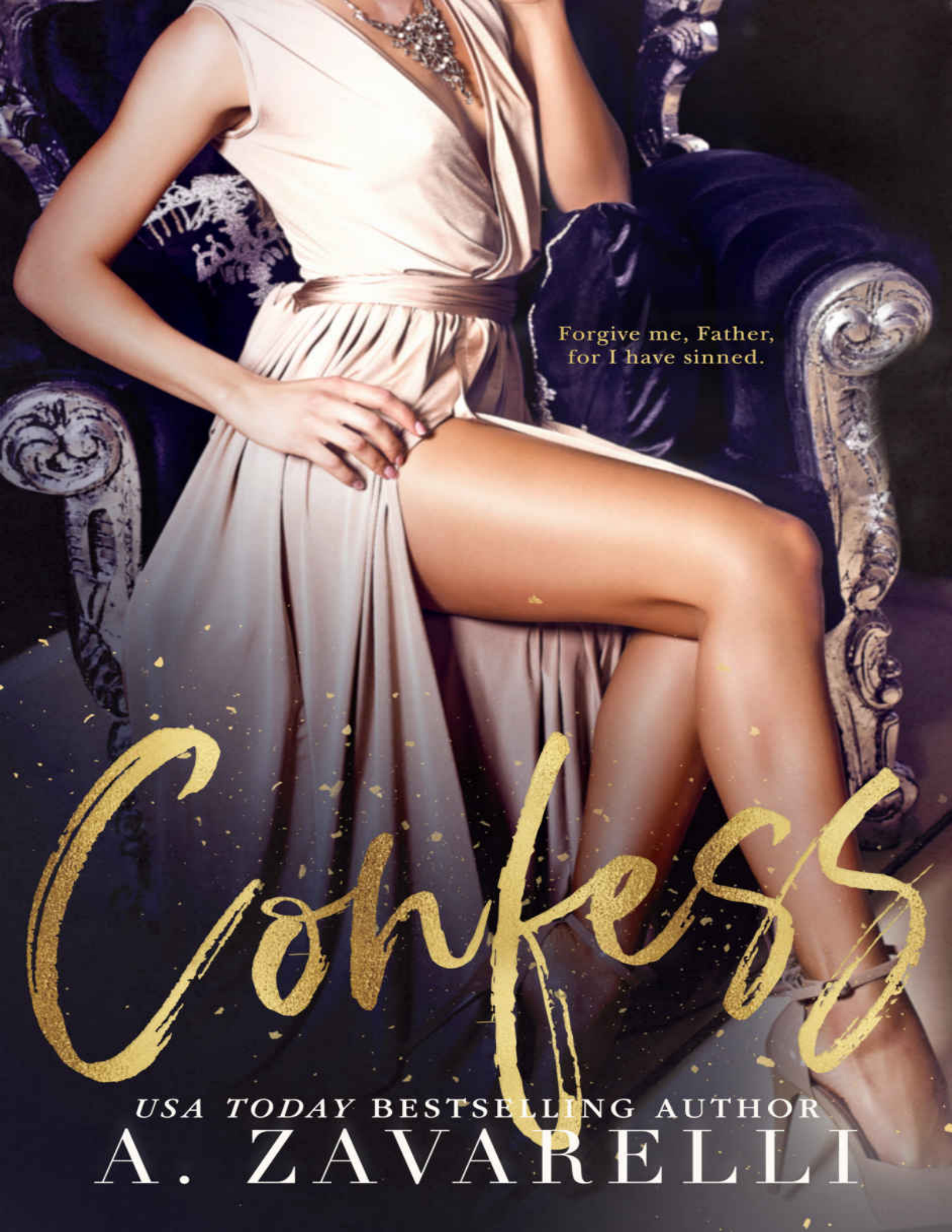
Forgive me, Father,
for I have sinned.
Confess
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
A. ZAVARELLI

SIN CITY SALVATION #1

A. ZAVARELLI

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If You Ever Did Believe—Stevie Nicks
Run on for a Long Time—Blues Saraceno

Be My Devil—Extreme Music
Slow Farewell—Raphael Lake
Hero—Extreme Music

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In memory of Addison Baldwin

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Prologue

Gypsy

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

The shadow on the other side of the metal grate moved, and the priest cleared his throat. "How long has it been since your last confession?"

I had a difficult time believing he didn't know, but he always asked that same question.

"Three weeks, give or take."

A moment of silence passed between us, and I wondered what he was thinking. I wasn't well versed on the practices of the church, but from what little I knew, this circumstance we found ourselves in was out of the realm of normality for both of us. He was supposed to ask me questions, I was supposed to talk about my sins, and then I'd receive my punishment. But after my first visit here, that had never been the way it went down.

"Speak freely," the voice on the other side of the wood instructed.

He was patient with me when I didn't obey. As usual, I never knew where to begin.

"Why don't you tell me what brought you here," he suggested.

My fingers moved over the weathered wood bench beneath me. This building had always felt so vast. Too quiet and holy for the likes of me. But in this booth, I was safe. Anonymity granted me the freedom to confess to someone I couldn't see.

"Have you ever wished that something was a dream?" I asked.

The reply was somber. “Every day of my life.”

The gravity of his statement sounded like a confession, and I didn’t know what to do with it.

“I just finished another job.” My hands wrung together in my lap. “Another con. It was a lot of money.”

The wood from his seat creaked, and I imagined him shifting, trying to process what kind of monster I really was. “How did that make you feel?”

“This isn’t about my feelings.”

“Then what it is it about?”

I closed my eyes, and the image came flooding back to me. My lungs burned. The landscape of my mouth turned to desert. I’d never said this part out loud before, but I needed to. Someone had to hear it.

“My sister suggested we get ice cream to celebrate. We always celebrate after a job.” I tried to will the nausea in my stomach away as I spoke. “I couldn’t even remember the last time we had ice cream together, though. She got bubblegum, her favorite. And it… it triggered something.”

“A memory?” the priest asked.

“The day I got home from juvie, I found her in the kitchen eating ice cream. I’d been gone for six months, and every day, I was sick with fear for her. She was so small. So helpless.”

I heard the priest swallow, and his voice was hoarse when he responded. “You thought it was your job to protect her?”

“It was,” I assured him. “She had nobody else. And when I walked into the kitchen that day, for a split second, she was so happy to see me that I thought everything was going to be okay. I thought he’d kept his word, and she was okay.”

“But she wasn’t?”

I looked at the floor, clutching my stomach as I recalled her eyes. For as long as I lived, I would never forget what I saw there.

“No,” I whispered. “I could see that something had changed.”

“What was it?”

“Her innocence,” I answered. “It was gone.”

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Chapter 1

Gypsy

"Here." I shoved a fat wad of twenties into the cabbie's palm. "That's half. I'll give you double that if you're here when I come back. Twenty minutes tops."

He glanced down at the stack of cash and shrugged. "No problem, lady."

I checked my lipstick in the mirror and swung open the door. It was a chore getting out of the cab in my fluffy white dress, but I made it work.

Outside, New York City Hall was bustling with crowds rushing to their destinations, but they all paused to look at the woman scurrying down the sidewalk in a wedding dress and cowboy boots.

I waved like a princess and even blew a few kisses to a pair of little girls with stars in their eyes. No doubt they were dreaming about their own wedding someday. Hopefully, theirs would turn out better than this one.

A chivalrous stranger with dark eyes opened the door for me, and I thanked him while I rushed past, nearly colliding with my groom the moment I stepped inside.

"Graham," I squeaked.

"Where have you been?" He glared. "You're ten minutes late."

I bit my tongue and smiled. This was the most charming he'd been in the past two weeks, and it only solidified my decision to play him like a fiddle.

“The bride is supposed to be late.” I offered him a wide smile. “It’s tradition.”

“Nothing about this wedding is traditional,” he muttered.

That wasn’t news to me. He couldn’t even spring for a cake or flowers, and he hadn’t invited a single family member to this shotgun wedding of ours. Yet he was deluded enough to believe I actually thought he loved me. The reality was that he was gunning for senator, and he needed to secure a wife for the upcoming political rallies. Family men were always more likable in the public eye.

He checked his watch and gestured for me to put my arm in his. “Come on. We’re next in line.”

I tagged along toward the courtroom where the magistrate was probably waiting. “This is all so romantic, but Graham, do you think I could have a word with you in private first? I have something I’d like to give you.”

He glanced down at the envelope in my hand, his features tightening before he smoothed them with practiced civility. He would make a good politician.

“Sure,” he said curtly. “But we’ll have to make it quick.”

I nodded and tugged on his hand, leading him into an empty vestibule that was closed off to the public.

“What are you doing?” He stared down the empty hall. “We can’t go in here; they’ll kick us out.”

“Trust me,” I whispered. “You’ll want this to be private.”

His face was a mask of irritation as he followed my lead and came to a stop around the corner. I looked up at him, mentally preparing to rip off my own mask. It was always best to do it like a Band-Aid.

There was no love for me in his eyes, but even so, for a split second, I hesitated. I’d known Graham for three weeks, and in that time, he’d showered me with gifts and tokens of his appreciation. His appreciation for helping him to keep a secret he wasn’t even aware I knew. I was just the dumb baby fawn being led to slaughter in a marriage he’d never truly be happy with, but hoped he’d make work by pacifying me with money.

In part, he was right about that. Because I *needed* the money. My little sister needed the money. I wanted to give her a better life, and I decided long ago that if fate wouldn’t give us our own opportunities, I would create them.

I had to remember that when I looked at Graham, even if a small part of me hated what I was about to do. Sure, he was an asshole who thought he could buy me. I'd dealt with enough of them to know it wouldn't break his heart when I walked away. He'd be wiser, and I'd be richer, and we'd both be winners in the end. But lately, I didn't feel like a winner at all.

"Come on." Graham reached for the envelope in my hands. "We're wasting time here. Is that for me?"

His sharp words snapped me back to reality, and I narrowed my eyes. Rich men were all the same. They thought they could treat women like shit because they had fat wallets. And this was my reminder that it didn't matter what I was going to do. Graham would pay the money to avoid the humiliation of a scandal, and it wouldn't hurt him… *much*.

I handed him the envelope that felt so dirty in my hands. "This is for you, my darling."

He didn't spare me a second glance as he pulled out the contents of the evidence I'd gathered on him over the last three weeks. Sometimes this part of the game could be dramatic. I certainly never knew what I was going to find on a mark before I started researching him. One could only speculate, but even I wasn't past being surprised on occasion. Everybody had a secret. And I was very good at exploiting them.

"What in the hell is this?" The color drained from Graham's face as he looked over the photos of him with his best friend's wife. Those had been taken just three days ago, but there were plenty of others. Clandestine meetings in motel rooms and dark corners at dinner parties. It was all there. And it was an irrefutable fact that when he agreed to wait until after marriage to consummate, he was completely full of shit.

"There are plenty more where those came from." I dropped the Southern accent I'd been using since the night I'd met him. "As well as dates and times. Locations. They're all stored in a digital file."

"You're blackmailing me?" His eyes widened in disbelief. "You, the dumb blonde bimbo who's been parading around on my arm for three weeks? How the fuck did you get this? Who sent you?"

I pulled off my wig and shook out my hair with a smile. "Actually, I'm a brunette. And I'm a lot smarter than you give me credit for. I work alone, Graham."

The veins in his neck swelled, and his face mottled with red as he realized he'd just been played by the bimbo. "You know I'm a powerful

man. How can you be sure I won't just make you disappear?"

"Because you don't want even the scent of impropriety around you," I answered. "The woman you were supposed to marry goes missing? It's a problem you don't need. Besides, I have fail-safes for such an event, and I can promise you that this information does not go missing with me. But you can make it all go away, Graham."

His eyes pinched together, penetrating me with the resentment he'd been hiding up until this point. "What do you want?"

"One hundred thousand."

"You must be joking," he seethed.

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

He turned away, curling his lip as his eyes fell to the picture in his hand. The lovers in the frame were lost in the throes of passion, disgracing the guest bedroom of his best friend's summer house on the cape. I was there with him that night on the beach with his friends, regaling them with stories of my fake life. But when I snuck away and spotted them, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to snap the shot.

As I watched him now, his feelings were written all over his face. He wouldn't betray her. He couldn't.

"You love her," I said, "don't you?"

He dragged a hand through his hair and stuffed the photos back into the envelope. "It doesn't matter. You'll get your money if that's what you want. It's done."

His answer was what I expected, but at the same time, it renewed my constant companion of hopelessness. This was a cruel world. A world where people would choose reputations over love. Dirty escapades over happiness. I never wanted to weave myself into that fabric of society again. Situations like this reminded me why it was better to be a loose thread, dangling in the wind.

I didn't know how to love men. I only knew how to leave them, with everything I wanted.

"I'll need it by five o clock today," I told Graham.

And then I walked away.

.

Chapter 2

Lucian

"How about another shot, cutie?"

The drunk college student drooling at her feet couldn't take his eyes off her. Around the bar, a similar theme persisted. In the face of the jilted bride dancing on the bar to a country song, the entire male population of the little dive bar in Jersey had suddenly forgotten they had girlfriends or wives.

I had to give the girl some credit. She knew how to captivate a crowd. Her sob story about the groom leaving her at the altar had earned her plenty of suitors who were ready and willing to be her Prince Charming this evening and soothe her aching heart. The wedding dress and boots were a nice touch too. She had them convinced she was a small-town Dixieland princess who was homegrown and fresh off the farm with that fake Southern accent.

I'd been watching her play this game for two hours, and so far, she'd swindled several of her potential suitors out of a couple of grand by playing light with her fingers. Knowing that she'd just come from a large con, she wasn't doing this because she needed to. She was indulging her reckless behavior because she wanted to get high on her favorite drug.

Fucking over the men who would fuck her over if given the chance.

In a bold move, she decided to try her luck at the pool table. But while her male counterpart might have had a dick, he also had a brain. And he didn't take too kindly to her pretending she didn't know how to play while

they were placing bets only to come out and reveal herself as a shark halfway through.

His voice was getting louder, and her taunts were tiptoeing the line of savagery.

“You didn’t call the shot,” he said.

She planted her hands on her hips and glared. “Yes, I did.”

“No, you didn’t.” He pointed the pool stick in her direction. “Now I’m beginning to think you’re a lying bitch.”

I didn’t come here with the intentions of stepping in, but at this point, I had no choice.

“That’s because she is.” I moved in beside her and commandeered the stick in her hand. “But that’s still no way to talk to a lady.”

“She ain’t a fuckin’ lady,” the guy snarled. “She’s a lyin’, cheatin’—”

“Con artist,” I finished for him. “And she was trying to swindle you out of your money.”

She peered up at me, and I removed some cash from my wallet, tossing it down on the table. “That should cover the inconvenience.”

Shark gray eyes cut into me. “Who the hell are you?”

“That’s a good question,” her opponent chimed in. He walked around the table and stopped a foot away, studying me. “You aren’t from around here.”

“No, I’m not.”

He cocked his head to the side, and I knew the moment recognition sparked in his eyes. I cringed before he even spoke.

“I know who you are.” He jabbed his pool stick in my direction. “You’re that fella from the TV. That lawyer who defends all those rich wife beaters and such.”

Gypsy looked up at me, her eyes flaying me alive. I could almost hear her judgment already. With one simple comment from some drunk moron, she’d made up her mind about me.

“I saw you,” she murmured. “At the courthouse. You were the guy who opened the door for me. Are you following me?”

“Let’s discuss this outside.”

She took a step back, shielding her body with her arms. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Who the hell do you think you are?”

I took back the space between us and whispered in her ear. “I’m the guy who just saved your ass. And if you don’t leave now, I’ll tell this whole bar

just how much you've stolen in here tonight."

Her shoulders went rigid, and when she pulled back to look at me, she knew I meant it.

"I'll leave on my own," she announced. "Thank you very much."

She scooped up the hem of her white dress, which was now stained with beer and crumpled peanut shells, and then sauntered out the door. I followed, keeping my distance just so I could watch her get safely into a taxi.

She waved at the cabbie and poked her head inside to ask if he was available before flinging herself into the back seat and shutting the door. She gave him the address, and then out of curiosity, she looked back at the door to find me standing there. I didn't stop her before they drove away.

I'd see her again soon.

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Chapter 3

Gypsy

THE DUSTY, HEAD-IN-OVEN VARIETY OF heat hit me as I strode from McCarren International Airport's baggage claim with my Kate Spade luggage in tow. Even though Birdie was late—again—a familiar warmth bloomed in my chest as I stood on the curb and inhaled the exhaust fumes and cigarette smoke.

I was finally home.

It had been three weeks since I'd set foot in Sin City, and I missed it. Something about the constant lights and noise and obnoxious heat of this place attracted lost souls. A few years ago, I was one of them. Las Vegas had spoiled me with the glitz and glamour, and it didn't matter how many places I visited—nothing else ever compared.

My almost marriage to Graham Darby kept me away for longer than I'd anticipated, but thanks to him, Birdie and I would be sitting pretty for at least a year. I could probably even take a vacation, but who was I kidding? I loved the con too much to quit.

As I checked my bank account to ensure Graham had fulfilled his end of the bargain, I couldn't help but notice that I had an admirer edging closer to me on the curb. He had the subtlety of a shark circling blood-infested waters, and if he weren't wearing department store khakis, I might have taken the bait.

Ignoring him, I sent Graham a quick email, letting him know that the photographic evidence of his affair would be delivered by six this evening, and he could do with it what he wished.

It was a clean break, and we both came out better for it. Though I probably could have squeezed even more out of him, in the end, I knew when I was pushing my luck. Dealing with powerful men was a dangerous game, but I hadn't lost yet.

The insufferable vocals of tween pop preceded the flash of red that alerted me to Birdie. Pulling up in the red Audi TTS I bought her last year, she popped her bubblegum and waved for me to get in.

"Sorry, sorry, I know," she said. "I'm always late."

With a pink tipped fingernail, she pressed the button that opened the trunk, and my admirer rushed to help me put my bags in.

"Thanks," I murmured.

Once he finished stuffing my suitcases inside, his eyes didn't miss the opportunity to roam over my fitted yellow romper and gold stilettos.

"My name's Kevin," he offered.

I struggled not to roll my eyes. "Hi, Kevin."

"Do you have a name?" he teased.

"My name is you can't afford me, sweetie, so I'm going to save you the trouble of working up the courage to ask me out."

I didn't wait for his reply, but I heard it nonetheless. Regardless, I laughed it off. I'd been called worse things than a bitch by guys far more intimidating than Kevin.

"Another one bites the dust, huh?" Birdie laughed as I shut the door, and she gunned it out of the clustered pickup zone.

"He might need some therapy, but I'm sure he'll survive."

Birdie turned down the music and gave me a quick once-over before replacing her oversized Coach sunglasses. "How was New York?"

"Crowded, loud, obnoxious." I sighed.

"C'mon, Gyps," she whined. "You know I don't like it when you make me ask a million questions. Just tell me about the money. Did you score big?"

I examined my little sister from the passenger seat, wishing for the thousandth time she'd never found out what I actually did to support us. It was my job to protect her, and even if she was nineteen, Birdie didn't have the skills to survive this world on her own.

She had grown far too excited when talking about my cons with me, and I needed her to know that it wasn't exciting. At least, it shouldn't be for her. It was dangerous. In reality, it was the most dangerous job I could possibly pull off, and every time I went into a con, I never knew if I'd come out alive. But I did it for us.

"Where did you get that ring?" I asked, the gleam from her right hand practically blinding me.

She wiggled her finger and shrugged. "Somebody dropped it in the casino."

She was lying, and I knew she was lying. That ring had to be worth at least twenty grand, and considering I recently put Birdie on a necessities-only allowance, she couldn't afford it.

"What about the sunglasses? Did you find those on the floor too?"

She smirked. "Of course not. I just smiled and batted my eyelashes, and the sales guy gave me a huge discount."

"Birdie." I rubbed my temples, trying to will away the tension. "We've talked about this."

"About what?" She tried using the same tactic she just described by batting her pretty blue eyes at me.

"You're getting too used to this lifestyle. I don't like it. You need to cut back and start focusing on your future. On school."

She pursed her lips and shook her head, strands of blond hair flying around her face. "School is boring. I want to work with you."

"No." My jaw clenched. "That will never happen. Never."

"I'm an adult, Gypsy. You can't tell me what to do anymore."

"Then why don't you act like one and get your GED like you promised you would?"

"Funny coming from you." She rolled her eyes. "Hypocritical much?"

My attention drifted out the window, watching the cars fly by as we wound our way across Summerlin Parkway. I was so tired of this argument. I knew it, and Birdie knew it, but neither one of us knew what to do about it.

"Look, I'm sorry," Birdie muttered a minute later. "Are you mad at me?"

I smiled at her because she was always the first to break. I loved my sister more than anything. I think she was the only person I was actually

capable of loving. So the question was ridiculous, but she asked it often because deep down she was still a damaged little girl.

“I could never be mad at you,” I told her. “I just want what’s best for you. Always.”

“I know.” She dipped her head to hide her emotion. “That’s why I’m trying to do what I promised. I’m still going to all my classes. Mostly.”

“If you want to get into design school, you need to have your GED. There’s no way around that.”

“I know.” She shrugged a dainty shoulder. “It’s just hard to stay focused while I get through all the boring stuff first.”

“It will get easier,” I assured her.

“What about you, Gyps? What do you want to be when you grow up?”

I leaned my head back against the headrest and smiled at her joke. I was already well and truly grown up. Too grown up for twenty-three. “I want to be rich.”

“Ha.” Birdie snorted. “Could have seen that one coming.”

She whipped the car into a parking space in front of our luxury apartment building in Summerlin North but kept the car idling.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “I have class.”

My gaze moved to the clock on the dashboard. I knew her schedule like the back of my hand because it was the only way I could feel safe. Those details were vital to me. There was never a question in my mind that at any minute we might need to cut and run, and I was constantly reminding her of it.

“Your class doesn’t start for three hours.”

Birdie groaned. She got sick of me being so overprotective of her, but she secretly loved and needed it. “Yes, but I need to study for a test. I’m meeting Trouble at Starbucks to chill out for a couple of hours. If I stay here with you, I’ll be too distracted.”

I wanted to believe her, but something about her explanation didn’t sit right with me. Birdie had never been so dedicated to her studies before. She would usually cram for a test fifteen minutes beforehand in the parking lot while chugging a Rockstar. She didn’t even like coffee. And as far as her new friend Trouble? Well, the name said it all. Birdie had found the lost, homeless girl wandering through a casino, and they’d been inseparable ever since. I didn’t necessarily think she was a good influence for Birdie, but she

was trying to make a point that it was time to relinquish some of my control over her life. The anxieties would never go away, but I knew that there would be a day when Birdie would decide she was ready to start taking baby steps toward her freedom, and it looked to me like that day was arriving.

“Just be careful,” I pleaded with her. “Check in before you get to class, please. And when you’re on your way home.”

“I will,” she promised.

She never argued with me on these points because she knew it would make me sick with worry if she didn’t follow through. Birdie might have been a brat, but she loved me too, and she would never want to hurt me.

I got out of the car and grabbed my suitcases, rolling them up to the sidewalk.

“Hey,” Birdie called out after me. “How about dinner tonight? A celebration for when I ace this test.”

I smiled. “Sure, that sounds good. How about Sinatra at seven? I’ll make us a reservation.”

“Perfect!” she shouted. “Make sure it’s on the patio.”

I rolled my eyes, but I ultimately relented, the way I always did with Birdie.

Chapter 4

Gypsy

THE AL FRESCO DINING EXPERIENCE at Sinatra was one that couldn't be matched, and I often shared dinner there with Birdie when I was home between jobs.

Nestled between giant white columns designed to make you feel as though you were in Italy, vibrant orange chairs created an intimate and cozy atmosphere on the patio. In front of the crackling fire, warmth bloomed in my stomach, and it wasn't from the wine.

I'd taken the day to recharge at the spa, and I felt amazing. In the process, I'd even managed to come up with some ideas to incentivize Birdie in her studies. A rewards-based program like those gold stars parents gave their kids on a chart for doing a good job. Except I was dealing with Birdie, so her rewards would be Prada and Gucci. I was excited to tell her about it because I was desperate to see her succeed.

But I was already two glasses deep in rosé, and she hadn't shown up. Discreetly, I pulled out my iphone and texted her again. She knew better than to make me wait like this. She knew better than to let me think the worst, which was exactly what I was doing.

Fire. Car accident. Hostage situation. These were just a few of the thoughts racing through my mind like a freight train. But what it always came back to was something much worse.

It wasn’t logical, but for years, I had considered the possibility that *he* had come back to haunt us. Even though I’d washed his blood from my hands. Even though he was declared dead and laid to rest. It always came back to him.

It was an irrational fear, but that didn’t mean I was crazy. Ricky had a lot of friends who, for reasons I couldn’t fathom, felt some sort of loyalty to him. Just because he was dead didn’t mean the threat was.

I glared at my phone for the thousandth time in thirty minutes, ready to call the waiter and ask for my check. This wasn’t getting me anywhere, and I couldn’t just sit here. I needed to find her.

Those plans were at the forefront of my mind when I looked up, hoping to find the server nearby. Instead, my eyes collided with the six foot of lean muscle who had taken up residence in the empty seat across from me when I wasn’t looking.

“Are you lost?” I scowled.

“No.” He moved the napkin aside and set his empty glass on the table. “I think I’m right where I’m supposed to be.”

A chill moved over me at the deliberate way he said those words. I couldn’t dismiss this as coincidence. It wasn’t a coincidence that he was in New York with me two days ago, and now, he was sitting across from me in Las Vegas. Lucian West and I both had a taste for the finer things in life, but our paths had never crossed until this week.

I made it my business to know the potential vipers in my surroundings, and as soon as I left that dive bar, I started researching him.

What I’d discovered so far was that Lucian was a high-profile criminal attorney with a bankroll that made mine look like peanuts. He was in the public eye and known for being ruthless in the courtroom. It didn’t seem to bother him that the newspapers often labeled him as heartless, cynical, and self-serving. It also didn’t seem to bother him that he had been forever branded as the man without morals.

In the last year alone, I found countless news articles regarding two of his clients. A celebrity and a professional footballer whose common thread were the crimes they were accused of. Murdering their own wives. It rubbed me the wrong way, but my ire was nothing compared to the public outcry when he actually won the cases and his clients walked free. It didn’t matter what the justice system had decided because in the court of public opinion, he was one of the most hated men in America.

Sitting across from him now, I had my own thoughts about him. Something was unmistakably hard about the man. A real prince of darkness whose features matched his lightless soul. He had all the trappings of an aristocrat—broad shoulders and an angular jaw, eyes the color of hot coffee, and jet-black hair with only a hint of silver streaked through the side. In short, he was ridiculously handsome if you were into the devil. But the persisting media evidence was that he was never seen in the company of a woman. It only stirred more questions about what he was doing here with me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

He smirked. “Why don’t you tell me?”

I reached for my Coach bag and moved to stand. “I don’t have time for this or you. I need to go.”

“Sit.”

His voice came out like a whip, soft but deadly. I glared back at him, wondering if he truly was insane.

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m sure by now you know who I am,” he answered. “Just as I know who you are, Gypsy Blue.”

I collapsed into the chair with weak knees. Nobody knew that name. Nobody but Birdie. For as long as I could remember I’d been handing out fake names like candy. I could easily be a Kelly, or Brittney, or Sarah. But never Gypsy.

“What do you want?” This time, the question was softer, and I hated that I’d shown him even a hint of vulnerability. But I had a feeling that it didn’t matter. This man was here to get what he wanted, one way or another.

“Your sister isn’t coming,” he said casually as he flagged down the waiter and ordered us both another drink.

It hurt to breathe, and I knew I was on the verge of panic, but I tried to stay calm. I had learned the hard way that dramatics got you nowhere.

“Where is she?”

“She’s safe,” Lucian said. “For now.”

“You motherfucker,” I hissed under my breath. “If you even think about hurting her—”

“I have no reason to hurt your sister.” He fixed his gaze on my eyes in a way that made me feel as though he could see into my soul. “However, a

few powerful men in this city might feel differently."

Mentally, the only detail I could grasp onto was that Birdie hadn't been hurt. I was already making lists and planning our escape. I just needed to shake this guy first and get out of here. I would find her, and we would split. It didn't matter what she'd done as long as she was safe.

I glanced around the room, suddenly aware that the patio had been cleared and no new guests had been seated. Even the waiters had disappeared after bringing our drinks. It was just the two of us now.

I leaned forward, adopting the position I often used to make men feel like I was gifting a piece of myself to them. "If it's money you want, I have it. Just tell me where she is."

Even though my breasts were on display in the tight red dress, Lucian's eyes never strayed from my face. That was how I knew I was in trouble.

"I know you have money." He plucked his glass from the table and swirled the amber liquid around the fat chunks of ice. "The money you've swindled from men all over this country. It appears that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree as far as your sister is concerned."

My fingers went numb under the weight of his implication. "Birdie doesn't do that."

"How well can you really know a person when you're never here?" Lucian cocked his head to the side. "You leave her alone while you're gone. How would you know what she's doing?"

I gave up the pretense of niceties and leaned back in my chair, shielding my body with my purse. "Because she tells me, and she wouldn't lie to me."

"Stop deluding yourself." He scoffed. "Everyone lies. It's human nature."

"You would know," I snarled. "Considering you defend the worst of humanity."

His brow arched in surprise. "Isn't that a little self-righteous coming from you, sweetheart?"

This conversation was going nowhere fast, and time wasn't on my side. I needed to focus on disarming this bomb so I could get out of here. "Tell me what you think Birdie has done, and I will fix it."

The darkness in his eyes melted away to a cocoa brown, and his voice betrayed a hint of humanity when he spoke. "You can't fix everything for her."

Those words scared me more than anything because they held so much weight. It was as if he knew our history, and I couldn’t accept that it was true. I didn’t want to.

Lucian bent down to retrieve a file from the briefcase beside his chair, and my heart palpitated when he slid it across the table. “It’s all in there.”

With trembling fingers, I opened the folder. I thought I was prepared for anything, but it was worse than I imagined. What he said was true, and this was the proof. Birdie had been stealing from men, but she was an amateur, and it was painfully obvious by these photos.

Shot after shot, she was proven a thief and a liar. Rings, watches, wallets, cash. They were all listed in the damages, and the total was in the hundreds of thousands. But it wasn’t even the worst of it. The worst was that there were naked photos of her in this file. Photos of her seducing the men she stole from and doing exactly the thing I had been trying so hard to protect her from this whole time.

It hurt me, but it pissed me off too.

I looked up at Lucian. “Some of these are from casinos. But what about the rest? Are you having her followed?”

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. The proof was right here.

I pushed the file away, unable to look at it a second longer. “I can pay it back. I’ll just need some time.”

He dipped his head, and the hardness returned to his features. “I’m sure you could. But these are just petty thefts compared to some of the things you’ve done. I don’t think a courtroom is going to let you charm your way out of a category A felony.”

My stomach roiled as my eyes darted toward the nearest exit. “And what exactly would that be?”

Lucian leaned forward, prompting every inch of my body into high alert. “How about the murder of Ricky Montoya?”

My heart leaped into my throat, and for the first time in too many years, I forgot how to speak. Terror wrapped its icy claws around me as I tried to figure out a way to deny it. But I couldn’t.

Lucian tapped the table, drawing my attention back to him as he whispered, “It isn’t your money I want, Gypsy Blue. It’s your life.”

Chapter 5

Lucian

HER FACE PALED, AND THE composure she wore as an armor finally fractured.

"You must be joking," she choked out. "You think you can coerce me into doing what you want because of this?"

"It works for you, doesn't it?"

She pursed her lips and took a sip of her wine, trying to hide her nerves.

"I think you'll do whatever I ask of you if it means protecting Birdie. The Ricky Montoya deal is just another incentive."

Her fingers made small, jittery movements in her lap. "And what exactly are you asking of me?"

For a moment, I allowed myself to get lost in her smoky gray eyes. They were hypnotic, almost feline, and I could see why men fell all over themselves for her. In this lighting, the soft glow on her coppery skin painted an image of a Greek goddess—close enough to touch but too far removed from reality. She was the ethereal oasis that men wished they could find in the parched desert. At a different time in my life, I might have been one of them.

Gypsy was tall and curvy in all the right places, flaunting a body not even an airbrush could replicate. Her presence radiated sexuality. Femininity. Sharp cheekbones and boldly arched brows highlighted the beauty of her face, but the real Achilles' heel was her plump red lips. She

was the woman who brought men to heel, her siren's song luring them toward an unknown hell.

Her beauty wasn't her only asset, but it was the only one she ever learned to use. If I were a sexually motivated man, I might have considered her a nice trophy, but to me, she was just another tragedy.

"You're going to be my wife," I told her.

Her lips tilted at the corners. She was amused by the idea, and she didn't hide it. "Yeah, right."

I drained my glass and wiped the condensation from my hand with a napkin. "Here is my offer. The only offer you will get from me."

Her smile dissolved as I retrieved the pre-nup from my briefcase and tossed it in front of her. Dark chestnut hair fell around her shoulders as she leaned forward to read, her eyes narrowing farther with every flip of the page.

"Why would you do this?" She peered up at me. "You know what I do. Who I am. Surely even an asshole like you can find a wife who wouldn't put you through hell."

"It would be a mistake to lump me into the same category as the men you've fooled," I assured her. "You won't make my life hell because you will never have that power in this situation."

"Of course not." Her jaw tightened. "Because you aren't looking for a wife. You're looking for a puppet."

