much to

fear, for so many reasons. It was like Manson went to war against himself, while Vincent and I handed him the weapons to fight.

He was relaxed now, the most relaxed I'd seen him since his father showed up at the house. The difference could be physically felt as I laid against him, listening to the beat of his heart, steady and slow. He'd softened, as if the tension he'd been carrying had finally released its hold. He sipped a whiskey on the rocks as we watched hapless teens fall victim to killer alien clowns, all five of us laughing at the ridiculous gore and slimy fake blood.

It was a night to be savored, our last day of peace and isolation before we returned to Wickeston tomorrow. Going back home meant facing reality again: my mom and her judgment, my ex-friends and their vitriol, Alex McAllister and his endless grudge against the boys. And...Reagan Reed.

Manson had hoped his father would leave town again while we were gone. Pessimism usually wasn't my instinct, but something told me Reagan wasn't going to leave so easily.

He'd still be there. Waiting, watching, but for what exactly, I didn't know.

Manson was clearly tipsy by the time we started watching Elvira, and his drunken running commentary throughout the movie had me laughing until my stomach hurt. Even as the hour grew later and my eyes became heavy, I didn't want to go to sleep...not yet. I didn't want the night to end.

Somehow, amid the thrills and excitement of the dirty games we played, I'd become comfortable. When I was with them, I didn't have to think about anyone's disapproval. I didn't have to care what went on outside our walls.

They'd become my haven.

We were awake bright and early Monday morning. We packed everything into the vehicles, cleaned the cabin, then ensured all the doors and windows were locked up before we got on the road.

Just like that, vacation was at an end.

It was a melancholy feeling to go back to reality. Thoughts of what I'd need to get done at work that week crowded my head, my to-do list already

trying to demand my attention. But stressing about work wasn't my only distraction.

I was about to meet Vincent's parents for the first time.

The Volkov family had taken care of Jojo and Haribo over the weekend. When Vincent first mentioned that we'd be going by the house to pick the dogs up, I hadn't thought much of it. He'd brought it up so casually that it barely registered in my brain.

Then midway through the drive, a call from his mom came through. He talked to her with a massive smile on his face, assuring her that the drive was going well and that we'd be there in "only a couple hours."

That certainly brought the nerves crashing over me like a tsunami.

Holy shit.

I was meeting his parents. Oh God, what if they hated me? What if they disapproved? I hadn't worn any makeup all weekend and today was no different, but suddenly I was rummaging in my purse for mascara, concealer — anything I could do to try to make a better impression.

In typical fashion, Vincent noticed exactly what I was doing.

"Hey, hey, don't stress yourself out," he said. He caught my hand and laced his fingers through mine. "My mom is really excited to meet you. I tried to tell her not to, but she's cooking an early dinner for us."

"You're going to love Vera's cooking," Jason said. "Vincent's a good cook, but his mom blows him out of the water." Vincent nodded along in agreement.

It had been a few years since I'd bothered to meet the family of anyone I'd dated. Getting people's families involved, including my own, made things complicated and far too serious. Dating was more comfortable when it stayed casual. It was easier to walk away from.

Except in this case, as bad as my nerves were, I *did* feel excited. If Vincent's mom was eager to meet me, then that meant she'd *heard* about me. What on earth had he told her? What must she think of me? Vincent was such an easy-going person, so I could only hope his family was the same. Knowing how hard it was to please my own mother, my stomach twisted up into knots imagining the judgment Vera Volkov could mete out against me.

As we got closer to the house, I was squeezing Vincent's hand like a vice. The Volkovs lived on the outskirts of Wickeston, down a meandering country road overshadowed by trees. We pulled on to a narrow dirt

driveway, with a carved wooden sign fixed to a post next to it. *Home Sweet Home*, it read.

The house sat at the end of the winding driveway, surrounded by trees. It looked as if it had originally been a barn, but features had been added to convert it to a house. Numerous windchimes hung from the large front porch, tinkling in the breeze. Potted plants and bunches of drying flowers dangled along the porch railing. Chickens pecked for bugs beside the house, lifting their heads curiously as the cars drove up.

We parked, everyone groaning tiredly as we got out and finally had a chance to stretch our legs. Suddenly, the front door burst open and two little girls sprinted outside, squealing as they ran, with Jojo and Haribo hot on their heels. A younger girl, only four or five years of age, ran after them barefoot, her brown hair flying wildly around her face as she tried to keep up.

“Oh no, it’s the gremlins!” Vincent shouted. The two older girls — who I suspected were twins — flung themselves at him, giggling, as they hugged him. The youngest girl ran straight for Jason, who swept her up and spun her around.

“I caught a bug today, Vince!” she said, bouncing excitedly in Jason’s arms. The other two climbed Vincent like a tree, one settling in each arm. One of them immediately went to work forming a braid in his hair, while the other smiled at me shyly.

“Oh, yeah?” Vincent said. “Did it put up a good fight?”

“No!” the littlest girl exclaimed. “We don’t fight the bugs, silly. They’re friends.” She waved at Manson and Lucas excitedly. “Hi, Uncle Manson! Hi, Uncle Luc!” She held out her arms and Lucas took her, but she quickly insisted, “Shoulders, please!”

Lucas obliged, and Manson helped the little girl get her balance on his shoulders.

“Did you take good care of Jojo this weekend, Miss Kristy?” Manson said, and she nodded.

“Yes! We dug in the yard and she helped me catch bugs,” she said, swinging her legs so they tapped against Lucas’s chest. “She ate some of my candy too, even though she’s not supposed to.”

“Girls, this is Jessica,” Vincent said, motioning toward me as he set the twins down. They wore matching yellow dresses, their skirts stained and

their shoes muddy. They looked at me with wide green eyes, the same color as their brother's.

"Hi," I said, crouching down to their level to offer my hand. They each gave me a quick, giggling handshake. "What are your names?"

"Anna," said one.

"Franchesca," said the other.

"And I'm Kristina!" The littlest girl waved her arms at me from her perch on Lucas's back. "You look like my Barbie. Are you...are you..." She had to pause her rapid words to breathe, and I stifled a laugh. "Are you my brother's lover?"

"Oh my god." I looked up at Vincent. "How does she know that word?"

"Our parents are very open people," he said, trying to restrain a smile as he poked the giggling girl. "Don't be a Nosy-Nancy, Kristy. Now where's that bug you caught?"

"In my room!" She braced her hands against the sides of Lucas's head, turning his face toward the house. "Go, go! Let's tell Mama you're here!"

"Hold on tight," Lucas said. She squealed with excitement as he jogged toward the house, Jojo bouncing along behind him. Haribo was already glued to Jason's side and followed him as we made our way in.

Another girl had appeared on the porch, smiling at us as we approached. She looked to be around fourteen years old, tall and slim like her brother, with long brown hair.

"This is my oldest sister, Mary," Vincent said. Mary politely shook my hand, greeting me in a soft voice barely loud enough to hear.

"I go to school with your sister," she said. "Stephanie, right?"

"Yeah! Are you two friends?" I honestly didn't know who my sister's friends were, but she was so much like me I could only assume she was a social butterfly too.

Mary's face tightened up for a moment before she smiled again and said, "Oh, um...no...but I've seen her around."

"Come on, come on, we're gonna let the cold out," Lucas said as he held open the front door. Kristy was tapping her palms on his head like it was a drum, but he didn't seem to mind.

The house's interior was an eclectic mix of decor. Polished wood furniture sat beside plush velvet chairs and a couch, which was occupied by an older man with long gray hair. Paintings covered the walls, some clearly done by the children but framed nevertheless. The windows didn't match,

some of them stained glass, some round, some square. The house smelled like spices with a faint hint of rose, and a fire crackled in a wood-burning stove in the corner.

The man rose from the couch, setting aside the worn sci-fi paperback he'd been reading.

"Welcome home, boys," he said, hugging each of them before he got to me. His resemblance to Vincent was undeniable, especially in the smile he gave me as he took my hand in greeting.

"You must be Jessica Martin," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you, young lady. I'm Stephan Volkov. Any partner of our boys is family here, so make yourself at home."

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Volkov."

"Please, call me Stephan," he said, and I smiled gratefully, right as a woman emerged from the kitchen.

There was a beaming smile on her face as she wiped her hands on her apron. She wrapped her arms around Vincent, leaving a dusting of flour on his shirt.

"Oh, my boy," she murmured. Her voice was as warm, her long gray-streaked hair pinned up into a bun. "So good to have you home." She released him from her embrace and hugged Jason immediately after, clutching Manson's hand as if she couldn't wait to greet him too.

"You didn't have to go to all the trouble to cook, Ma," Vincent said.

"I'm always going to feed my children," she said, waving her hand as if to brush away his concerns. "It's hardly any trouble."

"What am I helping with, Mama?" Lucas said as he hugged her. "You get that apron off and give it over. I'm sure you've been on your feet enough."

"You don't need to do a thing, Lucas," she said, patting his cheek affectionately. "I just need a moment to meet Miss Jessica." She turned to me, with the kind of smile that carried all the warmth and comfort of coming home after a long day. "My goodness. Well, Vincent told me you were beautiful but you really are a ray of sunshine, aren't you?" She embraced me, surrounding me with the aromas of cinnamon, nutmeg, and patchouli. "I'm Vera. It's wonderful to finally meet you, Jessica."

"I'm so glad to meet you," I said. My nerves had finally calmed down, soothed by how welcoming they all were. "I'd be happy to help with whatever you need."

“No need, dear, no need,” Vera said. “Everything is almost ready.”

“Don’t go tiring your arms out mashing those potatoes. That’s my job,” Lucas said, poking his head out of the kitchen. He’d slipped in there while we were distracted, and was now wearing a hand-made apron with a pattern of classic cars on the fabric. The twins dragged Jason out the back door, insisting that he play with them, and Manson had already been roped into a conversation about moonshine with Stephan.

As Vera returned to finishing up the meal, Vincent took my hand. “I’ll show you around.” He led me through the living room, pointing to the various paintings and craft projects scattered around and telling me which sister made which. “I told Ma she didn’t have to keep all my old shit, but she’s a bit sentimental.” He opened the small door for the storage room under the stairs, and I gasped at the stacks of painted canvases within.

“Those are all yours?” I exclaimed.

“And Mary’s,” he said. “She’s a much better painter than me.”

“Am not,” Mary said, although she blushed at the praise.

“She’s too modest,” Vincent said, closing the storage room again. “Do you mind if I show Jess the old room, Mary? Promise we won’t be too long.”

She nodded, and Vincent led me up the narrow stairway. Some of the stairs were a little crooked, and the railing was a long tree limb that still had the bark attached. Little figures and designs had been carved into the wood, and Vince pointed them out to me as we went.

“My dad did the carving here,” he said. “He used to be a carpenter when he was younger, before his arthritis got too bad. He made all that furniture downstairs himself.”

At the top of the stairs, at the end of a narrow hallway, a ladder led up to the attic. The rails were wrapped in sparkle lights and the rungs were decorated with fake flowers.

“Mary has really prettied things up since I last lived here,” Vincent said. “The room wasn’t quite this cool when it was mine.”

He reached the top of the ladder first, then extended his hand for me. The attic was smaller than the one Vincent occupied now, but it felt cozy instead of cramped. Pale green and purple tapestries covered the walls, with more twinkle lights along the ceiling and around the tall narrow window. The bed was covered with a mishmash of blankets and pillows in varying colors and patterns.

Despite it being his younger sister's room, the space still felt familiar.

"Mary must really take after you," I said, noticing the shelves of paints, brushes, and piled canvases. There were drawers of beads, plastic boxes full of charms, craft supplies stored on every available shelf. It was a treasure trove of interesting things to discover.

"The urge to create is really strong in the Volkov family," he said. He led me to the window seat, which was too small for the both of us. But he sat and then pulled me onto his lap. We could see down into the backyard, where Jason and the twins were playing ball with Bo and Jojo. "Growing up, our parents were always making things. Whether it was building their own furniture or growing their own food. They did everything they could to give us a happy childhood. We didn't have much; money was tight, especially with so many kids. But they made it work. They didn't hesitate to take in Jason after his parents kicked him out, either. It wasn't even a question to them. I owe them a lot." His expression grew somber for a moment. "That's why I was selling pills in high school. Figured it was the only way I could really try to help, it was quick money. I tried to keep it quiet, but it really broke my mom's heart when I got in trouble."

"You got in trouble?" I said. "I heard the rumor you were arrested, but you were back in school so fast, I didn't think it was true."

"It was true," he said with a grimace. "I was a terribly naughty boy and they had to arrest me for the good of society. The school decided not to press charges as long as I did their little 'scared straight' program. Unfortunately for them, I'm a good actor and very stubborn. I'm also good at learning from my mistakes. Never got caught again."

We watched Jason and the girls play with the dogs for a while, snuggled close on the window seat. The house was swiftly filling with delicious smells, and my stomach grumbled with hunger. I noticed a little heart carved into the window sill, and when I leaned closer, I spotted the initials V+J inside it.

"Jason and I used to watch the stars out this window," Vincent said, as I traced my finger over the heart. "It always made our problems feel smaller, somehow. Like in all that vastness of space, we're just tiny motes of dust with tiny problems."

Staring up into the pale blue sky, I understood the feeling. A few wispy clouds floated by, the breeze rustling the trees. Autumn was just around the

corner. Despite the drama, the pain, and the confusion we humans went through, the world kept on turning anyway.

It was reassuring, in a way. No matter how stressful or uncertain things felt, life would go on.

“I’ve always wanted to buy him a really good telescope,” Vincent continued. “He really loves, like, planets and all that shit. Just haven’t been able to afford it yet.” He kissed my cheek, then rested his chin on my shoulder. “We should take you stargazing sometime. If you want.”

“I’d love that.” I giggled as I watched Jojo lose the ball, and the girls had to run and retrieve it for her. “Do you know any good spots?”

“I know a few. There’s a new spot I heard of recently that sounded fun; it’s in a state park up north. They have a haunted lighthouse you can stay in.”

“Okay, you’ve sold me!” I said. “Where is this place and when can we go?”

“It’s in New York.” His voice caught slightly as he said it. He was tracing his fingers over my arm, and when I looked back at him, the smile on his face was almost shy. “We can go whenever you want. Really.”

“To New York?” I said softly, and he nodded.

“Wherever you want to be, baby.”

Oh. It was like all the breath whooshed out of my lungs. He cupped my face, leaning so close as if to kiss me before he said, barely above a whisper, “Wherever you go, I want to be there too.”

“Yoo-hoo! Dinner is ready!” Vera’s voice called up to us from below, breaking the breathless tension. We both laughed, and he kissed me before we got to our feet.

Downstairs, the table had been set as if for a feast. There was a whole roast chicken with potatoes and carrots, biscuits, green beans, and dressing. My mouth started watering at the sight of it, and my stomach gave another enthusiastic growl as I took a seat between Vincent and Manson.

There was no clasping of hands and no prayer, but Stephan stood at the head of the table and said simply, “We are thankful now, as we always will be, for the blessing of our children, for the blessing of their love, and of course, for the blessing of new love.” He smiled at me, and Vera held my hand across the table. Then he sat and leaned over to kiss his wife on the cheek. “Thank you for all your work to create a beautiful meal for us, my dear.”

We echoed his thanks around the table before he clapped his hands, encouraging us all to dig in. I piled my plate high, not wanting to miss a taste of anything. Vera popped a bottle of wine and we passed it around the table to fill our glasses.

The crackling fire was warm and the rich food brought me back for seconds. Conversation was easy, with both of Vincent's parents being quick to laugh and eager to listen. All throughout the dinner, Stephan's words stuck in my mind. *The blessing of new love*. As I watched Vincent do magic tricks for Kristina, Lucas and Manson joking with Stephan, and Jason promising to play dolls with the twins after dinner, those words kept coming back to me.

Love.

16 - Manson

After dinner, Stephan poured Vincent and I a couple fingers of the moonshine he kept stored out in his shed. He and Vince lit up a joint, although I declined, and the three of us sat near the greenhouse as we talked.

Lucas and Jess were helping Vera clean up, while Jason played with the kids. They'd been giving him a "makeover" when I last saw him, his blue hair affixed with numerous sparkling hair clips. All my memories in this house were good ones, and I was thankful for that. Coming back felt like a homecoming, regardless that I hadn't grown up there. Vera and Stephan had made their house a shelter for not only their own kids, but any child who'd needed them.

Lucas and I had slept on the couch here dozens of times when we had nowhere else to go. They would have taken all of us in permanently if they'd had the space.

"Jessica seems like a good woman," Stephan said, passing the joint back to his son. He was always slow to speak, choosing his words carefully.

"She's the wildest little angel you'll ever meet," Vincent said. "She's amazing."

"Makes me feel like I'm losing my damn mind half the time," I said, and Stephan chuckled as he nodded. "Luckily, I'm happy to lose it."

"The right person will change you for the better," he said. "Sometimes, it's a temporary change — someone comes into your life for a time and tweaks things a bit before they move on. But sometimes, it's permanent. Things in your life shift around just right and they fit in like the spot's been waiting for 'em."

Part of me had known Jess would fit in with us perfectly. But in my experience, good things weren't meant for me. Being cautious and expecting the worst was safer than having hope.

But I felt hopeful, for the first time in a long time. Maybe good things weren't meant for me, but I'd fight fate and God to have them anyway.

There was eventually a lull in our conversation, and in the ensuing silence, Stephan's expression changed. He straightened up, cleared his throat, and said, "I suppose you may already know this, but I still wanted to bring it up. Your papa is back in town."

I took another small sip of moonshine, focusing on the heat as it went down. My stomach coiled around it, threatening to reject it. “Yeah, I know. He’s been up to the house. How did you find out?”

“Word gets around,” he said. “Old Reagan has been down at Billy’s Bar recently, and a friend of mine said he overheard some conversations.” He looked between Vincent and I, the seriousness of his expression giving me a cold feeling. “He’s stirring up trouble, boys. He seemed to be saying anything and everything he can to try to get people up in arms about you all.”

“Up in arms?” I frowned, leaning forward on my seat. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say that he’s trying to make friends with some folks that don’t have very positive feelings about you all. I’ve been told that Reagan has been talking to a group of young men over there, trying to convince them to sabotage you all.”

“What kind of sabotage?” Vincent said.

“Not a clue, but I’ll keep an ear out for any word. I know you boys like to handle things on your own, but don’t go thinking you don’t have people at your back. If Reagan is going up to the house and giving you trouble...”

“We have it under control,” I said quickly. The last thing I wanted to do was drag the Volkovs into this drama. They’d done more than enough for us already.

“I figured you’d say as much.” Stephan glanced over at Vincent. “I know you’ll look out for each other, and I have no doubt Miss Martin can handle herself —”

“She’s safe. We’re keeping her safe.” I drained the last of the moonshine, welcoming the fire it shot straight into my veins. Vincent nodded his head in agreement.

“We’ll be safe, Pops,” he said. “We’re used to this shit anyway.”

“I’m sure it’ll be a relief for you to finally make the big move,” Stephan said. He rose from his seat, carefully stubbing out what was left of the joint. “I was looking around the old place while I was up there checking on things. You’ve done real well with that house; should turn a nice profit for you. Have you all decided on where you’re looking to move?”

“Not yet,” I said. The topic had been coming up more often now that we were closer to being able to sell. We’d all been trying to keep an open mind when it came to location.

But lately, there had been certain areas that were calling to me. *One* area in particular.

“It’s a big decision to make,” Stephan said. “But there must be someplace you all are drawn to.”

“New York.”

I looked at Vincent in surprise, right as he looked at me. We’d responded in perfect unison, and Stephan chuckled. “New York, eh? I have a cousin who lives in Buffalo. He’s always seemed to like the area...” Then he was off on a slow-moving tangent about why his cousin had moved there in the first place. I barely heard a word of it.

When we’d finished our drinks and were headed back inside, Vincent hung back with me, and in a lowered voice, said, “Are you okay? Do you need a minute?”

“No, I’m good,” I said, releasing a deep breath. As Stephan opened the front door, I got a glimpse of Jessica seated on the floor as the twins braided her hair, with Lucas beside her playing with Kristy. Jason was on the couch, laughing with Vera as they finished off the wine. “That fucker doesn’t get to steal one more minute from me.”

“Good, man.” Vincent clapped my shoulder, a small smile coming over his face. “So...New York, huh?”

“We’re all thinking about it, aren’t we?” I said. The laughter and conversation coming from the house helped put me at ease; it grounded me. And the reality was that if we didn’t make a decision soon, we might lose Jess again. She might slip away, because she had a life to live and so did we — but I wanted her to stay in ours. “We’ll need to have that conversation, Vince. We’re going to have to choose.”

“Fate gave us another chance,” Vincent said, casting his eyes skyward as if this had been divinely planned. “I’ll be damned if I let that chance slip away this time.”

Darkness had fallen by the time we left the Volkov family’s house. Lucas and I took the dogs in the Bronco, while Jason and Vincent drove Jess home in the WRX. Parting from her, after kissing her good night, was even harder than I had expected. I loathed the thought of not having her in my bed every night any more.

After Stephan's warning, my feelings weren't only rooted in longing. How was I supposed to know she was safe if one of us weren't with her?

Lucas noticed that my mood had plummeted.

"Sucks sending her home, doesn't it?" he said, and I nodded. "Why don't we just have her stay the night? She could bring her laptop over. She could work here in the morning, there's plenty of places in the house where she could get some privacy."

I'd been asking myself the same question. "Her mom gets on her case enough as it is," I said. "How is she supposed to explain where she's staying all the time?" She already had to lie about who she spent the weekend with. As much as I wanted to keep her by my side, I didn't want to cause her more trouble either.

"Well that's fucking stupid," Lucas muttered, folding his arms. "I'm going to have to have a talk with her mama before this shit gets out of hand."

We pulled up to the gate, and I gave him a warning look before I got out to unlock it. "Don't confront her Mom. Seriously." He shrugged, but that wasn't an agreement. I scowled. "I mean it, Lucas."

"Okay, okay," he said. When I still didn't move, he motioned towards the gate as Jojo began to whine. "Come on, the dogs are gonna piss in here if we don't let them out soon."

He still hadn't really agreed, but he was being stubborn. Rolling my eyes, I went to unlock the gate so he could pull into the yard. He parked, and I opened the back hatch to allow the dogs to jump out. They ran around the yard, sniffing everything. It didn't take Jojo long to find a ball and bring it to my feet, demanding I play with her.

"We'll play tomorrow," I told her, wrapping my arms around her chunky body and giving her a squeeze. She licked my face in understanding, her tale whipping from side to side.

The garage was still locked, exactly as we'd left it. A cynical part of my brain had expected to find it broken into again, but fortunately we weren't so unlucky. We trudged inside the house, flicking on the lights and dumping our bags in the living room. It would probably be a few days before we bothered to unpack.

"Can I bum a cigarette off you?" I said, before Lucas could make his way upstairs.

“I thought you were quitting?” he said, holding back the pack as if he wanted to be sure I meant it.

“I’m working on it.” I hadn’t bought another pack since my last one ran out; I’d been cutting back. But every time I thought I was ready to go cold turkey, stress reared its ugly head and demanded I light up again.

My answer was good enough for Lucas. He tossed me the pack with a smirk, saying, “It’ll cost you.”

“Yeah?” I took one out of the pack, shoving the remainder in my pocket. “What’s the price?”

He stopped at the top of the stairway. “Hurry up and smoke it, fucker. Then come upstairs and find out.”

I was going to make it a quick smoke break then. The screen door slammed behind me as I walked out onto the back porch, taking a deep breath of the cool night air. Leaning against the railing as I smoked, I could faintly hear the music Lucas turned on upstairs. The pipes groaned as he started the shower, and I imagined the bathroom filling with steam as the water heated. It had been a long day, and a hot shower sounded heavenly.

Putting down the cigarette for a moment, I curiously sniffed the air. Something smelled strangely minty — no, it wasn’t mint. It was menthol.

We had an ashtray out here, and we were always careful about not leaving discarded cigarette butts around the yard. But as I looked toward the far side of the porch, I spotted three stubbed-out cigarettes on the railing. They had been crushed against the wood, leaving circular burns on the white paint.

One of them still had a thin trail of white smoke streaming from it.

Dread knotted my stomach and made my limbs go cold. The porch suddenly felt too vulnerable, as if I was being watched from all sides. My father could have been standing right there in the shadows and I wouldn’t have been able to see him.

No sooner had I stumbled through the back door, than Jason and Vincent were coming in the front.

“Hey, you’re still lit,” Jason said, when he noticed I still had my cigarette. But then he saw my face, and his expression fell. “Are you okay?”

“Pull the cameras,” I choked out. “Lock the —” My lungs felt like they were closing. Christ, I couldn’t panic, not now. I had to hold it together. I

braced my hand against the wall, and forced out the words, "Someone was here. Someone was on the property."

Someone. I knew exactly who it was.

It only took Jason a few minutes to pull up the camera feeds on his laptop. Vincent and I gathered close behind him, watching over his shoulder as he rewound the tapes.

"There," Jason said grimly, pausing the video. My father stood on our back porch, gazing across the yard as he smoked. Occasionally, he'd glance up and look directly into the camera. He didn't seem nervous; even when the Bronco pulled up to the gate, he didn't show any alarm. He just put down the cigarette and walked out of the camera's view.

"You barely missed him," Vincent said. "Holy shit, Manson. He could still be out there."

"We need to search the yard," I said. "Get some flashlights. I'll tell Lucas."

Our search was fruitless. After wandering around the dark for half an hour, all we found was fresh shoeprints near the fence. There was no relief in coming up empty-handed. Even once we were back inside with the doors locked, I couldn't make myself relax.

This wasn't just a violation of our space. My father was sending a message. He knew the cameras were there, and he'd left the cigarettes in plain sight. He wanted me to feel threatened. He wanted me to be afraid.

"You've got to try to get some sleep," Lucas said, when our search was over and I was still sitting on the couch, staring at the camera feed on Jason's laptop. The slightest movement on screen made me flinch: a fluttering bug, a leaf tumbling in the wind.

I shook my head. "I'm going to stay up for a while. I need to keep an eye on —"

Lucas closed the laptop, grabbing my hand before I could wrench it open again.

"You're shaking," he said, but I couldn't stop. I was sweating, but I was so damn cold. "Your fingers are freezing."

He pulled my hands close to him, then wrapped his arms around me. The shivering got worse; I was shaking so hard, he knew it wasn't only from the cold.

"Do you want your pills?" he said.

It took me a while to answer. “No. Just stay with me.” He held me tighter, resituating us so he could lean back and I could lay against him. With every passing second, I felt guiltier. It killed me that all it took was one little incident — one goddamn trigger could destroy my self-control, my courage, my logic.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “Grab that blanket.” He pointed to a thick fleece blanket folded on the back of the couch. I spread it over us and lay against his chest again, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

“Good boy,” I whispered, and he squirmed beneath me, wrapping his arms around me a little tighter.

“I love you.” He scratched his fingers through my hair, and I closed my eyes. It felt so good to be held.

“I love you, too.”

There was a creak on the stairway, then Vincent and Jason shuffled into the living room. They both had blankets around their shoulders, and Vince looked half asleep already. Jason was dragging his pillow in one hand.

They both settled down on the couch, and I frowned as I watched them. “What are you doing?”

“I thought we were having a sleepover in the living room,” Vincent said, stifling a yawn halfway through the sentence. He collapsed onto the couch, stretching out his limbs until his bare toes were shoved against Lucas’s side. Jason lay down beside him, the two of them sharing his pillow.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. Lucas sleepily patted my head.

“With all due respect, stop talking,” he said. “Let us take care of you.”

“If you think you need to sleep down here to keep watch, then that’s what we’ll do,” Jason said, buried beneath his blanket. “I enjoy sleeping on the couch.”

Soon enough, Haribo and Jojo wandered in too. Jojo made a brief attempt to lick my face, then settled herself with a heavy sigh on the carpet. Bo jumped up on the couch and curled himself at Jason’s feet.

“Jess should be here,” Vincent said softly. But he was only stating what we were all thinking.

17 - Jessica

It was strange to be back home, sleeping in my own bed. It felt too cold, too empty, when I slipped into it that night. After tossing and turning for hours, I managed to wedge enough pillows around myself to give the illusion that I was snuggled between the boys, and finally got some sleep.

The next morning, I awoke to four “good morning” texts in the group chat. It made me smile, but God, I already missed them.

What had happened to me? Where had the independent, didn’t-need-a-man-let-alone-four version of Jessica go? That version of me had been lonely and anxious, haughty and judgmental. But she’d been pretty damn untouchable too, and life behind a barrier made a lot of things simpler.

This wasn’t simple anymore, none of it.

Especially now that I’d met Vincent’s family. It had quickly become obvious that he’d been talking to them about me, and the realization was both intimidating and strangely comforting. Stephan and Vera had made me feel instantly welcome, as if I’d been having dinner with them for years. Little Kristy started crying when we had to leave because she and I hadn’t gotten the chance to play with her dolls, and could only be consoled when I promised to come for a visit again soon to play.

Was it even fair of me to promise that? Was it right for me to be building relationships with his family when I wasn’t even sure how long our own would last?

But when Vincent mentioned New York, I swear the entire world stopped for a split second. A world of possibilities — of hopes, fears, and what-ifs — flooded me in an instant. And the tide hadn’t receded yet.

Mom kept her eyes on me suspiciously all morning, although I had no idea what I’d done to deserve it. It was like having an angry cat follow me around; I was surprised she wasn’t hissing every time she saw me. Something had pissed her off, and soon enough, I’d find out what it was.

At least work allowed me to avoid her for a few hours.

Since I’d missed my Monday morning meeting, my boss scheduled a one-on-one Zoom call so she could catch me up to speed. After giving me the rundown on our current clients and upcoming design projects, she brought up a client I’d been working with over the past few weeks.

“Mr. Krazinski had nothing but praise for you, Jessica,” she said. “He was incredibly pleased with your correspondence and said you were very professional.”

Mr. Krazinski had been such a difficult client, I’d been convinced he hated me. But he was also a repeat customer, someone who’d been working with the Smith-Davies Firm for years, so impressing him was crucial. It had taken every ounce of patience and professionalism I had in me, but I’d managed to do it.

“How are you feeling about your upcoming review?” she said. “You’ve been with us for almost six months already.”

“I’m feeling good,” I said. “I’ve been working on expanding my portfolio like you suggested, and I’m really excited to show you what I’ve been working on.”

“Excellent to hear that, Jessica. I look forward to it. The other partners and I have been giving a lot of thought into hiring you full-time.” She tipped down her glasses, peering at me with a smile. “Is that something that’s still of interest to you?”

“Oh yes!” It was a struggle to rein in my excitement. “Absolutely, I’m still interested.”

“Wonderful. Well then, I’ll see you during our Friday meeting and we can get your review scheduled.”

I practically floated out of my bedroom after work. I had customers giving me praise, my boss was clearly pleased with me. Getting that promotion felt closer than ever. I was so excited, I had to call Ashley to tell her the good news.

As I spoke on the phone, I fixed myself a snack in the kitchen. Mom’s eyes were boring into the back of my head the entire time, latched on to me like missiles prepared to fire. Every time I turned around and made awkward eye contact with her, I knew something was coming.

The moment I clicked off my phone and turned to head back upstairs, she said, “Did you have a good weekend with your friends?”

I turned. She was sitting at the table, her phone in one hand with a glass of sweet tea in front of her. She was smiling big, her voice was upbeat and friendly.

Red flags. Red flags everywhere,

“It was great,” I said. “A lot of fun.”

“Who all were there?” She asked it so casually, it was almost as if she didn’t care.

Almost. I knew better.

“Quite a few people,” I said. “You probably don’t remember them, so...”

“Danielle and Candace?” she said, tweaking up a perfectly-plucked eyebrow. “You said they were going, didn’t you?”

“Yep, they were there.” This felt like an interrogation, and I really wanted to make a quick getaway. She was still smiling, and it was starting to unnerve me. Sometimes, she’d pretend to be in a good mood to lull me into a false sense of security.

Then she’d rip me to shreds once my guard was down.

“Well, you wouldn’t believe the weekend I’ve had!” she exclaimed. She pushed out a chair, motioning for me to sit.

With a tense smile, I set my plate down and sat as she launched into an in-depth account of everything she did while I was gone. Shopping trips with friends, brunch, dinner, cocktails. I listened without getting a single word out, but Mom wasn’t looking for conversation.

It was weird to simultaneously feel like she was trying to be my best friend and my manager. But she had always been that way. She wanted the comradery of someone who was obligated to please her; who better than her daughter?

I zoned out, distracting myself with memories of the weekend. The feeling of the cool river water washing over my naked skin as Manson and Lucas held me was so fresh in my mind. It made me feel lighter, and when I thought of Vincent’s sweet kisses and my conversation with Jason under the stars, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

Mom thought the smile was related to her story.

“I’m so glad you remember him!” she said, and I stiffened with alarm at the realization that I had no idea who she was talking about. “Marguerite said he’d be so excited to see you —”

“Wait, wait, who are you talking about?” I said.

Her face scrunched up with disapproval. “Oh, good grief, Jessica. Marguerite Fall and her son, Greg?” My face must have shown my confusion, because she sighed and said, “Greg Fall, from middle school?”

Rubbing my hand over my face, I said, “I guess I remember him.”

“Well, you’ll get to know him much better on Saturday,” she said, grasping my arm in her excitement. “I told him he should take you to that

Italian restaurant you've always liked. Anthony's!"

Surely I'd misheard her, or was misinterpreting what she was saying. I tried my best to remain calm as I said, "Mom, did you set me up on a date with a stranger?"

"Oh, honey, he's not a stranger," she said, chuckling as if I'd said something silly. "You've met him before! It's just *dinner*. Besides, the man has more money than he knows what to do with —"

"I don't care about his money!" I blurted. "Mom, this is so incredibly invasive. You can't schedule things for me without asking me, let alone a date!" She was still looking at me as if I was being silly, overreacting. It drove my temper to boiling. "What if I already had plans on Saturday night?"

"Well?" She folded her arms. "Do you have plans? Perhaps with the same friends you spent time with this last weekend?"

I folded my arms in return, realizing too late that I was mirroring her position exactly. "Yes, actually. I do have plans with them."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "I saw Danielle and Candace in town on Sunday. They weren't with you this weekend, you little *liar*."

Goddamn it. Caught red-handed. I should have known better than to tell her the names of people she would recognize. Her eyes filled with tears, and her voice trembled as it increased in volume.

"After everything I've done for you..." She sniffled. "Everything I sacrificed. Driving you to cheer practice, dance recitals, the piano lessons, tutoring! The amount of money we poured into your pageants so you could be happy!" She gave another massive, exaggerated sniff. "Do you have any idea how rude I'll look if you don't go to that dinner?" She clutched her hand to her chest, gasping through big fake sobs. "I'll be so humiliated. And here I thought I was doing something nice for you. You have no idea what it's like being a mother! To watch your own daughter breaking your heart! Spending all her time with *degenerates*!"

"Mom —"

"That's who it is, isn't it?" she said, her tears vanishing as quickly as they had appeared. "Those boys, those 'mechanics.' Good Lord above, we let you live here rent-free, we provide for you, and this is how you repay me? By lying to me?" She cut me off again before I could get so much as a word out. "Is it really so hard to go and meet the man? A fine, decent, *normal* man with a good job?"

My heart throbbed against my ribs. Fury pumped into me with every beat. “What exactly do you mean by *normal*?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Oh please, honey, the dumb blonde schtick is not a good look for you. I’m not ignorant of what those boys get up to. Word gets around.”

“You mean, *gossip* gets around.”

“The ladies at church have been asking me why I’m letting you go anywhere near them,” she said, shaking her head as if she hadn’t even heard me. But I’d had enough of not being heard. More than enough.

Shoving my chair back from the table, I stormed from the house. Mom shouted something after me, but the door slammed behind me before she could finish. My stomach felt like a hollow pit, my heart was racing in anger. If she expected me to go to that ridiculous dinner, then she was dead wrong. She could cry about it all she wanted.

Except it wouldn’t just be tears. It would be griping, scolding, and passive-aggressive comments until I gave in out of sheer exhaustion. It would be guilt-tripping me for every aspect of my existence that didn’t cater to her.

Swallowing hard around the lump in my throat, I pulled my cell out of my pocket as I power-walked down the street. Without really thinking about it, as if on instinct, I dialed Vincent’s number.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, baby.” He sounded groggy, as if he’d just woken up. “What’s up?”

“Can you come pick me up, please?” Tears of frustration were threatening to escape, but I’d be damned if I let a ridiculous argument with my mother make me cry.

He instantly sounded more awake. “Give me ten minutes, I’ll be there.”

“She doesn’t listen! She never fucking listens! No matter what I say, it doesn’t matter to her.”

Choking up for a moment, I fell silent. It had been a long time since I’d been this frustrated with my mom, but it brought all the old feelings rushing back. The anxiety. The doubt.

On one hand, I had this heartrending desire to be her perfect daughter — but I couldn't be, I could *never be* perfect enough for her. On the other, I wanted to kick, scream, and claw my way away from her. Part of me wanted to shut her out of my life, sever the relationship and never look back.

It made me ill to think about it. Sick, frustrated, and so confused.

Jason sat beside me, rubbing slow circles on my back. After Vincent had picked me up, he'd taken me straight back to the house. Seated in their garage, I felt better just to have them around me.

Things felt different with them, different than with anyone else I'd ever known. They used to make me feel out of control, like I couldn't regulate my brain or my tongue properly. Now, I realized the feeling of being "out of control" was just the sensation of all my fake bullshit failing me. I couldn't pretend with them.

"Some parents will try everything they can to hold on to control," Jason said. He'd set his laptop aside when I arrived, postponing his work to listen to me vent. "Either because they're afraid of losing you, or afraid of fucking up, or —"

"Or because they're assholes," Vincent said. He was standing beside me, already dressed in a crisp black button-up and slacks for work. He'd picked up extra shifts that week since he'd taken the weekend off. "Just because they're family doesn't mean they get to walk all over you."

Across the yard, Lucas was on the phone with a delivery driver as he opened the gate for them to drive in. He guided the white box truck as it backed toward the garage, then he and Manson helped the driver remove the large, unwieldy package from within.

Temporarily distracted from my mommy issues, I watched them maneuver the item into the garage. "Is that what I think it is?"

Manson pushed his hair out of his face, giving me a grin. "Come, take a peek." He ripped open a corner of the tightly-wrapped cardboard so I could peer inside. Lots of metal...and a telltale BMW logo within.

Practically squealing with excitement, I spun around and threw my arms around Manson's neck. I embraced Lucas right after, kissing him and then smacking my lips at how salty he tasted. Both he and Manson had been working all day, and they were covered in grime.

"I need a shower, don't I?" Lucas said, swiping his hand over his forehead and leaving a streak of grease behind. I swiped it away with my

thumb and left another kiss instead.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “I’m just happy to be over here instead of at home. I interrupted you guys in the middle of work...”

“You definitely did not,” Manson said. “You’re never an interruption, angel. Whenever you need us, we’re here.”

My shoulders slumped as I relaxed into Lucas’s arms. He leaned against the bumper of the white Honda Civic they had been working on today, holding me close with his chin resting on my head.

“Are you installing it today?” I said, eager to focus on something exciting rather than the other bullshit.

“Damn, girl, in a little bit of a rush, huh?” Lucas said. “We don’t install parts until they’re fully paid for. And don’t give me that pouty lip or I might bite it.”

“Sounds like I’m being held captive with an engine as collateral,” I said teasingly, before quickly withdrawing my pouting lower lip between my teeth. That didn’t stop him from biting me though. He went straight for the throat, clinging tightly to me as his sharp bites turned into rough kisses.

“We don’t need an engine to hold you captive,” Manson said. “But you will have to be patient for a little bit longer. We have other clients to take care of too. We need to have that beauty over there ready for a show in a couple of weeks.”

He nodded his head toward the bright red Ford Thunderbird currently on a lift at the back of the shop. *Dante’s Inferno* was emblazoned across the side in swirling calligraphic letters.

“Mm-hm, sounds like you’re stalling,” I said.

My breath hitched as Manson crowded close to me. Lucas’s arms were still around me, and Manson delicately tucked back a lock of my hair before he said, “Maybe we are. Maybe I’m being a very selfish bastard because having you as my toy is too fun.”

“I...um...” I was usually quick with a sassy response. But with Manson looking down at me like that and Lucas’s lips on my neck, while Jason and Vincent snickered, words were lost to me.

“So you’ll be patient, won’t you?” Manson said. “You’ll be a good, patient girl for us?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, then when he tweaked up an eyebrow, I quickly corrected, “Master. Yes, Master.”

Those words tingled every time they touched my tongue. I'd never expected to be calling anyone a title like that. Not only regularly but *frequently*. It was a loaded word; it carried a seriousness that mere pet names didn't. But it also carried a promise: guidance, protection, authority. It was a promise of his care.

"There you go," Manson said, giving me a quick kiss on the forehead before he walked over to the tool bench and began putting things away.

"So is your mama getting what she wants?" Lucas said. "Are you going to dinner with this guy?"

"I'm going to fake that I'm sick," I said determinedly. "My mom gets really grossed out by vomit, so if I fake gag a little, I can get out of it without subjecting her to eternal shame for backing out."

"Come on, Jess," Jason said, shaking his head. "You shouldn't have to fake it."

"You can't let her bend your boundaries," Lucas said, in the most reasonable tone I'd ever heard from him. "You have to be firm."

"Lucas knows all about being firm with parents," Vincent said, a smirk on his face. "He was *really* firm with his old man."

"Damn right," Lucas said. "I firmly punched him in the face and we stopped having problems. Mostly. And don't interpret that as me telling you to punch your mother. Don't do that."

Grateful for the levity, I laughed. "No, I'm not going to punch my mom. I just wish she listened. She's always talking about the things she's done to make me happy; but those things made *her* happy, not me."

Manson peeled off his dirty gloves, tossing them into the trash. "What do you know about this Greg guy anyway? Did he go to high school with us?"

"We went to middle school together. He moved away before high school. I don't know anything about him beyond that. But knowing my mom, I'm sure he's good-looking, wealthy, and probably really boring. That's the type she goes for."

"A sugar daddy type?" Vincent said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Damn, if you won't go for it, I'll give it a shot. I'll let some boring old dude pay for my shit."

"He's not old," I said. "But you're more than welcome to take my spot at dinner. Bleach your hair and no one will ever know."

“All right, what’s the plan then, boys?” Lucas said. “Are we killing this guy or just giving him a good scare?”

“We could dispose of the body by feeding him to Bo,” Jason said. “That little shit will eat anything.”

“Hey, everyone, take it easy,” Manson said slowly, his tone mysterious, as if he’d thought of something the others hadn’t. “Maybe Jess should humor her mom one last time and go to dinner.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “Wait, what? You *want* me to go?” I looked at the others, but they appeared surprised too.

“Yeah,” Manson said. “You’ll get to dress up and have a nice evening. I’ll even go with you.”

Now, I was truly confused. “I don’t think Greg swings that way, Manson...”

“I don’t mean I’ll be sitting at the table with you. I mean I’ll be there, in the restaurant, making sure you’re safe. Making sure you enjoy yourself.”

He grinned, cocksure and ridiculously sexy. It made sparks shoot off in my chest, sizzling on my swiftly beating heart.

Lucas seemed to have caught on to what Manson intended as he said, “So when you say you’re going to make sure she enjoys herself, what you mean is that you’re going to be fucking her right under the nose of her date.”

Manson spread his arms innocently. “I like what I like. And I’d really like to see our pretty little fucktoy get dressed up nice and sit politely on her dinner date — while I make things like *sitting* and *being polite* extremely fucking difficult.”

Oh, that was filthy. The sparks in my chest were more like fireworks now, exploding in little rushes of adrenaline, arousal, and uncertainty. But there was one thing I was *very* certain of.

Returning Manson’s eager grin, I said, “I think I’d like that too.”

18 - Manson

As I pulled the Mustang into the parking lot outside Anthony's, nerves roiled through me in a slow, thick wave. But it wasn't the sickening dread of anxiety, it wasn't mind-numbing, heart-pounding panic.

It was the kind of nerves I experienced before a race, when the rumble of the engine seemed to move through my entire body and take over everything. Or before a bondage scene, when I had my subject on their knees waiting for me; knowing I had the power to hurt or pleasure or destroy at will.

It was a headrush, a flood of power that was so fucking sweet it was like a drug.

For a moment, I had to sit there in silence, eyes closed as I let my energy settle. Jess and her date would be here any minute, but she wasn't here for him.

She was here for me.

After locking up the Mustang, I headed for the entrance, buttoning up my jacket on the way. I hadn't worn a suit since Kathy and James Peters renewed their vows, and it was easily the most expensive clothing I owned. I didn't even know how much it had cost exactly, since Kathy had bought it for me.

There was something grimly satisfying in experiencing how differently people treated me when I exchanged ragged jeans and boots for a perfectly tailored suit. When walking into a nice place like this, I was usually under scrutiny from the moment I came in the door. But the host greeted me and led me inside without any issue.

I took a seat at the bar, taking a few minutes to soak in the atmosphere before I looked at the menu.

This place was pricey, upscale. The lighting was romantically dim, the bar backed by a massive surface of reflective crystalline tiles that caught the light and the colors of the liquor bottles. White cloth covered the tables, candles flickered. Gauzy red curtains and potted plants afforded a bit more privacy to the tables, but I had a good vantage point from the bar.

I saw her as soon as she walked in.

Jess was ravishing in every sense of the word. Her hair was fixed half-up with numerous little pins that glittered in the light, the loose length

falling over her shoulders. Everything she was wearing, I'd chosen for her. The silver heels, the figure-hugging pale pink dress, even the lingerie she wore beneath. I pulled out my phone, opening the photo she'd sent me earlier as she was getting ready.

Words weren't enough to describe her. A glimpse of her was enough to get me hard, and I had to angle myself toward the bar to hide the bulge. But I kept my head turned slightly in her direction, not wanting to take my eyes off her for even a moment.

At her side was Greg — tall, dark-haired, square-jawed. He actually looked a lot like Kyle, which immediately revolted me. The host led them past me, and as Jess walked in front of me, her eyes darted over.

It drove me wild, the way her gaze lifted to my face and said a thousand things in the space of one breath.

Longing. Submission. Obedience. Excitement. Her body language was perfect. She carried herself without a single indication of what was really going on.

She was here for me. For my pleasure, awaiting my orders. Greg — poor fuck — didn't have the slightest clue. He was too busy talking about himself, droning on and on as they were seated. Jess smiled and nodded politely. I had yet to even see her open her mouth.

Why the hell was this what her mother chose for her? Some self-absorbed guy who could sit there bragging about himself when he had a woman like that in front of him? God, anything I had to brag about — and I didn't have much — was utterly forgotten at the sight of her.

There wasn't a single material thing in the world that could come close to being good enough for her. She deserved so much more than that.

Motioning for the bartender's attention as he walked past, I ordered a Sazerac and settled in to watch the show.

Greg suggested they order a bottle of wine. Jess wanted white; he explained why red was better, and I sipped my drink to cool the anger that flared up in my chest. This fuck was already unbearable.

The bottle arrived, and she tasted it. By the way her lip twitched, I knew she didn't like it.

After letting them get settled in for several minutes, I caught the bartender's attention again. "Would you mind pointing me to the restroom?"

He directed me to a back corner, where there was an archway framed by flowering plants. Catching Jess's eye as I got out of my seat, I turned and

headed straight back.

It was easily the nicest public restroom I'd ever been in. An orchestral melody played from the speakers, and I paused in front of the large mirror, washing my hands before I adjusted my collar. Vincent had said I should wear a tie, but I really wasn't about that shit, suit or not. I'd left the collar unbuttoned instead.

Waiting for Jess felt like the longest couple minutes of my life. But I'd told her not to make it too obvious, not to get up too soon after I did. Someone came in, used the urinal, and left. Then the door opened again, and heels clicked across the floor...

She stepped around the corner, and it took my breath away for a moment. She looked eager, but uncertain. Excited, but slightly afraid.

Perfect.

She came to stand in front of me as I leaned back against the sink. Her eyes glittered with makeup, her lips a soft shade of mauve. It fascinated me how she could do that, transforming her face like an artist.

Although, I loved her bare skin the most.

Loved. That word kept coming up when I thought about her. It felt strange, even dangerous, like I was betting for the highest odds.

I'd always been a risk-taker. Couldn't stop now.

"How's your date?" I said as she stepped closer, and I brushed my hand down her bare arm. Goosebumps ignited as I touched her and it made me grin.

She rolled her eyes. "He's been trying to explain property taxes to me like I'm five. Apparently, he's really into real estate. And he thought my name was Jenny."

Switching places with her, I pressed close behind her as I watched her face in the mirror. Her breath hitched as my hands came around her waist, caressing low on her dress. Someone could have walked in at any moment, but the risk of being caught made my heart beat faster.

"You look so gorgeous." I left the words in whispered kisses along her neck; I dug them into her skin as I held her tight. She'd tried to cover the hickeys on her neck and had done a damn good job. But up close, I could still see the marks through the makeup.

Our marks. Our girl. Ours.

Fuck the game. She could go on playing if she wanted, but this was no game to me. It never was.

“That motherfucker has no idea how lucky he is,” I said, my voice a whisper that made her shiver. “Sitting at a table with a fucking goddess and all he can do is talk about his own damn self. Shameful.”

She braced herself on the edge of the marble sink with a gasp as I shoved her forward. I pulled up her dress, peeling the fabric over her ass like it was the juiciest peach. White strappy panties hugged the curve of her hips, and I took a moment to enjoy the sight of her like that: bent over, dress shoved up, her beautiful legs spread for me.

Humming appreciatively as I traced my finger up the inside of her thighs, I said, “What a good girl. You know exactly how to get into position for me.”

“I’ve had some practice,” she said, winking at me in the mirror. Her tone had grown husky, and she sounded so fucking sexy. I slid down her panties, and she bit her lip. “Someone might come in.”

“You’re right.” The panties fell to her ankles. “Someone might come in, see you bent over the sink being eaten out, and maybe they’ll even stay to watch.”

Holding the image of her blushing face in my mind, I knelt behind her and buried my face in her. I lapped my tongue over her, savoring every sweet bit of flesh I could possibly consume. The taste of her was intoxicating, as was the way her body moved with me, reacting when I got it right.

She groaned softly, and I grabbed her thighs, holding her in place.

“Shh, don’t be too loud, angel,” I said, then proceeded to eat her until her gasping little cries became too much for her to control. Her legs were trembling and her face was flushed as I stood, wiping my lips with the back of my hand.

“Please don’t stop now,” she whispered. “Please.”

But she knew what I liked, and I liked her on edge: shaking for me, waiting for me, riding the pleasure until I decided she’d had enough.

“I have one more treat for you,” I said, reaching for the pocket inside my blazer. “I don’t want you to forget for one single second who owns you. Who gets to be inside you.”

I pulled out her jeweled plug and a bottle of lube, and her eyes widened.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “Oh, fuck...”

“The entire time you’re sitting there with him, this is what you’ll feel.” I squeezed the lube onto my fingers, spreading it over her and probing my

fingers into her. “I own this ass. I own your pussy, your clit, this entire gorgeous body, every goddamn inch of you...is mine. It’s Lucas’s. It’s Jason’s. It’s Vincent’s.” She clenched her hands into fists in an effort to be silent, shuddering with pleasure as my fingers pumped into her. “You’re ours, and I want you to remember that every time you squirm and feel how tight this plug is inside you.”

She watched me in the mirror as I stretched her, before I lubed up the toy and pressed it inside. She whimpered softly, and her eyes fluttered when it settled fully inside her. I pulled up her panties and adjusted her dress, lifting her from the sink so I could get a good look at her.

“It’s like it’s not even there,” I said, before I gave her a quick smack on the ass, and her eyes lit up. “Better get back out there before your date starts to worry.”

She was breathing deeply, trying to compose herself.

“Damn it, Manson.” Her voice shuddered. “Sometimes I think you’re the devil himself, with the way you make me feel.”

She couldn’t have paid me a higher compliment.

She returned to her table, and I went back to the bar a minute later. The bartender had been kind enough to keep an eye on my drink, so I tipped well before ordering another. I really wasn’t a big drinker; my relationship with alcohol was cautious at best, considering what I’d seen it do to my parents. But I was enjoying myself even more than I’d expected to and wanted to indulge.

They ordered their food and Greg was still talking, although he’d finally asked her where she worked. I ordered a white wine and had it sent to her table because she damn well was going to need it; fuck whatever red wine swill he’d stuck her with. When I told the bartender not to say who it was from, he chuckled and luckily went along with it.

Greg was pissed about the wine and was looking around like he was going to beat someone’s face in. As if he had the right. As if he had any claim to her.

Jess looked pleased, smirking as she sipped the drink. And that was really all that mattered to me.

But she was also distracted, squirming in her seat. Maybe she thought I was cruel for keeping her on edge, but I did the same thing to myself. I’d ride the edge as long as physically possible, greedily taking every last ounce of pleasure I could.

But I couldn't wait much longer.

The moment she set down her fork, I caught her gaze and curled my finger at her. I left for the bathroom again, trying to subtly adjust myself on the way.

I paced in front of the mirror, my patience on the verge of snapping. I needed her now. Right now. Before I marched back out there and fucked her over the table right in front of him.

I loved to share, but only with the right people. I wanted to watch my girl get fucked hard, used as messily as she could be, but I wanted to know that whoever was doing it truly appreciated it. I wanted them to do it right, to satisfy her in the way she needed to be satisfied. Anything less than that was unacceptable.

It was a damn good thing the bathroom was empty, because the moment she walked in, I snatched her by the throat and backed her into one of the stalls.

“On your fucking knees,” I snarled, and she dropped in front of me, lifting her chin to keep her eyes on me. Jerking open my belt, I groaned softly at the sight of her. I wanted to rip those pretty little clothes off her, make her scream my name, fuck her until her eyes rolled back.

The moment my cock was in front of her, she wrapped her lips around me, sucking me into her mouth. She kept her eyes locked on mine the entire time, those green irises as alluring as a succubus. She took me deep, until I hit the back of her throat. Her muscles clenched, then all the way out again, her tongue swirling around my head.

“Fuck, that feels so good. Such a good girl...” She laid her hands on my legs as she balanced herself. Wanting more, I drew her wrists up so her hands could push up my shirt and scratch over my abdomen, her claws leaving long red lines on my skin.

She was so damn good. Those perfect lips bobbing up and down on my shaft, her long lashes blinking slowly over her teary eyes as she took me into her throat again and again. I was already struggling to control myself — it was too soon, too fucking soon.

I pulled back, grabbing her arm and tugging her to her feet. She looked at me in surprise, but then I was pressing her back against the stall door, my tongue in her mouth as I kissed her. I squeezed her throat until her breath stuttered, then turned her around and pinned her face-first against the door.

“Pull your dress up,” I ordered, and she obeyed. I ripped her panties down and sunk into her pussy until I could feel the plug in her ass nudge against my abdomen. I grasped her hips, arching her back as I fucked her. She bit her lip but that didn’t stop the moans coming out of her; her self-control dwindling by the second.

“God, you feel so good,” she gasped. “Fuck, please touch me, please...”

I rubbed her clit until she was weak, slumping against the door with her eyes half-lidded. We had to be quick, we couldn’t draw this out too long, but I was going to send her back to that table with my cum dripping out of her.

“You like that?” I said, and she nodded quickly, desperately. She felt so tight with the plug inside her, I could feel the swell of it as I pounded her. She was throbbing around me, ecstasy making her hold her breath as she came right up to the edge of orgasm. “Come for me, angel. Come on my cock.”

God, she clenched so tight. It was like the only thing that had been holding her back was my orders, and once I’d told her she could come, it crashed into her uncontrollably. The thought alone had me gasping, my balls tightening, practically ripping apart at the seams as I came inside her.

“You are mine for the rest of the night,” I said. For the rest of the night...for the rest of fucking forever. The two seemed nearly synonymous in my mind at this point. “I want you to take an Uber straight home after dinner, understood?”

“To your house?” she said, and a shiver of heat went straight up my spine.

When I said “home,” her first thought wasn’t of the house she lived in. It was our house. Our home.

“To your house, angel,” I said, holding her a little tighter. “Text me when you get there.”

“Yes, sir.” The words shook but they were strong. I could barely manage to keep standing, but I held her up with me, supporting her as she caught her breath. I kissed her shoulder, her neck, her cheek — but we’d taken too long already and it wouldn’t do to get caught now.

“Straighten up,” I said. I pulled out of her, immediately missing the loss of soft, comfortable warmth inside her. “You have a date to finish, remember?”

“Don’t want to,” she said. She faced me, her back to the door. Her cheeks were so pink and her lips were swollen from how hard I’d kissed her. “I just want you.”

Oh...

Fuck.

I smiled at her, at the pout of her lips and the pleading look in her eyes. “You’ll have me all night, angel, I promise.”

Her smile was like the clouds parting in the middle of a thunderstorm. Sunshine and destruction all wrapped into one.

A storm I’d chase to the ends of the earth.

19 - Jessica

I sat nicely with Greg through the first half of our “date” for the sake of appearances. But with dinner finished, and an Uber on the way, I absolutely relished giving him a piece of my mind. He’d been laughably unpleasant, but I’d expected nothing less. Mom had always loved pairing me up with assholes.

“And another thing! The next time you go on a date, ask the woman yourself instead of assuming her mother gets to set up dates for her! I’m not a prized cow for her to parade around!” I yelled, right as I got into the backseat of my ride. Greg looked thoroughly pissed off, and I grinned in satisfaction. He’d spent the entire evening contradicting everything I said and only talking about himself, yet he thought I’d be a good polite girl and take it?

Hell. No.

I was a good girl for a *very* select group of men, and he was not among them.

As the Uber pulled out of the parking lot, I spotted Manson’s purple Mustang pull out behind us. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me all night. And the things he’d done to me — God, they made me squirm in my seat. My body was still warm and sated, but I was on pins and needles waiting to get home. He’d promised I’d have him tonight, and after that whirlwind of pleasure at the restaurant, I wanted nothing more than to curl into bed, wrapped in his arms.

I kept a lookout for his car as we drove up to the house, but I didn’t spot it. Although I wasn’t certain what his plan was, I sent him a text as the Uber dropped me off.

His response came through as I reached the front porch. **Go inside. I’ll see you soon.**

Mom noticed the moment I walked in the door, of course. “Well?” she called, before the door had even closed behind me. “Isn’t he a dream?”

“More like a nightmare,” I muttered, taking off my shoes. Then, more loudly, I said, “He was a jerk the entire night, Mom, and I told him as much.” She was quickly rattling off some excuse for him as I walked into the living room, where she was watching a movie with my sister. “No more dates. No more setting me up, no more playing matchmaker. None of it.”

Turning on my heel, I went straight upstairs without giving her even a moment to start another argument. My feet were aching from the heels I'd been wearing, and I was eager to take off this tight dress and get into something more comfortable.

The moment I stepped into my room, I gasped and hurriedly shut the door behind me, mouth agape at the sight in front of me.

There was a bouquet of flowers on my bed; pale pink roses the same color as my dress. Beside it was a bottle of wine — the same white wine I'd wanted to order at the restaurant. My closet was open, and I locked my bedroom door before walking to the end of my bed.

Manson was sitting cross-legged on the floor, illuminated only by the subtle light of my desk lamp. He'd cleared a space in my closet for us to sit, using an old chess board as a makeshift table. Two wine glasses sat on top of it, beside a to-go box from the restaurant.

"How did you get in here?" I whispered. He got to his feet, the smirk on his face setting loose a swarm of butterflies in my stomach.

He held up a little blue plastic circle attached to his keyring, and said, "Jason made an extra security fob for your house. But I came in the window so your family wouldn't see me."