"For the purpose of transparency, I will give you that. Your role is what I say, when I say it. You fulfill your end of the bargain for as long as I want, and then I will set you free. If you don't, then I will use my digital Rolodex to destroy you and your sister's lives."

She shoved the papers back in my direction and shook her head in disgust. "I won't do it. You can forget it."

I stood, buttoning my suit jacket. "Suit yourself then."

She rose too, like a queen from the flames of her throne. "Where is my sister?"

"You have seventy-two hours, and then the offer is forfeited."

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Chapter 6

Gypsy

EVEN THOUGH MY AUDI R8 was built for speed and power, I'd never really tested its capabilities like I did on the way home. Gunning it through the streets of Vegas had always been too risky, and I didn't need that type of attention. But in this case, the cops were the least of my concerns.

When I pulled into the lot, Birdie's car was parked in her space, and my heart was racing as I scrambled up the stairs to our door. There was no need to unlock it because it was already cracked. I hesitated on the threshold, too paralyzed by the idea of what I might find inside.

"Gypsy?" Birdie's frail voice called out. "Is that you?"

I shouldered the door opened and pushed inside but halted at the sight of my trembling sister on the sofa. Her eyes were red, her cheeks stained with mascara, and it had the immediate effect of triggering every protective instinct inside me. I wanted to murder Lucian West, and if he were here right now, I seriously might have.

"Birdie, are you okay?" I moved closer but froze a foot in front of her.

She wasn't a little girl anymore, and I didn't know how to comfort her when she was like this. Inside, Birdie was softer than she let on, but on the outside, she was full of rage. There was an incendiary device lying in wait for the right trigger, and it didn't explode often, but when it did, it leveled everything in her path. Even that was preferable to what I was witnessing

now. Birdie didn't cry. Neither of us cried anymore. It was a silent promise we made to ourselves after we left California. No more tears.

"I'm sorry." She clutched her arms around her body, rocking back and forth. "I'm so sorry, Gypsy. I screwed up. I screwed up so bad—"

"It's okay," I assured her. "I promise, it's going to be okay. But right now, I just need you to go pack. Only necessities like we've talked about. Your wallet, IDs…"

Birdie's gaze moved behind me, and the rest of the instructions lodged in my throat when the telltale sound of a gun cocked and pressed against the base of my spine.

"She's not going anywhere, and neither are you."

Birdie broke down again, sobbing uncontrollably while I tried to come up with a plan. But apart from kicking this dude in the nuts and trying to run before he shot and killed us both, I had nothing.

"Do you work for Mr. West?" I asked.

"I'm an associate of Mr. West's," he answered. "I don't work for anybody but myself."

Well, that was clear as mud. "Whatever he's paying you, I can double it."

A husky laugh wheezed out of his throat. "That's cute."

"Look, what do you want?"

"It isn't what I want. You know the deal. It's been laid out already. If you need clarification, you can call Mr. West."

"Can you kindly put the gun away?" I asked. "So we can discuss this like civilized adults?"

He removed the gun from my back, and I turned around slowly to face him. The guy was huge. Undoubtedly some type of mercenary if my wild imagination had anything to say about it. I wasn't in the habit of feeling intimidated by men, but it was a natural instinct to falter in the presence of this one.

The guy was an animal. Six feet of rugged muscle poured into motorcycle boots, jeans, and a leather biker vest. Not exactly who I would expect Lucian to run with, but I guess it shouldn't have surprised me. He was a criminal attorney.

"I'm Gypsy." I offered a tentative smile. "Which I'm sure you know already. But I didn't catch your name."

"You can call me Ace," he grunted.

“Okay, Ace. Let me take a stab at the situation,” I ventured. “Mr. West helped you out somehow, and now you feel indebted to him, right?”

He tilted his head and smiled. “Lucian was right about you, you know that?”

His words left a sour taste in my mouth, but I tried not to let it get to me. “How so?”

“You think you can bat your eyelashes at any man who comes your way and bend him to your will.”

“It was just a simple question.”

Ace shrugged. “Well, if you must know, he did help me out. He helped me out in a way that nobody else ever would, and I owe him my life. So you can save your breath trying to make a deal with me.”

I knew he wasn’t mincing words. His loyalty to Lucian was unwavering, and I was at a loss. “So what happens now?”

Ace glanced at Birdie, and I stepped in front of her to obscure his vision. I didn’t want him to witness my sister crying. I didn’t want anyone to see how vulnerable she was.

“The way I see it.” Ace scratched at his beard. “You and your sister here are fucked six ways from Sunday. If I were you, I’d take the deal.”

“No,” Birdie shouted.

When I turned, she was already up off the sofa and trying to push through the barrier I’d created to protect her.

“Sit down, Birdie.”

“No,” she insisted. “I did this. It was my fault. Tell Mr. West that I will fulfill the deal.”

Ace narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “That’s not the deal, kid. Ain’t gonna happen.”

“Are you crazy?” I asked Birdie. “You know I wouldn’t let you do that. Stay out of this, B.”

“God, Gypsy.” She wiped at her tear smudged face and turned her angry blue eyes on me. “I’m not a kid, okay? I screwed up, and I should be the one to pay for it. You can’t fix everything for me all the time. Do you get that?”

“Obviously,” I snapped. “Because everything I’ve done to protect you has completely gone to shit now. How could you do this to me? After everything I’ve done to make us a home here, how could you just throw it all away?”

Regret welled in her eyes, and she looked at the floor. “I just wanted to be like you.”

Her words gutted me, and I knew she was right. This was my fault. I hadn’t shown her the way to live. I’d managed to get by with the idea that I’d done the best I could with what I’d been given, but that wasn’t an excuse. My eyes burned so deep with shame, it nearly spilled free. But I couldn’t allow that to happen.

Birdie had to know I was strong. She had to know I could handle this. I would fix it. I always did. I forced myself to hug her, and she cried harder.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “I’m sorry, B. I should have done better. I will do better from now on.”

“It’s not your fault,” she insisted.

We broke apart, and I fixed the messy hair around her face as Ace walked to the fridge and grabbed a six-pack of beer he must have brought with him.

“Women,” he muttered.

“What are you doing?” I asked as he plopped on the couch, kicking his dirty boots up onto my Italian mahogany coffee table.

He reached for the remote and turned on the television. “Making myself at home. It’s going to be a long three days.”

I stared at him incredulously. “You think you’re staying here for the next three days?”

He flipped through the channels without regard to my frustration. “It’s either that or I take her with me as collateral until your decision is made.”

I jabbed a finger in his direction. “Over my dead body.”

He didn’t bother to look at me as he settled back into the sofa and got comfortable. “It’s your funeral then.”

I didn’t think he was serious about killing me, but then again, how could I be sure of anything? I turned to Birdie, who was obviously terrified even though she was trying to put on a brave face.

“It’s going to be okay,” I promised her.

“How?” she whispered.

I looked at Ace and forced the words out with a smile for her benefit.

“I’ll think of something. I always do.”

Chapter 7

Lucian

After clearing security at Clark County Detention Center, the guard escorted me to a private room reserved for attorney-client meetings.

While I waited for my next client to be brought in, I went over my case notes and organized my thoughts. This was shaping up to be another high-profile case, and there was no doubt in my mind the media would hang my client out to dry.

Emmanuel Morales was another victim of an overzealous prosecutor and shitty detective work. The kid was only twenty. He still had his whole life ahead of him, yet the public's already skewed perception of him would justify him rotting in a cell for the remainder of it.

The only thing they saw was the pretty face of the nineteen-year-old girl who had been murdered and the man accused in bold print beside the photos. So far, the witness accounts were contradictory at best, and the evidence was circumstantial. But it didn't matter because a neighbor swore she saw a Hispanic man lurking around the victim's home, and that man soon took the shape of Emmanuel Morales.

Signed, sealed, delivered.

In these situations, I was almost always portrayed as the villain. But the truth was that what the public thought of me didn't matter. What mattered was that this was the worst week of Emmanuel's life, and he needed an ally.

Not because he was a potential criminal, but because he was human, and he deserved a fair shot at justice.

When the guard brought him into the room, he looked just as terrified as the first day I met with him. He hadn't even made it to real prison yet, and I had serious doubts about his ability to survive in here.

"Emmanuel." I met his gaze as he sat across the table. "How are you doing?"

He shrugged, but there was a tremor in his lip when he spoke. "I don't know. This place is kinda crazy, ya know?"

"I know," I told him. "But you're here, and that's the reality of the situation. So, I'll tell you what we're both going to do, all right?"

He nodded.

"You'll mind your own business. Be civilized, but not overly friendly. If someone gives you shit, you don't react, but you don't show weakness either. You acknowledge it, and you move on. This is the job I need you to do so I can do mine. Okay?"

"Okay."

"If it gets too bad, you tell me. Steps can be taken to protect you if it comes down to it."

He dipped his head. "All right."

Sharp pain stabbed at my chest, and I doubled forward in a coughing fit that sucked the air from my lungs. I tried to be discreet as I retrieved my handkerchief and dabbed at my lips, but Emmanuel's eyes were wide as he watched me.

"Are you okay, Mr. West?"

"I'm fine." I tucked away the evidence that might suggest otherwise. "Just recovering from a nasty bug."

I opened the folder and redirected the conversation to the reason I was here. Going over some of my case notes with him, I asked questions to clarify points and scribbled his answers as we went along. This would be my first of many visits with him, and I warned him from the beginning it would be tedious. Establishing a solid case took time.

"I understand." Emmanuel looked at me with eyes that were far too young to fully comprehend anything like this situation he found himself in.

For now, we were finished, so I closed the file and stuffed it back into my briefcase. "Is there anything else you need?"

“Could you…” Emmanuel paused. “Would you be able to give my mom a letter for me? She won’t answer my calls.”

His face fractured as he admitted the truth, and even though I had witnessed this a thousand times before, it was Emmanuel’s first time having his life ripped apart.

“This happens sometimes.” I searched for empathy I didn’t often possess anymore. “It’s easy to get sucked into what the media says. What they don’t show on television is that the family becomes criminalized too.”

Emmanuel’s shoulders hunched forward. “My mom is a good person. She doesn’t deserve that. I don’t want anybody harassing her over this.”

“I’ll check on her. And I’ll give her your letter too.”

“I haven’t written it yet,” he admitted. “But I will. Maybe next time you come, I’ll have it.”

I nodded and stood, pressing the button for the guard outside. “I’ll be back next week. In the meantime, if you think of anything else that’s pertinent, let me know as soon as possible.”

The door opened, and the guard gestured me outside, but Emmanuel’s voice made me pause.

“Hey, Mr. West?”

I looked back.

“Why are you doing this for me? Why did you take me on even though I can’t pay you anything?”

As this haunting brown eyes stared back at me, it was a question I never knew how to answer, but intuition guided me to the right answer.

“Because even if nobody else does, I believe you, Emmanuel.”

The drive back to the office was long and congested at midday, and I still hadn’t eaten lunch. Hunger had evaded me for months, but I kept up a regular meal schedule regardless. Emmanuel needed me, and I had to stay focused.

Easier said than done when I walked into my office and found the tall, leggy brunette waiting for me. She wasn’t the only one either. Beside her,

Ace played around on his phone while Birdie flipped through a magazine.

I wasn't surprised to see her this soon. In all honesty, I'd expected her to show up at my door last night, demanding to have Ace removed from her presence. But it appeared as though they survived the night, just barely.

"May I have a word with you?" Gypsy asked.

"You may," I told her as I checked my watch. "In thirty minutes, when my lunch is finished."

Her eyes narrowed, and she planted her hands on her hips as she stood. "You must be joking."

"I don't joke."

She stalked forward, stopping only when she'd breached the narrow distance that few people ever dared to try with me. She was reverting to her baser skills of seduction via proximity, but I doubted she even realized it. The instinct came naturally to her, often reeling in whatever she wanted, and admittedly, it might have worked on me too once.

She smelled of coconut oil and sunshine, and it encouraged a vivid image of her lying out on the beach. I could almost bet that if I were to touch her skin, it would be warm too. So warm that it would be easy to get lost in. She probably counted on it, but I was prepared to let Gypsy know from the start how this game would be played. Only one set of rules existed, and they were mine.

"Do you want me to throw a fit?" she threatened as her eyes darted around my office. "Because I will."

Now that was funny. My lips tilted despite my resolve to remain dry as toast. "Do you think it would be the first time someone threw a fit in here?" I asked. "I'm sorry to tell you this, pet, but it wouldn't."

"It would probably be the first time someone accused you of holding them hostage in front of your employees."

I turned and made a flippant gesture with my hands. "Be my guest."

Her lips compressed, and any other coercions she might have entertained were swallowed bitterly. After watching her for so long, these unintelligent threats from her were a disappointment. Of course, she wouldn't make a scene because she had more to lose than I did.

"Thirty minutes," I repeated. "I'll have my secretary call for you when I'm finished."

I walked into my office and shut the door behind me.

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Chapter 8

Gypsy

By the time the red-headed secretary announced that I was permitted to go inside Lucian's office—as if I needed her permission for anything—I was fuming. After giving her the once-over and noting how attractive she was, I figured she was banging Lucian. I bet she serviced him whenever he asked. But if that was the case, then why did he need me?

"Stay put," I instructed Birdie before my gaze swung to Ace. "And if you touch her, I'll murder you right here."

He smirked, and I walked into Lucian's office, slamming the door behind me.

"There's no need for dramatics." He sighed. "We can get through this without you being a brat, or we won't get through it at all."

"Whatever." I crossed my arms like a petulant child. "You need me for something, or else I wouldn't be here. As much as you might threaten to turn me in, you don't want to."

Lucian looked up from his desk with eyes devoid of emotion. He seemed empty and cold, but for some reason, the only thing I felt when I looked at him was profound sadness.

"Take a seat." He gestured to the chair across from him.

Standing by my declaration, I remained rooted to the spot. This was a war of wills, and I was determined to win. It was better that he figured out

now that everything he asked of me would be difficult. He wanted a wife on a silver platter, but I never promised I would be obedient.

He closed the lid of his laptop, then shoved it aside as he pushed back from his desk. When he circled around, I tried to stay brave. But he was taller than I was, and stronger than I was, and it was hard to deny those things when we were face to face.

His face was impassive, but frustration swirled in his inky eyes. Without warning, his hand shot out behind me and gripped me by the hair, tightening until I was forced to tilt my head up in his direction.

“Sit down,” he said again. “This will be the only time I ask you nicely, Gypsy.”

“This isn’t asking nicely,” I shot back.

He yanked his fist in a downward motion, and I squeaked as my head and the handful of hair he was holding followed. More than anything, it caught me by surprise, and before I could find a way to compose myself, he had me on my knees in front of him. My face was inches from his cock, and I was humiliated. With burning cheeks, I looked up at him.

“Let me go.”

“I think you are still struggling to comprehend how this works.” Lucian forced my gaze up to his face, exerting his dominance. “I know it must be difficult to relinquish control when you love it so much, but that is what you’ll be signing up for. So, you better get used to it.”

I was tempted to junk punch him, but I knew better than to resort to physical violence. A wounded man was a far more dangerous contender.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“Are you ready to behave and do as you’re told?”

“I’ll never behave.” I clawed my fingernails into the carpet. “So you might as well get used to that.”

“Suit yourself,” he answered in a low voice. “I will enjoy punishing you.”

My fingers trembled, but I didn’t let him see it. Whatever he was planning to put me through couldn’t be any worse than the hell I’d left behind me.

“I will sit in the chair.” I forced the words between my teeth. “If you’ll let me up.”

To my surprise, he released me immediately. I was left to the humiliating task of getting off the floor in my red dress without exposing

myself, but in the end, he granted me a shred of privacy by removing his watchful gaze. I brushed the wrinkles out of the material and sat down, rubbing the redness from my knees that had been left from the carpet. Lucian walked back around to the other side of his desk and took a seat, resting his elbows on the solid wood as he studied me.

“Now that we’ve established that, let me clear up your earlier point. I don’t need you, Gypsy. There is no ulterior motive for me doing this beside the fact that I want to. Turning you in would mean nothing to me, and I won’t hesitate to do it in a heartbeat if you become more trouble than what it’s worth.”

His words plowed through my mind and had the immediate effect of dousing my anxiety in kerosene. *He was only doing this because he wanted to.* Translation? He wanted me. Obviously, it had occurred to me. I wasn’t naïve. Men liked to get their dicks wet, and I knew it better than anyone. But I hadn’t shared my body with a man in four years.

I looked over his workspace. Tidy and clean. Minimalistic. These were the guys who scared me the most. The psychopaths. I could tell a lot from a man based on the way he kept his surroundings. Lucian’s life was orderly, and he would want his wife to be the same.

I squeezed my thighs together beneath the privacy of the desk. “There is nothing about a sexual relationship written in the pre-nup.”

“It wasn’t necessary to include it,” Lucian stated. “As I said before, there is only one rule to this arrangement. You do what I say, when I say it. It’s very simple, Gypsy.”

Arguing that it wasn’t fair would be a wasted breath. Nothing about this was fair, and he knew it. He didn’t care. He was exploiting my vulnerability the same way I had exploited men when I conned them. Karma really was a bitch.

“What if I don’t want to do something?”

He shuffled some papers around and plucked a pen from the holder, his attention more distant by the second. “Then we will discuss it like adults and come to a compromise.”

At this point, I wasn’t sure we were even talking about the same thing. If he was talking about sex, it didn’t show on his face. There was no excitement. No hint of impropriety. Nothing. But I couldn’t trust that.

“So, what if I say I don’t want to have sex at all?”

His lips tightened, and he turned his attention back to me. “How long has it been since you’ve let a man inside you?”

I squirmed, despite my resolve to appear brave. “That’s none of your business.”

“Every aspect of your life is my business.” Lucian clicked the end of the pen beneath his thumb, a steady drum beat. “Because I’ve made it so. When you’re my wife, you’ll be in my bed. For now, that’s all you need to know.”

I snapped the rubber band around my wrist to give my fingers something to do. The truth was that it didn’t matter what Lucian wanted me to do. He had me.

I knew last night that there was no escaping him when Ace cuffed the three of us together to sleep. Even if we were somehow able to run, I doubted we would get far. Lucian had been watching me for a long time if his evidence had anything to say about it. He’d prepared for this. He’d thought of every angle. And he knew that deep down, a life of running from the police was not what I wanted for my sister. I would do anything to give her a better life, and that was my weakness.

“I have a few conditions,” I murmured.

Lucian’s face was absent of the victory I expected. Instead, he was all business. “Such as?”

“Birdie goes free. And by free, I mean that you destroy every shred of evidence you’ve collected on her and call off your dogs, whoever they are. You won’t have anything else to do with her life.”

He cocked his head to the side and shrugged. “I have zero interest in what your sister does with her life after you say your vows.”

The word vows made me shudder, but I kept my focus. “I will have contact with her as much as I’d like by phone or email, and monthly visits.”

“She can visit you here,” he conceded. “As much as she’d like. Phone calls or emails are at your discretion.”

“Fine,” I agreed.

“What else?” He scribbled a signature down on a piece of paper, filing it away into a folder.

“The paperwork you showed me at the restaurant said we had to be married for two years before I could divorce you and receive a settlement. Is that correct?”

“Yes.” He squinted down at a message that had been left from his secretary. “Two years or my untimely passing. Whichever comes first.”

“Let’s hope for the second option,” I muttered under my breath.

When he looked up, his eyes were full of venom. “I’m a busy man. Do you have any other questions or are we done here?”

“Just one. What are the rules?”

His brows pinched together, displaying a level of impatience characteristic of someone who scoffed at the idea of ever needing to explain themselves at all. “I already told you. Whatever I decide.”

“That’s pretty vague.” I bobbed my heel up and down like I had all the time in the world. “I’d like to know what my life will be like. What boundaries will be in place. These things are important to discuss.”

Lucian leaned back in his chair and toyed with the ballpoint pen between his fingers. “Your job is to be my wife. That means your nights and weekends will be spent with me. Apart from that, I will have some scheduled activities for you to pursue. There will be downtime when you are free to do as you wish within the parameters of my rules. But I suggest you find a new hobby to keep you occupied if you don’t want to see what you look like in prison orange because your scheming days are over.”

“Obviously.” I rolled my eyes.

“You will have an allowance for clothing and other necessities. During our marriage, you are not to have extracurricular sexual relationships, and you will be required to wear a tracking device at all times.”

“You do realize that there are websites for this kind of thing,” I pointed out. “There are actual women who would love to do this without a fight.”

“I don’t see you putting up a fight now,” Lucian noted.

My heel stopped moving, and I gathered up my purse. “Whatever. Is there anything else I need to know?”

He got up again and walked around the desk, invading my space as he leaned down to grip my chin in his fingers. “Only this, princess. I know you tend to believe you’re always the smartest person in the room but know this. If you fuck with me, I will ruin you.”

I glared at him. He didn’t take his hand off me, so I pried it off myself. “Where do I sign?”

“You can sign our marriage certificate tomorrow. Here at noon.”

“Just like that?”

He nodded. “Just like that.”

Christ, I was going to be married to this asshole tomorrow. I stood and prepared to leave, but he stopped me at the door.

“Oh, and Gypsy?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t expect a honeymoon after that little stunt you pulled in here today. You’ll be cleaning my house for the next week instead.”

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Chapter 9

Lucian

She showed up ten minutes late in a black sheath dress with a matching wide-brimmed hat. Appropriately, she looked like she was dressed for a funeral, but it made little difference to me. She couldn't understand the irony of her wardrobe choice, but I could. Judging by the smirk on her crimson lips, she thought she was getting one over on me already.

The joke was on her.

"I considered you might pull something like this," I told her when she stepped into my office. "So, you can take a seat and wait until the officiant arrives in twenty minutes."

"You said noon." She flopped onto the seat opposite of me and scrubbed at a mark on her glossy red fingernail.

"Indeed, I did."

She was quiet after that while I continued to work on my laptop, but it didn't escape my notice that her sister was absent. I had a suspicion she'd throw a colossal fit if she knew what Gypsy was doing, and I wondered what she'd told her.

"Didn't want your sister here for the occasion?" I asked.

She snorted. "You'd have to physically restrain her if she knew what was going down in here right now. I'd rather just avoid that whole mess, thank you."

I returned my attention to the screen in front of me, reading over the witness statements in Emmanuel's case. The preliminary hearing gave me an opportunity to review the prosecutor's evidence, and I believed I was within reason to file a motion to suppress some of that evidence based on the method of collection. A warrant was never issued, and what the arresting officer deemed probable cause was weak at best.

The prosecutor was pushing hard for a plea, but I already advised Emmanuel I didn't think it was wise to take it. We both knew there was reasonable doubt, and I intended to prove it. But first, I just needed to get Emmanuel through the coming months and the trial, and I needed to stay healthy enough to see the process through until the end.

"This is like, really romantic," Gypsy remarked. "What I always dreamed my wedding day would be like."

I scribbled a note about a witness that I needed to follow up on and returned my attention to my needy future bride. "I can't imagine you ever dreaming of a wedding. Unless it included a loaded old man who was about to kick the bucket."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're old enough to be my father."

I smiled. "Does that mean you're going to call me daddy?"

When her face blanched, I knew I'd hit a nerve with her, but she needed to learn when to keep her mouth shut. This wasn't about her, and it was a difficult concept for her to grasp. From the time she'd run from California with her sister in tow, Gypsy had made a habit of ensuring she got whatever she wanted at any cost.

Though I was aware of the events that transpired to create this little monster, I knew that regardless of her front, she didn't want this life. She'd transformed herself from a terrorized child who had nothing into a self-indulgent brat who thirsted for money and vengeance. It was time that she had an authority figure to guide her and, more importantly, to humble her.

"You are deranged," she muttered. "You know that?"

"So I've been told." I shrugged. "And I'm only forty. By all accounts, that should be younger than what you're used to."

"Not by much," she countered. "The oldest guy I ever conned was forty-three, so don't consider yourself special."

We had seventeen years between us. It probably was a little deranged that when I thought about her, my cock swelled to a level of discomfort I hadn't experienced in years. So far, I'd succeeded in redirecting my

thoughts from nature to nurture, but it wouldn't always be so simple. Everything about Gypsy exuded sensuality on a level I hadn't experienced before. She was the mysterious and exotic creature that all other women aspired to be, and the one who men thought only existed in their dreams. But to me, she could only ever be a temporary responsibility.

Jessica knocked on my door to alert us to the presence of the officiant. Rex had already been given my instructions earlier, and he came prepared. Dressed as casually as possible in jeans and a tee shirt, he shot one look at my bride and arched his brows, letting out a low whistle.

She glared, and I laughed. Rex worked in a drive-through chapel off the Strip, and he was about as classless as they came.

He clapped and rubbed his hands together. "We ready to do this? I have two hookers handcuffed to my bed at home, and I'm paying them by the hour."

"Really?" Gypsy flayed me with her eyes. "This guy? Could you get any lower?"

I walked around the desk to join her with a smirk. "Only the best for you, baby doll."

She blew out a breath and tossed her hat on the chair behind us. "This is going to be a long fucking marriage."

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Chapter 10

Gypsy

ALTHOUGH I RECOGNIZED REX WAS probably an actual officiant, I also suspected he was intentionally making this ceremony beyond awful. For whatever reason, Lucian seemed hell-bent on making this wedding that he wanted a completely miserable event I would soon hope to forget.

Our half-drunk—and I suspected high as well—officiant stumbled over the words he read from a leather-bound booklet in his hands. If he really did this for a living, God help the poor souls who had to endure this and stamp it into their memories for all of eternity.

"Is he on something?" I asked halfway through the opening statement.

Lucian shot me a dark look and shook his head. Rex was the one to answer.

"High on life, baby. These vows are new to me, believe it or not."

Lucian shifted at the admission, and I took notice. Did he pick them out? I thought it would be in my best interest to listen carefully if that was the case, and what I heard surprised me.

I expected sleaze, but what Rex recited was more traditional. He talked about honor and obeying, of course, but he also recited lines that were not quite the norm.

"Do you, Lucian, promise to protect her and always do what's best for her, even if she may not like it?"

I looked at the man who was about to be my husband, and a weird sensation took root in my gut. He had never been anything but dead serious so far, and I suspected the same was true now.

“I do.”

Goose bumps broke out along my arms, and I tried to regain my bearings. Something about that line shook me to my core. I could still remember a time when all I ever wanted was a protector. A dark avenger. Someone who would come and save us from our life. But I wasn’t a little girl anymore, and I’d been saving myself for a long time.

“And do you, Gypsy, promise to listen and trust that Lucian has your best intentions at heart in all matters, large and small?”

I stared into the inky pools of his eyes, wondering what I was missing. It didn’t make sense to me. None of this made any sense. I didn’t want to respond because everything about this was a lie. But I thought of Birdie and what would happen if either of us went to prison. I imagined the devastation I would see in her eyes when the jig was up, and our lives were officially over. That was all the confirmation I needed to spur me on, and I recited the vows back word for word.

The charade continued with promises of honesty and loyalty in the face of struggles yet to come. Every line felt like it was sealing my fate with some form of dark voodoo I’d never be able to escape, but the truth was, I worried that it was Lucian I’d never escape.

There was already an end in sight. Two years, for better or worse. But it felt like so much more than that. It felt like at that moment, I was surrendering myself to some greater force that would change my life forever.

The ceremony came to an abrupt halt when Rex declared us husband and wife. He didn’t bother to tell us we should kiss, and Lucian didn’t try.

It should have brought me some relief, but all I could think about was when he would.

“Is everything okay?” Birdie bolted up from a seat outside Lucian’s office the moment she saw me.

I stuffed the evidence of my sister’s crime spree into my purse, tucking it away so that I could shred it later. True to his word, Lucian handed it over as soon as I was officially his wife.

“You were supposed to wait downstairs,” I told her.

Worry clouded the pretty blue of her eyes, and I wondered if there would ever come a time when I didn’t see her as a little girl who still needed me.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Are you still negotiating?”

I offered her a weak smile. It was the easiest and most convenient lie. Birdie always took my word as gospel, and this time was no different. I didn’t want her to worry. I wanted her to know that everything would be all right, even if she didn’t like what I was about to say.

“The deal is done,” I murmured. “We’re married, B.”

Her eyes widened as they drifted to my hand, the ring on my finger weighing me down like a cement block.

“You lied to me,” she accused.

“I’m doing what’s best for both of us,” I insisted. “You don’t see that now, but someday you will. It’s only two years of my life. I know what I’m getting into, and I’m okay with it. I need you to be okay with it too.”

“How can I?” She paced around the room, shaking her blond hair with every jittery motion. “You barely know this guy! He could be a sick, twisted fuck who wants to kill you and eat your liver for all you know.”

“I doubt he’d have gone to the trouble of marrying me if that were true,” I teased. “This isn’t any different than what I’ve been doing for the past four years, B. It’s just another job. A marathon instead of a sprint. It’s going to be okay, and you’re going to be okay because you’re going to get out of here.”

“No.” She came to a dead stop and jammed a finger into her chest. “This is my fault, and I should be the one to pay. I’m not leaving you.”

I couldn’t focus on what happened, and I wouldn’t let Birdie either. We both needed to move forward. “I can talk to you anytime by phone or email,” I assured her. “And you can come visit me once a month.”

Her hands curled into fists at her sides. “That’s not good enough. I can’t just take off—”

“Birdie, there are dangerous men here who want to hurt you. I won’t be able to sleep at night until you tell me that you’re going to move.”

Her lip trembled as she swathed her arms around herself. She knew I wasn’t exaggerating. I’d be sick with worry about her, and it was the truth I was counting on that she’d do exactly what I needed her to.

I choked down the pain in my voice and forced myself to focus. “Remember plan A?”

She nodded. For as long as we’d been in Vegas, I’d had exit strategies in place for us. It only made sense, considering my line of work. And now Birdie would have to use that plan on her own.

The thought tore me up inside, but I couldn’t let her know it. We hadn’t been apart for more than a couple of weeks at a time in the past few years. Back when we first ran, we couldn’t even sleep in separate beds because we were so terrified. But Birdie was a grown woman now, and I needed her to be brave and smart and strong just like I’d been trying to teach her.

“Everything you need is in the apartment.” I held up my fingers as I ticked off the list. “There’s cash, lists of places to stay, and people you can trust there. Ace is going to take you home and make sure you get out of the city safely tonight.”

She blinked at the sudden impact of my statement. “Tonight?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I will be going to Lucian’s.”

Birdie flung herself at me and squeezed so hard I thought she might actually break me. I wasn’t prepared to say goodbye, but it was better to do it now. This was the only way she would be safe. I had to keep telling myself that to believe it was the right thing to do.

“I’m so sorry, Gypsy,” she sobbed. “I won’t ever let you down again.”

“I know you are,” I whispered. “And I’m going to hold you to that. You can enroll in another GED program. Promise me you won’t quit.”

“I promise,” she heaved the words out.

“And promise me you won’t steal anything else ever again.”

She pulled back, only to reach down and hook her pinky into mine. “Never, ever, ever.”

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Chapter 11

Lucian

"This is the GPS device we discussed."

Gypsy glanced at the silver band and wrinkled her nose. "A watch?"

I edged my fingers over the metal, unlocking it before I secured it on her wrist. "Don't bother tampering with it. If you do, our deal is void."

"It's ugly." She poked at the links, moving it around her delicate wrist.

"Well, if that doesn't work for you, there's always an ankle chain."

"Funny," she snapped.

I got out of the car and left her to open the door and follow me inside. My bride was distant and quiet as I introduced her to our home. The four-bedroom fortress was nestled into the gated community of Diamond Bay, an exclusive retreat in the suburb of Desert Shores, but Gypsy didn't seem impressed.

"Did you just move in?" She glanced around the crisp white space, taking particular notice of the cathedral ceilings and Roman columns. The place was probably a little too decadent for my tastes, if I were honest, but at the time I'd purchased it, I was in a hurry and it was available.

"No. I've lived here for five years."

Her dark eyebrows shot up as she surveyed the open floor plan. "It's so empty. And white."

She wasn't wrong. The furniture and decorations were sparse, consisting only of the necessities since I was seldom home. I rarely had

visitors, except for Nolan and Ace, but I considered how she might see the space from her perspective.

“Ace will bring whatever furniture you’d like from your apartment.” I observed a few empty spots she could fill. “And if you’d like to redecorate, that’s not out of the realm of possibility.”

Gypsy shot me a look that proved she found the idea amusing. She didn’t seem like the homemaking type, considering she rarely ever had a place to call home for very long.

“The entire upper level consists of the master bedroom,” I explained as we walked upstairs and opened the French doors. “This is our room.”

She looked around the space, her face absent of emotion. “You want me to sleep in here with you?”

There was a softness to her voice that betrayed her nerves, but I chose to ignore it. Nothing I said would ease her fears, and there was no point wasting my breath. “There is space in the closet for your things. The bags are already in there, so you can unpack.”

She swiveled away from the closet, completely disinterested. “Don’t you have someone who can do that for me?”

My dick swelled at her bratty behavior. Gypsy had been living the high life for the past few years, but she was in for a surprise.

“I have a housekeeper,” I answered. “But she isn’t here to do you any favors, she comes here to clean. And besides, I gave her the week off. Remember?”

She crossed her arms and it pushed her breasts up between them. They were soft, natural, and huge, and already, I’d had too many indecent thoughts about them. Thoughts I shouldn’t have entertained at all.

“I’m not cleaning your house,” she insisted.

I smiled. “We’ll see.”

In the interest of establishing the rules, I decided it would be best to marry on a Friday so I had the weekend to play house, so to speak.

Already, Gypsy seemed to be settling in and attempting to exert her control over the situation. In the three hours she'd been here, she'd complained about the lack of cable TV, demanded the Wi-Fi password, and whined about my comment that she'd be responsible for making her own meals when I was gone.