Shaking my head at the audacity, I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him.

"You remembered the wine," I said as he picked up the bottle and produced a corkscrew from his pocket. "I can't believe you could hear me from the bar."

"I have pretty sharp hearing," he said. "Especially when I'm focused." He pulled the cork with a satisfying pop and poured generously for both of us.

We sat on opposite sides of our makeshift table in the closet. I turned on the twinkle lights that hung around the doorframe, giving us more light. It felt like our own little fort, a fantastical place hidden away where we could be alone. We clinked our glasses together, and as I took a sip, I found it to be just as delicious as I'd hoped.

"What did you bring?" I said, glancing down at the to-go box.

"Since you were busy telling off Greg, you didn't have a chance to order dessert," he said. "And that's just criminal." He opened the box, and I had to clap my hand over my mouth so I wouldn't squeal too loud.

“German chocolate cake? Oh my God, it’s my favorite!” It was a thick slice too, perfectly moist and layered with chocolate ganache. The sight of it alone was drool-worthy. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” he said, but the twinkle in his eye told me it was so much more than that.

It wasn’t a “lucky guess.” It was him paying attention, listening, watching, caring. It wasn’t luck, it was effort.

He knew me. He saw me.

That first bite of cake was practically orgasmic. My obvious pleasure made Manson smile even wider. He leaned back on one hand, holding his wine in the other. He’d taken his jacket off and unbuttoned his shirt a bit more. His hair was slicked back, but a few pieces had fallen loose and hung in his face.

Putting down the cake for a moment, I said, “You look so handsome.”

His eyes widened slightly, and he cleared his throat, shifting his position around. His smile turned remarkably shy as he said softly, “Thanks, Jess. I should clean up for you more often.”

“I like you dirty too,” I said. “You still look handsome covered in grease.”

He lowered his eyes, swirling his wine before he took a sip. When he looked up at me again, his expression made my heart skip a beat.

Like he was desperate. Like I was something awe-inspiring — perhaps even frightening.

“It was really nice of you to do this,” I said. “The flowers and the wine...thank you. I guess this adds a little to my debt, huh?”

“Debt?” He looked genuinely confused for a moment before realization dawned and he shook his head. “Oh, yeah. The engine. Ha.” He still had that *look*. Like he wanted so badly to say something, but he’d choked on the words and couldn’t get them out.

“Can you...” He started slowly, shaking his head as if he was aghast at his own request. “Can you close your eyes for me?”

Setting down my wine, I did as he said. The moment I closed them, his warm hand pressed over my eyes, ensuring that even if I opened them again, I still wouldn’t be able to see. He moved closer, scooting around our makeshift table until his knee bumped against mine.

“Sometimes, it’s too much when I look at you,” he said, his voice so soft and close. “Your eyes see too much of me.”

Reaching out, I grasped his free hand. He held me back, bringing the back of my hand to his lips so he could kiss it.

“I need to talk to you about your debt, Jess,” he said, and the seriousness in his voice made me tense up a bit. But he quickly reassured me, saying, “Nothing is wrong, that’s not it at all. I’m just...I’m trying to tell you...I *need* to tell you...”

There was a long silence, broken only by the breath he inhaled and slowly released.

“I don’t care about the money, Jess. It was never about the money.”

Frozen, I could barely breathe. He was holding my hand so tight, like he never wanted to let go.

“It’s about you. It’s...shit, Jess. I’d replace that engine a thousand times if it meant keeping you in my life.”

He leaned closer; although I couldn’t see him, I could feel him. The nearness — the heat of his skin, the soft touch of his lips.

“Every moment I have with you feels stolen,” he said. “Like God, or Satan, or whatever the fuck is out there is playing another trick on me. I don’t know if you’re ready to hear this yet. You probably aren’t, but I’ll regret it for the rest of my life if I don’t tell you. If you walk out of my life again...when the car is finished and the debt doesn’t matter anymore...if you choose to leave, I want you to know.”

For a moment, sitting there in darkness with him so close, it was like we were the only people in the world. My mind was racing, but I couldn’t form a single thought.

I already knew.

I knew, because he’d shown me.

But when he whispered those words in my ear, it stopped my world entirely.

“I love you.”

My eyes flew open, but his hand ensured I still couldn’t see him. He kept his palm there, and his arm shook. My heart was pounding so hard, it ached — God, it *ached* but it was the best kind of pain I could imagine.

“Please don’t say anything,” he said quickly, before I could get out a word. I would have stumbled over them anyway; my tongue seemed to have entirely lost its grasp on language. “This doesn’t depend on you saying anything. I love you. I’ve *loved* you. For so long. And I’ll love you, even if

you don't love me back. I'll love you even if this is the last day I ever see you."

But it wouldn't be the last day. It couldn't be. I didn't want there to be a "last day" with any of them.

He went on, and every word made that ache a little deeper, a little sweeter. "If you leave and spend your life with someone else, I'll love you still. I want you to be happy, Jess, no matter who it's with. And I'll love you through all of it. Always. Forever."

It felt blasphemous to speak, but I had to.

"Why?" My question sounded so much more vulnerable than I'd meant it to. It shook, as much as his arm did.

"Because you were my glimpse of heaven from hell," he said. "You were the sun in my sky, and now you're like a comet sent to earth. A wildfire I can touch...kiss...hold..." He kissed my cheek until I giggled, nuzzling his face against mine. "You're strong. You're brave. You're so damn beautiful. You've shaken us up, Jess. All of us." I could hear the smile in his words. "I just can't keep my damn mouth shut, so...there it is."

He uncovered my eyes, but moved his hand down to my mouth instead. His gaze was warm as he looked at me. "Don't say anything back. I mean it. I want you to think about it. I want you to have time. Okay?"

Smiling against his hand, I nodded. My body was buzzing. My chest felt light. I could have run a marathon, I could have climbed a mountain in that moment. And my mind was still racing. I couldn't discern a single logical thought in my brain, but I didn't need to.

Love.

He loved me.

Manson Reed *loved* me.

"Now, when I uncover your mouth, I want you to tell me how damn good that cake is," he said. He laughed when my own laughter was muffled against his hand. "And then I want you to tell me your best stories from college. I want to hear what I missed in those years you were gone. Can you do that?"

I nodded again, and when he let me go, that was exactly what I did. After a while, we moved to bed, finishing off the cake and passing the bottle back and forth so we could drink straight from it.

We talked for hours in soft whispers, and I lost track of time. Sleep came slowly, then all at once. I drifted off in his arms, drunk on wine, full

from cake, and happy.

I'd never been so happy.

20 - Jessica

Manson's kisses woke me up. He was kissing my neck, then my cheek, and when I groaned softly and rolled over, he kissed my mouth until I absolutely melted.

"Don't go," I said sleepily. My eyes weren't even fully open, but my bed would be so empty without him.

"Sorry, angel," he said, nuzzling his face into my neck. "But I have to bail before your parents find out I'm here. I think your mom might castrate me if she finds me."

He kept kissing me until my whines of protest became giggles. He left out the window, and I sat up to watch him go, kissing him again as he crouched on the roof's overhang outside my window. My parents were awake; I could hear them downstairs. Hopefully neither of them would walk outside in the next couple of minutes and see the man on their roof, kissing their daughter through her open window.

"You should come over today," he said, holding his hand against my cheek. Despite having just woken up, his eyes were bright with energy, a playful smile on his face.

"I will later," I said. "I promised Julia I'd go shopping with her today."

An expression flashed across his face so quickly, I almost missed it: a tightening at the corners of his eyes and mouth, a flicker of concern. "Where are you going? Wickeston Outlets?"

Nodding, I said, "Don't worry. Julia is picking me up. She'll be with me the whole time." But I could still see the worry in his eyes. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Instantly, the expression vanished, hidden behind his crooked smile. "No, it's nothing you need to worry about. Text us if you need us, okay?"

"Okay."

He turned as if to leave — then quickly turned back, cupped my face and kissed me again. A hard, deep, possessive kiss. And when he parted from me, he said, "I love you, angel. Be good today."

Holy shit, those words snatched the breath right out of my chest. They made me feel as if I'd been falling from a great height and suddenly started floating. He tapped his finger against my mouth, as if to remind me of what he'd said last night: to think about it, to take my time.

But God, how easily I could have said it back to him. It scared me how quickly those words could fall from my lips.

“I’ll be good,” I said. “I promise.”

He left, dropping down into the backyard and climbing over the fence. He turned to wave at me as he walked down the sidewalk, and I waved back. Only when he was around the corner and out of my sight did I collapse on the bed, releasing a heavy sigh as I stared at the ceiling.

This wasn’t a game anymore. This was so much more.

He loved me. No matter how many times that moment in the closet swirled around and around in my mind, it still made me breathless. It was terrifying and remarkable and...

Clutching one of my pillows as tightly as I could, I tried to crush down the swelling feeling in my chest. I felt like a schoolgirl with a crush, my mind racing, my heart pounding, palms sweating. And yet, at the same time...

I felt assured. I felt certain. Manson wanted me to wait, to give it thought, and I understood why. Every moment of my reunion with them had been overwhelming and new, but this? Even more so.

I’d told partners that I loved them before, but it had never felt quite like this.

What had happened to me? How had I become so completely lost in this, in them? But I didn’t *feel* lost — I felt like I’d found something instead. Like I was picking up little pieces of myself along the way, assembling the version of *me* I was meant to be.

Julia came to pick me up around noon, rolling up outside in an old red Cadillac convertible.

“Sorry about the mess, girl. You can chuck it on the ground honestly.” She laughed, clearing water bottles, books, and crumpled receipts off the passenger seat.

We headed for the outlet mall, which was a quick drive across town. After telling Julia as much as I reasonably could about our vacation to the mountains — she complained that I’d left out “all the juicy details” — I then told her about Mom’s attempts to interfere with my dating life.

“You need to move out,” she said simply. “That’s honestly super toxic. What is she trying to do, like, arrange a marriage for you?”

“Trust me, if she could, she would,” I said. “But you’re right. I really don’t know how much longer I can stand living with her. I appreciate them letting me move back, obviously, but I’d rather break the bank trying to pay rent somewhere else. But I have my review at work soon, and I have a good feeling about it.”

Julia glanced at me excitedly as we pulled into the parking lot outside the outlets. “Yeah? You think they’ll hire you full-time? That’s so exciting!” But as she parked, she said, “That would mean you’d move to New York though, right?”

“Yeah. Right.”

We looked at each other, her expression sympathetic as I sighed. Moving states away from my hometown used to be all I wanted to do. Now, the idea was fraught with indecision.

Vincent’s words still echoed in my head. *Wherever you want to be, baby.*

We were walking across the parking lot toward the entrance when I heard a sharp sound of disgust. Glancing to the side, I spotted Danielle and Candace making their way in the same direction, both of them sneering toward us.

“Oh, great.” I muttered the words under my breath, rolling my eyes away from the sight of them.

“Ignore them,” Julia said firmly. She linked her arm through mine, tossing her hair back like a fiery mane. “People like them thrive on attention. The more you give them, the more they’ll want.”

She was right, but I’d always hated to run from confrontation. If Danielle and Candace had something to say to me, then they’d better damn well say it. Fortunately for everyone, I lost track of them once we were inside.

We were both hungry, so our first stop was the food court. We were finishing lunch when Julia leaned toward me and said in a low voice, “Don’t turn around, but you have an admirer who’s been following us.”

My eyes widened. “Julia, you can’t just say that and tell me not to turn around. That sounds terrifying.”

She laughed. “Sorry, sorry, okay, I admit that sounded super creepy. Then again, Lucas *is* a little creepy.”

“Lucas is here?” Instantly forgetting that she’d told me not to look, I turned in my seat and scanned the food court. It only took me a moment before I spotted him. He was seated on a bench on the other side of the court, partially hidden behind one of the tall trees that shaded the walkway between the shops. He was looking away from us, distracted by something. But when he looked back and caught my eyes, he winced and got to his feet.

“Stalkeerrr,” Julia teased as he reached our table and pulled out the chair beside me.

“Not stalking,” he said, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me over to his lap. We were in the middle of a crowded food court, and yet he couldn’t seem to resist having me sit on him. “I just happened to be here.”

“Oh really?” I said, folding my arms skeptically. “You didn’t come to play guard dog?”

The growling noise he made was indeed very dog-like. He took my chin in his thumb and forefinger, giving my face a little shake. “Don’t get sassy with me, sweetheart. I would have been a perfectly fine guard dog if this one hadn’t gone and told you about it.” He made a dismissive motion toward Julia, who gasped in mock offense. “She *did* tell you, right?”

“You weren’t exactly subtle, Lucas,” Julia said, sighing as if his performance was painfully amateur. “You were so busy making sure Jess didn’t see you that you didn’t bother to hide from me.”

“Have you ever known me to be subtle?” he said, and she shrugged as if he’d made a good point. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to intrude on your day.”

“You’re not intruding,” I said. “You should join us, since you’re already here.” I glanced over at Julia to confirm, but she clearly didn’t mind.

“Yeah, trust me, it’ll be a lot easier to guard your little lady if you’re next to her,” she said.

She was teasing him, but by the expression on Lucas’s face, he was hardly playing around. He looked as serious as he always did, but it was hard to miss how nervously he was looking around as we started walking again. He was constantly scanning the crowds, one arm around my shoulders so he could hold me close.

When we passed by a lingerie shop, he abruptly halted.

“Hold up a second,” he said, nodding toward the store. “I think the boys and I owe you a few new pairs of panties. And a bra or two.”

“Oooh, sounds like fun,” Julia said. “I’ll meet up with you guys when you’re done. I have to go to the bookstore anyway. Toodles!” She fluttered her fingers at us as she walked away, almost skipping as she headed toward the bookstore.

Lucas followed right behind me as I wandered around the store, standing so close that I continually bumped into him. After several minutes of him acting like the Secret Service, I turned to him and said softly, “Lucas, what’s going on? Manson was acting weird about me going out today and now you show up. Did something happen?”

He hesitated before saying, “Nothing you need to worry about. We told you we’d be keeping an eye on you.”

“Yeah, if I was going somewhere alone.” I took his hand and stepped closer, brushing my fingers along his jaw. He looked like he hadn’t shaved in a couple of days. “I’m glad you’re here, and I want you to be. But if something has changed, if Manson’s dad has done something else and it’s freaking you guys out, please tell me.”

He sighed heavily, his eyes snapping over to glare at another couple as they moved past us. As if he saw a threat in everything, everywhere. It had to be exhausting to be so tense, to always be on the lookout for danger.

“Vincent’s dad gave Manson a warning,” he finally said. “Reagan’s been trying to stir up trouble at a community level. Spreading lies, rumors. I don’t know what all. None of us do. But we’re not going to risk you running into the wrong person and having shit go south. Like I said, don’t worry about it. You’re safe.”

He touched my arm gently as he said it, his calloused fingers trailing down my skin. As frightening as those words were, I knew I was safe with him. There wasn’t a single doubt in my mind. But it pained me to see him so on edge. They’d all been working long hours since we returned from the mountains, but the exhaustion was visible on his face.

“Come on,” he said. “Don’t dwell on that bullshit. Let’s get you some pretty little underthings that I can rip up.”

In an effort to distract him from being so on edge, I insisted he pick which panties I should get. Watching him rummage through drawers of frilly lingerie, eyes narrowed with intense concentration, was *priceless*. To my surprise, the pairs he picked were so spot-on to my style, it was as if I’d picked them myself. Bright colors, lacey edges, cute patterns.

He paid for everything, taking out his card at the register before I could even reach into my bag.

“Now, what was that fancy-ass lipstick I ruined?” he said as we left hand in hand. He’d insisted on carrying my bags too, and was now laden not only with my purse but with multiple pink bags containing my lingerie purchases.

Laughing at his description, I said, “It’s called MAC. Are you *sure* you want to set foot in a makeup store with me? It’s dangerous territory. I could spend hours there.”

He shrugged. “Then I’ll spend hours with you.”

He said it so easily, as if he truly didn’t mind traipsing around after me with all my bags on his arm. Kyle used to get so pissed at how long I would take when I was shopping, but picking out makeup was serious business.

We met up with Julia again at the makeup shop. We browsed together, with Lucas keeping close behind us. He didn’t hover as close with Julia here, but he also didn’t let us out of his sight for even a moment.

Unfortunately, he had every reason to be so tense.

As we turned down another aisle, I came face to face with Danielle and Candace.

We didn’t say a word to each other, but the tension in that aisle swelled until it was practically vibrating my bones. Doing my best to ignore them, I simply went on looking for the product I wanted, even when it meant standing right beside them.

But Danielle couldn’t keep her mouth shut.

“It’s scary how lax security has gotten here,” she said, speaking to Candace with a heavy sigh. It immediately got my hackles up, and despite Julia shaking her head at me, I didn’t think I’d be able to hold back. “They let so many creeps walk around here now, it doesn’t even feel safe anymore.”

When I laughed, both of them looked at me as if they’d had *no idea* I was there at all. But I knew the tricks of their petty little game. The casual insults, the fake innocence — I hated it.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I startle you?” I said. “I knew you were a coward, Danielle, but now you just sound paranoid.”

Her mouth gaped open at me. Maybe they had expected me to keep quiet, but if they wanted to trade insults, I wasn’t about to back down.

“Ugh, let’s go,” Danielle said, putting down the palette she’d been examining. They squeezed around us; Candace clumsily bumping into Lucas as they went. He barely even glanced at her.

“Ah, nothing like the stench of insecurity,” Julia said. She managed to get something like a laugh out of Lucas. He exhaled a bit harder than usual, but that was close enough to a chuckle for me.

We browsed a little longer before we headed to the register to pay. When we proceeded to the door and the alarm sounded as we stepped through, I didn’t think anything of it. They probably forgot to remove a tag from one of the items when they checked us out.

A security guard accompanied the employee who approached us to check our receipt. The guard lingered around us, eyeing Lucas suspiciously. The employee wanted to see inside our shopping bags next, and people were starting to stare.

“Is this all really necessary?” I said, exasperated at how long this was taking.

They’d let Julia proceed outside, and I knew she was in a rush to get home so she could get ready for work. It was taking so long that I finally waved at her to go. I’d ride home with Lucas instead. She didn’t seem particularly happy to leave us. So much for security at this place being “lax.”

“This is standard procedure, ma’am,” the security guard said. He kept one hand resting on his taser, and my palms were starting to sweat. People were looking at us like we were already guilty. I felt the stares, I heard the whispers.

Lucas had lowered his head, his thumbs hooked in his pockets, his jaw clenched so tight that a muscle in his cheek was throbbing. The employee looked through all our shopping bags, but then wanted to see inside my own personal bag — which Lucas was carrying.

“You want her purse?” Lucas said, his voice rising in frustration.

The security guard stepped closer and muttered something into his walkie-talkie, so I said quickly, “It’s fine. I don’t mind, Lucas, it’s okay.”

We had nothing to hide. It was just weird and uncomfortable, and I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. Lucas was breathing deeply, his stance growing tighter. He handed over my bag with a look of furious resignation.

My eyes widened as the employee reached into my purse and withdrew a large bottle of perfume in an elaborate glass bottle. We hadn't paid for that. We hadn't even *looked* at perfume.

"There has to be some kind of mistake," I said. But the guard seized Lucas's arm, and he jerked back instantly, throwing the guard off balance. The man stumbled, people gasped, and within seconds, he'd pulled out his taser.

"Stop! Stop, please, this is a mistake," I said, desperately putting myself between Lucas and the guard, even with a taser aimed straight for me. He was breathing so hard, I could feel him shaking against my back.

The guard said something into his walkie-talkie again, some kind of code before he called for an "officer."

"Is this your bag, ma'am?" the employee said.

"Of course it is," I said. "But we didn't —"

"I've been carrying her bag since we've been here," Lucas said. "She had nothing to do with this, she hasn't even touched the bag since we got in the store."

"You didn't steal that, Lucas!" I blurted. How the hell had this happened? A bottle of perfume didn't just jump off the shelf!

But then I remembered Candace bumping into him as she'd left.

That was it. It had to be. She had to have slipped the bottle into the bag.

"We were set up," I said. Hearing my own words, they sounded so weak. Like a terrible lie. "Pull the cameras and check, please. He didn't take that perfume."

"We're going to need you to step aside, ma'am." My stomach lurched. The officer the guard had called for had arrived, an armed policeman who was watching Lucas like he was a bomb about to explode.

When I turned and looked back, I could understand why. Lucas had been backed into a corner near the door and his eyes were wide, his fists were clenched. He wasn't thinking clearly; I could see it in his eyes — unbridled rage and fear had overtaken everything else.

"Sir, for our safety, I'm going to need you to turn around and put your hands behind your head."

Lucas's entire body twitched. "Fuck you."

"Lucas, it's okay, it's okay, please." I grasped onto his arms, even though the guard had told me to step back. "Look at me. Listen. You'll be okay. You didn't do anything wrong."

“Step back, ma’am.”

“Sir, if you keep resisting, I’m authorized to use force.”

I laid my hand against Lucas’s face, physically turning his head so he had to look at me. God, he was shaking so hard. “Listen to me. It’ll be okay. I’m not leaving you. You did nothing wrong. Just...” I hated what I was about to say. I knew he’d hate it too. But we had no choice. “Just do what he says, Lucas. Please.”

His face flinched; that pained look breaking my heart. But he nodded slowly. When I finally stepped back, he closed his eyes before he turned around and put his hands behind his head.

21 - Lucas

I knew just from looking at him that Officer Asshole here was going to use this as an excuse to boost his pathetic little ego. When he wrenched my hands down and locked them into cuffs, he did it with enough force to tweak my shoulder. But I didn't let on that he hurt me. In truth, I barely felt it. My adrenaline was so high, I probably wouldn't have felt it even if he'd shot me.

Panic filled me so thickly that I couldn't breathe, I could barely think. The only thing I could hold on to for the sake of my mental sanity was Jess: she was there, she was with me, and damn was that girl raising hell.

"This is absolutely outrageous!" she said, jabbing her finger at the fumbling guard. We'd been taken to the security office and made to wait there while the officer went to pull security cameras from the store. The guard kept mumbling something about forms and procedures, but Jess wasn't having it. "Is the law in this country no longer innocent until proven guilty? We are being detained against our will! This is intimidation and harassment!"

Despite how absolute shitty this situation was, it still made me crack a smile. She was making that guard nervous as hell. The man kept trying to casually spin his pen between his fingers, then fumbling it, clearing his throat and making progressively weaker excuses. "You're not being detained, ma'am, you're free to go —"

"Not without my boyfriend, I'm not!" she snapped.

She'd never called me that before. It was probably a strange thing to latch on to, but I'd take any shred of distraction I could at this point. I was so hyped up already, all it really did was add even more adrenaline into the mix.

Boyfriend. Huh. I could get used to that.

I *liked* that.

"Ma'am, I need you to calm down," the guard said. His pencil-thin mustache looked like a worm laid across his upper lip. Jess laid her hands flat on his desk, leaning toward him. It was as if she was channeling every drop of Queen Bitch energy she could possibly muster.

"Don't you *dare* tell me to calm down," she hissed. "If you don't call that officer and find out what he's seeing on those security tapes right this

very second, I'm calling my lawyer."

She didn't have a lawyer, not that I knew of. The guard stuttered, shuffling around papers and saying something about a form. But when she whipped her cell phone out of her back pocket, he immediately clicked on his walkie and said, "Officer Madden, so we have any updates for Mr. Bent and Ms. Martin here?"

Seconds later, the walkie crackled and someone on the other end said, "We have two young women on tape planting the perfume in the bag. Suspect didn't appear to see them do it."

The guard audibly gulped, his eyes flickering over to me. I probably looked like I was going to kill him.

He'd be damned lucky if I didn't.

It was like I was walking in a daze until we got back to my car. I had my awareness again once I was behind the wheel, but only barely. My head was swimming, my bloodstream a cocktail of stress-induced chemicals that wouldn't simply disappear. They lingered, making my hands shake and my stomach churn.

My fingers were gripped so tightly around the wheel that they ached as I sped down the highway. Every beat of my heart was sickening hard. It was hot, so damn hot that sweat was dripping down my back. No matter how high I turned the AC, it wasn't enough.

Jess said something to me, but my ears couldn't make sense of the words. They were drowned out by anger — by suffocating, choking *rage*.

My only sense of relief was watching that odometer crawl higher and higher as I hauled ass down the highway.

It was always the same. No matter what efforts I made, no matter how I changed myself or vowed to do better, the world always gave me a reason to sink right back down again. I would have beaten that cop's face in if Jess hadn't stopped me; I probably would have gotten myself hauled off to jail or killed.

But that was the point. These people wouldn't be satisfied until they found a way to make us disappear.

They sat in their churches and shouted "Amen!" to love and forgiveness, before they turned around and used every avenue they could to

make those they didn't approve of pay for merely existing. It wasn't enough to keep your head down and try to disappear into the crowd. No, they'd sniff you out and make you the villain.

A shiny new Civic was trying to keep pace with me as I drove, revving up beside me and making it obvious he wanted to race. I nodded toward him, and we both slowed slightly until we were driving side by side at the same speed.

There was a storm in my chest with nowhere to go. The pressure was building, and I needed an outlet; I needed to do something, anything, to get rid of this feeling.

The Civic honked his horn in cadence, once, twice...on the third, we floored it. Jess gasped as the El Camino roared forward, blasting past the Civic without a struggle. He was barely even competition for me.

It wasn't enough, it wasn't fucking *enough*.

"Lucas, you need to pull over," Jess said. Her voice was calm and even, her eyes boring into the side of my face. I readjusted my hand, tightening it on the shifter. I didn't need to be told what to do.

She reached over, laying her hand on my arm. "Lucas, you're swerving. You're angry. Pull over so you can calm down."

The instinctual resistance that rose up in me wasn't strong enough to defy her. I pulled off the highway, driving down a quiet residential street. The narrow road forced me to slow my speed, which I'd admittedly been pushing to dangerous levels.

Manson would fucking kill me if he found out I was driving like that, let alone with Jess in the car. The moment that thought hit me, shame hit with it. What was wrong with me? I'd let anger overtake everything else, I'd lost control when I should have been mature enough to handle it.

After driving aimlessly for a few minutes, I pulled off onto a dirt road. It led deep into the fields, but I parked to the side under the low-hanging boughs of a massive old oak tree. I turned off the engine, grasped my hands tightly on my knees, and closed my eyes as I focused on just breathing.

Jess's fingers squeezed my arm; a reassurance I didn't even know I needed. Her touch grounded me, and I finally opened my eyes.

"Let's get out," she said, giving me a nudge toward the door. "Come on."

It was disorienting to step out in an unfamiliar place when I was already so on edge. Jess took my hand, walking with me to the back of the car. The

sun was low in the sky, casting streaks of pink and orange through the clouds. The fields around us were quiet, with only the rustling of the grass and subtle buzzing of insects.

Opening the back of the car, we took a seat on the tailgate. She drew close to my side, leaning her head against my shoulder without saying a word. It was such a simple thing, but it meant more than she could have possibly known.

She hadn't left me. She hadn't run away when things went to shit, even though she could have. There was nothing to keep her there except the desire to protect me, which felt too damn strange to believe. But I'd seen it with my own eyes. Heard her words. Felt her grasp my hand and lead me out of there because I was too shell-shocked with anger to navigate my way out.

This was why I tried, and why I had to *keep* trying even when it sucked. For her. For all of us.

The blinding rage had leaked out of me, but apprehension was left in its place. I hadn't said a word in that security office because I hadn't dared to. If I'd moved, if I'd opened my mouth at all, I would have made everything so much worse. But that had left Jess to handle it alone, and I could have slapped myself for doing that to her.

Finally, I managed to get out, "I'm sorry." The words felt sticky and thick in my mouth. "I shouldn't have been driving like that." I put my arms around her, embracing her tightly, then even tighter as the seconds went by. God, I didn't want to fuck this up and make a mistake that would drive her away. "Thank you for calling me out on it."

"I understand," she said, her voice soft and muffled against my chest before I loosened my hold. "I don't blame you for being pissed off, Lucas. I am too. The next time I see Danielle or Candace..." She cracked her knuckles against her palm, such a vicious look on her face that I couldn't help but laugh.

It wasn't that I didn't find her intimidating; it was the opposite. Pissed-off Jessica was merciless and I fucking loved it.

"Don't be getting into fights," I said. "At least not without me there, got it?"

"Got it. I'll wait until you're with me so you can enjoy the show." The thought made me smile, and her fingers brushed over my cheek before she said quietly, "I like it when you smile."

The expression swiftly disappeared once she pointed it out. She said it so tenderly that my face heated even more, as if I wasn't sweating enough already.

"I don't like my smile much," I said. It was a sentence I really shouldn't have bothered to utter. What the hell did I want out of it — pity?

But she clicked her tongue, not as if she pitied me but as if she thought I was wrong. "Why not?"

It was shockingly difficult to do this "open and honest" communication thing. It made me antsy, like I needed to get up and run a mile instead of speaking anymore.

I turned toward her, baring my teeth and pulling my lower lip down, expecting her to cringe with disgust.

My teeth weren't pretty, especially on my lower jaw. They were crooked and misaligned, yellowed from too much coffee and cigarettes. So I hid them. I didn't give big toothy smiles. I hardly dared to even part my lips.

"My mouth is fucked up," I said, shrugging as I turned away again. "My family never had the money for braces, or any regular dental work. Had to pull six teeth a few years ago because they got so bad." I cleared my throat uncomfortably. "It's just ugly, Jess, there's no other way to say it."

This time when she touched my face, it was to turn it toward her. She gripped her fingers around my jaw and pulled my head down into a demanding kiss. I clutched her waist, and she spread her legs and pulled my hand down to lay it against her thigh.

"Listen to me," she said when she parted from my mouth and I was left breathlessly wanting more. "I like your smile. I like your crooked teeth. I like the filthy things you say." She kept me close, gripping my shirt. God, I craved that fiery side of her. The more demanding, pushy, and confident she acted, the more I longed for her. "I like the way it makes me feel when you bare your teeth at me, and when you bite me..." I leaned into her neck and did just that. She groaned, and I traced my fingers up her leg, pushing her skirt up. "I love the way you touch me...the way you make me feel..."

Did she even notice when she switched from saying "like" to "love"? Because I sure as hell did. The word pricked my skin like a needle, but the drug that flowed through my veins wasn't poison.

What a hopelessly desperate word. What a beautiful word...what a beautiful idea.

I pressed her back, practically climbing on top of her as I bit the soft flesh on her shoulder, holding on and tightening my hold every time she whimpered and squirmed.

Usually, when I felt this lost, I had Manson there to set me straight. To guide me through the anger back to reality. He knew how to focus my brain, how to redirect my attention and hold it. But Manson wasn't here, and I still needed that outlet to let go.

Jess paused, and I lifted my head, watching her face. She was smiling as she watched me; a small, clever smile that made her green eyes sparkle.

"Kneel," she said. Her voice was soft but her words were firm, and it made something inside me clench up tight in anticipation. "Get on your knees."

I stared at her without moving. This was new. Overcoming her and overpowering her struggles had always been the *thing*, a craving it seemed both she and I shared. She'd never tried to take command before, but hearing that authoritative tone in her voice was sexy as hell.

"Why should I, sweetheart?" I said, growling the words into her mouth as I kissed her again. I'd thought kissing wasn't my thing — Manson being the exception because shit, the things he could do with his tongue made me weak — but Jess had quickly fallen into that exception too. Her whole body moved when she kissed me; it melded against me like hot wax, pouring into every hollow place inside me.

"Because you're distracted," she said. "You're hurting. You're angry. Let me..."

We paused again, out of breath. Her lips brushed mine, and I could barely open my eyes to look at her. She was too beautiful, too perfect. If I looked at her, she would vanish like a mirage.

Her open palm caressed over my head, coming to rest at the back of my skull.

"I want you..." she said.

"You shouldn't. I'm disgusting. Fucking filthy."

She smiled wickedly. "I like disgusting boys."

Our gazes clashed. Hers blazing with want, need. *Demanding* more from me — but also offering me an escape, opening the door to a haven I hadn't known existed.

"You want me to kneel?" I said.

“Now.” Her voice carried the same unshakeable confidence I’d heard from her for so many years. The voice filled with derision that allowed her to walk through the halls of Wickeston High with her chin up, not fearing a single soul. Immoveable in her authority.

This was new, indeed. I didn’t know what to make of it, only that I liked it and it made my scattered brain suddenly zero in on one thing and one thing only: her.

I got out of the bed and dropped to my knees in the grass, right at the edge of the tailgate. It was slightly damp, soft as my knees pressed into it. That put her spread legs at eye level, and I salivated. Visions of burying my head beneath her skirt and inhaling the perfect scent of her pussy filled my brain. I looked up at her — those dilated green eyes, that beautifully sadistic smile — fuck, when had this side of her appeared? Maybe it had always been there, maybe we’d all sensed it and it had needed a little time to make its first appearance.

She trailed her finger along her thigh, bright blue acrylics hooking beneath the hem of her skirt as she pulled it up. It was a fucking tease as she spread her legs a little wider, her panties barely covering her.

“Don’t get used to being in charge,” I said. “I’m giving you a pass this time.”

She tweaked up one perfect eyebrow, giving me a smirk that made me want to ravage her. Her thighs quivered, her breath shuddered. I was so hard, I could split her in half.

“Keep telling yourself that,” she said. “Make yourself useful while you’re down there. Go on. Lick it.”

“With fucking pleasure.”

I tugged her panties to the side, closing my mouth over her. She was already wet, slick beneath my tongue when I probed into her.

“Stop.”

I jerked upright. Her command was forceful, but the way she was looking at me — her cheeks were pink, her lips parted, her breath coming in short gasps.

She’d loved it, but she still made me stop. She was flexing her power to make me obey.

I gripped her thighs, jerking her toward me with a snarl. Her hand snapped out, grabbing my face and holding my gaze upward. Damn, those claws were sharp.

“Don’t you growl at me,” she said in that same stunningly forceful tone. *Goddamn*, that was sexy. “Behave.”

Desperately, I disentangled one arm to tug open my jeans, giving my cock room to stretch. No one had better come along this road because they were going to get a real show if they did.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Start again.”

I groaned as I ate her. She was so heavenly I never wanted to stop; I wanted to hold her there beneath my tongue until she writhed. She grasped my head, urging me on as she held me there. I stroked myself, flinching with pleasure when she laughed.

“Did I tell you that you could touch yourself?” she said. That little fucking *brat*.

I kept stroking to see if she’d dare tell me to stop, flicking my tongue over her clit until her legs were shaking in my hold.

“Mm, so you *know* you’re being disobedient then,” she said, pushing herself up a little straighter so she could tip my head back, forcing my mouth off of her. I ran my tongue over my lips, licking up the exquisite taste of her. But I saw her quiver. Her longing for me to keep going was obvious, despite her bravado to make me obey.

I said, “You’re such a fucking slut. You know you want more.”

“And you like sluts, don’t you, filthy boy?”

Maybe it was some fucked-up trauma response, but humiliation, shame, pain — it all got me hard. The rest of me could be swimming in embarrassment, drenched in anger, and my cock would still rise to the occasion. That was why Manson could work me so well; he thrived on degradation. He could say things to me that I’d beat anyone else down for, but from his lips, they were erotic, irresistible.

Now, I felt the same thing over her dirty words.

“Goddamn, girl, keep talking like that,” I said, looking up at her from between her legs. “You’ll make me cum if you keep that up.”

I wanted to sink into that heavenly cunt and pound her until she screamed. She spread her legs a little wider, but kept my head tipped back as she said, “Oh yeah? You like it when I talk down to you?” She laughed, the sound tingling over my spine. “What a fucking freak you are, getting off from having a girl humiliate you. Pathetic.”

I broke out of her hold, closing my mouth over her and eating that pussy like it was my last meal. She gasped, her protests dying in her throat as

pleasure washed over her.

“Fuck, Lucas.” Her words shook, but she still managed to sneer at me. “Do you like how that tastes?” I nodded against her, not letting up for even a second. The more turned on she was, the better she tasted. “Want more? Do you want to fuck me?”

I nodded again, my cock twitching with eagerness to be inside her. She nudged herself against my mouth, grinding her pussy on my tongue. “Of course that’s what you want, you pervert.” She sucked in her breath, looking down at me with a wicked gleam in her eye before she spat on my face.

That unleashed the beast, and there was no getting it back in its cage once it was free. I rose up so fast that she yelped, as I lifted her entirely off the bed and impaled her on my cock. She grabbed hold of my shoulders, her legs wrapping tightly around me as I clutched her hips and fucked her hard.

“I fucking warned you not to get used to it,” I snarled, ignoring her pleading cries as her pussy squeezed around me. Her eyes rolled back as she came, helpless groans punctuating every thrust. I didn’t last much longer than she did.

I pressed inside her as deep as I could as I came, holding her there so not a single drop could escape from inside her. It was some primal bullshit but I couldn’t get enough of that — filling her up, pumping her full of my essence and leaving her marked with my cum.

My strength was sapped, and I sunk down into the grass and took her with me. Her legs straddled me and she laid her chest against mine, my cock still inside her. Our deep breaths swelled in unison for a few minutes as we lay there silently, eyes closed, surrounded by the soft sound of the breeze and twittering birds.

After several minutes of silence, she shifted to roll off of me and lie in the grass beside me. She snuggled close against me, resting her head on my shoulder as I wrapped my arm around her back.

“Lucas?” Her voice was soft, and surprisingly vulnerable. I tucked my free arm behind my head so I could look at her better.

“What happened today...it’s not the first time people have done shit like this to you,” she said. Her eyes kept darting away, as if she wanted so badly to lower them but was forcing herself not to do it. “I know that...I’ve done things to you, said things about you, that were just as unfair as what happened today. And I regret it so much. I wish I could take it back.”

She took a deep breath, and held it for a moment. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. An apology? For me? From *her*?

People didn't apologize to me for shit, but I also didn't welcome apologies in the first place. I didn't forgive people. There was no point.

With Jess, I'd figured the past was the past. I wasn't going to pretend I was an innocent victim; I'd had a hand in more than my fair share of trouble. She'd been a bitch back then and hadn't been much better when we reunited...at first.

Somehow, against my better judgment, I think I'd forgiven her without even realizing it. But now that she was actually apologizing, I could see the worry all over her face. The fear that she'd wrenched herself open, forced herself to be vulnerable, even though the result might hurt.

She didn't expect me to forgive her. She couldn't even look at me anymore.

I sat up, and she did too. "Okay, hold up — I have to put my dick away for this." It was a relief when my comment got a tiny laugh out of her. I was uncomfortable as hell with conversations like this. Frankly, I couldn't remember the last time anyone had apologized to me, and I didn't know what to do with it now that she had.

She was plucking at the grass, nervously pinching the blades between her fingers. I needed to say something, but I had to figure out what the hell I was feeling first. I wasn't angry. I was nervous, because I was confused and caught off guard. But I felt...

Relieved? Validated? Assured? I didn't know what the hell to call it, but it wasn't a bad feeling.

"You don't have to forgive me," she said quickly, cutting me off when I opened my mouth to respond. "I realize that apologizing puts you on the spot to have some kind of response for it, and you don't have to. I just wanted you to know. I really am sorry."

"Shit, Jess." I rubbed the back of my head, trying to come up with the right words. I didn't know the first thing about accepting an apology, so I tried to think of how Manson reacted when I apologized to him. "I get it. I mean, I can be a major dick too. I think when...when you've spent a lot of time feeling out of control, feeling like other people are running your life, you'll end up doing almost anything to take some of that control back. Even if it means turning around and hurting other people. Doesn't make it okay..." I looked over at her and found her watching me. Waiting, with this

look of hopeful vulnerability on her face that made me just want to hold her. “People don’t apologize to me, Jess, so I’m in uncharted territory here, okay? But I accept your apology. Thank you for...for saying that.”

“Actions will mean more than words,” she said, giving me a small smile. “I’ll show you I mean it.”

She was already doing a damn good job of it.

“Come here.” I gathered her up and pulled her between my legs, so I could hold her there with her back against my chest. I rested my head against hers, savoring that sweet strawberry scent in her hair.

“Well, since we’re here confessin’ shit...I guess I’ll tell you something you should probably know. Back in high school, when I smashed that bottle on Alex’s head...it was because he was talking shit about you, Jess.”

She stiffened, and she turned her head to look back at me with a shocked expression. “Wait...*what?* Lucas, you hated me back then. You couldn’t stand me. Like, I don’t blame you, but...” She shook her head slowly. “Why would you do that?”

I barely understood it myself, but I still had to try to explain. “I suppose I did hate you, about as much as you hated me. But I guess I was a little protective of getting to hate you. When I heard him talking about you, he was bragging about Kyle showing him some photos of you...”

“I knew it,” she hissed. “I fucking knew Kyle showed him. He always denied it.” She closed her eyes for a moment, working through whatever she was feeling in silence. “Why did you...I mean...you got expelled for that, Lucas.”

I shrugged. “I hated that school. I was really only sticking around for the boys anyway. So, you know, I saw the opportunity and took it.”

But she didn’t look like she believed me, at least not the way I was telling it. I wasn’t being entirely truthful either. I didn’t mention how it had made me so fucking furious to hear Alex talk about her that I would have done the same thing even if he’d been my best friend.

“I guess you’ve been guarding me for even longer than I thought, huh?” she said, with the cutest blush rising on her cheeks.

“Guess so. Guard dogs never go off duty,” I said.

I looked at our hands, twined together on her lap. Those fingers of hers were magic, but not only because they could bring pleasure. She knew how to touch me when I was angry, when I was scared. I couldn’t even be sure when she’d learned to do that, or if it was simply natural to her.

“Never?” she said, and it took me a moment to realize what she was asking. But when I answered, I really fucking meant it.

“Never.”

22 - Lucas

Wickeston High School — Junior Year

Pops had been dead for two weeks and it still didn't feel real. The old man should be out of my damn head by now. He should have been the last person in my thoughts. But he was still there. I'd wake up in the morning thinking I heard him shouting for me. Thinking I heard the door slam.

But all that was left of him was ashes. They sat in a plastic bag in a cardboard box on the tiny table in my trailer. Half of me wanted to just chuck them in a dumpster. The other half thought that I should do shit properly, honor Mama's wishes and go back home to lay him to rest.

But fuck him. He never let me rest when he was alive; why should he rest anywhere at all once he was dead?

I wasn't sad the old man was dead, but it certainly complicated things. He had no life insurance, he hadn't left me with savings to cover his final expenses. I'd been working as many hours as I could at the tire shop but minimum wage didn't cover the bills.

They'd already been piling up, even before his heart attack. Now, I didn't even bother to open the envelopes. They sat on the dirty kitchen table, some stamped with FINAL NOTICE on the front.

I didn't need electricity. I could get away with water from the hose in the trailer park. But I couldn't get away with not having food, and funds for that were running dangerously low. Vincent kept showing up with casseroles and "leftovers" from his mom, things he insisted she was sending because it was "extra" but I knew better. They were putting themselves out, trying to take care of me when they already had too many people under their roof. Four of their own children, plus another on the way. And Jason had been staying with them more often lately as the fights with his parents grew worse.

The Volkovs would have taken all of us in without hesitation. They would have found a way. But I wasn't going to take advantage of that family's generosity; I needed to find my own way out of this shit.

It was getting harder and harder to keep trying. Why did everything have to be such a fucking struggle? Just a constant, unending stress. From the moment I woke up to the second I managed to fall into a fitful sleep. I

spent most of my waking hours trying to distract myself, but distractions didn't do much good when you were hungry, cold, or desperate.

So that was why I was at this damn high school even after classes had ended. I wasn't entirely sure what the occasion was. It was some kind of open house, it seemed, with parents wandering around the gymnasium picking at plates of catered sandwiches and making small talk with teachers. The only students who'd bothered to come were the exact sorts I went out of my way to avoid: preppy, overly-involved, stuck-up fucks with silver spoons in their mouths. They had nothing better to do than come here and schmooze with teachers, thinking it would somehow get them ahead in life.

I doubted any of these people even knew my dad was dead. I hadn't exactly made a big deal out of it; I'd been trying to figure out how to get emancipated even before his death. The most involvement my dad ever had with my schooling was calling to complain that I was only allowed to work a certain amount of hours outside school.

I was already attracting attention by being here, so I tried to keep my head down and blend in. Unlike me, there were plenty of other people here very eager to have all the attention on them.

Like Jessica Martin and her mother. The two of them could have been twins, although separated by about twenty years. They both wore tight blue dresses, although Mama Martin's had a deeply plunging neckline that showed off a very expensive pair of tits. As annoying as Jessica was, I had to hand it to her: she always managed to look like she was about to attend some fancy party. I couldn't understand where she got the energy to bother.

Although, I guess when you're not stressing about survival, you get to spend your energy on ridiculous shit like sparkly bags and matching shoes with your mom.

The two of them were cozying up to Mr. Kotham, our English teacher, and of course the old creep was thrilled at the attention. Most of the teachers at this school I disliked, but it was nothing personal. But with Kotham, *that* shit was personal. He was always hovering over the young women in class, touching their shoulders, offering private tutoring. Real pervert behavior.

Jessica was one of his favorites to dote on. Funnily enough, Jason said she was still failing his class. Maybe that was why Mrs. Martin was making

those bedroom eyes at him, utterly ignoring the fact that he kept touching her daughter's waist. Holding her hand. Embracing her.

It was going to make me fucking sick. Turning my attention away from them, I focused on loading as many sandwiches and cold cuts onto my plate as I could get away with. Mama Martin's laughter kept cutting sharply through the murmur of conversation, loud and shrill as if she wanted to show off what a good time she was having.

It had only taken one glance at Jessica's face to know she didn't share her mother's enthusiasm.

Slipping out the door, I released a sigh of relief the moment it clicked shut behind me. Finally, some peace and quiet. My plan was to eat what I'd already gathered, and then smuggle as many leftovers home as I could.

The grass was damp as I sat down, but I didn't mind. Eating under a clear night sky, surrounded by the sound of crickets really wasn't too bad. But hungry as I was, something had put a cramp in my stomach. A feeling of unease, of *anger*, still lingered inside me.

What kind of mother wouldn't protect her daughter from a creep like Kotham? How could she stand there happily while her daughter plastered a fake smile on her face and tried to endure the attention she so clearly didn't want?

Whatever. Jessica and her weird family dynamic wasn't my business.

Reaching into my jacket, I pulled out the half-smoked cigarette I'd been carefully burning through over the past few hours. My stock of cigarettes was running out and I didn't have the money to buy more. Jason would loan me the money; I just hated asking.

These catered cold cuts were fantastic though. Jesus Christ. They'd be lucky if I didn't run back in there and take the whole damn tray.

While I was in the midst of stuffing my face, the door burst open beside me and I nearly choked on thinly-sliced salami.

Jessica didn't see me at first, sitting in the shadows against the building. She traipsed out onto the grass, her breathing heavy, her lower lip clenched between her teeth. Staying silent, I waited and watched. She paced, wobbling slightly with her heels in the grass. She tightly folded her arms, sucked in her breath and held it...

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Just a few, and the rest of her expression didn't change. She let them fall and then hurriedly wiped her face, clearing

her throat. She seemed to be composing herself to go back inside when she turned and finally spotted me.

“Holy shit! What are you doing out here?” Her eyes were wide, and she stepped back several paces. Like I was a wild animal that might fly at her.

“Jesus Christ, girl,” I muttered. “Get a grip. I’m doing the same damn thing out here as you are.”

Her stance immediately shifted to the offensive. Her hands balled into fists, her lip curling into a familiar sneer. “And what exactly is that?”

Holding up my food, I took a massive bite before I said, “Just tryin’ to get some peace an’ quiet!”

She stood there for a moment watching me. Then, slowly, she walked over to the wall and slid down to sit a couple yards away from me. She unzipped her purse, pulled out a small flask, and quickly sipped from it.

The gap between us was rather comically wide, but it was still the closest I’d been to her in a while. We usually kept our distance from each other. Our personalities clashed a little too violently to do otherwise.

Maybe it was just the atmosphere, but Jess was different out here. Quieter. She didn’t carry her head like she was looking down on the world.

She held out the flask, leaning toward me. “It’s vodka and soda.”

I winced, but free liquor was free liquor. It tasted like carbonated rubbing alcohol with a squeeze of lime, and it burned immediately going down. At least it was strong.

There wasn’t much left of my cigarette, but since she’d offered her drink... “You smoke?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s gross.”

“You’re right. It is gross.”

She took the flask as I passed it back, taking another sip. She pulled up her legs, sighing at the tightness of her dress and shifting around uncomfortably.

“Why do you dress like that if it’s so damn uncomfortable?” I said.

“Why do you still smoke cigarettes when you know it’s gross?” she snapped.

“Because I’m a gross person,” I said, taking another bite of my food. Quite frankly, I was enjoying this. She was quicker than I’d expected. “I do gross things.”

She scoffed, rolling her eyes, and I laughed. “What? Are you going to deny it?” She looked over at me, narrowing her eyes, but she didn’t say a

word. She averted her gaze again, and I shook my head in disbelief. “Damn, you’re pleading the Fifth? Unbelievable.”

She kept her eyes straight ahead, but I swore I could detect the little hint of a smile on her lips. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen her smile at me before, and although it wasn’t quite there, it was close enough for me.

I didn’t even like this chick and it still made me feel a little better.

“So what exactly are you doing here?” she said. When I held up my plate in answer, she laughed softly and said, “Don’t your parents feed you?”

“Considering my Pops is dead and Mama can barely feed herself, no, they don’t.”

Her face blanched. “Oh, fuck. I, uh —”

“Don’t start whimpering over me. I’ve been waiting for my old man to die for years, it was about damn time. Just a little inconvenient. I’m not sure if you know this, but that papery green stuff that buys food don’t exactly grow on trees.”

She fell silent. A microscope jab of regret made me sigh, but I didn’t have a damn thing to be sorry for. Jessica lived in her own little world and I wasn’t about to sugarcoat real life for the sake of her feelings. But her gaze had become distant, and for some damn reason, it made me want to keep talking.

“You’re here with your mama? You two coordinate your outfits on purpose?”

She winced. “No, we didn’t.” She was silent for so long, I thought she’d leave it at that. But then she said, “She wanted to talk to Mr. Kotham about an extra credit project for me. I just have so much on my schedule, I can’t always keep up with his assignments.”

She’d tried to sound nonchalant. It didn’t work. As she got to her feet, it was obvious that she was freezing her happy expression into place. She couldn’t let herself slip up for even a second.

I was suddenly so blindingly enraged I completely lost my appetite.

“I guess I’ll see you around,” she said, giving me a breezy wave of her fingers as she walked back inside. But I couldn’t manage a word in response.

Putting my remaining food away in the plastic baggies I brought, I returned to my car. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I made a mental note of where Kotham’s vehicle was parked. It was perfect, really: he’d parked

all the way at the back of the lot, where almost no one else did, because he was so paranoid about his precious old Cadillac.

He'd taken good care of that car. It was pristine.

For now.

I parked around the block and walked back, cutting through a drainage ditch and across a field so I wouldn't have to make my way along the sidewalk. Already, some of the other cars in the parking lot had departed. It was getting late and was dark enough for the street lights to pop on.

Crouching down behind the bushes, I pulled on the ski mask I'd brought from the car. Was it suspicious as hell that I kept a mask in my car? Yeah. But *obviously* it came in useful.

After taking a careful look around, I popped open the switchblade from my pocket and approached the Cadillac. It was a baby blue '59 DeVille, and I couldn't resist caressing my hand over its curves.

Then I jabbed the blade into the front tire, satisfaction melting through me at the hiss of air streaming out. I did the same to the other tires before I dragged the knife up and down the sides, carving up that perfect paint. Then I took a seat on the curb along the passenger side of the car, and waited.

After about twenty minutes, footsteps approached.

Mr. Kotham didn't notice the damage at first, nor did he notice me as I crept up behind him. He was too busy fumbling with his keys, jabbing them awkwardly at his door handle. He must have forgotten his glasses tonight.

All the better for me.

Grabbing him from behind, I wrapped my belt around his neck and twisted it taut, until it was biting into his skin. He immediately began to choke, flailing against me. But he was clumsy, weak. He didn't stand a chance.

"I'm not going to kill you tonight, Kotham," I said, keeping my voice as low and rough as I could to disguise it. "But if I ever see you touch Jessica Martin again, I will. I'll fucking murder you and bury your body in the woods."

He coughed and choked, and I loosened the belt enough for him to suck in a tiny breath. "Kyle?" he wheezed. Even better that he thought I was Jessica's boyfriend; he'd be far less likely to report this if he thought the school's *golden boy* was justifiably behind it.

"Now I suggest you start looking for another job," I snarled. "Because in a few days' time, everyone at this school is going to have proof you're a

creep.” It was an empty threat, but he didn’t know that. He stiffened up, and that told me he had plenty to hide. “I hope you sleep like shit, pervert.”

I tightened the belt again, enough to choke him out. His body went limp, and he slumped to the pavement, unconscious. It gave me the time I needed to slip away again, back to my car.

I never told anyone about that night. But Kotham quit the next day.

23 - Vincent

It had been a long time since I'd had anything close to a "normal" schedule. Even in high school, I'd been such a night owl that I was usually asleep during classes. But being the last one out of bed was actually a great way to start the day. By the time I was awake, coffee had already been made, leftover breakfast was waiting for me in the fridge, and everyone was so preoccupied with work that I usually had uninterrupted time to work on my own projects for a bit.

But some days, the first thing I wanted upon waking wasn't coffee or microwaved breakfast leftovers. Today, I just wanted company.

So I rolled out of bed, trudged down the attic stairs, and stumbled straight into Jason's bedroom.

He had his headphones on, so he didn't hear me come in. I expected to find him working, his screen covered with long lines of multi-colored code. It was enjoyable to watch him work, even though I barely understood a word of it. The rapid click of his fingers on the keys was relaxing.

But he wasn't working. He was scrolling through real estate listings.

Stepping closer, I narrowed my eyes at the screen. All of these places were in New York. He jumped between towns, idly bobbing his head to whatever music he was listening to as he opened up photos of an overpriced McMansion.

Shit, we didn't have *that* kind of money.

He jumped as I slid my arms around his chair, grasping his shoulders. He tugged his headphones off, saying, "Damn it, you scared me! These are noise-canceling, remember?"

I pulled his chair back, grabbing his face as I leaned down.

"Mm, you do look good when you're scared," I said. "All wide-eyed."

"H-hey." He pushed his hand against me, but his protest dissolved the moment I kissed him.

"What are you looking at anyway? Slacking off from work?" I squeezed my way into his chair, basically forcing him to sit on my lap. It made his feet dangle off the floor, which absolutely tickled me but made him huff in exasperation.

"I was only taking a break, for like five minutes."

“Sure, sure, just a quick five minutes browsing for houses.” I scrolled through the listings, wincing at some of the prices. Shit was so expensive.

“I’ve been thinking about it more,” he said suddenly, his voice reserved. “I know Manson and Lucas are putting it off, but Jess’s car is going to be fixed soon...”

He felt like he was running out of time. I’d had the same fear lately, although I’d been trying to ignore it. I was determined to go with the flow, come what will, let fate take its course.

But Jess felt too important to leave up to fate anymore. I’d come dangerously close to telling her as much that day at my parents’ house.

Manson had already confessed to her; he’d told us so. I thought he was being overly cautious by demanding she not give him a response yet, but maybe I was too eager. When I fell for someone, I fell fast and hard. *Not* telling Jess as much had me ready to explode.

Why all the secrecy? Why the hesitancy? Because this was uncharted territory, and she was new to this entire scenario. She had plans and none of us wanted to interfere with that. Her life was already in the midst of turmoil and change, as was ours.

We all feared how things like love and commitment would complicate that even further.

“I don’t think she’s going to bail as soon as she gets the car back,” I said, frowning. “Don’t you think we’ve moved past that?”

“Probably,” he said. “But it’s not just that. She’s going to get hired full-time at that design firm. I know she will. She was talking about it at the gym the other day. Her review is coming up.”

Jess had been excited about that review all week. I was damn proud of her, but that hadn’t stopped the apprehension from creeping up on me. If she got the job, her moving away wasn’t optional. Sure, there was a discussion to be had for long-distance, but we didn’t plan to stay in Wickeston either. The entire premise of the five of us splitting up just felt...wrong. Extremely wrong.

“I saw Manson looking too,” he said. “For places in New York. He can’t let her go.” He sighed heavily. “I...I don’t think I can let her go either, Vince.”

Resting my chin on his shoulder as I stared at the screen, I said, “Yeah. I feel the same way. Have you told her?”

“No. I mean, not exactly. Not everything I wanted to tell her.”

I could be a goof about a lot of things, but when it came to love and relationships, I'd had to teach myself to slow down. Obviously, with Jason as my primary partner, being too frivolous with who I "brought in" wouldn't be fair. After all, just because we weren't monogamous didn't mean it was a free-for-all.

So there were things I hadn't said to Jess. Feelings I hadn't admitted. Fate had thrown this second chance in my lap, and in some ways, I wondered if I was squandering it. Was I being too cautious? Hesitating too long?

As I held him tight, he turned his head to press his forehead against mine. Our breath mingled, and I closed my eyes.

"Do you still plan on coming with me to stay at Dante's this weekend?" I said. There was no point in driving back and forth to work every night when I'd picked up double shifts. Luckily, I didn't really mind the long hours. I enjoyed my nights at the club. But I really hated coming back to an empty bed.

"Course I am," he said, stretching with a groan before he rubbed his eyes. His dark circles were coming back again, an indication that he'd been missing sleep. But I knew why. He always slept worse around this time of year.

"Are you okay?" I said, and he tried and failed to act like my question surprised him.

"Yeah, yeah, totally. Just distracted. Work, and...you know..." He waved his hand vaguely. "Everything."

"Is it *everything* or something more specific?"

He sighed. "Goddamn it, Vince. You know I hate talking about it."

"I know. I just hate to see you struggling and not saying anything. Have you thought about calling your brother this year? Seeing if he'll talk?"

He shook his head. "He's almost fourteen. I don't even know his number anymore. My parents would flip if I tried to contact him on Facebook or something. Who knows what they've told him about me anyway? He probably doesn't even want to hear from me."

His brother's birthday always hit him hard. He hadn't seen the kid since his parents kicked him out, and that was five years ago now. They'd been close before that. The thought of being cut off from my own siblings made me sick, and it pissed me off to no end that his parents insisted on keeping them apart.

“Well, I’ll find a way to keep you distracted this weekend,” I said. “Maybe I’ll take you to work with me and just keep you tied up under the bar top.”

“I’m sure your boss would *love* that,” he said.

“She wouldn’t mind. It would probably bring in more customers.” He gave me a shove, and I laughed, getting up out of his chair. “I’m pretty sure Dante will be here soon to pick up his car. He’s going to leave us the keys to his place, too. Are you going to come down and say hi?”

“I’ll be down. Gimme a minute to get some real clothes on.”

There was a lot on my mind as I made my way out to the garage. Dante was upstairs in the garage loft, chatting with Manson. Lucas and Jess hadn’t returned yet, but he’d texted the group to say they were on their way.

“Hey, what’s up, my man?” Dante rose from his seat to greet me, grasping my hand and pulling me into a one-armed embrace. “Good news. You and Jason get the place to yourselves this weekend.”

“Oh, fuck yeah.” I grabbed the keys he offered me, slipping them into my pocket. “Where are you going to be?”

“At the sideshow with this dude,” he said, laughing as he clapped Manson on the shoulder and sat back down. “We have to show off the T-Bird, man. Those new headers are fucking sick.”

Dante was a tall guy, although not quite as tall as me. His long dark hair was bleached blond at the ends, and his face was pierced with multiple gold hoops in his lip, nose, and eyebrow. He’d been the shop’s first true client. He’d entrusted his car to Manson and Lucas with permission to go nuts — do whatever it took to make the car a champion.