"So you can have meals prepared for you?" she asked as she eyeballed the containers in the fridge, "but I can't?"

"No," I answered. "Marisa isn't here to serve you. Although I'm certain it will be a real hardship, you are capable of making a sandwich."

She slammed the fridge door and glared. "Fine, I'll just eat out. No big deal."

"Not likely." I turned my attention back to the yellow legal pad in my lap, attempting to read over the notes I'd made today.

"What does that mean?" she questioned. "Not likely? I have my own money. I can do whatever I want with it."

Exhaustion settled into my body as I put my work away for the evening. I'd been hoping to avoid this conversation until she was tired too, but even after unpacking her belongings, she showed no signs of slowing down.

"I made it clear that you'd be cleaning the house for the week," I said. "And you refused. Which means you're grounded."

Her eyes widened in disbelief, and she laughed. "Grounded? What, like I'm five?"

"Yes, grounded," I repeated. "You won't be leaving the house until you've performed the task I've given to my satisfaction. It's a rather simple concept."

"And what, you're just going to stay here and make sure I don't run off?"

"It's not necessary," I assured her. "I can lock every door in this house from my phone if I want to. And even if I couldn't, you're wearing that watch. Failing all that, there is one last thing you seem to have forgotten already. I own you, Gypsy. And if you want to fuck with me, be my guest. See how far that gets you. Already, I'm beginning to wonder if prison would be a better alternative."

Her cheeks flushed red, and her nostrils flared. "You are unbelievable. Do you get off on this?"

"Do I get off on dealing with an overindulged princess who thinks the world owes her everything? The answer is no."

“You know nothing about me.” She sliced the air between us with her hand, as if to cut any invisible connection we might have.

“I know a lot more than I care to admit,” I replied. “And the first thing you should know is how sorry I am for what happened in your past. But it doesn’t mean that you get to go through life punishing every man who crosses your path for the sins of your father.”

Her fingers curled inward, nails biting into her skin as she turned away to hide the rare display of emotion. “You don’t know anything about my past. I don’t care what you read or who you talked to.”

I let her have that statement because it was the only thing she had right now. The room was quiet, and I needed to establish her boundaries, but my phone alarm went off, signaling it was time for dinner.

I silenced the alarm and walked into the kitchen, retrieving the meal from the fridge that Marisa had prepared for tonight. Gypsy sat at the table, texting her sister while I assembled dinner. When I placed the salad and bread in front of her, she dismissed it with a shove of her hand.

“I’m gluten free.”

“If that were true, then you wouldn’t have eaten the breadsticks at Sinatra,” I said. “But regardless, the choice is yours. You don’t have to eat. You can just sit here while I do.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” She stood and straightened out her dress. “I think I’ll take a shower so I can wash this awful day off me.”

Chapter 12

Gypsy

In almost any situation, there was usually a silver lining, and in this case, it was Lucian's open stonework rainforest shower.

I took my time, allowing the hot water to cascade over my sore muscles and soak into my skin. I'd brought my own bath products with me—thank God—because all he had was bar soap and basic shampoo.

After washing my hair and exfoliating my body, I felt like a new woman. Or at least, I felt I could handle whatever the rest of this weekend held. It was only eight o'clock on a Friday, and I was already bored out of my mind.

Stepping from the shower, I reached for one of the towels, which held a lot to be desired. It appeared that even though Lucian had money, he had no clue how to shop for anything.

I dried off my body and reached for the silk pajamas I'd set out, but they weren't there. In their place was a cheap white tee shirt and black yoga pants. My eyes burned a trail of fire over the offending items before I wrapped the towel around me and walked out of the master bathroom.

I couldn't even grab something else because it seemed Lucian had locked the door to the closet as well. Nevertheless, I still jiggled the handle until his voice from behind made me jump.

"You can wiggle it all day long. It won't open unless I unlock it."

Clutching the towel around me, I turned and met his gaze. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Those are my clothes.”

He crossed his arms and stood firm. “I told you that you would clean the house, and you refused. I told you that you were grounded, and you didn’t acknowledge it. And then you broke a direct order to remain at the table during dinner. The only logical conclusion is that your privileges be revoked.”

“So you’re taking my clothes?” I snorted. “That’s your grand plan to get me to do whatever you want?”

“Not just your clothes.” His eyes flicked to my painted toenails. “The shoes too. And your iphone.”

Blind rage burned into my chest as I stalked toward him. “You can’t do that.”

“I can, and I did.”

“I’m supposed to have contact with Birdie,” I insisted. “You promised.”

“And you can,” he answered. “Through me. If there are messages you would like to relay, I will send them until you can learn some manners.”

“Manners?” A bitter laugh burst from my chest. “That has to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard coming from an asshole like you.”

He arched his brow. “Would you care to make it two weeks? I have no problem with that.”

My lips slammed shut because I actually believed him. For whatever reason, this little game seemed to amuse him.

“All right, it’s settled then,” he said. “You have one week to clean the house and start earning your things back. But for now, I’d suggest you go get dressed. You have thirty minutes until bedtime.”

“Bedtime?”

“Yes,” he repeated slowly. “Bedtime.”

I waited until I turned to roll my eyes, stomping back to the bathroom. But it didn’t stop me from hearing his last threat.

“Oh, and Gypsy? Next time a foul word leaves that pretty mouth, see what happens.”

The tee shirt was scratchy and uncomfortable, and the leggings were even worse. It reminded me of a time when I had nothing, and I hated it. I hated that Lucian had this level of control over me already, but every time I thought about leaving, I remembered Birdie.

The cost was too high.

It was my job to protect her, and if that meant putting up with Lucian's deranged games for a couple of years, then it was a small price to pay.

Without anything else to do, I climbed into the right side of the bed, claiming it as my own. At least it was a California king, another silver lining. It didn't mean he wouldn't have expectations when he got into bed with me, but it made me feel like I had more distance to escape to if I needed it.

When Lucian disappeared into the bathroom, I closed my eyes, trying to steady my breathing as I waited for whatever happened next.

His game, his rules.

That was what he kept saying. It was what I agreed to. But I couldn't agree to give him my body. And I think if he tried tonight, I might actually come unglued.

I heard the door open and then shut, and my heart skipped a beat as he padded across the floor and turned out the lights. It was too quiet, and I was certain he could tell I wasn't really asleep.

I had a habit of acting as if I could take on the world, but the truth was that intimacy terrified me more than anything. The trust I'd once given so freely had been broken forever and letting someone near me again was too dangerous.

The men who I conned would try, of course, but I always had ways around it. I would tell them I was on my period, or even just chalk up my inability to "female problems," which was enough to dissuade them from asking further questions. That was why I always knew my mark inside and out. I had an exit strategy in addition to a timeline so I could execute the job before it ever got too far. But with Lucian, my exit strategy at present was nonexistent and the timeline was so far on the horizon I couldn't even see the sun anymore.

The only option I had was to hold my breath and hope I didn't have to kill him.

The bed dipped when he climbed in and pulled the blankets over him, and for a minute, we both just laid there, motionless. I could hear his breathing and even smell the subtle hint of his cologne, and there were so many questions I had about him that I wanted to ask.

Who was he? Why was he doing this? What did he want from me?

I didn't know, but I was certain I'd find out. Time had a way of revealing the truth. Just as I always knew this day would come when someone would try to out me for Ricky's death. I just never realized it would be someone I didn't even know.

Lucian shifted closer, slowly, hesitantly, and I froze. I was lying on my side, facing away from him, but even so, I could feel his body heat close to me. I'd planned for this scenario. I thought I'd been prepared for it, but the truth was that I couldn't be prepared for what he did next.

He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me against his body, spooning me. He was warm and strong and probably hard, but I tried not to think about that. I couldn't think about any of it because what was happening didn't make sense.

He was cuddling me.

And after several minutes, it occurred to me that it was all he intended to do.

"You can relax," his lips whispered against my hair. "You're safe with me, Gypsy. I won't ever harm you."

I shouldn't have believed him. He was a liar by profession. A manipulator. A con artist like me. I don't know why I didn't pull away from him. But somehow, my breathing grew steady, and I eventually fell asleep in his arms.

Chapter 13

Gypsy

THE OBNOXIOUS WHINE OF LUCIAN'S alarm clock pulled me from a happy dream, and I rolled over with a groan. Who set their alarm on a Saturday? Truthfully, I couldn't even recall the last time I'd woken to an alarm. One of the perks of my job was that I had the luxury of sleeping in and planning my day accordingly.

That didn't mean I was lazy. Quite the opposite was true. I was driven by a primal need, and I'd never forgotten the days when my motivations were the choice between life and death. After Birdie and I got out of California, our lives had taken a dramatic turn. I didn't think it was selfish to do what was best for us for a change. I never felt for a second that putting us first was wrong when we'd spent our whole lives coming in dead last. And just because Lucian was rigid in his schedule didn't mean I had to be too. So, when I heard him move from the bed, I chose to ignore his request for me to get up and get ready for the day.

He'd already taken everything away from me anyway, so I didn't see what else he could really do. There was also the matter of facing him after he'd spent the entire night holding me in his arms. A surreal and unfathomable truth. I didn't want to discuss it, or think about it, or even try to play this whole situation off as normal when I looked him in the eye. So I kept snoozing. For all of about twenty minutes until he returned.

"Am I to believe you've suddenly grown hard of hearing?"

When I opened my eyes, he was in front of me. Fresh from the shower and naked from the waist up.

I tried not to look.

While I could appreciate the art of a male body when I saw a good one, I certainly didn't want to appreciate this one. Even if it was beautiful and muscular and lean.

"It's Saturday." I wedged my head beneath the pillow and closed my eyes.

"Very good," Lucian replied. "You get a gold star for that. But you know what you don't get a star for?"

"Are these stars theoretical?" I mumbled.

"Ignoring a direct order," he answered. "Is everything going to be a fight with you, Gypsy?"

"Probably. I did try to warn you."

He was quiet for a minute, and I waited patiently for the next threat. I was already prepared to get out of bed and do his bidding when he yanked back the covers and hauled me up into his arms. An awful squeal ejected from my throat as he carried me into the bathroom, and I laid in his grasp like a limp noodle.

"What are you doing?"

His answer was to turn on the shower and force me directly beneath the spray. The *ice-cold* spray. I was still in my tee shirt and yoga pants, and he was officially the king of assholes.

"This is bullshit." I crossed my arms and shivered. "Let me out of here."

Lucian didn't move from the shower entry, and the only way to leave was to push past him. He knew I wouldn't do that, and it wasn't fair.

"You're a bastard," I thundered. "Do you know that? What they say about you is true. Every word."

He didn't even flinch. My words had no effect on him, and they were the only weapons I currently had in my arsenal.

He crossed his arms and leaned casually against the wall. "Are you going to behave? Are you going to do as you're told?"

"Why should I?" I shot back.

"Because that was the agreement we made."

He had a point, even if I didn't like it. I still didn't like him either, and I had a feeling the longer I spent with him, the more I would grow to hate

him. But I was freezing, and right now, I was willing to lose the battle if it meant I still had a chance in the war.

“Fine, whatever. Will you leave now so I can take a shower in peace?”

He checked his watch. “You have ten minutes.”

I reached for the knob to turn up the heat, but a flash of color on his retreating form caught my eye and my curiosity. Knowing Lucian as the straight-laced man he was, it shocked me to see the vivid riot of colors on his back.

It looked as if the asshole had a tattoo.

When I stepped out of the shower, the wet clothes I’d discarded on the floor were gone, and on the counter was a new set. The same crappy tee shirt. The same yoga pants. I drew in a deep breath and groaned. This was not turning out to be a good day, and I hadn’t even had my coffee yet.

It pissed me off that I had a closet full of designer clothes, and he wanted me to wear this crap. I had come too far in my life to regress so fast, and I couldn’t stomach another second of it. Sometimes, my temper got the best of me, and the only thing to do was roll with it and deal with the consequences later.

A search of the bathroom cabinets turned up a pair of trimming scissors, and I went to work cutting the clothes into bits. It pleased me more than it should have as I thought about the possibilities. How many pairs of these clothes could he have? And how many ways could I find to destroy them?

Knowing he’d be back to retrieve me when the ten minutes were up, I brushed my hair and sat on the counter, wrapped in a towel while I waited. Every second felt like a minute, and when he finally came back, my nerves were coiled so tight I worried how I might react when he inevitably exploded. But he didn’t. He walked into the bathroom as cool as ever, eyeing the discarded shreds on the floor.

“I take it you don’t like the clothes.”

“You get a gold star for that,” I chirped.

It really wasn’t smart to provoke him, but there was an innate need within me to know the limits with him. How far could I push him before he reacted? What would he do when he got really mad? These things were important. These things defined the boundaries of my life with him for the next two years.

Lucian stooped down to pick up the discarded clothes. I’d only ever seen him in a suit, but today, he was wearing jeans and a tee shirt. It was a different look for him. A casual look. I couldn’t make sense of this guy. He was completely loaded, yet he acted like none of it mattered to him.

“If you didn’t like the clothes, all you had to do was say so.” He discarded them into the trash bin.

I was pretty sure it was a trick, but I played along anyway. “Well, I don’t like them. I want my clothes back.”

“I told you that you have to earn them,” he answered. “And one thing you should know about me, Gypsy, is that I never go back on my word.”

I looked up at his dark eyes, trying to figure out what my next move should be. But truthfully, I didn’t have one. I refused to degrade myself by cleaning his house, yet I knew there was no reasoning with him.

“Hand me your towel,” he ordered.

I squeezed my arms down around it, prepared to fight. “No.”

He cocked his head to the side, examining me. “No?”

“No,” I repeated, but this time I sounded less sure.

All I had on beneath was a pair of underwear. Last night, I made it through unscathed, but it was apparent he had no intentions of allowing that to continue. This was what I’d feared all along. He would take me against my will.

I couldn’t let it happen. I wouldn’t. But when he stepped into my space and pried my fingers off the cotton, there was little I could do but yelp as we struggled for dominance over the towel. Ultimately, as he had with most of our disputes so far, he won.

I slapped my hands over my breasts and took a step back, glaring at him. “You aren’t touching me.”

His eyes didn’t leave my face. “Did I say that I was?”

My lips slammed shut, and something in his voice made me shiver. The hammering pulse in his neck alerted me to the fact that my remark set him on edge. I was finally tiptoeing a boundary with him, and I desperately

wanted to retreat. He had never looked so foreboding, and I didn't know what would happen next.

"You should think very carefully before you make snap judgments about someone," he said.

I stared past him to avoid the intensity in his eyes. "Usually, my judgments are pretty accurate."

"I told you I wouldn't hurt you." He folded the towel in his hands and wedged it beneath his arm, and the ritual seemed to bleed away some of the tension in his body. "I gave you my word. But I did promise that I would punish you, and I intend to do so now."

I couldn't prepare myself for either fight or flight because he walked out of the bathroom without another word. I stood there dumbly, trying to determine what course of action to take before I trailed after him. But I stopped short at the sight of him emerging from the closet with a pair of my Jimmy Choos.

I gulped in a breath, my fingers trembling as I moved toward him. "What are you doing?"

"I told you not to use foul language," he said. "You're more intelligent than that."

Desperation left me to chase after him as he carried my favorite pair of shoes down the hall and into the kitchen.

"I didn't!"

"You called me a bastard in the shower," he said calmly. "I warned you about speaking that way. Maybe next time you will remember it."

Horror froze me to the spot as he tossed the shoes into the sink and then unceremoniously dumped bleach all over them.

"Are you crazy?" I bellowed. "Do you have any idea how much those cost?"

He discarded the ruined shoes into the garbage. "What does it matter to you? I'm almost certain you didn't pay for them."

Blackness threatened the edges of my vision, and it hurt to breathe. He couldn't understand. He had no idea what he was doing to me. He wasn't just taking my possessions, he was taking my pride. "I earned those."

He laughed in a humorless, condescending way, and I wanted to rip his throat out. "Someday, you will come to understand that material possessions can't buy you happiness, pet."

"This is bull—" I stopped short, and he offered me a bemused smile.

“See? You’re learning already.”

Bitterness coated my tongue, and I couldn’t remember feeling this low since I’d left California. There was no intelligent conversation to be had with him. Only the venom that flew from my lips. “I hate you.”

His eyes were an inky melancholy when he stepped closer, brushing a thumb over my cheek. I didn’t want to tremble, but it happened involuntarily.

“Save your words, pet,” he whispered. “I haven’t even given you a reason to hate me yet.”

Chapter 14

Lucian

"WHAT ABOUT MY CLOTHES?" GYPSY obscured her breasts beneath her crossed arms, positioning herself in the middle of the kitchen so I was forced to acknowledge her.

I walked to the fridge and pulled out the milk, setting it beside the cereal on the counter. "You cut them up, I'm afraid."

"I'm talking about my real clothes," she argued.

"Would you like some breakfast, or do you prefer to pout through this meal as well?"

She didn't answer, and when I turned to look at her, it was clear she still wanted to fight. She was having trouble accepting her new reality.

"I want my clothes."

"Then perhaps you should start cleaning," I offered. "Maybe after breakfast?"

"I told you I'm not cleaning."

"Then you better get used to being naked."

I turned my attention back to breakfast, and she stomped off, but I knew it wasn't over. It was going to take longer than I anticipated to acclimate her. She was strong willed, and I admired that. But it didn't mean I was any less eager to break her.

I spent the day working on Emmanuel’s case from my home office while Gypsy spent the day ignoring me. I knew she’d cave eventually, so there was no need to hurry the process along from my end.

She’d been in the kitchen a couple of times already, begrudgingly slamming cupboards in what I assumed was the search for food. The only time our paths had crossed since then had been when I found her in the bedroom huddled in the sheet from the bed.

I presumed that at the present rate, she’d be in there all day, which was why I was surprised to find her standing in the doorway to my office, sheet still wrapped around her like a toga.

“This is ridiculous,” she huffed. “Seriously, what do you expect me to do all day? Lie around and stare at the ceiling?”

I gave her a passing glance before returning my attention to the computer screen in front of me. “I already told you what you were supposed to do.”

“I’m not a servant.”

“I’m aware of that but thank you for the clarification.”

“You have a housekeeper,” she pointed out. “Someone you actually pay to clean the house.”

“I’m aware of that as well.” I shuffled some paperwork around on my desk.

“So why are you making me do this?”

“I already told you, and I’m not in the habit of repeating myself unnecessarily.”

“God, you are infuriating.”

I didn’t respond, and she didn’t leave. For two minutes, she stood there, staring at me while I continued to work.

“I want you to text Birdie,” she said.

“Fine. What would you like to say?”

“SOS. Trapped by a psychopath. Come save me.”

I reached for my phone and began typing. “Anything else?”

A flash of white flooded my vision as she rushed forward. “Wait, don’t send that. It was a joke.”

My finger hovered over the send button. “I told you I don’t joke.”

Her eyes pleaded with me long before her lips finally did. “You can’t, she’ll worry about me.”

“You seem to think that everything is a game, Gypsy. I’ve explained the rules very simply, yet you refuse to follow them. So, give me one good reason I shouldn’t send this.”

Her body caved forward, and it was the first time she ever showed how truly sensitive she was. “Because it will upset her.”

“Then you shouldn’t have told me to send it.”

I moved to press the button, and her hand captured my wrist. Gunmetal gray eyes collided with mine, and her voice was the softest I’d ever heard it. “I’ll clean.”

I held her gaze for five long seconds before deleting the text. It was not in my best interest to barter with her because it would establish in her mind that everything had the possibility of compromise. But she loved her sister fiercely. She wanted more than anything to protect her, proven by her current circumstances, and I’d already exploited that wound enough. There was no need to add salt.

“Very well.” I put the phone away. “You may go then.”

She let go and walked into the hall.

“Gypsy?” I called after her.

She turned, her glossy brown hair cascading down around her shoulders. “Yes?”

“Put the sheet back on the bed where it belongs.”

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Chapter 15

Gypsy

My formative years had been one humiliating chapter after another, and degradation was an old friend of mine. But cleaning Lucian's house in my panties and a bra I'd fashioned out of the fabric scraps in the garbage felt like the most ridiculous, unscripted form of porn that one could create.

I expected him to come and perv on me, but he didn't. He didn't leave his office all day. But it was nearing dinnertime, and I assumed he'd be making his way back to this part of the house soon enough. I was hoping to be finished by then, but my luck had run out. He appeared out of nowhere at the ill-timed moment I was on my hands and knees, scrubbing his stupid kitchen floor.

He walked past me without a word and grabbed his meal from the fridge, popping open the container and leaning against the counter while he ate his salad.

"You missed a spot," he said between bites, pointing with his shoe at a scuff mark on the tile.

I glared up at him, another choice word on the tip of my tongue. I didn't use it because I wasn't prepared to lose another pair of shoes. "Don't you have anything better to do?" I asked.

"It's dinnertime," he said. "You should eat something as well."

"I already ate."

He didn’t move, and I couldn’t stand the thought of him watching me disgrace myself to appease him. Even though my childhood had stolen any shred of modesty I might have possessed, I hadn’t shown my body to a man in a long time.

I rocked back on my knees and looked up at him, trying to figure out how I was going to even the score. In the middle of that notion, the front door opened without warning, and I let out a shriek as another man breezed his way into the kitchen.

He arched an eyebrow in my direction before turning his attention to Lucian. “Did you get a new housekeeper?”

Lucian smirked. “Something like that.”

I tried to make a beeline for the bedroom, but Lucian’s voice stopped me. “Gypsy, have you forgotten your manners?”

I didn’t turn around, and I knew I would pay for it later, but he was delusional if he thought I would entertain conversation in my current state.

“You’re an asshole,” I announced. Screw it. The loss of another pair of shoes would be worth that one.

“So you’ve said, several times. There’s a flannel in my office. Why don’t you put it on and come back out to say a proper hello to Nolan.”

I wasn’t going to argue with that. A flannel was better than nothing. I bolted for his office and found the flannel hanging on the back of his chair. It seemed odd that he’d have a flannel lying around in the middle of a Vegas summer, but I wasn’t going to question it. It was soft, but too big, which worked out in my favor. The fabric hung down to my thighs, giving me a shred of security.

Lucian would expect me to return without delay, but before I left, I couldn’t help looking over the scattered paperwork on his desk. There was a lot of it that didn’t really interest me, but the key hanging from the desk drawer did.

It was risky to take it, but if I had any chance at all of getting out of this marriage I would need to find some dirt on him. Even though the likelihood of me digging anything up in this office was small, I figured it couldn’t hurt to try. I locked the drawer and shoved the key into the pocket of the flannel. If he found it, I could always say he left it there.

I walked out of the office but stopped before the end of the hall. I really didn’t want to go talk to his guest, whoever he was, but I was keenly aware that it didn’t really matter what I wanted. Lucian would make me pay for it

if I didn’t go, and I needed to pick my battles wisely. I peeked around the corner and found Lucian and his friend at the kitchen table. They were engrossed in conversation, and I figured it couldn’t hurt to listen in for a minute before making myself known.

“It’s going to be tough win,” Lucian said.

“Aren’t they always?” Nolan smiled wistfully. “Yet you take them on.”

“Something’s different about this kid.” Lucian rubbed the back of his neck, but it did little to dissolve the tension in his body. “I don’t know.”

“Is it possible that he reminds you of yourself when you were his age?”

Lucian was pensive, and it was the first time I’d seen any semblance of emotion on his face. This was the proof that something in his past haunted him, and I just needed to figure out what it was.

“How are you feeling?” Nolan redirected the conversation.

Lucian shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“You’ve lost weight.” Nolan’s eyes drifted over Lucian’s frame with concern.

“Not much.”

“How do you plan to see this case through if—”

“I will see it through,” Lucian interjected.

They were both quiet then, and I knew I’d blow it if I waited any longer. I exited the hall and took a seat at the end of the table. They both turned their attention to me.

Lucian waved his hand between us. “Nolan, this is Gypsy.”

“Hi, Gypsy.”

I batted my eyes in his direction. “Hello.”

Nolan was an older man. Probably in his sixties, if I had to guess. He seemed surprised by my sudden presence in Lucian’s life, and the curiosity in his eyes gave me hope. He would be an easy mark to plead my case to if it came down to it. I might as well start winning him over now, just in case. Every person in Lucian’s life could be a potential ally if I worked it right.

“I’m gay,” he announced dryly. “So you can save your charm for someone else.”

My shoulders fell, and he smiled. “How do you two know each other?”

I wondered how Lucian was going to spin this, so I turned to him with a smile. “Yes, how did we meet, my darling husband?”

Nolan’s brows shot up at my endearment, but it didn’t faze Lucian.

“I’m blackmailing her,” Lucian said.

I glared at him, and Nolan chuckled as if he often heard this kind of thing in everyday conversation. “I see.”

“She’s a brat,” Lucian went on. “Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

“And you’re a bastard.” I showboated my pearly whites.

“That’s two items from your closet.” He returned my sarcasm with a lazy smile. “You sure you want to keep going? There’s a Louis Vuitton bag in there calling my name.”

“Not the bag,” I responded, horrified.

“Watch your mouth and you might still escape with it intact. This is your last warning.”

I looked at Nolan. “You just heard him tell you that he’s basically keeping me hostage here, and you’re okay with that? What kind of man are you?”

Nolan held up his hands. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on between you two, and I don’t care to know either. What Lucian does is his business, and I trust that whatever his reasons for keeping you here are good ones.”

I stood and shoved back the chair. This guy was no help. “May I be excused now?”

“You may,” Lucian answered. “It’s probably best you get back to cleaning, princess.”

Chapter 16

Gypsy

By the time dinner had come around, I was starving. Lucian told me there was a salad waiting for me in the fridge before he disappeared into his office. I popped open the container and took one look at the greens and decided against it.

My frustration drove me to the pantry where I sorted through bins of whole grains and health foods I didn't even know how to pronounce, let alone cook. The man didn't own a single microwaveable thing or anything of the pour and stir variety.

Enough was enough. He could eat this way if he wanted to, but I had my own money and my own options. Even though he'd taken away my cell phone, Lucian was still one of the rare people to own a landline, and as luck would have it… a phone book. I scoured through the yellow pages and hit gold. But the minute I began to dial, a shadow fell over me, solid fingers prying the phone from my hand.

"What are you doing?" Lucian scowled.

He was so close that I couldn't move without touching his body, so I kept my gaze forward.

"Obviously, I was trying to order pizza."

He closed the book and shoved it back into the drawer from where it came. "We have food here."

My frustration swelled and ejected from my mouth with all the eloquence of a four-year-old. “I don’t want your stupid, weird food.”

There was a long silence in which I could feel his eyes on me, dissecting whatever it was he thought he could see. “There’s some macaroni and cheese in the cupboard,” he offered. “If you want to make that instead.”

My cheeks heated, and I turned away, so he couldn’t see. “Forget it.”

I tried to leave, but his arm snaked out and caught me. My body was rigid, and he wasn’t respecting my boundaries when he forced me to turn and meet his eyes.

“Gypsy.” His voice was deceptively soft, and his eyes made me think for a split second that he was being nice. “Do you know how to cook?”

“Of course, I know how to cook.” A lie. A big, fat, embarrassing lie. But that was none of his business.

The typical sharpness of his features gave way to compassion, and I hated it. I hated that he thought he had any right to feel sorry for me.

“I’ll just go to bed,” I said. “Let me go.”

“No.” Lucian released me. “You won’t.”

I was prepared to wage a full-fledged war with him until he walked to the cupboard and removed a pot, offering it to me.

“What is this?” I eyed the offending item wearily.

“Come here,” he instructed. “I’m going to show you how to make macaroni and cheese.”

I didn’t want to go. I’d been humiliated enough already, and I suspected this wouldn’t go over well. But I also suspected that Lucian would do something worse to my innocent shoes if I didn’t. At least, that was what I told myself when I forced myself to join him in front of the stove.

He handed off the pan and gave me instructions in the same no-nonsense way he always spoke. “First, you need to add water.”

I used the filtered spout from the fridge and did as he told me, anxiety building in my chest when I realized I didn’t know how much to add. I was too proud to ask, but it didn’t matter because a moment later, I felt his hand on my arm, signaling me to stop. When I turned, he was so close my hair brushed against his jaw. Our eyes locked, and for a second, I forgot how to breathe. I couldn’t deny the power of this man. Not when it was right in front of me.

He was unjustly handsome, his face the kind of beautiful you’d never expect from someone so antisocial. Inwardly, I knew he didn’t feel

anything. I'd seen him cold and cruel, inflexible and harsh. But at that moment, his eyes were gentle, and I couldn't find it in me to break away. I studied the lines of his face, the signs of stray silver hairs on his temples. Something about him made me feel as if I'd been punched in the chest every time I looked at him.

I broke the spell between us and turned away. Lucian took my cue, shaking his head as he retreated and gave me back my space.

"Now it goes on the stove," he told me, his voice thick with something I couldn't identify.

"Okay." I set the pot on the stove, and he continued his lesson, never taking his eyes off me.

He showed me how to light the burner, and then he stood beside me while we waited in awkward silence for the water to heat. The kitchen was hot, and somehow in the space of just a few moments, the tension between us seemed to reach a boiling point.

I followed his instructions for the next ten minutes, emptying the pasta into the pot, stirring, straining, and mixing. Every time Lucian leaned closer and his skin brushed against mine, my heart beat a little faster. I wondered if it was intentional, if he knew what he was doing to me. But when I chanced a peek up at him, I realized it wasn't just me.

Gazing into eyes so dark, they looked downright predatory, I didn't have to guess that he was affected too. I could feel the heat rolling off him when he tucked an errant piece of hair away from my face.

"You should wear this back when you cook," he said in a rough voice.

I nodded because I couldn't speak, and Lucian seemed to understand that things were getting out of control when his eyes momentarily drifted to my lips. For a split second, I thought he might try to kiss me. But instead, he turned away, scrubbing a hand through his hair before he retrieved a bowl from the cupboard and set it on the counter.

"Eat up, pet. I need to get back to work."

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Chapter 17

Lucian

"Holy crap." Gypsy glanced out the passenger window with wide eyes. "You're taking me to church?"

I glanced at her face in profile, the beaming sunlight highlighting her coppery skin. She had the cheekbones of a woman, but her animated expressions often exposed her youth. I wondered what was going through her mind when she pressed her fingertips against the door and leaned forward. Did she recall how many times she came here on her own to confess her sins, or would she even admit to me that she had?

She opted for silence, even as I opened the door and helped her from the car. I'd given her a new dress for the occasion—one I hoped would be modest—but it occurred to me there was no such piece of clothing for Gypsy. Her legs went on for miles, and it didn't matter what material she wrapped herself in, she was the Christmas present every man wanted.

At that moment, I was one of them. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Without all the makeup and the invisible armor, she looked like she might have belonged here, even if she didn't feel like it.

She smoothed some imaginary wrinkles from the material around her waist. "Is this some sort of an exorcism? Is that why you brought me here?"

"No," I answered. "We're here for Sunday service."

Her eyes drifted toward the entrance of Saint Vincent's, a place she'd come to know well. I waited again for her to acknowledge it, but she didn't.

“I have something else for you,” I said.

She turned to see what it was, and her arm brushed against mine. Her skin was soft, and it had the immediate effect of making me feel as if this was the last place I belonged because all I wanted to do at that moment was touch her again.

I retrieved the delicate gold rosary necklace from my pocket. It was expensive and rare, a one-of-a-kind piece I’d purchased on a whim after the first night I saw her. I’d waited for months to drape the chain around her neck, and when I did, the moment lived up to all my expectations. It was the perfect complement to her skin tone, and it brought out a sweetness in her temperament, but more than that, it gave me a sense of relief.

“It’s beautiful.” Gypsy ran her fingers along the tiny pearls. “But I don’t know the rosary.”

My lips tilted at the corners. “I know. But I couldn’t imagine it belonging to anyone else.”

My palm found the small of her back, and I escorted her inside the church. She shivered, and it reminded me of the first time I’d stepped foot in here. It was a time when I didn’t have faith in my life, and if you’d asked me if I was a believer, I’d have told you to go to hell.

I didn’t know what Gypsy’s belief systems were. I only knew that, on some level, she felt safe here. She often stole in here secretly, confessing her darkest secrets, only to flee as though she’d never spoken them aloud at all. It was the reason that even though she represented everything I loathed, I wanted to believe there was redemption for her.

She trailed along beside me, pausing to observe the water inside the baptismal font. I dipped my fingers into the liquid while she watched, making the sign of the cross on myself. Then, against my better judgment, I wet my fingers again. I met her eyes, and she sucked in a breath, and everything else around us seemed to slip away. With scrupulous care, I anointed her forehead and sternum before dragging my fingers across the sensitive flesh of her collarbone to finish on her right.

She trembled, and it triggered an image of me baptizing her naked form in this holy water, only to desecrate her afterward like the true heathen I was. My eyes closed on a sigh, and I tried to gain control of my body and thoughts before they ventured into darker territory. I wanted to protect this girl, but I couldn’t deny the urge inside me that wanted to ruin her too.

We took a seat in the outer pews, and she seemed relieved that I didn’t make her sit up front. I wasn’t certain what to expect when the priest and his attendants took their places for the service. Part of me suspected she would throw a fit and demand to leave, but she didn’t.

Instead, she listened raptly throughout the service as if she were trying to decipher the true meanings behind the hymns. Catholicism was, in essence, a series of rituals. And while I didn’t necessarily consider myself a devout Catholic, I respected the rituals. They gave order to the chaos inside my head at a time when I needed it the most.

After the darkest chapter of my life, I’d found peace in this place, and I brought Gypsy here with the hope that someday she might too.