Dante was well-off; business-savvy parents had led to a business-savvy son, besides having a sizeable trust fund. He had plenty of money to spend and was willing to do it here.

“I guarantee you’ll be the one to beat,” Manson said. “Hell, I wouldn’t race you, not now. I think your car is the best build we’ve ever done.”

“Damn right.” Dante turned in his seat at the rumble of the El Camino’s engine as it pulled up to the garage. Jess got out of the passenger seat, and when he turned back around, his mouth was hanging open. “You have to be

shitting me. *That's* the girl y'all are all over?" He whistled long and low. "Goddamn, how the hell did you pull a cute little thing like that?"

"It was our award-winning personalities," Lucas shouted up to us, raising his middle finger to Dante. Dante flipped him off right back.

"Yeah, you're a real catch, Bent!" he yelled. Lucas and Jess joined us upstairs, and of course Dante had to dial up the charm as he shook Jess's hand.

"Pleasure to finally meet you," he said.

"Likewise." Jess smiled easily as she shook his hand, then sauntered over to Manson so she could greet him with a kiss, before coming to me. I picked her up off her feet to kiss her, grinning, because I could smell sweat and sex on her and had to wonder what she and Lucas had gotten up to.

Before she could settle in on the couch, Dante leaned forward in his seat, looking between us conspiratorially. "Listen up for a second. I've been meaning to bring up something to you guys. There's...uh..."

His eyes flickered to Jess for a moment, uncertain. She didn't notice, so I said, "Baby, would you go up to the house and see what's taking Jason so long? He's been holed up in his room all damn day."

"Sure! I'll get him out here." She rubbed her hands together with a mischievous grin before she disappeared back down the stairs and outside. Lucas took a seat next to Dante, and I noticed for the first time that something was different about him.

"What the fuck happened to your wrists?" I said as he rubbed the reddened marks on his skin. Manson was on high alert instantly, jerking upright in his seat to look.

"Nothin'," Lucas said quickly. But he caught Manson's eye and winced. "There was an incident at the outlets. We ran into those old bitch friends of Jess's and they planted something on me. Almost got arrested." Then, under his breath, he added, "I almost got tazed..."

"You fucking *what*?" Manson was out of his seat and by Lucas's side in an instant, grabbing his wrist so he could have a better look. Lucas's face couldn't have reached a deeper shade of crimson.

"Damn, easy there, Daddy," Dante said. "Your boy is still alive, he's okay."

"Thanks to Jess," Lucas said, shaking his head. He looked weary, and rubbed his hand over his head. "I'll tell you about it later."

Manson still didn't look happy. He stayed where he was, planted against Lucas's side as we finally gave Dante his chance to speak.

"Now look, I don't want to scare y'all and I didn't want to scare your girl either," he said. "But there's some weird rumors floating around. Apparently there's some people that really have it out for the four of you."

"No fucking shit," Lucas muttered.

"Well, it's getting serious, because I'm even hearing about it," Dante said. "Guys are saying someone is out to sabotage you, and I'm not talking about just slashing tires or some good old sugar in the gas tank." He lowered his voice, taking a quick glance down into the garage as if he was afraid someone else might hear. "Someone wants you *dead*."

Manson was nodding slowly, and Lucas's jaw tightened up until it ticked. When Dante saw our grim expressions, he said, "I take it that this isn't a surprise to you?"

"Unfortunately not," I said. "There have been some issues."

"That's putting it mildly," said Manson. "Are you thinking something is going to go down at the show this weekend?"

Dante shrugged. "It's a possibility. That's why I wanted to warn you. I've got your back, so do my people. Just say the word."

I'd never questioned who exactly Dante's "people" were. He had connections in both low and high places, and that was all I needed to know.

"We appreciate that," Manson said. "We'll keep an eye out. Maybe we..." He glanced at Lucas again, at the marks on his wrists. "Maybe we shouldn't take Jess with us. To the show."

"Aw, don't do that to her," I said. "She's been looking forward to it."

"We'll be looking out for you," Dante said firmly. "Don't doubt it. Just keep your girl close. I don't know who these dudes are or what their problem is, but they're willing to play dirty."

"We'll keep her safe," Lucas said firmly. Whatever had happened today, it seemed to have lit a new fire in him. "Not a damn thing is going to happen to her."

I didn't like the idea of the three of them going to that show without us now that Dante had voiced his concerns. Not that there was much I could do about it, but we were stronger when we were together. Splitting up just made us more vulnerable.

But laying low hadn't helped us. Trying to ignore the problem hadn't made it go away. Whatever happened now, we were going to have to start

fighting back fast and hard. No mercy. These assholes were getting too bold. And whether Reagan was behind it, or if it was just the same old bullshit, it didn't matter.

We had to protect each other, no matter what that took.
And that meant people were going to have to get hurt.

24 - Jason

Dante's warning gave me the creeps. I'd been looking forward to getting away with Vincent for the weekend; even though he was going to be working, I enjoyed having the alone time with him. I'd have peace and quiet during the day so I could work on my laptop while Vince slept, and since he was away at night — well, I could work then too, if I was unable to sleep.

Which I likely wouldn't, now that I had Dante's warning on my mind.

"Maybe I shouldn't leave this weekend," I said. Aiming down the scope of the paintball gun in my hands, I pulled the trigger.

Missed.

Lucas scoffed. "Don't do that. You're worrying over nothing. Dante is just being cautious." He took aim, fired, and hit his target perfectly. Yellow paint splattered across the old car door we were using for target practice.

"Well, don't you sound optimistic for once?" I grumbled. I sounded like a jerk but I was so tired. I'd been trying to keep myself distracted from my younger brother's upcoming birthday, and all the pain and guilt that brought with it. But this wasn't the kind of distraction I wanted.

Lucas put up his weapon, resting it against his shoulder. Although the summer's heat still had us in its clutches, gray storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. There was a prickle of electricity in the air, a feeling of unease. Maybe it was only my imagination, but even the dogs seemed agitated lately.

Was it a gathering storm? Or was it Reagan creeping around, watching our house, trying to cause trouble? I'd been checking the cameras every morning, but the old man hadn't returned to the property since we got back.

"What are you scared of?" Lucas said, in a calm tone that made me feel even guiltier for snapping at him. "Is it the sideshow? Are you afraid of something happening while we're there?"

Taking aim, I fired three rapid shots. Finally, I was successful, and blue paint splattered across the door. But it didn't feel satisfying.

"It's supposed to be a big crowd," I said. Despite being an "underground" event, the meet up that weekend was likely going to attract car enthusiasts from all over the county. Hundreds of people, all gathered together in the middle of the night, outside the city limits. It was hardly a

recipe for safety. “You could lose track of each other. Jess could get lost. You could all get separated and then...” I didn’t know where my tangent was leading me. Looping my arm through the gun’s strap, I let it dangle from my shoulder as I took a seat on the back porch.

Lucas sat beside me, his arms resting on his knees. I didn’t say a word, but I couldn’t help staring at the faint bruises on his wrists. It had been a couple days since the incident at the outlet mall, and he’d barely spoken about it. At least not to me.

He noticed me staring. He lifted his wrist, holding it into the sunlight as if to see it more clearly.

“You know, I was always covered in bruises when I was younger,” he said. “I broke so many damn bones as a kid, it’s amazing I’m still functional.” He flexed his scarred fingers. Some of them were stiff, and some were crooked. They were big hands that showed the years of hard work they’d been through. “But it occurred to me that if I get bruises now, it’s usually something minor from work. Or from fucking around...” His rare smile was contagious when he turned it towards me. “I’m in a better spot now than I’ve ever been. Safer. Happier. And it’s because I have all of you.”

I was shocked to hear him speak so plainly. Lucas didn’t like to discuss emotional things and I didn’t blame him. But when he did finally venture into those discussions, they always felt genuine. Too raw to be insincere.

He didn’t linger on the topic. He sat up straighter and waved his hand, as if he was trying to brush the words away. “My point is, we’ve always taken care of each other. We have to trust each other.”

“I do trust you,” I said quickly.

“Then trust that we’ll be safe this weekend. We’ll look after ourselves, we’ll be cautious. Besides, you need the time with Vince, and he needs you too.”

“Damn it.” I shook my head at him in disbelief. “Since when do you give good advice?”

He widened his eyes in mock offense. “I give flawless advice. It isn’t my fault that y’all barely listen.” He shoved me playfully and I shoved him back, our words dwindling off into laughter, then silence. But after all the shoving, his arm remained resting on my thigh.

I brushed my index finger over the yellowing bruise on his wrist. He said, “I don’t know what I would have done if Jess wasn’t there. I’d be in

jail right now, J. I wouldn't have been able to handle it. I couldn't advocate for myself, I couldn't calm down enough to speak. But she spoke for me." He nodded slowly. "She stayed with me. She didn't have to, but she did. Just like any of you would have stayed."

There was still disbelief in his voice.

"I'll protect her," he said. "No matter what." He clasped my hand, hardened determination in his eyes. "Don't feel guilty for not coming with us. Besides, you know I'm not keen on Vincent staying in the city by himself."

When he put it that way, there was no argument to be had. I nodded, rising with him when he stood up. It was getting late in the evening, and I usually would have gone back inside to keep working. But since it was our rest day from the gym, I hadn't gotten to see Jess that morning and I really wanted her company. After having her to ourselves during those three days in the mountains, going more than twenty-four hours without seeing her was difficult.

"What are your plans for the evening?" Lucas said, lining up his paintball gun for another shot. As if he'd read my mind, he said, "You should get out of the house for a while. Go pick up Jess and do something fun." *Ping, ping, ping.* All of his shots hit their target, and he gave me a cocky smirk. "See? I got it handled."

Arms folded, I said, "Except you're not taking your paintball gun to the sideshow."

"Eh, whatever, I still have good aim with my fists," he said. I could see him watching me in my peripheral vision, waiting for me to make eye contact. But I didn't want him to see the worry still lingering on my face. "Look, if you're still nervous about it, you should get Jess signed up for a self-defense class or something. You're in the gym every morning anyway."

There certainly wasn't enough time to teach Jess any serious self-defense skills before the weekend, but it still gave me an idea.

Usually I would have given Jess more warning, but I was feeling spontaneous. I called her as I drove toward her house, and she picked up on the second ring.

"Hey! I just got out of the shower," she said. "What's up?"

I tried not to get too distracted imagining her all naked and wet. “Got any plans tonight?”

“Nope,” she said, before adding slyly, “Unless *you* have plans for me?”

I chuckled. “Damn right. I’ll be there in ten.”

“What?! Wait! I can’t fix my hair in ten minutes!”

Twenty minutes later, Jess met me in my car just around the corner from her house. Her hair was styled into perfect blonde waves, her black skirt and red blouse giving her a darker look than I was used to seeing on her.

“What do you have on under that skirt, princess?” I said, after she leaned across the center console to kiss me. The skirt was tiny — almost microscopic. A very intentional tease.

“I guess you’ll have to find out later,” she said sweetly, crossing her legs as she settled into her seat. “What’s the occasion anyway? I hope I’m dressed appropriately.”

“The way you’re dressed is perfect,” I said. I really needed to keep my eyes on the road, but with her looking so damn good beside me, it was difficult to focus. “Absolutely perfect. No occasion for it; I just felt like seeing a movie.”

I didn’t need an *occasion* to want to spend time with her. I was thinking about her almost constantly, I missed her when she wasn’t around. When I was with her, I felt I’d chosen to do something risky, like climbing to the top of the highest diving board despite barely being able to swim. Just talking to her was a rush, touching her was intoxicating.

“Have you been to the drive-in theater before?” I said, and she shook her head. “They do ‘Throwback Thursdays’ and have older movies playing all day. Today they’re showing ‘Secretary.’ Have you ever seen it?” She shook her head again, and I grinned. “I think you’re going to like it. It’s pretty kinky.”

“Kinky?” she laughed in surprise. “Are you taking me to see a *romance* movie?”

“Don’t sound so shocked,” I said. “I like romantic shit too, you know.”

The last time I’d seen this film, the *last* thing I’d cared about was any romantic aspects; it was the BDSM that drew me in. It was the first movie I’d ever seen portray a Dominant and submissive relationship. That alone blew my mind.

Films with violence, torture, and death were easy to find — but movies that portrayed anything close to realistic kink were practically unheard of. It

didn't make much sense to me why consensual sex could be considered more taboo than murder. But maybe that was why I didn't get along very well in "normal" society.

There was already a line of cars waiting to buy tickets when we reached the theater. We got a good parking spot inside and had some time to spare before the movie began, so we walked over to the concession stand for popcorn and candy. We both had a weakness for snack foods, and ended up with far more than we planned for. We dumped it all into a pile on the center console, and spent the first half hour of the movie stuffing our faces with candy.

When the first spanking scene started, it was as if the air around us was instantly charged. Glancing at Jess out of the corner of my eye, I saw exactly the reaction I was hoping for. Her eyes were fixed on the screen, her lips parted slightly as her breathing deepened. She squeezed her crossed legs together for a moment, and I grinned at her obvious attempt to stimulate herself.

"Enjoying the movie so far?" I said.

"Oh yeah," she said. "When you said it was kinky, I still wasn't expecting a whole spanking scene."

It was impossible to keep my eyes on the screen anymore; I only wanted to watch her. "When I was younger, before I really understood what I liked and why, I got way too excited every time I found a movie that had spanking in it. Even if it wasn't supposed to be sexy, I was still into it. I tried so hard to excuse it as *anything* but a fetish."

"I understand that feeling," she said. Her thighs tensed again, squeezing, and I really wished they were squeezing around my head instead. "Were you more curious about doing the spanking, or being the one getting spanked?"

"Both," I said. "Just to make things more confusing for me."

"Does Vincent spank you?"

Her question took me by surprise, but it was sexy how confident she was talking about this. Her gaze didn't wander away from me, her words didn't shake. A playful half-smile remained on her face as she waited for my answer.

"He does." There was just the right amount of humiliation involved in admitting that to her; just enough shame to make my cock pulse as it hardened. "I can be a brat sometimes, if you haven't noticed. I push him to

do it, I'm pretty clear about what I want — or so he's told me." Her smile had widened, and she uncrossed her legs as she leaned back at an angle, resting against the door. "You like hearing about this, don't you?"

She nodded. She spread her legs, and her finger traced absent-mindedly along her inner thigh. Neither one of us was paying attention to the movie anymore, but the sounds of the spanking coming through my speakers made the cab feel extremely warm and small.

"I do like hearing about it," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. Her finger had reached the edge of her skirt and kept going, dragging the cloth with it. My eyes fixated there as her hand reached the apex of her legs. "Tell me about the last time he spanked you...or about the first time."

My cock had hardened so fast that it was uncomfortably squashed against my waistband, and I hurriedly readjusted. Shit, either she was taking cues from Vincent, or they both really enjoyed convincing me to say things that made me squirm.

"Is that embarrassing for you?" she said, a little too eagerly when I didn't answer immediately. She was looking at me like she was hungry, like she wanted to pounce.

Did it really get her worked up to fantasize about me like that? That was...damn, I honestly felt flattered. I didn't usually think of myself as the type anyone would bother to have fantasies about. But the way she was looking at me, like just the sight of me turned her on, was a particularly addictive ego boost.

"It's not embarrassing," I said. My statement wasn't entirely true. It wasn't embarrassment, *exactly* — but there was a hot feeling of shame dripping through me. I liked the sensation: the warmth that pooled in my stomach, how my tongue grew clumsy, and my brain felt slowed down. "I just don't talk about it out loud very often."

I could almost hear Vincent's laughter in my head. It was easy to imagine what he would say if he were here.

Since it's so difficult to say out loud, you should be practicing. Say it, boy. Tell her every last detail.

Damn it. He'd infiltrated my brain so thoroughly, he could dominate me without even being here.

"It seems like you enjoy talking about it," Jess said. She spread her legs wider, and lifted one up on the seat so her skirt was lewdly bunched up. Her hand was between her legs, but I could still see her lace panties beneath.

“You have such a dirty mouth when you’re fucking me. I want to hear you say those dirty things about yourself, too.”

My nerves made me laugh again, and my face had grown hot. But I wanted to encourage whatever she was up to with her hand between her legs.

“I’ll tell you about the first time,” I said.

Her eyes were bright with excitement, her smile both sweet and wicked. There was a bit of haughtiness in her expression; just enough mocking pleasure that it dialed up the degradation for what I was about to say.

“Vincent and I had been dating for almost a year. We were arguing about...something. I don’t even remember honestly.” It had been something petty. Vincent didn’t like arguing; he couldn’t be bothered. Looking back on it now, the topic hadn’t bothered me nearly as much as the fact that he refused to debate with me about it. “I’d been looking for a fight. I was stressed out, irritated...”

“You wanted to take it out on someone,” she said. “So the word vomit came up.”

Yeah, that was a good way to put it: word vomit. “I definitely said some things I shouldn’t have. We were sitting in my car, I had a hatchback at the time. It was pouring rain outside. And he looked me dead in the face and said, ‘You’re acting like a brat. Do I need to treat you like one?’”

“Oh, shit.” Her eyes widened. Of all people, I was sure she could understand the feelings a threat like that inspired.

Vincent’s words had filled me with a cocktail of dread and desire. One of the many times I’d found myself afraid of the very thing I wanted. He’d been so calm, and it made me feel like a petulant child. Naturally, that only made my attitude worse.

“I’d been trying to pick a fight with him all day,” I said. “I already felt guilty and tired.” Pushing my pants down just enough to get a grip on my cock, I went on, “So I said something rude. I cursed at him. He got out of the car and I thought he was going to walk away.”

There had been a split second of terror when he got out. I’d realized, in those brief few seconds when I didn’t know what exactly he was doing, that my behavior could cost me the person I loved. Ridiculous, rash, petty behavior.

“But he didn’t walk away,” I said. A shiver went over me as she pushed her panties to the side, massaging two fingers directly over her clit. I spat,

allowing the saliva to drip down to my cock so I could stroke myself. “He opened my door and pulled me out of the driver’s seat. He said, ‘Either you get into the backseat willingly or I’m spanking you in the middle of the parking lot.’ So I got in the back.”

He’d told me he was going to spank me, and I’d thought it was a joke. Half the things he said were just jokes. But part of me, a part I was still struggling to embrace back then, knew he was serious.

I’d been so damn relieved that he was serious.

“What did he spank you with?” she said, her voice breathier than usual. She was flushed, I could hear how wet she was as she pleased herself.

“His hand, at first,” I said. The words were debasing, but they tasted as sweet as honey. My balls were drawn up tight as I jerked my hand, slick with saliva but not *quite* lubricated enough. “Then a hairbrush.”

“Fuck.” Her breathless curse was so goddamn sexy. It drove me wild that she was getting off to this.

“He made me bend over his lap in the backseat,” I said, dragging the words out of my memory no matter how damn difficult they were to say out loud. “He told me exactly what he was going to do to me, reminded me of my safeword, and asked me if I was going to stop him.”

“I bet you said something bratty, didn’t you?”

“Naturally.”

My response, as I recalled it, was a very prompt, “fuck you.” Which Vincent *loved*, because it gave him an excuse to teach me a proper lesson.

“I started fighting him when he pulled my pants down,” I said. “But I can’t ever overpower Vince. Even though I’m stronger than him.” He was a lanky motherfucker but he didn’t have the muscle I did, that was simply a fact. But his actual physical strength didn’t matter. I didn’t submit to him because he forced me to. I submitted because I wanted to — because I *needed* to.

“You can’t overpower him because you don’t *want* to be stronger,” she said. “You want him to make you weak.” Her breath hitched for a moment, pleasure softening her expression.

She understood, exactly like I knew she would.

“He made me cry like a baby,” I said, and she made a soft sound. So close to a groan, almost a whimper. The air around us felt too thick to breathe. I couldn’t bear to watch her without touching any longer. I tried to

sound severe even though I was barely holding it together, as I said, “You little sadist. You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“I’m not sorry,” she said, sticking her tongue out. “The thought of you being bent over and punished is too hot. I can’t help it.”

“I should spank you just for saying that.” I nearly choked on my words. Goddamn it, she was impossible to resist.

“Maybe I’ll bring it up to Vincent,” she said, despite my threat — perhaps because of it. “I bet he’d let me watch the next time he punishes you.”

The way she bit her lower lip, dragging it through her teeth, made me completely ravenous. I abruptly moved my seat back, giving myself more room. “You fucking brat. Get over here.”

Withdrawing her hand from between her legs, she held up her fingers so I could see her arousal coating them. She took them into her mouth, keeping her eyes on me all the while, and licked them clean.

“Fucking hell,” I said, and she smiled as she popped her fingers from her mouth.

She crawled onto my lap, straddling me. She was facing me, her skirt pooling around her thighs as they framed my cock. It put her in the perfect position for me to grip her ass with both hands, squeezing her before I smacked both my palms down at once. She gasped, the sound dissolving into an enthusiastic groan.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, lowering her head and kissing my neck. The touch of her lips induced chills down my spine, and I smacked her ass again. She trembled, her mouth brushing tantalizing close to my ear. “Harder, sir.”

God, I wished I was in a position to bend her over. But space was limited. I pulled up her skirt in the back, tucking it into her waistband before I spanked her again. “You want it harder? You bad girl.” I smacked her three times in quick succession, and the way she sharply gasped in pain was so damn sexy.

Her hands gripped my shirt, kneading the fabric. Her panties were soaked and her thighs were sticky. Merely grinding on me wasn’t enough for her, and she plunged her hand under her skirt again.

Fucking hell, I could hear how wet she was as her finger moved. She threw her head back and groaned as I continued to spank her, bringing me dangerously close to coming immediately.

“Ride me, princess,” I said. She lifted up, pulled her panties to the side, and sank down on me. I smacked her again, loving the way her pussy clenched so damn *tight*. I kept spanking her as she impaled herself on me again and again, her hands braced on my shoulders.

“Are you going to come from getting spanked?” I said, as her eyes fluttered closed, practically rolling back in her head. I made my next smack harder than the last, hard enough that my palm stung. She cried out softly, beautifully. The slick tug and squeeze of her riding me was going to make me come far too quickly, and I wanted to see her reach her peak first.

“Stop,” I said softly, and she went still, my cock rooted deeply within her. I bent her toward me so that her head rested against my shoulder and said, “Keep touching yourself. Don’t stop until you come.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, and gasped as I began to spank her again. Every swat got a little whimper out of her, deepening with pleasure. Before long, her whimpers became moans and her legs trembled.

“I’m going to come, Jason,” she said. She clenched so fucking tight, even biting down on my neck. I growled at the pain, bucking my hips and continuing to mercilessly spank her as she throbbed on me.

“That’s it, princess,” I said. “You love that don’t you? Coming all over my cock while your ass gets spanked. Fuck —”

I came inside her, buried deep. My arms wrapped around her, keeping her crushed against me as the orgasm washed over me.

We both went limp, breathing deeply. After sitting there in silence for several minutes, sheathed inside her as she clung tightly to my shirt, I kissed her forehead and said softly, “You’re perfect, angel. You’re absolutely perfect.”

I took her home later that night, loathing that I had to separate from her at all.

“I’ll miss you this weekend,” she said. I was parked down the street from her house, and we’d been sitting there for nearly forty minutes just talking, our hands twined together. The engine was off, and we had only the streetlights’ illumination. “I’m glad you’re getting time with Vincent though. I think he gets really lonely without you.”

“He hates being alone,” I said. “I think if he didn’t have all of us, he’d probably be living in some hippy commune somewhere. Meditating with crystals. Drinking ayahuasca.”

She laughed at that. I adored how easy her laughter was, how it seemed to take over her whole body.

“Well, I’ll still miss you at the car show,” she said. “You haven’t taken me drifting yet.”

I’d showed off a little bit when driving her around. But I had yet to actually have her in the car while I was drifting, and I was excited to give her that experience. There was nothing else quite like it.

“Listen, Jess...” I began slowly, uncertain of exactly what to say. We hadn’t mentioned Dante’s warning to her, or Stephan’s warning either. None of us wanted to scare her. But she needed to know the reality of what was going on. “I want to talk to you about the show this weekend. It’s just that...there are going to be a lot of people there, and there’s a chance that —”

“Someone will cause trouble,” she said, finishing for me. She squeezed my hand. “Jason, I know something is up. You guys don’t want to freak me out, I get it. But I don’t get scared very easily. People are still fucking with you — with *us*, and I’m prepared to deal with that.”

It was a relief to hear her say that, but she didn’t only need knowledge. She needed *actual* preparation.

“This is for you,” I said, opening my glovebox and pulling out a bag from inside. She withdrew the palm-sized cylinder from within it, handling it carefully.

“Pepper spray?” she said. I quickly repositioned her hands, ensuring she didn’t accidentally aim the thing at me.

“Keep it on you at all times,” I said. When her eyebrows drew down into a heavy frown, I added, “Please. It’s just a precaution.”

She pulled out her keys, attaching the paper spray to her lanyard. But her frown remained, and she said, “Did something happen? Something you’re not telling me?”

“Reagan is still causing trouble,” I said. “When we got back, we found out that he’d been trespassing on the property. We just need to be careful, all of us. If you’re by yourself, I’d feel better if you carried protection.”

She tucked her keys back into her purse. “I’ll make sure I keep it with me. And I’ll be careful.”

I leaned across the seats, cupping her face with my hand. I loved the small, shy smile she gave me when I got close. “Good girl,” I said. “That’s all I needed to hear.” She leaned into my kiss, sighing softly. Her lips tasted like the sour candies she’d been eating at the theater, and the unexpected sweetness made me smile against her mouth.

“Good night, Jess,” I said, barely parting from her to whisper the words. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.” She kissed my mouth again, then left a quick kiss on the tip of my nose. “But I’m excited to hear *in detail* about your weekend with Vincent in Dante’s fancy apartment.”

“Damn, girl. Insatiable, aren’t you?” She nodded immediately, and I laughed. “I’ll text you later. Stay out of trouble.”

“I can’t promise that,” she said sweetly, twiddling her fingers at me as she stepped out of the car. I watched her until she was inside. Then, just for safe measure, I drove around the nearby streets, on the lookout for Reagan’s old red Chevy.

Thankfully, I found no signs of him.

25 - Manson

The smell of burned rubber, oil, and gasoline filled the air as smoke wafted through the boisterous crowd. The energy around us was palpable as people cheered and yelled, cell phone cameras flashing as I pumped the gas pedal and my tires squealed.

There were dozens of cars and hundreds in attendance at tonight's sideshow, all of us gathered in the parking lot of an abandoned K-Mart. We were about thirty minutes outside Wickeston, and luckily, we'd had no trouble with the cops yet. Eventually, they'd get complaints about noise and traffic, then they'd show up to disperse the crowd and impound whatever they could get their hands on.

But for now, we had no fear and didn't have a single fuck to give.

Jess hung out the open passenger window as I burned out the Mustang's tires, her phone in her hand as she recorded the cheering crowd. All these people gathered here in the dead of night were car enthusiasts who'd come either to show off or be impressed. There were dragsters of every make and model, show cars that had been restored to pristine glory; a few people had even brought their motorcycles.

These gatherings weren't legal; the little two-lane road was backed up for a mile because of all the traffic. There had been takeovers of multiple intersections on the way here, dumbasses blocking traffic so they could do burnouts and donuts before the cops came and chased them off. I wasn't into that shit; I wasn't about causing public interference with my hobbies. But gathering in an abandoned parking lot wasn't hurting anybody, not that the police would be convinced.

I wasn't scared of the cops either. When they showed up — and they would — I already knew they couldn't keep up with me.

Jess cheered as I did donuts around the pit, the crowd pressing dangerously close. Lucas kept a tight hold on her belt so she wasn't at risk of falling. He was trying so hard to keep a straight face, but her screaming laughter was getting to him.

It was just good to see them both enjoying themselves. Especially after what happened. Lucas's bruised wrists were healed, but it was his mental health I was most concerned about. The last time Lucas had a run-in with the cops, it had fucked him up for weeks. He had a deep-seated fear of

being locked up. The threat of being taken away and forced into a jail cell was terrifying to him. He'd told me before that he would rather die than go to prison.

It was different this time, and I knew it was because he'd had Jess with him. She had stayed by his side the entire time; she'd fought viciously for him. He hadn't felt alone. He hadn't been abandoned. And that made all the difference in the world.

Someone shouted for the crowd to step back, and I stopped showing off. It wasn't entirely for show though; burning out the tires was going to give me better traction when I raced. My opponent was waiting for me, parked beside the traffic cone that served as our starting line.

The flagger guided me into place alongside my opponent. The crowd was eager, gathering as close as they could. Lucas locked his hands across Jess's lap, holding her tight and close against him. Now that the windows were closed, the cheering of the crowd was muted. Jess turned up the music, moving her hips in a little dance that made Lucas growl, "If you keep grinding on me like that, I will fuck you in the middle of this crowd."

"Promise?" Jess said sweetly.

Lucas didn't have a chance to respond. The flagger waved us off and I slammed on the gas, launching the Mustang forward and pressing us all back in our seats. My vision tunneled, focusing on the finish line as we flew towards it.

A drag race lasted only seconds. But in the moment, I felt like everything slowed down. I was starkly aware of my own breathing as my heart pounded slow and heavy. It made the air on my arms stand on end as the engine's power rumbled through me, tingling in my fingertips.

My opponent was fast, but I was faster. I flew past the finish line, bringing the car to a screeching halt. I didn't even have a chance to catch my breath before Jess leaned over, stealing the little oxygen I had left as she pulled me into a ravenous kiss.

"That was so fast!" she said, parting from me with a wide smile. "Holy shit, you kicked that guy's ass! I'm still shaking." She held up her hand so I could see. Her fingers trembled with excitement, and I grasped them to hold them still.

"Did you like that?" I said, and she nodded quickly.

"That was such a rush," she said. "We should do it again."

I laughed, rolling down my window as my opponent came up to congratulate me. He was a good driver; I'd seen him at shows before.

"What the hell do you have under the hood, man?" he said, clasping my hand through the open window. I popped the hood before we all got out of the Mustang, but I waited a few minutes for it to cool down before I used a rag to lift it. Showing off our work was exactly what Lucas and I had come here to do.

Lucas let me do the talking, standing to the side with his arms wrapped around Jess. He had a hard time keeping his hands off her, and I couldn't blame him. Even as I conversed with other drivers and curious onlookers, I couldn't keep my gaze away from the two of them.

Lucas's expression was hard, as usual; he looked around like he was ready to fight, his eyes narrowed, his shoulders knotted and slightly hunched. But every time Jess whispered something in his ear, every time she laughed, smiled, or teased him, his hard expression softened.

My phone pinged with a text. It was Dante, who was about to start his first race of the night. I caught Lucas's attention and we got back into the Mustang, which I slowly drove across the lot. I found Lucas's El Camino and parked beside him, before giving Dante a call to figure out exactly where he was.

It still took us several minutes of wandering through the crowd before we found him. I recognized the sound of his T-bird's engine before I saw him, the deep rumble standing out to me. I knew that car, inside and out, and I knew its sound just like I knew the sound of my own.

"Mr. Reed, my man," Dante bumped his knuckles to mine, then Lucas and Jess. "Y'all ready to see what this baby can do?"

His opponent was driving a fierce-looking Pontiac, but I didn't have the slightest doubt Dante would win. We stepped back to a safe distance as the flagger stood between the vehicles, checking to see that both drivers were ready. I preemptively put my hands over Jess's ears.

"What are you doing?" she said, but she got her answer the moment the flagger gave the signal to start. She'd heard loud cars before, but she hadn't heard Dante's Inferno.

The Thunderbird launched forward so hard that its front tires momentarily left the ground. The engine's roar was ear-splitting. It rumbled through my entire body and left my skin itching. Lucas timed Dante's

speed, and when the T-bird rocketed past the finish line, he pumped his fist in victory.

“Six seconds!” he exclaimed, showing me the time on his phone. “Six fucking seconds, Jesus Christ. Dante needs to get that car to the track. He doesn’t have any real competition out here.”

Dante was leaning out his window as he drove back towards us, howling, pumping his fist in the air. His beaten opponent looked sour-faced, but the crowd was loving it. People clapped and cheered as he revved the engine, spinning his tires until smoke poured around us.

Jess looked at me with wide eyes as I uncovered her ears. “I can’t believe how loud that was!” she said, yelling so I could hear her over the noise of the crowd.

“When we take you to a real drag competition, we’ll get you earplugs,” Lucas said. “If you spend all day listening to cars like Dante’s without protection, it’ll crack your eardrums.”

Dante rejoined us after several minutes, dancing his way through the crowd. He was in a great mood, and his wide smile was contagious.

“What a night! You all having a good time?” He gave Jess a nudge and beamed when she answered in the affirmative. “Fuck yeah. No one is giving you any trouble, right?”

“Not a damn thing,” I said. We’d been keeping a careful lookout since we’d arrived, sticking close to each other, not letting Jess out of our sight. But so far, our caution seemed unnecessary. The crowd had good energy, people were friendly, and we already had crossed paths with multiple drivers that we knew.

In all, it was shaping up to be a good night.

“Hey, are you Manson? Manson Reed?”

A man I didn’t recognize came up to me out of the crowd. I nodded cautiously as Lucas eyed him, but the guy grinned and said, “My buddy wants to race you. He’s in the Mercedes AMG.”

He nodded his head toward a slick, matte gray Mercedes sedan. The windows were rolled up and tinted, so I couldn’t see the driver. The car was nice, there was no doubt of that. But it looked stock to me, with no visible modifications.

In other words, a nice luxury car with a good engine. Not a drag car.

“He’s seen your shop online,” the stranger said. “He thinks he can beat you.”

Keeping my arm protectively around Jess's waist, I glanced over at Lucas. He didn't look impressed by this guy, and stalked closer with his arms folded.

"What's your buddy's name?" Lucas said. He was snappy, as usual, but the man didn't seem fazed.

"Freddie," he said quickly. He didn't look at Lucas as he answered, and I didn't like that. Lucas was intimidating, but the way this guy was avoiding even acknowledging him was disrespectful. It was too intentional to merely be social awkwardness. Then the guy reached out, giving me a tap with the back of his hand as he said, "Come on, man, are you down?"

His knuckles barely touched me, but it still made me flinch. Lucas, instantly, put his body between us.

"Watch it," he snapped, his teeth clipping together as the stranger hurriedly put up his hands. "Don't fucking touch him, understand?"

"Jesus, man, what's the big deal?" The guy laughed nervously, and people around us were starting to notice the rising tension. "Is he your boyfriend or something?"

Laying my hand on Lucas's arm, I silently encouraged him to step back. Although I couldn't put my finger on exactly why, something about this entire interaction felt *off*.

"Listen, your friend has a pretty ride but it's not competition for me," I said. It was a cocky statement, sure; but it was true. I wasn't going to waste the small amount of gasoline I had left in my tank on an opponent who could never keep up.

The stranger laughed and said far too loudly, "Oooh, sounds like you're scared, bro! Are you scared?" A few other people joined in with the jeers, eager to see more competition. When it was clear I wasn't going to budge, however, the man's face fell. "Goddamn, Reed, what's the big deal? Too good for a little friendly competition?"

"Your competition isn't friendly," Dante said, coming to stand beside us. He'd been watching the interaction from a distance up until then. "I know that Mercedes. I've seen the plates before. It belonged to a friend of mine before the cops impounded it. That's a NOS car. So who's your buddy, huh? Is he a cop?"

The Mercedes' driver door opened. The driver stepped out, unfolding his massive frame from the car, and I swore softly.

“Should’ve fucking known,” Lucas said, his voice low and vicious as Nate stood up, folding his arms.

“The truck suited you better,” I said dryly as the big man regarded us. “You’re going to get back problems squishing yourself into that sedan.”

“Your concern is real damn touching, Reed,” he said. His friend had quickly retreated to his side, using the larger man’s body like a shield. “Never thought it would be so hard to get you to do something you’re supposedly good at. Why are you so afraid to race me?”

“Why are you so eager?” Dante shot back.

Nate gave him a look that could have curdled milk. “I wouldn’t get yourself involved with this, if I were you.”

“I’m already involved,” Dante said, a grim warning in his tone.

“Is Daddy letting you go shopping at the impound lot now, Nate?” Jess said, her words catching me by surprise. I snickered at her taunt, but we really needed to break this up. The situation was deteriorating fast.

Nate gave her a nasty smile. “I figured you’d have shit to say about it, bitch. Always running your mouth, aren’t you?”

Lucas lunged at him instantly, viciously. Only Dante’s quick actions held him back as he wrapped an arm around Lucas’s chest, saying quickly, “It’s not worth it, dude. Don’t do it.”

“Call my girl a bitch one more time,” Lucas snapped, straining against Dante’s arm. “Fucking say it, Nate! I’ll crack your thick fucking skull —”

“We’re going to walk away,” I said, making it loud and clear to everyone that I was done with this shit. “We’re not looking for trouble.”

“Well, that’s too fucking bad,” Nate said, unfolding his arms to crack his knuckles. “Because trouble has found you.”

There were guys moving into position behind Nate, slinking through the crowd. I recognized his buddy, Will, first. Then I caught a glimpse of Alex, and clenched my jaw. There were at least three...four...five friends with him.

Not fucking great odds.

Under my breath, I said to Jess, “Do you remember where we parked?” She nodded, but clung tighter to my side. I wasn’t sure what was about to happen, but I needed her out of harm’s way. “If we get separated, I want you to go straight to the car —”

Suddenly, a shout echoed through the crowd. It took a few seconds before I could hear it clearly; one word repeated again and again as the message found its way toward us.

“Cops! We got cops!”

The distant wail of sirens hit our ears simultaneously. Everyone stirred; then people began to run. Car horns blared as drivers tried to make their way out of the rushing crowd, trapped by the throngs of people.

Nate narrowed his eyes. The police were already pulling into the parking lot.

“Watch your back, Reed,” he snapped, getting back into his Mercedes. The moment his door was closed, we sprinted.

26 - Jessica

The sideshow had erupted into chaos.

People were running in every direction. Cars were driving dangerously fast and close through the panicked crowd, trying everything they could to get to the road. Manson had a tight grip around my arm as he dragged me through the crowd, and I was holding onto Lucas's hand so we wouldn't get separated.

It was impossible to tell which way was which with all the people spilling around us, jostling and shoving. People's panic heightened as police officers moved through the crowd, some of them with dogs. Sirens were wailing, lights were flashing.

I squeezed Lucas's hand and he squeezed back, a reassurance that he was still there. Luckily, Manson seemed to know exactly where he was going as he led us through the pandemonium. I soon spotted the Mustang and the El Camino parked ahead of us, side by side.

"Are you sure Dante had someone watching the cars?" Lucas shouted over the commotion.

"Dante keeps his word," was all Manson said before he wrenched open the Mustang's passenger door and hurried me inside. He and Lucas exchanged words, then the two parted as Lucas got into the El Camino and started her up.

"Are we really going to run from the cops?" I said, my fingers fumbling with the straps as I buckled into my seat.

Manson grinned as he cranked the key and the engine roared to life. "Damn right we are. Are you scared?"

"No," I said. "I'm excited."

Manson and Lucas would keep me safe. Safe from Nate, from the cops, from any other danger this night could throw our way. I wasn't scared, but my heart was still pounding as the Mustang lurched forward. Manson laid on the horn and the people in front of us leapt back, some of them yelling furiously. Lucas drove close behind us as we slowly made our way through the crowd, moving at snail's pace.

"Come on, motherfuckers, move!" Manson laid on the horn again, and the crowd finally parted enough to let us through.

We had to *go*.

Instead of trying to wedge his way onto the crowded road as the cops closed in, Manson sped toward the back of the parking lot, with Lucas close behind. The car scraped painfully as Manson hopped the curb to get to the street. A dark road ran along the backside of the lot, leading away from the chaos and into the fields.

The moment we were on open asphalt, Manson's speed increased. We were flying down an unknown road in the dead of night, and we swiftly surpassed 100mph. Dark shapes flew by on either side, faster and faster as Manson shifted through the gears.

My cell vibrated, and I looked down to see an incoming call from Lucas. I picked up, and before I could get a word out, he said, "People are tailing us. I don't know who the hell it is, but it ain't cops."

"Shit," I hissed, and Manson looked over at me in alarm. "Lucas says people are tailing us."

"He's sure they're not just running too?" he said, and Lucas heard him without me having to repeat the message.

"Considering one of them tried to fucking sideswipe me, I don't think so," he said.

Turning in my seat, I looked out the back window. At first, all I could see was the harsh glare of Lucas's headlights. But then, another vehicle sped up alongside him, surpassing him and gaining on us.

"Shit, Manson, they're getting close," I said. He'd already noticed them; his gaze kept darting towards the mirrors, keeping an eye on every side of the vehicle. While one vehicle was gaining on our left, another suddenly appeared, speeding up on our right.

It was difficult to see in the dark, but I was almost certain who was following us. On the left was a gray Mercedes. On the right...a red Hellcat.

"Fucking McAllister," Manson said. "These assholes don't know when to quit. Shit." He slammed his palm against the wheel suddenly. "Tell Lucas we have another problem. I'm really low on fuel."

Glancing at his fuel gauge, I found the indicator to be well within the red. For the first time that night, fear stabbed into me. We were going so fast, and with only our headlights illuminating the road, Manson's sight was limited.

We were close to 120mph.

Lucas suddenly yelled in my ear, "Fuck, they're going to —"

There was a loud bang, the impact throwing me to the side as the Mustang swerved erratically. I screamed, nearly dropping the phone as Manson struggled to get the car steady again. The Hellcat had swiped the back bumper, and was already pushing its speed to try again.

“They’re going to run us off the road,” I said, my voice shaking. “Shit, Manson...shit...”

“They’re not going to do a damn thing,” Manson said. His eyes kept darting towards his fuel gauge, even as his speed kept climbing.

“Put me on speaker,” Lucas said, and I quickly did so. “Listen, there should be a crossroads coming up. Look for the train tracks, then take a hard left as soon as you pass them.”

Manson nodded, his knuckles white as he gripped the wheel. There was a sudden sharp glare of light in the side mirror, and Lucas’s headlights swerved behind us as the Hellcat veered toward him.

“Shit!” he yelled. “They’re trying to fucking kill us, Manson.”

Manson grit his teeth. “Can you get beside me and box them out?”

“No. They’re on both sides, I’ve got no room to move.”

“This is fucked,” Manson snarled. “The car is running on fumes, I can’t keep this speed.”

I spotted the railroad crossing sign ahead, glowing in our headlights. “There! There’s the tracks!”

The narrow road Lucas had told us to take was going to require an extremely sharp left turn. There was no way Manson could make it without slowing down, but we were barreling towards the tracks at a terrifying speed.

“Oh my God,” I said the words in the barest whimper, but Lucas still heard me.

“Manson is going to take care of you, sweetheart, don’t worry,” he said. But I didn’t like the way he said it; something in his tone raised red flags of worry in my head.

“Please be careful, Lucas,” I said. The tracks were coming closer...closer... “Please don’t do anything that might —”

“Hold on to something, Jess,” Manson said. But I didn’t even have time to brace myself before he wrenched the wheel to the side.

The tires screeched and the car swerved, the back end sliding as we turned hard to the left. The car bumped so hard that I dropped the phone, and I grabbed onto the harness and held on for dear life. The g-force was so

intense it made me nauseous. Manson straightened out, and the Mustang bounced hard as it flew down the narrow pot-holed road.

He kept glancing in the rearview mirror, his eyes growing wider with every passing second.

“Goddamn it, Lucas,” he said. “He didn’t follow us.”

Turning in my seat, I saw only darkness behind us. When we turned, Lucas must have kept driving straight, leading our pursuers away from us.

Scrambling to pick up the phone, I called Lucas again. It kept ringing and went to voicemail. I tried again — no luck. With every unanswered ring, I felt sicker.

“He’s not answering,” I said, my voice sharp with dread after I’d called Lucas for the fourth time. If the bastards succeeded and ran him off the road, at that speed the resulting crash could be fatal. We had no idea where he was, and we didn’t have enough gas to go back.

“Text him,” Manson said. “Tell him to meet us at the house. I think I can make it back if I’m careful.” My breath hitched as I typed, and Manson suddenly reached over, grasping my thigh. “He’ll be okay, Jess. He’ll be okay.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as me.

The Mustang was sputtering as we pulled into the yard, its fuel completely depleted. It didn’t even make it inside the garage before it turned off. Manson hurriedly got out, bringing his cell to his ear as he walked back toward the gate. I ran to join him, and together we looked down the road.

But no one was coming.

Manson dialed the number again.

And again.

“Come on, you fucking bastard, pick up,” he said. I waited with bated breath to see if this was the call Lucas would answer.

Nothing.

“Fuck!” Manson moved as if to redial, paused, then started pacing, running his fingers through his hair.

“He should be here by now,” I said. My hands wouldn’t stop shaking. The thought that Lucas was out there somewhere alone, possibly wrecked,

possibly hurt, possibly...no. *Don't think about that.* “We need to go look for him.”

Manson nodded, latching on to my suggestion like it was a lifeline in a churning ocean. “We’ll take the Z, it has a full tank. I need to find the —”

The rumble of a familiar engine reached my ears, and it felt as if my heart burst apart as a pair of headlights turned toward the house.

Lucas pulled up next to us, rolling down the window as he grinned. “Miss me?”

He barely had a chance to pull the handbrake before Manson wrenched open his door. The car stalled as Manson pulled him out of the seat and into an embrace, squeezing him so tightly that Lucas wheezed, “Jesus fucking Christ, I’ll take that as a yes.”

There was damage to the driver’s side of the El Camino — long white scratches in the paint, and a massive dent on the fender. But all that mattered was that Lucas was here — alive and safe. Manson wasn’t letting him go, so I threw my arms around Lucas from behind, clinging to him, trying to keep my breathing steady as his familiar scent surrounded me.

The very thought of something bad happening to him had thrown my mind into a panic. I didn’t even want to fathom the thought of waking up to a world without him in it.

“Don’t fucking scare me like that,” Manson said. “I didn’t know what the hell you were doing.”

“Shit.” Lucas chuckled softly. He pulled on my arm, tugging me in front of him so I was squished into a hug between him and Manson. “Don’t tell me y’all were stressed over me? Come on, I’m faster than those fucks.”

“Shut up,” Manson said. “Just...just shut up.”

We held each other in silence. We held tight until the panic subsided, until the sickening dread of loss had finally vanished. And then we held on even longer, because frankly, I simply never wanted to let go.

27 - Jason

“I shouldn’t have let you go without me. I should’ve — Goddamn it — I should have been there!”

My scalp ached from how hard I was gripping my own hair. It was just after midnight and I was alone in Dante’s apartment. I wasn’t usually a stress smoker, and the only thing Dante had on hand was pre-rolled joints, but I lit up anyway. The weed helped, but only a little. It could barely blanket my worry after what Lucas had just told me.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference, J.” Lucas sounded so tired. It seemed cruel to keep him on the phone, but I was too frustrated with myself to stop talking.

“I *knew* I should have gone with you,” I said. “I had a feeling something was going to happen, and it fucking did!”

“You’re psyching yourself out,” Manson said, speaking in the background of the call, as if he were further away from the phone. “You’re exactly where you need to be, dude. Take care of Vincent, okay? Maybe tell him all this after he’s had some sleep?”

“Yeah, I’ll...uh...” I had to pause and take a deep breath. Jesus Christ, I was spiraling. I needed Vincent here. I needed to not be alone. “I’ll do that. You should try to get some sleep.”

“Okay,” Lucas’s voice was so groggy, I could hear him begin to yawn. “You should go to bed, too. Love you.”

“I love you, too.” I nearly begged him not to hang up. But he sounded so tired, and after the day he’d had, he truly needed the rest.

When the call ended, I sank down onto the couch, clutching my phone in my hands. My legs were bouncing anxiously as I stared at the carpet. What could I have done, if I’d been there? I couldn’t have stopped it, but I could have made sure Lucas wasn’t alone, at the very least.

How the hell had it come to this? It was one thing when these guys were just bullies. We could tolerate a few bruises, we’d learned to live with harassment. But trying to run Lucas and Manson off the road? That was attempted murder.

Holy *shit*, these people seriously wanted us dead.

Time ticked by and I barely noticed. Unable to sleep, and unable to force myself to get up and find a distraction, I sat there lost in my thoughts

until the front door suddenly opened.

“Hey, babe. You’re up late.” Vincent tossed his keys on the counter and dumped his bag on the floor, his smile fading as he came closer. “What’s up? What are you doing just sitting there?”

Manson had asked me not to tell him until morning, but that wasn’t possible for me. Keeping my voice low, as calmly as I could, I told him what had happened. About Nate showing up at the show to challenge Manson, how they pursued Lucas when he and Manson were split up. He came to sit beside me, and remained silent as I spoke, absorbing every word with a grim expression. His hand rested on my back, slowly rubbing across my shoulders.

“I should have been there,” I said, after I’d poured the whole story out and nothing remained except my own guilt.

Vincent shook his head. “Don’t do that to yourself, babe. They’re okay. They’re not hurt.”

“They could have been. Lucas could have —” I stopped myself before my voice broke. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close. I curled up against his chest, clinging to him. Part of me was ashamed that I needed this, ashamed that the only thing that could comfort my fear and my fury was his gentle embrace.

“Lucas is okay,” he said, and just hearing the words made my throat swell with emotion. Goddamn it, I *hated* to cry. I was determined not to, regardless of how overwhelmed I felt.

“They needed me,” I said. “They needed me, and I wasn’t there.”

“What did *you* need, Jason?” he said gently. “I want you to think about that for a minute.”

My brain was scattered, but I tried to think. After I’d counted to twenty, things started to slow down. After a count of forty, I said, “I needed this. I needed to be here with you.”

He kept rubbing my back, holding me. His shirt smelled sweet, and mildly like alcohol. He hadn’t even been able to change out of his work clothes before attending to me.

“Relax.” His arms tightened slightly when I tried to sit up, and I collapsed limply against him again. “Stay right there. You’re not inconveniencing me, alright? Holding you is exactly what I was looking forward to being able to do when I got home, babe. I want you to stay just like this until you feel better, okay?”

I released a shuddering sigh and closed my eyes. The slow movement of his hand on my back was lulling me into a trance-like state, almost too exhausted to sleep.

“You didn’t let anybody down,” he eventually said, when I sighed again and practically melted into him. I swore he could read my thoughts; my fears were far too obvious to him. “There was nothing you could have done if you had been there. It only would have meant that you would be in danger too, and I can’t have that.”

He got up suddenly, keeping his arms around me as we shuffled together into the guest bedroom. He gave me a little push towards the bed and said, “Undress. Then get comfortable in bed.” He kissed me on the forehead before he retreated to the bathroom, loosening his bowtie. I flung off my clothes and got under the covers, shivering at the pleasantly cool sheets. My worry had faded, but an uncomfortable feeling of guilt remained. I wasn’t entirely sure what to pin it to, except for the very fact that I needed this.

Goddamn it, why couldn’t I suck it up?

Vincent returned, to the sight of me lying under the covers with my face squashed into the pillow. The mattress dipped with his weight as he crawled over to me and slid under the covers. He’d stripped down, and he smelled like his face wash and toothpaste.

“Hey, look at me,” he said. I uncovered one eye from the pillow to look at him, and he chuckled. “Don’t hide from me. Do you want to smoke before we settle in?”

“Already did.” I mumbled my words into the pillow. He gave me a little push, and I rolled over so he could be the big spoon. His naked body curled into mine, enveloping me. I felt instantly warmer, and my muscles sagged. I swear I sunk another inch into the mattress as the tension went out of me.

“How was work?” I said, stifling a yawn as he nuzzled the back of my neck. His cock was hardening, and it nudged against my ass as he snuggled closer.

“It was good, babe. Busy night, it went by fast. I couldn’t wait to get back to you.”

Smiling sleepily, I arched my back a little, pressing my ass into him. He made a soft sound, a little hum of appreciation.

“Let me take care of you,” he said, his voice a husky whisper in my ear. Heat flooded my veins, and I lay still in quiet anticipation as he reached for

the bedside table. He grabbed the lube we'd brought, and squeezed some into his hand. He reached his arm around me again, snuggling close, and wrapped his fingers around my cock.

He stroked me slowly, his fingers *squeezing* as he slid over my head. My breath caught, releasing sharply when he did it again. He was moving at a leisurely pace, and kissing the back of my neck. His cock was wedged up against me, hot and hard between my legs.

"I love feeling you stiffen up in my hand," he said. His breath was warm on my neck, his hair tickled my ear. He rolled his hips against me, grinding his cock on me with a soft sigh. "I want to fuck you to sleep, babe. You don't need to move a muscle."

Closing my eyes, I relaxed into the sensations. The way he was stroking me was luxuriously lazy, bringing soft noises out of me. I pressed into him again, jerking my hips demandingly. He chuckled, the sound low and wickedly condescending.

"Please..." My words were barely more than a whisper. "Want your cock...inside me please..."

He rolled his hips again, his length sliding between my legs, nudging against my balls. His hand left me for a moment, and I heard a click as he opened the bottle of lube again.

"You want me inside you?" he said, crooning in my ear. "You're going to have to be patient."

His hand was warm but the lube was cold as he swiped his fingers over my hole, massaging slowly to relax my muscles. I missed the tug and squeeze of his hand, but he'd told me not to move. I lay there limply, flesh and bones he could manipulate as he pleased.

A finger pressed inside, moving at the same languidly slow pace he'd used while stroking me.

"Be patient," he said again, when I moved my hips as if to grind against him. "I'm going to take my time with you, so just relax or I'll have to tie you up."

Not that I disliked being tied up; but I didn't want him to stop touching me, so I forced myself to lie still again. But it was impossible not to twitch and tremble as he fingered me. He added more lube, and a second finger, so warm and slick inside me.

"Please, Vince..." I was getting desperate. He was toying with me, and every touch was soothing, it practically made me melt. But my need was

growing. My cock was so hard and I reached down, but he made a soft sound of reproach.

“*Patience*,” he hissed. I pulled my hands back, panting and squirming. He went on toying with me, murmuring the filthiest things in my ear as he did, “You’re loosening up so nicely for me. Feel how easily my fingers slide in?” As if to prove his point, he pressed his fingers deep inside me, curling them just slightly. “Do you think you’re ready to take my cock?”

“Fuck, yes.” I barely restrained myself from grinding against him again.

He smiled, his lips against my neck. “Mm, maybe I should make you wait. I love the way you squirm when I finger you.” He wedged his other arm beneath me, curling his fingers around my cock again. My entire body flinched, curling inward, instantly overwhelmed with his touch.

“Nope, no getting away,” he said. He pulled me back up, using the arm he’d hooked beneath me. Once I was pressed to his chest again, he went back to stroking me. “Stay right here with me. I want to feel you.”

I groaned hopelessly, pressing into him, arching my body against him. He tightened his grip on my shaft as he stroked me. “You’re so dramatic. I haven’t even started fucking you yet.”

His two fingers and clenched hand was more than enough to rip me apart. But then his fingers withdrew, and his cock angled up toward me. He pressed forward slowly, nudging firmly against my hole. I was so slick, so relaxed from his fingers, that it was easy for him to slide inside.

But I still felt the sudden stretch, the *fullness*. “God, that’s so good — Vincent, you feel so — so good —”

“Shh, relax,” he reminded me. “Just relax, babe, that’s it. Let me take care of you.”

The thrust of his cock was just as methodically lazy as the way he was stroking me. It was a slow torturous pleasure. After a while, he went still again, thrust fully inside me. He was so deep it made my toes curl.

“We’ll have to do something special for you soon,” he said. “We’ll get the whole household involved. I want you to be fucked to oblivion.”

I was gasping, writhing against him. He kept up the same firm, steady pace as he stroked me, mercilessly unwavering. His hand was so damn *slick*. In desperation, I moved my hips to fuck myself on him.

Oh, *fuck*, that —

I whimpered his name as I came. Every stroke of his hand made me shudder, it sent ripples of pleasure cascading through me. He groaned,

stroking me through it, his hips jerking into me.

“Don’t think I’m going to stop anytime soon,” he said, as I lay there panting, shuddering with overstimulation as he kept stroking me. “I warned you: I want to fuck you until you pass out.”

He rolled on top of me, crushing me into the mattress as he drove into me. He’d drag his cock almost fully out of me before plunging back in, and every time he drew back, it felt like he was pulling out my soul.

He meant what he said. He fucked me until every shred of energy I had left was gone, until I couldn’t even lift my head and my eyes were falling closed, My groans had been reduced to nothing more than breathless whimpers. He shuddered, growling my name as he came inside me.

He didn’t pull out. He rolled us back onto our sides, away from the wet spot I’d left on the bed. He wrapped his arms around me again, sleepily kissing my shoulders and neck until I drifted off, completely lost to the world and all its worries.

28 - Jessica

That weekend, I didn't go home. Sleeping in their bed was all I wanted. The reality of what had happened was still sinking in; it barely felt real. This was the kind of thing that happened in movies and overly-dramatic teen dramas, not boring little Wickeston.

My mom wouldn't stop blowing up my phone, but I had no desire to text her. I sent a text to my dad instead.

Please tell Mom that I'm staying with friends for the weekend. I'll be back on Monday.

As usual, Dad didn't have a problem with it. **Have fun, sunshine.** Nice and easy. It didn't make my mom stop texting, but at least it made me feel better about not opening her messages.

When I woke up on Sunday, Manson was still fast asleep, but Lucas's spot on the bed was now cold. Rising quietly, I slipped on a pair of Jason's socks and my shoes before I went downstairs. A pot of coffee had been made, and I poured a mug before I walked out to the garage.

The morning was pleasantly cooler than usual, with a late summer storm gathering dark clouds overhead that flashed with lightning. Lucas was leaning over the engine bay of a BMW, a few years older than my own car, fiddling with something.

Setting down my coffee and coming up behind him, I wrapped my arms around his waist and leaned my head against his back.

"Mornin'," he said, drawing me around in front of him so he could hug me in return. He had his gloves on, and was careful not to touch me with them, although I wouldn't have cared if he did.

"Are you really working on a Sunday?" I said, and he shrugged.

"It's a quick job, just an oil change," he said. "But I know I should be taking a day off. Sometimes it's hard to turn off the work side of my brain."

"I'm sure it helps that you like what you do," I said, pulling over a stool so I could sit closer to him while he worked.

"That does help. I like the work, it keeps me focused." He motioned me closer. "Don't sit down yet. Get some gloves on. I'll show you how to change your oil so you don't end up with another dead engine."

Lucas was a patient teacher. He showed me everything we would need to use first — the new filter, gaskets, and tools. Then he put a ratchet in my

hand with an oil filter socket attached, and directed me on how to remove and replace the filter.

It got predictably messy. Even with gloves on, I got streaks of oil on my arms, and at one point, Lucas made me pause so he could rub a smudge of it off my chin. He insisted we couldn't use the lift. "You won't have a lift available when you're changing oil in your driveway." So I got to use a car jack for the first time in my life.

"Go on, put some muscle into it," Lucas said, chuckling softly as he watched me awkwardly clutch the jack handle with my too-long nails. "It won't bite you, show it who's the boss."

As I moved the jack stands into place to keep the car elevated, Manson walked into the garage with a steaming mug of coffee.

"Little early for work on a Sunday, isn't it?" he said. He took a long sip of coffee, closing his eyes for a moment as he savored it.

"It's not work, it's life lessons," Lucas said. "All right, so now you're going to take your ten-millimeter hex key..."

He continued to instruct me as I lay back on the wheeled board that would let me slide under the car — he called it a "creeper." After the oil had drained, I was about to slide myself back out when I was suddenly grabbed by the legs and *pulled*.

Lucas crouched there, his fingers gripped around my ankles, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Did I scare you?" he said. I tried to swat him with the rag I'd been using to wipe my hands, but he dodged it and caught my wrist, pinning me back against the creeper. I struggled a little, not truly trying to get away, but giving enough of a fuss that he had to work to keep me down.

"You're going to get me worked up if you're not careful, Jess," he warned me.

"Oh, no!" I said, dramatically. "That would be *terrible*." I was still lying on the creeper, and he allowed me enough room to prop myself up on my elbows. The look in his eyes was hungry, and that was exactly what I wanted to see. I teased, "You might not be able to control yourself, hm?"

His eyes narrowed as he stood, offering me a hand up. "You have a job to finish, remember? Don't get distracted." But he was clearly very distracted already.

I was having fantasies of him bending me over the car as I poured the new oil. Lucas stood behind me, his hands on my arms as he guided me. He

stood so close; close enough that he was touching my back and when he had to adjust himself, I noticed.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I gave him an innocent, wide-eyed look as I secured the oil cap back into place. “Am I doing a good job?” I said. My ass was wedged up against him, and I smiled sweetly. “I just want to be sure I’m pleasing you.”

Across the garage, Manson snickered at my words. “She’s trying to wrap you around her little finger, Lucas.”

But Lucas was looking at me as if I’d already succeeded. “I can think of a few more ways you can please me, too,” he said, cupping his hand around my throat to pull me back. We pressed up against the front of the BMW, my hands braced against it. Lucas was practically grinding on me. He bit down on my shoulder, softly at first — then hard enough to make me whimper.

“Ah, Lucas...” I reached my arm back from him, and made eye contact with Manson as I did. He was sitting on a stool, leaning against a workbench with his coffee close by. He was intently focused on us, smiling in a way that wasn’t entirely pleasant. It was a pitying smile, as if he knew something that Lucas and I didn’t.

God, I loved when he watched us, it was such a turn-on. Lucas’s fingers squeezed around my throat and I groaned, grinding my ass back on him. “Mm, you’re so hard,” I said. I watched Manson’s face, eager to see his reaction as I said breathily. “You should fuck me right here, Lucas. Bend me over and split me open.”

Lucas snarled in my ear. Instantly, his hand was fumbling with my pants as if to pull them down. But Manson’s pitying smile widened into something far more sadistic.

“I don’t recall giving my toys permission to fuck,” he said. He spoke so casually, but Lucas froze upon hearing his words.

The silence stretched for several moments before Lucas hissed, “Are you going to stop me?”

Manson laughed, taking another sip of his coffee before he got off his seat. “I’ll let you play, don’t worry. But you’re going to do it on my terms.”

Lucas growled again. He couldn’t stop touching me; his hands were heavy as he gripped and caressed me. Manson tipped his head tightly to the side, eyes narrowing.

“I’m going to need to restrain you, aren’t I?” he said. His words quickened with excitement, as if the idea delighted him.

Lucas nipped my sensitive skin again and I groaned. He was grinding against me desperately, as if he knew he was running out of time. Manson stalked closer. His expression grew a little more wicked with every step. Lucas went still, and a shiver went over him when Manson reached his side.

Manson rubbed his hand slowly over Lucas's back: up his spine, over his shoulders, as if he was soothing him. Then he settled his grip on the nape of Lucas's neck, his fingers digging in as he said coldly, "Playtime is over."

Manson marched us up to his bedroom, and made us undress each other as he watched. He barely had to touch us to exercise control. After Lucas had stripped me down, Manson ordered me to undress him in return. He made me pull off Lucas's boots, his socks, his jumpsuit. I had to remove his underwear with my teeth, keeping my hands clasped obediently behind my back.

Manson had a short, stiff, leather crop in his hand, and he gave me a sharp tap with it every time he gave me an order. "Now open the bottom drawer on my dresser, and fetch the muzzle for me."

Scrambling to obey, I crawled to the dresser and slid open the drawer. Various restraints made of leather and metal lay within. It took me a moment, but I grabbed the closest thing to a muzzle I could find and brought it back, carrying it in my mouth.

Lucas was on his knees at Manson's feet, and he glowered at the muzzle as if it had insulted him.

Manson stood behind Lucas, almost straddling him with his legs. He pulled Lucas's head back, forcing the man to gaze up at him as he said,

"You have a hard time restraining yourself," he said, nodding, as if Lucas was a very silly thing who would struggle to understand. But Lucas was nodding his head quickly, almost desperate to agree. "So your Master has to help you, isn't that right?" Lucas nodded again, his breath coming faster as Manson fastened the leather straps around his head. The metal cage was secured over his mouth and nose, effectively taking away his ability to bite. But Manson wasn't done.

"Kneel there," he told me, pointing beside the bed. I scrambled into place and waited there on my knees.

Manson went to the bottom drawer and chose another item from within, although I had no idea what it was until he'd fit it onto Lucas. Then I realized it was a cock ring. The sight of the twin black rings sitting around the base of his shaft and his balls made my mouth water.

"Disobedient puppies need to be kept on a leash," Manson said, returning to the drawer once again. Lucas waited obediently until he returned, then took a slow deep breath as Manson strapped a thick leather collar around his neck. He attached a leash to it, allowing the leash to drag on the floor when he said, "Go. Kneel next to Jess."

Lucas obeyed. The two of us waited there, side by side, as Manson paced in front of us. He kept tapping the leather crop against the leg of his pants, the leather hissing as it whipped through the air. Every impact made a little shiver go up my back.

My eyes remained fixed on Manson's boots, my gaze respectfully low. The very act of paying him respect was arousing for me now. Waiting there in silence, as he decided what to do with us, made me ravenous with desire.

Manson stopped in front of me, and tucked his fingers under my chin to lift my head. I gazed into his eyes as a hot visceral feeling crept into my stomach.

"Open up," he said.

He fit a black ball gag between my teeth and strapped it around my head. It wasn't too large, and there were holes in the ball so I could breathe with ease. Manson had a proud smile on his face and he traced his fingers over my lips, spread around the gag.

"I love you, angel," he whispered, leaning down and kissing my forehead. The words made me squirm with pleasure; I would have smiled if my mouth hadn't been preoccupied.

Manson moved over to Lucas next, who lifted his caged face as Manson reached down. He hooked his fingers through the bars of the muzzle, giving it a little shake. Lucas looked at him like he was in awe, like he wanted to close his eyes but couldn't.

"I love you, pup," he said, his voice so tender that Lucas shivered.

"I love you too, sir." His voice was so much softer than I was used to hearing it. He adjusted his position, straightening his back, sliding his knees out so his legs were spread wider. A thick pearly-white drip streaked down the head of his cock, some of it clinging to the shiny metal of his piercing.

“Both of you, turn around,” Manson said. “Remain on your knees, face the bed, hands on the mattress.”

As I stretched out my arms on the bed, I was vibrating with excitement, trembling with need. A few moments of silence passed, punctuated only by that slow *thump, thump, thump* of Manson’s boots behind us.

“Who wants it first?” he said, and he didn’t need to elaborate for me to know he was talking about the leather crop.

Before I could whimper my acquiescence, Lucas said, “I do, sir.”

The snap of the whip’s impact came so fast I flinched in surprise. Lucas released a low groan, his hands flexing and clenching.

“Thank you, sir. Another, please.”

The crop snapped again, but the impact was different. A high-pitched gasp burst out of him as Manson laughed softly and said, “Aw, did I get your balls with that one? Sounds like it hurt.”

“Fucking hell...thank you, sir,” Lucas gasped like he was drowning. The tremor that went through him made the whole mattress shake.

A finger traced down my spine. “Your turn, angel.” The stiff leather tapped lightly against my ass. “Are you ready?”

Nodding, I tried to brace myself for the impact. But Manson didn’t strike right away; he waited, and paced some more. When my guard slipped for a moment and I readjusted myself, that was when he whipped the crop down.

It stung, a sharp biting impact across my back. Then it came again, on my thighs. Then again, across my butt.

My words of thanks were garbled by the gag. Manson kissed my shoulder, right where my skin stung from the lash. “You look beautiful when you suffer for me.” He pressed two fingers inside me, my arousal making his fingers slick. “That’s what I like to feel, angel. You’re so wet for me.”

Leaning heavily against the bed, I lost myself in that perfect feeling of his fingers plunging into me.

“If you want pleasure, then it’s going to hurt,” he said, his body warm and heavy as he pressed against my back.

When his fingers withdrew, I held my breath. The crop whipped down again, but the pain was pleasure and I shivered all over. Then came a familiar metallic sound, and Manson came close again. But it wasn’t his

fingers that rubbed over my clit. The thing that touched me was hard metal, and slightly cold.

“Do you remember this feeling?” he said. I did. I could never forget the sensation of his knife handle touching me, rubbing me, probing me. When he’d fucked me with that knife at the Halloween party all those years ago, I’d been so shocked at myself for liking it.

Now? None of my desires shocked me anymore. I liked extreme pleasure, I liked pain, I liked every new and unusual sensation between.

Manson probed the handle into me. Leaning forward, I rested my head against the mattress as I zoned out, lost in a stupor of sensation. Lucas was watching me with a rapt, starving expression. His hands were clenched into fists, and I whimpered his name, but the gag made it impossible to understand.

He understood anyway, because he cursed under his breath and determinedly turned his face to stare dead ahead.

“Lucas doesn’t like watching as much as I do,” Manson said, so damn conversational while I was falling apart. “Drives him wild that he can’t touch. Can’t bite.” He shot a self-indulgent smile over at Lucas. “Self-control is hard, isn’t it?”

Withdrawing the knife and leaving me quivering, Manson held it up in front of Lucas’s muzzled face. “You see how wet she is? Her pussy feels so fucking good.”

Manson reached over, dipping his fingers into me again. Then, using my arousal like a lubricant, he slowly pressed a finger inside Lucas. “She’s so slick, isn’t she?” he said; his expression almost maniacally pleased as Lucas bent over the mattress. His jaw was clenched tightly within the muzzle, as if he was struggling to keep his noises inside.

Did having me there make it harder to submit? Did it tear him between wanting to maintain his vicious persona, and wanting to be a good boy for Manson?

“Do you want to fuck her?” Manson said.

Lucas nodded quickly, then winced in pain and said, “Yes, sir. I do.”

“You’re going to have to earn it.”

Manson braced his hand against the back of Lucas’s neck, pinning him bent over the bed. He fingered him until Lucas’s cock was twitching, pressed into the side of the mattress, dripping with need. It was so difficult

to wait for my turn; it was sheer torture to listen to Lucas's desperate sounds and not touch myself.

When Manson climbed up on the bed, he dragged Lucas with him. Manson straddled him on the mattress, his knife in one hand as he grasped Lucas's cock with the other. He didn't stroke him; he didn't even squeeze hard. But Lucas's entire body twitched, his eyes fluttered closed and he *groaned*. The sound was fraught with desire and his hips bucked up, desperate little pleas dropping from his lips.

"Manson, *please*, fucking please, just —"

He went rigidly still when Manson tapped the cold, sharp tip of the blade against his cock.

"Jess." Manson's voice instantly commanded my attention. "You may remove your gag." He tapped the blade again as I obeyed, his fingers squeezing and slowly stroking along Lucas's shaft. Working the stiffness out of my jaw, I respectfully set the gag on the bedside table before I returned to my position. Manson was nodding in approval, his thumb rubbing a slow, teasing circle over Lucas's head. "Who does this cock belong to?"

"To you, Master," I said quickly.

Manson smiled. "That's right. Good girl." I got such a rush of endorphins at that simple declaration. "See, pup? She understands. She gets how it works, although it admittedly took a while to get it through her thick little head. You...belong...to me." He tapped the blade to punctuate his words, and Lucas flinched with every touch.

Lucas's breath was coming in quick, deep gasps. "I'm yours, sir," he said, whispering it like a prayer. "Don't let me forget...don't..."

Manson kissed his chest, pressing his lips right over his heart. He reached for the bedside table, opened the drawer, and withdrew a small disinfectant wipe from within. Tearing off the paper wrapping with his teeth, he used it to wipe the blade down, speaking to Lucas all the while.

"Of course you're not allowed to forget," he said. "No matter how many years go back, no matter how old you are, no matter where we go, you will always be mine. *Always*. No one and *nothing* will take you from me." He leaned forward, resting his forehead against Lucas's. Lucas was panting, his chest heaving, his fingers knotted tightly in the sheets. "Don't ever forget. I take care of what's mine."

Manson lifted the blade and carefully pressed the tip into Lucas's skin. He took his time, carving something into his side, below his ribs. I saw every emotion that flashed through Lucas's eyes. I saw the moment of pain as his lip curled, his entire being shivering as he bared his teeth. Then ecstasy washed over him, and his eyes almost rolled back. He pulled at the sheets as if he wanted to tear them apart.

Manson hummed with pleasure as he worked. "You bleed for me, you come for me, you live and die for me. Understand?" Lucas nodded rapidly, closing his eyes as Manson stroked him with one hand and cut him with the other.

Manson lowered his head and took Lucas into his mouth, eliciting a guttural moan from his victim. Manson took him deep and slow; his lips parting as he lifted his head again and trailed his tongue up the shaft. The sound that came out of Lucas when Manson's tongue lapped around his piercing made my insides clench.

Manson's initials — M. R. — were carved into Lucas's side in shallow cuts. Blood dripped slowly down his tattooed skin, his chest heaving as Manson sucked him. Unable to look away, unable to touch myself, and not daring to speak, all I could do was kneel beside the bed and watch, torn between fascination and longing.

When Manson lifted his head, he looked right at me. "Come up here, angel. Lie on your back, hands above your head."

Lucas moved aside, and I lay down with my arms extended toward the headboard. Manson retrieved multiple pairs of restraints from the drawer — leather cuffs connected by short lengths of chain. He locked my wrists to the headboard first, taking his time to touch and tease me as he did. Then he bound my ankles too, cuffing them to the headboard so I was left folded almost in half, exposed.

It was a good thing I was still flexible, otherwise this position would get difficult quickly.

The position gave me a clear view as Manson teased the knife handle over me.

"Do you want more, angel?" he said, and I nodded as I watched the metal thrust into me. With the handle inside me, Manson lapped his tongue over my clit before he closed his lips over me. My cuffs strained against the headboard as I writhed, but they still held me firmly in place.

"That feels so good," I whimpered.

All I could do was lie there and take it. Manson brought me right to the edge before he stopped. He set aside the knife and moved back, tugging Lucas over by his leash. He grabbed the muzzle, jerking Lucas's face close as he said, "I'm going to fuck your ass while you fuck her. Look at her. Don't close your eyes."

When Lucas faced me, his eyes glazed like he was drunk. He was floating through that headspace of perfect submission: no thoughts, no fears, only the pure bliss of giving up control. I wished I could touch him, run my fingers over his chest, draw him to me.

"God, you look so beautiful," he said. His eyes closed for a moment as Manson moved behind him, his cock pressing against his entrance. But he quickly opened them again, keeping them locked on me as Manson entered him.

At the same time, he lined up his cock with my pussy and pressed inside.

"You're like heaven," he whispered, and I didn't know if he meant me, or Manson, or if it even mattered who he meant. He was right. This was the only heaven I wanted.

"Don't give up on me now, pup," Manson teased, pulling the leash taut as Lucas shook inside me. "Go on and fuck her...and take my cock deeper."

Lucas groaned as he moved. He thrust into me, and as he drew back, he bared his teeth slowly exhaled.

"Shit..." He said the word like both a curse and a desperate plea.

Manson wrapped the leash's length around his hand and said harshly, "Take it like a fucking man. Fuck her like you mean it."

Squirming in my binding, it took every shred of self-control not to start begging. My pussy was throbbing for more; the thick feeling of Lucas inside me making my toes curl. But the two together were going to drive me mad with lust. Watching them, it was easy to understand why Manson was such a voyeur. It was fucking delicious.

I drank up the eroticism of their touches, their tension, their anticipation. It affirmed me, encouraged me. It ignited that sadistic side of my brain when Lucas groaned in pain, every muscle taut as he endured. But it also lit a fire under my masochism, filling me with yearning.

"Fuck me, Lucas," I groaned. I was dizzy with pleasure, practically vibrating with need. "Fuck me hard, please. Make it hurt."

“Fucking hell.” Lucas’s fingers dug into my thighs as he watched himself sink into me. He found his rhythm, fucking himself on Manson’s cock and fucking me at the same time. He braced his hands against the headboard, gripping the bars so tight that the veins stood out sharply in his arms.

Manson’s head tipped back, pleasure contorting his face. “There’s my good boy. How does that feel?”

“Fucking amazing.” Lucas’s words shook, his eyes narrowed and desperate as he watched my face. He reached down, rubbing my clit with his thumb. My pleasure rocketed to a feverish height, my muscles tensing and straining against the chains.

Looking up at him from between my spread legs, I whimpered, “That feels so good, Lucas, you’re going to make me come.”

“Come for me, sweetheart,” he gasped, and I groaned with utter abandon. His teeth were bare within the muzzle, and he leaned down — only to snarl with despair when he realized he couldn’t kiss me... or bite me.

Manson tugged on the leash and jerked him upright. “Someone is a very whiny dog today. Maybe you should have been a little more careful defying me, hm?” Lucas nodded rapidly. “Because I always get what I want, don’t I?” Another rapid nod. He was fucking me mercilessly and my muscles were locked up in bliss. “Who owns you, Lucas? Say it.”

“You do, sir.”

I came so hard that I held my breath. Lucas kept touching me, fucking me, and the pleasure drew out to an ungodly intensity. My legs were shaking, and I was left gasping, so eager for Lucas to come inside me, I mindlessly begged for it.

“She wants you to fill her up,” Manson said, growling the words in Lucas’s ear. “Look at her face, look how badly she wants it. Are you going to give her what she wants, pup?”

“Yes, sir.” He dissolved into a moan as Manson moved, rolling his hips into him. Manson fucked him hard, inserting his fingers through the bars of the muzzle. Lucas took the digits in his mouth, sucking them with a desperation that made him close his eyes again.

The force of Manson fucking him drove him into me. His cock swelled, and with a vicious groan, he came inside me. Manson clung to him, the sound of his hips slapping against him growing more erratic until Manson shuddered, his eyes squeezing closed in bliss.

29 - Manson

Today was the day. Anxiety gripped me before I'd even opened my eyes, and I lay very still as I tried to bring it back under control. Since moving into this house, we had repaired piping and electricity, rebuilt walls and replaced flooring. We'd torn through every damn room except one.

I had to face it. There was nothing in there but four walls and too many memories. I'd tried to get all my thoughts out in therapy yesterday, but shit, Dr. Wagner would have a lot more to hear from me next week too.

Rolling over, I snuggled closer to Lucas, wrapping my arm around him. He sighed softly, wiggling himself back so I was spooning him. It helped to have him close; I needed the warmth, the comfort. It pained me that Jess hadn't been able to sleep over, but she was on such thin ice with her mom.

There had been another argument since she stayed over the weekend, and it stressed her out to keep fighting. Poor girl looked exhausted when we went for coffee yesterday, but she had a lot on her mind.

She had her review first thing on Monday next week. She'd worked so hard for it, but nerves still plagued her. We were confident she'd get that promotion, though.

Maybe that was why I suddenly felt spurred on to clear out the old bedroom. Life moved fast and I didn't want to be left behind. It had become an unspoken agreement among us, it seemed, that when Jess moved to New York, obviously we would too.

But we needed everything in place.

Although I loathed leaving the bed's warmth, I wasn't going to get any more sleep. I was wide awake, my heart was pounding a bit too hard. Kissing Lucas's shoulder, I climbed out of bed and shuffled into the bathroom. My hands were twitchy already, and I nicked myself with the razor as I shaved. Gulping down my pills before I left the bathroom, I went straight to the oil diffuser and switched it on. I briefly considered bathing in lavender essential oil, but figured there was only so much help the floral scent could offer me.

Jason was in the kitchen when I came downstairs. It surprised me to see him awake and dressed, before I remembered that he habitually was up this

early now to join Jess at the gym.

“Damn, you’re awake before Lucas?” he said, shaking protein powder and water together in a bottle. He didn’t sound as tired as I’d expected; he didn’t *look* that tired either.

“Unfortunately,” I said, taking a seat at the table. Jojo trudged out of the living room, looking sleepy and confused at the early hour before she laid down beside me with a groan. “You look chipper this morning.”

Jason shrugged, chugging down his protein shake. “Can’t say I’m a fan of waking up before the sun, but it is nice to start the morning at the gym.” He smiled in thought before he took another sip, and I chuckled.

“Yeah, I bet it’s *real* nice when it’s with Jess,” I said.

“Goddamn, it really is. You could start working out too, you know. Imagine getting to stare at Jess’s ass in leggings first thing in the morning. It really sets a good mood for the whole day.”

“Bring her over afterward,” I said. “I know she has to work, but have her bring her laptop. She can work here.”

“She’d be down for that. I know she wants to keep working on that project for her review. She’s barely been able to get peace in that house.” He rolled his eyes in irritation, and I shared the feeling.

Most people I’d dated were in similar positions and didn’t see their folks, so I’d never had to care much about pleasing a partner’s parents. Vincent’s family was different. They’d practically adopted me. But with Jess, I knew my very presence in her life was a source of conflict. It was a problem I didn’t know how to fix; none of us did.

My stomach turned unpleasantly. I really didn’t need to dwell on more problems today.

Too on edge to relax, I spent most of the morning reorganizing the garage and playing with the dogs, trying to get my restless energy out. Once Lucas was awake, I felt a bit better. We said little to each other, but seeing him on the porch as he drank his coffee and smoked his morning cigarette gave me something comforting and normal to hold on to.

My initials had scabbed over on his side. I’d find him tracing the letters sometimes, absentmindedly running his fingers over them with an

expression that was very nearly a smile. It wasn't exactly a collar, but it was something like it.

We found our own ways to claim each other. Collars, rings, bruises, scars. As if to remind each other that even when we were apart, parts of us remained together.

It helped keep me focused on the now, rather than spiraling into memories.

It was only a goddamn bedroom; I hated to be so hung up on it. But I'd spent eighteen years of my life in that room. I'd gone hungry, tried to sleep through pain, and barricaded myself in that room.

I used to think I'd die in there.

About an hour later, when Jason pulled into the yard with Jess in his passenger seat, a sense of relief rushed over me. She stepped out of the car and came to hug me, like a ray of sunshine burning away my cloudy mood.

"Are you okay?" she said. Jason must have told her what was up. I nodded, although being "okay" was a generous description of what I was feeling. The pills were doing their job and mellowing me out, but the anxiety didn't go away. It hid in the shadows, lurking and waiting for an opportunity to squeeze between my lungs again.

"We picked up breakfast burritos," Jason said, tossing a white paper bag my way. I caught it, relishing the smell of cheesy eggs and bacon from inside.

The four of us ate on the porch, Vincent joining us right as we were finishing up. He ate his burrito slowly, with his eyes half closed and his head resting against Jason's shoulder.

The food didn't settle well in my stomach, but I choked it down regardless. As Jess set up her workstation in the living room, Lucas reiterated our plan for the day.

"We'll get all the old shit pulled out and thrown away," he said. "Clean it up, get it painted. Once the paint is dried, we'll rip up the floor. I figure we can get it all done by this weekend." He glanced over at me, seated beside him on the porch. "You want everything thrown away, right? *Everything?*"

I nodded. I didn't want to go through my old shit piece by piece, sifting through memories and trying to decide what didn't hurt too badly to keep. We could burn it all.

Lucas shoved himself to his feet. "All right then. Let's get to it."

As we came inside, Jess called to us from the couch, “Hey, I want to help! Tell me what I can do.”

“You don’t have to do anything, angel,” I said, leaning against the doorframe as she hurriedly put her laptop aside. “Don’t you have to work?”

She shrugged. “It’s a slow day, honestly. I answered most of my emails yesterday.”

Having another pair of hands to help out would make things go faster. Part of me was ashamed to have her see that old bedroom though. It was frozen in time, a rotten, barely-preserved piece of my old life.

But maybe it was time to move past shame. “You can help pull things out if you really want to,” I said. “We just need to get everything into bags or thrown out in the dumpster.”

They all gathered behind me as I fumbled with my keys in front of the door, finally jamming the right one in the lock. I didn’t want to stand around and think about it, but I was still giving myself an internal pep talk as I did it.

“I feel like I’m about to follow Mr. Tumnus into Narnia,” Vincent said, and I gave a hopeless laugh.

The door creaked as I shoved it open, the old hinges groaning. A distinct smell of dust wafted out to greet us, and I stepped into my childhood bedroom for the first time in almost five years.

Even when we first moved in after Mom’s death, I hadn’t looked at it. The door had remained locked since the day I left and never came back; neither of my parents had bothered to open it.

The bed was shoved in the corner, unmade. There were no sheets on the stained mattress, just one thin blue blanket that had the texture of felt. The closet was open, dirty clothes piled on the floor next to shoes with holes and broken laces. My bedside drawer was open, and I had a sudden vivid memory of the last morning I’d spent here.

I hadn’t slept, nerves keeping me awake with thoughts of what I was about to do. I laid awake and stared at the ceiling, as the word “murderer” rolled around on my tongue.

I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I didn’t.

But part of me wanted to. Part of me was willing. Part of me knew that if Kyle didn’t stop, I’d do what I needed to.

I rolled out of bed, yanked open the drawer, and put the knife in my back pocket...

A hand grasped my shoulder and squeezed. Vincent. “You okay, man?” I nodded. “Yep. Totally fine. Let’s clear this shit out.”

“It’s really remarkable,” Jason said, hands in his pockets as he looked around. “This room has perfectly preserved the stench of a teenage boy.”

“Just like your own room, bud,” Lucas said, slapping him on the back with enough force to make him huff.

We got to work, equipped with black trash bags. The closet seemed like the most approachable area for me so that was where I started, stuffing clothes and pieces of trash into the bag. I didn’t look at anything too long. I tried not to get caught up in it.

“Hey, Manson? Do you want —” Jess abruptly cut off, and as I turned around, I could tell that Lucas had tried to stop her from asking. She held a photo in her hands, and she quickly stuffed it in her trash bag. “Never mind. It was nothing.”

“It’s okay,” I said. I didn’t want them to feel like they had to tiptoe around me. Curious now, I pulled the picture back out of her bag and turned it over.

It was a photo of my mom and I. It was the only family trip I could remember us ever taking — I was around five years old at the time. We’d gone camping for the weekend, and Dad had spent most of his time hunting, leaving Mom and I alone at the campsite.

She was different back then. She was so young, younger than I was now. In the photo, she was smiling with her cheek squished against my head. Her arm was held out, since she’d taken the photo herself on a disposable camera. I was smiling big, holding a frog with both hands, my glasses askew on my nose.

We looked normal. Like a happy mother and son.

Mom had looked nothing like that when she died. It was like she rotted before she was even dead. Her face had grown haggard, all the weight had fallen off her bones. Toward the end, she’d barely been eating, hardly sleeping. Just pills and booze, over and over until her body couldn’t sustain itself anymore.

“I can get rid of it,” Jess said softly. I handed it back to her. “Do you want me to?”

I shook my head. I had no idea what that photo meant to me, but it felt strange to see it. Not bad, exactly, but not happy either. It was a memory filled with melancholy and a strange sense of longing.

“I’ll keep it,” Jess said, holding the photo against her chest. “That way, you won’t have to think about it unless you specifically want it.”

“Thanks, Jess.” There was so much of my childhood I either couldn’t remember or didn’t want to. But there were little moments — bright spots in an endless abyss. Things like this photo, that reminded me of goodness and love, no matter how brief they’d been.

It felt important to remember.

Before too long, Jason and Lucas were hauling the old mattress outside to the dumpster and the room was finally empty. There was still plenty of dust and dirt piled in the corners, but all my old stuff was gone.

Standing in the empty room, I stared at the faded paint and mildew stains on the walls. This place used to feel like a pit I was trapped in, scrambling for a way out. But it didn’t feel threatening anymore. It was muted, like any other place abandoned for years. There was nothing remaining here that couldn’t be repaired, painted over and laid to rest.

We swept, dusted, and wiped everything down before we took a break. Vincent cooked up some lunch for us, but I still didn’t have much of an appetite.

As they all sat on the porch to eat, I found myself back inside, wandering around my old room.

It had taken me a long time to realize that “home,” to most people, represented a place of comfort and safety. Home was a place people *wanted* to return to, not one they dreaded or feared. I’d had to build my own home, my own family. I’d crafted it in the only way I knew how; it was messy and strange, but it was mine and no one could take it away from me.

No one. Not Alex or Nate, and not my father.

Sinking down to the floor, I sat with my back resting against the wall beneath the window. Facing the open doorway, my stomach felt hollow. My fingers twitched in a familiar rhythm, as if I was flipping my blade open and closed, and I closed my eyes.

This feeling wasn’t joy; it wasn’t sadness. It felt as if I’d finally put down a weight I’d been carrying for far too long. But it still ached, as if the weight had compressed me down. Even in its absence, its effects remained.

Maybe some wounds never healed. They needed to be tended forever, treated gently. It was hard to accept that when it felt like admitting defeat.

But shit, even a victor in battle could come away from it wounded.

There came the soft sound of bare feet approaching. When I looked up, Jess was standing in the doorway.

“What are you doing in here?” she said. Her hair was in a long braid today, and she was stroking the end in her fingers.

“Thinking too hard,” I said.

“Do you want to be alone?”

Usually, I would have said yes, even though it wasn't true. I didn't *want* to be. But I also didn't want to confuse anyone with my scattered thoughts, worry them with my fears.

But Jess had been there. She'd seen me when I was weak, when I was out of control, when I was scared. She saw me already.

I spread my arm toward her. “I'd rather be with you.”

She came and sat beside me, tucking herself under my arm. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she moved to sit on my lap instead. Her legs straddled mine, and she traced her finger along the lines of the snake tattooed near my collarbone.

“Why a snake?” she whispered.

Not all of my tattoos had meanings. Some were only there because I'd been bored and had nothing better to do. It was a stroke of luck that I'd never gotten an infection from the shady places and people I'd let tattoo me.

But the snake was important, since I'd actually put a little thought into it.

“Have you ever seen what happens when you cut a snake's head off?” She made a face of disgust, wrinkling her nose. “You're telling me your dad never chopped the head off a snake when it wandered into the yard?”

“Ew, no!” She laughed. “If there was a snake, we'd just, like...call animal control.”

It made me happy to hear that, strange as it was. Not everyone in the world operated like my parents did, and that was a relief.

“Well, when you cut a snake's head off, it will keep snapping its jaws at you,” I explained. “It'll twist and struggle on the ground. It's just nerve endings firing off. Death throes. It's not actually alive, even if it looks like it.”

She frowned, lifting her eyes from my chest to my face. “Do you feel like the snake? With its head cut off?”

“I used to. When I was living here before, I thought I'd die here. I thought that one day, my dad would take it too far. That he wouldn't stop. It

was like I already thought of myself as dead. Why was I trying? Continuing to struggle to make life worth it felt useless.”

I’d been hopeless. Even when I’d tried to act optimistic for my friends, it had all been fake. Every day felt too long, and every night felt too dark. But somehow, I didn’t die.

“Did you want to give up?” Her fingers brushed so gently over my skin, slow and soothing. They made me shiver, even as they warmed me up. She touched me like she had when I was bound in Vincent’s rope in the cabin: taking her time, moving reverently.

“Sometimes,” I said.

My answer made her wince. When I said I didn’t want to hurt anyone, this was part of what I meant, too. I kept my pain to myself because it hurt others to hear it.

When I was younger, when I’d thought about ending it all...sometimes, the only thing that made me hold on was knowing that Lucas would be lost without me. Or that Vincent would never forgive himself for not finding a way to stop me, or that Jason would be devastated. Maybe staying alive for the sake of other people wasn’t healthy, but it was better than the alternative. I found whatever I could to keep me going, no matter how small.

My family. My dogs. Sunrises and quiet mornings. The taste of coffee. The determination that I’d see Europe someday. The desire to go on a road trip across the States. I had a desperate, almost frantic belief that someday, things would be better.

Whatever it took to keep myself alive.

“Manson?” Jess’s voice was soft, timid with the question weighing it down.

“What is it, angel?”

“I love you.”

The earth stopped turning for a moment.

She cupped my face in her hands, moving herself closer. I wrapped my arms around her, trailing my fingers up her spine as she lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. “I love you, Manson Reed.”

She kissed me, swallowing the words I couldn’t string into coherent sentences. She surged against me, so passionate and so right. Our lips would part for a moment, for a breath, and she’d say it again. She whispered it, snarled it, kissed it into my skin. She pressed her chest against

mine, and her heart thumped, it beat so damn hard. Or was that my own? I wasn't sure if I could tell them apart when we were tangled so close.

“I love you.” It was all I could say and it still wasn't enough. But if I could keep saying it — if I could say those words from now until the end of forever — God, maybe then, those words could take on the fierceness I meant them with.

30 - Jessica

I was in love. So desperately, irrevocably in love.

But it wasn't only Manson. We'd been honest with each other first, but that didn't mean my mind wasn't with the other boys. Nervousness swirled within me every time I thought about it. When I envisioned their faces, the way they held me, touched me, kissed me — the same feeling was there. The same warm feeling of trust, the *certainty*.

That was what got me. How damn certain I felt. It was like a switch had been flicked and all the shadowy corners of my mind were illuminated, all my worries chased away with the dark.

I was admittedly a little airheaded during work the next day, but I really couldn't help it. It was too hard to keep this to myself; I had to tell someone.

It was about time Ashley knew what was going on anyway.

Somehow, miraculously, she called me out within minutes of answering my phone call.

“Girl, wait, I don't know what's up, but uh...” She paused, a loud crunching sound coming over the call as she chewed a snack. “You sound different. You sound, like, giddy? Is that a word?” She laughed loudly, and I missed her more than ever. God, I just couldn't wait to be in New York with —

With...

It all spilled out. I told her everything, every disastrous, messy detail. I thought she would have an aneurysm when I told her about breaking into the garage and hiding from the boys on their own property.

“Holy shit, girl, how are you not in jail? You're telling me they *forgave* you for that? I think I'd throw you in the fucking ocean, honestly.”

I didn't mention the punishment that came before their forgiveness; that was too personal. And I had to do some twisting with the story to avoid mentioning our “agreement.” But Ashley got the whole story — at least as much of it as she needed.

“Girl, I knew it,” she said, with a satisfied crunch as she took another bite. “I could have seen this coming a million miles away.”

I laughed. “Is that so?”

“Uh, yeah? I knew it was going to happen after you hung out with Manson all night at that Halloween party! Like it was so obvious you were into him. The other guys are a surprise, but you know...” I could almost imagine her shrugging casually on the other end. “It’s up to you, babe. It’s about what works for *you*. If you want four dudes in one big house where everybody is loving on everybody, then more power to you. I’m just too jealous for that shit.”

We went on talking, getting distracted for several minutes with tales of Ashley’s latest dating exploits. Apparently, she’d found a new dating app where *everyone is rich!* so she’d been having far too much fun with that. I didn’t even know anymore how she managed to go out every weekend.

All I used to think about was parties, clubs, events — making sure I was in the middle of whatever was happening, constantly chasing after the next big thing. Now? I couldn’t even be bothered to care. All I wanted to do, every day, was sit in that garage while the boys worked. Lay on the couch next to Jason, play in the yard with the dogs.

That was what gave me happiness. That was what brought me joy. And leaving that behind for a job...

God. That was a problem.

“So are you guys doing long-distance?” Ashley said, as if she’d read my mind. But her question alarmed me, because I didn’t have a good answer.

“I...well, I’m not sure,” I said, and she gasped.

“Wait, wait...you’re telling me that you haven’t even discussed what’s going to happen when you move? Jess! What are you doing? You have to talk to them!”

“I know, I know, it’s just —”

“Just nothing! Jess, seriously.” I was actually surprised at how determined her voice became. “Listen to me. I can hear the change in your voice. I can tell how much happier you are, okay? And that’s amazing. I love that for you, and I don’t want you to lose a good thing. Talk to them about it. So what if the conversation is hella awkward? It needs to happen.”

“You’re right, you’re totally right,” I said. “I will. I’ll talk to them.”

I just didn’t know what exactly to say.

As I did the dishes that night, I kept mulling it over. I’d told Manson I loved him, but what about the others? The same feeling was there for me, but what if they didn’t...what if...

A cup nearly slipped out of my hands, and I barely caught it before it shattered in the sink. I leaned against the counter for a moment, turning off the water and taking a deep breath. What if the others didn't feel the same? That was what I feared. Rejection from Vincent, from Jason...from Lucas.

I put down the cup and pulled off my gloves. My stomach was in knots, and at the forefront of my mind was the desire to talk to someone with more knowledge than me, someone who could offer me advice and tell me which way I was supposed to turn.

I certainly couldn't talk to my mother about it. Even removing the fact that she was already biased against the boys, her criteria for a good partnership was very different from my own. She believed money, status, and good looks trumped all other attributes. Relationships weren't about love so much as they were about financial stability and showing off.

But that wasn't what I cared about.

I thought suddenly of Vincent's mother, Vera. Her warm smile, her kind, quiet manner. How eagerly and sincerely she'd listened, how she'd made the effort to engage with each of the boys. She'd been so easy to get along with, so kind. I longed to talk to her again and realized that I should have asked her for her phone number while I was over there.

I would ask her next time. Maybe my own family couldn't offer me the advice I needed, but I'd come to realize that "family" was far more than merely being related by blood.

Collecting the garbage bag from the trash, I carried it out the front door and down to the bins at the curb. Night had fallen, and the streetlights were the only illumination for our quiet cul-de-sac. Holding my breath, I shoved open the trash bin and tossed the bag inside, taking a deep breath again only once the lid was closed.

When I did, I got a lungful of cigarette smoke.

In the shadows across the street, outside the pool of light cast by one of the lamps, was a small faint light. Like the smoldering tip of a cigarette. A figure was faintly visible beyond the little point of light, but it was only a silhouette.

It was impossible to see their eyes in the dark, but I swear they were looking at me.

I'd never seen any of the neighbors walk around smoking. And our neighborhood was out of the way, somewhere people rarely walked through if they didn't already live here.

So, who the hell was standing in the dark?

They hadn't moved, but dread crept through every inch of me. It shivered over me as I turned away, forcing myself to walk — *don't run, why did I feel like I needed to run?* — back to the front door.

As I reached for the door handle, there came the sound of rapid footsteps from behind me.

With my heart pounding out of my chest, I slammed and locked the door as quickly as I could. My fingers were shaking so much with adrenaline that I put in the wrong code twice as I tried to arm the security system. When ARMED finally flashed across the screen, I went straight into the kitchen and grabbed the biggest knife we had.

Keeping my head low, I peered out the kitchen window toward the front porch. The light was on, illuminating the man now standing directly in front of my door.

Reagan. He looked even more haggard than when I'd last seen him, and he swayed slightly as he brought the cigarette to his lips again.

Ding-dong. The pleasant chime of the doorbell almost made me jump out of my skin.

"What the fuck," I whispered, ducking down below the counter. "What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fucking fuck is happening..." Had Reagan lost his mind? There was no good reason for him to be at my door after dark, stalking around my neighborhood, *watching* me.

My phone was plugged in to charge upstairs. The pepper spray Jason had given me was up there too, inside my purse. With the frantic speed of someone who anticipated being grabbed at any second, I sprinted through the hallway, up the stairs, and into my bedroom.

With my phone in my hand, I felt braver. But I swore I was hearing things. After the doorbell rang a second time, a long silence followed in which I was almost certain I heard the creek of a footstep downstairs. But it was impossible. The door was locked. The alarm was set.

But what if...

Dialing Manson's number, I tried to calm myself down as I listened to it ring. He was an old man. I could defend myself. He wasn't a supervillain, he couldn't just blast through a locked door —

"Hey, angel. You okay?"

Manson's voice sounded groggy with sleep. I hadn't even bothered to check the time. My intention had been to sound calm, but that was *not* what

came out of my mouth.

“Your dad is at my house,” I blurted, the words shaking and far too loud with panic. “I mean he’s...he’s outside. He —”

“Is your door locked?” It sounded like Manson was moving, his words short and clipped. But calm. I didn’t understand how he managed to stay so damn calm.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s locked. The alarm is set. He was watching me take out the trash and then he...” As if I could exhale the trembling fear from my body, I slowly breathed out through my mouth. “He followed me to the door. He’s been ringing the doorbell.”

“I’ll be right there.” There was muffled conversation on the line, rustling fabric, and the sound of a door slamming shut. “Jason and I will be there in five minutes, okay?”

By the time Jason and Manson arrived minutes later, Reagan was gone.

“There’s no sign of him,” Jason said, after he’d driven around the neighborhood for a while. Manson had stayed with me, holding me in his arms as we laid in bed. He almost had to pry the kitchen knife out of my clenched fist when he arrived.

Now that Jason had returned, I finally felt like I was safe again in my own house. Reaching out for him, I grabbed his shirt as he came close and dragged him down onto the bed. He snuggled up tight against my side and Manson adjusted his arms to make room for both of us.

“Will you stay here tonight?” I said. “My parents won’t be back until tomorrow evening, so...”

“Of course we will,” Manson said, and Jason nodded in agreement.

“We need to start keeping you at our place,” Jason said. He’d wrapped his arms tight around me, his hand resting in such a way that he was holding my breast. He squeezed, sighing in contentment before he said, “I don’t know how you can keep your own hands off these; they’re so soft.”

Laughing, I said, “Do you really think I’m going to walk around playing with my own titties all day?”

Jason nodded enthusiastically. “Uh, yeah? I would, if I had tits that nice. My hand would be down my shirt all damn day.”

“Instead of down your pants all day?” Manson said, and Jason gave a mocking laugh.

“Very funny, asshole, but untrue. My hand is down *Vincent’s* pants all day, thank you very much.”

As they went on teasing each other, I drifted off to sleep. I was still shaken up, uncertain now of where I could expect danger to be lurking. But I liked Jason’s idea; how he’d so casually mentioned keeping me at their place.

That was exactly where I wanted to be.

31 - Vincent

“It was just so creepy, you know? He *chased* me to the front door and then just stood there, ringing the bell. Like, what did he think was going to happen? That I’d invite him in for a sweet tea?”

Listening to Jess recount the story of seeing Reagan was literally going to give me hives. I swear I could already feel them popping up on my arms, but I was trying my damndest to take it in stride and not freak the fuck out.

We were near Wickeston Heights, hiking through the hills, hand in hand. The wall of the gated community was ahead of us, and we were coming up to the back end of the neighborhood, where its oldest houses still stood. We traipsed through the trees, climbing over bushes and stomping through weeds. Funnily enough, Jess hadn’t even asked where we were going. When I’d arrived to pick her up after work, she’d come out to meet me without a moment’s hesitation.

More and more, it seemed like she was craving spending time with us. Not sex, not some wild game. Just company.

And honestly? I was craving the same thing. I’d admit that a lot of Jess’s initial appeal was the fact that she was a closeted freak. But now? Jess was so much more than that.

She was introspective and clever. She was passionate, and viciously loyal. All that loyalty she’d given to her unworthy friends, for so long, made so much more sense now. It was misplaced devotion, and now that she’d overcome it, I sincerely hoped she’d never find herself in that position again.

I wanted to make sure she didn’t. I couldn’t help it. The instinct to protect and care for her, like I cared for Jason, was overwhelming. It was that “oldest sibling” syndrome, I swear. I wanted to solve everything, always be there with an answer.

But this time, I wasn’t sure if I had one.

“I’m glad you called us when you did,” I said, holding a branch out of the way for her to pass beneath. My backpack was weighing heavily on my shoulders, but it would be worth it once we reached our destination. “I feel like shit that I didn’t wake up.”

“Don’t,” she said quickly. “Don’t feel guilty. I didn’t want to wake all of you up anyway.”

It was a relief that Manson and Jason had woken up and gone to her. But I still felt responsible. It made me never want to let her out of my sight. The fact that I couldn't always take her home at night, that I couldn't keep her in our bed and under our protection, was an annoying itch that grew worse every day.

"Where are we going anyway?" she said, panting as she paused for a moment after nearly stumbling on a tree root. We could see the wall now, a formidable ten-foot height of thick gray brick.

"We're going to a house party for two," I said, giving my backpack a little shake. Cans of spray paint and bottles of beer clattered together inside. "We're almost there, we just need to get over the wall."

She narrowed her eyes at me, with a mischievous smile on her lips. "Is what we're about to do illegal?"

"Yes," I said simply, and she didn't offer a single argument.

Pulling myself up to the top of the wall first, I straddled the bricks and reached my hand down so Jess could scramble up. We dropped down on the other side, landing in an overgrown backyard. Jess immediately ducked down while I remained standing, and she looked up at me with wide eyes.

"Aren't you afraid they're home?" she whispered.

"Nope. The houses back here have been abandoned for years. Look."

The first houses built in Wickeston Heights had been these overly ornate, ridiculously extravagant small mansions. The one in front of us only had a few of its windows still intact, and most of its gray-white facade was overgrown with vines. Chain fencing had been put up against the house to keep people out, but it was cut open and bent out of place.

"Is this really Wickeston Heights?" she said.

"Yep. These are some of the oldest houses in the neighborhood." Taking her hand, we walked together toward the broken back door. Our shoes crunched on shattered glass as we stepped inside, ducking under the bent fencing. "My dad remembers when these were built. Wickeston wasn't much back then; apparently these people were really hot shit. They wanted to turn Wickeston into some fancy, upper class town."

Jess snickered. "That obviously worked out for them."

We explored the lower floor together, taking our time. What I loved most about these old mansions was that so much was left behind. The rooms were still furnished. The remnants of tattered drapes hung limp around broken windows. There was canned food still left in the cabinets.

Almost everything was destroyed, of course; broken glass and trash littered every room.

But it was still beautiful. Like wandering through an apocalyptic landscape, touching the remnants of someone's hopes and dreams.

We climbed to the top of the stairs and sat side by side, cracking open a couple beers. From our seat, we faced the front door below and a massive chandelier overhead. It was strewn with cobwebs and thick with dust, but some crystals still caught the light and shimmered.

"You really like abandoned places, don't you?" Jess said, leaning back on her hands as she sipped her beer. "Why?"

"They make me feel like I'm stepping back in time," I said. But that wasn't quite right, so I explained, "Or like I'm slipping outside of reality. It always makes me wonder what a place was like before it was abandoned. Like this house, for example...I have no idea who lived here. Were they happy? Did it break their hearts to leave? It's like touching someone else's memories."

"I like that," she said, nodding as she listened to me. "I used to think abandoned buildings were just eyesores." She brushed her fingers over the staircase's wooden railing, leaving trails in the thick dust. "But you're right. They have their own stories to tell."

We finished our beers, and I grabbed her hand to help her to her feet. I led her down the hallway, into the first bedroom. As we stepped inside, I motioned toward the wall around the door and the painting I'd started there last week. The walls of the room were blue, so I'd chosen an oceanic scene. Swirls of green, blue, and gray paint melded together around a plethora of sea creatures. Seals were hidden within tall strands of kelp, while a school of rainbow-colored fish swam above.

It wasn't a particularly realistic scene, but I hadn't intended it to be. I didn't paint with the intention of being true to life.

"It was hard to find a space that was completely my own when I was growing up," I said. "With little siblings running around, and no lock on my door, someone was always popping in. And I didn't mind. I loved having my family around me. That house was loud, it was always full of love. But sometimes...sometimes I wanted something that was just mine. Something no one else would see or touch. That's why I like to paint in places like this."

She smiled as she noticed the little wings I'd painted on the narwhal in the corner. "But no one will ever see it here. Don't you want people to see the art you make?"

I shook my head vehemently. "No. Most people, I don't. Art is personal. Sharing it is an act of intimacy; it's letting someone inside your head. Would you trust most people you meet to come inside your head?"

"Hell no," she said. "People barely know how to be polite in day-to-day interactions, let alone when you get personal with them." She stepped closer to me and wrapped her arms around my chest. "I should thank you for letting me inside your head, then. I like it here."

My heart sped up, and I kissed the top of her head. "I have more to show you. Come on."

Leading her further down the hallway, I pointed to the paintings I'd covered the walls with, explaining their stories as we went. I'd been coming to this house for years now, painting whatever the hell came into my head. Some of my older pieces had been covered by graffiti, but I wasn't too concerned about that.

The paintings I wanted to show her had never been shared with a single other soul.

The door creaked as we stepped into the primary bedroom. It was a massive room, and it was the only one I'd bothered to clean up since I spent so much time in here. The glass had been swept off the floor, and I'd thrown away the trash but left all the old knickknacks and furniture alone.

The walls were almost entirely covered with my art, from floor to ceiling. Spray paint canisters, brushes, and pallets littered the corners, and my ladder was still set up from the last time I was here.

Jess didn't realize what she was looking at, at first. I directed her attention to the wall beside the door, where I'd done the first painting of this massive mural.

It was a painting of a child's hand, holding a flower with its root and a clump of dirt still attached.

"Do you remember when we met?" I said.

"First grade." She giggled. "You were so loud! I remember you running all over the place and the teacher kept telling you to sit down. You threw dirt at me."

"And you cried because it got in your hair," I said, scratching my head sheepishly. "I felt so bad, I hadn't meant to make you cry."

It hadn't been dirt either. It had been a yellow flower I found on the playground and roughly tore out of the earth, determined to bestow it to the prettiest girl I knew of. But childish immaturity took over, and in a panic, I'd thrown the thing at her instead.

Her expression changed as she looked at the next part of the mural. Perhaps, she was beginning to understand ...

"You were the princess in the school play in second grade," I said, and she nodded as she brushed her fingers over my depiction of a little blonde princess holding up an apple for her horse. "I'd only been the back end of the horse in that play, but I was still pretty damn excited that one of your lines was about me."

She looked back at me, her forehead creased in confusion. "Vincent...what is this?"

Fuck, I felt like I was breathing too hard and talking too fast. But I couldn't stop now, I couldn't. I had to get it all out there even though my voice cracked and my hands shook.

"Fourth grade was the last time I saw you until high school," I said. "You cut your hair to your shoulders that year. I heard your mom tell you —"

"That it made my face look too round," she said softly, shaking her head. "How could you have heard that...how could you remember..."

"Because I paid attention. It was impossible not to stare at you, not to listen to everything you said. I loved how your hair looked, and I wanted to tell you so bad, but I was so shy. And fucking awkward." I was the tallest kid in my class, gangly and skinny, full of anxiety. I was big enough to wear my dad's old clothes, which meant everyone made fun of me for dressing like a grandpa. So I learned to laugh at myself too. As long as I could laugh with the people laughing at me, then eventually, they'd like me.

No matter how much it hurt when they laughed, I'd force myself to laugh too.

"And the sunflowers, see?" I drew her further into the room, where massive yellow sunflowers and leaves of swirling green colors covered the wall. "The first day of freshman year, you wore a dress covered in yellow sunflowers, and I've never fucking forgotten. Because I can't. I can't forget you, Jess. Not a moment — the good or the bad. See?"

I motioned to the last part of the mural, the part I was still working on. Two figures stood in the rain under one umbrella: one in black, the other in

a gown of pink satin. I was still working on shading in the elaborate skirt of her dress. She'd looked like a true queen that night; she hadn't needed the cheap plastic crown on her head.

Jess didn't say a word, and it felt like my lungs were slowly being crushed in a vice. Maybe it was too much. Too soon. I did tend to get intense. Once I'd made up my mind, I struggled to keep it to myself. I turned, readying an apology...

But she stood there, staring at the sunflowers with tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, Vincent..." She sniffed, covering the soft sound behind her hand. "You remembered everything. That dress..." Her fingers hovered over the petals. "My mom hated that dress. I was so self-conscious, but I didn't want anyone to know." More tears overflowed, and I wanted to hug her tight to make them stop. But her lips quivered into a smile. "This is so beautiful, Vince. It's amazing, it's..." She turned to me, her eyes shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the shattered window. "When did you start working on this?"

"When I saw you at the carwash," I said. "It felt like it meant something. I know that sounds weird." Even the guys teased me for it, albeit gently. "But I knew that we'd get another chance. It inspired me. You inspire me."

I took her face in my hands, wiping her tears away. "Please don't cry, baby. I just want you to be happy. I want to keep you safe, take care of you. I know that's a lot to take in. But trust me. I'm not leaving you. Not again."

More tears fell, and I kissed them away. But she was still smiling as she said, "It's unbelievable. The colors, all the details...this must have so much time." She laid her hand against my chest, her fingers tightening in my shirt. "You've always been so good to me, even when I was awful to you."

"Oh, don't worry about that," I said, waving my hand as if to brush the thought away. "I'm okay, Jess. I feel like you tolerated me pretty well." I winked, but she still looked uncertain.

"I'm sorry," she said. "For all of it. All the shit I said back then." The regret was obvious in her eyes, and I nudged her chin with my knuckle.

"You're forgiven, baby," I said. "You know that. I'm sorry for throwing dirt at you."

She laughed, and I swear the whole room got brighter. I scooped my arm around her, lifting her up so I could kiss her. I carried her to the

window and leaned against the sill, bathing us in the early evening sunlight. I set her back on her feet and she leaned into me, resting against my chest as I stroked my fingers through her hair.

“Do you want to know something else?” I said. The rustle of trees and chirping of birds carried in through the window, the breeze cool. Jess nodded, her arms around my torso, her nails lightly grazing my back. “I love you, Jess.”

She abruptly lifted her head, staring at me. Her lips parted in a silent gasp. “You...you do?”

“I do.” I framed her face in my hands, smiling at the look of utter bewilderment on her face. “I love your mind; how clever you are. I love that you’re passionate. And you’re strong. You’ve changed your own deeply held convictions, and that’s not easy to do. You’re loyal. Tenacious. A force to be reckoned with. You surprise me every day.”

Her eyes were still shimmering, but only a tiny quiver was in her voice as she said, “I love you too, Vincent.”

My cheeks actually hurt from how wide I was smiling. I couldn’t seem to stop, not even as I kissed her. I pressed her against the wall, and tucked back her hair so I could see her beautiful face.

“I love you. I love your lips...” I kissed them tenderly. Her cheeks were rosy, and I kissed them next, first one and then the other. “And I love your smile...”

“Vince, you’re making me blush!” she said, but then she dissolved into giggles as I kissed her throat.

“I love every inch of you,” I said, growling it against her skin. “Inside and out, baby. I could spend years telling you all the ways I love you, all the little things you do that drive me fucking wild. So I think I will. I think I’d like to spend a very long time showing you how much I adore you.”

32 - Jessica

We stayed in that house for hours; painting, laughing, drinking. Every now and then Vincent would sweep me up into his arms again, just to hold me close and whisper his love. I had paint smudges all over my face and clothes. My head was swimming from the beer, my chest was warm. But I felt as light as a feather, as if I could float, as if I could sing.

It wasn't the beer giving me this warm, light feeling. It wasn't drunkenness that made me pause every few minutes to look at Vincent, with his hair wild around his face and paint all over his hands, and feel such a deep adoration that my chest ached.

My head was still spinning when he brought me home. He pulled over down the street from my house, where he barely had a view of my front porch.

"I really hate that I can't walk you to the door," he said, frowning as he held my hand.

"It's okay," I said. "I mean, it's *not*, but I don't know if I'll manage to sway my mom on this."

"Don't worry about it, baby," he said, giving me that easy smile that always made me feel a thousand times better. "It's not your fault, so don't feel like it is."

I nodded, even though I did still feel guilty. Mom's behavior may not have been my fault, but she still came with me like an unpleasant package deal. The boys had been trying their best to tiptoe around her, and frankly, they shouldn't have had to.

"Thanks for the adventure," I said, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "And for...everything."

We laughed through our messy kisses for a moment, and when I opened the door to get out, he said again, "I love you, Jess."

Those words...God, it made me feel like my heart had been punted like a football, flying high through the air.

"I love you too." My response left my tongue tingling. First Manson, now Vincent...but I paused for a moment, biting my lip.

Vince noticed. "What's wrong?"

"It's just...you all make me so happy," I said. "But make me feel differently, too. Like I couldn't compare the way I feel about you to Jason,

or Lucas. Except...I can in some ways. In one way, I do feel the same about all of you." I swallowed hard as I looked at him, wondering if he'd managed to make any sense out of that word vomit.

There was one feeling they all inspired in me. Two of them, I'd been honest with. The other two...

"Every relationship moves at its own pace," Vincent said. "Even the ones happening in tandem. Don't worry about someone getting jealous or feeling left out, but if you are, talk to them. Manson and I wear our hearts on our sleeves. Jason and Lucas are a little harder to figure out."

The tension went out of my shoulders, and I said, "Thanks, Vincent. I'm still getting used to how this all works."

He shrugged. "I am too. We'll probably be figuring it out our whole lives, but that's okay. We've got a lot going on in that lump of gray flesh up there." He tapped the side of his head. "Well, most people do. Sometimes, mine is stuck playing elevator music for hours on end."

I laughed as I got out of the car, closing the door behind me and waving at him through the open window. Before I walked away, he quickly added, "Hey, Jason is meeting you for the gym in the morning, right?" I nodded. "Try to keep things upbeat for him tomorrow if you can. It's...it might be a rough day."

"A rough day?" I frowned. "What happened?"

Vincent grimaced. "He'll talk to you about it if he feels like bringing it up. Just, uh...distract him?"

I gave him a sly smile. "Oh, I can certainly do that."

If I hadn't had to work in the morning, I would have gone with him back to their house to sleep. Sleeping in my own bed, alone, was getting significantly more difficult. I missed the warmth of them around me. I missed waking up early to have coffee with Lucas. I missed wearing Jason's clothes around the house.

Coming home didn't feel warm and welcoming like going to their house did.

As I walked in the door, Steph was setting the table for dinner, complaining as she did. "But, Mom, it's not *fair*! Olivia got her extensions put in last week. Why can't I get mine done tomorrow? Come on!"

Her whining was already getting on my nerves. Mom shot me an odd look as I came into the kitchen, automatically getting out a stack of plates since my sister had barely set out the forks.

“Where have you been all day?” Mom said sharply, looking me up and down with a suspicious expression.

“Out with friends,” I said, setting the plates around the table.

Steph was still griping, and Mom finally sighed and said, “Fine, sweetie, fine, I’ll switch your appointment to tomorrow.”

Good grief, was that the trick to getting Mom to do what I wanted? Be as whiny and annoying as possible? Except, that literally had never worked for me. The way Mom handled me versus how she responded to my sister was depressingly different.

But at least it made Steph stop nagging. We sat down to eat, but that weird tension emanating toward me from my mother wouldn’t quit. She kept sniffing, as if she smelled something bad, wrinkling her nose and huffing.

“Is something wrong?” I finally said, after she loudly sniffed and made a face yet again.

“Ugh, it’s that awful smell,” she said. Me and my sister exchanged a look of confusion. My dad was determinedly staring at his phone, scooping food onto his fork without even looking at it. “Like a skunk.”

It took considerable effort not to roll my eyes. There was no way Mom smelled weed on me; I hadn’t even smoked. She was being petty, so I said nothing and went back to my food. But Mom wasn’t done.

She took a long sip of her wine, delicately set down the glass, and said primly, “There’s a drug test on the bathroom counter, Jessica. You’ll take it after dinner.”

My fork clattered against the plate as it dropped from my hand. “Mom, that is ridiculous.”

Dad awkwardly cleared his throat, saying, “Now, Charlene, I thought we talked about that not being necessary.”

But Mom paid him no mind.

“I know what those boys do, Jessica,” she hissed. “What kind of fool do you think I am? Your sister goes to school with that Volkov boy’s sister, and she claims the two of you are *dating*. Dating a *drug dealer*, Jessica? Really?”

“He’s not —”

Mom gave a highly unpleasant laugh. “Criminal records are accessible to the public, I’ll have you know. If he was getting in trouble for it in high school, I highly doubt he’s stopped now. While you are living under my

roof, you will follow my rules. And I will not have you going out and getting high with these degenerates.”