The service finished without delay, and she remained quiet on the drive home. I didn’t intrude on that silence. I felt it best to let her digest it on her own. At times, I could teach her, but there would be moments she’d have to learn on her own.

Chapter 18

Gypsy

WHEN WE GOT BACK HOME, I left Lucian to finish some of my cleaning duties. Partly because I just wanted to finish them, and partly because I needed to organize my thoughts about this man.

He was an enigma. A man who essentially blackmailed me into a marriage and threatened to send me to prison at every opportunity, but one who apparently concerned himself with my soul. It didn't make sense. Nothing about this situation made sense.

I replayed this morning's events over and over again, searching for clues to determine his motivations for bringing me to that church. It crossed my mind that he knew about my secret confessions, but then I remembered that the priest told me himself he was bound to silence, and he would not break that silence.

Very few men in this world were worth trusting, but I believed in Father Hawk. He hadn't betrayed me so far, even after he'd seen my face and talked to me without the veil of a confessional booth. The only logical conclusion I could draw from the day's events was that Lucian took me there merely because he wanted to. Perhaps in time I would understand his reasons, but it wouldn't be today.

I was just finishing the dusting when I heard his alarm go off. Another oddity about Lucian was his timed meals. It didn't matter what he was in the middle of, when that alarm went off, he ate. The strangest part was that

it seemed robotic. There was no enjoyment on his face when he ate, and whenever he finished, he logged everything into a nutritional app before marking it off on his calendar.

He was methodical and rigid. Unyielding, in fact. And my brain could only speculate what forces of nature shaped his mindset. I could have asked, but I had a feeling that he wasn't the sort of man to give anything away. Unlike the men I targeted, he was a closed book. A locked diary, to be more accurate. And that lock had a trip wire on it that would explode if you dared to poke at it.

If I was going to get any answers about him, it would have to be done the hard way. Regardless, I had two years to figure it out.

"Is there something wrong with the salad?" Lucian asked.

I flung a piece of greenery across the bowl to get to the chicken. "Not really, I guess. But I don't usually eat this kind of stuff."

"You mean healthy?" he mused.

I looked up at him. His voice was lighter. His whole demeanor was lighter, and I wondered if it was from the spiritual experience of this morning's events or something else.

I set my fork down and took a sip of lemon water. "I do eat healthy, but I also choose to eat good food. This has no flavor."

"Tell me what you'd like on the menu, and I'll see what we can do," he suggested.

I stared into his cocoa brown eyes. When they were warm, they looked like melted chocolate. It was hard to remember that he was such a prick when he had the capability of looking like a puppy too. And I was fairly certain this was some kind of a cruel trick, but I decided to humor him. "A little pasta wouldn't kill us, would it?"

He shrugged. "Probably not."

"And some wine. Good wine. Not the cheap crap."

His lip tilted at the corner. "We'll see about that one."

"I like fruit more than vegetables," I admitted.

“That doesn’t mean you can get out of eating them.”

Somehow, I didn’t doubt he was serious. I went back to picking around the greens and polished off the chunks of chicken in my bowl. “I usually drink them with a Caesar. Does that count?”

Lucian got up to clear our plates and load the dishwasher. “No, it doesn’t.”

He started sifting through the cupboards, moving boxes around and shifting items until he seemed to find what he was looking for. He pulled a few containers from the inventory and set them on the counter.

“There.” He dusted off his hands and wiped them with a towel. “Tonight, we can work on rice and beans. And good news, pet. You get to cook it.”

I shot him a disinterested look, but really, I was sort of looking forward to it. At least it gave me something to do.

Now that we’d finished our lunch, I imagined he was planning on holing back up in his office to work on his case, so I planned to get the rest of my cleaning done. The sooner I could get back into my own clothes, the better.

“May I be excused?” I asked sweetly.

He shook his head. “You may, but only to change back into your tee shirt and leggings.”

“Why?”

“That dress is only for church,” he answered. “And I need your help. Meet me out front in fifteen minutes.”

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Chapter 19

SIXTEEN MINUTES LATER, THE FRONT door slammed behind me and I thought I was ready to stage a rebellion. Instead, I found myself rooted to the welcome mat.

Now this was a holy experience.

Lucian West owned a vintage Shelby GT500, and he never even told me. It was a pearly blue, and it was a beauty. But honestly, I didn't know what was more impressive. The car or the man beneath the hood turning the wrenches.

His hands were covered in grease, and an oil rag was hanging from his back pocket. Every muscle in his body worked as he torqued the wrench in his hand, and I watched in fascination from the sidelines. I would have never guessed that this high-powered attorney could fix cars too. Even if I had no idea what he was doing, it was apparent that he did.

He squinted at me through the afternoon sun. "Are you going to watch all day, or are you ready to help?"

My cheeks flushed, and I was annoyed that he'd caught me staring. "I thought you would have paid someone to do this sort of work for you."

"There's no pride in that when I can do it myself."

I didn't reply, but I did move closer when he gestured for me. "What do you need me to do?"

He looked down at my fingers. "I need your hand."

I stopped moving. “My hand?”

“It’s smaller than mine,” he observed.

I arched a brow. “What will I be doing with said hand?”

“There’s a loose bolt on the header,” he informed me. “I need you to reach down between the body and engine gap to tighten it.”

He pointed and showed me what he wanted me to do. It seemed easy enough, but I still wasn’t quite sure of myself, and I hated feeling that way. I was half tempted to go back in the house, consequences be damned, but then he moved behind me and positioned my body the way he decided would work best.

Or something like that.

I was too aware of his heat behind me. The scent of car grease and gasoline and something so distinctly Lucian, I’d never forget it. His whole house smelled like warm caramel and cloves, and it had taken me a while to realize that it was just him.

“Here.” He guided my arm down into the machinery of the car, and I followed his instructions carefully while I held my breath.

I didn’t know what was happening, but I felt warm all over. He was so close to me. I should have wanted to push him away, but I didn’t. And I couldn’t understand that.

Despite his religious beliefs and the few nice things he’d done for me, he wasn’t a good person. He blackmailed me, forcing me into this marriage, and threatened to ruin my life. Even if that weren’t the case, we had a huge age gap between us. Seventeen years. It felt wrong that I had even for a split second considered him attractive.

“Are we done now?” I asked as I finished the task he’d given me.

He took my arm in his and wiped it with a cloth, but his eyes never left mine. “You have trouble with men getting close to you.”

I didn’t know if it was an observation or a question, but regardless, I wasn’t answering.

“I told you I would never hurt you,” Lucian said.

“So?” I shot back. “You brought me here, didn’t you? You made me marry you. How can I know what you’re capable of? I barely know you.”

“You don’t need to know me,” he answered. “You only need to know that I stand by my word. I said I won’t hurt you, and I meant it. I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid.” I crossed my arms.

He stared at me until I felt like I wanted to melt into the concrete. I didn’t want to believe that he knew all my secrets, but maybe he really did. Because when he looked at me, it wasn’t the way other men did. It wasn’t with sloppy lust or greed. There was passion and determination in his eyes. I just had to figure out exactly what that determination meant.

“You did good, pet.” He brought his thumb to my cheek and wiped away a streak of grease I didn’t know had collected there. “Have you ever had a real job?”

I shook my head. I’d made a shitload of money in my lifetime, but none of it was what society would call a real job.

“I want you to come to the office with me this week,” he said. “You can work the front desk.”

“Seriously?” I groaned. “What about your girlfriend?”

His eyes narrowed. “What girlfriend?”

“You know, the pretty redhead you’ve probably banged about a thousand times.”

He stuffed the oil rag back into his pocket and crossed his arms. “She’s an employee, not my girlfriend. And I’ve never fucked her.”

“Whatever.” My cheeks felt like tomatoes. “I don’t want to work with her.”

“Feeling threatened?” he mused.

“No,” I bit out. “I just don’t want to do that job.”

Lucian slammed the hood and locked the car. “I think you’re forgetting something, pet. It doesn’t matter what you want. Remember?”

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Chapter 20

Lucian

"How are you doing?"

Emmanuel bobbed his head, but nothing came out of his mouth. The shadows beneath his eyes were more prominent than the last time I'd seen him, and the bruising on his jaw was fresh. I was aware he'd been in several scuffles already with other inmates, which wasn't entirely surprising. This place was a cesspool of crime, but there were always a few who believed their crimes weren't as morally repulsive as the rest.

Emmanuel would have to face down these demons for the rest of his life if he was convicted of murder, and I knew better than to give him false comfort or hope. His case would be difficult to win, and I wouldn't tell him otherwise. All my cases were notoriously difficult to win, but I couldn't deny the overbearing sense of hopelessness in this one.

I needed a working theory. Something that would convince the jury of another plausible suspect. The problem was that Emmanuel's neighborhood was notoriously anti-police, and nobody who had any real information was actually talking. All I could do was ensure Emmanuel was prepared for trial.

I shuffled through my paperwork and got down to business. "We need to go over the questions again. I need your honest answers. Can you do that?"

He nodded.

“How well did you know Ariana Sanders?”

Emmanuel rubbed a hand over his face. “I already told you, I didn’t know her. She lived on my street, but we had never talked before that night. I just saw her drop her groceries, and I offered to help. That was it.”

“Tell me in your own words what happened that day.”

His eyes rolled up toward the ceiling as he recounted his story. “I picked up the bag and waited for her to open the door. I wasn’t going to go inside, but she told me it was cool. I walked into the kitchen, set the bag on the counter, and tried to leave. She thanked me and offered me a glass of water. It was hot out, and I was thirsty, so I took it. We talked for a couple of minutes and I left. That was it, I’m telling you.”

“So this twenty-three-year-old woman who lived alone and didn’t know you invited you into her apartment without any apparent concern?”

“Yes, man.” Emmanuel ground his teeth together. “We’ve been through this. Why are you asking me the same questions over and over?”

“Because that’s exactly what the prosecution will do, Emmanuel,” I answered. “And I will continue to ask them until I’m blue in the face if it means that your story never changes. That’s what they want. They are looking for ammunition. They want to nail you to the cross, and if you give them an opening to do that by losing your cool on the stand, they will prove their point. When you come off as having an easily provoked temper, they win.”

He was quiet while he digested my words. His eyes were heavy, and he looked remorseful for his behavior, but he couldn’t know just how much I got it. If he didn’t come out of this place having mental issues, then I would be worried.

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I just can’t believe this is really happening. I can’t believe I’m in here for murder.”

“I know. But you have to stay focused. I need one hundred percent of your attention on this trial. If you get bogged down in other possibilities, then we don’t stand a chance.”

“Okay,” he answered solemnly. “I get it. I’ll do whatever you say.”

I returned my attention to the questions I’d written, and for the next hour, we went over them in detail. Emmanuel answered them all to my satisfaction except for the one that mattered most. Who could he think of that might be responsible for Ariana’s murder?

I knew from his history that he wasn't affiliated with any gangs or criminal organizations, but I suspected on some level he was too afraid to point fingers at anyone else. Not for himself but for his family who still lived on the street.

I stuffed my paperwork back into the briefcase and stood. Another visit to his mother's house was on the agenda even though she refused to see me the last time. "Did you have a letter for your mom?"

He blinked and shook his head. "No, not yet. I've been trying to write it, but…"

"The words will come," I assured him. "Give it time."

He jerked his chin. "Thanks, Mr. West. I appreciate it."

I half expected the office to be burned to the ground by the time I returned, but instead, I found Gypsy at Jessica's desk, painting her nails.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

She snapped her bubblegum and gave me a bored expression. "Isn't it obvious? Since I haven't been able to get a manicure, I had no choice."

"You're supposed to be working."

She shrugged. "This place is boring."

"Welcome to having a job," I told her. "Do I have any messages?"

She blew on her fingers. "I dunno."

"You haven't answered the phone?"

"What the hell am I supposed to say?" She glared. "I have no idea what I'm doing here."

This was clearly something we needed to work on. Whenever Gypsy was out of her comfort zone, she resorted to acting like a self-indulgent brat. I needed to figure out that disconnect, but first, I had to address the issue of her punishment.

I walked around the desk and threw her nail polish into the trash, followed by the can of soda beside it.

"What are you doing?" she screeched. "I wasn't finished."

“In case I didn’t make it clear, this office is for work.” I grabbed a bottle of water from the mini fridge and set it on the desk in front of her.

“I don’t want to work here.” She shoved the phone away, as if that would stop it from ringing. “This is stupid. You’re defending wife beaters and murderers, and you want me to help you with that? No fucking thanks.”

My temper rarely got the best of me anymore, but in this case, I wasn’t proud to admit that it did. I didn’t even realize what I was doing when I pulled her up from the chair. She tried to fight me, but my grip on her was too strong, and my anger too raw. I forced her over the desk and held her there with one palm in the middle of her back. My other hand collided with her ass three times before I noticed her trembling arms and terrified eyes, and I froze.

Fuck.

I’d lost control, and she was scared of me. It was the last thing that I wanted. I’d promised her I wouldn’t hurt her, and in her mind, this probably crossed that line. What I was about to do next would cross the line too, but it couldn’t be avoided. Not now.

I pulled her into my lap and eased her head onto my chest, stroking her hair. “I’m sorry, pet.” My voice cracked. “I shouldn’t have done that. It was wrong, and I know it was wrong. But you’re safe now.”

She shuddered but didn’t speak. I continued to comfort her with gentle assurances and a soothing touch until her quivering disappeared and her heart rate calmed, and only then did I release her. It wasn’t anywhere close to quitting time, but there was no question I would have to take her home.

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Chapter 21

Gypsy

WHEN WE WALKED IN THE door, I tried to make a quick escape to the bedroom, but Lucian wasn't having it.

"It's time for dinner," he said.

"But it's only four." My gaze lingered down the hall, longing to escape to the seclusion of the only privacy I had in the bedroom.

"And after your behavior today, you'll be spending your evening thinking about it."

My shoulders caved forward as I looked up into his steely eyes.

He spanked me.

I still couldn't believe it. And I didn't want to think about it, but I kept replaying it over and over in my head. He seemed contrite afterward, but now he wanted to dole out more punishment? I couldn't make sense of this guy.

I was tired and admittedly on edge, and I didn't want to test the boundaries anymore today. He'd already proved that he wasn't past touching me, and if he could spank me, there was no telling what else he might do.

I slumped into my seat at the kitchen table, and Lucian grabbed a plate of raw vegetables and sliced chicken from the fridge, setting it in front of me. I stared up at him incredulously. Surely, he didn't expect me to eat this.

“Finish your plate.” He issued the command without a hint of the remorse he’d shown earlier. “Or you’ll be eating the same thing for the next week.”

I held my tongue and glared at the offending food. So much for pasta. The vegetable selection went from bad to worse. I crunched every baby carrot as loudly as I could manage while he tore into his salad quietly. Who knew what he had planned for tonight, but it couldn’t be worse than this.

It took me thirty minutes to finish, but I did finish. As usual, Lucian cleaned up the plates and then gestured for me.

“Come.”

He issued orders as though he expected people to obey them. Most of the people in his life probably did, but I didn’t want to be one of them. I hesitated for too long, and he sighed. “We can do this the hard way, if you’d prefer.”

I still didn’t move. But in one swift motion, he had me tossed over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Let me go,” I demanded.

He didn’t. Instead, he carried me down the hall to the guest room and set me down at the small desk.

“I punished you at the office for your words,” he began. “I was angry, and I shouldn’t have done it without your permission. But you still have repercussions for your behavior today. When I bring you to work, I expect you to work.”

The problem was, I didn’t want to work with him. But I wasn’t going to say it out loud. I’d learned the hard way he did not take lightly to criticism of his job.

“Here.” He offered me a pencil and shoved a pad of legal paper in front of me. “Write this down.”

I aimed my pencil at the paper but not before glaring at him.

“From now on,” he recited as I scratched the words into the paper, “I will be a good girl and do what Lucian says.”

I paused to look at him. “Are you for real?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

He didn’t look like he even knew what a joke was. But that was beside the point. I wasn’t doing this. I unlocked my fist, and the pencil clattered against the desk. Lucian didn’t even blink when he opened the drawer

beside me and retrieved a pair of handcuffs. That was when the air in my lungs changed tide.

“What are you doing?”

He slapped the cuff around my left wrist and locked it onto the metal drawer handle. “You can stay here until you finish. One hundred lines, nice and neat.”

“You’re psychotic,” I shot back.

“Maybe.” He offered me a grim smile. “Or maybe I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

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Chapter 22

Lucian

ACE KICKED OFF HIS MOTORCYCLE boots and left them at the door while he surveyed my living room. “So you just need me to chill here?”

“Yes.” I grabbed a jacket from the hall closet and shrugged it on. Even though it was still hot outside, I was feverish. “If you hear any suspicious noises coming from the room, go ahead and check on her. If she needs the bathroom, she can use it, but she goes right back to the desk until her lines are finished.”

He bobbed his head and took up residence on the couch. “Man, you gotta get Netflix or something in this place.”

“I like the quiet.”

“It’s cool,” he grumbled. “I’ll just raid your fridge and take a nap.”

I walked toward the door before I thought of something. “Did you get Birdie out of the city?”

Ace hesitated, and he didn’t look at me when he answered. “Yep.”

I trusted him implicitly, but it felt like he wasn’t telling me the whole truth. Regardless, it was out of my hands at this point. I told Gypsy I wouldn’t keep tabs on her sister, and I meant it.

“Is she safe?” I asked.

“Yes.” Ace met my gaze this time, and there was fire in his. “As safe as she can be.”

I nodded. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Take your time,” he mumbled, leaning his head back against the sofa and closing his eyes. “It’s kinda nice here.”

“How long has it been since your last confession?”

I rapped my fingers against the wall between us. “It’s me, Cristian.”

There was a pause of silence, and I was almost certain he dreaded this conversation as much as I did. I’d come to atone my sins but never in the usual way. I didn’t address him as Father, and I often found myself talking to him as a friend rather than my priest. But over the years, Cristian had become both.

“I saw you at mass on Sunday,” he offered.

“I know.”

“I saw you with her.” His tone was accusatory. Protective. Even slightly scornful. He had a right to those feelings when he’d warned me against this from the beginning, but I had set my path long ago, and it was never to his standards of righteousness.

“I’m only trying to help her.”

“I don’t think you can offer her the kind of help she needs,” he replied.

“If not me, then who can?” I challenged. “As long as she’s been coming here to confess her sins, what good has that done her?”

Another pause. “I give her an ear to listen without judgment.”

“Followed by a healthy dose of atonement,” I mused. “We are not so different, Father.”

He sighed. “I would ask you how you found her, but I don’t think I want to know.”

“Anybody is easy enough to find,” I told him. “If you have the right tools.”

Cristian knew that I saw her here first. I set my sights on her in this place of worship, and that was a problem for him. Despite what he might believe, the decision hadn’t been an easy one. I’d spent months combing through the details of her life, tormenting myself over what I should do. Gypsy was my greatest controversy, and she had no idea.

“How is she doing?” Cristian asked.

“She’s a handful,” I admitted. “More than I probably should have taken on, but I’m in it now. There’s no going back.”

His shadow moved on the other side as he shifted. “What if your plan doesn’t work? What if it only causes her more pain in the end?”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” I deflected. “I’m only here to teach her. Nothing more.”

“It isn’t nothing I saw in your eyes when you talked about her.”

“I’m incapable of loving anyone,” I told him. “You know that.”

“That’s what you’ve said,” he agreed. “But that doesn’t mean it’s true. God has a way of proving our truths false sometimes.”

“Like your own.”

It was a low blow, and I immediately regretted the jab. Cristian had been struggling for some time with the vows he’d taken, and I knew he questioned his own path, even if he couldn’t admit it himself. That was the truth I saw in his eyes. The torment I recognized too well. In the end, he chose not to acknowledge my words at all.

“While you might be able to guarantee your feelings, you can’t guarantee hers.”

“She won’t fall in love with me.” I bowed my head and pinched the tension in the back of my neck. “She can barely stomach looking at me.”

He didn’t know the full extent of our arrangement, and it was better that way. His conscience wouldn’t allow him to stand by while I went about things the way I chose.

“Your presence in her life can only be a temporary one,” Cristian noted. “You think you are saving her, but how can you be certain you might not equally devastate her?”

“It won’t happen. I won’t allow her feelings to grow roots.”

“You wouldn’t be here talking to me if you didn’t have your doubts,” Cristian argued. “Tell me what it is you want to hear from me?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“I can’t give you my approval.”

“I know.”

We were both quiet then. He took it upon himself to redirect the conversation. “How is your health?”

“It’s fine.” My fingers bounced against my thigh, a nervous pattern that I couldn’t recall making before. “I’m tired. But fine.”

“And you are still certain of your course with that matter?”

“Yes.”

“Then I can offer you only this,” he said. “Do what good you can while there is time.”

“I’m trying.”

“God will light your way.”

I smiled into the darkness. “I hope for your sake, Father, he will light yours as well.”

Chapter 23

Gypsy

"I HAVE TO PEE."

Ace gave me a bored expression as he uncuffed me from the desk. I was free, but I knew it wouldn't be for long. While I went to the bathroom, I contemplated my potential escape options, but they were limited to spraying him with water or throwing a bar of soap at his head. Nothing in this bathroom would be useful, and the man was a tank.

"You might as well just suck it up and do it," Ace told me when I came back out. "You're only delaying the inevitable. He won't let you go until it's done."

"You sound like you know from personal experience."

"That's because I do."

I arched a brow at him. "Did he make you write lines?"

"No, worse. He made me go to school."

He locked me back to the desk, but my curiosity wouldn't let him go. "What could he possibly have over you?"

"He saved my life," Ace said. "I owe him more than I could ever pay him. The least I could do was get my shit together if that made him happy."

I looked up at the beefy man who sounded mild as a kitten whenever he talked about Lucian. "So you finished high school?"

"College," he corrected.

That information shocked me. Maybe it was a stereotype, but I'd just assumed the huge biker dude probably didn't have much going on in that head of his other than beer and broads.

"What's your degree?"

"Diesel mechanics," he explained. "It was a two-year program. Now I got my own shop, make a decent living, and give some of the boneheads from my club something to do with their time. No complaints on my end."

"Huh," I mumbled.

"Yep. I'm going to go take a nap. I suggest you get to writing."

"Wait," I pleaded.

He sighed. "What?"

"Can't you tell me just a little bit about Lucian?"

"That's for him to tell you."

"I'm not talking about his darkest secrets." I rolled my eyes. "I just… I don't know anything about him really."

"He's a good dude." Ace shrugged. "That's all I can really say."

"Good?" I snorted. "He gets criminals off. How is that good?"

Ace crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "Have you ever considered that maybe you don't know what the hell you're talking about, little girl?"

"What do you mean?"

"He defends *accused* criminals. There's a big goddamn difference. Now give that some thought before you go tossing out bullshit statements."

His body language warned me we were in choppy waters here, but I was finally getting somewhere, and I couldn't stop now.

"You were innocent?" I pressed.

"Yes." Ace gritted his teeth. "Even if you find that hard to believe, not everyone who gets tossed in the can actually deserves it. You might be surprised if you did your research."

I toyed with the pencil on the desk as I thought that over. "So he just takes on cases of people he thinks are innocent?"

"I can't answer for him. All I can say is Lucian does what he thinks is best. He's a damn good guy who got dealt a shitty hand, and I stand by his choices whatever they may be."

"Shitty hand?" I looked up at him, desperate to know what he meant by that.

"You'll have to ask him about that," he said.

I groaned, and Ace smirked. “You know, you’re a little brat. But I kinda think you might be good for him if you can get your own head out of your ass and see him for who he is.”

And with those sweet parting words, he left me on my own.

Hours had come and gone, and I still hadn’t written my lines. I knew I wasn’t getting out of it, but I was desperate to prove that I couldn’t be so easily controlled. Lucian had yet to return, but when he did make an appearance, I would show him that his orders weren’t the rules I lived by. At least for a little bit.

Honestly, I was tired, and this position was uncomfortable. My arm was cramping, and I wanted to go to bed. I also couldn’t stop thinking about the conversation I had with Ace.

He believed Lucian was a good guy, deep down to his core. But everything Lucian had shown me so far pointed to a control freak who lived a regimental lifestyle and wouldn’t know the definition of kindness if it slapped him in the face.

I found it difficult to reconcile the two wildly different accounts of him—how the media portrayed him versus the one his close friend gave. Either he was a piece of shit criminal attorney with no morals, or he was a selfless justice-seeking one-man army for the innocent. He couldn’t possibly be both. I wanted to find out more about him, but so far, he hadn’t given me the opportunity to do it. That key from his office was still hidden in the bedroom, and it couldn’t stay that way for long. I needed to get in there and poke around, but with him accounting for every hour of my day so far, it was easier said than done.

“Still trying to prove a point, I see?”

Lucian’s voice startled me, and when I turned, I found him hovering in the doorframe, his dark eyes moving over me with a tiredness I felt deep in my bones.

“I could write the lines.” I shrugged. “But they would be a lie. We both know I’m not going to do what you tell me all the time.”

“They wouldn’t be a lie,” he corrected. “They would be a goal. An intention. And it’s up to you whether or not you want to be the kind of person who follows through with your intentions.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I could come up with way better intentions than that.”

Lucian closed the distance between us, his fingers grazing the strands of hair around my neck. “Something you should know about me, pet, is I don’t bend or break. You can write the lines, or you can sit here until you do. Those are your options, and your defiance won’t change it. Is it worth your discomfort to prove a point that means nothing to me?”

I looked up at him, a maneuver that forced me to acknowledge his dominance over me. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you misbehaved, and it needs to be corrected.”

“No.” I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. “I mean why are you acting like you’re my father or something.”

“You don’t have a father.” The heat of his hand disappeared from my neck, and when I met his eyes again, they seemed almost black.

“Everyone has a father,” I answered.

He shifted away from me. “In your case, he was merely a sperm donor.”

A rush of heat exploded into my chest as I slammed my hand down on the desk. “Don’t pretend to know me or my life.”

“I do know your life, and I won’t pretend otherwise, pet. It would be of no benefit for me to lie to you.”

“Yet I know nothing about you,” I shot back. “How is that fair?”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and examined me with wary eyes. “What do you want to know?”

It felt like a trick question, so I proceeded carefully. “Why do you defend… people you think are innocent?”

“Because someone once defended me when I needed it,” he answered darkly.

“You were in prison?”

“Yes.”

A blanket of ice wrapped around me as my mind went wild trying to imagine what had happened. I wanted to ask more. I wanted answers desperately, but since I’d opened that can of worms, his whole demeanor had turned to steel. His eyes were arctic, and at that moment, his

formidability scared me. I was too afraid to push him for the answers I needed.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“No,” I whispered.

He left the room and took my wits with him. I picked up the pencil and wrote one hundred lines.

Nice and neat.

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Chapter 24

Lucian

SHE WAS QUIET WHEN I finally took her to bed, and after the day's events, I expected more of a fight when I nestled her against my body. But there wasn't a fight to be had. And even though I knew I shouldn't, I breathed her in. She still smelled of coconut oil and sunshine. Paradise, if there was such a place. It was ironic, considering she had been forged in the depths of hell.

My lips were inches from the vulnerable skin of her throat, and my dick was relentless. It had been since her arrival into my home and my life, and time had not calmed that. Constant fatigue was a close companion of mine, and I considered that eventually, the tension would wear off and my fading health would replace the growing need inside me.

I could only hope that was the case. We weren't a week outside of our marriage yet, and already I wanted to break my vow that I wouldn't take her. That was never part of the plan, and logically, I knew it wouldn't help her. But logic wasn't a factor when I pulled her closer and allowed her to feel the heat of my cock pressed against her ass.

She stopped breathing for a second, and I did too. I didn't know why I was tempting my resolve when I was so tired, and she was soft and pliable against me. But when her lungs filled with air again and her beating heart calmed, she didn't move.

Neither did I.

.

Chapter 25

Gypsy

"YOU CAN PICK ONE DRESS from your closet to wear today."

I swung my gaze to the bathroom door, where Lucian was already dressed in a black three-piece suit. He looked sharp. Tall, powerful, and devilishly handsome. My cheeks heated when I thought about the night before and his cock pressed against me. His warmth wrapped around me. I hated that I didn't pull away, and even more so that I didn't want to.

"Thank you," I answered.

He told me what he'd come to say, but he didn't leave. Instead, he lingered for another minute, his eyes on my body. I was still wrapped in a towel, and even though he'd seen most of me already, I felt exposed. Nervous. But something else too.

After the first few days, I'd assumed he hadn't taken an interest in me that way. His behavior was at odds with what I typically received from men. He didn't eye fuck me. He didn't try to touch me at every opportunity. And the initial ground rules he'd set in place left me with the impression that he felt he was more of a role model than anything else. But this was different. His eyes were darker. Warmer. More predatory and less protective.

I squeezed my thighs together. He cleared his throat. "Make sure whatever you pick is modest and appropriate for the office."

And with that, he disappeared just as quickly as he'd arrived.

After applying the finishing touches to my hair and makeup, I settled on a form-fitting red Armani sheath dress and gold Valentino heels. The color combination worked well with my skin tone, and the hemline came to just above my knee, so he couldn't say it was inappropriate.

I joined Lucian at the table for breakfast—oatmeal and fruit—and he read the paper while I attempted to corral my rampant thoughts. The silent war waged on until we arrived at the office, where he gave me a quick rundown of what he expected me to say when I answered calls while I settled into my space behind the desk.

"If anyone calls regarding Emmanuel's case, I want them patched through immediately," he instructed. "If I'm not available for some reason, then it's imperative you take thorough notes of their name and contact information. Do you understand?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Yes, boss."

"No more screwing around today, pet," he told me. "I need you to focus on the work I've given you."

"What am I supposed to do between phone calls?" I grumbled.

He pointed at a stack of papers and a pen on the desk. "I have some paperwork I need you to sign. Non-disclosure agreements. Work contracts. Even if it's only temporary, you'll need to fill it out."

"Oh goody," I joked.

"When you're finished with that, you can make a list for me. Three things that you would do with your life if you could do anything."

"Seriously?"

He arched a dark brow at me. "Have you ever known me to be anything but serious?"

"No," I admitted.

"I want serious answers, Gypsy," he reiterated. "Give it some real thought."

I wasn't in the mood to argue this morning, so I just shrugged. "If that's what gets your jollies off, I guess I've got nothing else to do."

He gave me one final glance before walking into his office and shutting the door.

If I'd learned anything from my brief internship at Lucian's office, it was that real work was boring as hell. I kept glancing at the clock on the wall and wondering if something was wrong with it. The phone had rung a total of seven times, and in almost all the cases, it was a new client looking for an attorney. Per Lucian's previous instructions, I had to turn them down because he wasn't taking on new cases. It seemed a bit strange that he would only work one case at a time, but then again, he was super focused.

I spent a good part of the day rifling through the drawers of the desk I had access to, though I wasn't surprised when I didn't find any juicy tidbits lying around. The most exciting thing I found was a heavy-duty stapler, if that counted for anything.

Around noon, I realized that Lucian's meal alarm was about to go off, and I decided I might as well bring it in to him. It would give me an excuse to stretch and at least eat up a few minutes of the day. I grabbed his chicken wrap from the mini fridge and a bottle of water and headed for his office. He didn't answer when I knocked, but I could hear him coughing from the other side.

I waited for a few more seconds, but the coughing didn't cease, and it sounded pretty awful. It wasn't really my concern, and it probably served him right catching a cold, but I figured it wouldn't kill me to do something nice for him and at least give him the water.

I opened the door and let myself in but stopped when I found Lucian doubled over the garbage can. There were bloody tissues in his hand, and his dress shirt was soaked through with sweat.

"Lucian?"

He looked up at me and shook his head. "Go away."

My stomach roiled. I could go away, and I probably should, but something wasn't right. As selfish as I might be, I wasn't about to leave him alone if he was seriously ill.

"Here." I walked around the desk and untwisted the cap from the bottle of water, forcing it in his direction.

He looked up at me like he wanted to yell at me, but I didn't think he could. Instead, he took a long drink and wiped his mouth.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's nothing," he growled. "Just a touch of bronchitis."

I remembered when Birdie was little, she got a few fevers that terrified me. I was so certain I would lose her each time that I wouldn't even sleep until she was better. She always tried to put on a brave face for my benefit, and even though I was hardly the nursing type, it seemed like Lucian was also downplaying how awful he felt. Sure enough, when I rested my hand against his forehead, he was burning up.

He seized my wrist. "Go back to your desk, Gypsy."

"You have a fever," I snapped. "You can't work like this."

"I'm fine," he insisted. "Now leave."

But he wasn't fine. He launched into another coughing fit, and I stood by helplessly. It caught me off guard to see such a strong-willed man suffering. He was accustomed to controlling every aspect of his life, but right now, he couldn't see that he was being ridiculous.

"Fine." I walked around the desk and rummaged through his jacket pocket until I found his car keys. "I will leave, and you can either come with me or stay here. Your choice."

"Gypsy." His voice was a warning, but I ignored it as I fled from the office and down the hallway.

His black Dodge Demon was parked in the company lot, and I jogged in my heels to get there before he did even though I was fairly certain he wouldn't be running in his condition. I was already behind the wheel with the engine fired up when he made an appearance at the driver's side door.

"Get out," he ordered.

"No." I pointed at the passenger side. "You get in. I'm driving."

"You are not driving my car."

"Don't you mean our car?" I smirked. "What's yours is mine, honey."

"You can't handle this much horsepower, pet."

"Bullshit I can't."

We glared at each other, and he broke into another coughing fit before doubling over in pain. I got out of the car and approached him the way one would approach a wild animal.