“You don’t know them!”

I stood up so fast that my chair screeched across the floor. They were all staring at me, eyes wide, food forgotten. My skin was on fire. I was so furious that I almost sputtered as I shouted.

“You’ve never met them, you’ve never even asked me about them! You’re basing all of this off of assumptions you made about them years ago! If you’re so concerned about my well-being, if you’re so damn worried, why don’t you talk to me like a human being? Why don’t you treat me like you actually care? You’re just pissed off that I’m not dating someone *you* want me to!”

Mom stared at me, her mouth agape. Steph was making a clear “oh shit” face as she watched me completely lose my temper. Dad was peering at me over his reading glasses.

“Let’s all just calm down,” he said, but I wasn’t having it.

I was past the point of being calm.

“I’ll start paying rent,” I said. “Dad, we can have a discussion soon and agree on a price, okay?” He nodded, still looking perplexed. “And I’ll be moving out as soon as I can. Mom...” She folded her arms, stubbornness running through every inch of her. “If you actually care, if this has anything to do with you *actually* being worried about my safety, I’ll happily talk to you about it. But you’ve never asked me how I felt. You’ve never asked if I felt safe, happy, cared for, anything! And I can’t even introduce them to you. I can’t give you an opportunity to know them, because you won’t let them near the house.”

“And I won’t be letting them,” she said. “I know everything I need to.”

I sighed, picking up my plate. “No, you don’t. And if you keep refusing to see that, then someday, you won’t know me at all. You won’t hear from me. You won’t see me. No phone calls, no visits, no texts. Nothing. You are driving me away from you.” I held eye contact with her, watching fury and sadness go to war in her eyes. “Because of you, when I leave here, I’m not going to want to come back.”

She gasped, but I’d already turned my back. Dumping my plate in the sink, having lost my appetite, I spent the rest of the evening shut in my room.

My heart was in my throat when I heard my mother's footsteps come up the stairs. But she didn't knock; she didn't even take a step towards my room. I heard her bedroom door close, and faintly, the sound of her TV.

My throat was so tight. My eyes stung, until my vision was nothing more than a watery blur.

I'd always wanted my mom's approval so badly. When I was little, the thought of disappointing her made me physically ill. But now, any desire of the like was out the window. I felt stifled, frustrated, *stuck*. I felt like I'd been made into a villain not because I'd done something wrong, but because I'd dared to do something *right* for me.

It hurt. It fucking sucked. Severing my relationship with my mom felt like cutting off my own arm. Even if it was necessary, even if that was the only way I'd be able to move forward in my life.

I still felt so damn guilty.

That guilt hadn't gone away when Jason arrived to pick me up for the gym the next morning.

"Morning," he said, leaning over to kiss me. He obviously hadn't slept well either. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his voice was still rough as if he'd just rolled out of bed. His hair was disheveled, curled into odd positions and mashed against his head on one side.

"Morning," I said, rubbing my tired eyes. Lack of sleep always gave me a headache. I was still trying to begrudgingly work my way through a protein bar, but every bite tasted like sticky cardboard.

By the time we pulled into the gym parking lot, I'd simply given up on eating it.

Jason parked, but he didn't immediately turn off the engine. We sat there in silence as the song played out, both of us lost in our grumpy little worlds.

When the song ended, we sighed and looked up at each other in surprise.

"Jess, honestly, I don't feel like working out today," he said. "I slept like shit."

"Me too," I said. "I'm so tired. My head hurts." I made a face at my gross protein bar, crumpled the wrapper around it, and stuffed it back in my

bag. "Let's skip the gym today."

"That sounds good to me," he said.

"I'm going to call out of work," I suddenly muttered. "I sincerely don't have the energy to deal with bullshit today."

"Damn, being bad today, huh?" he said, pinching his lip thoughtfully. "I think I'll join you on that bullshit-free day of yours. Sounds exactly like what I need."

Already feeling better, I turned the radio up and settled back into my seat. "So, what should we do?"

He gave me a smile that spoke of only wicked things.

33 - Jason

Thick white smoke filled the air as my tires shrieked, skidding on the asphalt. I whipped the Z into a tight circle, pushed the clutch in as I braked, tapped the acceleration, and flew sideways through the turn.

Jess, sitting beside me in the passenger seat, was shrieking her lungs out. She hadn't decided yet if she loved it or was terrified for her life.

But that was the fun part. As confident as I was behind the wheel, there was always a risk.

We'd driven around aimlessly for a while after leaving the gym, but I knew what would help me feel better. My happy place was behind the wheel, feeling the rush of its speed, experiencing the adrenaline of playing with death. Jess had seen me drift but she'd never felt it, she'd never had the opportunity to actually experience what it was like.

So we drove over to an abandoned lot on the far side of town, and I let loose.

The engine purred, the turbo whistling as I wrenched the wheel. The smells, the sounds, the pull of the tires — it was a rush. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Jessica was clinging to the straps of the harness. “Holy shit, holy shit, holy —” Another turn, and her curse drew out into a scream. “Shiiiiit!”

Sweat was beading on my forehead when I finally stopped, and I was gasping from laughing so hard. It was impossible to listen to her reactions and maintain my focus but I didn't mind.

I liked getting to show her things like this. I enjoyed being someone who could give her new experiences. It was a simple joy in the grand scheme of things, but that was what I needed today.

Simple joys, little slices of happiness. The weight in my mind was heavy, but laughter lightened it.

The interior of the cab felt like a sauna, so I stripped off my shirt and tossed it to the floor. Sitting there with the windows down, letting the cool breeze flow through the car, felt amazing.

“What do you think?” I said, once she'd caught her breath enough to speak.

“That was amazing!” she gasped. “Holy shit, it was terrifying...but amazing...oh my God. Let's go again!”

I certainly wasn't going to deny her.

We didn't quit until my gas was running low and my stomach had begun to loudly growl for food. We went to our usual place, a tiny Mom and Pop cafe that had the best breakfast burritos I'd ever tasted. Sitting in silence as we ate allowed the bad thoughts to creep back in, but I'd expected it. This feeling wasn't going to go away.

This day came around every year, as inevitable as clockwork, yet it never got any easier.

Some years, like this one, it felt like it had gotten worse.

My little brother's birthday. The brother I'd been forbidden to see since my parents kicked me out. The brother who'd been fed lies about me since he was a little kid, who probably hated me now, who probably thought his big brother had intentionally abandoned him. That was how my parents framed it.

I'd *chosen* this. I'd chosen to leave, to live in sin. I could have simply followed the rules and overcome my sinful desires. The fault was on me, and probably always would be.

Most of the time, I gave little thought to the family I'd lost. But every time Charlie's birthday rolled around, the reality of it sucker-punched me. How much I'd lost, how much they had *taken* from me in a fit of bigotry and rage.

The same people who had raised me to be kind, who had claimed to love me, held my hand, wiped my tears — were the same people who'd caused me so much pain it almost killed me.

My appetite fled. Jess noticed, although I tried to make it seem like I was simply full and preoccupied with my phone. When I wrapped my half-eaten burrito back into its paper, she frowned.

"So you didn't get much sleep last night?" I said quickly, hoping to get her talking about her own problems instead of mine. I could deal with other people's problems; I could figure out ways to solve them, I could offer advice, I could comfort. The problems I had...weren't solvable. There were no easy answers. It was a constant process of hurt and acceptance, and year after year, I told myself that I was healing. I was improving.

But sometimes I doubted if I was healing at all. Maybe I was burying the pain, deeper and deeper, until it was so lost in the depths of my soul I couldn't untangle it from the most natural parts of who I was.

Jess sighed. “Yeah. I got in a fight with my mom last night. Again.” I winced in sympathy as she went on. “Vincent dropped me off and she immediately started carrying on about how I smell like weed, and she was going to drug test me. Then she told me not to see any of you again, and...I kind of lost it.”

“Shit...what did you do?”

“I just yelled. A lot.” She folded her arms, glaring at her burrito as if it no longer interested her. “I told her I’m going to pay rent until I move out, which will hopefully be soon.”

A pang of worry throbbed through my chest unexpectedly. Until she moved out...soon. The uncertainty of that made my brain run in circles.

“How’s that going?” I said, trying to sound cool and casual. “Have you been looking for apartments?”

“Yeah. I mean...kind of. Sometimes.” She frowned, taking a sip of her orange juice. “It’s tricky. I was really certain I knew what I was looking for, but now...”

“Now?”

She looked at me across the table, like her lungs had frozen and only I could make her breathe again.

“Now, it’s more complicated,” she said. “I never had anything in Wickeston that I wanted to stay for, but...”

“Wickeston still isn’t worth staying in,” I said firmly. Yes, things were complicated, and I had no fucking idea what we were all going to do. But the one thing I was certain of was that Jessica Martin didn’t need to be questioning a single one of her dreams for our sake. “You’ve wanted to get to New York, and you will.”

A smile broke through the worry on her face. “Thanks, Jason. I guess I’ve just been feeling overwhelmed by everything. Work and my mom, the shit with Reagan, Alex, and Nate.”

“It’ll get better,” I said, although as soon as the words were out, I didn’t like how false they sounded.

It gets better was just another phrase people threw around when they didn’t know how the hell else to fix something. It gets better! Just wait and see! Just suck up the pain and let time bury it for you!

Damn, I felt like an asshole today.

But Jess nodded, and when she smiled again, I knew it was as fake as my words. “You’re right. It will.”

“But that doesn’t help what’s happening right now,” I said. “I’m sorry she’s giving you such a hard time, Jess. You don’t deserve that.”

“Oh, I’m used to it,” she said, exaggerated optimism making her voice pitch higher. “That’s just how my mom is, you know? Always has been. I told her she’d lose me...” Her optimistic expression froze into place. Her lower lip trembled for a moment. “She probably won’t care. I don’t fit into her perfect little world anymore.”

She cleared her throat, chugging down the rest of her juice. I hated to see her burying it: shoving the pain down, pretending it didn’t matter, a mask of smiles.

“Come on,” I said, rising from my seat and taking what was left of my food. “Let’s go for a drive.”

Jess picked the music, choosing something upbeat with a heavy bassline, and we drove around Wickeston with no particular destination in mind.

But eventually, without even meaning to, I drove down the familiar streets of a suburban neighborhood. It was quiet, mostly older houses on small plots of land, as opposed to the newer cookie-cutter housing tracts.

After a while, I pulled over and parked. The street was lined with trees, and birdsong filled the air. Ahead of us, at the far end of the street, was a familiar two-story house. There was one car in the driveway, a Toyota SUV that my mom had been steadfastly driving for years. I could only assume Dad was at work, as usual. Charlie would probably be in school.

We sat there for a while in silence. Jess wanted to ask; she kept moving slightly in her seat, drawing in her breath as if she was preparing to speak. Maybe she thought it would upset me to ask, or maybe she had her own shit to worry about and didn’t need my problems poured on her too.

“Jason...” When she did speak, as gentle as her voice was, it still felt like being prodded by something sharp. “Are you okay?”

I dreaded that question. Always had. Most people didn’t want an honest answer when they asked. They wanted a convenient answer, something that wouldn’t require them to feel anything or offer any sympathy.

Jess asked because she cared; I knew that. But the more cynical interpretation still gripped me.

“No,” I said. I turned off the engine, sighing in the silence that followed. “I’m not okay, Jess. It’s...it’s my little brother’s birthday. Charlie. He’s fourteen today.”

Why the hell was I complaining? What right did I have to sit here whining about this? My life was good. I was fortunate as hell with the things I had. Why should I complain when there were people who had ended up in far worse circumstances? People who had no one?

Sometimes I felt guilty that it hurt at all.

“Is this your old neighborhood?” she said, her words prodding me gently when I was silent for a while. “Are we here to see him? I’d...I’d love to meet him.”

God, she meant it so sincerely. She was looking around, trying to figure out which house belonged to my family, no doubt. But this wasn’t going to be some sweet visit like it was with Vincent’s family; she wouldn’t have dinner with my mom or hear terrible jokes from my dad.

“My parents won’t let me see him,” I said. “I haven’t...not since...not since I left. Since they made me leave.”

She reached across the seat and laid her hand on mine. She didn’t say anything ...and I was so damn thankful she didn’t. Because this was the part where people apologized, where they said how *sorry* they were. But sorrow didn’t help, pity got me nowhere. Sympathy didn’t fix my parents’ bigoted views; it didn’t erase the ideas they put in my brother’s head.

Her silence made me feel like I could keep talking. When people expressed sadness for me, it shut me up quick. If my words were causing pain, why keep talking? But she was quiet, holding that space for me and touching me to let me know she was there.

“When you talk to Lucas or Manson about their childhoods, it’s obvious how it hurt them,” I said, starting slowly. “It would be clear to any decent person, I think, that how their parents treated them was fucked up. But for me...it’s not quite like that. My childhood was nice. It was calm, quiet. My parents didn’t yell, they rarely spanked us for anything. My mom stayed home with us all day, read us bedtime stories, played with us. We ate dinner together as a family every night, we went to church every Sunday, we took family vacations and had a big party on Thanksgiving. That’s the kind of childhood you’re supposed to want. But...it wasn’t that simple.”

For a moment, I swore I saw movement in the upper window of the house. Maybe Mom was cleaning, humming “Amazing Grace” as she

dusted the windowsills and swept the floors. She'd always loved to sing. She was a shy woman, but when she joined the church choir, she had loved getting to perform.

“It’s strange that I can think of my family, and the way I was raised, and feel like it was good. But it was, in so many ways. It's just that all that goodness, all that love, affection, and kindness, was conditional. It’s really foolish to think unconditional love even exists because it really doesn’t. Not from family, friends, lovers. Everything has a condition. And if you don’t meet them...”

I hated thinking about it. I’d replayed the day they found out everything again and again. The way they’d looked when they opened my bedroom door and said that we “needed to talk.” How they’d taken me out to the garage to discuss it, because they didn’t want my little brother to hear them yelling — berating me. Telling me I was disgusting, that I was a sick, confused sinner. That if I stopped now, I could be forgiven. I could “fix” it. I could fix myself.

But I wasn’t broken. I’d tried so hard to tell them, to make them understand. They’d only gotten angrier. My explanations were defiance, my desperate insistence was seen as me being lost to sin. They claimed they would have rather discovered I was addicted to drugs, or that I’d gotten someone pregnant.

But no. The worst thing I could have done was fall in love with a boy.

The next worst thing was to refuse to renounce it.

“Jason...” She grasped my hand, twining her fingers through mine. It was an anchor back to reality, a reminder that I’d moved past that event, past that pain.

“It was worth it, to give it up,” I said. “Even though I was scared. I was really lucky, honestly. I’ve known kids who ended up on the streets for years after their parents kicked them out, kids who died. That could have been me, easily.”

That was why Lucas had given me that warning back then, that was why he’d questioned if I should just keep my head down. Because he knew what happened to kids like me.

“My parents tried to use my safety as a bargaining chip. If I did what they wanted, then I’d be safe. I’d be cared for. I’d have a roof over my head, food, a bed.” The fear still felt so real. It still lived in me, that terror that everything I knew and needed could be snatched out from under my

feet with the snap of someone's fingers. "But I had to live a lie. I had to pretend to be someone I wasn't, and keep pretending. I couldn't do it. And I couldn't...I couldn't walk away from Vince. I remember my mom screaming at me that if I showed up at Vincent's door needing a place to stay, he'd turn me away. They tried to make it out like he was using me, like he'd corrupted me."

Admittedly, I had a corruption kink. So did Vince. But I'd come into it after the fact; it had become a coping mechanism. Roleplaying religious corruption was soothing for me. It reoriented my brain, allowing me to take something painful and turn it into play.

"He'd never turn you away," she said, as if the very idea was ludicrous. And it was. But like her parents, mine had based all their assumptions on beliefs rather than actual knowledge. They hadn't been interested in learning the truth, only in clinging to their fucked-up viewpoints.

"No, he wouldn't," I said. "But even if he had...even if my parents had been right, and Vincent was just some fuckboy who was using a naive guy for sex...even then...it didn't change who I was. It didn't change that there were parts of me they wouldn't accept."

When I looked over at her, she was staring straight ahead, her eyes far away. I could only guess at what she felt; I didn't know what her mother had said to her, or what dark worries lived in her heart. But I knew that she didn't deserve to live a lie any more than I did. Whether she chose us, or moved on, she still deserved to live authentically.

"It was worth it," I said. "Even though it hurt. It was worth it to hold on to who I was and not let anyone take that away from me. It'll be worth it for you too, I promise you. I know it sucks. It hurts to stand up to people you love. It hurts even more when they reject you. I honestly don't know if that pain ever goes away. But even if it hurts for the rest of my life, I wouldn't take it back."

"You're one of the bravest people I've ever met, Jason," she said. "But you shouldn't have had to be brave. You shouldn't have had to fight to be who you are. That wasn't fair."

"Life isn't fair, I suppose," I said. "But I think things worked out for me pretty damn well. I mean...look at what I have. A boyfriend who's been with me for over six years, lovers who understand me, a family unit that respects me, you..." I traced my finger along her face. "A remarkable woman, a fighter, a challenging little princess." She laughed at me, and

although she rolled her eyes, she did it with a smile. “It was hard as fuck to get here, but it was worth it. If I had to go back...I wouldn’t change anything.”

Once upon a time, I’d dreamed of bringing a girl like her home to meet my family. To see the pride on my father’s face, to have my mother’s approval. But those things were out of reach for me now, and that was okay. I had something better. My family had chosen me and I’d chosen them in return. I was loved...and desperately in love, too.

She leaned close and we met in the center of the cab. Our foreheads pressed together for a moment in silence as I held her hand. She used to make me so anxious. Every time I looked at her, my heart would beat faster, and I’d become suddenly aware of my every flaw.

It didn’t feel like that anymore.

My heart still beat faster when I looked at her, but it was because I couldn’t believe she was here. With me. Holding me, kissing me, fucking me. It blew my mind. A few years ago, I never would have thought this was possible. But now...

Now I wasn’t sure how it was possible to let her go.

“I know these past few weeks have been...weird,” I said. “It’s probably been overwhelming. But regardless of how we got here, I’m glad we did. I’m glad you’re a petulant little brat who couldn’t say no, so you ended up abandoned in our garage. I’m glad that part of you knew what was right, and that you were brave, and that you chose to face us instead of running away.”

“I’m glad too.” She sat up straight, gazing at me with a look that was partly fearful and wholly wild in its determination. “Jason, I...I have something to tell you...and I don’t know if I should...” Her voice trembled, on the verge of whispering.

“You can tell me anything,” I said. “Come on, you know me. I’ve heard it all already, princess.”

She lowered her eyes, and when she lifted them again, she looked as if she was bracing herself for something that would hurt.

“I love you, Jason.”

I stared at her, the words slowly sinking in. Her eyes were so sincere, and she reached over, grasping my hand. She traced her finger over my rings, nervously, and swallowed hard before she said, “I love you so much.”

To my alarm, it actually made my eyes sting.

Holy shit.

She loved me.

I laughed softly, a chuckle that became something more. It wasn't enough to hold her; I wished I could pull her inside me and keep her there. I wished I could somehow impart, physically rather than with words, how fucking much this meant to me.

But physicality wasn't enough either.

I brushed my hand through her hair, the golden strands coiling around my fingers. "God, Jess. I never thought I'd hear you say that." My smile felt too vulnerable, too earnest. As if I'd forgotten my boundaries, my caution suddenly gone. "I love you. Fuck, I..." My hand was visibly shaking as I held it against her head. "I love you so much, Jess, I feel like I'm losing my mind. But I'm happy, I'm..." My words were getting tangled up. Shit, she'd fucked up my head, but I loved it. "I'm so happy. You make me so happy."

34 - Jason

We barely managed to get back to the house before we were tearing each other's clothes off.

Jess's shirt was discarded and my pants were pulled halfway down my ass as I got out of the Z. After yanking my pants back into place, I flung Jess over my shoulder and carried her across the yard, her tits bouncing against my back, her legs kicking as she squealed.

As we passed the garage, Lucas slid out from under a vehicle and Manson peered down from the loft.

"Hey, I thought you were working!" Manson shouted.

"We're playing hooky today!" Jess called, breathless with laughter when I smacked her ass.

"Don't tell on us," I scolded, laughing with her. Jojo and Bo were very intrigued by the new game as I carried Jess into the house; Jojo kept jumping up to lick Jess's face. "If Vince finds out we faked sick —"

"If I find out what?" Vincent poked his head out of the kitchen, looking between us with a confused frown. "I thought you were both working today."

"Didn't feel like it," I said, which was the truth. Kissing him quickly, I left him looking stunned at the bottom of the stairs as I said, "I felt more like spending the day railing this little princess until she can't see straight."

I carried Jess straight up to the attic, shoving open the door with my foot. I threw her down on the bed, and she collapsed into the pillows with a laugh. She pulled me down as I climbed on top of her, hands gripping tightly to my shirt as she drew me into a demanding kiss. I felt like I was high, like I'd drank way too much caffeine. It was difficult to touch her without shaking.

Stripping her naked, I pulled her legs up over my shoulders and buried my face in her pussy. God, the taste of her was one of the closest moments to heaven I could imagine. She gripped my hair as she gasped, her fingers tugging, *pulling* until it hurt.

"Fuck, yes, pull it just like that," I murmured, my lips moving against her swollen folds. Her lip curled viciously as she watched me, but her expression quickly faltered when I swirled my tongue around her clit. A

frantic moan burst out of her, her legs twining around my head, her thighs squeezing.

“Ah...Jason —” Her voice broke, dissolving into a blissed-out sob.

The way her thighs squeezed around my head as she came had me grinding desperately against the pillows. She was dripping, and my face was messy with her. I probed my tongue into her, savoring her heat, grasping her tits as she cried out.

She was shaking as I let her go, gasping for breath. I kicked my pants off and my briefs followed, chucked carelessly into a corner. I spread her legs around me, lining myself up with her. She groaned as I rubbed my cock over her clit, sliding back and forth as she whimpered, “Please fuck me, Jason. Fuck me like you hate me.”

“Goddamn, princess.” I curled over her, clenching my hand around her throat. “I’ll do better than that. I’ll fuck you like the desperate little sinner that you are. I think you need to learn a lesson, don’t you? You need to be punished for tempting me to sin.”

Her beautiful eyes widened. “You should teach me a lesson.”

“Yeah?” Her heart was pulsing in her throat, pounding rapidly against my fingers. “How should I do that, hm? Should I start with —”

“You should start with a spanking, then hand her over to us.”

Either they’d entered the attic silently, or I’d been so lost in Jess’s pleasure that I hadn’t noticed three grown men come in. Manson and Lucas flanked Vincent on either side. Manson’s arms were folded, a crooked grin on his face. Lucas had his gaze fixed on me, and he still had a pair of black latex gloves on, the type he usually worked in. But this pair looked clean, as if he’d just put them on before he came up here.

Vincent smiled, his head lowered just slightly as he came toward the bed. In his hand was the paddle from my bedroom, and it was tapping against his leg as he stopped at the edge of the bed.

“Well?” he said. “I see two little sinners who need to be punished. So turn her over and spank her until we say she’s had enough. Then, it’ll be your turn.”

Shit, his *voice*. Dangerously sweet and dark as night. It tingled up my spine as he stood next to the bed. Jess squirmed, her legs still splayed around me. It was a hell of a position to be caught in. My dick was so fucking close to sinking into her. Forcing me to stop now was cruel.

I scoffed. “Are you going to make me?”

“Shit, Jason, you’re going to get me in trouble!” Jess said.

“You’re already in trouble, angel.” Manson’s expression was playful, but the chilling intensity of his eyes on me was still enough to make me regret being a smartass. “We can’t have you living in sin under our roof.”

The words grazed over painful memories inside me but didn’t ignite them. Instead, it shoved the pain aside and demandingly occupied the space where it had once festered. It twisted the memories into something I could reclaim.

“You know very well that I can make you obey, Jason,” Vincent said softly, gently, as he would to one beneath him. “It’s your choice. Either you obey and accept your punishment like a good boy, or you keep running your mouth...”

“And what happens if I choose the second option?” I said. But Vincent looked terribly entertained. He actually laughed.

“Keep being a smartass, J,” Lucas said. “Seriously, do it. It hypes me up.”

Licking my lips, I stared him down. His focus was zeroed in on me. He looked like he would rip me apart.

It made a shiver go over my entire body.

“Punish me, Jason,” Jess said. She sounded so excited, her words running together, shaking and punctuated with a little whimper. “I deserve it.”

“There’s my good girl,” Manson said. “You want to learn your lesson, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and a strangled groan escaped me before I swiftly turned her over. She lay on her stomach, her ass pushed up eagerly for me, her legs still spread around me. She slipped a hand between her thighs, and I watched as she played with herself, fingers slick with arousal.

“She’s not allowed to touch,” Vincent said. As if by magic, he produced a pair of leather cuffs and tossed them to me. “Chain her to the headboard.”

Jessica held up her hands as I secured the cuffs onto them. Manson now stood near her head, watching her as he said, “You’re doing well, angel. This is what happens to unrepentant sinners, isn’t it? This is what you’ve earned.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered. Her eyes were closed as I restrained her, her expression lax as she sunk into that sweet headspace of submission.

Dragging my fingers down her back, I gripped her ass in both hands, squeezing her appreciatively.

Fuck, I loved roleplays like this. Pin me down, scold me, tell me all the awful, dirty, sinful things I'd done and punish me for them. Take the real fears of eternal damnation from the back of my mind and make them harmlessly real, twist my terror into something controllable, make it into a toy. I wouldn't have been able to put into words that I'd needed this, but Vincent knew. He always knew. He read me like an open book.

"Are you ready, Jess?" I said. Leaning down, I kissed her back, trailing slowly down her spine until goosebumps prickled over her skin.

"I'm ready, sir," she said.

I smacked my palm down; a sharp stinging spank to start her off. She inhaled sharply, her eyes still closed as the second spank landed. Falling into a rhythm, I switched between cheeks, back and forth until both were reddened. Her fingers flexed and clenched, little huffs and whimpers of pain bursting out of her as she buried her face against the pillows.

All the while, I was painfully hard. She arched her back, offering her ass for punishment despite how flaming bright her skin had become. Even with her face pressed into the pillow, her whimpers of pain were becoming increasingly audible.

"Keep going," Vincent said. He paced beside the bed slowly, overseeing my every move. Lucas was doing something behind me; I could hear chains moving, metal being dragged and set down. I didn't know what they had in store for me, but the anticipation made me jumpy, all my nerves on high alert.

"Ah! Jason, please!" Jess kept her mouth pressed down, effectively gagging herself. But Manson lifted her head, tucking her hair back and stroking her face.

"You're almost there, angel," he said. "God, just look at you. You're doing so well, that's it. Arch your back for him." She obeyed, even though she whimpered, even though her legs shook. Fucking hell, my cock was weeping at the sight of her, cum streaking down my shaft. I spanked her again and she cried out with a desperate little sob.

"Thank you, sir!" she gasped. She was holding her position bravely, although I was sure she was feeling the burn.

"Ten more," Vincent said. "Make them count."

Only ten more, and then it was my turn.

I meted out the swats, savoring every beautiful cry she gave me. She squirmed, her body demanding she try to avoid the pain. Another sob escaped her at the last spank, and she sniffled as Manson praised her.

“Good girl, I’m so proud of you.” He cradled her head, kissing her cheek and wiping away the tears that had escaped. She smiled, unabashed, although a little dazed. “You took it so well.”

She was so *wet*. That spanking had only made her messier. Gripping my cock, I swiped the head over her, rubbing over her clit. It would be so easy to sink into her; I was certain I could orgasm in two strokes if I could just —

My head was pulled back, rough fingers tangled in my hair. Lucas grinned down at me, sharply patting my cheek with his gloved hand.

“Don’t get too excited thinking you’re going to get to fuck her, brat,” he said. “You’re all mine.”

Oh...shit.

Lucas practically dragged me off the bed, forcing me to my knees at Vincent’s feet. He shoved my head down, but I pushed back, locking us into a battle of strength that seemed caught firmly in a stalemate.

“I think the boy wants to be hurt,” Vincent said, calling me out with precision.

He was right. I wanted pain. I wanted to be overcome, used, claimed. I wanted to defy everyone and everything around me, but be made helpless regardless.

“Oh, I can help with that.” My defiance made Lucas grin. He nudged his boot between my legs, until he was pressed against my balls.

He *kept* pressing.

“Ah, shit...” The instant feeling of building pain in my abdomen made me double over. But Lucas was merciless, he was almost crushing me. Sucking in my breath, grinding my forehead against the floor, I cried, “You fucking dick, I don’t have to — Ahh —”

If I hadn’t been so distracted by the pain, I would have been embarrassed by the pitiful sound he forced out of me. He tapped the steel toe of his boot against my balls, repeatedly, switching up the intensity every time so I had no clue what to expect. Flinching, whimpering, my body shaking, I said, “Fuck, please, I’ll be good, I’ll shut up —”

“It’s a little too late for promises,” Vincent said. “You know exactly what you’ve earned.”

As Lucas tortured me, Vincent walked away. But he was back within a few moments, and he set something down near my head. It was a suspension bar made of sturdy metal, with four thick locking cuffs dangling from it. As Lucas held me in place, Vince secured my wrists to the bar. I was dragged to my feet, and although I could still lift my arms, it was significantly more difficult with the bar attached to them.

Vincent gripped my face, smiling down at me. That smile of his made my stomach somersault, twisting with anticipation. Lucas held me from behind, his erection nudging against my ass as he murmured, “I’m going to fucking *ruin* you.”

“Your turn,” Vincent said. The way he leaned over me made me feel so small; an insignificant mote compared to the size and strength of the men around me. “Since you can’t control your tongue, you’ll be putting it to good use.”

Lucas turned me toward the bed, and I gasped softly. Manson had unchained Jess and now had her upper body resting against his chest. She lay on her back, and he was holding her legs spread.

Shoving me toward the bed, Lucas said, “Get into position. Face in her pussy, ass up.”

“Yes, sir.” It was the first time I’d managed a proper response since they’d come up here, but I was enraptured by the sight of her. As I got into position, burying my face between her legs, she nudged herself against me. Her eyes were wide, watching me as Manson held her.

Closing my mouth over her, I started slowly. Gentle licks, soft sucking; she was already so sensitive and every little touch made her twitch. The bar lay beneath my chest, and I couldn’t touch her with my hands despite how desperately I wanted to.

The paddle tapped my backside. It wasn’t a smack, it didn’t hurt. Vincent was steadying himself, making sure the strike would land where he intended and not somewhere that might injure me. Every inch of my body was tense. I was clenching my muscles so hard that they ached. No matter how many spankings I’d gotten — no matter how often we played with pain — in the moments right before it happened, I was always left frozen with anticipation of how much it would hurt. Jess was a welcome distraction. The taste of her on my tongue —

Smack!

The impact was heavy, the pain sharp and burning. Holy shit, it burned. My head jerked up, my mouth opened and closed several times before I clipped my teeth together.

“What did we tell you, boy?” Vincent said, jovial as ever. “Get your head back down.”

Giving me no other option, Lucas forced my head down again, smacking the back of my skull. Jess shivered as I groaned, bucking her hips upward for more.

Smack!

Shit, shit, shit. The pain made my entire body tingle, and I jerked my head up again. I wiggled my toes, taking a moment to slowly exhale.

“Stubborn, isn’t he?” Lucas said.

“Stubbornly disobedient,” said Manson. “Maybe you’re not hitting him hard enough, Vince.”

The paddle tapped, demanding my attention. “Is that true? Not hard enough for you?”

“Not hard enough, sir,” I said, even though I was filled with regret the second I said it. There were a few beats of silence, punctuated only by Jess’s soft sounds, and I almost blurted out an apology as the quiet dragged on.

Smack!

That one made me cry out. Fucking hell, I was in trouble.

Smack!

The sound of the paddle smacking down again was humiliatingly loud. Exhaling slowly, I managed not to make a sound.

“Get his head back down, Lucas,” Vincent said. “Hold him there. I don’t care if he can’t breathe, he needs to obey.”

Lucas’s hand locked onto the back of my head and forced me down. I could eat Jess forever. I was fucking ravenous for her. But every swat made me cry out, and the pain was building; it was nearly fucking impossible to do anything useful with my tongue when I was trying so hard not to beg for mercy.

The paddle tapped my thigh, and I flinched. “I want to be sure I’m not disappointing you,” Vincent said. “Are these hard enough?”

I nodded, mumbling “Yes, sir” against her pussy.

“You’re sure? You still sound relatively coherent...” *Smack!* “Perhaps a little harder?”

The sound that came out of me was embarrassingly high-pitched. Jess's head was tipped back but she was still watching, her muscles pulsating around my tongue when I probed into her. She was going to get off to the sight of me being paddled. The very thought made my hard cock twitch. To think I'd been so damn close to fucking her —

Smack!

Christ, my ass was on *fire*.

Vincent's hand rubbed over my lower back, warm and soothing before the smack that followed. My body instinctively retreated from the source of pain, as I tried to lower my ass. But Lucas didn't let me. With one hand, he kept my head down, and with the other, he reached between my legs, gripping my balls and giving them a squeeze.

"Stay in position," he said. "Or you'll be very sorry."

The next few swats had me squirming and yelling like a baby. Jess was panting as she said, "That feels so good, Jason. God, you look so sexy."

Lucas chuckled. "Makes his cock twitch when you talk to him, Jess. He's desperate to fuck." His grip tightened, and I shook.

They were breaking me down, and I loved every second.

"Only one more," Vincent said. "I have to make this one the hardest. It's going to hurt, but I know you can take it. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir..." No amount of bracing myself would make the pain more endurable, but it was almost over.

There was a pause, then Lucas lifted my head. He carefully wiped away a tear, giving me a moment to catch my breath.

"Can you take it?" he said. The harshness in his voice was softened, his touch was tender. "Be honest with me."

Vincent had warned me in the past to take time to clear my head when he was checking in with me. So I didn't answer immediately. I settled my brain, tuning into my body as best I could. Beyond the raging horniness, I felt fucking fantastic. It hurt but it was exactly the pain I craved.

"I can take it," I said. "I want to."

Lucas leaned down to kiss my temple before he forced me to lower my head again. I was determined to make Jess come, and by the sounds she was making, it wouldn't take much to do so. I closed my mouth over her clit, flicking my tongue back and forth over the nub as she keened and gasped, "Oh fuck...fuck, that feels so good."

The paddle rubbed slowly over my stinging backside, a deceptively gentle touch. I tried to brace myself when it swung back, but the smack broke me. My cry was muffled, the choked gasp that followed was too. Jess tensed, her legs shaking in Manson's hold as she said, "Please keep going Jason, please, you're going to make me come!"

Although a few tears escaped me, I did keep going. I was fucking determined to feel her come on my tongue again.

"That's it, J, that's a good boy." Vincent lavished me with praise, his hand rubbing over my back again.

"Make her come for us," Manson said.

Jess groaned, long and loud as she dissolved into complete oblivion. Then I was hauled to my feet and dragged to the floor again. Pinned and restrained by Lucas, Vincent lifted my legs and cuffed them to the suspension bar. It left me exposed, legs spread, arms raised and secured.

"My turn with you now," Lucas said, grinning above me like a madman. "What do you think, Manson? Should we string them up and make the little whores watch each other?"

"Damn, I like that idea," Manson said. "Where's that other suspension bar, Vince?"

After supplying Manson with the requested restraint, Vincent pulled down one of the chains we had attached to the ceiling. It wasn't an intricate system, but it did what we needed. He hooked the chain to the bar I was cuffed to, then took his time to double check my restraints.

"Everything feel okay?" he said as he ensured the cuffs were properly tight enough to support my weight. "Is there any tingling? Anything pinching?"

"No, nothing," I said. I was taking deep breaths in and slow breaths out, readying myself. "I'm okay."

He kissed me, whispering how much he loved me, how exquisite I looked, how proud he was of me. I wanted to sink into those words, wrap them around me like a blanket and live in them forever. It was overwhelming enough to have one man love me: sincerely, truly, without limitations, this man *loved* me. But to have all four gathered around me — using me, pleasuring me, teasing my body into new heights of sensation — was blissfully intense.

Vincent stepped back, and the chain clicked as Lucas cranked it. The cuffs tightened, dragging me upward until I was suspended. Jess was

similarly restrained, and once I was locked into position, she was suspended as well.

We hung there, facing each other. We were spread open and completely exposed, as Manson, Vincent, and Lucas stalked around us. Lucas came to stand in front of me, rubbing his gloved hands over my legs.

“Have anything nice to say?” he said, with a smirk that told me he already knew I didn’t.

My mouth twitched with a smile I barely restrained. “Fuck you, Lucas.”

He widened his eyes, a mocking attempt at offense. “Looks like you don’t get the privilege of speaking then.”

“These should shut him up,” Manson said, and at the same moment, a wad of cloth was stuffed into my mouth. “Those are Jess’s panties. Just to remind you what you’re missing out on while I fuck her.”

The smell of her flooded my nose, her taste was on my tongue — but the thickness of the cotton filled my mouth, and I winced, clenching my teeth around it. It made my stomach crawl for Jess to see me bound up like this, it was sweet and bitter all at once.

“Shit...” My voice broke, and the word was muffled by her panties. Manson patted my cheek, each pat growing significantly harder until it was sharp enough to sting.

“Whining already?” he said. “And here I thought you’d put up more of a fight. Don’t you want to keep swearing at us?”

“I can’t imagine why he wouldn’t,” Lucas said, trailing his hands over my spread thighs before slapping them down. The sting bloomed like sparks exploding across my skin. I held his gaze, refusing to look away. “Go on, Jason. You had so much to say earlier, where’s that smart mouth now?”

Clenching around the gag, I barely held back a loud groan as Lucas smacked me again. My legs trembled with tension, muscles twitching and flinching.

“Let’s see which one begs for mercy first,” Manson said, peering at me over Lucas’s shoulder. Vincent was standing near my head, and he laughed softly at Manson’s suggestion.

“Perfect idea,” he said. “What do you think, boy? Hm? Let’s see how long it takes you to beg for mercy.” He pulled my head back so I could look at him, letting it rest against his chest. “Let’s see how long it takes you to beg Lucas to fuck you.”

I already wanted to beg for that. I was almost feral with need, even though Lucas scared me half to death, even though he was by far the most intimidating man I'd ever met.

"It won't take long for that," Lucas said. "Just look at him, drooling and leaking all over himself." He smacked me again. "Pathetic."

Behind him, Manson sunk two fingers into Jess, making her groan. He'd found a vibrator and ran it teasingly over her spread thighs until she quivered. "That's it, angel," he murmured, his head so close to hers as he pumped his fingers into her. "Fuck, you're so wet. I'm going to make you come again, understand?"

"Yes, Master."

I whimpered at the sound of her. That beautiful, sweet, submissive voice. So eager to please.

Then Lucas grasped my cock, stroking me slowly before he lowered his head and took me into his mouth.

The heat of his tongue and the sudden suction made my eyes roll back. My toes curled as I clung tightly to the chains, my abdomen flexing as Lucas dipped lower and swiped his tongue over my hole. He probed his tongue into me, watching me from between my spread legs.

"Lucas, please...please..." The words didn't make it out of my mouth, but I felt them with every shred of my being. My pleading was nothing more than muffled moaning to him.

"Look who's begging already," Vincent said. Jess cried out as Manson moved the vibrator against her clit, the slick sounds of his fingers pumping into her almost unbearably erotic.

Lucas's nose was buried against my taint, his tongue stroking, pushing, swirling. He hooked his hands around my thighs, holding me tight against his mouth. Then he stroked his tongue upward again, lapping and sucking at my balls like he wanted to eat me alive.

The sight of his teeth so dangerously near my most intimate places was nothing short of terrifying.

He didn't let up. He took my cock into his mouth again, sucking and lapping until I was deep into his throat. At the same time, he slid his finger inside me. I was moaning right away, fingers and toes flexing with desperation.

Vincent still held my head, gently stroking his fingers through my hair. "That's it, you're taking it so well," he murmured as my muffled noises

grew more desperate.

I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. Everything felt so bright — every touch, every chill that went over me. Adrenaline had me shaking all over, exacerbating my reactions. Saliva had dripped down my chin because I couldn't swallow properly, and Vincent swiped it up with his fingers.

“Such a mess already,” he said, using those same fingers to probe into me. “You try to act tough, but put you in ropes and you make the cutest slutty bottom, don't you?” He delivered the words in a condescending tone, almost like baby talk.

Lucas's finger joined Vincent's, squeezing inside me as he lifted his head to taunt, “He looks like a slut, all right. Look at how sticky he is.” He carelessly swiped up the precum from my stomach, licking it from his finger with a look that seared straight through me. “What do you say, slut boy? Should I fuck you?”

I nodded desperately. Jess was shuddering, her head thrown back in ecstasy as Manson forced another beautiful orgasm out of her. I wanted — no, I fucking *needed* to come. I was more than willing to abandon every shred of pride if it would only convince Lucas to sink that thick cock inside me.

Lucas straightened, still probing his finger into me as he wiped his chin. “Lower him down a bit, Vince.” His finger pressed deeper when he saw my expression. “Aw, what's wrong? Scared? Good. You should be.”

Vince left me and the chain clicked, lowering me several inches so I was suspended on an even level with Lucas's hips. His jumpsuit was open, his cock was out, and he stroked himself slowly, tapping his head against me. The piercing glinted, and I stared, wishing I didn't feel so damn *helpless*. I couldn't move other than to tense my muscles and shake.

Vincent passed him a bottle of lube. He spread it over himself and dripped even more of it on me. Pleading words they couldn't understand were still pouring out of me, and they increased in pitch and volume as he lined himself up with ass.

“Easy, babe, deep breaths,” Vincent said, supporting my head, almost holding me. Lucas pressed in, so damn *tight*. The unusual bump of his piercing was obvious immediately. I closed my eyes, because it was all so much — the sights, the smells, the sounds surrounding me.

I almost came from the feeling of Lucas filling me up.

“Hey, open your eyes.” Lucas’s hand tapped my face, and I opened. He’d buried himself in me up to the hilt. Seeing him stand there between my legs with his tattooed chest bare, his jumpsuit unzipped, grinning at me like he won something...it made my head spin. “Don’t you close your eyes. I want you to look at me.” He thrust into me, and I nearly closed my eyes again.

Not that he felt all that different from Vincent. Different size, different technique, and the piercing — yeah, that was different. I’d been fucked by people besides Vincent, but I hadn’t been fucked by *Lucas*. He was the person my younger, semi-closeted self had been so damn afraid of — not only because he was a capable fighter, or frighteningly sadistic, or mercilessly blunt. He was fucking sexy. He was this vicious, feral, unabashedly filthy man who knew what he wanted and how to take it.

He knew what he wanted from me. And God, as he fucked me, I wasn’t sure if I’d survive. It felt too good, it *hurt* too good. Lucas fucked hard, brutally. Vincent was holding my face and praising me, and Jess was watching me with such a blissed-out expression...

Vincent pulled her panties out of my mouth, telling me, “Don’t hold your breath. Scream if you have to.”

I hadn’t even realized I was. But with my mouth freed, so was my tongue.

“Fuck, Lucas, please, I need...fuck, that’s going to make me come, please let me come, please —”

“Yeah? You want to come?” Lucas squeezed my face as he curled over me, one hand still hooked around my thigh as he impaled me again and again. “Keep begging for it, then.”

God, I wanted him to touch me. I wanted *so fucking badly* to feel his hand on me. I kept begging, a useless and almost indiscernible stream of words pouring out of my mouth.

I tried to keep my eyes on him, but Jess was impossible not to look at. Manson used the vibrator to make her come yet again, and she was shaking so hard that tears streamed down her face. My cock slapped against my stomach, the force of Lucas’s thrusts as he drove into me almost enough to make me sob.

“Please —” I wasn’t sure who I was begging anymore. Lucas, Vincent, Manson...hell, anyone who would offer me relief. “Give me permission to come, please, please, please —”

My punished skin stung as Lucas's hips slapped against me. In stark contrast, Vincent gently kissed my cheek, still comfortably holding my head.

"You're allowed to come, but he's not going to stroke you," he said. "Hands-free only."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Manson, please!" Jess suddenly cried out, but she couldn't struggle, she could barely move. All she could do was hang there as Manson flicked the vibrator to a higher setting, using it in unison with his fingers as he pumped them into her. Arousal dripped from her, glistening, and I swear I ascended my body.

Lucas was bearing down on me, and the sounds I was making made him smile. "I want to see you come all over yourself," he snarled. "Make a mess of yourself for me."

I broke. My cock throbbed as I came, spurting cum across my stomach in thick white ribbons.

"That's it, that's what I like to see. Come all over yourself, slut."

Vincent swiped up the cum and smeared it over my face, pushing his fingers into my mouth so I could taste myself. The way he smiled at me made my stomach feel hollow, the gentleness of his hands compared to Lucas's brutality.

I looked at him and babbled on, stuttering and hiccupping on hitched breaths, saying, "Thank you, sir, thank you for letting me come, thank you for letting him use me, thank you —"

Lucas's grip tightened painfully, possessively. He buried himself deep inside me as he came, growling viciously, "Fuck, that's fucking perfect."

35 - Lucas

Although we had to take Jess home that night, we all slept in the same bed anyway. Usually, Manson's bed was the one we all congregated in; tonight, I wandered up to the attic after I'd returned from dropping her off.

Vincent and Manson were both showering. Jason was sprawled on the bed, his hair damp, wearing sweatpants and nothing else as he played a game on his phone. Lying down beside him, I reached up and patted my hand on his head.

He slowly put down his phone, giving me a questioning look. "What are you doing?"

I smirked. "Aftercare."

Laughing softly, he repositioned himself to snuggle closer. "You dumbass. Aftercare, right."

His finger tapped rapidly across the screen as he played through the next level of the game. I didn't know how he kept track of all the explosions, abilities, and sparkly graphics. I could handle games that were straight forward: go somewhere, shoot something, pick up items. That's it. Some games he played were ridiculously complicated.

It was a good feeling — lying there with him. We'd been living together for years. He was one of my best friends. But our relationship was one I'd neglected, almost taken for granted. It was complicated to admire someone as much as I admired him, while also feeling this almost irrational need to protect him. From the world — from myself.

I'd felt like a threat to him when I'd first met him. Like I'd fuck up his life. I supposed, subconsciously, it made me keep him at a distance.

But feeling lonely and isolated for so damn long was exhausting; I didn't want to do that anymore. Being cared for was frightening, so I pushed away the very people who cared about me most. In an effort not to lose the love I'd found, I almost destroyed it.

I'd heard the pain in his voice that night I'd called him after the sideshow. The idea of me being hurt, the idea of possibly losing me, had clearly shaken him. I wasn't good at reading people's emotions, I couldn't always discern hidden meanings like Vincent or Manson could. But the anger and fear in his voice had been obvious.

This man I'd tried so hard to protect wanted to protect me in return.

My fingers were tangled in Jason's hair when I said, "You know I love you. Right?" That was a shitty-as-hell way to frame that. Can't just say "I love you" like a normal human, hell no; I had to go and qualify it like a demand.

Jason tipped his head back to look at me. "Of course I do. You know I love you back."

I knew that, but it still felt damn good to hear it.

I hated avoiding confrontation. It was the opposite; I *relished* it. If someone had a problem with me, I wanted to have it out. I'd take yelling, swearing, fighting, *anything* other than simply trying to ignore it.

Hanging my cigarette out the window, I stared up the street toward Jessica's house. Her mom was outside, wearing a massive sun hat as she pruned the rose bushes. She had long acrylic nails, like her daughter, and even while working in the yard, she was dressed like she was about to go to a fancy brunch. She'd probably been a party girl in her younger years, the woman people were irresistibly drawn to. Big hair, big personality, and an even bigger attitude.

Avoiding Jess's house so we wouldn't rile up her mom was something I did for *Jess's* sake and no one else. But it grated on my nerves. If Mrs. Martin had a problem with me, I'd rather have her say it to my face. Let's get the yelling and screaming out of the way already; none of this sneaking around.

Jess would probably be pissed, but I'd made up my mind. I wanted to see her and I didn't want to wait for her to sneak out of the house and formulate some ridiculous excuse for her mother.

Jess was stuck with us. She could make whatever plans she wanted; move across the state, the country, the goddamn world. We'd just go along with her. It didn't make much sense, but even my best laid plans rarely did. I didn't "think things through"; I made a decision and went for it.

There was no way in hell I would lose Jess now; I'd already made up my mind she was ours. So her mother would have to get with the program.

Discarding my cigarette in the ashtray, I got out and took care not to slam the door for once. This neighborhood was too damn quiet, and it made me uncomfortable. There had been noise at the trailer park constantly. Dogs

barking, babies crying, music playing — always someone shouting. Jess's neighborhood felt like a muted version of WhoVille.

It was like Mrs. Martin could sense me coming. She glanced over as I came up the sidewalk and immediately straightened. She turned to face me, gripping her pruning shears like a weapon as I came to stand at the end of her driveway.

"Morning, ma'am." I nodded my head but didn't step closer. I wouldn't put it past her to throw those damn shears at me. She looked about as horrified as I expected, but she also looked angry. Now *that* was an emotion I could work with, something I could get behind.

Before she could open her mouth to tell me off, I said, "Now I know you don't want me on your property. And I'm not, see?" I motioned to the ground, where my boots were solidly on a public sidewalk. "I'm just here to pick up Jess."

Mrs. Martin scoffed, folding her arms with her shears dangling from one hand. "Oh, is *that* what you're here to do? You think you can just show up and drive off with my daughter?"

If only I was the type who could fake a smile. Instead I stood there looking hateful as hell, trying to sound polite. At least the politeness was real. My father had instilled some basic manners but not much else.

"I didn't think it would be all that easy, ma'am, to be honest," I said. "I figured I'd need your blessing first."

She raised her eyebrows, widening her eyes that were the same color as her daughter's. So many of Jess's mannerisms were reflected in her, it was a little uncanny. The apple didn't fall far from the stubborn tree.

"Bonica roses?" I said, motioning to the thick bush behind her. "My mom had some too, she loved them. She used to keep big bunches of them on the kitchen table. I always liked the color of them."

"The color of them...yes, that's why I chose them," she said primly. "Lovely color." She'd been surprised, and she loosened her grip on the shears, although her gaze grew no less sharp. "What's your name, young man?"

"Lucas Bent," I said. "I'd shake your hand but..." I motioned to her driveway again. Until she told me I could, I wasn't taking a goddamn step over her property line. I'd stand there all day if I had to.

"You were arrested several years ago," she said, her mouth set in a hard line.

“Yes, ma’am.” I didn’t tell her no charges were filed. I’d sat in juvie for a few days after bashing Alex over the head, until my dad eventually came to get me. Personally, I would have rather kept sitting in jail.

“What did you do?” By the way she was looking at me, she already knew. Maybe she was pressing to see if I’d lie.

She’d get the truth from me, even if it was ugly and unpleasant.

“I broke a glass bottle over another student’s head,” I said. “Split his head open about an inch. He needed stitches. He was speaking disrespectfully about someone I...someone I cared about. And I lost my temper.”

She wouldn’t believe me if I told her Alex had been talking about Jess; it would seem like I was trying too hard.

“Do you lose your temper often?” she said.

“Not as often as I used to.” I managed something like a smile then, at least it felt like I did. “I wouldn’t hurt your daughter, ma’am. I’m not like that. I know I look like shit, and probably sound like it too. But all I want from Jess is some of her time and company. She’s safe with me.”

She nodded slowly. “Oh, yes. Isn’t that what they all say?”

The door opened, and Jess poked her head out, an expression of stunned disbelief on her face. “Lucas? What are you...” Then she spotted her mother and her face plummeted. “Oh. Uh...Mom...”

“He says he’s here to pick you up,” she said, turning back to her roses without another glance at me. I couldn’t be certain, but it seemed there was a little less venom in her voice. She went on pruning, snipping each limb with particular enthusiasm.

Catching Jess’s eye, I jerked my head toward the El Camino parked back along the curb. She nodded quickly. “I’ll be right back, just need to grab my bag.”

She disappeared inside for a minute. Mrs. Martin kept her back turned, continuing to snip without a word. Her message was loud. And perfectly clear.

“I can’t believe you walked right up to her!” Jess exclaimed. She wasn’t angry; she seemed to be in stunned disbelief. “You’re seriously lucky she didn’t call the police. She’s going to be pissed at me.”

“No, if she gets pissy with you, call me and hand her the phone,” I said. Jess laughed out loud.

“Lucas, you can’t just...you don’t know my mom.” She shook her head. “She’s even more stubborn than I am, trust me, there’s no wearing her down.”

“No? Try me. I can wear down goddamn diamond.”

Even though she sounded exasperated, I liked the way she laughed. “Where are we going anyway? What’s the big surprise?”

“I wanted to show you something,” I said. “It’s...it’s difficult to explain but I have some friends I want you to meet.”

“Ah, shit, Lucas, I don’t have any makeup on!” she groaned, scrambling for her bag. Reaching over, I grabbed her hand, pulling it close.

“Don’t start fussing,” I said, kissing the back of her hand before I held it in my lap. “Trust me, they’re not going to care if you have makeup on, or what your hair looks like, or what you’re wearing...although I like what you’re wearing.” I was such a sucker for her in a skirt. It made me want to push it up her thighs and bury my face in her. It was yellow plaid and her shirt was white, hugging her chest like a corset. “You look sexy as hell.”

I leaned over and kissed her, and she cried out that I was going to get us into an accident, but I wasn’t worried.

I hated this town, but I knew its roads like the back of my hand; even the old rutted ones that led through the unsavory parts of Wickeston.

“You used to live there, didn’t you?” she said, pointing to Montgomery Park as we passed it.

The trailer park used to be nice, back in the 70s when it was mostly full of retired seniors. But many people had come and gone over the years and worn the place down. The paint had peeled off the old sign in front of it, and water stains leaked through the wood.

“Yep, home sweet home,” I said. The trailer park was backed up to a drainage ditch, where people had been dumping their trash for years. Old mattresses, broken furniture, glass bottles, and other pieces of refuse were scattered all over the area.

Turning down the narrow dirt service road alongside the ditch, I parked and turned off the engine. After several seconds of silence, curious little faces poked out from beneath the trash.

“This is it?” Jess said.

Nodding, I put my finger to my lips. “They’re a little shy, so try to keep your voice down.”

She looked confused, but she got out of the car after me. A few little faces darted back into hiding as I reached into the bed and pulled out the supplies I’d brought.

As she watched me open up a box of Friskies, Jess said, “Lucas...why do you have all this cat food?”

“For my friends,” I said, keeping my voice low as I motioned for her to follow me. There were several metal baking trays I’d hidden in the shade of the trees nearby, and I ripped open a bag of kibble to pour out on the trays. Clicking my tongue to encourage them to come out, I stood back from the trays for a moment and waited.

Cats, at least a dozen of them, came running out from hiding. Jess gasped as they rushed around us, tails in the air, meowing loudly for food. Some were brave enough to rub around my legs, but others held back, too wary to come close.

“Oh my God, are these all strays?” she said. She kept her voice down, but I could see how badly she wanted to reach down and pet them. The cats began to chow down, even before I added several cans of wet food on top of the kibble.

“They’re strays,” I said. “Most of them are feral and have been out here their whole lives. This colony has been here for years.” I stepped back, giving the more frightened cats a chance to feed. “I used to come back here to smoke so my dad wouldn’t give me shit about it. That’s how I found out they were here. They were hungry and no one was feeding them, so I started bringing them food. And I’ve been feeding them ever since. I try to come out once a week. But if the weather is rough, I’ll come more often to check on them. I used to have shelters out here for them, but people kept breaking shit.”

People were fucking cruel, especially to cats. When I discovered some teenage assholes were bringing firecrackers back here and trying to catch the cats, I almost went ballistic. But they never came back after they showed up one day and found me waiting for them.

“I’ve managed to trap most of them and take them to the vet,” I said. “The local shelter has a program to get strays spayed or neutered for free. But there’s some I’ve never been able to catch, so...” I motioned toward a

tiny orange kitten that toddled out from the weeds. Jess squealed in delight, quickly covering her mouth to muffle the sound.

“It’s so tiny!” she gasped, watching the kitten get into the food. I’d suspected another litter was born recently, but with only one kitten making an appearance and no mother near her, I had a bad feeling they hadn’t made it.

Life was rough out here, and I couldn’t save them all.

Moving slowly, I plucked the kitten out of the bunch. She was immediately feisty, twisting in my grasp and giving me a vicious, spitting hiss. She put her little paws up and stuck out her claws. She fit in my palm, and I held her close against my chest, forming a cocoon with my hands for her to hide in while Jess gently stroked her back.

She felt too thin, too fragile in my grasp. She was obviously malnourished, too young to be weaned.

“No one else knows about this,” I said, and she looked up at me in surprise. “It’s not that I think it needs to be a secret. It’s just always been *my* thing. It makes me feel like I’m doing some good. If I can make their lives a little better, then it...it means something. But I never wanted to brag about it, or make some big show of it...”

I wasn’t sure why I’d suddenly brought her here. As I’d bought the food yesterday, the thought had come into my mind and never left. Something I’d never shared with anyone, that had only ever been for me, I wanted to share with her. No...I *needed* to share it.

So gently, she took the kitten in her hands. The baby looked at her with wide blue eyes, still milky with youth. But she didn’t hiss again as Jess held her close under her chin, talking to her softly.

“I think she likes you,” I said.

“She’s so soft.” Jess kept her voice a whisper. Opening another can of wet food, I set it down in the bed so the kitten could eat without competing with the adults. She had a massive appetite, and growled as she dug into the food, taking the largest bites she could fit in her tiny jaws.

“She’s a little fighter,” I said. She growled even more as I stroked my finger down her spine, her entire face messy with food. When I looked up, Jess was watching me.

“I think that’s the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on your face,” she said. “I had no idea you liked cats. Why don’t you have one at the house?”

There wasn't an easy answer. It wasn't the dogs I was worried about; Jojo was a softy who wouldn't hurt a fly, and Bo might act tough but one whack from a cat and he'd learn to respect them.

"I guess it's...I haven't had a cat in a long time. I never really had one as a pet at all, not for very long at least."

I wasn't going to dig into the subject, but Jess was getting too damn good about seeing past my evasiveness. She laid her hand against my cheek, stroking her thumb over the stubble on my face. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Yes. No. Both. Talking about it, disgustingly, felt an awful lot like vomiting. I didn't *want* to — but it would probably feel better once it was over.

"There's not much to talk about," I said. "Pops didn't like cats, but I found one when I was nine years old. A stray had a litter under our front porch, and once they started wandering around, my dad chased them off. One got left behind, the smallest. He had a weird face, a birth defect; it made him look like he was always frowning. I tried to hide him in my room, but you can't really hide a kitten."

My stomach felt like it was cramping. Manson would have called it a trauma response, but I tried to ignore it.

"He told me to get rid of it," I said. "Told me to get it out of the house and that he'd shoot it if he saw the cat around the property."

Jess sharply drew in her breath. Her expression was pained, horrified. This was something I rarely talked about, and I didn't expect much of a reaction when I did. Most people I knew were raised similarly, so things like this wouldn't strike them as shocking.

But Jess had experienced nothing like that; it was shocking for her. My knee-jerk reaction was to tell her it wasn't so bad. I'd survived. I turned out just fine.

But maybe her reaction was normal, and the numbness and disconnection I felt around it...wasn't.

I swallowed around the sensation of something stuck in my throat. My body felt strange but my brain remained a void, refusing any emotional input.

"I couldn't let the little thing fend for himself," I said. "So I took him and left. I planned to run away and never go back. I didn't think it through; I was just a kid. Once night set in and I was still walking, I started to realize

I'd have to go home. I had to eat. I still walked all night, with that cat's little head sticking out of my backpack, bawling my eyes out because I thought I'd have to leave him somewhere."

That memory cut through the numbness. It still felt real: the pain of being so alone, so helpless to do anything. I hated that feeling with every bone in my body.

"What did you do?" she said. She'd moved closer and it helped that she wasn't looking directly at me but instead down at the cat. When she watched me, I worried too much about what my face was doing.

"There was an old lady who lived a few miles from us," I said. "Mrs. Isabella Thorn. Most of the kids around town thought of her like our granny. I don't know why the hell this old woman was sitting out on her porch at five in the morning, puffing on her pipe, but there she was. She took the cat and told me she'd keep him safe. That was that. I went home. Never had another animal until Manson got Jojo, and then Vincent moved in with Haribo."

I finally looked at her again, expecting pity or sadness. Instead, there was fury in her eyes.

"Who the hell treats their kid like that?" she blurted. "Threatening to kill an animal? Scaring you so bad you ran away? What the fuck! If he wasn't already dead, I'd —"

She cut off abruptly, her eyes going wide. But I stopped her before she could apologize.

"Trust me, if he wasn't dead, I'd kill him again myself. I hated my father. Hated him with every goddamn bone in my body. He *made* me hate him. He thought that showing emotion or getting attached to things made you weak, made you less of a man. Toys, pets, my own mother — a real man wasn't supposed to care about any of that shit."

"You were a child!" She was so angry she sputtered, scaring a few cats. "Kids need comfort! Kids need toys! I just...I can't imagine —" She shook her head. "I'm so sorry you went through that. It's...it's sick."

Sick...yeah, I guess it was.

"I guess he was right, in a weird way," I said. Despite how much I detested my father, he still raised me. He'd been the biggest influence in my life, after my brother was taken away. "You let yourself care too much about something, and it makes it that much worse when you lose it."

“But it’s worth it,” she said fiercely. “Yes, we all lose things in our life. Things we love, people we adore, really important things. And it hurts. It absolutely sucks and sometimes the pain feels like it will never stop. It’s worth it even when it’s hard.”

My intent hadn’t been to get emotional. But I was anyway, further confusing myself. Something in my brain had decided it wanted to be heard; it wanted to break down the wall that had kept me safe for so long.

Now I was surrounded by the rubble of my defenses and didn’t have a clue what to do with myself.

“We should take her home,” I said suddenly, nodding toward the kitten. “The boys won’t mind, and she won’t survive out here. Not alone.” I petted her gently, getting another vicious hiss before she went back to inhaling her food. “Damn, so angry. I’m trying to help you, you know.”

Somehow, my own words acted like a boomerang. I flung them out without a thought, only for them to come right back and smack me in the face.

The people that cared about me would always try to help me. Even when I reacted angrily, on instinct, they still picked me up and looked after me. Sharp claws and all.

Jess lay her hand atop mine, and my heart skipped a beat.

“You deserve so much better than what life gave you, Lucas,” she said.

Looking at her perfect fingers on top of my crooked ones, I said, “I don’t know what the hell I deserve, Jess. I don’t want to be angry all the time. I don’t want to always feel like I’m fighting the world. I just want to live. That’s all.”

“I know,” she said. “You won’t be angry forever. Only sometimes. And it won’t hurt forever either.”

“Only sometimes,” I echoed, and she nodded.

“I’m glad you brought me out here,” she said. “It means a lot that you wanted to share this with me.”

Fuck, my throat was getting choked up. Everything still felt tight and stifling — but it was like I was finally *breathing*.

“Lucas.”

She held both my hands in hers. God, she was terrifyingly beautiful. She was so tender it hurt, and when she looked at me, I felt like I could shatter into pieces.

“I love you, Lucas. I love you, even if you don’t love me back. Even if you don’t completely trust me yet. Even if —”

I put my fingers against her lips, stopping her. My heart was pounding a million miles a minute, and my brain was flying as quickly, too fast to grab a single thought — except one.

“Why would you love me?” They weren’t the words I wanted to say. They weren’t tender, they weren’t soft, they weren’t the words she deserved. But I needed to know, because if I didn’t, I’d convince myself it was all a lie.

I wasn’t the person that people *loved*. I was the person who was tolerated, the one who was begrudgingly *allowed*. I was detestable, unpleasant, rude, and temperamental.

“Because you’ve always told me the truth,” she said. “You’re honest, but you care so much. I know you try to pretend like you don’t. And you’re so strong. You’re brave. You went through so much shit and you’re still...you’re still kind.”

“You don’t mean that.” My voice was far too weak for my liking.

“Yes, I do. Look at what you’ve done, for creatures that can’t even do anything for you in return! Most of these cats will never let you touch them; they might never trust you at all. But you’re still here, every week, making sure they’re taken care of. Making sure they have a chance. You’re trying to give them what the world never gave you.” She swallowed hard. “You showed up and talked to my mom, knowing she didn’t like you, knowing she’d judge you. And you protected me, even when I didn’t know I needed to be protected.”

Closing my eyes, I bowed my head and folded my arms, trying my damndest to keep it all in. It was too much. God, it felt like it would crush me.

“You deserve to be loved, Lucas,” she said. She was close, and her voice was low, holding me like she was protecting me. “You deserve to be happy. You deserve to heal.”

“Goddamn it.” I hurriedly scrubbed my eyes before I put my arms around her and crushed her against my chest. I was holding her too tight, I knew it, but I feared that if I loosened my arms even a bit, she would vanish and this would all be a lie. Replaying her words repeatedly in my head, I tried to force myself to believe them, to stop questioning them.

I deserved to heal — *what the fuck did I need healing from, I needed to just get over it.*

I deserved to be happy — *why the hell should I be happy?*

I deserved to be loved — *a person like me didn't deserve love.*

As if I could hide myself there, I pressed my face against her hair. It was a hell of a lot easier to be honest with her when I was angry, not when I was a blubbering mess.

“I love you too.” What fucking terrifying words. But they didn't kill me to say, the world didn't implode. So I said them again, to be sure. “I love you so much, Jess.” God, my stomach was in knots. “I fucking love you.” The more I said it, it was like I couldn't stop. The words felt like weights dropping out of my mouth, making me lighter every time. “I love you so much that I can't let you go.”

She nodded against me, and she didn't need to say a damn thing. She loved me, and I believed her. She thought I deserved better things, nice things — and possibly for the first time in my life, I was beginning to think I deserved that too.

36 - Lucas

Manson must have noticed a change in me.

I wasn't sure how he knew. When he came into the garage the next morning, I had a fresh mug of coffee on my tool bench and the orange kitten in a large cardboard box nearby. The sides were low enough that she could see me, but not enough for her to attempt an escape. Jess had named her Cherry, and I thought the moniker suited her.

None of the guys had been surprised when I brought home a kitten. Not even slightly. Apparently I was losing my touch, or I wasn't as subtle as I thought I was. Manson saw me walk in the house with Cherry last night and all he'd said was, "About damn time you got a cat."

Vincent was instantly obsessed with her. Jason made a face and said the last thing we needed was a cat shredding the furniture with its claws, but I still caught him making friends with her by offering her bits of lunch meat from his sandwich.

"How's the fluffball doing?" Manson said, squatting beside the box to offer Cherry his hand. She let him know what she thought of his intrusion with a loud hiss. "Grumpy, isn't she? No wonder you two get along."

"She's a warrior," I said, looking down at the tiny spitfire proudly. Introducing her to the dogs last night had been one of the funniest things I'd seen in a while. Jojo, as expected, feared her. Haribo ran in circles around her, barking, while she faced him with claws out and her tail puffed up. He hadn't even been brave enough to get within swiping distance.

They would get along just fine.

But Cherry was still small, and I didn't want to leave her alone while I worked. So there she was, peering around the garage, standing up on her back legs to see more of her new domain. I had music on but I wasn't blasting it; the little one needed time to adjust to all the new sights and smells.

Manson was usually the one to turn the speaker on, preferring to work with sound rather than silence. I'd never cared much either way, but today, the upbeat playlist felt right. It kept me going, kept me energized.

But it wasn't the only thing energizing me.

You deserve to heal, Lucas. You deserve to be loved.

Those words refused to leave me the fuck alone. They'd been stuck in my head for days, intruding to the front of my mind every time a text from Jess popped up on my phone, every time I saw her face around the house.

It made me mad, at first, because what the hell did that even mean? Life had nothing to do with *deserving*. You get what you get and you deal with it. Implying anyone inherently deserved one thing or another felt naive, like a child's dream.

No one deserved shit. Life was unfair. You fight to survive or don't.

But then the anger dissipated. I didn't know if I deserved anything, but I *knew* the boys deserved someone who didn't fly off the handle at every random provocation. Someone who didn't push them away the moment things got too raw. They deserved better, Jess deserved better. Maybe I deserved better from myself.

The wrench slipped from my hand and clattered on the ground, making Manson flinch in surprise. "You good?"

"Yeah, yeah...shit." Crouching down to pick up the wrench, I paused for a moment. My brain was a wreck, wildly fluctuating between giddiness and despair. Jess loved me — *fucking hell*. She wanted me to improve — *Christ, it was too hard*.

She wasn't the only one who wanted to see better from me. Not just better from me, but better *for* me.

I wasn't a good man; I never had been. But Jess made me feel like I was; like I could be.

Left to my own devices, I would have let myself wallow. Fuck it all, I was trash and I'd stay that way. But I couldn't do that, not when I had people around me who cared about me so damn much. People who could soothe my pain, who didn't judge me for how much I struggled.

Trust was terrifying. Intimacy even more so. But I was learning to be vulnerable. Maybe this was what it felt like to heal. It was stunning.

"Hey, Manson?" He nodded his head to acknowledge that he'd heard me. "I think I want to go to therapy."

He paused, reaching over to turn the music down before he turned to look at me with a stunned expression. "You...you what?"

There it was, my chance to take it all back. Deny I said anything. Shut the fuck up.

Not this time.

“I want to try out therapy. For my...you know...all the trauma and shit. I think maybe if...if I talked to somebody, maybe they could tell me how to get the fuck over it...or something.”

Yeah. Okay. That wasn't so bad. It didn't kill me. He wasn't scoffing at me.

Manson looked elated.

“Well, yeah, of course, that's good. I can get you my therapist's number —”

Closing my eyes, I counted to ten. Forcing myself to make that phone call would take a while. What was I supposed to say? *Hey Doc, I'm pretty fucked up and I guess I'm supposed to talk to someone about it. Want to hear about some child abuse? Also, my brother was that murderer all the papers talked about, so do you mind if I dump all my confusion about that on you too?*

“I'll call for you,” Manson said quickly. “I'll set up the appointment. Will that work?”

Clearing my throat, I gave him another nod. If I were to think seriously about what I did and didn't deserve, I didn't feel like I deserved him. I didn't deserve that level of patience or empathy. But maybe thinking that was part of the problem.

I walked to the front of the garage so I could light up a cigarette. My hands were only shaking a little. It could have been worse.

Manson came to join me, silent, as I smoked. He'd always been good about that, always willing to share the quiet with me. Words were hard, and I hated feeling so many conflicted things at once without a way to make sense of them. But his presence was stable. It was one of the few things I'd ever counted on.

“I'm proud of you,” he said, and I groaned.

“Can't you punch me in the gut instead?” I said. “It would be a lot easier to take than...than whatever you're doing right now.”

He chuckled, shaking his head as I offered him the cigarette. “You'll survive. What made you change your mind about therapy, anyway?”

“Jess said something,” I muttered. “She said a lot of things yesterday.”

“What'd she say?”

Manson had told me when he confessed his love to her. It freaked me out. Knowing he was in love with her while believing she could never love me too hadn't been fun to deal with. Polyamory wasn't all rainbows and

sunshine, it took work. We had to deal with those uncomfortable feelings when they arose.

“She loves me,” I said. It made me grin like a fool as I raised my shaking hand for another drag on the cigarette. “She said that I deserve to heal. But what if I can’t? What am I supposed to do then? What if I sit down on that damn couch and spill my guts and even a doctor can’t help me?”

“Then we’ll find you a new therapist,” he said. “You’re going to have to be patient with yourself. It’s going to hurt. But you’ll get there. I know you. You’ll be okay.”

His eyes were so dark they were almost black. It was the first thing I’d ever noticed about him: the way he looked at the world, the way he looked at me. He looked at me like I was something worth saving, something good.

He reached up, and his thumb traced from the corner of my mouth across my lips. “She’s right, you know.”

I gave a quick, abrupt shake of my head. “I doubt that.”

“Maybe. But you believe in it enough to try.”

I hated the fear that squeezed around my lungs, how it demanded I reject this. It wanted me isolated, hopeless, angry and scared. That fear had damn near won. But I wouldn’t let it. Not now, and never again.

I drew closer to him. He and I had been vulnerable with each other before I even knew what that meant. All those nights we’d laid in the Bronco curled against each other, with one thin blanket and our body heat as our only defense against the cold. I thought of the bruises he’d drunkenly kissed. The promises. The tears we’d never let anyone else see.

“I’m not good at doing shit for me,” I said, my voice low and thick with the effort. “But I’ll do it for her. And for you. For all of us.”

“I’m just glad to see you doing it,” he said. “Regardless of who or what it’s for. You’ll figure it out.”

“You better stop talking like that or you’re going to get me choked up,” I said.

But it was too late for him to stop.

He kissed me slowly, almost lazily. His mouth was all minty, like he’d just brushed his teeth. I probably tasted like ash and black coffee, and I drew back from him suddenly, self-conscious.

He pulled me right back, demandingly. His kiss was deeper this time, authoritative as he shoved me against the side of the garage. He kissed me

like he was hungry for me, and he pushed up my shirt with his hand so he could run his fingers over my chest.

He found his initials, carved into my skin, and traced them. If the cuts didn't scar when they healed, I intended to tattoo his initials there instead. He'd left his mark on me in a thousand invisible ways; I wanted at least one that was perfectly visible, one that could never be erased.

"Don't be gentle," I said. He was touching me so tenderly and it exacerbated the emotions I was struggling with. I didn't want to *think* I just wanted to *feel*.

He nuzzled against my neck and shoulder, making soft sounds of satisfaction as he kissed me. "Don't be? Why?"

Stupid question. He knew the answer.

"Don't deserve it," I said, because that was the easiest way to explain it. That was the simplest thing I could water my response down to: gentleness was not something I'd been given, and it frankly wasn't something I felt like I deserved.

I was an angry, violent person. I was harmful and dangerous and —

"You do deserve it."

I stiffened, and he caught my wrists and pinned them to my sides as he continued to slowly, *gently* kiss my neck.

"I thought I told you to cut that shit out." My words dripped with bitterness and I hated myself for it. Hated how petulant I sounded, how miserably angry.

"Since when do you tell me what to do?"

His response cut me to the quick. My first feeling was regret, because what the hell was wrong with me that I was talking to him like that? Then came fury, rebellion, because no one was in charge of me and I wasn't going to just roll over and submit.

Then came fear, because I'd barked out words without thinking and that carried consequences. I wasn't afraid of Manson himself, not truly. I wasn't afraid he would hurt me, even though he could, and had, and would gladly do so again because it pleased both of us.

It wasn't about fear of being beaten, like it had been with my father. I'd blurt out things to my Pops and just brace myself. Wait for the blows to start coming. I learned to blot out the pain, ignore the humiliation. Pretend it didn't matter.

I wasn't afraid of Manson abusing me.

I was afraid of him finally having enough, and walking away. It made me feel like a manipulative asshole. He deserved better, yet I expected him to stick around? How fucking toxic was that?

“Get out of your head, pup.”

Manson was looking at me sympathetically, but with a small smile that softened the pity. He laid his hand against my cheek, and I leaned into his warmth.

“Please don’t.” I inhaled shakily and a pathetic whimper accompanied my exhale. Furious with myself, I clenched my fists. “Don’t...don’t...”

“Don’t be kind to you? Fuck that.” He looked at me like I was something precious, something amazing. “You’re scared, I get it. Things are changing, and change is hard. Even *good* change is so damn hard. I know. But you’re loved. You’re cared for. Every change that comes, we’ll handle it together.”

I was still shaking my head, stuck in a spiral. He pulled me away from the side of the garage, walking me backwards as we moved inside. He kept me upright when I nearly stumbled, guiding me with one hand on my waist and the other still cupping my face. When I finally bumped up against something, I looked back and realized that it was Jess’s BMW he’d pushed me up against.

“I’ve got you,” he said. He pulled off my shirt, tossing it carelessly to the floor. Then his hands spread over me, and I hissed at the cold touch of the car against my bare back. But he just laughed gently, and said, “I’m going to fuck those nasty thoughts out of you.”

37 - Manson

Lucas was shaking like a leaf as I touched him. He tried so hard; not a single one of us doubted it. But he was still cruel to himself. He was really no better than me when it came to treating himself kindly.

But that was what we had each other for. Some folks said that you couldn't be loved by someone else until you loved yourself, but that simply wasn't true.

I learned how to love myself from the love others gave me. I was still learning, I'd *always* be learning. Lucas had a hard time seeing the goodness in himself, but he was getting better every day. He just needed reminders.

"I'll take care of you," I assured him, cupping my hand around his bulge and squeezing as he groaned. I was taking my time and he was getting antsy, waiting for the moment when I would pin him down and be rough with him.

But it wasn't happening this time, no matter how much he protested. He wanted to punish himself for needing comfort, but I couldn't let him do that.

Taking his hand, I opened the door to Jessica's backseat. "Get in."

He gave me a baffled look, but got in. I pushed him back as I crawled in after him, so that he was lying against the opposite door with one leg up on the seat, the other sprawled on the floor.

"Smells like our girl, doesn't it?" I said, crawling into the back. I popped open the button on his pants and dragged them off him, then his underwear too.

He looked so fucking good. Completely naked with his legs sprawled on those red leather seats, his hard cock resting against his belly. There wasn't much room back here but I was determined to make it work.

Fucking him in Jess's car just felt *right*.

"It does smell like her," he said. "Hopefully she doesn't mind us steaming up her backseat."

I shook my head as I pulled my pants off. "Are you kidding? She'll love this. She's going to lose her shit when I tell her." Crawling back on top of him and forcing his legs even wider apart, I grinned. "I bet you she'll even get off to it."

I spat on my hand, getting my cock slick first. There wasn't any lube out here, but whatever, I'd made it work. Lucas wanted a rough fuck anyway, and although I was determined to be gentle, I really did enjoy when it was a struggle to squeeze inside him.

Getting as close to him as I could, I hooked his leg over mine and pushed the other one up, so his foot rested on my shoulder. He huffed, squirming against the door, glaring at me for putting him into such a ridiculous position. I took both of us in my hand, holding our cocks together as I thrust against him.

"Goddamn it," he gasped, teeth bared at the pleasure. "Fuck me, Manson. I don't care if it hurts, just —"

"I care," I said. I kept stroking us together, enamored by the sight of us. "I'm not rushing a damn thing. You look so fucking good like that..." He growled at me, furiously petulant, and I teased, "Are you really in a position to be snarling at me? When you have your legs up in the air, spread open like a slut?"

"Then fuck me like one!" he demanded, hips bucking, his entire body squirming.

I suddenly recalled the first time I ever fucked him. He'd been so...pushy. Almost angry in how demanding he was, like he was constantly challenging me to fight back, to put him in his place.

Now, I could recognize that desperation in his eyes.

"What are you waiting for?" He gasped out the sharp words. His toes twitched as I pressed his leg even further up, crushing him into the seat.

"Ask nicely," I said.

He practically snapped his teeth at me.

"Are you fucking kidding? Come on! Reed!" He jolted his hips toward me. Aggressive. Demanding. "Fuck me, bitch! Come on!"

His pupils visibly dilated when my hand snapped out and grabbed his face. "Excuse me? Would you like to repeat that?"

He gulped. The leather seat creaked beneath him. "Uh...no. Wouldn't...I don't..."

"Come on, *Bent*," I snapped, squeezing my grip into his face at the same time. "Try me, love. Call me a bitch again. I dare you. I *really* want you to. Go on."

He shook his head, lips firmly sealed. He was shaking like he was actually scared of me and I felt a little mean for smiling. Softening my grip

on his face, I said, "I promised you I was going to be gentle. Why are you trying so hard to force me not to be?"

"I told you I don't deserve it," he said. His voice was pleading, as if he was begging me to believe him. He looked down, whimpering softly as I continued to stroke our cocks together. "Please, Manson. Please...it's so hard."

"I know it is." I let go of him, angling myself towards his hole instead. His entire body tensed up in anticipation, but I took my time. "But it will get easier. I'll remind you every day if I have to: of how much I love you, and how precious you are to me."

He groaned like he was angry, his hand locked around my arm as he watched me press into him. I moved slowly, pushing inside only until I encountered resistance. Then I paused, letting his muscles relax, allowing him time to open up to me.

After several minutes of stretching him, inch by inch, I was able to enter him fully. His eyes widened, his mouth opened as if to make a sound but he snapped his jaw shut, grit his teeth. I moved slowly and he was more than ready for me, but he still looked at me like I was killing him.

"This is exactly what you deserve," I said. "You deserve to be treated kindly. You deserve to be loved and pleased and cared for."

"Stop," he whispered, and I paused. He swallowed hard, blinking rapidly. "Yellow...I just...need a second..."

He closed his eyes, breathing deep and slow. I waited, sheathed fully inside him. My balls were drawn up so tight, and I wanted nothing more than to fuck him hard and fast. But ensuring he was okay was far more important than momentary pleasure.

When he opened his eyes again, the hardness in them was gone. Fuck, he looked so vulnerable like that. Legs up, crushed beneath me, eyes wide. He'd been a fighter all his life, he so rarely had the opportunity to be soft.

"You're safe here," I said, and he nodded his head. I began to move, rocking against him, and he let out a breathless noise. He was trapped between the door and my cock, nowhere to squirm away to, nowhere to hide. "You're so fucking sexy, Lucas. *Goddamn*, I'm a lucky man."

He shook his head as if that would convince me to stop talking. This was torturing him, but I had no intentions of stopping. I didn't need to cause physical pain to satisfy my sadism; watching him struggle so hard against my tenderness was more than enough.

“I want to see you come all over yourself,” I said, wrapping my hand around him and stroking as I fucked him. He shuddered as I massaged my fingers over his glans, legs twitching, breath catching. “I want to feel this beautiful cock throb in my hand. I want to taste you...” I leaned down, curled over him, our panting breaths hot as they mingled. “This is what you needed, isn’t it, pup? Just someone to take care of you, fuck all the bad thoughts away. Remind you how fucking sexy and strong and incredible you are —”

He made a keening sound and strangled it. His dick pulsed and I squeezed, then his legs were shaking, cum spurting over his stomach. I fucked him through it, but the sight of him was too perfect, it was *exquisite*. I groaned, my movements becoming erratic as the pleasure built, radiating through me. I came only a few seconds after he did, my sweaty forehead pressed to his.

We didn’t move for nearly a minute. Our bodies were clenched so tight and close into the back of that car; my muscles would ache when I eventually unfolded them. But I was perfectly content for now, squashed into the corner of Jess’ backseat with Luas impaled on me, eyes closed as he composed himself.

“We...we made a mess of her car,” he said faintly.

“Too bad she isn’t here to clean it up with her tongue,” I said, and he swore with a soft laugh.

We moved slowly, disentangling from each other, stretching out our limbs as we crawled out of the car. I grabbed a clean rag and wiped us both down, cleaning up the mess from his stomach. My tongue helped a bit too, which made him shiver and complain that I was tickling him.

“Keep complaining and I really will tickle you,” I said, and that shut him up pretty quick.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jason open the front door to let the dogs out, stretching his arms as he shuffled out onto the porch. They trotted back into the trees, as they usually did to take care of their business. Soon, however, I could hear one of them messing around near the fence, snuffling and scratching.

“Sounds like Jojo is digging again,” Lucas said. Buckling my pants, I trudged around to the side of the garage to stop her. She had a bad habit of digging at the fence, and I didn’t want her slipping out of the yard.

But when I rounded the garage, she wasn't digging. She had something in her mouth — something wet and slimy — and she was trying to choke it down as quickly as she could.

“Hey, woah, spit that out...shit!” I locked my arm around her neck, squeezing her big jaws in an attempt to get her to give it up. She gave me a very guilty look but didn't let go. “Lucas! Damn it, I need some help!”

Lucas sprinted over to me, and as I held Jojo still, he managed to pry her jaws open. She spit out her prize, licking her chops with disappointment. The thing she'd spit out was red and smelled strange, dripping with some kind of greenish liquid.

“Is that a dead animal?” Lucas said. Bo was barking excitedly, unsure of what was going on but *very* sure he wanted to be part of it.

“Hey what's going on? Is that —” Jason stopped abruptly as he came around the garage, trying to figure out what we were staring at. “Is that a steak?”

Not just a steak. The thin cut of raw meat sat in a pool of neon green liquid, close to the base of the fence. The smell of it was acrid, like something chemical...

Like rat poison.

“Get the dogs inside,” I said. I thought I'd gotten to Jojo in time, but I had no idea if she'd managed to swallow anything before I reached her. “Jason, call the emergency vet. Tell them Jojo might have eaten rat poison.”

We spent the next half hour searching the property. We found more meat inside the fence, similarly poisoned. Jojo seemed okay, luckily, and hadn't actually swallowed any of it. But given a few more seconds, she wouldn't have been so fortunate.

“I checked the cameras,” Jason said, as Lucas and I came back inside. As he put Cherry's box on the coffee table, I leaned down to take a look at Jason's screen. He played back the video, pointing out the skinny figure barely visible outside our fence.

The time had been after 3 in the morning.

“Reagan,” I said grimly.

“Have you checked the older footage too?” I said, and Jason shook his head. His arms were tightly folded, his foot tapping rapidly on the rug. “I want to know how often he's been coming here. Document all of it.” I really hated what I was about to say, but I didn't think we had a choice

anymore. “We need to report this to the cops. Even if they don’t do shit. We need a paper trail to cover our asses.”

We needed to have evidence that we’d tried to solve this problem legally. Because in all likelihood, the resolution wouldn’t be legal at all.

38 - Jessica

I'd never been so excited despite not having a clue what was going on.

"You're going to vibrate right off your damn seat if you don't calm down," Lucas said, but I really couldn't help it. He and Manson were installing my new engine today, and I could barely contain my excitement to finally have the freedom of my own car again.

"Don't worry about it, Jess," Vincent said, calling down to me from the couch in the loft. "Lucas just isn't used to having such an audience while he works."

Lucas grumbled, turning away again as he tried to concentrate. It likely would be far less distracting for him if I stopped constantly peering over his shoulder, so I went up to the loft to join Jason and Vincent. Taking a seat between them on the couch, I grinned as they both planted a kiss on my cheek at the same time.

"How are you feeling about tomorrow?" Jason said. I had my review with my boss first thing in the morning, and I'd been trying to keep myself distracted to avoid stressing over it.

"I'm a nervous wreck," I said, wiping my sweating palms on my jeans. "It'll go well. I think. I mean, at least I hope it will."

"You'll be fine," Vincent said. "You're going to get that promotion, you're going to start making the big bucks" — he rubbed his hands with a grin — "and then you'll adopt us all as your sugar boys."

Jason snorted. "Sugar boys? Really?"

"Only if I get to make him wear a catboy costume," I said. "And if he doesn't get stuck in it because it's too small, it doesn't count."

"That can certainly be arranged," Vincent said, and Jason threw up his hands.

"Y'all are not going to make me into a catboy. Come on —"

"Hey, keep it down!" Lucas yelled. "All your weird cat talk is making Cherry uncomfortable!"

"If we're going to have a catboy and a pup in the same house, I'm going to need a primal play scene between you," Manson added, and burst out laughing at the look Lucas gave him. "Don't lie, you know you'd enjoy that."

Jason suddenly looked as if he'd be into it.

Luckily, the boys did an excellent job of keeping me distracted from my nerves. My lofty view was the perfect spot to watch as Manson and Lucas tore my car apart. Piece by piece, they removed anything connected to the engine and set the parts aside. Then they wheeled over what looked like a miniature crane, connecting a hook and chain to the top of the engine so it could be lifted out.

They took a break for lunch, and Vincent whipped up a delicious bacon mac and cheese. After being so on edge all morning, the rich meal made me drowsy, and I fell asleep on the couch without meaning to. When I was woken up a few hours later, it was by Manson caressing my cheek until I opened my eyes.

“It’s ready for you, angel,” he said as I yawned and rubbed my eyes back to wakefulness. “The new engine is in. It’s time for a test drive.”

Until I was sitting behind the wheel, flying down the highway with the wind whipping through my hair, I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed simply driving around. Once I was on the highway, I pushed the vehicle’s speed, unable to stop a wide smile from taking over my face.

“Yes! Finally!” I cried, slapping my palm against the wheel in my excitement. “God, it’s good to be driving again.”

Manson snickered at that. I took the next exit, pulling off the highway so I could make a U-turn and drive back in the opposite direction, back toward the house.

“I’ll admit it, though,” I said. “I’m going to miss you guys giving me rides everywhere.”

“We’ll still give you rides any time,” he said. “You just call, we’ll come. Personally, I’m not giving up on our daily coffee runs.”

Despite my excitement, a strange feeling of melancholy had set in. “So, this is the end of my debt, huh? I’m all paid off?”

While I was trying to watch the road, Manson was watching me. I didn’t think he’d taken his eyes off me even once since we’d gotten in the car. “You’ll get a receipt and everything. Will I have to go back to challenging you to dirty games to get you to fuck me?”

I laughed, reaching over and shoving his arm. “You know I’ll never turn down a challenge.” We were almost back to the house now, as I pulled off

the highway and drove down Route 15. “But you know we don’t need a game. Or a dare. Or a debt.”

“We’re really past all that, aren’t we?” he said as I pulled onto the dirt road back toward the house.

I stopped at the gate, grabbing his hand before he got out to open it. “Manson, I love you. I love all of you. We’re past the games. I don’t know yet how we’ll make it all work...For the future, I mean. I don’t know what to do when we all eventually move away from each other...”

A smile tugged at his mouth. “Move away from each other? Now, why the hell would we do that?”

I blinked at him rapidly. “Well...I mean...we’re moving, all of us. You guys have your plans, I have mine...”

It wasn’t that simple — God, at least I *hoped* it wasn’t. When Vincent mentioned going to New York that day in his old bedroom, I’d clung to that hope. I’d hidden it in my heart, not daring to bring it up. Who wanted to move to a whole new state for a girl anyway? Especially when I’d realistically only been tolerable to them for the last few weeks.

It was simply too good to be true. I tried to be an optimist, but some things were too far-fetched to believe.

Manson kissed my hand before he got out of the car, pushing open the gate and walking toward the garage as I drove into the yard.

But I brought the car to an abrupt halt when I noticed the boys, all standing inside the garage as they waited for me.

They were carrying bouquets. Their various choices in flowers were almost laughably different, but in the sweetest way I could have ever imagined. Lucas was holding two: a big bunch of red roses which he handed to Manson, while he kept the bouquet of blue cornflowers and pink wild roses. Jason held a bunch of daisies; Vincent held sunflowers.

It was impossible to move from my seat. Tears streamed down my cheeks, my breath shuddering as I tried to keep it together.

Vincent opened my door, offering me his hand. “Come here, baby. It’s okay. Don’t cry.” He wrapped his arms around me, but that made the tears worse. Damn it, I was making my face so puffy and red, but all I felt was joy. I wasn’t sure what was happening, only that seeing them all waiting for me had filled my heart to the brim.

When I lifted my head from his chest, they were all gathered around me. Jason smiled at me, cupping his hand around my neck as he kissed me.

“What is all this?” I sniffled as I stepped back from Vincent’s arms. “The flowers...”

“You paid off your invoice,” Lucas said, clearing his throat roughly. He was having a hard time looking at me, his eyes kept darting everywhere else as he shuffled his feet. “You don’t owe us anything, Jess. Not a damn thing. But we...we don’t want this to be it. Probably pretty damn obvious by this point, all things considered, but um...shit...” He rubbed his hand over the back of his head. “Someone a hell of a lot more eloquent than me better speak up.”

Vincent chuckled softly, and Manson stepped closer. “Jess, you know how we feel. We’ve all had the chance to talk to you as individuals, but not together.”

“We love you,” Jason said, causing my breath to catch again on a fresh sob.

“We’re honestly a little obsessed with you,” Vincent said.

“Little would be an understatement, Vince,” Jason added, giving me a wink that made me laugh through the tears.

“We want you to know exactly what this is,” Manson said. “No debt, no dare, no games. Just us, with you.”

“That’s all we want,” Lucas said. “And we know you’re moving, but we’re not worried about that. Hell, we figured we’d probably just move up that way too.”

It felt like a dream, probably because I *had* dreamed of this multiple times. It was all for real.

They loved me. They wanted to be with me, to move their entire lives to be close to me.

“You want to move to New York? All of you? Are you serious?” But it was clear just how serious they were. There was no doubt in their eyes, no hesitation. In disbelief, I shook my head. “How can you be so sure?”

“We’ve known you for years, Jess,” Vincent said. “We’ve seen it all. We’ve seen your worst, you’ve seen ours. We want the opportunity to show you the best of us.”

“We want you to be ours,” Manson said. “I lost you once, Jess. I can’t do it again. I can’t watch more years go by without you in my life, wondering where you are, if you’re happy, if you’re safe...I just can’t.”

Lucas cleared his throat again as he reached for me. He seemed unsure of where to touch; his fingers hovered over my lips before they brushed my

cheek.

“I don’t want you to leave,” he said, his voice barely loud enough to hear. “You’ve gone and gotten me attached to you, Jess. You’re stuck with me. With all of us.”

“We want to take you on a date,” Vincent said. “A proper date, a real one. We want to take you to Tris.”

“The club,” I said. Giddy excitement, fraught with nerves, trembled through my chest. Tris wasn’t only the nightclub Vincent worked in, it was also where he and Manson had learned to practice BDSM safely. It had been a haven for the four as they found community.

“We want to show you more of our world,” Jason said.

“We want more adventures,” Vincent said.

“More challenges,” Lucas added with a smirk.

“We want you,” Manson said. “To be part of us. Will you?”

It wasn’t necessary to consider my answer, but I paused for a moment anyway: to take a breath, to let it sink in that this was my reality. That everything, truly, had changed.

“Yes, I will,” I said. “Absolutely.”

39 - Vincent

We were all on pins and needles waiting to hear the results of Jess's work review. My confidence for her was sky-high; our girl was a force to be reckoned with, an artist, a verifiable badass. Hoping it would give her a little boost for the day, I texted her as much first thing in the morning. Her stomach was in knots, despite her recent efforts to hide how nervous she was about the review.

She was doubting herself, but I didn't want her to have a single doubt in the world. Everything she had done so far would pale compared to what she was capable of, and I wanted her to know that.

When I loved someone — and I loved her down to the very depths of my soul, if I had one — I wanted them to feel like they could take on anything. Like they could do anything, *be* anything. When my partners thrived, so did I. My optimism could grate on some people's nerves, but I would rather be known as annoyingly positive than risk dragging anyone down, especially those I cared about.

When Jess finally called my phone, about five minutes after noon, I shouted as loudly as I could. "Jess is calling! We've got an update, boys!"

It was lucky they were already in the house. They sprinted into the living room, and Manson stumbled through the doorway so quickly that he almost tripped himself on the carpet. They all gathered tightly around me as I answered the call and put it on speaker.

"Hey, baby," I said. "Tell me you've got good news for us."

"Is everyone there?" she said. Try as I might to discern any emotion in her voice, her true feelings eluded me.

"We're all here, angel," Manson said, his fingers tapping rapidly on the couch's backrest. Jason nervously chewed his lip; Lucas was frowning. Even the dogs could sense the tension: Bo and Jojo were sitting close by, ears and tails perked up. Cherry didn't have a thought in her head besides Lucas and playtime, so she was rolling around behind Jojo, trying in vain to catch the dog's tail.

"I got it!" Jess exclaimed. "I got the promotion! I start work in three months!"

Our cheering was so loud, it drowned her out. The dogs were barking, tails wagging. They didn't understand, but they were happy to be involved.

“We knew you’d get it,” I said. “Congratulations, Jess. It’s well fucking deserved.”

“I’m so proud of you,” Manson said. “You’ve worked so hard for this.”

“We’re all proud,” Jason said. “You’re going to do amazing, Jess.”

“New York City doesn’t know what it’s in for,” Lucas said, reaching down to grab Cherry off the ground before Jojo could step on her.

Jess’s joy was contagious. She sounded breathless with excitement, her smile permeating her every word.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you all. I used that drawing of your house as part of my portfolio. My boss was really impressed with it. She said...” She paused, and I could imagine the smile on her lips. “She said she could tell that a lot of love had gone into that project.”

My chest swelled every time she used that word.

“We’re giving you the full VIP experience at Tris to celebrate,” I said. I’d already discussed it with my boss; even on the off chance that Jess didn’t get the promotion, she still deserved the best night out we could give her. “This Saturday night, full bottle service. How does that sound?”

“I think she might be excited,” Manson said, when Jess’s enthusiastic scream of “yes, yes, yes!” came over the line.

Club Tris occupied a tall, narrow building, nestled between a pizza place and a record shop. The brick facade was painted black, and the windows were covered from the inside. The front door was slightly ajar, allowing a small glimpse of the stairway within, illuminated with red bulbs. Over the doorway was a neon sign in the shape of two entwined broken hearts, one pink and one purple.

People were lined up to the end of the block waiting to get in. My energy was high, my mood was fucking fantastic. It had been far too long since I’d come to Tris to have fun, rather than to work. This place was my old stomping ground; it had been *my spot*.

I’d been fresh on the scene the first time I snuck in here. Manson and I had waited in line for what felt like an eternity, clutching fake IDs, nervous as hell that we’d be found out.

We *had* been found out, but it took a while. It was enough time for us to mesh ourselves in the good graces of the club's workers and regular patrons. So instead of kicking us out permanently, we were banished for about six months only until we both turned twenty-one.

Jason and Lucas had never craved the club scene, unlike Manson and I. Jason had warmed up to it, but it had taken time and my insatiable insistence we go out often. Going out in public, especially as a couple, had been difficult for him at first. He'd always been afraid, looking over his shoulder, constantly on the defensive. But as he gained confidence in himself, he came to like the environment far more, which was perfect for me.

I loved showing him off. Had it been up to me, I would have paraded him around the place naked, crowing he was mine.

Now, walking up to Tris with Jason on one arm and Jess on the other, my ego had inflated to the size of Jupiter. It had me smirking like a damn fool to be escorting two such attractive people at the same time.

"Someone is going to think you're trying to start a fight," Lucas grumbled, tapping the back of my head as we walked down the crowded street. "Stop fucking smiling at everyone."

As usual, the sight of a crowd got Lucas's hackles up. Manson was walking arm in arm with him, grinning while the other man glowered.

"Most people won't start a fight over a smile," Manson said. Lucas flinched as a car drove by and backfired, and Manson said gently, "You're safe. Don't worry."

Easier said than done for Lucas. He hadn't left the house much since the incident at the sideshow. But he took a deep, measured breath. By the time he exhaled, some of the tension eased out of his back. He rolled his shoulders, and said, "Yeah. You're right."

Jess disentangled herself from my arm to go take his hand. He wore boots laced up to his knees tonight; the yellow laces were the only pop of color in his otherwise dark ensemble. Manson was in black, save for the silver chain he wore over his black button-up.

Walking beside them, Jess was almost glowing. She was made to be the center of attention: she was wearing silver heels that made her legs look extra long, and a tight black skirt that hugged her hips and ass. Her shirt was draped silver fabric, held around her neck and back with two slim chains. She wasn't wearing a bra either.

It only took a few minutes of her talking to Lucas before she distracted him. It was a relief to finally hear him laugh as Jess clung to him, drowning him in sweetness and affection. The finesse with which she could influence him was remarkable. There had been a time when I'd believed that only Manson could figure out how to make Lucas calm down; Jess had proven me wrong.

Leading our group past the line, I walked up to the bouncer and clasped his hand in greeting.

"How's it going, Robbie?" I said. "Good night so far?"

"You know it," the big man rumbled, attaching a yellow VIP wristband to my arm. He greeted the rest of us as he attached our bands, motioning us along toward the bag check ahead. When he got to Jess, he said, "Well, goddamn. You boys have been busy. How are you doing tonight, little mama?"

Jess beamed, holding out her wrist for her band. She kept a hold on Lucas's hand as Robbie let us through.

"Rachel and Mark are up in the lounge!" Robbie called up to us. "I'm sure they'd love to say hello while you're here!"

"We'll be looking for them!" Manson yelled back, giving him a thumbs-up.

We reached the landing at the top of the stairs, and paused there to figure out where we wanted to go. Jason was bobbing his head to the music, bouncing with the bass-heavy beat. The shirt he'd chosen was mesh, showing off his muscular physique and the rope I'd bound around his chest in an elaborate harness.

The need to crow about him was irresistible. Wrapping my arms around him from behind, I kissed the top of his head, and he tilted his chin up to look at me.

"You look so damn good," I said. His grin was wide, joyful and unbridled.

"So do you," he said, and I kissed him again, on the mouth this time. He tasted like the cider he'd drunk on the way here, mango and apple. Too sweet to resist, I swiped my tongue at the corner of his mouth for another taste.

"Let's try to get to the VIP booth before we rip each other's clothes off, yeah?" Manson said.

“Am I going to have to start calling you *Father* Manson instead of Daddy?” I said, and he rolled his eyes.

“Move it along, ya’ horny bastard,” he said, waving his arm to get me moving. “At least let me sit down before you give me a hard-on.” He took Jess’s hand, so she was walking between him and Lucas as we moved deeper into the club. “Stay close to us. You look too good to be out of my sight.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. Her tone was demure; her expression was anything but. “Although, if you wanted me to heel, you should have brought a leash.”

She batted her eyes at him and I swear I could see his intelligence leaking out his ears. Getting her into the privacy of a VIP booth was high on my priority list and was only getting higher with every passing second.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head, sweetheart,” Lucas said, clipping his teeth close to her ear as if to bite. “Manson always looks after his pets.”

Another short set of stairs led us onto the dance floor. A circular bar occupied the middle of the space, with a massive chandelier above it. The two upper floors looked down upon us, with people dancing and grinding along the railing. Beyond the bar, at the far side of the room, a sea of people danced in front of the DJ on stage. Like naughty Christmas decorations, golden cages stood on pedestals around the room, the dancers within wearing nothing more than thongs and jockstraps.

“This is incredible,” Jess said as she took it all in. There were VIP booths cordoned off along the walls, but the main lounge was upstairs. That was where we were headed after we’d gotten our beverages.

“Were you expecting a grimy basement?” I said. We stayed close to each other as we made our way through the crowd; the club was packed tonight, people pressing close on every side. “Water stains on the walls, concrete floors?”

“Bondage freaks always operate in basements,” Manson said. “Or red rooms.”

“You guys don’t even *have* a red room,” Jess said, sighing dramatically. “What kind of Dominants are you?”

“I would like a rainbow room, personally,” I said. “Red doesn’t work with my skin tone.”

“We don’t need a goddamn *room* to destroy you,” Lucas said as we reached the bar. “First round is on me.”

The bar was as packed as the dance floor. Although small, we had a good team of bartenders here. The three working tonight handled the rush without a problem, and although there was a short wait, one of them soon made her way toward us.

“You better be here to work, Vince,” she said as she came to rest her elbows on the bar in front of us. “I’m slammed, if you didn’t notice.”

“Hell no, I’m not working,” I said, leaning across the bar to bump my knuckles to hers. “It’s my night off, Keisha!”

“What kind of asshole spends his night off at work?” she said. “I guess I’m supposed to serve you and all your friends in the middle of a —” She abruptly stopped her taunting when her eyes fell on Jess. Her gaze lit up, and she quickly adjusted her bow tie. “Oh, well, excuse me. Didn’t realize you brought a lady this time. What are you getting, honey?”

“Cosmo, please,” Jess said. Keisha flipped the shaker between her hands as she prepared it, handing it over with a flourish. Such a show-off. Jess plucked her cherry out of the drink first, popping it into her mouth with a smile.

“What’s a girl like you doing with these weirdos?” Keisha said, rubbing orange rind around a glass for Manson’s Sazerac.

“They offered me a damn good deal to fix my car,” Jess said.

“Oh yeah? Let me guess, then they started offering you rides around town since your car was being worked on?” Keisha said.

Jess giggled. “Something like that. There have been a lot of...rides.”

“Short rides, long rides, hard rides...” Manson said.

“Rides in public...” Jason began, and Keisha put her hands up.

“Jesus, all right, I get it, you’re all a bunch of horndogs,” she said, laughing as she shook her head at us. She presented our line of drinks on the bar: the Sazerac for Manson, beer for Lucas, vodka with Redbull for Jason, and a Sex on the Beach for me. Keisha made a face as I took a long sip of the bright orange drink and smacked my lips contentedly.

“You can’t be a normal bartender and just get beer and a shot?” she said. “Mezcal on the rocks, maybe? Where’s your bar-hardened disdain for sugar, Vince?”

“Excuse me for liking things that actually taste good,” I said, poking my toothpick-speared strawberry garnish at her. “I haven’t managed to develop a taste yet for the liquid form of a burned tire.”

“All right, clear out,” Keisha said. “You’ll have me here talking all night and you’re holding up the line.”

We made our way toward the stairs that would take us up to the lounge. Tris wasn’t explicitly a kink club, but the influence the local BDSM community had here was obvious if you knew what to look for. Some people wore collars of leather, metal, or chain. Some were dressed in latex, others in leather. Handkerchiefs of various colors dangled from back pockets, signaling their desires.

We flashed our VIP bands to be allowed upstairs. Booths lined the area, and some already had their silky black privacy curtains drawn. Our own booth was further down, but I wanted to say hello to Rachel and Mark before we settled in. Leading the way to their usual booth, I poked my head around the corner and was unsurprised to find the two already in a compromising position.

Well, the *three* of them. Rachel and Mark loved to play with others. Rachel had her stilettos resting on a young man’s back as he served as her footrest. Mark was in the midst of pouring more wine for her, decked out in leather, as usual.

Rachel’s face lit up when she saw me. “Vincent! I didn’t know you were here tonight.” She was in her late forties, if I were to make a guess, but it was difficult to tell. She had a face that seemed both young and mature at the same time. Her long dark hair was loose, her voluptuous curves hugged in a form-fitting red dress. “All of you are here! What a pleasure. I feel like we haven’t seen you in ages.”

“We haven’t *been* here in ages,” Lucas said as she hugged him. She was a tall woman, made even taller by the platform stilettos she always wore. Her height was equal to my own when she stood up.

“Rachel, Mark, this is Jessica,” Manson said, stepping aside so Jess could say hello.

“Added a new one to the pack, have we?” she said. She shook Jess’s hand, giving her a long look up and down. Rachel’s eyes could tear you apart without her needing to say a single word, but Jess made her smile. “Beautiful. They’d better be treating you well.” She lowered her voice as if she was imparting a dark secret. “I did everything I could to train them to be gentlemen; I do hope it worked.”

The first time she spoke and found me lacking, I’d almost pissed my pants. She’d been the one to eventually figure out Manson and I were too

young to be sneaking in here, and she'd had to report us. But she still offered us her own time and company; she knew we were coming to Tris because we were interested in getting involved in BDSM, and she insisted on being our mentor.

"You must be a good teacher," Jess said. "Although, I haven't gotten them to do *that* yet." She looked over at the young man on the ground, who obediently kept his gaze focused on the floor.

Rachel's laugh was loud and boisterous, easily filling any space she was in. She snapped her fingers, and the man on the ground lifted his head. "Young man, get up. Go fetch another drink for Mark."

"Yes, Mistress." He disappeared so fast, I barely got a look at his face. I had to assume he was one of their regular playmates. Rachel and Mark were adventurous, but picky, and they didn't like playing with those who were inexperienced.

"We won't keep you too long," I said, shaking Mark's hand as he got up to greet us. "Just wanted to say hello and introduce you to the new victim."

"I prefer Lady Fucktoy, thank you," Jess said, a disapproving look on her face as she casually examined her nails.

Innocently putting up my hands, I said, "Sorry, sorry. I should have introduced you properly, *Lady Fucktoy*."

Jess proudly lifted her chin. "That's better."

"You've gotten yourselves a brat, I see," Rachel said, her red-painted claw tracing thoughtfully over her chin. "Perfect for the four of you."

"I keep them on their toes," Jess said. She owned her role so confidently now, and I loved to see the pride on her face. Before bringing her here, I'd wondered if being among such a large crowd in a public place would make her feel ashamed again. It was only normal, I wouldn't have blamed her. Fear of others' judgment could be stifling.

But she seemed more confident now than I'd ever seen her. She carried herself like royalty, carefully skirting the line between respect and cheekiness when she spoke to us. Personally, I did not enjoy unquestioning submission. We all liked a challenge, and Jess had found the sweet spot between perfect obedience and playful defiance.

"As you should," Mark said, and Rachel lightly smacked his arm.

"It's very naughty to encourage disobedience," she said, and although the man tried to appear contrite, it was all in fun. Rachel gripped his jaw to

kiss him, her sharp nails leaving red marks on his skin. “What do you think of Tris so far, Jessica? Is it your first time here?”

“It is,” Jess said. “I’ve been to a lot of clubs, but never one quite like this. I love it. It feels...it feels free.”

“We felt the same way when we first came here,” Mark said.

“When you’ve spent a long time trying to disguise who you are, that first place of freedom you find will always be special,” Rachel said. “The power of a community who supports you really can’t be underestimated. That’s why we make ourselves available as mentors.”

“Supporting the next generation of kinky folks keeps the community headed in the right direction,” Mark said. He chuckled as he patted Manson on the back. “I seem to remember this one waltzing in here not only lying about his age, but about his experience!”

Manson winced at the memory, a rare sheepish look on his face. “I spent a bit too much time ‘educating’ myself on BDSM fantasy blogs,” he explained to Jess. “I may have once told Mark a very extended lie about being an expert with a bullwhip.”

Jessica’s eyes widened, and she laughed when Rachel added, “We figured out his lie the moment I actually put a whip in his hands.”

Jessica, Rachel, and Manson went on chatting. Lucas had edged further into the booth and away from the people walking by. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and perhaps to most people, he looked slightly bored.

I knew him too well to be fooled by that. He was nervous being in public. The crowds, the sounds, the claustrophobia of being trapped inside with limited exits.

“Been a while since you went out?” Mark said, speaking to Lucas and snapping the man out of his distant expression.

“Yeah, I guess it has,” he said. He watched a group of people as they passed, eyes narrowed at their laughter. “Every time I’ve left the house lately has turned out to be a shitshow for me. Hard to get excited about going out when you have to wonder if you’ll end up fighting for your life.”

Mark nodded, his gaze downcast in understanding. “Too many of us have had to spend our lives living in fear. But that’s exactly what they want. The folks who claim to hate you, those who are willing to hurt you, they’d prefer that we all stay hidden away. When judging and shaming us doesn’t work, they’ll try violence. Then they’ll offer thoughts and prayers when people end up dead on account of their hate.”

Someone laughed too loudly behind him and Lucas flinched again. But this time, slowly, Jason grasped Lucas's arm and drew close to him, positioning his body between Lucas and the walkway. He didn't say anything; he didn't need to.

We protected our own. We had to.

"The world isn't a very friendly place," Lucas said. But his voice softened, some of the tension gone out of it. He stood a little taller when Jason touched him, as if he'd suddenly remembered who he was. "It's not so bad when you have the right people though. I just get caught up in my head sometimes."

It wasn't that simple, we all knew it. Finding that line between living with caution and living in fear seemed almost impossible sometimes. Lucas had plenty to fear. We all did.

We chatted for a few minutes longer, before we left Rachel and Mark to enjoy their night. As we left their booth, I put my arm around Lucas's shoulders, gave him a kiss on the cheek that made him groan at the affection, and said softly, "You're being really damn brave, you know."

He winced, looking at me as if in pain. "Don't start saying nice things to me, man. Come on, I'm...I don't..." He sighed. "Thank you."

Manson overheard us, because he looked over his shoulder and said, "Hey, be gentle with him. Being forced to listen to nice things about himself is a soft limit."

Jess fell into step alongside me, saying, "We're going to need to push that limit a bit more."

I was eager for Jess to get a look at our own VIP booth, so I grasped her hand as I led the way. Our booth was at the very end of the walkway, right above the DJ. A large sectional black couch occupied the majority of the space, with a low glass table in the middle. A bottle of champagne sat in an ice bucket on the table, alongside multiple glasses. The back wall and ceiling were mirrors, and the lights that dangled overhead were designed in long strips, like glowing streaks of rain.

Manson took a seat, spreading his legs comfortably. Lucas moved to sit beside him, but Manson stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"On your knees," he said, pointing to the floor between his legs. "Where pups belong."

The curtain surrounding our booth was still open, and anyone who passed could easily see inside. I flopped down comfortably on the couch,

stretching my arms as Jason sat beside me. Jess hesitated for a moment, torn between sitting at my side or joining Manson and Lucas.

Manson made the choice easy for her. “You too, angel. Get over here.”
Happy to watch the show, I sipped my drink and settled in.

40 - Jessica

The curtains were wide open for all to see as I knelt at Manson's feet like Lucas, although he couldn't keep still. He kept shifting around as if he was uncomfortable, clearing his throat, his gaze darting toward anyone who walked near our booth. Manson made us wait for nearly a minute, simply observing us in silence as he sipped his drink.

"You look nervous, pup," he finally said. Jason snickered, and Lucas whipped his head around to snap something in retaliation. Manson grabbed his face and jerked it back. "*I spoke to you. Not him. Keep your eyes where they belong.*"

Manson looked too pleased, his grin disconcertingly wide. If I were in Lucas's position, I would have been shaking. I was eager to behave. Something told me that Manson could put me over his knee in this club and no one would bat an eye. It was an idea that I dreaded as much as I craved.

"Angel, get Lucas's drink for him," Manson said. Remaining on my hands and knees, I turned and grabbed Lucas's beer off the table, then hurriedly brought the drink back to Manson.

He nodded his head toward Lucas, and said, "Give him a drink."

When Lucas looked over at me, his gaze smoldered with intensity. I brought the beer to his lips so he could drink, and some of the liquid dripped from the corner of his mouth. I licked up the drip, tracing my tongue up his throat and over his chin. His body rumbled with a growl, and I took in a mouthful of the beer myself before I kissed him.

The liquid passed between our lips, messy and dripping as our tongues twined. Manson slipped the beer glass out of my hand, and I wrapped my arms around Lucas's shoulders, scratching my nails up his spine. He groaned, grasping my waist as his hips thrust against me.

The hard bulge in his pants made me want to rip every item of clothing right off him.

With my eyes closed, I felt someone join us. Jason knelt behind Lucas, kissing his neck as I made out with him. Lucas's breathing deepened, and Jason's hand slipped between us, stroking Lucas's cock through his trousers.

Manson reached out and tangled his fingers in my hair, grasping the long locks tightly to pull me back from Lucas.

“What a good pet you are,” he said. He and Vincent shared a wicked look, then Manson ordered, “Kiss your Master’s boots, angel.”

My heart set off at a galloping pace. Bending down, I kissed them, whispering my thanks as I did. I wasn’t even sure if he could hear me, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was adoring the part of my Master I’d been allowed to touch, the place he ordained suitable for me.

When they gave me orders, it was like my mind reached another plane of existence; a different reality in which unwavering obedience was the ultimate pleasure. I *craved* pleasing them; I longed to hear more praise from Manson’s lips.

“That’s my good girl,” Manson said. “Sit up.”

I did so, in time to see Manson pour Lucas’s beer into his hand. He offered it, and Lucas drank from his palm as Manson brought his cupped hand to his lips, even sucking his fingers when it was gone. Lucas’s eyes were darkened, almost intoxicated — although he hadn’t drunk enough for that. He thrust against Jason’s hand, reaching back and pulling the other man’s head down to his neck in an obvious demand. Jason obliged, his mouth teasing over Lucas’s throat, biting hard enough to leave reddened marks on his skin.

“It’s your turn, pup,” Manson said, stroking his hand affectionately over Lucas’s head. “Kiss your Master’s boots.”

“With the fucking curtain open?” Lucas looked like he regretted the words the moment he said them, closing his mouth so fast that his teeth snapped together.

Jason laughed softly, whispering, “Oh, you’re going to get it now. He’ll crush you for that.”

Manson was in his element. He didn’t remove his hand from Lucas’s head, but he turned his attention to Jason, leaning down so he could look him directly in the eyes as he said, “If you’re not careful, I’ll crush you too, on principle.”

Vincent rose from his seat and tugged Jason’s head back, gripping his hair tightly enough to make him wince. “Are you causing trouble?” he said. His tone was deceptively upbeat, as if he’d caught Jason in a childish prank. “How the hell do you expect to get through the night if you’re pushing to get punished already?”

He patted Jason’s cheek sharply, hard enough to sting. Jason smiled at him lazily, leaning into his hand as he said, “Perhaps you should distract

me, then.”

Jason’s blue eyes shot straight to me. I looked up at Manson, batting my lashes at him, hoping he’d give me permission.

“All right, angel, go on,” Manson said, after letting me squirm for a few moments. “Keep the brats occupied, Vince. Lucas and I need some alone time.”

Vincent nodded, leaning down to give Jason a kiss on his forehead before he slapped his cheek again. “Behave,” he said, but Jason’s expression was far from compliant. He got to his feet when Vince let him go, and immediately offered his hand to me.

“Want to dance with us?” he said, and I nodded excitedly, accepting his hand as he helped me up.

Vincent swiftly drained the last of his drink before seizing me around the waist, planting a kiss on my neck. “Then we’ll go dance, baby.”

Jason held tight to my hand and took Vincent’s in the other as he led us from the booth. We made our way to the railing overlooking the DJ below, the dance floor an undulating mass of bodies moving and grinding. The music reverberated through my chest as I moved to the beat. Vincent was close behind me, and I pressed my ass against him as I swayed my hips. Jason leaned against the railing but he wasn’t watching the crowd below; he was watching us, sipping his drink with a smile on his lips.

I lifted my arms and reached back, trailing my fingers along Vincent’s neck as I swayed.

“Damn, you can actually move,” I said.

He chuckled in my ear, sending a shiver up my back as his hands moved over me. “I spend every weekend in a club. Of course I can dance.”

His cock was hardening as I danced on him. I reached for Jason, drawing him close, caressing my nails over his chest. He kissed me as the beat dropped, the crowd going wild as bass pounded from the speakers. He tasted sweet, energy drink and liquor tingling over my tongue.

Vincent’s fingers dipped dangerously low and slipped under my skirt. My breath hitched as he rubbed over my panties, encouraging my arousal as he massaged my swollen clit.

“How does that feel, princess?” Jason said, grinning as he glanced down. “Fuck, I’d love to see you get off on his fingers.”

My body craved the same thing. When I swayed my ass against Vince, I also pressed down on his hand, grinding on him. He pushed my panties to

the side, and I groaned as two fingers pumped into me.

“So wet for us already?” he murmured, fingers moving inside me. “Does being in public turn you on?”

It did. Every time I caught the eye of someone moving past us, it made me hotter. People at this club wouldn't be shocked or offended by sexual activity — I was sure I spotted a couple in the corner of the dancefloor who were actually fucking. Glancing back toward our booth, I clenched on Vincent's fingers when I saw Lucas with his head resting on Manson's lap, the two of them watching us together.

Manson was slowly stroking his fingers over Lucas's head, gentle and soothing. Everything in his posture exuded his control, and Lucas's eyes were half-lidded, his body finally relaxed as he watched me dance.

Showing off had always come naturally; I loved that they were watching, I adored getting to put on a show to wind them up.