"Lucian." My voice was soft, and I couldn't remember being soft with anyone besides Birdie. "Please get in. Let me take you home."

Finally, he looked up at me and nodded, his eyes filled with defeat. I wrapped my arm around his side and helped him into the passenger seat. I could tell he didn't like it, but at this point, he really wasn't in a position to argue.

I returned to my seat and drove the entire way home with him bitching about every little thing I did. Lucian did not like being out of control, and that was a fact. But I let him have this one because he was weak and tired and cranky as hell.

I helped him into the house until he shrugged me off and insisted he would be fine before collapsing onto the sofa, which was as far as he could make it. I offered him a couple of Tylenol from the kitchen and a glass of water, along with a cool cloth for his forehead. It was all I could really do. I expected he would be better in a couple of hours.

But he wasn't.

He wasn't better even after four hours, and by the time the moon came out, his fever had spiked to a dangerous level. He was delirious but still managed to respond when I roused him.

"Lucian, we need to go to the hospital. This isn't normal."

"My phone," he croaked.

I fished around in his pocket for his phone, and he gestured for it. He typed out two texts before dropping it beside him and sinking back into the couch.

He wasn't moving, and I didn't know what to do. I checked the last message he sent, and realized he'd asked Ace to come over. But Ace wasn't the only one to show up. When the doorbell sounded, and I answered it, I was surprised to see the same priest I'd been confessing my sins to for the last year.

"Father Hawk, what are you doing here?"

"Lucian texted me," he explained. "I'm here to take him to the hospital."

"Oh." I opened the door and let him inside. "Thank you. I'll just grab my shoes, and we can go."

He stopped and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you can't. He just wants me to take him."

"But—"

"Don't argue," Ace said as he strode into the house. "You know by now it's a waste of time. Besides, you'll have me here to keep you company."

I glanced at Lucian on the couch. I guess it didn’t matter that he didn’t want me there with him as long as he was going to see a doctor. But it didn’t change the fact that I was worried about him, and I didn’t even know why. Maybe it was just basic human decency, or maybe he’d found a way under my skin already. Regardless, I couldn’t deny the strange need I felt to go with him.

“Just take him to the hospital,” I pleaded. “He needs to go.”

Father Hawk and Ace loaded him into the car while I watched from the doorway. By this point, he was barely conscious, and I couldn’t say a word to him. Even if I could have, I didn’t know what it would be.

I hardly knew the guy. We were married, but that was just a piece of paper, really. That technicality didn’t make me feel any better when I watched Father Hawk drive away with my new husband.

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Chapter 26

Lucian

AFTER AN ENTIRE DAY IN the hospital, I wasn't sure what I would find waiting for me at home. But Ace was on the couch napping, and beside him, Gypsy was flipping through a magazine. When she looked up, there was a flash of relief in her eyes, followed by indignation.

"I wasn't sure you'd even still be here," I mused.

"Trust me," she mumbled. "I considered leaving more than a few times."

I didn't ask her why she hadn't. We both knew why she was here. It wasn't because she was afraid of going to prison. She wanted to protect her sister, and as miserable as she might be here, she wouldn't jeopardize Birdie in any way.

"Well?" She set down the magazine and stood. "What happened?"

"I'm fine," I told her. "The fever broke, and they let me go."

It wasn't exactly the whole truth. I'd gone round and round with the doctors—as I usually did—but in the end, I discharged myself.

Gypsy bit her lip and held her hands together in a way that reminded me how fragile she could be. "So it was bronchitis then?"

Her eyes were soft and open, and I didn't want to lie to her. I chose deflection, a cheap ploy. "Did you ever finish your list?"

She blinked. "What list?"

"If you could do anything with your life," I said.

“Oh. Yes.”

“Do you have it?”

“It’s in my purse.” She didn’t look like she wanted to show me, but she would regardless.

I took a seat on the empty space of the couch. “Go get it.”

“Right now?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes, pet. Right now.”

“Glad to know you’re feeling like your old self again,” she murmured as she walked down the hall.

While she was gone, I thanked Ace and sent him home to relax. Gypsy returned a few minutes later with the piece of paper in her hand, her body rigid when she forked it over. “This is stupid, by the way,” she pointed out.

I looked at the list and couldn’t suppress the smile that tugged at my lips. Her goals were ordered as I requested. All three of them.

1. Become a millionaire and retire early
2. Travel around the world
3. Get a boring, normal job

I was sure she expected me to chalk it up to sarcasm, but the thing about Gypsy was that she needed those boundaries. She craved them even though she couldn’t admit it to herself. When I looked at her, I saw the broken little girl who never had a chance to have those things. She’d been taking care of herself and Birdie so long that she had no idea what it was like to let someone take care of her. It was time she finally learned.

“I enrolled you into the GED program,” I told her. “You start on Monday.”

Her face blanched. “But what about work?”

“That was just a stepping-stone. You need to focus on school now.”

“I don’t want to go to school,” she protested.

I held out my hand. “Come here, pet.”

She hesitated, though ultimately gave in, coming to stand in front of me. I handed her back the list. It should have been the end of it, but I knew what I needed to do. And also, what I wanted to do. I pulled her into my lap, and she gasped.

“You did good,” I praised her with a featherlight touch against her arm. “I like it when you do what I say.”

She swallowed. I wanted to kiss her, but I didn’t. I needed to have some self-control because once I started, I wouldn’t stop.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she answered quietly. “I just don’t want to go.”

“You’re an intelligent girl. It’s time you put that intelligence to use.”

She looked away. “What good will a GED do me?”

“It’s a start,” I said. “And then you can take the next step, whatever that may be.”

She was quiet, and I doubted she’d accepted it that easily, but regardless, she was done arguing about it for the time being. I adjusted our bodies and narrowed the gap between us, resting her head against my shoulder. Her body was far from relaxed, but she didn’t move. Not even when I played with her hair.

Not even when I kissed her forehead.

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Chapter 27

Gypsy

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

“How long has it been since your last confession?” Father Hawk asked.

“I think you know.”

There was silence, and then he shifted, bowing his head forward. “How are you?”

He never addressed me by name because I’d never given it to him, and he had never asked. I liked the anonymity of it at first, but I didn’t anymore.

“What’s your first name, Father Hawk?”

I wasn’t sure if he was supposed to answer, so I was surprised when he did.

“Cristian.”

I toyed with the rubber band between my fingers, snapping it against my skin to ease my nerves. “My name’s Gypsy, just so you know.”

I figured it didn’t matter at this point if I revealed at least that much. Lucian already knew my secrets anyway, so there was no running anymore. Not really.

Cristian didn’t answer, and I wondered what he was thinking. He was young for a priest. Maybe about thirty, if I had to guess. He was handsome too, and I could have pictured him living an entirely different life from the one he’d chosen. If I saw him in street clothes, I would have never known he was a religious figure. But maybe that’s what I liked about him. He was

a modern representation of an ancient religion, and he didn't judge me for the things I told him. I had a notion that was why Lucian liked him too.

"How long have you known Lucian?" I ventured.

"You know I can't answer that."

I shrugged. It was worth a try. "You must know him pretty well for him to call you when he's sick. At first, I thought there was no way it could be a coincidence."

"What?" Cristian asked.

"Both of us coming to this church. It seemed like there was some sort of connection, and you were the only link."

"I would never betray your trust," Cristian answered solemnly.

"I know. I'm just telling you the thought crossed my mind at first."

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind today," he suggested. "What brought you here?"

"I'm not sure." I snapped the band again. "I've been with Lucian for two weeks now, and he thinks he's going to send me back to school."

"And how do you feel about that?"

I leaned back against the wood panel and blew out a breath. "I don't know. It's weird. I always wanted my sister to go so she could make something of herself, but I never really thought about doing it myself."

"Why not?"

"Because." My voice grew quiet. "I wasn't sure that I could make anything of myself. I'm still not."

"It's scary for you to step outside your boundaries," Cristian observed.

I nodded, forgoing a verbal response. Honestly, I wasn't sure why I was telling him any of this. I knew the whole point of coming here was to confess my sins, but it always ended up being more like a counseling session somehow. And today, after signing up for class, I felt like I needed to come here.

"What makes you so uncertain about your future?" he prompted.

"I don't know. I'm only good at one thing, and it isn't a good thing."

He lowered his voice and leaned closer. "Conning people?"

"Yes."

"I believe there is much more to you than that."

"Not really." I sank into myself the way I usually did when someone tried to give me a compliment. "After my mom left, Ricky only kept us in

school when it suited him. I can't even remember the last grade I made it through."

He was quiet for a while, but I knew he would ask about her. Maybe that's why I brought it up. Sometimes, I thought of her. Sometimes I missed her, and other times I hated her. Mostly, I didn't even know if she was ever real because it had been so long since I'd seen her face.

"When did your mom leave?" he asked.

My foot edged toward the door, an old habit that eased some of the anxiety during difficult conversations. "I'm not sure. I was six, I think."

"Where did she go?"

"Ricky always said she went back to her clan. She was a gypsy, but she'd been shunned, and that's how she ended up with him in the first place. So, I don't think she really went back."

"What do you think really happened?" Cristian asked.

"I think Ricky killed her, probably."

Cristian's posture changed, and I could practically feel the tension taking up space between his bones. I'd never admitted it out loud to anyone before, not even Birdie. I told her that Mom had to go back to her clan, and we weren't allowed because we were only half gypsy. She hadn't ever questioned it.

"And Ricky was not your real father?" Cristian's voice was delicate as though he thought his questions might break me.

"No, he was her pimp. We don't know who our fathers were. I don't even know if my mom knew."

Another silence. It hurt to admit my truth, and I didn't know why. It shouldn't hurt so much anymore. I was an adult now. I'd made it through the worst of my life. It was stupid that I came here and confessed these things. They weren't important, but Cristian seemed to disagree.

"Sometimes it helps just to say things out loud," he acknowledged gently.

"Yeah, I guess." I nodded. "But that's why. My schooling wasn't a priority when I had to take care of my sister. I never resented it, but now I don't know what else to be. I don't know how to be anything else."

"It's never too late to change," he said. "You are still young. You have your life ahead of you. Perhaps you should set your fears aside and just take it one day at a time instead of looking at the big picture."

It was good advice, but I still didn’t know how I was going to handle it. The whole idea was terrifying. “Do you ever wish you could change something, Cristian?”

He cleared his throat, and when he answered, his voice was filled with torment.

“Yes, I do.”

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Chapter 28

Gypsy

SINCE I ENROLLED IN SCHOOL, Lucian had relaxed the leash a little. He was at work for the rest of the day, and I finally had the house to myself. A golden opportunity to snoop through everything.

And snoop I did.

But as it turned out, Lucian didn't have anything of significance in this house. If he did, it was probably in the safe I found in the bedroom closet, but unfortunately for me, I didn't know how to access whatever was in there.

Apart from that, I searched the house high and low but came up empty in the end. Even the desk key I thought might be my golden ticket turned up nothing but a bunch of office supplies. The only certainty I'd gleaned was that Lucian was a minimalist to the extreme. There wasn't a single family photo in his home. Not a birth certificate. A birthday card. Literally zero evidence that he even had a life outside his office.

It only created more questions about him, and in the end, my Google search wasn't any better. Page after page turned up endless articles about the controversial cases he'd worked, and there were simply too many to sift through them all. The ones I did manage to read reflected the same scathing opinions of his character. He didn't do himself any favors by forgoing the opportunity to defend himself in interviews either. The persisting evidence suggested he declined any questions not relating to his clients. His

standoffishness and permanent scowl only furthered the agenda of the media firing squad.

Admittedly, I had the same sour sentiments when he blew into my life with all the delicacy of a hurricane. But now, reading such awful accounts of him was somewhat sickening. It wasn't that I had bonded to him, but I'd come to know a few things about Lucian in our time together, and I didn't really believe he was quite the monster he was painted to be.

I decided it was probably best if I stopped reading those articles altogether and pushed my feelings aside, because at that moment, it was difficult to make sense of them.

Lucian had given me a set of rules for my time, and I knew at any given moment he could be tracking me. But he'd returned my phone and my car keys and even purchased a laptop for my studies.

Typically, I'd spend my days shopping or lunching or visiting the spa, but when I thought about doing any of that, it wasn't as appealing as it used to be. So I called Birdie instead.

"Hey," she answered. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I squinted up at the bedroom ceiling. "Are you settling into Washington all right?"

There was a pause, some shuffling around, and I heard someone in the background before Birdie answered. "Uh-huh, I'm fine."

She sounded distracted, and it worried me. "Who's with you?"

"I'm having lunch with Trouble."

"She went with you?" I knew Birdie would get defensive if I poked too much, but this was news to me.

"Yes," she answered. "I figured that it would be better if we stuck together."

I choked down the jealousy her words provoked. I wanted Birdie to have a life and friends, but for so long, it had just been me and her. I couldn't help the childish notion that I'd been replaced so easily. That was until she spoke again.

"I miss you," she said. "It isn't the same without you here to boss me around all the time."

I laughed, and it felt good. "I miss you too, B. Are you staying out of mischief?"

"Yes, Gyps. I'm being good, I promise."

Some of the tension in my body melted away as I fell back on the bed and wiggled my toes. “Lucian enrolled me in school.”

“Oh my God, seriously?” Birdie giggled. “If that isn’t irony, I don’t know what is.”

“It’s not funny,” I grumbled.

“It kind of is, actually. Considering how hard you pushed it on me.”

“Are you still going?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess we can both complain about it now.”

Birdie cleared her throat. “How is he treating you?”

I paused, not really knowing how to answer that. “Good. He has a bunch of rules that I hate, but otherwise, it’s not that bad.”

“Ace told me he’s a really good guy,” Birdie said quietly. “I wondered if it was true.”

“When did he tell you that?”

Another pause. “I asked him that night you made me leave with him.”

“Oh.”

“He hasn’t touched you, has he?” Birdie pressed.

A shiver moved through me as I recalled the feeling of Lucian’s body pressed up against mine. His fingers in my hair, his arm around my waist, and his beating heart so close to mine I could feel it. These weren’t the type of things she meant, and I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I’d allowed him to cuddle me every night.

“No, Birdie. He hasn’t.”

“That’s good,” she said. “’Cause you know I’ll kill him if he does.”

“That isn’t funny,” I whispered.

She was quiet then, and we both shook off the bad memories in our own way.

“I should go,” she mumbled. “I have to study.”

“Okay.”

“I love you, Gyps.”

“Love you too, B.”

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Chapter 29

Lucian

"PASTA?"

Gypsy looked up from the plate I served her with confusion in her eyes. I didn't have to guess what she was thinking. She was wondering what strings were attached. I suspected she would always wonder that, unless by some miracle I managed to establish legitimate trust with her.

"You earned it," I told her.

"How?" she asked.

"You followed all the rules today, didn't you?"

She offered me a bored expression because she didn't want to admit that she had. I wasn't naïve enough to believe that I'd tamed her. This was just the calm before the next storm, but we could both enjoy it while it lasted.

Gypsy dug into her pasta, and I watched her while I ate. I could already tell she was getting nervous. Tomorrow would be her first day in class, and I was certain she would invent some sort of imaginary plague so she didn't have to go. But I was mentally prepared for whatever she might throw at me. I wanted her to face her fears, and I wouldn't allow her to be conquered by them.

"You're staring," she mumbled.

I probably should have looked away. I should have read the paper, or checked my emails, or done anything else with my attention. But I couldn't. I liked to look at her, a little too much, and that was becoming a problem.

I cleared my throat and set down my fork. “When you finish class tomorrow, I’ll need you to do your homework right away.”

“Why?” She peeked up at me with a mouthful of pasta.

“Because we have a work function to attend.”

Her brows pinched together. “What kind of function?”

“A picnic,” I griped.

She laughed. “You put on a picnic?”

“No. My partners do.”

“Ah.” She nodded. “Those must be the other names on the door. Vincent and Emily. I was wondering.”

“It’s a large firm,” I told her. “I like the private side of the building, but you’ll meet the everyone else tomorrow.”

“Can’t wait.” She snorted. “I imagine your office parties are all the rage.”

“They aren’t,” I assured her. “It’s just business.”

“It’s time to get ready for bed.”

Gypsy looked up from her magazine, her steely gaze staring right through me. “It’s only eight.”

“Yes, but you have a big day tomorrow. We both have to get up early.”

She set the magazine down in her lap and closed the pages but didn’t move. “Why are you doing this?”

“This was the deal you agreed to.”

“I would hardly call it agreeing,” she said. “You blackmailed me into this situation. But regardless, I want to know why you’re acting like you have some sort of parental role in my life. I’m a grown woman.”

“Are you?” I cocked my head to the side. “What is the last grade you completed, pet?”

“That’s irrelevant.” She glared. “Those were circumstances outside my control and—”

“I never said they weren’t. My point is that you want to be an adult, yet you have none of the basic skills required to survive in this world.”

“That isn’t true,” she insisted. “I get by. I’ve always gotten by. And if I don’t know something, I figure it out.”

I wanted to touch her. She was always beautiful, but never more so than when she was vulnerable like this. “Wouldn’t it be nice to do more than just get by for a change?” I asked.

Her eyes met mine, and for a split second, I saw the fear there. The idea of allowing anyone to help her was terrifying. Gypsy had only ever learned to take what she needed or wanted, but now she needed to learn to accept what was given freely.

“Come.” I held out my hand, and she stared at it as if it were poison.

I knew she wouldn’t take it but hope still lived inside me. Instead, she rose on her own and crossed her arms. “What now?”

“If you want a shower to help you wind down, then you need to take it now. Otherwise, you can get dressed for bed.”

She padded down the hall without protest, and a minute later, the shower turned on. I had to restrain myself from following the way I wanted to. Instead, I walked into the kitchen and drank a glass of ice cold water. But even that didn’t stop me from thinking about her naked body beneath me.

It didn’t help matters when I walked into the room and found her in one of her silk nightgowns. It was beautiful and classy and everything that Gypsy was, but it also emphasized her every curve. Curves that my hands ached to touch. It felt wrong when it was never my intention to be this way with her. She was my wife on paper only, and that couldn’t change.

“You’re staring again,” she noted as she moved to her side of the bed.

I turned away wordlessly and changed into a pair of lounge pants and a tee shirt. Typically, I would sleep with nothing more than briefs on, and with the night sweats, I’d been miserable. But it was the only way to ensure that Gypsy felt safe, and I wouldn’t sacrifice her sense of well-being for my own comfort.

“I won’t be able to sleep,” she whined.

“Get into bed,” I told her.

She thought about arguing but decided against it. She could protest that she wasn’t tired until she was blue in the face, but I could see it in her eyes.

I picked up the copy of *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout and flipped to the first page. Gypsy was on her back beside me, her face nestled into the pillow, and her fingers beating a restless rhythm against her opposite arm.

When I began to read aloud, I felt her gaze move to me, but I didn't look back. It was difficult enough as it was without staring into her eyes, and I had begun to doubt my self-restraint the longer I was around her.

I read the story of Olive, and she fidgeted through the first five pages, but the next time I peered over at her, she was enrapt. She caught me staring, and for a moment, neither of us were quite sure how to handle the situation. Ultimately, it was me who broke the gaze as I went back to the story, reading until I caught her dozing off several times.

It was just past ten when I set the book on the nightstand and turned out the light. The room was quiet, and I was already too warm. I also didn't trust that if I put my arm around Gypsy right now, I'd be able to leave it at that.

So I stayed where I was, flat on my back, and removed my tee shirt. Gypsy and I were separated by covers, but she became restless as the minutes wore on.

"Are you going to sleep?" she asked.

"Yes."

There was quiet, and then more shuffling around. "I can't sleep," she complained. "Why did you stop reading?"

She was irritable, and it had nothing to do with the reading. That shouldn't have meant anything to me, but it did. I knew what she needed and withholding it now wouldn't be fair. I moved closer, leaving the blankets between us, and wrapped my arm around her waist.

She sighed, and I did too. We were closer than ever, skin to skin. Our forearms melding together as our beating hearts found synchronicity between our breaths. I wanted her. And the realization was so overpowering at that moment, I didn't know what to do with it. It had been a long time since I'd wanted anything.

She turned her face toward mine, her breath blowing across my chest as she spoke. "You're burning up again. Do you have a fever?"

I wished I could say that I did, but that wasn't my problem. My problem was that it should have felt wrong when I lowered my face to hers. It should have felt dirty when my lips dragged against hers and froze there. She should have pulled away, and I should have stopped. But neither of us moved. And when my fingers found the tender flesh of her throat, I drew her closer, tasting what was never meant to be mine.

She didn’t make a sound. Her lips parted on a silent gasp, and I inhaled her breath. I dug my fingers into her skin and hated myself for doing this to her. For wanting her. My cock was hard and long, and my thoughts were short.

I couldn’t.

I couldn’t.

I couldn’t.

My lips broke away from hers. She was swollen from my kiss, and I was emptier than I thought a broken man could be. But for the first time in a decade, I remembered what it was like to be whole.

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Chapter 30

Gypsy

THE SHOWER WAS ALREADY RUNNING in the bathroom when the alarm on the nightstand went off. I rolled onto my back with a groan, covering my face with my arm as the offending sunlight streamed through the curtain.

I was not a morning person. For so long, my days had been dictated by me. I could sleep in as long as I wanted, and I could work when I wanted. I decided everything because I was the captain of my own ship. I lived a hedonistic lifestyle, and I didn't regret it. But my life had taken a complete one eighty since Lucian barged onto my ship and took the wheel.

A glance at the clock, confirmed it was seven a.m., and I knew that Lucian got up every day at six thirty. I was surprised he wasn't already in here, freshly showered and dressed, prodding me to get up.

Curiosity drove me to my feet, and I caved in to my urge to see what he was doing. It was none of my business, and already, the lines between us were blurring. From cuddling me every night to kissing me, things were progressing at a snail's pace, but they were still progressing. It needed to stop. What I couldn't figure out was why I hadn't.

When he kissed me, it felt like he'd tasered me too. Sparks shot through my body, and heat burned in the depths of my belly. I think I might have even kissed him back. It should have felt dirty; the way I always remembered feeling when a man touched me. I'd felt that way with every con, and all the others before them who lined up to take a piece of my soul.

But with Lucian, it was different, and I was afraid to acknowledge that maybe it was because this time I wanted it.

As further evidence of my growing sickness, I found myself in front of the bathroom door. It was wide open. He hadn't bothered to shut it because he knew he usually had to wake me. This morning, he hadn't counted on me standing there. He hadn't counted on my curiosity driving me to the edge of the bedroom where the carpet met the tile. And he certainly hadn't counted on me finding him like this.

His back was turned away, his head tilted toward the floor as hot water beat down on his skin. One hand was pressed against the shower wall, and the other was fisted around his cock. He tugged on the angry, swollen member so hard it looked painful. But so were the sounds he tried to stifle in his throat. The grunts and groans of a man who seemed as though he hated what he was doing. Perhaps even hated himself.

It was a moment so intimate it felt wrong to bear witness, but I couldn't find it in me to move. I watched him until he came all over the shower floor, releasing himself but not his demons. His shoulders sagged, and his head fell forward, but there was no satisfaction in the aftermath.

My lungs burned with the need for air, and my heart beat so viciously against my chest that I felt dizzy. There was something so kindred at this moment between us. A moment he didn't even know we were sharing.

I could feel his emptiness. His self-hatred. And as heat flooded the space between my thighs, I wondered if he'd been thinking of me.

All I could think about was how this man had managed to get under my skin. The man who went to church on Sundays and blackmailed unsuspecting women like me in his free time. He looked dark as sin, but I couldn't deny there was light inside him too.

I couldn't deny that when my eyes moved over the lines of his body and the Revelation tattoo on his back, something awful had happened to him. I knew it in my soul. And if I was going to preserve my sanity, I would need to uncover it, and inevitably, use it against him.

“I’ll be here at four to pick you up.”

I glanced across the seat at Lucian and gave him a stiff nod. My nerves hadn’t let up the entire ride to the learning center, and I didn’t think I could really do this. Already, I was busy making plans to leave the moment he drove off, consequences be damned. But Lucian had other ideas. He turned off the ignition and unbuckled.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m walking you in.”

He got out of the car and came around to my side, but I still couldn’t move. I didn’t know why the idea seemed so daunting, but it had occurred to me that I was probably going to look like an idiot as soon as the class started. I could already feel the humiliation of being the last to complete every test and assignment. Or the horror when the teacher might call on me for an answer I didn’t know.

“I don’t want to do this,” I said. “Please don’t make me, Lucian. I’ll do something else. I can study online—”

He bent down until he was on my level and surprised me by taking my hands in his. “I know you’re nervous, pet, and it’s completely normal. But I promise you that your fears are bigger than any challenges you’ll face in that building.”

I turned away, frustrated that he knew so much about me when I hadn’t given the information freely. I hated him for making me do this.

He unbuckled me and helped me from the car, and I followed because it was pointless to argue. Today, I would have to go inside. But that didn’t mean I had to stay. I could slip out to go to the bathroom and then make a run for it. There were a million options that Lucian had no say in. That was the only comfort I had as he led me in to the slaughter.

The building was large and empty. The kind of empty that made our footsteps reverberate off the walls as we walked. It smelled like lemon-scented cleaner and freshly sharpened pencils, and probably the stuff of every failed dropout’s nightmares.

Lucian stopped in front of a door numbered 105, and I squeezed my fists together as he knocked. Someone called out from the other side for us to enter, and I froze to the spot. Lucian opened the door and then guided his hand to my lower back, bringing me forward with him.

I expected to see a bunch of pimply faced teenagers judging me from their seats, but instead, the classroom was empty apart from one woman. An

older woman who looked like she was more suited to a Paris runway than this learning center.

She was beautiful and classy in a Helen Mirren type of way with silvery strands of hair pulled back to proudly display every crease she'd earned on her face. I was surprised by the warm energy surrounding her, and even more so when she reached out and hugged Lucian.

"My sweet Lucian," she whispered. "How I have missed you."

He remained stoic as ever when she pulled away and turned her gaze to me. "And you must be the beautiful Miss Gypsy I've heard so much about."

I looked up at Lucian curiously, but he didn't give anything away.

"Thank you for doing this, Kate," he said. "Gypsy is going to be on her best behavior for you, aren't you?"

When he looked at me, there was a spark of pride in his eyes, and I wasn't quite sure what to do with it. Nobody had ever been proud of me before.

"Here." He produced a brown paper bag from his other hand. "I packed your lunch."

I clutched the sack in my hand and stood wordlessly as he exchanged a quick goodbye with Kate. I was still anxious even without the prospect of a classroom full of people to bask in my ignorance. Lucian must have sensed it because he pulled me toward the door to give me one last parting gift.

"You can do this, pet." His fingers skated down the length of my arm and caught my trembling fingers. "Just remember, you're always the smartest woman in the room."

I didn't know if it was just to delay the inevitable, but I clung to his hand. And when he leaned down to kiss me for the second time, there was no disputing that this time I kissed him back.

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Chapter 31

Gypsy

"So it's just the two of us?" I asked.

Kate sat down at the desk across from me and smiled. "Yes, it will just be the two of us."

I didn't know if that was better or worse. She seemed like a nice enough lady, and I felt it was only fair to give her a heads-up of things to come.

"Just so you know, this is a waste of time," I said. "I'm probably going to quit or run out. It's inevitable."

"Well, we'll have to make the most of the time we have together then, won't we?"

I examined her, not quite sure how to handle someone who was so… *happy*. She was still smiling at me after I'd told her this was a waste of her time.

"Where do we start?" I asked, eager to get the show on the road so I could plan my escape.

"Have you ever noticed that most people will ask you broad questions?" Kate tapped at her chin thoughtfully. "Well, I'm not really about that, Gypsy. So I'll tell you a few things about myself. Three things you'd never guess."

She took a sip of what appeared to be a cup of tea, staring off into the distance as she spoke. "My star sign is Pisces. I'm a member of a hardcore

rock band. And I was a victim's advocate for thirty years, so there isn't a thing on God's green earth you could say to push me away."

I shifted in my seat, already uncomfortable with where this conversation was heading. I didn't like that she'd used the word victim as if it somehow related to me. And I liked even less the fact I wasn't sure how much she knew about my life.

"I don't know your story," she said. "Lucian told me a little but not much. Just that you didn't make it through school, mostly. And I'm here to help you with that. What I'm not here to do is coddle you or play into your fears. You can tell me that you're going to quit every two minutes if it makes you feel better, but we both know that Lucian won't let you. And neither will I."

I had to respect the woman for being so honest. It wasn't what I'd been expecting at all when Lucian talked about school. But it was clear that Kate wasn't about to let me get away with anything, and she was right that Lucian wouldn't either.

"Why don't you tell me three things about yourself," she suggested. "Anything you want."

I stared at a poster on the wall. It was a cat hanging by one paw with a motivational phrase beneath it. I was used to telling lies, so I considered telling a few now. But I think a part of me was tired of lying because what came out was nothing but the truth.

"My star sign is Leo. I listen to country music but pretend that I don't. And for the past four years, I've been a professional con artist."

Kate flashed a conspiratorial smile and patted my hand. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it? Now we can get started on the fun stuff."

True to his word, Lucian arrived at four to pick me up from the learning center. I got into the passenger seat, and he waited for me to buckle in before driving out of the parking lot.

"How was it?" he asked.

I fiddled with the radio station. "Boring."

He smirked. Truthfully, it wasn't that bad, but I wasn't about to admit that to him. Kate must have been a good teacher because she had a way of presenting things in a way that made sense to me. It was easy to pay attention to her because she found a way to make every problem relatable, and I didn't know if it was just like that with me or all her students.

"Are you ready for the barbecue?" Lucian asked.

"Sure am." I rolled my eyes. "I've been looking forward to it all day."

"I would tell you to be on your best behavior," he said, "but I have a feeling it won't make any difference. So instead, I'll tell you this, pet. Don't think for a second that because we're around my colleagues that I will hesitate to punish you in front of them if you decide to act out."

I shot him a glare. "That's a little unfair, isn't it? You've already pre-determined my course without giving me a chance."

He gave me a sideways glance. "I'm not saying you will or you won't, but I want you to be aware of the consequences."

He could shove his consequences where the sun didn't shine for all I cared.

We were both quiet for the rest of the trip to the park where the barbecue was being held, and when we arrived, I wasn't in the best of moods. I couldn't figure out why, but it irritated me that this morning he'd been encouraging and even vaguely sweet when he dropped me off, but now he was treating me like I was a wrecking ball.

Lucian parked the car, and we walked across the grass together. There were more people than I expected to see, and it occurred to me as small children zoomed in and around the adults that this was a family event.

Lucian charged through the maze with purpose, stopping along the way to say hello to a few people here and there. He was all business as he introduced me to Vincent, his other partner at the firm. I shook his hand and smiled and did all the things I was supposed to do, though I didn't really care. These people weren't any association to me, and it made no difference what they thought of me either. Regardless, I played the part of Lucian's obedient wife. When that was out of the way, we went straight for the food and plated up, and it seemed like Lucian was in more of a rush to get out of there than I was.

We found a vacant picnic table and ate in silence until one of the employee's children took it upon himself to join us. He was a cute little boy,

probably only about six if I had to guess, and he was proudly displaying the water gun he'd brought with him. "Lucian, look what my daddy got me!"

I looked at Lucian, who seemed less than impressed and didn't make an effort to respond. In fact, he'd turned downright cold and irritable as I gave the boy a smile for his benefit.

"You should get back to your parents," Lucian told him.

The boy's shoulders fell, and I glared at Lucian after he retreated. "That was rude."

"It was rude for him to interrupt our meal," Lucian countered.

I stared at him in disbelief. "He's just a child. He was excited."

Lucian's response was to flatten his empty plate between his hands as he stood. "Finish eating. I need to speak to my colleague."

I scowled at his back as he retreated and made a point to appreciate every bite of the hamburger and chips I had left. He only ever ate healthy stuff, and I wasn't sure when I'd be able to enjoy something like this again. Lucian circulated through the crowd and disappeared on the other side of a large cluster of trees. And when he didn't return after ten minutes, I decided I might as well have a little fun since none of the adults were talking to me.

I joined a group of young girls playing the bean bag toss, and then they challenged me to a game of horseshoes, which I accepted and then purposely lost. They were begging me to play another round when I checked my watch and realized Lucian had been gone for a while.

It wasn't difficult to spot him in the crowd, considering he was about six inches taller than the average male. But what I didn't expect to find was the company he was keeping on the other side of the park. A tall, beautiful brunette in a form-fitting pencil dress and heels.

My stomach lurched, and the reaction made no sense to me. I didn't know what it was I felt, but it certainly wasn't jealousy. Lucian meant nothing to me. The fact he had discarded me so he could go chat her up should have been a relief. But it wasn't.

I found myself moving toward him like a lost puppy, only to stop and change my course midway. This was ridiculous. He'd forced me to marry him. He'd forced me to come to this stupid barbecue, and now he'd abandoned me to the wolves. But Lucian forgot where I'd come from, and I was all too happy to remind him.

I knew how to circulate a crowd too, and I already had my sights set on his buddy Vincent.

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Chapter 32

Lucian

"Are you sure everything's okay?" Emily asked.

I adjusted my collar and gave her a tight smile. "It's just a formality."

My colleague was young and hungry. Still trying to make a name for herself and change the world, and because of that, she didn't argue with what I asked of her. "I'm happy to take on his case, should it ever come down to that, as long as the client is willing."

It was a conversation I'd need to have with Emmanuel, but I didn't want to jump the gun. For now, I was just getting my ducks in a row.

"I should let you get back to the party," I told her.