Vincent drew his hand out from under my skirt, his fingers slick with my arousal, and brought them to Jason's lips. Heat flooded me as Jason took Vincent's fingers in his mouth, sucking them slowly. He stroked his tongue between them, opening his mouth as if to show off what he could do. Vincent's chest swelled as he sucked in a sharp breath, and he hooked his fingers around Jason's jaw to pull him closer. They kissed over my shoulder as Vincent's hand nudged under my skirt again.

“Oh...fuck...” I leaned my head back as Vince fingered me. I was engulfed in the heat between them, my breath coming deep and heavy, nearly overwhelmed by my growing pleasure. There were so many sensations: the flashing lights, the pounding music that throbbed in my chest, the goosebumps they ignited on my skin as they touched me. Jason brought his drink to my mouth and tipped it back, condensation from the cold glass dripping onto my chest.

“I think she's going to come for us,” Vincent said, as I clenched on his fingers again. Jason tweaked my nipple piercings through my shirt until I moaned, my rhythm shuddering as their touches brought me higher.

“It'll be the first orgasm of many,” Jason said, bringing his mouth close to my ear. “I want to see you shake, princess.”

Fuck, I was going to lose control. A woman walked by and caught my eye as she did; her gaze darted downward and came back up with a smile. She knew what was happening.

“You like when people watch, don’t you?” Vincent chuckled. “Dirty little slut. We need to get an audience for you, don’t we, baby? How would you like a few dozen people telling you how damn sexy you look when you come?”

His filthy words brought my ecstasy to its peak. My lips parted breathlessly, struggling not to make too much noise as I shuddered through the bliss, losing myself in the moment.

It was significantly harder to walk in my heels after I’d orgasmed. Jason and Vincent had to support my trembling legs as they led me back to the booth. Lucas was still seated on the floor, sipping a fresh glass of beer with his arm resting on Manson’s legs. Manson had a subtle smile on his face, sprawled on his seat like he owned the place.

He clapped slowly as we entered. “Bravo. What a show. Did you enjoy yourself, angel?”

Sauntering over to him, I stepped over Lucas to straddle Manson’s lap. He hummed with pleasure as I kissed him, grinding on him. When I lifted my ass up, someone’s hands teased over my thighs.

“God, you’re dripping,” Lucas said, his voice rough with desire. “I think we’re going to need some privacy.”

Jason pulled the black curtain closed, enclosing us in the booth. The bottle of champagne gave a loud pop as Vincent opened it, a rush of bubbles spilling out the top and running over his fingers. As he poured for us, Manson took hold of my jaw and pulled my attention back to him.

“Strip for us,” he said. “Take all of it off.”

With a smirk, I got off his lap and stood in front of him. Lucas remained on the floor, and Jason sat beside Manson, his eyes preternaturally bright in the moody lighting. I unhooked the chains holding my top on and let the silky fabric fall to the floor. I was wearing nothing beneath it, not even pasties. Lucas’s eyes were wide with rapt attention, and Manson watched me with his thumbnail between his teeth. He audibly bit down when I turned around, slowly sliding down my skirt.

Vincent still had the champagne bottle in his hands. As I kicked my skirt away and stood there in only my heels and a skimpy thong, he turned me around again so I was facing the others, and brought the bottle to my lips.

It was tart and slightly sweet, cold and sparkling. The buzz from the alcohol was just enough to have me feeling warm and relaxed — but still

aching with the desire for more.

Manson got up, coming over to trace his fingers over my body, following every curve. Vincent lowered the bottle slightly and tipped it again. Cold champagne trickled down my breasts and Manson licked it up, his tongue flicking over my nipple before he closed his mouth over me.

Shivering, I groaned at the warm suction. He swirled his tongue around my nipple, teasing the jeweled bar pierced through it before he lifted his head.

“On your knees,” Vincent said, and I was happy to oblige.

Jason and Lucas stepped closer as I sank to my knees between the four. It reminded me of that Halloween night — it felt so long ago now — when we’d all first dared to step over the line. But knowing them like I did now, *loving* them like I did, made this feel even more intense.

Lucas took a sip of his champagne, but he didn’t swallow. He leaned over me, and Jason pulled my head back, saying sweetly, “Open up for him, princess.”

Heat raced through me as Lucas spat the champagne into my open mouth. It tingled over my tongue and dripped past my lips, running down my chin. Jason licked where it spilled, kissing me messily as Lucas poured a little more champagne from his glass over my tits.

“Fuck, that’s sexy,” Manson murmured, his eyes devouring me. I wanted to shatter his nearly-perfect self-control. I wanted him to burst under the pressure and take me hard, take me mercilessly.

It was only a matter of time.

“Please...” I groaned as Lucas joined Jason in consuming me. Their greedy mouths were exquisite, their teeth left sharp marks of pain all over me. Lucas shoved me forward onto my hands and knees, gripping my ass before he gave it a sharp smack. Jason kissed me deeply, holding my face as Lucas pumped his fingers into me.

“Do you have a condom?” Lucas said, and Vincent answered in the affirmative. “Get it on here.”

It was impossible to see what they were doing, distracted by Jason’s kisses. Manson paced around us as he watched, his steps slow, the ice in his glass clinking as he swirled the liquid. After making a full circle around us, he resumed his seat on the couch: legs spread, one arm resting casually on the backrest.

“Crawl up there, baby,” Vincent said, as Jason stood and Lucas withdrew his fingers. I was shaking with stimulation as I crawled, climbing up to straddle Manson’s lap again. He cupped his hand around the nape of my neck, drawing me close.

“You’re perfect,” Manson whispered. “My beautiful little freak, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Master.” He tasted like whiskey when I kissed him, subtle spice and heat on his lips.

The couch lurched as Lucas sat down heavily beside Manson. He wasn’t holding the champagne bottle anymore; instead, he was gripping Jason’s hair with both hands, thrusting into his mouth. Jason choked when Lucas hit the back of his throat but kept his head down, his eyes lifted to watch the other man’s face. Lucas was breathing deeply, and he reached over to caress his hand down my back and over the curve of my ass.

“Make her ride it, Vince,” he said, and Manson smiled.

“Are you going to be good?” he said, keeping his hand firmly planted on my neck. I couldn’t look back to see what Vincent was doing, but *something* nudged against my pussy. The smooth feeling of the condom was recognizable, but the item it cloaked wasn’t. But I nodded, because I wanted every filthy experience they could give me. I wanted *more*.

“I’m going to put the bottle inside you, baby,” Vincent said. The item he was rubbing against me — the champagne bottle — pressed inside. It was safely sheathed in the condom but the unusual shape and hardness of it still made me shiver.

As Vincent slowly pressed it deeper, Lucas brought his finger to my lips and said, “Suck.” After I’d gotten the digit wet in my mouth, he probed it into my ass. I shuddered at the intrusion, but quickly relaxed into it. Manson set aside his drink and gripped my arms, moving them behind my back and holding my wrists captive.

“Ride it,” he said. “I want to see you make yourself come on that bottle.”

Bouncing my hips up and down, I impaled myself on the champagne bottle as Vincent held it in place. Manson was so hard, and yet he didn’t touch himself as he held me, watching intently. Every now and then, his hips would move, searching for stimulation, betraying his desires. Lucas pumped his finger into my ass, giving a loud groan as Jason’s tongue swirled around the head of his cock.

“Fuck yeah, take it,” Lucas said, as he shoved Jason’s head down, fucking his mouth mercilessly. Jason gripped his thighs, black-painted nails dragging over Lucas’s skin. His eyes were watering slightly with the effort, the muscles in his arms taut. Lucas pulled his head up suddenly and Jason gasped for breath. “Start stroking. Make me come all over your face.”

“Oh fuck, baby,” Vincent said, chuckling softly when I moved faster. The bottleneck wasn’t as thick as any of them were, but it felt so deliciously dirty to get my pleasure from it anyway. Lucas fingered my ass as Jason stroked him, teasing his tongue around Lucas’s head and toying with his piercing.

When Lucas came, grunting harshly as his cum spurt over Jason’s face, I came too. Everything faded away, save for the ecstasy melting through my body.

“That’s it,” Manson said, releasing my arms so I could brace myself against his chest. “Come for us, let’s hear you...” He pulled up my head, forcing me to look at him as the waves of pleasure rolled over me.

“Thank you, Master,” I whimpered, my eyes almost rolling back in my head. “Thank you...for letting me come...”

Manson took out his cock, guiding me onto it as Vincent set the champagne bottle aside. He moved us into the corner of the couch, allowing enough room for Vincent to get onto the couch behind me. Vince pulled back my hair as I sunk down on Manson, holding it out of my face and leaving featherlight kisses below my ear.

With his face still covered in Lucas’s cum, Jason crawled up beside me. Lucas was stroking him, and he visibly shuddered as I drew him closer, lapping up a pearlescent drop from his cheek.

“God, you’re filthy,” he said.

Breathlessly, with a little laugh, I said, “So are you.”

But that laugh dissolved into a helpless cry as Vincent’s cock pressed against my pussy, squeezing against Manson.

“Remember your safeword, angel,” Manson said, a shiver of pleasure going over his face as Vincent slid even deeper inside me. It was so impossibly *tight*. My muscles were relaxed from two consecutive orgasms, but the stretch still wasn’t easy to take.

“I remember,” I said softly. Taking slow deep breaths, I focused on keeping my muscles relaxed. Experimentally, I shifted myself back and

forth, taking Vincent a little deeper each time. He let me move at my own pace.

Jason whimpered as Lucas held him tightly, rapidly stroking his cock. I watched them, enraptured, as Lucas brought his mouth close to Jason's ear and snarled, "Watch them fuck her. You're not allowed to come until they both do."

"Can't...I can't...fuck..." Jason couldn't string a sentence together. He looked at me, and whatever he saw in my expression seemed to shake him to his very soul. Vincent pushed even deeper and fully settled inside me, him and Manson filling me to my limit. When I cried out, Jason squeezed his eyes shut in a last-ditch effort at self-control.

"Who can't fucking last now?" Lucas taunted, and Jason cringed against him as he came, semen ribboning over Lucas's hand.

Whatever punishment Lucas decided to mete out for Jason's failure to obey, I didn't see it. Manson and Vincent moved in unison, both thrusting into me at once. The tightness, the stretch, the fucking *bliss* made my brain short-circuit.

"How does that feel, baby?" Vincent said, his words punctuated by another thrust into me. My answer was another cry, broken and shaking.

"Harder," was what I finally gasped. "No mercy..."

"No mercy?" Manson dragged my face down to his, covering my mouth with his palm as he gripped me. "Do you want it to hurt?" He grinned at my nod, and I felt the difference almost at once; how their pace changed, how much harder they pumped into me. "Do you want to be used like the dirty little slut that you are?"

"Yes, yes, yes, please!" My words were muffled against his hand, my insides pulsing and clenching around the massive girth of them.

"Shhh, take it quietly," Manson said gently, adjusting his hand so it covered my mouth more tightly. Vincent inhaled sharply, leaning heavily against my back as he pounded into me.

"We're going to fill you up," he said. "And you're going to be dripping our cum all the way back to the hotel."

His promise shattered me in the most exquisite way. My body was beyond my control, overtaken. They had stuffed me so tight that when their cocks pulsed as they came, I could feel every throb. The sensation of being filled so tight and claimed so roughly was even better than my fantasies.

41 - Lucas

We left the club on shaking legs, our heads so lost in the afterglow we looked far drunker than we actually were. Vincent led the way back to the hotel, his arm slung around Jason's shoulders as the two scream-sang Rob Zombie at the top of their lungs. Manson was carrying Jess on his back as he walked beside me, and I had her heels dangling from my hand.

"I need a very hot shower," she said, her head resting tiredly against Manson's shoulder. "I'm so sticky."

We all were. Sweat, champagne, and cum had left us all a mess, even after cleaning ourselves up before we left the booth.

We'd splurged on the hotel since it was only for one night. It was a couple blocks from the club, and the large marble-floored lobby was almost entirely empty as we walked in. Our room was on the top floor, with a stunning view of the city skyline. Vincent and Jess took immediate offense at the sight of the two separate beds, and immediately set to work rearranging furniture so they could push the beds together.

"You two are going to get us kicked out," Manson said. "Most hotel rooms just don't have big enough beds for five people."

"Unacceptable," Vincent said, determinedly bracing himself against the wall as he tried to move the bed even an inch. Jess was attempting to drag the set of drawers between the beds out of the way, and she wasn't having any success either.

"You're both terrible at this," I said. I grabbed Jess around the waist, picking her up off the ground. "Someone pick up Vincent and get him in the shower."

"Then we can fight about which bed Jess sleeps in," Jason said, but I shook my head as I hauled Jess into the bathroom.

"She's sleeping with me, boys, that's that," I said, turning on the shower with one hand while I kept the other arm looped around Jess. She wasn't making any attempts to escape; it was the opposite. She had her arms around me, kissing my neck, touching me greedily. "Whoever manages to squeeze into bed with us is up to y'all to figure out."

They followed me into the bathroom, which was sizeable enough for all of us but only barely. But we were used to things being crowded. Whipping

off my shirt, I was about to help Jess out of her clothes when Manson came up to me, caught me by the throat, and pinned me to the wall.

“She’s sleeping with me,” he said, in a tone that allowed no room for argument. I swear we were the same damn height, but he made himself seem taller. “If you behave, you’ll be allowed to join us.”

Behave. Fucking hell. He knew exactly the right words, the little tricks of humiliation and control that would crush my pride in just the right way. He’d already spent significant time that night turning my brain to mush: making me kneel for him where *everyone* could see had squeezed my stomach into knots. He was the only person I allowed to push my limits like that, but I trusted him to do it.

He’d gotten me addicted to submission. I fucking *craved* the things he could do.

“I’ll behave,” I said. It felt ridiculously good when he hummed with satisfaction, kissing me tenderly before he let me go. He peeled his shirt off as he stepped back, and Vincent and Jason had stripped down. For a moment, I leaned there against the wall with Jess still tucked under my arm, watching them.

I was half-hard again already. Although I doubted I’d come again so soon, that didn’t matter. The smell of sweat, sex, and alcohol on their skin made me eager; it tapped into some primal animal drive to just *fuck*.

As if our minds were operating on the same wavelength, Jess sighed as she said, “God, you’re all so sexy, it really isn’t fair.”

“Not fair, hm?” I switched our positions, pressing her to the wall as I unhooked the chains holding her shirt in place. “I think what’s not fair is that I didn’t get to drench you in my cum tonight.” After pulling down her skirt, I knelt at her feet and grabbed her underwear in my teeth, dragging them off her too.

“Look how messy she is,” Jason said, crouching beside me. The stickiness on her legs was obvious; her tiny thong soaked. We probed her simultaneously as she leaned heavily against the wall, our fingers slick as they sunk into her heat. Her eyes fluttered closed, whimpers of pleasure panting out of her.

“Hold her open for me,” I said, and Jason knew what to do. He stood up, positioned Jess in front of him and lifted her leg, hooking his arm beneath her knee to hold it up as she leaned against him for balance. The

position spread her open before me, her pussy glistening with her own arousal and the cum pumped into her.

The sight of her made me salivate. The way she looked down at me — wide-eyed, vulnerable, full of longing — had my dick standing rigidly at attention as I closed my mouth over her. She groaned deeply, bucking her hips against my mouth. She was so juicy, deliciously wet; I could have eaten her for hours.

But the shower was still running, and I wasn't sure if fancy hotels ran out of hot water, but I didn't want to find out.

Getting to my feet, I gave her dazed face a little shake before I said, "Get in the shower. I'll join you after I take a piss."

Probably should have pissed before I got hard again, but fuck, I didn't plan my erections. Lifting the toilet seat as they all piled into the shower, I tried to focus on my aim when Jess's voice brought the whole process grinding to a halt.

"Wait, Lucas, please..."

It dragged my attention back to her immediately. She was standing in the open shower door, looking at me.

"I want it," she whispered, the words barely able to be heard. But it made us all pause, watching her. Her face turned bright, blazing red as she bit her lip, struggling to get the words out. "Please...I...don't waste it..."

Holy shit. She couldn't mean...no...no way. She had filthy desires, but *this*...she couldn't mean it. She was drunker than I thought she was.

Jason, smiling slyly, said, "I think you're going to have to be a bit clearer, Jess. What exactly do you want?"

She glared at him, as if he was asking for far too much. But then Vincent joined in, saying, "I don't think he understands, baby, you're going to have to be more explicit."

Jess looked like she wanted to crawl underground. My need to piss was now overshadowed by the desire to hear her confirm what she was asking for.

"Ugh, I don't..." She folded her arms, looking between the four of us. As if hoping one of us would interpret for her, so she wouldn't have to actually say it. "You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't, sweetheart," I said. "Explain yourself."

"Go on, Jess," Manson said. "Tell him what you want. Communication is important, remember?"

“I want...um...shit...” It was frankly adorable how red she was. Out of all the things we’d done, I liked knowing there were still things that could make her blush.

No matter how much it made her cringe, no matter how embarrassing, I wanted to hear her say it.

“What do you want?” I said. I was smiling like a madman but I couldn’t help it: seeing her struggle like this, trying desperately to hide her embarrassment, gave me such a rush.

“I want...” Jess paused, licked her lips, and took another deep breath before saying the words that made my heart pound. “I want you to piss on me.”

“Dirty girl,” Vincent said, as Manson muttered “Holy shit” under his breath.

“Look at me,” I said, and she gulped as she lifted her eyes. They were wide, her pupils full and dark with lust. I watched her expression, her movement, her awareness — searching for any indication she wasn’t mentally present enough to make this decision. But all I saw in her was embarrassment and desire, inextricably tangled. “Is that really what you want, Jess? Do you want me to put you down on your knees and piss on you?”

Even her chest was red from the heat of her blush as she nodded. “Yes, please...I...I’m yours. You should claim your property.”

“Fucking hell,” Jason groaned. At least I wasn’t the only one with a hard-on; Jess’s request had hit a sweet spot for all of us. “Do it, Lucas. Make our girl filthy.”

Feeling as if I was moving in a dream, I stepped into the shower. The steam was thick, the air was heavy. Having so many naked bodies around me at once, slick skin rubbing against mine, all watching me, was frankly a little intimidating. I wasn’t used to being the center of attention.

Jess shivered when her knees hit the tile. She waited, face upturned, her eyes darting to my cock again and again in nervous anticipation. It would be a challenge to go; I was so damn hard. No amount of mental math problems could change the fact that I had the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen on her knees for me, waiting to be covered in my piss because she *asked* for it.

“Look at me,” I said, my voice thick. She lifted her eyes, locking onto my own. “Tell me what you want.”

“Piss on me, sir,” she said. She was confident this time; any hesitation had vanished. “Put me in my place.”

Damn, if she thought her place was on her knees at my feet, I was a lucky man.

For a split second, I worried that I couldn’t do it. Subconscious instinct demanded I stop, my domestic brain screaming at me that this was vile, filthy, *wrong*. Everyone’s eyes on me added an extra layer of difficulty. But Manson was stroking himself already, and they all looked so damn eager to see me do it. And Jess — this beautiful, wild, insatiable woman — was looking at me like she was waiting for a gift, pleading with her eyes.

The way she gasped when the stream hit her chest was possibly one of the sexiest things I’d ever seen. The jewels on her bare tits caught the light as the golden liquid trickled over her, her entire body shaking as I got closer. I gripped her hair and pulled her head back, so I could watch her face as I pissed all over her.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. The smell was intoxicating; it was arousing on a deep, dark, primal level. Even though the shower washed it right away, it still felt like I was leaving a permanent mark on her.

“Fuck, that’s a beautiful sight,” Vincent said, his arms around Jason as they watched me. Manson groaned softly; he was stroking himself hard and fast, shuddering. If I’d been able to, I would have kept going.

Jess smiled at me when I stopped, with my hand still knotted in her hair. “God, I love you,” she said, and it unraveled me.

The hot water streamed over both of us as I sank to my knees to kiss her. Hearing those words still punched me straight in the heart; they latched on to me and made my brain flip upside-down.

She loved me. Every single person I was surrounded by *loved* me. Until I’d met Manson, I hadn’t thought anything like this was remotely possible. Having a family, a home, falling in love — they were nice things for other people, not for me.

“I love you, too,” I said, even though the words still felt terrifying to say. But it made her entire face light up. I turned her, urging her toward Manson. “Give him your mouth, sweetheart.”

She opened, sliding her lips over him, and pushed his hand away so she could circle her thumb and forefinger around his shaft. She stroked him with her fingers as she bobbed her head up and down, humming and slurping with enthusiasm.

He cradled her head in his hands, grunting harshly as he fucked her throat. I reached between her legs, massaging her clit as she got him off.

“Such a good girl,” Jason said, and she shivered at the praise.

Manson came into her mouth with a strangled curse. He let her go but remained leaning against the wall, his eyes far-off and dazed. Vincent got down beside me, kissing Jess as I brought her to another trembling orgasm. She cried out against his mouth when the euphoria overtook her, and he praised her through it, whispering words of affection, words of love.

The rest of that shower was as hazy in my memory as the steam that surrounded us. None of us had any energy left. By the time we stumbled out of the bathroom, I barely even managed to grab a towel before I dragged Jess into bed. The last thing I was aware of was Manson wrapping his arms around me from behind and feeling Jason’s fingers come to rest on my hand. Vincent laughed, saying something about “lying on top of us.”

But I didn’t care how crowded that damn bed was. We all got into it somehow, and I couldn’t move an inch, but I still slept like the dead.

42 - Jessica

For the first time since I'd moved back home, Mom didn't give me a hard time about spending the weekend away. She barely acknowledged that I'd been gone. There was no drug test waiting for me, no surprise date arrangement, and best of all, no arguments. No shouting.

Overall, the house was more peaceful than it had been in weeks.

Work was already loading more tasks onto my plate. But since I was moving to full-time, I had additional training I needed to complete on top of my usual duties. I wouldn't be merely answering emails and handling spreadsheets in a few months, and I almost cheered when my boss told me that the person who would take over my part-time position had been hired. The prospect of finally putting my degree to good use had me dancing around the house, humming little tunes as I went about my chores.

It was easy to forget the issues that still lingered. Reagan, Alex, Nate — I was so focused on the future I put them out of my mind. I was too busy daydreaming about apartments, about all the mischief the boys and I could get up to in the city. It would be a fresh start for all of us, the beginning of something so much bigger than I'd ever expected.

Julia invited me to go for a hike midway through the week, and I jumped at the chance to get out of the house after work. The weather was pleasantly cool as we set out, a mass of pale gray clouds blotting out the sun. Only a few minutes after getting on the trail, Julia slowed her pace and kept lingering a few steps behind me.

"Am I walking too fast?" I said, turning to walk backward as I looked at her.

She grinned and said, "Nah, I'm just trying to get a look at your ass in those leggings. Damn girl, that *cake*."

Looping my arm through hers, I dragged her along to walk beside me. "God, you're as bad as the boys."

"I'm worse," she said, and we both laughed.

She was thrilled about my promotion, although after a few minutes of excitement, her mood suddenly sobered.

"This means you're leaving," she said. "I mean, I knew it was coming, but damn. We only just started hanging out."

“New York isn’t *too* far away,” I said, although the words weren’t very comforting. It would be a relief to leave Wickeston, but I did regret the distance it would put between Julia and I. She was a good friend, despite only knowing me for a couple months, and that was hard to come by. “I’ll be coming to visit as often as I can. And you can come visit me too!”

That got her to smile again. “I am so down for a sleepover. Have you found a place yet?”

“Not yet,” I said. “The boss gave me three months to get everything settled, which is probably going to go by way faster than I think it is. I’ve been browsing apartments in the city online. Rent prices are killer though. I may have to choose something a little more rural and commute.”

“Girl, yes, go for someplace bigger and cheaper!” she said. “Besides, you want to have a little extra room for the boys, right? What’s their plan anyway? How did they take the news?”

It was difficult to talk about without getting emotional, and I refused to cry in the middle of a hike. I’d never been the type to cry over a man, but these men got to me in a way no one else could.

“They’re moving too,” I said. “To New York.”

Her shriek of excitement startled nearby birds out of their roost. “Oh my God, yes! Finally! I’m so happy for all of you!” She grinned proudly, a little strut coming into her step. “I knew you’d all fall for each other, I just *knew* it.”

The trail curved, looping back toward the trailhead and the parking lot. We’d been walking for a while, although it felt like only minutes. Two people were hiking up the trail toward us, but I paid little attention to them at first. It was only as they got closer, and their faces became clearer, that I realized who they were.

“Oh no,” I said softly, and Julia was immediately on alert, narrowing her eyes at the men approaching us.

“Is that Nate Calkin?” she said, her steps slowing.

“And Alex McAllister,” I said. “Do you know them?”

Their path wasn’t aimed to walk past us; they were walking *at* us. Although we slowed down, the gap between us was swiftly closing. Alarm bells were clanging in my head, tension making my palms sweat.

Whatever they wanted, it couldn’t be good.

“Nate and I were in the same grade,” she said. “We had classes together.” She clutched her arm a little tighter on mine. “He was always a

dick. Do you have pepper spray on you?”

“Always,” I said, reaching for the fanny pack strapped around my waist.

Alex and Nate stopped directly in front of us, blocking our path. Determined to keep walking, I tightly clutched Julia’s arm and stepped around them, keeping my eyes straight ahead. But Alex put out his arm, blocking me yet again, and my heart pounded.

“Where are y’all going in such a hurry?” Alex said. Nate had his arms folded, standing there like a human wall in our path.

“None of your business,” I snapped, again trying to sidestep him. I had one hand in a vice grip on Julia’s arm, the other one clutching my pepper spray. Neither of them had seen it as I kept it close to my side.

This time, instead of blocking my path, Alex shoved me back. I stumbled, and Julia prevented me from falling. The moment I was steady on my feet, she lunged at him.

“Fuck off!” she shouted, shoving her hands hard against his chest. It barely moved him. “Get away from us before we call 911.”

We didn’t have cell service out here; she knew it, I knew it. To judge by the nasty smile on Alex’s face, he knew it too.

“Hey, hey, we just want to talk,” Alex said, although his tone was anything but innocent. It wasn’t merely chance that brought them out here; they’d followed us. They’d waited until we were alone, far from anyone who could help us.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” I hissed. I held up the pepper spray, my finger poised on the trigger, and Alex’s face grew darker. “Get the hell away from us.”

Alex bared his teeth, fury finally showing through his faux calm exterior. “You have a lot of nerve, you little bitch. How many damn times did you think your boyfriends could fuck up our shit without any consequences? Bent almost ran Nate off the fucking road.”

“You and Nate came after Lucas first,” I said fiercely. “Have you two lost your minds? You could have *killed* us. Just fucking drop this. Leave them alone, leave *us* alone!”

Julia was close behind me, and I hadn’t lowered my pepper spray an inch. Nate still hadn’t said a word, his silence eerie. The way he was looking at me was cold, bleaker than the gray sky. Julia made a soft sound — a curse or a breath, I wasn’t sure.

“If they want to break what belongs to me,” Alex said. “Then I get to break something that belongs to them.”

Nate suddenly stepped toward me, and I aimed the pepper spray right at his face, but Alex grabbed me. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I blasted the spray. One of them yelled furiously, but Alex kept his grip on me, holding on so tight that his fingers dug painfully into my bicep. When he tried to wrap his arm around me to keep me still, I bit down as hard as I could.

My satisfaction at hearing him scream in pain was short-lived. He shoved me to the ground, and the gravel scraped my knees and my arm as I fell. Something twisted sharply in my ankle, pain shooting through me like a spark.

Julia caught my arm, dragging me to my feet. I tried to run with her, but God, that pain in my ankle was so bad, it was like a needle jamming into my joint.

How I made it back to the car, I had no idea. My mind and body felt sedated; my ankle was throbbing, but it felt so distant. Was this shock? Adrenaline? Sheer panic?

“What the fuck just happened?” I gasped, only once we were in Julia’s car with the doors locked. “What the fuck...oh my God...”

“We need to get out of here,” Julia said. Her voice was steady, but she had her arms braced on the wheel, breathing hard. “Oh God, Jess...your ankle.”

I didn’t want to look at it. I’d broken bones before, and this didn’t feel broken, but it hurt badly enough that I was struggling not to cry. Concentrating on taking deep, slow breaths, I said, “I need to go home. Not...not my parents’ house,” I added quickly as she pulled swiftly out of the parking lot. “I need the boys. They’ll know what to do.”

“I think you need a doctor, Jess,” Julia said, shaking her head as she pulled onto the highway. But I knew she’d take me to them.

I wouldn’t feel safe until she did.

43 - Vincent

“Get it, Bo! Come on, bring it back, you damn gremlin.”

Sighing, I watched as Haribo picked up the tennis ball I’d thrown for him, running in circles as he tried to keep it away from Jojo. The concept of “fetch” had never gotten through to him. Traipsing across the yard, I picked up the slimy ball when he dropped it and tossed it back toward the house.

“You’re getting more exercise than he is,” Manson said, laughing as he watched me from the garage. Jason was working with them today, helping to recalibrate the software on the car they were fixing. Bo grabbed the ball, but instead of bringing it back, he ran toward Jason instead.

“Wrong person, Bo,” he said as the little dog sat snorting and panting at his feet. “There’s not much going on in that little head of yours, is there?”

Lucas had his earbuds in, bent over with a welder in his hands as Cherry sat perched on his shoulder. That little kitten had settled in quickly. Most of her aggression had melted away, at least with Lucas. She barely left his side, and would mewl pitifully if he was out of her sight for too long.

We were trying to kill time before we went to meet with our realtor. We were finally getting the house listed for sale, and our appraisal had gone better than expected. Manson was still only cautiously optimistic, but I wanted to celebrate before the damn place was even on the market.

“Is that Jess?” Manson said suddenly, looking toward the gate. An old red convertible had pulled up, having kicked up a cloud of dust as it barreled down our street.

“She’s hiking with Julia today,” Jason said, getting out of the driver’s seat so he could see.

“That’s Julia’s car,” I said. Before the doors even opened, a strange feeling of trepidation made my stomach go cold. Something was off, but I didn’t know what until Julia opened the passenger door and had to help Jess stand up out of her seat. “What the fuck...”

Sprinting across the yard, I reached the gate first. The dogs thought this was an exciting new game, and I had to shoo them back so I could get the gate open. Jess had her arm around Julia’s shoulders as she limped into the yard, her face tight with pain.

“What the hell happened?” I picked Jess up right away, getting her weight off her leg. Manson, Jason, and Lucas had reached us, and they were

all talking at once, nearly drowning out Julia as she tried to explain.

“We were hiking,” she said, obviously trying to sound calm. “Nate and Alex —”

“What the fuck did they do to her?” Lucas’s voice shook with the effort to control his volume. He had Cherry clutched in one hand; with the other, he reached for Jess, grasping her hand and holding it tight.

“Everyone except for Jess and Julia need to shut the hell up!” I said, and silence fell instantly. It was rare that I raised my voice, but I couldn’t think with them all talking over each other in a panic. Jess had squeezed her eyes shut tight. She was in pain, and it made me so livid that I saw red. “Tell us what happened, Jess.”

“Nate and Alex followed us,” she said, her teeth clenched as she sucked in another breath. “They stopped us on the trail. They...shit...” She hissed in pain, and her next shuddering breath sounded dangerously close to a sob.

“I’m going to kill them,” Lucas said. “I’m going to fucking kill them.”

“Killing them would be a mercy,” Jason said. “They need to suffer.”

“Get her inside,” Manson said. “We need to call a doctor.”

“It’s not broken,” Jess insisted as I carried her across the yard and into the house. She pressed her forehead against my chest, and she was sweating despite the cool temperature. “It’s twisted, it’s happened before. I need...it just needs...”

“Ice and elevation,” I said, looking at Jason pointedly as I carried Jess into the living room and laid her on the couch. He got my meaning, and within a minute, he returned with a small bag of ice wrapped in a dish towel. Julia piled pillows beneath Jess’s ankle, and I carefully peeled up her leggings so I could get a better look at it.

Manson swore loudly when he saw the bruises and swelling. Jason held the ice against her, wincing when she whimpered in pain. “I’m sorry, Jess. Fuck...”

“Alex grabbed me,” Jess finally said, forcing out the rest of the story. She sounded far too calm considering what had happened, but at least one of us was. “I got them with pepper spray, but he pushed me. That’s how I twisted it. He said that since we broke something of his, he was going to break something of yours.”

The impact those words had on me was far deeper than mere anger. One look at the others and I could see the same emotion on their faces too.

Rage. Pure blinding rage.

“That’s it then,” Manson said. “We need to find them. Tonight. Now.”

“Manson, I don’t want any of you to get hurt,” Jess said. “Alex wants a reaction. He *wants* you to come after him.”

I shook my head. “No. Alex wants a reaction but he doesn’t think we’ll come after *him*. He’s too goddamn proud to think he’s vulnerable. If he thought we’d come for him, then he never would have dared to do this.”

“We’ll prove him wrong,” Jason said fiercely. “*No one* fucking touches our girl.”

Jess’s voice was desperate as she said, “You don’t have to do anything. This could fuck up everything you’ve worked for. What if you get in trouble? What if you’re arrested? What if —”

“What if I fucking stand here and do nothing?” Lucas said. He’d stepped back, leaning against the wall with his hands clasped behind his back. It was a position of self-control as he struggled to keep it all contained, but anger was leaking out of him. It was the first trickle of a flood before the dam broke. “What if I let that asshole hurt someone I care about and do fuck all about it?” His jaw tightened, vehemently shaking his head. “He’s not getting away with this. No way in hell. Apparently, I didn’t hit him hard enough last time, but we’re fixing that this time around.”

It didn’t matter what the consequences would be. I wasn’t used to feeling like this; I was generally a calm dude. Most shit would just roll off my shoulders, the vast majority of circumstances weren’t worth getting violent over.

But there were no rules once someone I loved was hurt; there were no limits, there was no caution. This wasn’t just payback; it wasn’t petty revenge.

This was punishment. This needed to happen to ensure that Jess was never, ever put in danger again. The thought of what could have happened if she’d been alone, if she hadn’t had pepper spray, if she hadn’t gotten away...

Holy shit, I could hardly stand to even think of it.

Lucas paced up and down the living room, too worked up to sit still. “Where was this? I need fucking directions.”

“They won’t hang around the trail,” Manson said. He was seated on the couch right behind Jason, having not taken his eyes off Jess for even a second. “Call Billy’s Bar. You still know one of the bartenders, don’t you? Call him and ask if they’re there.”

Lucas stalked out of the room, and within a few seconds, I heard him talking to someone on his cell.

“I can take you to Urgent Care,” I said, gently brushing Jess’s hair back from her face. But she shook her head.

“It’s okay. I’m okay. The ice is helping.” She squeezed my hand as I held it, giving me a small smile. “I’m okay, Vince. Really.”

“Except you fucking aren’t,” I said. Christ, I felt like I might shatter into pieces. I was sick with anger, with worry. I should have been with her. I should have been there. We all knew what Alex and Nate were capable of, we *knew* there was danger. How could I have been so foolish to think she would be safe?

“Do you want me to stay, girl?” Julia said, wringing her hands as she stood nearby. “I’ll call out of work tonight. I’ll tell them there was an emergency.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Jess smiled tightly, her breath hitching with pain. “I’ll text you later, don’t worry about me. I’m safe here.”

As Julia departed, Lucas returned.

“They’re not at Billy’s,” he said. “At least not yet. But he’s going to call me if they show up.”

“We need to find them,” Manson said. “I don’t care what it fucking takes.”

“Please don’t go anywhere,” Jess said, her eyes widening as she tried to sit up. I pressed her back down.

“Relax, baby, just relax. Let me give you something for the pain, okay?” I practically had a pharmacy upstairs, but I didn’t want to leave her side. I looked at Jason again, pleadingly. “Can you get my box from the attic? Under the bed.”

Manson took over with the bag of ice as Jason got up. He didn’t say a word, but his expression said plenty. Fury was etched into his face; it was knotted in his shoulders and clenched tightly in his jaw.

Starting fights and trashing the cars — I could find it in me to forgive that. But when they went after Manson and Lucas at the sideshow, I knew we had to get them back. Now that they’d gone after Jess...

They were going to wish they were dead men.

“I’m sorry, Jess,” Manson said. He was holding the ice against her ankle, and every time he moved his hands, they shook. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said. Her breathing had finally steadied as Jason returned with my box of pharmaceuticals. As I rummaged through it, she said, “Give me the good shit, please.”

“One of us should have been with you,” Lucas said. “I should have —” His cell vibrated with an incoming call, and after one quick glance at the screen, he picked up and said, “Are they there?”

I could only barely hear the man talking to him, but I heard a desperate plea. “Just don’t start shit, okay? I’m seriously on my last warning here. If you show up because you have a problem with these guys, then —”

Lucas hung up. “Nate and Alex just pulled up at Billy’s. Who’s coming with me?”

“I am,” Jason answered right away, then looked at me. “Will you stay with her?”

“I’m not leaving her,” I said. “You’d better be careful.”

“We will be.” Manson got to his feet, leaving the ice resting on Jess’s swollen ankle. It was difficult to guess what was going through his head, his expression was so carefully controlled. But when he looked at me, his voice was grim as he said softly, “Where is it?”

As much as I hated to carry the damn thing, I’d gotten a gun for a reason. We needed to defend ourselves, and I wasn’t about to let the three walk out of here without better protection than merely their fists.

“In the safe,” I said. “You know the code.”

He nodded, leaving the room. His steps pounded up the stairs as Jess looked between us with increasing distress.

“Don’t leave,” she said. “Please don’t go after them.” Lucas sat beside her, framing her face in his hands. She leaned into him, wrapping her arm around him. “Don’t go. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “Jason and Manson will both be fine. We’re not scared of them.”

“They’re not getting away with this,” Jason said. He was standing in the doorway, hands shoved in his pockets. Eager to go but hating to leave, especially when Jess turned her pleading gaze on him.

“I’d rather you be safe,” she said, and all the effort she’d put into sounding calm was suddenly gone. “You don’t need to go after them.”

“Yes, we do need to, angel.” Manson returned, pulling on his leather jacket. I glimpsed the pistol tucked into his jeans right before it was hidden

again. “They’re not allowed to touch you. You’re off limits and they couldn’t respect that. They’re going to pay for it.”

Lucas left Jess with a kiss, disentangling himself from her arms and stalking out of the house with Jason right behind him. Watching him walk out the door made me wish I could tear myself in two. I couldn’t protect him and Jess, and it terrified me to let him go.

Manson clasped my hand before he left, and I said, “Don’t you fucking dare get hurt. Don’t...” I lowered my voice, because Jess was already scared and I didn’t want to make it worse. “Don’t let him get hurt, Manson.”

“You know I won’t,” he said. “Take care of our girl. We’ll be back soon.”

44 - Manson

I didn't want to hurt anyone.

I'd clung to that fact, repeated it to myself like a daily prayer. Despite my desires in relationships — and I was sadistic, there was no doubt about that — I didn't want to cause *harm*. I wasn't like my father; I wasn't like the people who harassed me. The monster that lived inside me was tame, it was controlled. I wasn't a violent person.

But as I walked into Billy's Bar, with Jason and Lucas flanking me, the moral compass I'd clung to stopped giving me directions. The lines I'd drawn for myself, the boundaries I'd sought to maintain, no longer fucking mattered.

They'd hurt Jess. Alex and Nate had put their hands on my family more than enough times to warrant retaliation. I'd always held to the belief that physical violence was only needed in defense, but this time, we were on the attack.

It didn't matter where they went, where they tried to hide. It didn't matter who their friends or connections were. It didn't matter if I had to do this in public or private.

They had hurt our girl. They'd stepped so far over the line that they'd fucking shattered it.

I wanted to hurt them in return. All I could think of as we slowly made our way through the crowd, on the lookout for our targets, was how badly I wanted to hear them fucking *scream*. It wasn't a wild desire; it wasn't hot with rage or frantic. The desire to hurt them was calming. It was meditational. It felt good to dwell on thoughts of their agony.

I was furious, yes, but that word didn't encompass this feeling. It couldn't convey the monumental sense of needing to see vengeance served. I wasn't so moralistic and self-obsessed to think that this was the righteous choice, or even a *good* choice.

This wasn't about right and wrong; it was far beyond that. The only thing I cared about was protecting my people, *my family*.

Nothing and no one came before those I loved.

We stalked through the crowd, on constant lookout. Lucas got a displeased nod from the bartender, who looked even *less* pleased when he spotted the rest of us. He kept wiping down the same cup repeatedly,

watching us nervously. He wouldn't interfere, but someone else might if we weren't careful.

"There," Jason said, and I followed his gaze. Nate and Alex were seated at a corner table near the restrooms, hunched over glasses of beer. The lighting in the bar was dim, but Nate's face was obviously reddened, his eyes bloodshot.

"Looks like the big man took the brunt of that pepper spray," I said. The pistol under my jacket felt heavy; I passed it to Jason as I turned, keeping it low. He tucked it away under his shirt in one quick movement.

"Well, would you look at who it is?" Alex drawled, when he spotted us approaching his table. Nate glowered at us, his eyes so puffy and swollen I was surprised he could see us at all. "You've got big fucking balls to walk into Billy's, Reed."

It was true; we usually avoided this place. Billy's Bar was a real dive, a little hole in the wall that filled to overflowing almost every night. It wasn't our type of crowd, and I could feel the odd looks from people around us. Especially knowing that my father had been hanging out down here, I could only imagine what the regulars had heard about me.

"And you've got no balls at all, considering you attacked two women who haven't done shit to you," Jason said. Lucas was silent, but I'd warned him to be on the way over here. The last thing we needed was for him to run his mouth and escalate before we were ready.

"Attacked?" Alex scoffed. "Is that what that bitch told you? That I *attacked* her? Fucking typical. Why the hell do y'all trust anything she has to say?" He sipped his beer, his lip curled into an ugly smirk. He felt safe here, confident. He didn't think we could touch him.

"Jess isn't a liar," Lucas said, his voice even. "You put your hands on her, McAllister. You waited until she was alone, until there was no one around to help her. You're a fucking coward."

Alex rolled his eyes, his foot tapping rapidly on his stool. Nate folded his arms, turning away from us as he muttered, "This is fucking bullshit."

"We need to settle this," I said. "No more sabotage, no more fucking stalking. Man to man."

"We don't need to settle shit," Alex said. "Fuck off."

Jason laughed, causing Alex's head to snap toward him. "Figures. You're such a tough guy, Alex. Harassing women when they're alone, but you start cowering the second you see someone your own size."

Nate looked like he wanted to leave, but Alex's anger was getting the better of him. He lurched out of his chair, jostling the table and splashing his beer across the wood. Jason grinned as Alex got in his face.

"You've got a lot of fucking nerve to talk to me like that," he said, all tightly knotted rage while Jason looked like he was about to laugh again. "You want to fight me yourself, pussy?"

"Hey, take it outside!" the bartender suddenly shouted. Alex and Nate exchanged a look, while I walked over to the exit near the restrooms, shoving open the door to the back alley.

"Who's the pussy now?" Jason said, when Alex didn't immediately follow him out the door. But his taunting did the trick.

Nate shoved me hard the moment he stepped into the alley, charging toward me with his fists clenched. The alley was long and narrow, lined on one side with overflowing dumpsters. Nate slammed me against them, his hand clenched in my shirt as he pulled back his fist.

He froze when he felt my knife press against his throat.

"I would move very slowly if I were you," I said. He gulped and his throat bobbed, the blade digging into his skin. "My hands get really damn twitchy and I'd just *hate* to accidentally slice your jugular."

Nate was so distracted by trying to figure out how to respond to a knife at his throat that he didn't notice me swing back my arm until it was too late. My fist slammed into the side of his head, his eyes rolled and he stiffened, then he dropped to the ground with a heavy thump.

The second he hit the asphalt, I was on top of him. Blood spattered as my next punch crushed his nose, and I kept striking despite how limp he was. His lip split; his eyebrow did too. He didn't make a sound other than to grunt, his breath barely wheezing out of him. The world closed in around me, and the sole thought that remained in my mind was how much he could have taken from me.

He could have killed Lucas. He'd tried. He hadn't fucking cared.

He had helped hurt Jessica; he'd threatened her. He'd been ready and willing to use her like a pawn in their sick, twisted vendetta against us.

The thought of losing them...either of them...fuck, it would kill me. Life was worth living because I had my family, because we had each other. Losing any of them would shatter my world into pieces.

The roaring in my ears finally stopped. My knuckles ached. I was breathing heavily. Nate's head lolled against the pavement, only the whites

of his eyes visible. Rising to my feet, I spat on his face before I took a look at my hand. My knuckles had split, possibly from striking his teeth.

“Fucking bastard,” I said and kicked him in the side. I hoped I’d broken his fucking ribs.

When I turned, Alex appeared stunned. His eyes were wide as he watched Nate twitching on the ground. It had happened so fast; a matter of seconds. Alex looked like he might be sick.

“Where ya’ going, buddy?” Jason said, blocking the door when Alex turned as if to go back inside. As if we’d let him run away from this.

“Out of my fucking way —” Alex shut up abruptly when Jason brought out the gun. We had all trained with it; when Vincent decided we needed a firearm, we hadn’t taken that decision lightly. Bringing it with us tonight wasn’t a decision I’d taken lightly either.

But it was necessary.

“Get the fuck up, Nate!” Alex snapped. His friend groaned, likely unable to get his eyes to focus long enough to move.

“You’re not going anywhere, Alex,” I said, testing the edge of my blade with the pad of my thumb. It needed to be sharpened again soon, but it would have to do. “You’re going to take your beating, and you’re going to stay the fuck away from us. No parties, no races, nothing.”

“You’ve lost your damn minds,” he said. He was trying to back away, but he had nowhere to go. Lucas blocked his path out of the alley; Jason blocked the door back inside. Alex’s eyes were darting around like a trapped animal.

“When someone I love gets hurt, it does make me a little crazy,” I said, flipping the knife in my fingers. Alex didn’t know what to fear more: me with the knife, Jason with the gun, or Lucas cracking his knuckles behind him.

“You won’t fucking get away with this,” he said. “All this just to defend your little whore? She’s just a used up, worthless piece of flesh that y’all pass around!”

Alex didn’t understand when he needed to quit.

He stumbled when I rushed him, fear of the knife making him clumsy. Pinned to the wall with my blade pressed dangerously hard against his throat, he actually *whimpered*.

Fucking pathetic.

All it would take was one little movement — a slice, a jab. His throat would be sliced open and there would be no saving him. He knew it too; he was breathing fast, swearing under his breath.

“What’s wrong, man?” I said. “Are you scared of me?”

From the way his eyes widened, I must have looked unhinged. He squirmed and the blade nicked him, a trickle of blood running down his neck.

“Come on, Reed,” he whined, his tone of voice so damn annoying I rolled my eyes. “It wasn’t...that serious...”

“Is that supposed to make me fucking feel better?” I hissed. “You hurt our girl, McAllister. You put your hands on her.” I swiped up the blood that had trickled down his neck with the pad of my thumb and smeared it over his mouth as he sputtered in horror. “If you fuck with one of us, you fuck with all of us. So here the rest of us are. Not so brave now, huh?”

“Such a fucking coward,” Jason said with a sigh, as if it disappointed him.

“I really don’t like hurting people, Alex,” I said. Moving the knife aside, I pulled him away from the wall and shoved him to the ground. He stumbled, falling to his knees and catching himself on his hands. He scrambled to face me, but his eyes kept darting to the others, uncertain of where the first strike would come from.

As I flipped the knife open and closed, the subtle sound of scraping metal made him flinch. I repeated, “I don’t like hurting people. But he does.”

I nodded toward Lucas as he smiled, slowly cracking his knuckles. He didn’t need to say a word.

“Shit, look, I won’t fuck with her anymore,” Alex babbled, putting up his hands as if that would placate us.

Nate dragged himself to his feet just then, and for a moment, Alex dared to look hopeful. But Nate stumbled right past him, past Jason and Lucas. His face was smeared with blood, he was swaying on his feet as he mumbled to himself. None of us bothered to stop him, although Lucas turned to watch him go.

Alex seemed to finally realize he was fucked, his voice taking on a higher, panicked pitch.

“I won’t fuck with any of you again,” he said. He was still on his knees as we closed in around him. “It’s...Come on, man. We were just messing

around —”

Jason pistol-whipped him, knocking him to the ground so hard that his skull bounced when it hit the pavement. He curled up into a ball as Jason kicked him, yelling when a hard kick caught him in the ribs. He wrapped his arms around his head, but Lucas grabbed his wrists and forcibly splayed him out on the ground.

“It really shouldn’t have come to this, Alex,” I said. His grunts of pain and desperate, gasping breaths were music to my ears. “But you just couldn’t leave us alone. That’s all we wanted: to be left the fuck alone.”

“Which fucking hand did you grab her with?” Jason snarled, bending over him as Lucas held him down. Alex just shook his head, sucking in a wheezing breath.

“He’s right-handed,” Lucas said simply. He jerked Alex’s right arm away from his body, pinning it against the concrete, and Alex screamed.

“Fuck, you people are fucking psychopaths!” he shrieked. His tone only grew more frantic when Jason lifted his foot. “Stop! Fucking stop, shit — don’t —”

His fingers audibly cracked when Jason slammed his foot down. He screamed, his legs thrashing, and I got on top of him to help Lucas keep him still.

When Jason stepped back, it gave Lucas his opportunity. He looked at me first — just a glance. I barely had to nod to set him off. His fists landed with painfully heavy thuds, and he was laughing softly at each strike. He’d been waiting too damn long for this. Fucking *years* of anger and restraint were unleashed, and he kept striking with single-minded focus.

“That’s enough,” I said and laid my hand against his shoulder. His arm stopped in midair, knuckles bloody. Alex looked like he was about to pass out.

“Wish you were dead yet?” I said, slapping his face a few times to get him to look at me. His eyes rolled, his nose bled.

“Fuck...fuck you...” He gasped in pain, but there wasn’t much sense in him. “Should’ve...fucked her when I had the chance...”

I frowned. “Would you care to repeat that?”

“I should have fucked that little bitch when I had the chance!” he yelled.

My fingers twitched. “Turn him over.”

It took all three of us to get him onto his stomach. Slicing through his shirt, I ripped it out of the way and steadied my hand. He screamed as the

blade dug into his skin. I wanted it to scar and I didn't care how deeply I had to cut to do it. Lucas kept his knee pressed hard against Alex's shoulder, one hand in a death grip on the man's hair.

"Does that hurt?" he said, wickedly taunting as Alex struggled. His blood was staining my hands, making them slippery, but I kept carving no matter how messy it got. "Why don't you scream louder? Maybe it'll make us stop."

The satisfaction I felt as my knife ripped through Alex's flesh was almost orgasmic. A smile was fixed on my mouth. I laughed when he screamed and cried out, "You're fucking killing me, stop! Stop...fuck...*please!*"

"This won't kill you," I said calmly. "I wouldn't bother to kill you anyway, even though you're a fucking waste of flesh. Death is far from the worst thing that can happen to a person, Alex. You could have your dick cut off and shoved down your throat, for example. It wouldn't kill you, but you'd probably wish you were dead."

"I like that idea," Lucas said, and Alex wailed brokenly, bucking uselessly against our holds on him.

"Stop, stop, stop — I swear I won't ever — shit!"

"This knife is getting dull," I said, scoffing as the blade caught on his skin and sliced at an odd angle. "Shame about that. I'll just press a little harder."

We were limited on time; frankly, I was surprised the cops hadn't shown up yet. So I rushed through the last few cuts, eliciting more screams and more desperate begging. But the end result was a clear warning, deep enough to scar and ugly enough to be obvious.

I ABUSE WOMEN was carved deeply into his back. I pressed my bloody hand against his face, crushing him down on the asphalt as I said, "This is your only warning, understand? If I see you around again, I'll fucking skin you. I don't care where it is, Alex. Don't let me fucking see your face again."

We left him curled like a bug on the ground.

45 - Alex

It felt like an eternity passed before I hauled myself off the ground and sat against the brick wall. My face was swollen and aching; I couldn't breathe through my nose and a metallic taste filled my mouth. I spat globs of bloody saliva onto the ground, but it didn't get rid of the nasty taste.

How the hell did they have the balls to jump me in fucking *public*?

We'd had the perfect chance to end those assholes at the sideshow; all we had to do was run them off the fucking road. It should have been easy to cause a fatal accident at over a hundred miles per hour. But they'd slipped away from us; that damned El Camino was impossibly fast.

Now Nate had bailed on me, that damn coward. The big man was all talk and no action, but I'd thought he was better than this. Reed had beaten him with one damn punch, then beat him to bloody pulp for good measure.

Fishing my phone out of my pocket, my finger hovered over the Emergency Call button. But after a few moments, I furiously shoved it away again. I didn't need an ambulance; I needed fucking vengeance and I was going to have it by my own means.

"Fuck those assholes," I muttered. "Fuck that little bitch..."

This was all Jessica's fault, the stuck-up cunt. She wasn't so bad before she switched sides and decided to go be a slut for Wickeston's freaks. Women like her needed to be kept in line. Being so attractive that men almost drooled over her had over-inflated her ego, convincing her she was such hot shit.

But she was *nothing*. Just another worthless whore who thought the world revolved around her pussy. I should have done so much worse to her and her stupid little friend.

Someone appeared at the end of the alleyway. Cigarette smoke wafted toward me, and I turned my face away, frankly furious anyone would dare come along and see me like this.

"Fuck off," I said as footsteps approached. I wasn't in the mood to be checked on.

"Looks to me like someone put you through the ringer."

"I said, *fuck off*, old man!" I snapped.

Once I heard his voice, I knew exactly who it was. It was Reagan, that old man who'd been hanging around Billy's every day for weeks. He'd

offered Nate and I five hundred dollars each for going after Manson and Lucas at that sideshow. He hadn't explained why; but at the time, I hadn't needed an explanation.

He came closer, taking a long drag on his cigarette. I glared up at him, but I couldn't see his face very well when my eyes were swelling shut from bruises.

"I don't need your help," I said bitterly, as he stood beside me.

"Didn't offer my damn help now, did I?" he drawled.

Painfully, I got to my feet. Everything ached; there were sharp pains in muscles I didn't even know existed before today. "What the fuck is your deal, Reagan? Why are you here?"

"I'm just a concerned citizen." He offered me a cigarette. I wasn't much of a smoker, but I took it anyway. "Those men who attacked you today cause an awful lot of problems around this town. I'm simply a man looking for solutions."

"Solutions, huh?" I scoffed, accepting his lighter when he offered it. As I lit up, I took a more careful look at his face. The last time we'd conversed, we'd been inside at the bar and I'd been drunk. Drunk enough to think that accepting money to try to kill my rivals was a good idea. But as I examined his face, the familiarity of his features struck me.

"You're Manson's father, aren't you?" I said. "That's why you have a problem with those guys. He's your son."

He exhaled slowly, pale smoke disappearing into the cold air.

"I suppose he is," he said. His resemblance to Reed was uncanny. But something was different. Maybe it was the dullness in his gaze or the hard set of his mouth. It was difficult to pinpoint what it was, but one thing was certain.

When he looked at me, this guy gave me the fucking creeps.

"You want to get back at them, don't you?" he said. "They deserve to pay for the trouble they've caused you."

"Yeah, they do," I said, even though his words made a weird chill go over me. "They've felt comfortable around here for too damn long."

He laughed, low and rough. "We're in agreement, then. We'll all be a hell of a lot better off..."

He walked away from me, and I watched him in confusion. Shaking my head, I took a heavy drag on the cigarette and immediately coughed. Damn, this was way harsher than a vape...

“You coming or not, boy?”

The old man was waiting for me at the mouth of the alley.

“Are you going to let them walk all over you?” he said. The way he looked at me made me feel ashamed, like I’d done something embarrassing and didn’t have a clue what it was.

Jaw clenched, I said, “No...but what the fuck do you want me to do about it?”

He smiled at me, his teeth all yellowed and rotten. “I want you to follow me and stop asking dumbass questions.”

46 - Jessica

Vincent, Jojo, Bo, and Cherry were all snuggled around me on the bed. Now and then I would wake, but Vincent would rub my back for a while and soothe me back to sleep, reassuring me that the others would be back soon.

I didn't like to wake up and not have them all there. Even with Vincent and all the animals around me, the bed felt too empty; the house did too. As if I'd been listening for them in my sleep, I woke instantly at the sound of their footsteps trudging in the door.

"Are they back?" I murmured, unable to open my eyes yet. I was resting against Vincent's chest, still heavily weighed down by sleep. Jojo and Bo jumped off the bed, their nails clicking as they walked into the hall to greet the boys.

"They're back," Vincent assured me, tracing his fingers along my spine. His capable hands rubbed the knots out of my shoulders, easing away my tension. "Don't worry, baby. They'll be up here soon."

Hearing them all come into the attic made me finally open my eyes. The room was dark, save for the strand of multicolored Christmas lights around Vincent's bed. The gentle glow illuminated them as they climbed on the bed, discarding shoes and jackets on the floor.

"What happened?" I whispered, tracing my fingers over Lucas's face as he lay down by Vincent's side.

"They didn't hurt us, sweetheart," he said, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

"Everything is okay, Jess," Jason said, climbing under the covers and spooning me. "We're all here."

It was a struggle to keep my eyes open as I reached for Manson's hand, holding it tight as he climbed into bed behind Lucas. His hands felt so cold, his hair was disheveled. "Where did you go?"

"We had to send a message, angel," he said, drawing my hand close and kissing my fingers. "I'm sorry we woke you."

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" I hated not knowing what had happened, but my eyes felt so heavy. Sleep was dragging me back into its clutches.

“We’re not hurt,” Manson said, his voice floating in the darkness as I closed my eyes again. “Don’t worry, Jess. We’ll be right here with you. Go back to sleep.”

Within seconds, I was out like a light.

Hours later, my eyes opened again. The men were all asleep around me, Haribo and Cherry were curled at our feet. As much as I loathed leaving the bed’s warmth, I had to pee. Disentangling myself from their arms, I hurried down from the attic and into the bathroom.

My ankle was still swollen and mottled with ugly bruises, but it didn’t hurt nearly as bad as it had earlier. That pill Vincent had given me had done the trick; my muscles still felt like jelly.

Jojo was whining and scratching at the front door when I shuffled out of the bathroom. With a sigh, I limped downstairs to let her outside. She sprinted into the trees to do her business, and I leaned tiredly against the doorframe, my eyes drooping closed.

Jerking myself awake when my head sagged too low, I wandered out onto the porch and called, “Jojo! Come on, girl!”

There was rustling deep in the trees. God, what was she doing back there? Why did she want to explore during the night? Groaning, I made my way off the porch and to the side of the house.

“Jo! Come here!” I was struggling to make my voice carry without yelling, but I didn’t want to wake up the guys by calling for the dog. Snapping my fingers, I tried to get her attention however I could. “Jojo! Want a treat, girl? Come on!”

It didn’t work. Bracing myself to go search for her with another heavy sigh, I frowned at the smell that rushed in my nose. Smokey and sharp, like menthol...

Suddenly, a hand grabbed my face from behind, covering my mouth and jerking me backward. A thick arm wrapped around me and pinned my hands to my sides, almost squeezing the air out of my lungs. Unable to scream, I kicked and flailed to break free, but it was to no avail.

“Fucking hell, stop struggling!”

I knew that voice. Holy shit, that was —

Alex’s obnoxious cologne wafted around me as he dragged me toward the front of the house. He cursed in pain as I kicked his shins, lamenting that I hadn’t put shoes on before I came out here. I wanted to kick him hard

enough to break his bones. If there was any pain from kicking him with my injured leg, I didn't feel it. Adrenaline had flooded me.

As we reached the front of the house — I'd made it so damn difficult for him he was panting — I spotted someone else on the porch. The sight of *him* made me stop struggling, frozen in shock.