She nodded, and I looked toward the picnic table where I'd left Gypsy. It didn't surprise me that it was empty, but it did surprise me when I found her talking to Vincent.

"Excuse me." I nodded to Emily.

We went our separate ways, my sights set straight on the little brat who was currently making every facet of my life more complicated than it needed to be. Gypsy was oblivious to the wolf at her back door, and as I drew closer, I understood why. She wasn't just talking to Vincent, she was working him.

Her body language was all wrong. Soft, pliable, charming. All the things she never gave freely, yet she was giving to him. Her laughter was

vibrant, and her eyes were hungry. If I hadn't seen her slip into this second layer of skin before, I wouldn't even recognize her.

Vincent was a colleague, and I respected him, but he was also widely known to be overindulgent in his carnal pleasures, and right now, he wasn't backing down from my goddamn wife. My hands balled into fists when Gypsy touched his arm. She hadn't ever touched me that way. Not intentionally. And even if I knew it meant nothing to her—this was simply a game she was playing—it fucking bothered me.

It shouldn't have. And I shouldn't have let my temper get the best of me, but that's exactly what I did.

"Gypsy." My voice sliced through the space between them, and both of their heads swiveled in my direction.

"Lucian." Vincent cleared his throat and took a reproachful step back from my wife. "I was just keeping your girl company while—"

I wrapped my fingers around her waist and laid claim to her with a grip she wouldn't escape. "Did I ask you to keep her company?"

Vincent's jaw slackened, and he held up both hands in a weak attempt to pacify me. "I'm sorry, Lucian. I meant no offense. Honestly."

"We're leaving."

Vincent mumbled a quick goodbye, and I led Gypsy back to the parking lot. Once we were out of earshot, she tried to pull away, but I didn't let go.

"What is your problem?" she hissed.

"Don't play dumb with me, pet. It really isn't becoming of you."

Her eyes turned a flinty gray as she turned her nose up at me. "Have I told you today that you're an asshole?"

I opened the door to the Demon and hoisted her inside, forcing her buckle into place and securing her in her seat.

"I'm not a toddler." She smacked my hands away. "I can do it myself."

I leaned down into her face and grabbed her chin. "Then maybe you should stop acting like one."

"Maybe you should stop acting like a fucking prick!"

I had to take a step back to cool myself off because if I didn't, I would punish her in anger, and that wasn't what she needed. I tried to remember that when I got inside the car and started the ignition. But the entire drive home, she kept at it. She called me every name that her defiant mouth could think of and then some. I'd already decided I would need to call Ace to

babysit her, but the minute we walked in the door, she was at my throat again.

“There isn’t a single good thing about you,” she shouted. “That’s why nobody likes you.”

“Go to the bedroom,” I ordered. “Stay there until I tell you otherwise.”

She stood her ground, forcing me to acknowledge every spiteful word she threw my way. “How about no. How about I hate you, and I don’t want to be married to you.”

I took a deep breath and tried to remember why she was doing this. Gypsy didn’t know how to deal with her emotions in a healthy way. She only knew how to lash out, and once we both calmed down, we could discuss this rationally.

“What’s the matter, Lucian?” she taunted. “Are you so weak that you can’t even fight with me?”

She could have said anything, but she chose to say that, not knowing it would be the thing to push me over the edge. I struck out like a snake and wrapped my hands around both of her arms, dragging her against me before I forced her chin up to meet my gaze. “Is that what you think?”

“Yes,” she spat. “You aren’t half the man Vincent is. You should have left me there with him.”

I wasn’t proud to admit that I knew exactly what I was doing when I dragged her down the hall and into the bedroom, forcing her onto her knees. “Undress.”

She glared up at me but didn’t dare try to move. “Fuck you.”

“Have it your way.”

I hauled her up onto the bed and pinned her there with my body while I secured her wrists and ankles to the bed posts with the ties I’d picked out for that week. She fought me every step of the way, and I enjoyed it.

I enjoyed it so much that my cock felt like cement in my trousers as I cut her clothing from her body and tossed it to the floor. When it was done, I stepped back to look at the beautiful mess I created. She was at my mercy now. Naked and spread wide for me, her chest heaving, her beautiful features tainted with fear. I’d finally unleashed the monster I tried so hard to hide from her.

“Lucian.” All the fight had gone out of her voice when she looked up at me with kitten eyes. “What are you doing?”

I didn’t answer. In truth, I couldn’t move at all because my eyes were on her pussy. The scent of her fear and the moisture I saw on her delicate pink lips inflamed a craving I didn’t know how to suffocate anymore. I wanted to fuck her mercilessly. I wanted to plunge my dick inside her tight little hole over and over again until I stuffed her full of my come.

Her breasts were heaving, and her body was shaking, and I wanted her more in that moment than I could ever remember wanting anything else in my life. I longed to torment her. To punish her and teach her exactly how weak I wasn’t. I wanted to taste the tears she cried for me while I fucked her so hard she wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week.

She sensed the change in me. Gypsy knew how to spot a predator, and right now, that was me. She yanked against the restraints, the fabric chafing her wrists. Her panic rose when her eyes locked onto mine. Her breaths became shallow. Her pupils larger. Goose bumps filled the exposed spaces of her skin.

When I tied her up like this, I knew how it would affect her. But in the depths of her panic attack, my vindication slipped away. There was no glory in exposing her vulnerabilities the way she always seemed to expose mine. And when she started hyperventilating and shaking her head back and forth, it all came crashing down on me.

I did this to her.

Because I was still a monster, and I always would be.

I moved to her side, frantically trying to untie her, which was difficult when she was thrashing with all her force. It took me longer than it should have. I’d had years of practice, but suddenly, I felt as unskilled as the day I first experimented with the dark side of my desires.

“Gypsy.”

I tried to get through to her as I pulled her into my arms and cocooned her against my chest, but there was a disconnect I couldn’t breach. She was despondent. Broken. In the span of a few minutes, we had both regressed twenty years. The only thing I could do was rock her back and forth, whispering apologies that weren’t ever going to be enough. Her tears soaked into my skin, a long overdue event, but one that never should have happened this way.

“Talk to me, pet,” I encouraged. “Tell me what I can do to fix it.”

“Nothing,” she sobbed. “I hate you. I hate this situation. The only thing you can do is let me go.”

I held her tighter. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Why?” she pleaded. “I don’t even know why you’re doing this. One minute you act like you want me, and the next you’re with someone else.”

Her words turned every muscle in my body to stone as clarity sank into the pit of my stomach. *Emily.* She’d seen me with Emily, and that’s what triggered her. I should have known better. I should have realized that behind her wrath, there was something else, and that something else was jealousy.

A warm feeling filled my chest, but it was quickly replaced with sorrow. I couldn’t blame her for being confused. I hadn’t been clear with her, and I kept overstepping my boundaries, but moving forward, I would have no choice but to set the record straight.

I tipped her chin up and met her glassy eyes. My thumb dragged over her cheeks and wiped her tears away, and I ached to kiss her again. To give her assurances that weren’t true or realistic.

“Emily is a colleague, and nothing more,” I told her. “We were discussing a case. But you are right to be confused. I’ve been giving you mixed signals, and for that, I apologize.”

“I don’t understand,” she murmured. “Why are you with me? You act like you want me and then—”

“I do want you.” I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against hers. “I want you so fucking much sometimes it physically hurts. But it wouldn’t be right to take you. And the things I like… I can’t ask them of you. It was never my intention to consummate this marriage.”

She didn’t respond. I could feel the tension in her body, but I wanted to know what she was thinking. I wanted her thoughts, her feelings. It was a selfish desire, and one I couldn’t act on.

“What kind of things do you like?” she breathed.

“Things I couldn’t ask of you.” My grip on her deepened. “Things I wouldn’t ask of you.”

“Tell me,” she begged. “I just want to know.”

I sighed. “I can’t tell you, pet. It’s hard to explain. The only way I could think of… is to show you.”

A storm reeled in the gray landscape of her eyes as determination grew roots in her soul. “Then show me.”

Chapter 33

Gypsy

"WHAT IS THIS PLACE?"

Lucian gave me a dark look from the driver's seat. "It's a member's only adult club."

I glanced back at the mammoth-sized house surrounded in by a large wrought-iron fence. It didn't look like any adult club I'd ever heard of, but it wasn't difficult to imagine what might be going on in there. There were a lot of kinky sex spots in Vegas.

"Is it a BDSM club?" I asked.

Lucian shook his head. "It's an anything goes club. Fetishes, fantasies, role play… whatever two consulting members agree on. Sometimes, even more."

"I see." The lump in my throat wouldn't go down when I swallowed.

"There are things inside that I can't prepare you for," Lucian cautioned. "If you choose to go in, you need to understand that nothing is off-limits. You might witness scenes that could be a problem for you."

I didn't falter in my decision as I looked straight ahead. "Okay."

"You don't have to do this."

It was the fifth time he'd said it, and that was after we argued about it for an hour. He didn't want me to do this. He wanted to protect me from his secrets, but I needed to know what his darkness was. I had to see it for myself.

“I want to,” I assured him.

He looked out the window, a strange intensity bleeding into his features. “If at any point you feel uncomfortable inside, I want you to tap on my arm. That’s all you have to do, pet, and we’ll leave. Do you understand?”

I nodded.

We got out of the car and walked to the door together. He entered a code on the key pad and let us in, where we were stopped at the entrance by two burly men. One nodded at Lucian but didn’t address him by name.

“She’s with me,” Lucian said.

Another nod, and then they held out a dish where Lucian put his keys and phone.

“Locker 7,” the first guy said before he turned to me.

“She left her phone in the car,” Lucian told them.

The guy on the left ran a wand down us to ensure we were clean of devices before waving us through.

The house was larger than I thought. The farther we ventured inside, the further it seemed to go on. The entire lower level didn’t open up to all the horrors that Lucian warned me about. It was simply a social environment where groups gathered to drink and smoke and laugh at bad jokes. From this viewpoint, it looked like any other bar. But I knew when Lucian led me to the stairs, it was about to get real.

I wasn’t wrong.

We stopped on each level of the house and did a walk through, Lucian’s hand like an anchor in mine. The first few rooms we passed weren’t as crazy as he’d led me to believe. I’d seen a lot of stuff in my life, and a full-on orgy wasn’t anything that made me blink twice, even if it was hard to keep track of who was doing what. But as we progressed, it only became stranger.

There were people dressed up in outfits like nurses and firemen, and then there were people walking around in nothing at all. Some rooms contained couples having sex while others watched, and some rooms were closed off entirely.

At one point, we passed a room labeled “human furniture” that was pretty much exactly as it sounded. Men and women alike were poised as footstools and tables while groups of their masters socialized around them.

“If at any point something catches your curiosity, we can stop,” Lucian noted.

So far, everything just seemed like kinky, weird sex. It wasn't anything that I had a desperate need to see more of. There was only one reason I came here, and it had nothing to do with anybody else.

"Which room do you visit?" I asked.

Without another word, he led me all the way up to the top floor of the house. There was a separate entry code required on this level, a warning that things weren't going to be the same. I followed him blindly as he directed me down the hall and into the first room on the left.

There was a viewing area like some of the others, and Lucian gestured for me to sit down and wait. The room was empty apart from us, at least until he pressed a button on the wall and shut the door behind us. There was a brief pause of silence, and then out of nowhere, the black curtain was pulled back in front of us, giving us full view of the scene taking place in the room.

In the center, a woman kneeled on the floor, much the same way I had in Lucian's bedroom not long ago. I could still feel the rawness on my limbs from what happened afterward, and I rubbed them while the man in front of us nodded to Lucian. They were acquainted with each other, a mutual respect between them. But it was the girl on the floor who surprised me when her gaze turned to Lucian and warmed with a wicked smile.

A sharp emotion I couldn't identify pierced my stomach when I realized what was happening. Lucian had been intimate with this woman. And it wasn't difficult to guess what she liked. Already, her body was covered in welts. Her nipples were clamped together with clothespins, her knees digging into the rock salt on the tile floor.

There was not a shred of doubt in my mind she was a masochist, and that only left one possible avenue for Lucian. At some point, he'd probably stood over her the same way the other man was now. He had assuredly grabbed her chin and jerked her attention back to him in the same domineering fashion when she looked away for too long.

"Did I say you could move?"

"No, sir." The breathy whisper of her voice was undeniably sultry, and I looked at Lucian to see how he responded, but his face was blank.

Without warning, the sadist slapped the girl across the face, and I jumped. Lucian squeezed my hand, but it did nothing to quell my nerves as the sadist chose a cane from the selection of pain tools. The girl moaned and tugged at the restraints around her wrists, begging him for it. The drum

beat of my heart, and the blood rushing between my ears warned me this was a threat, but it didn't stop there.

The sadist gestured for Lucian, an invitation to participate. He silently declined, but I suspected it was only to be polite. He didn't want me to see the worst version of himself, but I needed to. I had a morbid curiosity that couldn't be contained. I needed to see what he would do with her. How far he would go.

"Show me," I whispered.

Lucian swiveled his head in my direction, eyes blacker than I'd ever seen them. "You don't know what you're asking, pet."

"I want to see," I insisted. "You said you would show me."

He tried to fight it. I saw the struggle in him, and then I saw the demon win. He glanced at the girl on the floor, resignation weighing him down as he accepted that, on some level, he wanted to show me too.

"You can tell me to stop at any point," he said softly. "If it becomes too much."

I nodded stiffly and released his hand, emptiness settling inside me when he left me on my own. The girl on the floor peeked up beneath a dark curtain of hair, excitement simmering in her eyes. It stabbed at me, the prospect of what might happen. But this was a test as much as it was a learning experience. I wanted to expose Lucian's deepest secrets as much as I wanted to know his loyalty for me.

Would he touch her with his hands? Would he kiss her? Fuck her?

I didn't know, but I needed to.

He picked up a whip, testing it in his hand, and the other man nodded his approval. Lucian turned his head as if he were going to look at me one last time but decided against it. He was close to the girl. So close that when he bent down to murmur something, it was just for her to hear. She nodded, and her eyes lit up.

He closed his eyes and breathed, and then he brought the whip down with a mighty strike against her back. She collapsed onto her forearms with a strangled cry, and I was so horrified I couldn't move. Lucian took no pity on her. Everything about him was different. His posture, his eyes, his voice. They weren't the man I thought I'd come to know.

"Get up," he demanded.

She did, and he whipped her again. He whipped her so hard, I almost begged him to stop. But she didn't. With every strike, she cried out in

pleasure and pleaded for him to continue. To give her more. To give her everything. For the next ten minutes, he doled out enough pain to last me a lifetime.

Finally, my eyes had been opened to the truth. Lucian was right that I couldn't or wouldn't ever give him these things. He couldn't say the word out loud, but he'd shown me. He was a sadist.

And I could never be his masochist.

Even now, when I glanced down at his trousers, I could see the hard outline of his cock. He'd been torturing himself for weeks, keeping me in his bed. In his arms. Having me just within reach and knowing that I could never be the thing he needed.

When he swiveled his head in my direction, I searched his face for answers. It didn't make sense that he'd chosen me as his wife, knowing I could never give these things to him. But suddenly, everything was clear. He never wanted to have sex with me. He never included a clause in our contract that *he* wouldn't have any extracurricular affairs.

I swallowed, and it felt like a rock was lodged in my esophagus. It should have come as a relief. It should have made my life easier knowing that in just under two years, I could be free of him and I would never have to worry about him taking my body. But already, things were too muddled between us. There was only one solution, and the simplest thing to do was push him away. Divine intervention helped me with that when Lucian set aside his torture device. He came back to sit beside me, but that didn't matter. The other man took one glance at the sweaty sub on the floor and gestured for Lucian as he untied her.

"I'm done playing with her now. She wants you."

"I'm not—"

"I want to watch you," I interrupted.

Lucian's fingers tightened around my thigh. The same fingers that had just wielded a whip with a skill that told me he'd been practicing for years. I knew this was a path we couldn't come back from, but I needed to do this for my sanity. For my well-being. I needed to remind myself that Lucian was nothing to me, and in the end, I was better off alone.

"You want to watch me with her?" His voice was deceptively soft, and I didn't trust it, but still, I forged on recklessly.

I nodded. "Yes. You said you would show me."

"That wasn't the agreement," he pointed out.

“She said yes,” the sultry voice purred from across the room.

When I looked over, the naked girl was crawling toward us, her eyes burning with need for Lucian’s touch while jealousy burned deep in my gut. I wanted to extinguish it. I wanted to hate him, and after this, I would.

I returned my gaze to Lucian, but he’d never taken his eyes off me. “She might have said yes, but I didn’t.”

The girl didn’t listen. Instead, she kneeled before him, clinging to his shoes, and I locked my fists at my sides to keep from clawing her eyes out.

Lucian regarded me with an intensity that made me shiver. “This is what you wanted, pet?”

I nodded.

“You want to watch me fuck her?” he pushed.

Again, I nodded.

“You want to watch me kiss her, and punish her, and fill her with my come?”

I jerked my chin toward the ceiling, but it was stiffer this time. The girl didn’t seem to care that we were still having a conversation because she began to lap at his shoes with her tongue, and I was so close I could smell her arousal for him. It made me sick. It made me hate him even more. Tears burned the back of my eyes as he forced her chin up.

“Kneel,” he ordered.

She panted like a dog in heat as he fisted his cock through the material of his trousers. “Tell me what you want her to do, pet,” he ordered. “Be specific.”

I looked at the girl. She was pretty. The opposite of me with fairer skin and softer features, but I wondered if she was more Lucian’s type. And then I wondered if it had been her he’d thought of when he masturbated in the shower.

“What do you want her to do to me?” Lucian pondered. “She’ll do anything, won’t you?”

The girl nodded, and I didn’t miss the blatant dig at me. I wouldn’t do anything with him, but was that what he wanted? I didn’t know anymore. I was confused. I thought I wanted him to fuck her, so I could hate him, but I couldn’t stomach to watch it.

“Do you want her to suck my dick?” Lucian suggested. “Ride me? I could eat her out. Tell me, baby girl, what do you want to see?”

He was pushing me, and he knew it. He was also being an asshole, and he knew it. And I hated him so much for getting inside my head this way. The whole world was collapsing in on me, and I had no defenses against it.

I stood and tried to look brave. “I don’t care. You do whatever you want with her. You’re the twisted fuck, not me.”

I tried to leave, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me back to him. “You were so willing to lend me to her,” he said coldly. “What’s the problem, pet?”

“I don’t need to see it.”

“But you want it,” he insisted.

I shook my head. “You want it, so it’s what you should do. I can’t be this for you. I can’t let you do those things to me, and you know it.”

The blackness in his eyes melted away to a warm chocolate brown as he snagged my wrist and tugged me onto his lap. He pinched my face with his fingers, his lips a breath away. It looked like he was going to kiss me, and I found that I wanted him to, but I couldn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he forced my legs apart and dragged me forward until I could feel the throbbing heat of his dick through my panties. It was wrong, but I couldn’t make myself remember that.

His hands cupped my ass, squeezing the flesh as he grinded against me. “Tell me you want me to do this to her, and I will. Tell me you don’t want me.”

I couldn’t. My head dipped, and a tear leaked from the corner of my eye. It was the second time today they’d spilled after I hadn’t cried in years. It was awful to feel so out of control.

“It isn’t what I want,” I admitted. “I just want to hate you.”

His lips pressed against the moisture on my cheek, kissing away the evidence of my vulnerability. I leaned into him, and it was the first time I could ever recall feeling complete calm with a man’s hands on me. Because whatever Lucian was capable of with someone else, he could only ever be this way with me. Maybe it was a first for him too, or maybe he just hadn’t recognized that yet. He said this was what he needed from me. He wanted to show me his demons, but he never asked to hurt me. And when I looked into his eyes, I knew he couldn’t.

I touched his face, my fingers grazing over the shadowed stubble on his jaw. “You would never do those things to me.”

He stared deep into my soul, his gaze reflecting a promise before he even said the words. “I wouldn’t, pet. I couldn’t. Not with you.”

I was warm all over, completely owned by him at that moment. And it hit us both at once that, in some small way, I was giving him my trust. It was a hard-won battle, and Lucian did not take his victory lightly.

He groaned, and his lips dragged against mine, kissing me with a hunger he’d never satisfied before. I kissed him back. I touched his face and his neck and any piece of skin I could claim through the barriers between us. I wanted him, and it was the most sobering thought I’d ever had. But he broke away, his forehead dipping against mine as he closed his eyes in what looked like silent prayer. The struggle was evident in his body. He was trying to find his morals. He was trying to resist what was happening between us. It made me feel so uncertain, and I wanted to second-guess it too. But before I could remind myself of the many reasons this was wrong, Lucian cut through the silence.

“I shouldn’t be doing this to you.” His voice held so much agony, I couldn’t stand it.

My fingers wrapped around his face, forcing him to look at me. “I want you to.”

He searched my eyes, and whatever he saw there ignited the flame inside him again. “Fuck,” he murmured. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t.”

I braced for the impending rejection, but it didn’t come. Instead, he wrapped my arms around his shoulders and rushed to free his cock and shove my panties aside.

We were so close I couldn’t see him, but I could feel him. I felt his heat against my skin. I felt how slick with want I was. The inevitable feelings of shame and self-loathing welled up inside me and threatened to ruin everything.

“Lucian—” My voice fractured.

He pulled me closer, the heat of his lips caressing my ear as he whispered the thing I needed to hear most. “I want every beautiful piece of you, pet. Even the filthy ones.”

I buried my face in his neck and nodded against him.

“Tell her that I’m yours,” Lucian demanded.

My cheeks heated as I remembered the girl kneeling on the floor in front of us. I’d forgotten she was there until I turned to look at her. The hooded eyes that were filled with lust only moments ago were now

overflowing with bitterness and jealousy. Maybe it was sick, but it made me wet knowing that Lucian chose me instead of her.

“He’s mine,” I told her as he kissed my throat and nimbly exposed my breasts for his pleasure.

I should have been more modest, probably. But at that moment, I didn’t care because his hands were on me everywhere, and I was burning alive for him.

“She won’t go until I tell her,” he breathed against my skin. “Do you want her to go?”

I looked at her again, and some feral part of me made me shake my head. I wanted her to watch. I wanted her to know what Lucian said was true. He belonged to me now, and he would never touch her again.

Lucian nipped at my throat, his words so low I barely heard them. “You’re going to ruin me.”

“Please,” I begged.

I was completely soaked for him and drunk on his touch, and there was no way I’d let him back out now. Not when he was the one who made this mess of me. I hadn’t been with a man in so long, I didn’t know if I could even enjoy it. I’d never enjoyed it before. I was terrified of the idea of him taking me, but I was terrified of his rejection more. I needed him to need this as much as I did. And when Lucian nudged his cock against me, I pushed against him too.

“Please.” I dug my fingers into his shoulders as he squeezed himself inside me.

It was tight. He was big, and I was incredibly full. But it felt… good. So fucking good. His face collapsed against my chest as he let out an agonized sigh.

“Gypsy,” he whispered.

I stroked his hair, and at that moment, I was the one comforting him. It was like we had crossed some invisible barrier for him, and he knew he couldn’t come back from it. Whatever it was, he was mourning it, and I gave him time to accept that this was really happening. He was inside me. We had crossed a line we both swore we wouldn’t.

He rocked his hips up into me, making me gasp. “This is going to be quick,” he said. “I just have to fuck you. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know what that meant until he grabbed my hips and pulled me against his body, burying his cock deep inside. I couldn’t move at all, and I

didn’t need to, because the momentum of his thrusts guided me. Synchronicity found us easily, and I got lost in the feeling of being connected to him in this way. The catch of his breath, the beating of his heart against my chest. His eyes were heavy, his head falling back in pure, strung-out bliss… because of me.

He worshipped me with his lips, ghosting my skin with kisses that sometimes turned rough between breaths. He drank from my mouth, sucked at my breasts, and whispered the things I needed to hear.

“You make me crazy.” His fingers wrapped in my hair, and my head fell back. “You have no idea how long I’ve needed this.”

I drank in the sight of him this way, and it was the most intimate thing I’d ever done. We weren’t just connected, we couldn’t take our eyes off each other. We kissed. He played with my clit and told me to come. I was so close, but I was anxious.

“Look at her.” Lucian turned my face to see the girl; her eyes lasered in on his cock thrusting in and out of me. “Tell her how good it feels. Tell her that this pussy is the only one for me.”

“He’s mine,” I snarled again, and the ferocity of the statement surprised me.

It also sent Lucian over the edge. He grabbed both of my hips and pulled my body down on top of his cock, completely burying himself inside me as he groaned out his release.

Some of his come started to leak out of me, but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he smeared it over my clit and used it to stimulate me while he was softening inside me. It brought me back from the dead, nerve endings flaring to life that I didn’t even know existed. It was scary and intense, but I stroked his hair and relaxed into his body, letting myself just feel for the first time.

It felt good. It felt right.

And when I came around him, it felt a little bit like I had cleansed myself of the filth I’d always believed I was.

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Chapter 34

Lucian

"FATHER."

"Lucian?" Cristian cleared his throat from the other side of the confessional. "What brings you here today?"

The words didn't come easily. I hung my head and tried to feel even a scrap of the solace I'd once found in this booth, but it wasn't there anymore. Overnight, I had gone back to old addictions. Sweeter addictions. The kind of addictions that could ruin me if I didn't get them under control.

"I think I've regressed," I said.

Cristian waited for me to explain, but it wasn't so easy this time.

"Tell me," he encouraged.

"I consummated my marriage."

More time went by, and I knew Cristian was struggling with what he should tell me. In the eyes of God and the Catholic church, we were married, so there wasn't a problem. But it wasn't that simple for him. He wouldn't paint my actions in a favorable light just to spare my feelings, even if he didn't know the worst of them yet.

During all the years I'd come here to confess, I'd never exposed the challenges I faced with intimacy. It didn't seem right, considering he was a man tormented by his own constant battle to remain untouched.

"Was it consensual?" Cristian asked.

“Yes.” I turned toward the grate. “I would never take her against her will.”

But the words I spoke so decidedly didn’t ring true to myself. I had already crossed so many lines with her. I tied her up. I poked at her raw wounds. I’d allowed her to feel insecure in my devotion to her because I was too afraid to show it myself. Already, I felt like a failure, and last night only compounded the situation.

When I took her to that club, there was no coming back from it. I exposed her to a world that she didn’t need to see, and I forced her into a corner where her jealousy was the only catalyst upon which she could act.

“You’ve told me many times that you have been unable to find joy in your everyday life,” Cristian said. “I’m tempted to wonder if you feel so conflicted because perhaps maybe this time, you felt something else?”

I stared at the wall, silence my answer. He was right, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit it. For years, every hour had been gray. I’d lived under a cloud of perpetual rain until she came along, and now my life was filled with color. A storm of passionate red. She was changing the landscape of my life, and I didn’t like it.

“Tell me what burdens you with guilt,” Cristian directed.

My throat felt too thick, and it was difficult to force the words out. “I never meant for it to happen. In the beginning, you told me I might hurt her, and I said I only wanted to help her. But this path I have taken is a dark one.”

“It’s not the only one.” Cristian shifted closer, adjusting his voice accordingly. “It’s not too late to change your intentions.”

I closed my eyes and sank forward. “They aren’t intentions. They’re compulsions. I can only show her what I am.”

“And what are you?”

“Pain,” I gritted through my teeth. “To her, I am pain. It’s the only way I’ve learned to suppress my rage.”

“If you can learn once, you can learn again,” he replied. “Just as you believe Gypsy can change, so can you. How can you ask her to be vulnerable if you aren’t willing to do the same?”

“She still has her whole life ahead of her,” I argued.

“And you have the rest of yours as well.”

He didn’t get it, but why would he? Cristian might be aware of the demons who lived inside me, but he wasn’t intimately acquainted with

them. He didn’t live with them every day.

“Perhaps love is the alternative you are afraid to face,” he continued. “But the one you need the most.”

“I don’t know how to love,” I reiterated. “I only know how to fuck.”

Cristian opened the grate between us, eliminating the shadow of secrecy that no longer existed. “If you let hate continue to rule your life and poison anything good, your past still wins.”

I laughed, and it was cold. “Don’t you understand, Father? She already won. I died long before I ever stood with one foot in the grave.”

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Chapter 35

Gypsy

"IT'S TIME TO GET READY for bed, pet."

I looked up at Lucian, uncertain what to make of the sudden warmth in his voice. He'd managed to avoid me all day by calling Ace over to babysit instead. But now here he was, puppy brown eyes and a face I couldn't deny I'd memorized.

We still hadn't talked about what happened last night. I wondered if we even would, or if we'd both just go on pretending it didn't happen.

"Come." He held out his hand for me, and I took it after a moment's hesitation.

I was tired, but my fatigue was mostly from the uncertainty of what the future held. It was exhausting to try to predict everything so I could feel in control, and with Lucian, it was nearly impossible.

I followed him down the hall, his hand principal in mine, and we entered the master bathroom. He turned on the shower and tested the water with his palm. His eyes met mine, searching for answers to questions he didn't speak aloud. Instead, his hands came to rest at the hem of my tee shirt, and he slowly guided it up over my head. With practiced care, he undressed me completely, and then did the same for himself.

I couldn't help that my eyes naturally roamed the great expanse of his body and settled on the thick muscle between his thighs. His cock was heavy but not fully hard. He caught me staring, and my eyes shot to his.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

He guided me into the shower, and I couldn’t figure out what was happening between us at this point. But every time he moved, I had flashes from the night before. Flashes of him inside me, fucking me raw like an animal. The worst part was that I’d been wet all day thinking about it. And even though I was sore, I felt empty.

My eyes fell shut as he soaped his hands and glided them over my body. He washed me carefully and then cleaned and conditioned my hair. There was a gentleness to his touch that I hadn’t ever felt before, and for the first time, I thought I understood why people craved this type of intimacy.

“Gypsy.” Lucian’s voice broke, and when I looked up at him, I was confounded by the torment in his eyes. “What happened last night, it can’t happen again. Do you understand that?”

He said this even as his hard cock hung heavy in front of him, and all I could feel was the pressure and heat filling my chest.

Was he rejecting me?

I tried to pull away, and his hands shot out to catch me. “It doesn’t change anything between us.”

“It changes everything.” I turned away from his sorrowful eyes. Everything about this was so fucked up, and I didn’t know how to deal with it.

“What is your end goal here, Lucian?” I asked. “Why do you want to punish me?”

“My goal isn’t and has never been to punish you,” he answered.

“That’s a lie. From the beginning, you told me I meant nothing to you, and you were more than happy to destroy my life. But why? What did I do to set myself in your sights?”

He relaxed his grip on me, and when he was certain I wasn’t going to flee, he let go altogether.

“I saw you.” His voice was low, the way I imagined it was when he confessed his sins.

“What?”

“You want to know what you did,” he explained. “But it wasn’t anything. I saw you, and that was your only mistake. I saw your pretty, tragic face, and I couldn’t let you go.”

It sounded like it pained him to admit it, but it still didn’t make sense to me.

“Where?”

“Saint Vincent’s.”

My mind reeled back to the many instances I’d found myself inside that church, confessing my so-called sins. But it was always empty, save for me and the priest. What Lucian was trying to sell me didn’t add up.

“You couldn’t have seen me there,” I argued. “I would have known.”

He bowed his head, and for the first time since I’d known him, he looked ashamed. “See isn’t really the correct word. If we’re being honest, then heard is more appropriate.”

My heart slammed against my ribcage, and I shook my head because it couldn’t be true. There was no way. But when I looked into his eyes, I knew that it was.

It was pure adrenaline that provoked me to run.

“Gypsy.” His voice sounded from behind me, but I kept going.

My reaction hadn’t been a logical one. I was still naked, and I had nothing on me that would be of any use if I did make it out of the house. But I couldn’t face him. I couldn’t face the fact that he’d been listening in on my confessions, my darkest and most intimate secrets.

I was mortified. Angry. And I knew that I would never want to look him in the eyes again.

“Gypsy.”

His voice was closer this time. I was almost to the front door, and I couldn’t look back. But when I wrapped my fingers around the handle, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that it was locked.

I shook it anyway, screaming out my frustration as strong arms wrapped around me from behind. I fought him. I stepped on his foot and kicked him in the shin and tried to thrust my head back against his chest before he eventually tackled me to the floor and pinned me down with his body.

“Stop,” he commanded.

I didn’t stop. I kept fighting because it was all I had left. But Lucian was stronger, as most of the men in my life had been, and he won. He pinned my wrists above my head with one hand and gripped my face with the other.

“Take a deep breath,” he said calmly.

“You’re sick,” I choked out. “There’s something wrong with you.”

His eyes softened, and his forehead fell against mine. “I know, pet.”

His dick was hard against my stomach, and his constant torment grew restless. He told me it wasn't going to happen again, but Lucian had proved himself to be a liar. And he lied again when his lips found mine. It wasn't an apology when he kissed me, it was possession.

I hated him at that moment, but I needed him too. Such conflicting feelings were not in my realm of normality. It wasn't right that fire spread through my body when he touched me. It definitely wasn't sane when I arched up into him and cried at the loss of him when his lips pulled away.

For three long seconds, he stared at me, trying to find his morals. His virtue. Whatever the fuck it was he thought could stop this. But like my protests, they weren't anywhere in this room. My parted thighs were a temptation even the saint in him couldn't refuse.

"Fuck," he growled. "I can't keep doing this."

His lips smashed against mine as he reached down and grabbed his cock and squeezed it inside me. His head fell back, and his mouth fell open, and he looked like he'd just found his version of Eden inside me. It was beautiful and ugly at the same time, and I'd never felt so torn about wanting something as much as I wanted him. I bit my lip to keep from crying out, and his fingers brushed against my throat before wrapping around the delicate flesh in warning.

"Be good," he whispered. "Don't make the monster come out to play."

I stared up into cocoa eyes so filled with torment, I couldn't believe him. He wanted me to be stronger than he was. He wanted me to say no and push him away. He was huge, and fierce, and dominant, and he overpowered me with little effort, but I felt something with him I hadn't ever felt with another man.

I trusted that he wouldn't hurt me, and maybe that was a mistake. Lucian was a lot of things that I didn't like, but he was also a protector. An alpha. A guardian. And right then, he was a lover too.

His hips rolled forward, and my eyes rolled back. I was soaked for him. Our bodies still sticky with soap, our skin filled with goose bumps. He kissed me like he owned me and fucked me like he couldn't live without me.

"This pussy is mine now," he groaned. "I can't stop, pet. I was lying when I said I could."

"I know," I whispered.

He kissed me and pulled my legs around him, fucking me into the tile floor. It went on forever, and every time he got close, he stopped to finger my clit. I came twice before he finally buried himself inside me and unleashed his monster with a roar. Hot come flooded my womb and warmed my body.

He collapsed with his dick still inside me and rolled me over so that I was lying against him, his hand coming to rest on my spine as his other arm wrapped around me possessively. For several minutes, we just laid there like that. Though my anger hadn't faded, my racing heart eventually calmed, and my breathing returned to normal.

"It wasn't intentional." Lucian broke the silence between us. "The first time it happened, you had arrived long after the priest had left. You were unaware of how confession worked."

"No." I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block him out, but it was in vain.

"I was kneeling in one of the pews, and you didn't see me. For a long time, you just stood outside the booth, trying to work up the courage to go in. You looked so… tormented. When you finally took that step, I couldn't let you sit in there alone, waiting for someone who would never come."

"So you betrayed my trust?" I grated.

"Yes." He dipped his face to breathe me in as he spoke. "I did. And I did it three more times when you came back. For weeks, I went to that church every night waiting for you. It became an obsession. I knew it was wrong, and I needed to stop. That's why I told Father Hawk about you. It's why he waits for you now on his own."

"He should have told me," I whispered. "That isn't right."

"He doesn't know the extent of it," Lucian admitted. "I couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth. He only knows that you needed him."

"I don't need anybody." Even as I said it, the words felt like a lie. I was cocooned in Lucian's arms, safe from the world outside, and I should have wanted to move, but I didn't.

He kissed my forehead. "You need me, pet. At least for a little while."

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Chapter 36

Gypsy

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

"Hello," the voice from the other side of the booth spoke softly.

"Hi," I whispered back.

There was a small thread of silence between these spaces that he always took the initiative to break. "Tell me what brings you here this evening."

My fingers beat a nervous rhythm against the worn wood bench. "I've been thinking about some things."

"Such as?"

I closed my eyes. "Mostly, my sister."

"It seems she's in your thoughts often. You must worry about her."

"Yes, I do. But also… there is some guilt."

"Tell me," he encouraged. "What do you have to be guilty for?"

I recalled Birdie's face, smeared with chocolate. Happy and innocent, the way she used to be before I fucked everything up. Tears burned my eyes, but I wouldn't let them spill.

"There were so many times when I was younger that I harbored bitterness because I loved her so much. When those men would come to visit me… all I wanted to do was run away. But that's how Ricky kept me. He used her as leverage because he knew I'd never leave her. It didn't matter if I lived or died, but it mattered if she did. I loved her too much, and sometimes, I think I hated her for that."

The urge to retch clawed at my throat as the words spilled from my lips. It was the first time I'd ever spoken them aloud. It was the first time I'd ever truly admitted what a horrible person I was. Part of me hoped the priest would agree, giving me the confirmation of what I always believed was true.

"You did the best you could in an impossible situation," he said. "You chose to stay and suffer so that she might have a brighter future. I can assure you that whatever feelings you experienced do not make you flawed. They make you human."

His words did nothing to ease the pain in my chest. I felt like he didn't understand, and I needed to prove he was wrong. That I was bad after all. Everything was my fault.

"I could have done better. I could have made someone listen."

"You told me that you tried."

"That wasn't…" I shifted my weight in frustration and crossed my arms. "It didn't matter."

"Why?"

"Because they had no birth record of my sister, or any evidence that she even existed. When the social workers went to Ricky's house, they couldn't find her. He made her hide in a trunk and told them I was delusional. He said I had problems from the start, and he didn't know what to do with me anymore."

"And they believed him," the priest murmured disapprovingly.

"This was in a state that still thought it was appropriate to arrest child prostitutes and lock them in jail. So, yes, they believed him. Ricky came to visit me and told me if I stopped blabbing, he wouldn't hurt Birdie."

"You did what you thought was best," the priest assured me again. "It was an impossible situation. The people you thought you could trust failed you."

I looked at the floor, my silver stilettos gleaming in the darkness like a beacon of sin. "And I failed her because, in the end, none of it mattered." Moisture tainted my cheeks, and I didn't move so I could pretend it wasn't there.

"He touched her anyway."

Chapter 37

Gypsy

"WHERE ARE WE GOING?"

Lucian squeezed my hand and continued down the sidewalk. "You'll see."

I didn't want to see. I avoided this part of town for a reason. The reason being, probably, that it reminded me of my past, and I didn't like it.

For most people, Las Vegas was shiny and new with the promise of glitz, glamour, and sinful temptations. But there was a darker side that visitors rarely saw, and it was only a few blocks from the Strip. Past the blinking lights and costumes and constant noise, there were broken sidewalks and shattered dreams. And Lucian was leading me straight into the heart of it.

He came to a stop in front of a safe house with a sign on the door that read *Haven*.

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"Volunteering."

He tugged on my hand to bring me forward, but I was frozen to the sidewalk. When his dark eyes turned to me, I didn't know what to say. I had never done a charitable thing in my life, and though it was an admirable trait, I didn't think it was one I possessed because I was presently struggling to breathe.

"I don't want to go in there."

“Gypsy.” I expected him to be harsh with me, but instead, he pulled me closer and brushed his fingers over my jaw. “You have nothing to fear. I will be right there in your sight at all times.”

“I’m not afraid,” I lied.

“Confronting our demons isn’t easy,” Lucian said tenderly. “But it is necessary.”

I wanted to argue that he didn’t know me as well as he thought he did, but it was wasted energy. “What am I supposed to do in there?”

“You’ll be able to choose,” he said. “Just come inside with me. Take the first step. Meet some of the women who live here, and if you still don’t want to stay after that, then we’ll go.”

“Really?” It felt like a trick, but he nodded. If I could leave anytime I wanted, I guess that would be okay.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

He kept me close as we walked inside, and on top of my own foot-dragging, I was still trying to figure him out. He was either a sadist who liked to dole out pain or a do-gooder who spent his free time volunteering, depending on who you asked. I wondered if maybe this was just another lesson for me until one of the staff members with a lanyard stepped forward to greet him by name.

“Lucian!” She smiled brightly. “How lovely to see you here again. It looks like you brought a friend?”

He gestured in my direction. “Nina, this is Gypsy. She’ll be helping out today too.”

“Hello,” she greeted me. “It’s so nice to have you here with us. I suppose since this is your first time, we should go ahead and give you the grand tour.”

Lucian nodded his approval, and we followed her around the shelter, my hand still clinging to his. The building was at full capacity, and it wasn’t very large, but it seemed like they made the most of the space they had.

There was a cafeteria, a common room, locker-room style showers, and a large open space filled with endless bunks that looked better suited to prison. I tried my best to avoid eye contact with the occupants, but it was obvious they had taken notice of me. Most notably, my dress and heels. My gut felt like it was full of lead when I snuck glimpses of their own clothing. Most of them were dressed in faded tee shirts, jeans that had seen far better days, or the occasional sweats with holes peeking out. Many of the women

were young, Nina told us, but they didn’t look it. Their faces bore the scars of whatever wars they had endured with deep-set wrinkles and shadows carved into their skin.

The worst part was the children. Small faces that had seen too much, and a familiar fading horror in their eyes. These were souls whose innocence had been stolen, and their faith in the world around them tainted from a young age. It hurt the heart I didn’t know I still had.

One little boy took it upon himself to run up and greet us, showing off his paper hat. “Look, Nina!” he exclaimed.

“That’s very lovely, Christopher.” She patted him on the back.

He went down the line, showing it to each of us and explaining how he’d made it in the arts and crafts class. I paid close attention, but it didn’t escape my notice that Lucian could barely look at him. There was no smile to be offered. No scrap of kindness. And it was at odds with the very reason we were here. Again, I didn’t understand.

“I’m so sorry.” A girl who looked to be about my age ran up and inserted herself into the conversation, taking Christopher by the hand. “These littles get away in a second if you’re not careful.”

“It’s okay,” Nina told her. “Luna, I’d like you to meet Gypsy. She’s going to be helping us out today. Maybe if she’s willing, when the tour is over, she can help you with looking after the kids. It seems you could use another pair of hands.”

“Always.” Luna smiled in my direction. “Gypsy, was it?”

I nodded. “Hello.”

Her eyes moved over my features, and her face brightened. “You wouldn’t happen to be Roma, would you?”

My shoulders went rigid, and I offered her a tight smile. “How did you know?”

“You have the look,” she said. “Plus, the name kind of gives it away. I’m Roma too, if you can believe that.”

I could, actually. Something about her was mysterious and beautiful; two qualities my mother always told me a gypsy possessed.

“I’m only half,” I admitted.

“Maybe by blood.” She held a hand over her chest. “But you are whole at heart.”

Lucian watched the interaction between us closely, and I felt awkward with everyone’s eyes on me. I wanted to know more about her. I wanted to

know how a gypsy ended up in this place.

“We’re almost done with the tour,” Nina cut in. “Maybe I can send Gypsy your way when we’re finished.”

Luna approved, and we followed Nina into the back office.

“I’ll need you to fill out a volunteer form,” she told me as I sat down at her desk. “We keep information on everyone who enters Haven for the protection of our staff and residents.”

“I understand.”

She handed me the form, and I went to work filling it out before I returned it to her.

“There are a few other rules I’d like to go over quickly, for future reference,” she added. “The facility is locked between the hours of six p.m. to eight a.m. every day of the week. Volunteer hours can be scheduled for those times, but otherwise, if you come during the day, just pop in and see me. I’ll find you something to do.”

“Okay.”

“Our facility does allow male staff members, but they don’t typically work in direct contact with the residents. You might see the cook, cleaners, and health care staff floating around from time to time, and that is normal. But if you ever see anyone without a badge…” She plucked the red lanyard from her chest and showed it to me. “Be sure to let another staff member know immediately. It’s just a safety precaution.”

I nodded.

“Do you have any questions so far?” she asked.

“Not that I can think of.”

“There’s just one thing I like to make clear to all of our volunteers,” she said. “This isn’t your typical shelter. We specialize in helping victims of human trafficking, so all the women here have been affected in some way. It’s very important you acknowledge that when working around them. Some startle easily and we need to be mindful of potential triggers. Using quiet voices, maintaining appropriate space and distance, these things are important. I have a pamphlet I’d like you to read over quickly, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” I agreed.

While Nina worked on retrieving the pamphlet from a file, Lucian brushed his fingers over my arm to get my attention. “Are you okay with staying?”

“I think so.”

His eyes were warm with approval when his hand squeezed mine. “Nina will show you what to do. I’ll be in the far left corner of the common room, but I’ll be able to see you if you need me.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I give the girls legal advice.”

He tried to release my hand, but I hesitated. A nagging sense of uncertainty plagued me when I realized he would be talking to these girls about the intimate details of their lives. Girls like me… the broken ones. And I wasn’t sure, but I had a suspicion that was what Lucian liked. Suddenly, I didn’t want him to go.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing.” I bit my lip.

This was a dangerous situation, and I needed to extricate myself before I admitted something awful. These feelings I had toward him—this possessiveness, the jealousy—they weren’t normal. I had been with him twice, and it was as if I’d forgotten the reason we were even together. He was blackmailing me, and I was his captive. I couldn’t develop feelings for him, especially when I knew he could never return them. Lucian was soft with me. He was even gentle at times. But it didn’t mean anything to him, and I would do well to remember that.

“You should go,” I told him. “I’ll be fine.”

He hesitated briefly and then left. I turned my focus to Nina as she offered me the pamphlet.

“Here you go,” she said. “Just give it a quick read and let me know if this seems manageable.”

“Thanks for helping out,” Luna said. “Arts and crafts can get kind of crazy.”

I looked around the room, which was, in fact, a madhouse. “What do we do?”

“Amber runs the class and gives the littles instructions,” Luna explained. “We just need to walk around and keep an eye on them. Make

sure nobody glues their fingers together or anything like that."

I smiled. "Sounds easy enough."

"You might need to stop and help them too. Some of them are fairly shy and don't speak up when they need help."

I scanned over the group of what I guessed to be about fifteen children. "Are any of them yours?"

Luna laughed. "No way. I love kids, but the best thing about these is you can return them to their mothers when they're done."

"Sounds about right," I agreed.

I tried to focus on the kids, but between the chaos, my eyes found their way to Lucian more than a few times. He was sitting at a table in the corner, just as he said, and there was a separate female chaperone present for each of his meetings. It made me feel a little better to know that everything was strictly professional, but Luna must have noticed my distraction because when I glanced back at her, she was looking at him too.

"Is that your boyfriend?" she asked.

I didn't know what to say, but I was wearing my wedding band, so I figured I should at least give her a half-truth. "Husband."

Her brows furrowed. "He's been coming in here for a long time. I had no idea he was even married."

"It's recent," I told her.

She smirked. "The honeymoon phase, huh?"

My cheeks heated as I thought of Lucian inside me. "Something like that."

"I could only dream of finding a guy like that someday," Luna sighed.

I wanted to know more about her story, but I wasn't quite sure how to approach it. "How long have you been here?"

"In Vegas?"

"The shelter," I clarified.

She wiggled her nose. "Oh, I don't live here. I mean I did when I first came down here. But now I live with a community."

"Oh." I felt like an idiot for assuming. "Sorry, I didn't realize. I had no idea there was a community here either."

"Yeah." She reached down to pick up a crayon that fell on the floor and set it back on the table. "There's a big one. It's cool. They don't know about my past, and they don't really care either. It's more of a lost souls

community. Not all of us are even gypsies. Just a bunch of outcasts living together in a group without the pressures of tradition, ya know?"

I didn't know, and part of me hated that. I remembered my mom talking about her clan and how much they meant to her, and how sad she was when she said she could never go back. She explained that sometimes they shunned people, and I could only assume the same had happened to Luna for whatever reason.

"It's good that you found a place you feel comfortable," I said, and I meant it. I only wished my mom had better luck than ending up where she had.

"You should come check it out sometime if you want," Luna offered. "I would love to hang out if you're up for it. I don't have many friends here yet."

"Oh." I blinked. "Sure, we could do that."

"Cool." She ripped a piece of paper out of a scratch pad and scribbled her phone number on it in purple crayon, handing it over to me. "Call me whenever. I'll be around."

"Okay."

"The class is almost over," Luna said. "If you want, you can help me clean up and then get snacks ready for the littles."

I trailed along behind her to the storage bins. "Sure, I can do that."

After all the crayons and paper and glitter pots were sorted and put into their rightful places, the desks were cleaned, and the kids were given juice and a veggie pack. I was grateful I didn't have to cook anything and risk the chance of embarrassing myself again, and the kids were happy over such a simple gift that it seemed like there was more I should be doing.

"Does anyone ever donate toys?" I asked.

"Oh, sure." Luna beamed. "The kids love toys, they're always a hit. But the real winner is just your time. They enjoy having someone to hang out with. It can be a pretty intensive process for the women who come here. They usually need a lot of therapy and time to rebuild themselves so they can be the best moms that they can. Job skills, education, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, all those things take time away from the kids, so it's really nice when they have someone to read to them or play a game or something simple like that."

I remembered how much Birdie used to love doing those things with me, and how she never complained that we didn't own a single toy between

us. It physically hurt me to acknowledge that part of our past, and I tried to wash the memory away as I acknowledged what Luna said.

“Hey.” Lucian appeared from behind us. “How’s it coming along?”

“Good,” I answered.

He glanced at the clock on the wall, and my eyes followed. It was hard to believe we’d already been here for a few hours.

“We have to get going. I have some business to finish up back at home.”

“Okay.”

I looked at Luna but didn’t know quite what to say.

“Thanks for helping,” she supplied.

“Thanks for showing me around. I’ll probably see you soon.”

She nodded, and Lucian guided me out the door with his hand on my back. He was quiet and distant, and my thoughts were occupied by the possibility of spending time with Luna. I wanted to, but the sudden cold front from my captor suggested he probably didn’t like the idea of it. I waited until we were safely tucked in the car and halfway home before I said anything.

“I think I’ll call Luna this week.”

He didn’t look away from the road, and his response was automatic. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I glanced at him across the seat. That was it? No argument?

He must have been thinking about it because it wasn’t until we pulled into the driveaway and shut off the ignition that he turned to me.

“Just be careful, Gypsy,” he said wearily. “Promise me you won’t go to the community with her.”

“Why?”

His fingers tightened on the keys in his hand. “I’m sure Luna is fine, and you have nothing to worry about. But it’s a different world out there, and it’s not something I want for you.”

Chapter 38

Gypsy

At the first opportunity, I called Luna and set up a time to meet after class. Lucian told me he'd be working late all week, and I didn't feel like sitting around the house by myself.

Luna was excited that I'd followed through, and before I knew it, we'd set up a lunch date on the Strip. We met at the Shake Shack across from the MGM, and she was ten minutes late. When she showed up with her wild red hair in a mess, she explained her blunder by pointing at the broken flip-flop that hung loose from her foot.

"I swear I go through a pair of these a week in this heat." She blew the hair from her face, exposing eyes that were lighter than what I expected of the typical Roma. But her skin was coppery like mine, and something was hypnotic about her features.

She was a living, breathing piece of art that left you emptier if you dared to look away. In another lifetime, she would have made a great con artist because I doubted many men could resist the mysterious bombshell. But the longer I took in her features, the more I realized she was better suited to a different life altogether. With the symbolic tattoos on her fingers and the bangles dangling off her delicate wrist, I could just as easily imagine her in a field picking flowers or casting spells in the dark of night.

In a way, her free spirit reminded me of Birdie, and it made me miss my sister. But I tried not to dwell on it when Luna sat down across from me and

let me indulge my craving for a bacon cheeseburger while she nibbled on some fries.

“God, this is delicious,” I moaned. “Lucian never eats stuff like this.”

Luna dunked a fry in some ketchup and popped it in her mouth. “He’s missing out. How long have you two been together?”

It took me a while to formulate the correct answer to that question. This friendship thing was a foreign concept for me, and I didn’t know how much to tell her. I could give her a million different scenarios at the drop of a hat, and I’d done it plenty of times. But I didn’t really want to.

I also didn’t want to betray Lucian by revealing too much about our relationship when I wasn’t even sure what was happening myself. So, I settled somewhere on a happy middle ground. “It hasn’t been long. It was somewhat of a shotgun wedding type scenario.”

“The gypsy blood runs strong in you then.” Luna laughed.

“Not really.” I smirked. “I don’t know much about the culture. My mom spoke very little of it because I think it hurt her to remember. She was shunned, so she had to leave it behind.”

“Ugh, that sucks.” Luna pushed away her empty fry boat and wiped her hands. “Some of the communities can be very hardcore traditional, and if you don’t conform, they’ll give you the boot really quick.”

“Sounds like you know from experience,” I said carefully.

Her pretty features shadowed with sorrow as she gave a tiny nod. “Unfortunately, I do. But this community here is different. They are very open. It didn’t take long for them to embrace me.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said.

“You should come over with me,” she chirped. “It would be cool to show you around.”

I wiped my hand with a napkin, Lucian’s words still ringing in my head. He didn’t want me to go there. He specifically told me not to. But had I really just started obeying his every command as though I didn’t have my own mind?

No. That was definitely not the case. It wouldn’t ever be the case. And just because things were evolving between us didn’t mean I was going to be his stay-at-home pet who waited at the door for him to come home every night.

“I think that would be fun,” I told Luna. “I’d like to come check it out.”

She picked up the tray and headed for the trash. “Awesome! You’re going to love it.”

When Luna said she was taking me to the community, I assumed it was somewhere in the city. But she started driving and didn’t slow down until we reached the desert, and even then, she kept going for miles before the commune appeared.

Her eyes lit up as she gestured to the flock of camp trailers parked in the middle of the desert. “Voila!”

“This is it?”

Luna parked the car in front of a small blue camper, and we both got out. “Yep. It’s quiet here now, but give it another hour or so, and it’ll get wild.”

I offered her a weak smile as my fingers grazed the links of the watch Lucian gave me. Stupidly, I thought I’d be back before he even noticed I was gone. But at this rate, it didn’t seem like that would be the case.

I followed Luna through the maze of trailers into the heart of the camp where a bunch of chairs and a fire pit were set up. Along the way, she introduced me to a few of the community members who had taken notice of me. There were a variety of people, young and old, and I could see what Luna meant when she said they weren’t all gypsies. She’d called them societies outcasts, and that net spanned far and wide. I didn’t know what I was expecting when I came out here, but the reality was completely different.

Everyone was clean and well fed and happy… and most notably, social. It seemed as if every person we passed stopped to say hello along the way, and they all knew Luna by name.

“People just live out here in the middle of the desert all year?” I asked.

“Pretty much.” She pulled out a couple of empty chairs, and we sat down. “It depends, though. I mean, people move around a lot, but then you have the regulars who are content to stay. Some are only here seasonally and then pack up and head off to other pastures for a while.”

“What does everyone do out here? How do they make money?”

Luna smirked. “Haven’t you heard that all gypsies are con artists?”

I knew she was joking, but it hit home for me, considering that I was. “I thought you said they weren’t all gypsies,” I replied.

“They aren’t.” She shrugged. “But we’re all tarred with the same brush because we live together. We get a bad rap, especially in Vegas because of a few bad apples. Some do run cons, but these people here are solid. They do good, honest work. Some have local jobs, or some just do seasonal work. A lot of the gypsies will leave the women home to tend to the children while the men work. It just depends on the family, really.”

I sat back and took in the buzzing excitement of a community free from the rules of society. “So where exactly does that leave you in all of this?”

“You mean because I’m single?” Luna teased. “I get by. I actually have a job in the city if you can believe that. I wait tables at a diner a few nights a week.”

“You forgot to mention your real talent,” another woman chimed in as she sat down beside us. “I bet you didn’t even know who you were sitting next to here, did you?”

Luna rolled her eyes. “She isn’t here for any of that, Tillie.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Tillie leaned forward, her face dead serious as she spoke in a whisper. “She’s a fortune teller. But not one of those scammer ones. She’s the real deal. I get chills just thinking about it.”

She rubbed her arms, and Luna bobbed her foot up and down in annoyance. “You’re going to scare the poor girl off before she even gets to know us.”

“Says the girl who brought her here for the circle.” Tillie laughs.

I looked at Luna in question. “Circle?”

“It’s a fire circle,” she explained. “I thought maybe you’d like to see it. Every month or so, we come together for this.”

“Speaking of,” Tillie cut in. “We should go get ready. Are you going to have her dance too?”

Luna offered me a mischievous look. “You can’t call yourself a gypsy if you don’t learn how to dance.”

The idea of dancing for anyone was the last thing I’d ever entertain, but as I watched the people come together around the fire and prepare for whatever was about to take place, I couldn’t say I wasn’t tempted. For as

long as I could remember, I'd wanted to know my culture, and this was my chance. I just didn't know if I had it in me to be a real gypsy.

"Just come and get ready with us," Luna said. "Then you can decide."

I followed her to her trailer, and she gave me the grand tour in about two minutes flat. "That's the bedroom." She pointed at a small space where her mattress was crammed. "Kitchen. Bathroom. And that's it really."

"It's cute," I said, and I meant it.

She had done a lot with only a little space. There were vibrant colors everywhere, and it was clean and homey. I wasn't one to deny my affinity for creature comforts, but there was something to be said for a space that was as warm and comfortable as this one.

"It's mine." Luna smiled proudly. "Bought it with my own money, and there's no greater feeling than that."

I smiled back, but it was tinged with guilt.

"Here." She opened a chest and pulled out a gold outfit that looked like it was straight out of a Vegas showgirl's wardrobe. "This would look amazing on you."

I eyed the three-piece costume that consisted of a bedazzled skirt, coin belt, and bra. Heat crawled up my neck when I thought about exposing that much skin. It was an instinctual reaction, a product of a childhood where I was the star of every man's sick fantasy.

Before I could say no, Luna was in front of me, her brows pinched together in concern. Without a word, she took my hands in hers, as if she were trying to read me. "You don't have to be nervous. This isn't for anyone else but you."

"I don't think I should," I said politely as I pulled away.

"You have no reason to be ashamed of anything," she said. "This isn't about displaying your body. It's about your femininity. Your beauty. Your mystery. All the things that make you who you are."

I looked at the costume again, heat flaming my cheeks. When she put it that way, it seemed silly that I would make it out to be anything else. I knew my mother loved to dance. I remembered watching her, mesmerized by the way she was able to maneuver her hips. It seemed magical to me, and I tried it many times on my own after she died, desperately longing to feel a connection with her.

"I never learned the dances," I admitted.

“You don’t need to know anything,” Luna said. “Just let yourself feel. You are a gypsy. Trust me, you can dance.”

Tillie entered from the kitchen, carrying three shots on a tray. “And failing all of that, you can do what the rest of us do. It’s called liquid courage.”

I took the shot glass, not for the courage to dance, but for the courage to believe that I could have any other life than the one I had known. Since I’d been free from Ricky, I thought I’d only ever done things because I wanted to. But the truth was that I didn’t know any other way. I never learned my culture because at the end of the day, it wouldn’t get me what I wanted or needed. I knew how to survive, but I didn’t know how to enjoy the simple things in life like Luna.

I would probably never be as free spirited as she was, but starting tonight, maybe I could learn. Maybe life could be something else for me. Something more than the next con, the thrill of chasing the dollar, or the past constantly nipping at my heels.

I set the shot glass down and gestured for the costume. “I’ll try it on. No promises.”

Luna handed it over with a squeak of excitement.

Five minutes later, I was dressed like a belly dancer, and Luna and Tillie were cheering me on as I tried to decide if I could really go through with this. We took two more shots of liquid courage, and in the back of my mind, I was aware that time was passing quickly. It was dark outside. Lucian would be home soon. He’d realize I wasn’t there, and it wouldn’t go over well. It was a recipe for trouble, but Luna was the first friend I could ever remember having besides Birdie.

“Okay,” Tillie said. “We need to go. We’ll be late.”

“There’s no such thing.” Luna giggled as she flew out the door.

We trailed behind her in the direction of the fire, which had grown exponentially in size. The empty chairs from a short time ago were now filled, and it looked like the whole community had come out to watch the event.

My belly was warm, and my nerves were on fire when I saw the other girls already dancing around the fire. The music was upbeat and exotic, and I was relieved to see there wasn’t really any coordinated effort. Like Luna said, everybody was moving to their own beat.

“Jump in,” Luna said. “Watch me, move like this.”

I tried to mirror her movements, but my body felt stiff and awkward. Luna giggled and put her hands on my hips, guiding the movements.

“Close your eyes,” she instructed. “Relax. Just feel.”

I did what she said with little faith that it would change anything, but miraculously, it did. Soon, the weight of her hands disappeared, and I was moving on my own.

“Yes, girl,” she shouted. “Now, you are a gypsy.”

I laughed, and we danced until I was high on adrenaline and drunk on the tequila we’d been drinking. We stumbled back to some empty chairs and sat down around the fire, listening intently as stories began to unfold.

I found myself enrapt as they spoke of their culture and history, losing track of the hours that passed. But I felt comfortable, and I was willing to face Lucian’s wrath if it meant indulging in something of importance.

When the fire had died down to nothing more than coals, three women emerged from the shadows with a kettle in hand, making their way around the circle with a ladle and cups, pouring the concoction for each member of the community. When they came to me, I looked at Luna for guidance.

“What is it?”

“Ayahuasca. It’s a medicinal tea from South America,” she explained. “Some believe that it has healing powers.”

I wasn’t the kind of person to buy into that mentality, but all eyes were on me, and I didn’t see the harm in at least taking the cup they offered. I didn’t have to drink it.

The brew was poured, and when I sniffed it, it smelled foul.

“It’s made from a vine,” Luna said. “There is a cleansing ritual involved in the preparation, but even still, it’s not the most appealing taste.”

I watched as she sipped from her cup and others around the fire did the same. In the span of just a few minutes, the conversation had died, and slowly, the crowd began to dissipate.

“Where is everyone going?” I asked.

Luna stood, and her whole body seemed to vibrate with a new energy. Something intense and focused that I couldn’t understand when she held her hand out to me.

“Come,” she said. “I want to read you.”

I hesitated, and Tillie leaned in close, brushing her fingers over my arm as she whispered in my ear. “She has secrets to tell. You want to hear them.”

I wasn’t sure that I did. Things were getting strange, and I was getting cold. Goose bumps had broken out along my skin, and I thought about telling them I needed to leave. But I didn’t, and I wasn’t sure why.

I felt compelled to know what happened next. Despite what my beliefs were, I still wanted to hear what Luna had to say. I stood and followed her through the darkness into her camp trailer, where she lit a solitary candle and placed it on the table between us. We sat down opposite of each other, and she took my hands in hers, her head falling back as she closed her eyes.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m just trying to get a feel for you,” she whispered. “I can’t understand your future until I understand your past.”

I didn’t believe she could know anything about my past, so even though it felt at odds with what I should do, I remained perfectly still.

Luna’s face was the only thing to change, and the reactions were sharp. Jerky. It was starting to creep me out, but then a solitary tear rolled down her face as she opened her eyes and looked straight at me.

“What?” I croaked. “What is it?”

“Pain. I felt your pain. You were hurt, but you stopped me from reading.”

I pulled my hands away, and Luna looked unsettled as she pushed the cup of tea toward me, encouraging me to drink. “Just a couple of sips. It will help calm your nerves.”

I looked at the tea. It was late. I should have left by now. But I thought about returning to Lucian and how angry he would be. I needed something to calm my nerves.

I brought the cup to my lips and took a sip, and it was awful. I coughed and choked it down, and Luna watched intently. The second and third sips weren’t any better, but I managed to get it down.

My head started to buzz, and I felt slightly intoxicated.

“Let it take you,” Luna’s voice drifted into my thoughts.

My body caved in on itself, so heavy in the chair, I didn’t think I could move. I didn’t want to either. When Luna took my hands in hers again, there was no protest.

It felt like I was on the outside looking in. Like I was floating above and watching the entire event take place as she tried to read me. It looked as if she were torturing herself, but she was paralyzed at the same time. I tried to

understand what was happening when Luna blinked and came out of the trance-like state, her face fractured and her body obviously still in distress.

“He can’t hurt you anymore.”

The tea and her words left a bitter taste in my mouth. “What do you mean?”

“You know.” She released my hands. “The one who is dead. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. “How did you know that?”

Her eyes fell to the table. “It’s a curse. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

I shook my head, unable to accept it. This didn’t make sense. Nothing about it made sense. “Fortune tellers aren’t real.”

“Some aren’t,” she agreed. “But I am.”

“Then tell me about my future,” I insisted. “Not the past.”

She closed her eyes again, and the name that she breathed was so intimate it made me burn with jealousy.

“*Lucian*.”

“What about him?” I demanded.

“He is your flame. He will win your heart, and then—”

She clutched at her chest, and her eyes snapped open, her features painted with horror.

“And then what?” I urged.

She stood and took a forcible step back, visibly shaken. “This was a stupid idea.”

“What did you see?” I pressed.

Her eyes met mine, and there was so much sadness there it terrified me. “Nothing that can do you any good to know. You are right to believe it isn’t real.”

Her body grew weak as she slumped back into her seat with heavy eyes. “I’m very tired now. We need to rest.”

But I couldn’t rest. What she said shook me. She knew something, and I needed to know what it was. Before I could press her any further, a sharp stabbing pain ripped through my gut as I doubled forward, and my mouth began to water.

I was going to puke. And Luna was out cold. I dragged myself outside of the camp trailer just in time before I spewed the contents of my stomach onto the ground. But it didn’t end there. I continued to heave until nothing came up, and all I could do was curl into a ball and lie in a puddle of my

own sweat. I didn't know what was happening, but the flashbacks that came were the most intense I'd ever had. Closing my eyes didn't help. Nothing helped. There was no way to block them. I could only embrace them.

"Put on the dress," Ricky said.

My stomach hurt as I looked at the pale blue dress with white lace. It was pretty and new, and so were the shoes and ruffled socks. I liked the dress, but I didn't want to put it on.

"Put it on," Ricky snarled.

I curled into myself and shook my head, and his hand exploded across my face, my skull vibrating from the force of it.

"Put on the goddamn dress, or I will put it on for you."

There was no point in arguing. He wasn't lying. He would put it on for me, and it would hurt. I picked up the material and pulled it over my head with shaking limbs. I felt like I was going to throw up, and I knew when the man got here I would. Ricky would really punish me for that, so I asked to go to the bathroom, but he said no.

He stayed until I put on the socks and shoes, and then he forced me to sit on the bed and wait. When he disappeared, I squeezed my eyes shut and wished I could be somewhere else. But Birdie was so small, and I didn't know how I would take care of her. I promised her that someday we would leave. We would run away together, and I wanted that now more than anything.