Reagan glared at me as he stood in front of the open door. He stubbed out his cigarette on the porch railing and left the filter there, leaking a thin trail of smoke.

"What do I do with her?" Alex said. His voice sounded strange, as if he couldn't breathe through his nose. Hopefully, the boys had broken it.

"Whatever you want," Reagan said. "It don't matter."

He lit up another cigarette before he walked inside, closing the door quietly behind him. There was a strange sort of finality to it, an overwhelming sense of dread. Spurred back to action, I fought again like my life depended on it.

It probably did. I had no idea what Alex planned to do, and frankly, he didn't seem to know either. At the moment, all he could do was try to keep me from slipping away from him.

"Damn it! You fucking bitch!" He shoved me to the ground when I bit his hand, chomping my teeth down as hard as I could. The look he gave me was murderous as I screamed, and he grabbed me again before I could scramble up from the ground. "Stop fucking struggling, before I —"

He stiffened. Jojo had trotted out of the trees. She was staring at us, her tail held in a stiff straight line. She cocked her head to the side, looking at me with her big brown eyes.

Then her entire body language changed. She barked, charging forward, a gray blur as she streaked across the yard. Alex tried to run for it but didn't get far. Jojo leapt at him, her jaws latching onto his arm. She snarled, whipping her head from side to side as she clamped down and refused to let go.

It gave me my chance to get away.

Despite the sharp pain, I sprinted into the house. The door slammed against the wall as I threw it open and stumbled into the kitchen, gasping when my bare feet touched something cold and wet pooling on the floor. Reagan stood there, pouring something over the floor, splashing it onto the walls. Then the sharp scent hit my nose.

Gasoline.

“Reagan, stop!” The old man lifted his head. His expression was eerily blank, cold with passionless cruelty.

“Don’t do this,” I said. My voice was raised, but I didn’t know what the hell to do. The attic door was closed, but surely one of the boys had to hear me.

If Reagan turned on the stove, or flicked down a single match...

If this place went up in flames with them still in the attic...

There was no way out.

Putting up my hands, I tried to sound calm. Reasonable. As if there was any hope of reasoning with a man like this. “Don’t...he’s your *son*, Reagan...”

He scoffed. “It’s too bad you had to get yourself involved. Such a damn tragedy. I doubt anyone will want this place after what’s about to happen. Five people dead in one fire.” He shook his head, as if the idea was so terrible, even as he advanced toward me. “The boys got lucky; they won’t even know what happened. But you...you’re going to be a damn problem, aren’t you?”

He lunged at me, and he was far stronger than he appeared. The acrid smell of gasoline burned in my nose as we fell hard to the floor, his fingers squeezing around my throat. I tried to fight, pressing my hands into his face and raking my nails over him. He was so heavy, and when he struck the side of my head, I saw stars.

Part of my brain, the part that seemed to watch all this happen from above, realized I was about to die. Not only was his hand strangling my breathing, but he was squeezing the sides of my neck, cutting off blood flow to my brain and...

He wasn’t stopping. He didn’t care. My struggles were growing weaker and he was too heavy, too strong. My ears were ringing, faintly, a far-away tone in a vast expanse of growing darkness.

There was a sound like something being struck. In my oxygen-deprived darkness, it made me think of a sack of meat being thrown against a brick wall.

Then air was rushing in my lungs again. Reagan’s hands were ripped away and there was yelling...so much yelling. My vision swam. I was so dizzy I thought I might be sick as I gasped for air, rolling onto my stomach and gagging. My hair dripped with gasoline; the harsh taste was in my mouth, all over my skin.

Suddenly, I was held, cradled, strong arms pulling me close.

“Breathe, Jess! Come on, baby, just breathe.” Vincent’s voice sounded like a dozen echos all sounding at once. My head lolled to the side, my vision blurry. My sopping hair was pushed out of my face, and I could hear Vincent’s heart pounding as I rested against him.

Blinking repeatedly, I tried to focus despite the chaos around me. The frantic scrambling, pounding, and yelling was an endless storm. Although blurry, I could see Manson on the ground, wedged into a corner against the kitchen cabinets. He had his arm locked around Reagan’s throat in a chokehold as Jason held down his legs. The man’s lips were swollen and blue, his eyes rolled back.

“Yes, we need a fucking ambulance! I don’t...Jesus fucking Christ, ma’am, the house is drenched in gasoline. How the fuck am I supposed to calm down?”

Lucas...poor Lucas...how had he gotten stuck being the one to call 911?

All the sounds kept fading in and out, like someone cranking a radio dial back and forth.

“Hey, baby, come on, open your eyes. Stay awake, okay? Keep breathing, deep breaths.”

Vincent’s voice sounded so nice, I wanted him to keep talking. The smell of gasoline was strong, it was inescapable. I needed more air. My gasps were too quick, they weren’t enough...

47 - Manson

Jessica's eyes were closed. It was impossible to hear, think, or see anything else besides her, lying limp in Vincent's arms as he tried to get her to stay awake.

"She passed out," Jason said. His arm was outstretched toward me and he wasn't holding my father's legs anymore, which was foolish. But maybe I wasn't hearing him correctly, because I thought he was talking about Jess, but he kept saying, "He passed out, Manson! He's out. You're going to kill him."

He had to physically pry my arm loose from my father's neck. As much as my thoughts were racing, it was like my brain was functioning at half the speed. My father fell limply beside me as my arm loosened, a bag of bones when he slumped to the floor.

Dead...or passed out...it didn't matter.

Nothing else mattered.

I scrambled over to where Jess lay. Vincent had moved her into the living room, setting her down on the carpet as he timed her pulse with his finger on her neck. Her eyes fluttered for a moment as I grasped her hand, kneeling beside her.

"Alex..." she barely whispered the name. "Outside...Jojo..."

So that was what all the damn screaming was outside. Jojo was right next to me, staring at Jess with her ears pricked up. I didn't give a fuck if Alex was alive or dead out there; the paramedics could deal with him when they arrived.

"I think she's in shock," Vincent said. His voice was calm, so damn calm I wanted to scream. "Too little oxygen, too much adrenaline. Just keep breathing, baby."

Jason was there suddenly, a damp cloth in his hands. He wiped her face, cleaning the gasoline away from her eyes and mouth, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

"Is she awake?" Lucas was still on the phone as he knelt beside me. He relayed Jess's condition over the line, rubbing his hand continually over his head, before he snapped, "Ma'am, I'm not hyperventilating. I'm perfectly damn fine."

Sirens wailed in the distance. Vincent had one hand on Jess's chest, the other on my shoulder. My anchor to reality. Jess turned her head, eyes glassy and half-lidded as she reached for my face.

"I'm here." I clutched her hand, holding it against my cheek. Maybe I was in shock too, because I wasn't certain if I could make myself get up, let alone leave her side. "You're okay. You'll be okay."

Our yard was soon filled with flashing lights and sirens.

Lucas shut the dogs away as the house was swarmed with cops. Alex had gotten away from Jojo by climbing on top of the trash cans near the garage, but he hadn't escaped her wrath. From the brief look I got as he was taken away, she had clearly broken his arm.

It barely felt real. I kept expecting myself to wake up gasping from another chaotic nightmare.

Lucas and I stayed with Jess as the paramedics took care of her, seated in the back of an ambulance. Vincent and Jason were giving their statements to police. My father was removed from the house, deliriously violent as he returned to consciousness. He was cuffed to his stretcher as he was loaded into an ambulance, and he looked right at me before they closed the door.

There wasn't anything worth reading in his expression. Whatever it was that made him hate me, that made him into this monster, wasn't going to go away.

But *he* was going away. Finally, after so many years.

Lucas flinched in dread as they put an IV into Jess's arm. "Oh fuck. Ugh..." I clasped his arm, squeezing reassuringly. He was still shaking despite the blanket the paramedics had given him.

"Just close your eyes," I said, but he still watched the needle go into her arm with a sickened expression. She had an oxygen mask over her nose, and bruises in the shape of fingers were darkening around her throat.

When I stumbled downstairs and found my father on top of her...God, it was like I blacked out. I couldn't recall the moments between seeing them, and my father falling unconscious as I choked him out. Even now, that image of Jess's face was frozen in my mind. How fucking fragile she'd looked as she'd clawed at his hands.

But she wasn't fragile. She looked far stronger than I felt at that moment, leaning her head against Lucas's shoulder as Jason and Vincent finally returned.

"Are you okay?" Jason said, tucking Jess's damp hair behind her ear. She nodded, and Jason exhaled shakily. "Fuck, Jess. When you passed out, I..." He couldn't even finish the sentence. He sat on the ambulance's bumper at her feet, tracing his fingers over her pajama-clad leg. "I'm sorry they ever touched you."

"Don't be sorry," she said, reaching down her hand to lay it on his head. "I'm okay, I promise." She snickered suddenly. "You should have seen how fast Alex ran when he saw Jojo. She deserves all the treats."

I laughed in sheer disbelief. Jojo had never even snapped at someone, let alone *bitten* a person. When I adopted her from the shelter after I moved out of the Peters' house, she'd been a silly little puppy. She'd grown up into an even sillier dog.

But it didn't matter how gentle or kind one could be. When it came to protecting those we loved, I guess Jojo and I were the same.

"I should have killed Alex," Lucas said fiercely. "I should have fucking killed him —" But Jess nudged him with her shoulder.

"Don't let the cops hear you say that," she said gently. "I'm glad you didn't kill him, Lucas. I need you with me. I need all of you with me."

"We're not going anywhere," Vincent said. He rubbed his hand over my back, and I reached back my free hand for his.

I needed all of them with me too. We were better when we were together, we were stronger together.

And we would stay together. No matter what it took.

"Jessica! Oh my God, my baby! My poor baby!"

Jessica's parents had arrived. Her mother rushed toward us, flinging her arms around Jess. The paramedics were getting annoyed with so many people crowding their workspace, but Mrs. Martin was in hysterics and wouldn't be moved. She was weeping openly, her arms trembling as she held her daughter.

"Mom, I'm okay," Jess said. "I'm fine, I promise."

"Manson Reed?"

Her father approached, and I hurriedly stood up. He extended his hand, shaking mine first, then Vincent, Jason, and Lucas's. He was wearing only a coat over his blue pajamas and slippers. "The police told me you saved my

daughter. It's a shame we didn't have the chance to meet under better circumstances, but I hope we can get to know each other after all this mess." He looked over at Jess and shook his head, his eyes shining. "I don't know what we would do without her. I...thank you. Thank you for looking after her. For protecting her."

"We always intend to keep her safe, Mr. Martin," I said, putting as much emphasis on *always* as I could.

"We love her," Vincent said, and Mr. Martin looked surprised to hear it stated so bluntly. But I think we were all done mincing words. There was too much left unsaid for far too long.

Mrs. Martin was now weeping on Lucas's shoulder, which was a sight to behold. He was rubbing his hand on her back awkwardly, saying, "Now, now, don't work yourself up over all this."

"We all love her, sir," Jason said. "That may not be what you want to hear from us, but —"

Mr. Martin held up his hand, stopping him. "All I want to hear is that my daughter is safe, happy, and loved. It's not my business to tell her how to live her life."

Despite everything that had happened, it still brought relief rushing through me to hear him say that. I was so damn tired — tired of fighting, of struggling. I wanted peace. I wanted to live the life I'd been fighting for.

Mrs. Martin suddenly came up beside me, wrapping her shaking arms around me. She was still weeping and shivering with the cold. She hadn't even put a jacket on.

"You saved my baby," she sobbed, holding on to me for so long that I had no choice but to hug her in return. She kept thanking me, crying and apologizing. I didn't know what to do or say other than to comfort her.

The paramedics were preparing to leave, readying Jess to be transported to the hospital to get her head checked out. She was lucid again, or close to it. The remnants of panic that still gripped me were chased away once I held her again, joining her in the back of the ambulance.

"You look so tired," I said. "Do you feel okay? How's your head?"

"I'm okay," she said, her words running together. She still sounded spaced-out, despite the brightness in her eyes. "I'm really sleepy. But they said it might be because —" She yawned. "Because of a concussion. I don't feel concussed."

“We’re not taking any chances,” Lucas said firmly. It was maddening for him that only one of us could ride in the ambulance with her. Vincent was struggling to get him into the WRX so they could follow us to the hospital. “I want them to check you out, run whatever tests they need to. What if you’ve got internal bleeding or something?”

“Don’t freak yourself out,” Jason said. He planted both his hands on Lucas’s shoulders, steering him toward the garage. “I’m going to get those nurses to fucking drug you when we get there. You’re going to give yourself a heart attack.”

One of the paramedics told me I needed to ride in the front passenger seat, but I pretended not to hear them. I laid my head down against Jess’s chest, closing my eyes. I wanted to hear her heart beating, strong and steady. I wanted to feel her warmth, her soft skin, her beautiful voice.

“I love you,” she said. It sounded like her sleepiness was winning, as the ambulance bumped out of our yard. “I don’t ever...ever want to be without you. Please...please promise...”

She was half asleep. Maybe she didn’t realize what she was asking, or maybe she was more coherent than I was. It didn’t matter.

“I promise, angel,” I said. “I promise you’ll never be without us again. You’ll never be alone. You’ll never have to doubt.” I kissed her fingers, watching her beautiful face as she closed her eyes. “I love you, Jess. Then, now, and always.”

48 - Jessica

2 Months Later

The property was about an hour's drive outside of New York City. But there was a railway station in town, which Vincent proudly brought up multiple times, and Manson insisted the commute felt much faster than it was.

"I drove it myself to make sure," he said. "Even during rush hour." But mentioning rush hour made him wince. "Well...it isn't great *all* the time. Some times of day are really rough."

I was just happy they'd found a house they were all so excited about.

This was our second trip to New York in the past couple months. The first time, I'd hunted for apartments in the city as the boys toured houses in the suburbs. To say that the rent prices for apartments were shocking was an understatement. Even with the sizable raise my boss gave me, I still cringed at the expense. The boys didn't have an easy time finding the right house either, and the clock was ticking for all of us.

Their old house had multiple interested buyers. Fortunately, Reagan had caused no major damage, although the stench of gasoline lingered in the kitchen for weeks. But the headlines the incident generated actually brought a lot of positive attention to the property. If the place was good enough to commit multiple murders for, it was worth buying.

The criminal trial for Reagan would likely drag on for months, but Manson was staying positive about it. It seemed like it was a relief for him to finally have an opportunity to ensure his father was permanently removed from his life. Despite how long Reagan went to prison for, at the least he would no longer know where any of us lived. His ability to torment us was gone.

Alex's family had been ready to fight tooth and nail to prove their son's innocence, but the security footage of him grabbing and restraining me made that significantly more difficult for them. Another wrench was thrown in their plans when Nate admitted everything, including telling the police that Reagan had offered him money to pursue Manson and Lucas at the sideshow.

They were now trying to enter a plea deal in hopes Alex would avoid time behind bars. My own mother was ready to go to war with them though; having her daughter's life threatened had made a world of difference in her

behavior. She wasn't perfect, by any means; her desperate want to be in control still led to unnecessary arguments. But she'd finally accepted that I was dating the guys and no longer gave me a hard time about having them come over to the house. It was a step in the right direction.

But I spent little time at my parents' house anymore. I spent almost every day with the boys, and nearly every night at their house. Frankly, it made looking at studio apartments depressing. Everywhere I could afford in the city was so small, barely more than a glorified walk-in closet. How was I supposed to fit all my men into a tiny apartment when they came to visit?

Ashley teased me endlessly that these were the "horrible" problems I had to deal with.

"Oh boo-hoo, how will you fit all your men in your tiny apartment?" she said, while I was out for drinks with her the previous night. "God, I would kill for your problems."

At least we'd all have plenty of room at the new house. Jason had brought up multiple times how big the place was, and when I finally laid eyes on it, he was right.

The house sat on a small plot of land in a quiet, older neighborhood. It was a classic Queen Anne Victorian, the exterior flawlessly restored. As we parked the rental SUV along the curb and got out, I was immediately enamored with the wrought iron and brick fencing around the manicured yard, shaded by mature maple trees. The beautiful red and yellow leaves had blanketed the grass and the sidewalk where the real estate agent was waiting for us.

"Hello! Manson Reed?" She held out her hand for him as we walked up, shaking it enthusiastically. "And this must be your..."

"Family," he said, motioning to the rest of us as he introduced us. If the realtor was confused, she was careful not to show it. She kept a big smile plastered on her face as she led us up to the house, gushing about the decorative details on the wrap-around porch.

"As you can see, the previous owner took its restoration very seriously," she said. "But you will find modern upgrades within the home, particularly in the kitchen."

"Fuck yes, that's what I like to hear," Vincent said. "I need to check out that kitchen."

Stepping into the entry hall took my breath away. The interior of the house stayed true to its structural roots, but the decor was modern. Stained

glass windows around the front door cast patterns of multi-colored luminescence across the polished wooden floors and beautiful curved staircase. There were large windows in every room, filling the house with light.

“As you can see, natural lighting was truly embraced in the home’s design,” the realtor said, her heels clicking across the shining floors. “Twelve foot ceilings throughout, and the rooms are spacious.”

There was a massive fireplace in the living room, and as the realtor went on about how cozy the room would be on a cold night, all I could think about was how there was more than enough room to have an orgy in front of the fire. I whispered my idea in Jason’s ear, and he looked at me like I’d promised him his own personal candy store.

“Sold on the place already, Jess?” Vincent said, having overheard my suggestion to Jason.

“As if I wouldn’t be,” I said. “You all *knew* I’d fall in love with this place!”

Vincent shrugged innocently. “We didn’t have the slightest idea. There’s nothing special at all about this house.” I could only shake my head at him.

The realtor encouraged us to have a look around and explore as we wished. Deciding to investigate the upper floor, I wandered through the bedrooms on the second level. They were spacious and most had doorways connecting them directly to each other, rather than simply to the main hall — a common feature in these older homes.

Manson was in the room at the far end of the upstairs hall. It was the primary bedroom and it looked down into the backyard through four arched windows. He heard me come in and smiled as he turned, reaching out his arm to snuggle me beneath.

“What do you think of the house?” he said.

“It’s stunning.” I wrapped both my arms around him. “But I think you already knew I’d love it.”

“You love it?” He swelled with pride when I nodded. “Better than your apartment?”

“Ugh, don’t rub it in,” I said. “I’ll be living in a shoebox, but at least I’ll get to visit this place. If you guys decide to get it, of course.”

“We already put in an offer.”

He was grinning widely. My mouth dropped open in shock, excitement that this place could actually be theirs rushing through me. “You did?”

Seriously? When?"

"We found this place online a few weeks ago," he admitted, looking out onto the leaf-strewn lawn. "It was a really good deal, so we put in an offer before we were able to visit the place. Now that we're here, I'm glad we did."

Through the windows, I spotted Lucas in the yard, checking out the detached garage. Leaving Manson with a kiss on the cheek, I made my way out onto the back porch and jogged across the grass to join him.

"Is this going to be the new shop?" I said as he greeted me with an arm around my waist and one hand squeezing my ass.

"Only for our own personal cars," he said as we wandered around the garage's interior. It was smaller than the shop they had now, but big enough for their own vehicles. "Manson and I decided that we shouldn't have our workplace *on* the property. Given that we both have such a hard time taking days off as it is."

"No more working on weekends," I reminded him. "Weekends are for debauchery only."

"Are they really?" He pressed me to the side of the garage as we walked back outside, covering my throat with kisses and bites. "Well, would you look at that: it's Saturday."

He kissed me until my knees were weak and heat seized me. I made him stop only when the realtor spotted us and awkwardly ducked back out of sight.

"Let her watch," he growled. "Hell, she could join in if she wants..."

Laughing as I smacked his arm, I said, "Don't scare the poor realtor! She's confused enough trying to figure out who's with who."

We wandered across the yard, the leaves crunching under our shoes. "I love how big these trees are," I said, looking up at the sprawling limbs of the maple tree that shaded the backyard. "We could totally build a treehouse up there."

"I think we're too big for treehouses, Jess," he said. But there was still longing in his eyes, as if he wished he wasn't, as if building a treehouse again was simply too tempting.

"Well, even if you're too big for it...kids would like it," I said as casually as I could, smiling and shrugging as I turned to go back inside. "I'm going to go find Jason and Vincent. I heard this house has a basement? If y'all don't turn it into a dungeon, I'm going to be disappointed..."

I'd only gotten a few steps away before he called to me and I glanced back.

"Kids?" he said. He sounded both terrified and hopeful at the same time.

"Yeah, you know, little miniature versions of you...Manson...Jason...Vincent..." His eyes grew wider with my every word, and I couldn't help laughing at his expression. "I bet they'd like a treehouse."

His mouth opened and closed several times before he managed to choke out, "Yeah, I bet they would." With his hands in his pockets, he looked blankly into the distance for a moment, a nervous smile on his face. "They'd like that a lot."

Maybe I jumped the gun there, but I no longer made a habit of hiding what I wanted.

There was just enough time for us to get ready for dinner after touring the house. The boys had made the reservation and refused to tell me where since they wanted it to be a surprise. All they told me was that I should dress up nice, so I hadn't been able to resist picking up a new dress for the occasion.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom, they were ready to go. All wore fitted slacks and button-up shirts — even Lucas, who hated buttons with a particular passion. The sight of them all dressed up made my stomach do somersaults.

"Damn, you all look hot," I said, my heels giving me enough height to kiss Vincent without him having to bend down.

"You still put us all to shame. Look at you." Lucas circled me, nodding in appreciation. My dress was ruched yellow satin that barely touched my mid-thigh, and it made my ass look incredible.

Manson kissed my neck, trailing his finger over my dangling diamond earring. "You do look absolutely stunning," he said.

Jason took my hand, giving me a twirl as Vincent whistled. "Now, how do you expect us to leave the house with you looking like that?" Jason said. "I think I'd rather stay here and take all this off you."

“I promise that fucking Jess will be even more enjoyable after a Michelin-starred dinner,” Vincent said, putting his arm around my shoulders as he steered me toward the door. “We’ve had these reservations for weeks, I’m sorry, but I might die if I don’t get to try their roast duck.”

“Better be a damn good duck,” Lucas said. He gave my ass a squeeze, his voice a growl in my ear as he said, “I knew you’d be wearing a thong under that slinky little thing.”

“Thong?” I gave him an innocent look. “Oh, you think I’m wearing underwear?”

Lucas stopped abruptly. “Vince, the duck isn’t worth it.”

Vincent had to carry me out of the house over his shoulder, like a dangling carrot for the others to follow. Jason drove, Vincent took the passenger seat, and I sat in the back between Manson and Lucas. They each rested a hand on my bare thigh, and those hands kept wandering as we drove. Soon, they had teased me into such a frenzy that not even the music could cover my whimpers.

“Don’t fuck up her makeup before we’ve even gotten there,” Jason said, grinning at us in the rearview mirror.

“Counterpoint: *do* fuck up her makeup and let her squirm in front of the waiters,” Vincent said, peering over his seat with a wicked grin.

They’d told me the restaurant was “nice,” but it was far more than just that. We were seated near the windows, where we had a beautiful view of the sunset over the trees. A pianist, seated at a massive grand piano beneath an elaborate chandelier, played Chopin as two bottles of champagne were brought to our table.

“I don’t think I’ll ever look at a champagne bottle the same way again,” I said, earning myself four smoldering looks.

We raised our glasses in a toast, clinking them together as the flickering candlelight made the bubbles sparkle like tiny fireworks. The food was delicious, and I thought I was too full to consume another bite until I caught sight of the dessert menu. It didn’t take much convincing to get Vincent to split a slice of Tiramisu with me.

The moment the waiter turned away from delivering the slice, the boys all exchanged a look.

“So what do you think?” Manson said. “Do we ruin her makeup now?”

“I still think we should have done it earlier,” Vincent said. “Trying to be patient is torture.”

“She’s ready for it,” Lucas said, giving me a wink that made my entire body tingle.

“Let’s do it,” Jason said.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hissed, trying to keep my voice down. “We can’t mess around in here!”

“Who said anything about messing around?” Manson said.

He reached into his jacket and withdrew a small black box tied with a silver ribbon. He set it in front of me, tightly clasping his hands together as he said, “No messing around, Jess. This is serious business.”

“What’s the occasion?” I said, looking between them as I loosened the ribbon. Vincent looked like he would literally burst out of his seat. Jason’s leg was tapping repeatedly under the table, and I swore Lucas was holding his breath. I laughed. “Is this some kind of prank? Is a snake going to jump out at me the second I open —”

The ribbon drifted to the floor as I opened the box.

Inside was a key...and a ring.

The key was shiny, clearly new. The ring had five gems set in a platinum band, with two diamonds on either side of a pear-cut pink sapphire. It was stunning. It caught the light beautifully, casting shimmers as the box shook in my hands.

As I lifted my head, I found them all staring nervously back at me. Manson cleared his throat.

“We got that house, Jess.” My eyes were stinging with tears as I gasped. “It was a hell of a fight to get a high enough bid in but we closed on it yesterday. We told the realtor not to give it away. That’s your key.” He cleared his throat again. “There’s a note in there. I figured, uh...well...I figured we’d all end up a bit tongue-tied so...”

My hands were shaking so hard I could barely unfold the note neatly tucked above the ring.

Jessica,

We’ve been pushing each other’s buttons since we were hardly more than kids. You’ve seen us at our worst, and been there to see us become our best.

This key opens your haven: a place where you can be who you are, where you can grow, change, and live how you want to without fear. We want to share this place with you, we want our home to be your home. Even one more night spent without you would be too much.

Our family may not be ordinary or easily understood, but we want you to be a part of it.

We know marriage isn't exactly an option for us, at least not in the legal sense. But that doesn't change what this ring means to us — we want to be with you, loving you and supporting you. Our lives are intertwined like the stones in this ring. They may be brilliant alone, but each supports the other. If any of them were missing, the balance would be off.

You took a chance on something you didn't believe you should have, and we did the same. That chance was worth it in every possible way, so we decided to take another.

We love you, Jessica, far more than words could encompass. We've spent all our lives reaching for the light, and you burned through us like fire. We're the luckiest men in the world to have you in our lives, and you'd make us even luckier if you accepted this.

The key is a promise of home, safety, comfort, and support. The ring is a promise of love and devotion, a bond that won't break.

Will you say yes?

They'd all signed their names. The paper shook in my hands, sinking into my lap. It was as if that ring were squeezed around my heart, stopping my breath, aching and heavy in a way that felt too beautiful, too blissful for words.

"Jess..." There was unmistakable nervousness in Lucas's tone. "If it's too much all at once, you can tell us so. We'll wait. Or we'll figure out whatever arrangement works for you —"

I lifted my head. My makeup was ruined; I wasn't crying pretty and perfect.

"Of course, I'm saying yes," I choked out, and the smiles I was met with made me hiccup with a sob. "Of course I'll move in with you, I — I don't ever want to go back to living without you. Ever. The years we were apart, I — I wasn't living. Not how I wanted to, not how I needed to. I needed —" I hiccupped again, and Vincent put his arm around me, holding me until I could compose myself.

"I needed you all," I said, when my voice was finally steady enough to speak. "I love you...I love you all so much."

It must have been quite a sight, all of them gathering around my chair as I tried to stop weeping — holding me, kissing me. But I genuinely didn't

care how we looked. I didn't care if every single person stared, because with them, I was in my own little world.

Our world was what we needed it to be. No one else got to decide, no one's judgment could determine how we felt. We had found our own way to surround ourselves with love. We had found safety and comfort, even when some had been determined to take it away.

Lucas held my hand as Manson slipped the ring on. Jason kissed my forehead as Vincent teased me and wiped away my tears. The only thing more distracting than those sparkling gems were the men they represented.

We'd fought for our love. Fought with ourselves, with each other, with those who wanted our love to not even exist. But this was our victory.

This was our forever.

Epilogue - Jessica

Halloween - One Year Later

The candy was gone, and the last of the trick-or-treaters had departed when I finally flicked off the porch light and locked the front door. It was a cold Halloween night in our little suburb, but the line of children eager to get to our door had been nearly constant all night.

We'd gone all-out for Halloween, naturally. It was a special holiday in our house. The yard was decorated to look like a haunted graveyard, with headstones and zombie hands protruding from the dirt. Fake cobwebs were strewn across our front porch, with orange and purple string lights coiled along the railing. We even had a fog machine.

My heels clicked loudly in the quiet house as I made my way down the hall and into the kitchen. It wasn't a very original costume, but I was dressed as a cheerleader. The boys had been absolutely ravenous for it though, claiming it tapped into a fantasy they all shared.

A fantasy in which prissy Jessica the cheerleader got her comeuppance.

They'd disappeared about thirty minutes ago, while I distributed the last of the candy. They didn't explain their absence, but I had a pretty good idea of what they were up to. After all, this costume had inspired an entire fantasy for them. They wanted to bring it to life before the night was over.

That was why I didn't take off my heels. Presentation was important, and if I was going to roleplay my old bitchy self, then I had to look the part.

Opening the fridge, I pulled out a pitcher of lemonade and poured a glass. Cherry entered the kitchen, announcing herself with a friendly *mreow!* as she rubbed around my legs. Our tiny kitten had grown up into a beautiful orange cat, with pale green eyes. She was friendly and cuddly with all of us, but she preferred Lucas's company.

Cherry probably didn't remember the trash pile we'd rescued her from. Julia still fed the colony of strays, having taken over for Lucas when we moved away. She sent us pictures every few days; she had tried giving all the cats names, but there were too many and she kept mixing them up. But Lucas enjoyed getting the pictures. He'd felt guilty leaving his old friends behind.

I finished my drink and put the glass in the sink before I turned. It was lucky I did, because my hands flew up to cover my mouth in surprise when

I found Lucas standing silently in the doorway.

“Shit, Lucas!” I gasped. “You scared me!”

The boys had all chosen similar costumes this year, and I thought they looked delightfully creepy. Jason came up with the idea after watching *Hellraiser*; they all resembled the Cenobites from the film. Lucas wore a latex suit that zipped up, the collar high enough to come all the way up to his jaw. The suit was made to look as if it was stapled together, accented with lines of metal stitching. His eyes were smudged with black makeup, making them appear sunken and hollow.

He didn’t move, and he didn’t say a word. He just gave me a very small smile —

Then the lights cut out.

The pale glow of moonlight through the kitchen window was my only illumination. The doorway was plunged entirely into darkness, and I heard footsteps — then silence.

“Lucas?” I shuffled forward, my hands out so I wouldn’t bump into the table. But he was gone.

The entire house was dark. They must have turned off the power. With a dramatic sigh, I kept shuffling forward out of the kitchen. “Okay, okay, breakers are in the basement...of course...the fucking basement...”

The door to the basement was in the hallway, under the stairs. The door was cracked open slightly, and there was flickering light within. Before opening the door, I took a moment to hype myself up. I knew it was only a game; the boys wanted to scare me. But I was filled with that giddy sort of fear, the kind where I wasn’t certain if I wanted to laugh or scream.

Finally, I cleared my throat and opened the door, marching down the stairs before fear could overtake me again. My heels clicked on every step, the stairs creaking with my weight. The faint light was coming from the back corner of the basement, near the breaker box.

“Hello?” My voice sounded far too loud as I neared the bottom of the stairs. There were so many shadows, it was impossible to see anything more than vague silhouettes. I should have grabbed my phone before I came down here, or a flashlight...

But where was the fun in that?

I could feel someone watching me as I made my way to the breaker box. A single lit candle sat beside it, which basically *screamed* that this was a

trap. I would bet anything that the candle was Vincent's idea. He loved setting a dramatic scene.

But I enjoyed playing the role of the hapless victim. I opened the box, narrowing my eyes as I tried to figure out what the hell I needed to do.

Someone blew the damn candle out. I heard their breath as they did it, and briefly — so briefly I almost thought I'd imagined it — I caught a glimpse of their shadowy face as they leaned forward.

Manson. Holy shit. He'd been standing so close to me and I'd had no idea he was even there.

But now, of course, plunged into complete darkness, I couldn't even find my way back to the stairs.

"Shit..." I backed up slowly, carefully, my arms outstretched. Having my eyes wide open but seeing only darkness was extremely disconcerting. I couldn't discern a single shape, but I could hear movement: footsteps all around me.

I raised my voice and said, "This isn't funny, assholes! Whoever is doing this..." As if I didn't know. "...you'd better stop it. When my mom finds out you're fucking with me, she'll go straight to the principal. You'll all be expelled."

It was the kind of threat I would have gone for in my younger years. There was a soft sound, a laugh. But it was shockingly close beside me, and I leapt away in alarm — only to slam into a hard body blocking my way.

Struggling away from the hands that tried to grab me, I scrambled toward the stairs. I could only guess where they were as I flailed in the dark. My foot hit the bottom step and I fell, but I quickly crawled up the stairs, kicking off my heels as I did.

I reached the hallway, got to my feet and sprinted for the living room.

The fire had burned low in the hearth, and the flames cast dancing shadows on the walls. Pale light streamed in through the open window, but it didn't reach the shadowy darkness of the doorway to the hall, or the doorway that led into the kitchen.

They came at me from both sides.

Lucas and Jason stepped out of the shadows first. Their footsteps were heavy as they strode out of the hallway side by side. Instead of wearing a full latex suit like Lucas, Jason was shirtless, showing off his chest covered in colorful tattoos. His face was painted with skeletal makeup, his eyes darkened, his cheeks hollowed. His trousers were tight leather, covered with

straps and buckles. Every time he took a step, the chains dangling from his pants clinked against his other hardware, giving an ominous sound to his movement.

Then, from out of the kitchen doorway, Manson appeared. He was the only one who'd opted out of donning latex. He was still dressed head to toe in black; even his suspenders. As he walked in, he was rolling the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows.

As if whatever he was about to do was going to get messy.

"Hello, Jess." His deep voice wasn't loud, but it still made me jump. The house was so quiet, except for the subtle creak of the floor as they surrounded me.

"What do you want, freak?" I said, and almost grinned when his eyes brightened and the corner of his mouth twitched. A barely-suppressed smile.

Jason laughed softly. "You should have expected this. All these years you've walked around with your head held high, treating everyone like shit. It's about time you faced the consequences."

"You need to pay us back for all the bullshit," Lucas said. "Quite frankly, I think you need to be taken down a few pegs. You need to be put in your place."

Lucas wanted nothing more than to keep chasing me, I could tell. He had too much energy; he was rocking on the toes of his shoes. He kept shooting Manson quick glances, hoping for the signal that would allow him to give chase.

Manson was walking closer, every step making my heart beat a little faster. I stood my ground, fists clenched as if I would fight. But the excitement pulsing through my veins was focused solely on what the end result would be. I could fight all I wanted, but I wouldn't win.

They would overtake me.

"Put in my *place*?" I snapped. I tried to sound as bitchy as possible. "Excuse me? As if I would ever touch you!"

I was so focused on Manson that I didn't notice Jason creeping closer. When he spoke, it was a harsh whisper right in my ear, "You won't have a choice soon enough, princess."

Jason grabbed me before I could run. I struggled, but then Lucas came to help him, and between the two of them I was held captive.

“I’m sorry it had to happen this way, Jessica,” Manson said, although his tone told me he wasn’t sorry at all. I wasn’t either; I loved getting to fight against them, I loved our perverse games. “But you’ve been teasing us for way too long. Prancing around school in that tiny skirt.” He came closer, and I was helpless to move as Lucas and Jason held me in place. “You know it drives us wild, but you just can’t help it. You always want more attention. More, more, more.”

“There’s going to be some changes in the hierarchy,” Lucas said. “Miss Queen Bee isn’t on top anymore.”

I scoffed, although I was breathless now. I didn’t sound nearly as intense as I had only seconds ago. “As if any of you could claim to be better than me.”

“Oh, no, no, not *better*,” Jason said. “We’re degenerates, Jess.”

“Losers,” said Lucas.

Manson smiled. “Freaks.”

“But now that we’ve caught you, we don’t ever have to let you go,” Jason said, his lips brushing my neck as he spoke, just behind my ear. “We’re going to keep you. Break you. Remake you into the perfect little fucktoy.”

My entire body crawled with desire. I wondered where Vincent was hiding — I hadn’t seen him yet. But Manson crowded into my space, and suddenly all I could focus on was him.

“I’ve wanted you for so damn long,” he said. “But all you could ever do was tease. Like you’re so goddamn special.” His words were heavy, dripping with the sweetest poison. “But not anymore. We’re going to take what we want. From now on, your only focus will be on how you can please your masters.”

“Please my —what!” I struggled again — it was an excuse to grind my ass against Jason. “You’re not in charge of me! You don’t *own* me!”

Lucas gave me one of those deliciously dark laughs of his. “Mm, that’s funny. She thinks we don’t own her, Manson.”

“Silly little thing,” Jason said.

Manson was just smiling. “Well, that’s only fair. After all, she doesn’t have her collar on yet.”

I blinked rapidly. Manson hadn’t broken character, but *I* was about to. “Wait — collar? Did you say collar?”

I'd been obsessively looking at collars online for weeks now; one of them was bound to have noticed. It had been so long since I admitted to Jason that I wanted one, I honestly thought he would have forgotten.

But if he hadn't...

"That's right, angel." Manson reached up, tracing his fingers in a line across my throat. "I think locking you into a collar would help remind you of your place. It would remind everyone else too. No one's going to look at you like you're hot shit when you're collared like a sweet little pet."

My chest felt light with excitement, but I tried to stay in the scene. Inside, I was jumping up and down, clapping my hands, practically squealing.

Externally, I started struggling as hard as I could.

They knew I couldn't get away, but they let me think I could. They let me go, but Lucas shoved me toward the couch and I stumbled onto it. When I tried to scramble back up, Jason pushed my shoulder and sent me stumbling into Manson.

Manson didn't let me go. He wrapped his arms around me, squeezing like a serpent.

"I knew you'd be wearing something sexy under this little skirt," he said, his voice dangerously low as he crushed me against him, lewdly holding up my skirt. "Just a tiny thong. It barely even covers you!"

Jason knelt at my feet and ran his tongue up my thigh. He'd gotten his tongue pierced last month and now that it was finally healed, he constantly wanted to show it off.

"She's such a little slut," he said. His tongue traced right along the edge of my underwear, the silver ball on his jewelry glistening in the light. "Are you really wearing this thong when you're out on the football field? Or walking down the halls?"

"It's like you're asking for it," Lucas snarled. He squeezed my tits through my shirt, hard enough to hurt. He chuckled when I flinched in pain, renewing my struggle to get away.

Their hands were all over me — gripping, pinching, pushing, pulling. They manhandled me back down into the basement, which was no longer pitch black.

Vincent was waiting for us.

"There she is!" he said cheerfully. The dark makeup on his face made his eyes and smile appear eerily wide. He had a coil of rope in his hand as

he bounced to his feet, tipping his head to look at me curiously. “I thought you might actually get away, and that would have been so sad.” He pouted his lip. “I have so many tricks to show you.”

His chilling words, and the smile that accompanied them, inspired another frantic attempt at escape. They weren’t expecting it, and for a brief second I managed to slip out of Manson’s arms.

It was Lucas who dragged me back, kicking and screaming. “Sorry, sweetheart,” he said. “But you’re not going anywhere.”

For the first time, I noticed the candles set up on the chest of drawers along the wall. The drawers were full of toys, restraints, lubricants — anything and everything we could need for a scene. But I was momentarily distracted with what was on top of the drawers, rather than within them.

The black candles were arranged in a semicircle, and something was shimmering in the center of them. It was a rose gold metal collar, slim and delicate. It glowed in the candlelight, and I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

I was obsessed with the ring they’d gotten me. I hated to take it off, even when I showered. People would ask if I was engaged, and most of the time I would simply tell them I was married. Just because we hadn’t signed legal documents didn’t make the ring any less meaningful.

But the sight of the collar had me swelling with emotion yet again.

“It’s yours, sweetheart,” Lucas whispered, his voice soft despite his harsh grip. Gentleness came to him far more easily now. His first few months in therapy had been rough, but as time went by, the change in him was obvious. Sliding back into character, he hissed, “We’re going to lock it onto you and throw away the key.”

Manson stood beside the table, and I noticed something dangling from his hand: a tiny metal key, on a red string. He held it up so I could see it better, and Vincent gave the key a little tap with his finger, causing it to swing erratically from Manson’s hand.

“Looks like Miss Queen Bee doesn’t find us as detestable as she’d like us to believe,” Jason said. “You like that collar, don’t you, princess?”

“Come here, Jess,” Manson said, and Lucas released me with a gentle shove. “Kneel for me.”

I stood there for a moment, wavering. I’d had no idea they planned on doing this, although I suddenly realized they’d been dropping little hints all week. This was why Vincent had made so many jokes about getting new

collars for the dogs. This was why Manson had continually made comments about how much he liked chokers on me.

Forgetting the roleplay almost entirely, I stepped forward. The candlelight danced in Manson's eyes as I knelt for him, keeping my gaze on him as I sunk down. My bare knees hit the concrete floor, and Manson smiled.

"God, that's a beautiful sight," he said.

Vincent lifted the collar from the table. It opened with a small, nearly-invisible hinge. I lifted my chin a little higher as he fit it on my neck, and I shivered at the touch of cold metal. The collar was very slim, but it had a pleasant weight to it as it settled into place.

It clicked closed and I gulped. Vincent kissed the nape of my neck, his fingers brushing over me tenderly.

Manson stepped closer, holding up the key.

"You're ours," he said. "Your safety, security, and well-being is our responsibility. You've entrusted yourself to us, Jess. We take that decision seriously."

"We always protect what's ours," said Lucas. He stood beside Manson, and although his expression was reserved, I could see the love in his eyes.

Love for me. For us.

"We couldn't decide who gets to hold the key," Jason said. "So we're getting three extra ones made so we can all have one."

We'd all fallen entirely out of character, but I was too happy to care. The weight of the collar around my neck filled me with pride. I sat up straighter as Manson leaned over me and used the key to lock the collar into place.

There was a tiny click, and it felt like my heart skipped a beat.

"When I said I can't ever let you go," Manson said. "I meant it." He kissed the top of my head, and suddenly I was blinking back tears. Being collared was sexy and unbearably erotic, but it was so much more than that, too. It was a comfort, a reassurance, a promise. It was a sign to everyone who saw it that I was protected and cared for.

But we were still in the middle of a scene. After I'd composed myself, their expressions darkened again. Manson slipped the key into his pocket, and said, "Now. Let's teach the little angel a lesson about respecting her masters."

They tied me to one of the basement's thick wooden support columns. Vincent's rope twined around my tits, squeezing them as I was secured to the column. He lifted one of my legs and tied it into place, so I was balanced on one foot.

"Poor little thing," he said, in a mocking voice. "Looks like you're in a bit of a bind." He cackled at his own joke, and Lucas snorted at the pun.

"You freaks won't get away with this," I said. It was extremely difficult to pretend to be rude to them after they'd collared me. The weight of it on my neck made me ache to be good, to bow my head and obey.

"We're already getting away with it," Lucas said. It disturbed me that I couldn't see him; he stayed just outside my peripheral vision, pacing behind me. His hand suddenly wrapped around my face, his fingers shoved into my mouth and pressed down my tongue. I gagged but he kept them there, merciless. "Watch that gag reflex, girl. You don't want to throw up on my dick, do you?"

"You know you'd love it if she did." Manson looked directly into my eyes as he said it, striding back into my view with Jason right behind him. The way he looked at me was challenging, mocking — like he wanted to taunt me into continuing to fight.

It worked.

"You're a bunch of sickos!" I shouted. "Perverted freaks! You'll never get away with this, I will tell *everyone* what you did!"

Manson and Jason looked at each other, eyes wide, expression uncertain. But when they looked back at me, all that faux uncertainty vanished.

"Sickos?" Jason said innocently, stepping closer. "Freaks? That's not very nice, Jessica."

"I think the lady protests too much," Vincent said, popping up beside me like a damned jack-in-the-box. "Perhaps she's ashamed? Perhaps a little...embarrassed...about her reaction?" He sank down until he was kneeling below me, looking at me with curious eyes as he walked his fingers up my leg. "What have we here? Is that...perhaps...a wet spot on your thong?" He stroked his finger over me and I struggled, trying and failing to jerk away from him. "Oh my, someone is a naughty girl, isn't she? Let's see..." He pushed my thong aside and pressed two fingers inside me. I was already so wet that he slid in easily.

“Oh, you little whore! You’re enjoying this, look at you!” Vincent swiftly stood and held up his fingers, glistening with my arousal. Then he pushed them into my mouth, far back on my tongue until I choked. “That’s right. Taste what you’ve done. I bet you’d love it if we fucked this wet pussy; you’re already dripping for us. You want to be bred so badly, don’t you? Stuffed with cum and knocked up.”

My eyes widened.

“It would serve the teasing little slut right,” Manson said. “Put our baby in her and she’d never get away from us again.”

Their words were filthy, terrifying — but outside of the roleplay, beyond the fantasy, they struck my heart instantly. My eyes darted between them, searching — *hoping* — for a glimpse of sincerity.

Manson paused.

“What do you think of that, angel?” he said, and I knew he was checking in, he was waiting for my go-ahead. “Would it serve you right to become our perfect little housewife, take our seed again and again until we put a baby in you?”

Rapidly, I nodded. I’d been fighting them so hard, but I didn’t want to fight anymore. I wanted to please, I wanted to submit.

His crooked grin was so damn sexy. “We’re going to fuck you then, Jess. All of us, one after the other, until you’re so full with us that you’re dripping.” He walked away suddenly, and came back with his knife. He flipped it open, the movement of his fingers shockingly fast. Carefully, he ran his tongue along the blade, opening a small cut on his tongue that swiftly welled with blood.

Then he was kissing me, tongue in my mouth. He sliced through the ropes, cutting them away until he could take me in his arms and lift me up. My legs wrapped around him, I gripped his hair with one hand and dragged the nails of my other hand down the nape of his neck.

“I want to watch them fuck you until you can’t move,” he snarled. He leaned forward suddenly, laying me down on the leather-padded table we had nearby. Vincent was right there with more rope, and he gave me a grin as he began to bind me again.

I squirmed, breathlessly pleading with them, “Wait — wait, please — no —”

Vincent paused, having nearly finished binding my wrist to my ankle. “Color?” he said softly.

“Green,” I responded, smiling quickly. “I’m just losing myself in the roleplay. I’m *such* a distressed damsel.”

Vincent snorted, hanging his head for a moment. “Baby, you’re going to make me break character.”

“Oh, um...” I widened my eyes again, whimpering, “I’m so sorry, sir.”

Still laughing at me, he gripped my face with one hand, squeezing my cheeks. “You sassy little brat. We’re going to fuck that sarcasm out of you, aren’t we?”

He finished tying me, securing my wrists to my ankles. The result was that I was lying on my back with my legs lifted and spread. My feet flexed and my toes curled, helpless to move otherwise. They all surrounded me, but it was Vincent who stood between my legs first. He pulled down the zipper on his latex pants, the tightness of which left nothing to the imagination. He cock fell forward, rigidly hard as it jutted toward me.

“Look at that pretty little hole,” he said, rubbing the head of his cock back and forth over me. “I bet you’ll be so fucking tight. Lucky me, I get you first.” He chuckled darkly. “I get to rip you open.”

True to his word, he shoved his cock into me and it *did* feel like he was going to rip me apart, split me in half. My body was quaking, my legs trembling uncontrollably. Every stroke was luxuriously deep. He’d bottom out inside me, and then push just a little more — enough to make me ache and beg.

“So-so deep, Vince, please — oh my God —”

“Aw, don’t you sound so sweet,” he cooed. “Look at that sexy pout on your face. Is that too deep for you, baby?”

“No, not — ah — not too — fuck —”

“She can’t even get her words out,” Jason said, laughing at me as he stood beside the table. “I think you’re going to make her come, Vincent.”

“Fuck yeah, look at her eyes roll back,” Lucas said, standing at my head as he peered down at me. God, they seemed massive, like giants while I was a tiny bug. Lucas braced his hands against both sides of my face, saying, “Come for him, girl. Let’s see how messy you can get.”

I cried out with abandon as I came. I was spread so wide, and Vincent was hitting so deep, he made me squirt. I gushed around his cock, and received enthusiastic praise from the men gathered around me.

“You feel so good, baby,” Vincent said, hunching over me, punishing me with every thrust. “I’m going to breed this pussy every fucking day, you

hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” I groaned as his face contorted with pleasure, driving into me hard as he came. He remained bent over me for nearly a minute, arms braced against the table, before he slowly dragged his cock out. I could feel myself dripping but I was helpless to do anything about it.

Then Jason stepped into position.

“Nice and wet for me,” he said, tapping his ridiculously thick cock against me. He tapped once, twice, then he plunged inside and groaned. “Fuck, yes, you’re dripping all over the place.” He looked down as he moved inside me, watching his cock drag in and out.

“Oh my God, Jason, *pleeeaaase!*” My begging drew out into a desperate whine as he leaned over me.

“Is it too much, princess?” he said sweetly. “Does it feel so good you just can’t take it?” He was fucking me slow, in long strokes that I felt deep inside me as his hips pressed against my ass.

“Feels so good,” I murmured. My eyes nearly rolled back as he increased the speed of his thrusts.

“That’s it, Jason, let’s hear her moan,” Vincent said. His hands were resting on the table beside me as he watched, and Manson stood opposite from him. Lucas still loomed over my head, his suit unzipped so he could stroke his cock.

Jason groaned, shuddering as he hunched over me and filled me with his seed. He kept rocking inside me even after he came, until slowly pulling out. They all leaned over to inspect me afterwards, as I lay helplessly spread open on the table.

Manson said, “I think you fucked the sense out of her, J, look at her eyes.”

God, I was in bliss. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t string together a coherent sentence — but I moaned with need when Lucas moved into position, stroking himself, his tongue trailing slowly along his lower lip.

“Look at that messy cunt,” he said, slapping the head of his cock against me. He rubbed himself through the cum dripping out of me, and without any preamble, shoved himself inside with one smooth thrust.

There was a deep, primal satisfaction to being entered so viciously. He fucked into me immediately, brutally. There was no build-up; there was no mercy. I was wailing with complete abandon, as loudly and recklessly as I

wanted. I was sore already, and Lucas's cock hit that deep *aching* spot inside me.

"Scream for me, girl," he said, hips slapping against me. Every plunge of his cock sounded so wet. "Can't do anything except lay there and take it, just like a good fucktoy should."

He came inside me with a rough groan. He pulled out of me, letting loose a string of curses as he caught his breath.

"There you go, Manson," he said, chuckling softly. "How's that for sloppy seconds?" He plunged his fingers into me, slick and wet. He fingered their cum inside me, pumping it into me. The lewd sound made me whimper.

Manson moved to stand between my legs, gripping his cock. Lucas withdrew his fingers, leaned down and stroked his tongue along Manson's shaft. My Master shivered, grinning with pleasure as he caressed Lucas's head, running his palm over skull.

"Mm, so excited, aren't you, baby?" Vincent murmured. "Do you want Manson to fill you up with his cum?"

I nodded, wiggling my bound legs, inching my hips toward him. Manson hooked his finger around my collar as he leaned over me, and my stomach fluttered.

"Tell me what you want," he said. His cock was poised to sink inside me and I wanted nothing more than to feel that deep, perfect ache again.

"Please," I said. "Please, sir. Fuck me."

Manson entered me slowly, keeping his eyes on my face. I was so wet, so full already; I felt messy and lewd as he squeezed into me. He groaned as he settled inside me, moving with slow, almost lazy thrusts at first.

It hurt so good, my pussy was so sore. Manson pulled back his hips, gripped my thighs, and tugged me toward him as he thrust forward again. I squealed, nonsensical words streaming out of me, "Feels so good, so fucking good, God, please..."

"Look at me," Manson said, and I lifted my eyes. There was a whole cocktail of hormones rushing through my bloodstream, and the chemical reaction left me feeling high. "Don't look away." He pulled almost fully out of me before he thrust in again, dragging a shattered cry from my lips. "I want to see your face when I pump you full."

Even though I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut tight, I didn't. I held Manson's gaze, overwhelmed by the rising wave of pleasure and pain.

Vincent reached down, rubbing his fingers over my clit as Manson pounded into me.

“Can’t come again!” I cried, legs wiggling helpless. “Oh, please, Vince, please, I can’t, I’m so sensitive, it hurts...”

“You’re going to come anyway, baby,” he said, his tone gentle but firm, leaving no room for argument. “You’re going to be a good girl and come all over Manson’s cock, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I barely nodded. My body was completely beyond my control and they manipulated me like it was nothing. Every inch of me clenched and trembled. I was weeping, but the tears that streaked down my cheeks weren’t a bad thing — it was a relief to cry, scream, and struggle as the pleasure took hold.

Jason kissed my cheek as I came, saying, “Such a good girl, Jess, that’s it. Feels so good, doesn’t it?”

“God, look at you shake,” Lucas said. “Gorgeous little thing. Scream for us, go on, let it out.”

I did — it was so much. It was pleasure and pain, degradation and praise, cruelty and love. And I was bursting apart; I was a bundle of nerves and desire and satiated need as Manson came inside me.

“Mm, pass me another peanut butter cup, please?”

It was 4am and the bathroom smelled like chocolate and weed. We lay in the tub, the jacuzzi jets blasting, the hot water filling the air with steam. Jason fumbled with the bag of candy, his eyes half closed, sunk down in the water up to his chin. He passed me the treat, and I added its wrapping to the little pile on the edge of the tub behind me.

“You’re never going to get to sleep if you keep eating all that sugar,” Manson said. His eyes were fully closed; I’d thought he was already asleep. Lucas had knocked out, and his head was slumped against Manson’s shoulder as he snored.

“Trust me, I’ll be able to sleep,” I said. “I feel like I need to recover for a week after this.”

“As you should,” Vincent said, passing me the joint. His long hair was tied up into a messy bun to keep it out of the water. He tugged Jason closer,

wrapping his arm around him with a soft sigh. “We should probably get out soon anyway. I’m getting all pruneey.”

“I think we *all* need to recover for a week,” Jason said, stretching as he sat up. “You’ve got a dangerous pussy, Jess. It sucked out my soul.” He tried to stand up, slipped, and sloshed water all around the tub. I started laughing, and Lucas blinked his eyes rapidly as he woke up.

“Shit,” he groaned, rubbing his eyes. “I gotta get to bed. Benji is supposed to call in the morning. I don’t wanna miss it.”

He’d been looking forward to that call with his brother all week. Apparently, there was a chance Benji was going to be released from prison early for good behavior. But Lucas would find out more during that phone call tomorrow. As excited as he was about it, he was obviously nervous too. He hadn’t talked to Benji in years.

“Alright, let’s get out,” Manson said. Water streamed down his chest as he stood up, then carefully stepped out of the tub and wrapped a towel around his waist. I’d lost track of time while we relaxed in the tub, and the hot water had eased the stress out of all my muscles. Between my legs, however, was still particularly sore.

Standing in front of the mirror, I quickly fixed my wet hair into a single long braid. Seeing that collar sitting around my neck, glistening and beautiful, made me smile uncontrollably. I leaned toward the mirror, tracing my finger along the slim ring.

Manson wrapped arms around me from behind, resting his head on top of mine. “Do you like it?” he said. “Jason was pretty sure that’s the one you wanted.”

“It’s perfect.” I turned around and kissed him. “It’s exactly what I wanted.”

He smiled. “That’s all I wanted to hear, angel. It looks beautiful on you.”

“Come *on*. Bed. Now.” Lucas tugged on Manson’s hand, trying to drag him out of the bathroom. “I’m going to fall asleep standing up.”

We’d pushed two King-sized mattresses together for our monstrosity of a bed. There was plenty of room for all of us, and we had heaped the bed with blankets and pillows. I thought the size was absolutely luxurious. It was a warm and comfortable nest; one of my favorite places in the house.

Jason and Vincent were already in bed. I ran ahead of Lucas and Manson so I could leap toward the mattress, landing softly in the mounds of

pillows. Vincent and Jason immediately snuggled close to me, while Manson and Lucas crawled into bed. Not one of them had even bothered to put on underwear.

Lucas wrapped his arm around my waist, sighing tiredly, and Manson settled in behind him. The bed had enough space for us to stretch out, and throughout the course of the night we would end up sprawled away from each other. But as we fell asleep, we were almost always piled together in a heap.

As tired as I was, before I closed my eyes, I had to ask, “So...during the roleplay earlier...what you said about getting me pregnant...what was that all about?”

Manson snickered, “I never thought I had a kink for that. But that was really fucking sexy.”

Vincent laughed. “Yeah, admittedly, I never thought I’d be into it either. But damn, talking to you like that, filling you up until you were so messy...” He exhaled a long breath. “That was amazing.”

“I mean, what you all were saying about *breeding* and knocking me up...” It felt almost silly to talk about that way, comically sexual. We’d never played that way before, I’d never even thought about it. But now that we’d tried it, I liked it far more than I expected to.

The idea of growing our family...someday...was truly beautiful to me.

“Are you asking if we meant it?” Jason said, kissing my hands as he snuggled closer.

“Yeah, I guess...I guess that is what I’m asking,” I said.

“We’re not trying to make anything happen right away,” Manson said. “But in a couple years...we might need you to get that IUD removed.”

“If you think that’s something you want,” Vincent added.

“Because we know it’s what we want,” Lucas said, and kissed the back of my neck. “Kids terrify me, but...you know...it’d be pretty cool.”

“Someday,” Jason said. “I think we’d all really like that.”

It was difficult to contain how happy that made me. I didn’t think I was ready for kids *now*; my career was only just getting started, the boys had their business to run and it was growing bigger every day. But someday, I knew I’d really like that too.

“Now get to sleep,” Manson said tiredly. “We can talk about babies when we’re not so tired.” But I was still wiggling with excitement, all the sugar in my bloodstream not allowing me to keep still. I squirmed around

and rolled over to my other side, and Manson muttered, “I told you that candy would keep you awake.”

“Sorry, sorry,” I giggled. “You can punish me tomorrow.” I sat up, and leaned over Lucas so I could kiss Manson’s cheek and whisper, “*Master.*”

THE END

Acknowledgements

First of all, I must thank myself. Thank you, Harley, for not completely losing your mind while writing this book – although it was close. Thank you for making it through the breakdowns, the panic, and the tears. Thank you for not giving up.

To my husband, I promise I'll start taking weekends off again! Thank you for always reminding me that I deserve to rest, for getting me out of the house, and making sure I'm actually eating. And for never letting me forget my tea.

Z, my fantastical editor, my wizard of words, thank you for everything. I'm so sorry for adding in chapters after you already edited the whole manuscript, and for all of the em dashes. (Although they are THE superior punctuation.)

Tasha, thank you so much for working tirelessly in helping me develop this book. Having your advice as it all came together was sincerely invaluable, as was all of your support.

To my lovely ladies at JLCR Author Services, y'all know I couldn't have done this without you. My ARC team wranglers, graphics creators, marketing masters – you have done it all and I'm so grateful for everything.

Bethany, thank you as always for believing in these books. You've helped them go farther than I ever thought possible.

To my ARC team and the Wicked Dark Desires reader group, YOU ALL ARE AMAZING! I'm so blessed with the community we've gathered here. All your support, enthusiasm, and excitement for these books is what keeps me going when I want to give up. Thank you!

And to you, dear reader. Thank you for picking up this book, thank you for sticking around until the end. Thank you for coming into my weird little world for a while. I hope you'll return for the next adventure.

Until next time,
Harley

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Harley is a writer of New Adult Erotica, Erotic Horror, and Dark Romance. She enjoys crafting steamy stories on the dark and kinky side, the creepier the better. Harley lives in Washington with her husband and three cats. She loves horror films, dry red wines, and almost always has a candle lit. Most days she can be found at her desk drinking tea with at least one cat on her lap.

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