The door opened, and Ricky let the man inside. He was old and gray, and I couldn't meet his eyes even when he told me to.

"Gypsy," Ricky warned.

"It's okay," the man told him. "We'll be okay."

The door shut, and Ricky disappeared, leaving me alone with the man. He looked over the dress he'd bought me, and his face looked happy.

"You look very pretty," he murmured. "So very pretty."

I watched him set up the video camera, and my stomach cramped up. I put my arm across it, so I could try to hold back the sick feeling, but it never went away. The man suggested that we play more dress up games, and I did. But I knew it wasn't what he really wanted. The dress up always made me feel sick in the end.

When he took off my clothes and touched me, I squeezed my eyes shut again and tried to imagine a different place in my mind. But he made me

touch him, and I couldn't stop the sick feeling. My stomach cramped and cramped, and I threw up on him.

He got angry and shoved me to the floor, wiping himself off in disgust. "You're going to pay for that, you little bitch."

It wasn't a lie.

They always made me pay.

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Chapter 39

Lucian

THE HOUSE WAS DARK WHEN I walked in the door, and something odd pinched at my gut when I set my briefcase down. The aching silence I'd known for fifteen years stretched between the walls, and though it was once familiar, it had quickly become a foreign concept.

In a short amount of time, Gypsy had managed to breathe life back into this house. But that life ceased to exist in her sudden absence. With the open floor plan, almost every part of the lower level could be seen from where I stood, and my immediate instinct was to check the master suite. I doubted she'd gone to bed early, but as I stalked toward our room, I found myself wishing that were the case.

A quick glance confirmed the bed was still made, and my stomach sank. For two long minutes, I stood in the middle of the room, debating my next course of action. I considered myself an excellent poker player, and I never expected Gypsy to call my bluff. But it seems that was exactly what she'd done.

She'd left me.

The thought was sobering, and it came out of nowhere. The airway in my chest felt like it was in a vise when my eyes moved to her side of the bed. The bed where she'd slept with me for long enough that I knew it wouldn't be the same without her.

But she didn’t mean anything to me. That was what I kept telling myself. I was only doing this to help her, and that was it. I never intended to send her to prison if she ran away. Everything I’d told her from the beginning was an empty threat. A way of manipulating her to stay and see it through.

My intentions were good, but now all I could see was the blackness dimming my vision as my hands curled at my sides. We had a contract. She couldn’t just walk away from me. We weren’t done. Not by a long shot. She signed the papers and took my name. She recited the vows that made her mine. And if she thought I was going to let her walk out halfway through the game, she was wrong.

I pulled my phone from the pocket of my trousers and swiped at the screen. But before I could do what I’d intended, something across the room caught my eye. The closet door was wide open, and inside, her belongings remained untouched.

A wave of relief expanded in my chest, only to be replaced by an irrepressible fear a moment later.

If she didn’t leave me, then what happened to her?

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Chapter 40

Gypsy

MY EYES OPENED AS I rolled over and stared up at the sky, and I prayed that the worst of it was over. But it wasn't. The visions came and went, dormant memories brought to life as I puked my guts out and questioned if I was going to die.

There was so much pain inside me, it felt like I'd swallowed acid. I just wanted to escape, to run away from my past and lock the door forever, but it wouldn't let me go. I was deep in its grasp, and soon, I realized I was all alone too.

I'd been crawling into the desert without even comprehending it, and I couldn't see my way back. I couldn't see anything but empty spaces on all sides of me, and at that moment, I was certain I would die. Sobs wracked my body as another vision held me hostage.

"Come here, sweet thing," Ricky purred.

He was high again, and he had the keys to the door in his pocket. I'd already secured Birdie in our room, hiding her under the bed, but I couldn't say the same for myself.

"Please don't make me," I whispered.

"You're just delaying the inevitable."

He'd been saying that for months now. When I sprouted breasts and got my period, Ricky told me I couldn't make him as much money anymore, but

there were always ways around that.

He got up off the sofa and gestured for me, and I froze. I'd fended him off a few times already, but he was right that it was inevitable. I fantasized about clawing at his face and running out the door with Birdie, but it wasn't going to happen. I'd been trying to make it happen for so long, I'd lost hope. In the end, it didn't matter what happened to me. As long as Birdie was okay, I could be okay too.

"Come," Ricky ordered.

I took a step back, and he lunged forward, catching me by the arm. He forced me closer, and I suppressed the urge to retch as he took my face in his hand and licked my cheek. I'd been to hell and back, but I'd never felt dirtier than I did at that moment.

"Please don't," I rattled.

"You should know by now those words don't work on me." He unzipped his pants, and my chest heaved. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I wished for it to be over.

My eyes fell shut, and Ricky grunted. I hadn't even touched him yet, and already he was getting off on the fantasy. His skin brushed against mine, and I braced for the roiling disgust. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't breathe. I was paralyzed, waiting for the worst to come, but instead, all I heard was a thud.

I opened my eyes to the sight of him on his knees. He wobbled, clutching at his back as blood dripped onto the floor behind him. I couldn't understand until I looked up and found Birdie standing there with a knife.

"It's enough!" she roared. "It's enough!"

I was immobile, still trying to come to grips with what she'd done when she flew into a rage and slashed at him again, this time hitting him across the face. Blood spurted from the wound and splashed against my arm. I tottered backward, and Birdie tackled him to the floor, stabbing at him again and again.

"You. Won't. Hurt. Us. Anymore."

Each punctuated word made his body lurch, and I tried to find the will to stop her, but I couldn't. Birdie had flown into rages before, but never anything like this.

"B," I whispered.

She didn't hear me. Her arm shot back as tears streamed down her face, and she screamed out her frustration, aiming at the soft flesh of his neck.

Blood. There was so much blood.

My body shook as I watched it pour from his gaping throat, and his empty eyes stared up at the ceiling. I knew he was dead, but I kept thinking that he was going to come back. The bad guys always came back.

I tried to grab Birdie. We had to run. We had to leave. But a hand wrapped around my arm, and I screamed.

“Stop.”

I scratched at the offending limb, kicking and screaming my way out of his grasp. I wouldn’t let him win. I wouldn’t let him take Birdie away.

“Gypsy,” the voice sliced into my hallucination. “It’s me. Open your eyes.”

I knew that voice. That voice calmed my racing heart, and I obeyed his command. When I opened my eyes, I met the darkness in his.

Lucian.

His arms were bleeding where I’d scratched him, and an enormous, gaping hole of sorrow opened up in my chest. When he leaned down to touch my face, I gasped out broken sobs as I clung to him like I’d never let him go.

“What happened, pet? Tell me.”

“She did it,” I whispered. “She killed him.”

Chapter 41

"IT HURTS," SHE CRIED. "IT hurts everywhere."

I pulled her against me in the bathtub, cradling her in my arms as she shivered. "I know."

Her body didn't stop shaking while I bathed her, regardless of how warm the water was. At that moment, she was like a child, completely helpless and dependent on me for guidance and care.

That reality lanced through my heart and poured acid into old wounds. I wanted to shake her for being so reckless. I wanted to do the same to Luna when she'd told me what she allowed Gypsy to take. But there wasn't any use in letting my anger control the situation. It was done, and now all we could do was weather the storm.

I removed Gypsy from the bath and set her on the counter while I toweled her off and brushed her hair. It was difficult to dress her when her limbs were so heavy, and she was tired, but I managed to get her into one of my soft cotton tee shirts before I tucked her into bed. It didn't last long. Before I could even get myself dressed, she was crawling across the tile floor in the bedroom, clinging to the surface like it was her savior.

"Noooo," she whined when I tried to pick her up again. "It's so hot. So hot."

Her body couldn't regulate temperature, but I had to trust that she knew what she needed while the plant eliminated itself from her system.

Accepting this, I laid down beside her on the cool tile, waiting out the worst of her tremors as fresh tears slid down her cheeks.

“Please don’t tell our secret,” she begged.

Her cognitive state of mind had improved, and that was a good sign, even if she wasn’t capable of recognizing it. I knew the moment she’d told me about Birdie, she regretted it. But she couldn’t know that I’d already suspected it from the beginning. From everything I’d uncovered so far, it was evident that Birdie was prone to mental breaks, particularly concerning her rage. Gypsy had been protecting her little sister for her entire life, and even in the depths of her worst pain, she still tried.

My fingers traced the lines of her arm as I whispered into the darkness. “I won’t tell.”

I shouldn’t have said it. It was the one thing that would guarantee Gypsy would stay here and fulfill her obligations. I needed her to stay. But even worse, I was beginning to understand that I wanted it more.

Her hand slid across the tile and reached for me, falling just short as she rolled onto her side and her gaze came to rest on my face. “I always heard the devil was beautiful.”

I smiled into the shadows, reaching out to find her fingers. She wrapped her pinky beneath mine, and we laid in the stillness, staring at each other on the cold tile floor for hours. When the sun came up, Gypsy’s breathing grew even, and her body settled into a state of exhaustion so deep, I knew the worst had passed.

I carried her back to bed, and she was too far gone to feel restless or scared anymore. But it didn’t stop me from wrapping my arm around her and pulling her against me anyway.

“Hi.”

Gypsy’s meek voice drew my attention to the doorway of my home office, where she was currently standing. The hem of my tee shirt brushed against her thighs, highlighting the sun-kissed skin of her mile-long legs. After the scare last night, I wanted more than anything to wrap those legs

around my face and punish her with my tongue, but that wasn't what she needed right now.

"Good afternoon," I greeted her.

She wrung her hands together. "I bet you're really mad at me, huh?"

I set aside the document I'd been reading and gave her my full attention. "You put yourself at risk last night. You specifically went against my rule, and you acted with no thought or regard to me, yourself, or even your sister. So, am I mad, Gypsy? No. I'm disappointed in you."

She bowed her head and curled her toes into the carpet. "That sounds like something a parent would say."

"That's because it is," I murmured.

"I didn't mean for it to happen." She looked up at me with soft eyes. "I honestly… things got out of control. Luna told me it was a medicinal tea. She didn't say that was going to happen. And when she drank it, she was fine, so I thought I would be too."

"Luna was fine because she drinks it often. Her body is acclimated to it, but yours isn't. Taking something like that without knowing what it is, you could have…" I choked down the words I didn't want to say. "Things could have ended much differently. You were lucky."

Gypsy's shoulders hunched forward. "Well, it doesn't matter. Obviously, I'm never going to see her again."

I found that difficult to believe. As mad as Gypsy was, she felt a connection to Luna because of their heritage. I had a feeling she would see her again, and I could only hope she'd learned her lesson, but regardless, I wasn't about to let her forget it anytime soon.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not yet. My stomach still hurts a little."

"Then I assume you are ready for your punishment?"

I expected a fight from her, but she just nodded. "I knew it was coming, so yeah."

"You can go sit in the corner and think about your actions," I told her.

"Seriously?" She arched a brow at me. "Like I'm five?"

"Until you can learn to act like a mature adult, you'll be treated accordingly."

She padded across the floor and sat down in the corner, crossing her legs and leaning back against the wall. "This might be weird to say, but I bet you'd make a good dad."

I turned away from her and tried to focus on Emmanuel's case files, but the truth was, I couldn't. I stared at them for two minutes before she spoke again.

"Why do you hate kids anyway?"

My foot beat a furious rhythm against the soft floor beneath my desk. "I don't."

"Yes, you do." She snorted. "Case in point, your work barbecue? You were really rude to that little boy who came up to show you his toy gun. You didn't even acknowledge him. And then at the shelter, I saw you do the same thing. It's like you can't even stand to look at them."

My head fell forward with a breath that collapsed my chest, and I closed my eyes. She was right, and if I was going to teach Gypsy anything about life, then I had to be honest with her too.

"That's because I can't," I admitted.

I met her eyes, and she almost looked afraid to ask, but in the end, Gypsy was always brave. "Why?"

My throat was painfully tight as I forced the words out. "I don't hate children, but it's difficult for me to interact with them. It reminds me of what I lost when I was a father."

"Was?" Gypsy whispered.

"Yes." A sour taste filled my mouth as I acknowledged the truth. "My son Dawson was three when he died."

Silence stretched between us, and I appreciated that Gypsy gave that to me. The conversation was far from over but taking it in manageable steps made it easier. I knew she had a soft spot in her heart for children, so this would be difficult for her too.

"Will you tell me about him?" she asked in a muted voice.

I leaned back in my chair and stared up at the ceiling, allowing my eyes to fall shut as a blurry image of his face came to mind. I often struggled between episodes of wishing to remember him vividly and trying to block it out altogether. Either way, it didn't help. There would only ever be pain when I thought of him.

"It's difficult to tell you all the things I would like to because he was taken from me when he was very small." I pinched the bridge of my nose and choked down the acid burning my throat. "But he loved pancakes. And puppies. He was very good with animals, and I always thought we would choose a dog together when he was a little older."

I didn’t know what else to say about him. It was difficult for me to remember much about that time in my life, and I never talked about him anymore. I never shared anything about him because it made it feel like maybe I had imagined it all if I didn’t. But I knew Gypsy wouldn’t be able to leave it alone, and she didn’t.

“What happened to him, Lucian?”

Her question was only fair, given what I knew about her. But it wasn’t easy to divulge the most difficult part of my life. The chapter where I’d turned from a boy to a man, forever blackening my soul. I didn’t know if I’d make it through all of it, but I told her anyway.

“I was young when he was born,” I began. “I hadn’t really given much thought to having children at that age. My father had a construction business, and I wanted to work my way up to taking over when he retired. That was all I thought about at the time. Women were on my radar, of course, but I didn’t want a relationship. I dated casually, and I was always upfront about my intentions. I was careful, and I wore protection.”

“There was a girl I went out with a couple of times who’d been chasing me for a while. She told me she was okay with the situation, but after a while, I could tell she wanted more. I tried to break it off with her, but she told me she was pregnant. She’d been sabotaging the condoms.”

“She sounds like a gem,” Gypsy chimed in.

“She was far from it,” I answered. “And it didn’t become obvious to me how unstable she was until I was too deep in it. But regardless of the circumstances, I was having a child, and I wanted to do the right thing. I stepped up and tried to make it work with her for the baby’s sake. I was there through every milestone of the pregnancy, and for a while, I was deluded enough to think that everything was going to be okay. But after Dawson was born, her moods only worsened. She wanted all my attention to the point that it became detrimental to the baby. If I interrupted a conversation with her to feed him or change his diaper, she’d fly into a rage. She was jealous of her own son, and no matter what I did, I couldn’t win. I got her into therapy and got her started on medication, but nothing worked. She started drinking and sleeping most of the day. I couldn’t trust her to take care of Dawson while I worked, so my mother cared for him during the day. But when she started getting violent, I knew something had to change.

“I tried to break it off with her. I offered to let her keep the apartment, and I would pay the rent. She could focus on getting herself help, and I

would take care of Dawson full time in the interim. She was heartbroken, but it had nothing to do with Dawson. She kept telling me I couldn't leave her. That's the only thing she cared about. Eventually, she got the point that it was really over, and she calmed down. I thought everything was fine. She went into the bathroom, and I fed Dawson and put him down for bed. But the next thing I knew, the cops were banging on the front door. When I let them in, they arrested me on battery charges, and I couldn't understand what was happening until I saw her come out of the bathroom with a bloody face."

"Oh my God," Gypsy murmured. "She beat herself?"

"She smashed her face into the mirror and told the police I did it. I was charged and booked into the county jail that night, and it didn't matter what I told them. They didn't believe me."

Gypsy curled into herself, glaring at the floor as she considered the circumstances. "That's so awful. They had to figure out she was lying at some point, right?"

A dry laugh ejected from my throat. "It only got worse from there. My parents bailed me out, but she'd been granted a restraining order against me which included my son. I wasn't allowed to see him or contact her. I abided by the rules because I knew it was the only way to get Dawson back eventually. I had faith in the system. I had faith that somewhere along the line, somebody would figure it out. But they didn't. And when she started using a phone she'd registered in my name to send herself threatening texts, it only compounded the problem. Stalking charges were added, and I was brought back to jail. This time, my parents didn't bail me out. They didn't know what to believe, I guess."

"But you were their son," Gypsy said. "How could they not believe you?"

"It happens more often than you'd think," I assured her. "Things can get so skewed in a courtroom that people find themselves questioning things they never thought possible. But regardless, it wouldn't have mattered what my parents believed. The court-appointed attorney didn't believe me either, and it was evident in court. He did his job with the least amount of effort required on his part, and that was it. The judge handed down my sentence, and I was convicted on both charges with a two-year sentence."

"What a load of bullshit," Gypsy snarled.

“I didn’t care about the sentence. My whole life had been ripped apart, and the only thing that mattered to me was Dawson. She took him away to punish me because I wouldn’t stay with her. I was worried for his safety and well-being, and nobody would listen to me. I requested welfare checks. I did everything I could, but they left him in her care.”

Gypsy shook her head in disgust. “Just another kid falling through the system.”

“They failed him.” I pinched my eyes shut. “I failed him.”

“What happened to him?” Gypsy pressed.

“I was a few months away from my release when the warden pulled me into his office and sat me down. He told me that Dawson was gone. He’d been gone for two weeks, and I didn’t even know it. Nessie had been getting violent with him. Hitting him. Kicking him. I don’t know the extent of it. He had internal bleeding and died from the injuries because she never took him to the hospital. He was three years old.”

The numbness I’d always felt whenever I spoke those words seeped into every crevice of my soul, and I couldn’t think of anything else to add. That was the end. That had always been the end for me. The day Dawson died, I stopped living too.

I didn’t know what Gypsy would think. I was almost relieved she hadn’t said anything at all. But when I opened my eyes and they fell on her, there were fresh tears on her cheeks. Those tears were for Dawson, and maybe a little for me too. I couldn’t recall ever sharing the grief with anyone, and it was a comfort to have a companion in my darkness, even if only for a little while.

Chapter 42

Gypsy

My body moved before my mind could process what I was really doing. It wasn't my conscience, but my heart that led me to him.

I'd been torn about this man from the very beginning. From day one, I had declared that I could only ever hate him. But between the shadows of last night and the early light of day, something had changed between us. He knew my darkest secrets, and now I knew his.

I needed to go to him. Breathe in his scent, feel his skin against mine. It wasn't logic, it was compulsion. A new addiction that I feared I might not ever recover from.

He looked up at me as I approached, and I reached out my fingers to brush them through his hair. He had beautiful hair. A striking face. And a body that was made to be seen. I could understand why someone would never want to let him go because at that moment, I felt it too. But more than anything, I felt a new rage inside me on his behalf. An equal need to destroy the bitch who ruined his life, and one to comfort him in the only way I could.

I made myself at home on his lap, straddling him as his cock stirred to life between us. "Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?"

"No," he answered, his lips a breath away from mine. "You would be the first."

I slipped my hands beneath his shirt, savoring the warmth of his skin against mine. “Sometimes, I think you came into my life for a reason. I think you came to save me.”

“Then you would be right,” he answered.

I buried my head in the crevice of his neck and breathed him in. “Why?”

“It’s the only thing I have to offer you.”

I clung to his body, terrified of what I wanted to ask next. “Have you done this with others? Women like me?”

“No.” He petted my hair. “You’re the only one.”

Tension melted from my body, but I was greedy for more. “What about the girls at the club?”

“They are different,” he said.

“Different how?” I demanded.

“They want pain. I want to provide it. That’s all it ever was.”

“And sex too.”

“No.”

I tried to accept it, but the way that girl devoured him with her eyes still haunted me.

He reached up and brushed his fingers against the pulse on my neck. “What are you thinking about?”

“That girl at the club,” I admitted. “You seemed intimately acquainted with her.”

“Pain is intimate,” he said. “Exposing yourself, trusting someone so completely to push your limits but stop when you ask… there’s nothing else like that. Some people, that’s what they need.”

“And what do you get out of it?”

His eyes darkened, and his voice was deeper when he responded. “Power. Catharsis.”

“Do you think of your ex when you hurt someone?” I asked. “Is that it?”

“No. I never think of her.”

“How could you not?” I challenged.

“If I thought about her, that would give her exactly what she wants. What’s done is done. I can’t change the past. I can’t change anything.”

“Is that why you go to church?” I hedged. “To find forgiveness?”

“I can’t forgive her,” he said roughly. “But I have to believe that my son is in a better place. It’s the only thing I can believe in. I’ve tried to hold onto that by living my life in a righteous way. At least, until I met you.”

His words stung, and I couldn’t hide it. “Is the sin of my flesh worse than the others?”

“There have been no others,” Lucian answered quietly. “She was the last before you.”

I stared at him, certain I’d misunderstood. “You’re saying that you’ve been celibate for—”

“Seventeen years.”

I got lost in the dark pools of his eyes. There was nothing to compare them to. They were warm like chocolate and strong like coffee, but even those words felt too weak to describe the visceral power of this man. He could disarm a woman with a single look, but he chose not to. I wanted to know what made me so different, but I was too afraid to ask.

My palms found his face, and my lips brushed against his. “Maybe you can find a way to repent.”

He wrapped his arm around my waist, dragging me against his body as he sighed into my mouth. It felt like I was causing him physical pain. He was tormented, and I didn’t know if I was taking advantage of that, but I couldn’t stop. We couldn’t stop. And if he believed we were going to hell because of it, then we’d be going together.

I pulled the tee shirt up over my head and discarded it on the floor. His eyes raked over my body as I fumbled with his zipper, trying desperately to free him.

“Don’t deny that you want this,” I said.

His cock sprang free, a pulsing monstrosity that belonged only to me. The thought was intoxicating in a way I couldn’t admit. I wanted all of him, and I was the only one who’d tasted him in seventeen years. I’d demolished his celibacy. Broken his vows of purity. And I wanted to do it again and again.

His fingers slipped between my thighs, and he groaned when he felt how wet I already was. “I don’t think I have it in me to be virtuous anymore.” He dragged me along the length of his cock. “All I’ve wanted to do from the moment I saw you was desecrate you.”

“Do it,” I begged. “Make me yours.”

He stroked himself roughly and edged the fat head of his cock against me. “You’ve been mine from the minute you said I do.”

The words were finalized when he buried himself inside me and shuddered. I collapsed against his chest and breathed in his masculinity. His raw vulnerability. Everything that made him my sweetest addiction yet.

I stroked his face and ran my fingers through his hair, searching his eyes as I leaned back. “Fuck me hard. Show me.”

He closed his eyes. He didn’t want to hurt me. “That isn’t what I need from you, pet.”

“Maybe it’s what I need,” I said.

He studied my face, searching for lies. But he didn’t find them. And when he was certain, he made his decision.

His hand found my lower back, and he lifted me as he stood, only to let me collapse back onto his desk. We were still connected, and his eyes hotter than I’d ever seen them when he spread my legs wide and propped my feet on the edge of the desk.

He could see all of me this way. Every little part. It was the first time I wasn’t inclined to squeeze my legs shut, and he knew it.

“Fuck, you’re going to kill me,” he murmured as he gripped my knees. “Don’t move, baby girl. I’ll give you what you want.”

He squeezed my calves in his palms and lifted my legs to suit his preference, holding me in place as he thrust inside. I watched him enter me, and then I became mesmerized by the drunken bliss on his face as he fucked me hard and fast.

I didn’t have any intentions on coming. This was about him. I wanted to watch him use me. I wanted to know that I was the only one he’d ever use this way. I waited for him to say the words. I watched his every twitch and listened to the painful sounds that erupted from his chest. He never told me what I wanted to hear. But when he buried his cock deep inside me and unleashed his orgasm, it was good enough for me.

When it was all over, he leaned his forehead against mine, dark lashes softly caressing his cheeks. “Don’t fall in love with me, Gypsy.”

“Then don’t make me,” I whispered.

“I can’t love you back.”

“Because of her?”

“No.” He didn’t give me further explanation, but it didn’t matter. It felt true. And I think we both needed it to be true.

It was the only way to protect ourselves.

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Chapter 43

Gypsy

"Hey," Birdie chirped from the other end of the line. "What's up?"

"Not too much." I stared up at the ceiling from my spot on the bed. "You haven't been answering my texts."

"I have been answering them," she said guiltily. "Just not as timely as you like, but still."

"That's it?" I rolled my eyes. "No explanation?"

"I've been busy," she mumbled.

"With what?"

"Life." She was being vague, and I didn't like it.

"Are you staying out of trouble?"

"Why does everyone always think I'm up to no good all the time?" she groaned.

"Who is everyone?" I demanded.

"You," she covered quickly. "Just you."

"I have good reason to ask that, B."

And I also had good reason to doubt what she was telling me now. Something felt off with her every time I'd talked to her lately, but I couldn't figure out what she was hiding.

"I know you do," she said softly. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a bitch, but if it means anything, I miss you."

I smiled into the phone. “It means everything. But if you miss me, then why don’t you come visit me like I’ve asked.”

The other line was quiet for so long I had to check the call connection before she answered. “When?”

“Soon,” I pleaded. “I want to see you.”

She shuffled around like she was getting comfortable. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” And surprisingly, I meant it. I could imagine Birdie probably thought things would be terrible here, but if that was the case, she hadn’t expressed it outwardly.

“You sound different,” she noted.

“I do?”

“Yep.” She blew a bubble into the speaker, and I could see her trying to work it out in her mind. “What’s going on with you?”

“I don’t know.” I rolled over and stared out the window. “But I’ve been thinking about a lot of stuff lately, and I just regret the way we were living. It wasn’t right for me to do that. I should have showed you a better way.”

Birdie’s voice was soft when she replied. “You did the best with what we were given, Gypsy. I know you aren’t my mom, but you’ve always taken care of me anyway. I would never want you to feel bad for doing what you had to so we could survive. In fact, you’ve done too much. I’m an adult now, and it’s time for me to carry some of the burden. It’s time for me to be responsible too.”

Her words surprised me, and they sounded so mature, I didn’t know what to think. Maybe Washington was good for Birdie, but I had to see it for myself.

“Please come visit me?” I begged.

“I will,” she promised.

“Next weekend? I’ll buy you the tickets.”

“I can do it,” she said with a smile in her voice. “All grown up, remember?”

“Right.” I laughed.

“I don’t know about next weekend. It might be a couple of weeks with my schoolwork, but I will come.”

“Okay. I’m going to hold you to that.”

“I miss you,” she whispered. “I’ll see you soon okay?”

“Miss you too. See you soon.”

We hung up, and I stared at the ceiling for a long time before I decided to move. I thought about what Birdie said, and the truth was that I did feel different. My time with Lucian had changed me already in ways I couldn't have imagined. He forced me to confront my demons, and I didn't like it, but it felt like I needed it.

But that wasn't the reason I felt lighter today. After waking up with the hangover from hell, I thought I would hate Luna for whatever concoction she gave me the night before. I felt as though I'd been tricked, and a part of me was angry. I certainly couldn't trust her, I knew that much.

But something was different about me, and I didn't know if it was the drink or the intense night and morning I'd spent with Lucian. Things were becoming clearer for me. Sharper.

I'd been dealt a shitty hand of cards in life, and I never realized until now just how fucking angry I'd been about it. The cons, the men, the money… I had so much suppressed rage built up over the years, it was my way of taking back power. When Birdie and I finally escaped Ricky, I felt like the world owed us everything for the hell we went through. It worked for a while, but deep down in the black cavity of my heart, I knew it wasn't going to work anymore.

Lucian was preparing me for the world, trying to teach me all the things I never learned before he let me go. The problem was that now I was scared to fly.

It terrified me more than anything, considering what my life would be like when things with him eventually came to an end. He told me he couldn't love me, and I believed him. This wasn't my fairy-tale ending, and I wasn't deluded enough to even consider it, but it didn't mean I was as good at protecting myself as he was.

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Chapter 44

Gypsy

BEING THAT IT WAS A Sunday, the shelter was almost completely full when I walked in. I knew from the briefing we'd received that the ladies participated in community activities and work skills on a regular basis throughout the week, but the weekends were for downtime.

Nina raised her brows when she saw me walk in carrying two oversized garbage bags, and I told her there were more in my car. She sent another volunteer to help me carry them in, and within two minutes, the entire contents of my closet were sitting in the middle of the people who probably needed them the most.

All the trophies I'd collected, the material objects I'd lusted over and worked so hard for, scheming and manipulating… they had very suddenly and without warning lost their luster. When I looked at them now, I was disgusted by everything these clothes and shoes represented. But I knew they still had a purpose; it just wasn't for me.

"I don't know if any of it's practical," I told Nina. "But I figured maybe they could get some use out of these."

"Clothes are always practical for women in crisis," she said. "I can't thank you enough for doing this."

My cheeks flushed with heat when she walked into the center of the room and made an announcement, publicly thanking me for my donation and telling the ladies to come up and take their picks.

I didn’t want the acknowledgment, but I received it nonetheless. Now that I had done my good deed, I was ready to run, but the director proceeded to lure me into conversation as the feeding frenzy began. The women tore through the bags, gasping at the designer labels and clinging to whatever piece they chose like it was their lifeline. Some even had tears in their eyes as they thanked me, and admittedly, I had to look away. I didn’t want them to think I was good, especially when I had done bad to get these items.

“I should go,” I said.

“Wait!”

I turned around to find Luna staring back at me, a pained expression tarnishing her pretty features.

My eyes narrowed in on her. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s Sunday,” she said. “I work here on Sundays.”

I didn’t answer, and I still wanted to leave, even if she was trying to express how sorry she was.

“Can I talk to you for just a minute?” she asked. “Please?”

Rightfully, I should have left. She deserved it. But I wanted to know what the hell she was thinking last night, so I followed her to an isolated corner of the building and crossed my arms, waiting to hear whatever she had to say.

“What you did in there was a really good thing,” she said.

“That’s it?” I glared. “That’s all you have to say?”

Her eyes drifted to the floor, and she shook her head. “The drink changes you. Just be careful about making too many big, life-altering decisions right away.”

“You didn’t tell me what was in the drink,” I snapped. “You could have killed me.”

“It’s safe, I swear,” she promised. “It’s totally authentic and prepared by a shaman, or I would have never let you take it. I never could have known how strongly you’d react to it. I never intended to cause you pain. It was supposed to be a spiritual experience.”

“You call lying in the middle of the desert puking my guts out a spiritual experience?”

“Your body was expelling negative emotions. Trauma.” She bowed her head. “I just wanted it to help you. I thought you needed it.”

I crossed my arms and took a step back from her. “How could you possibly know what I need? You don’t know me. And I don’t know what kind of stuff you’re into, but this isn’t what I do.”

She looked up, eyes bright. “You feel different today, don’t you? Lighter? I can tell in the way you carry yourself. You are softer. The drink did that.”

I wanted to deny it, but I didn’t because maybe she was right. I did feel better. “Look, I don’t know what it did or didn’t do, but you shouldn’t have tricked me. I was really sick last night.”

“I know.” Her pale red eyebrows pinched together. “I’m sorry. It’s always difficult to tell the intensity of someone’s first time. You have so many demons, I could not have predicted them all.”

Her words triggered a fragment of a memory from the night before. Something she’d said when she was reading me. She seemed horrified by something she felt, and I didn’t want to buy into her so-called abilities, but I couldn’t help being curious about it.

“Last night, when you read me, you said you saw something, and then you wouldn’t tell me what it was.”

Her face fell, and she shook her head. “Some things are not meant to be known until they happen. You can’t change fate; you can only survive it.”

I didn’t like that response, and I was prepared to argue, but she nodded behind me. When I turned, Lucian was walking through the door, his eyes scanning the room before they landed on me.

Luna grabbed my hand and whispered in my ear. “Please don’t hate me. Call me if you can forgive me.”

She disappeared, appropriately, right before Lucian arrived at my side.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought you had some work to do at the office.”

“I did.” He glared at Luna’s retreating form. “But then I saw you left the house again.”

“You never told me not to.”

“I thought it was implied after last night.”

When I looked into his chocolate eyes, it occurred to me he was really here out of concern. He didn’t like Luna based on his first impression, and I couldn’t blame him for that after he’d found me wandering through the desert like a lunatic.

“I’m coming home now,” I said.

He led me toward the door, his hand pressed against my lower back, firm and strong. “I’ll drive you.”

“But my car—”

“Ace will pick it up. You shouldn’t be driving in this part of the city by yourself.”

I didn’t argue. We buckled in and sped off, Lucian handling the Shelby he reserved for weekends like a professional racer rather than a lawyer. There were so many different facets to him, I wondered if I would ever fully understand who this man was. The two years that seemed like a lifetime in the beginning now felt like a small dot on the map of my life. I had so many questions, and so little time to ask them. But the first was why Lucian pulled into the mall and found a parking space.

“What are we doing here?” I asked.

He gave me a sly smile. “You’ll probably need some new clothes.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I probably will. But don’t you have work to do?”

“Always.” He sighed. “But I think today, it can wait.”

My eyes wandered over his face, pausing on his lips. I wanted to kiss him just for the sake of kissing him, and it was a dangerous notion to have. But I saw the same want reflected in his eyes when he looked at me. It was an intimate desire. A need to be close to me. Maybe I was imagining it, or maybe Lucian wasn’t as honest as he liked to believe. No matter what came out of his mouth, his body told me something else entirely.

He gave in without a fight this time, leaning in and finding my lips with his. I breathed him in, dragging my fingers through his hair as he groaned into my mouth. What I really wanted him to do was take me home and let me crawl into his lap and stay there for the rest of the day.

Being with Lucian was like soaring the unknown tracks of a roller coaster at high speed for the first time. My body jolting and my stomach lurching and the wind whipping my face as I screamed. I felt that way every time he looked at me now, and I wondered if for even a second, he did too.

“Gypsy,” he whispered against my lips, pulling away just far enough to meet my eyes. “I want you to know that I’m proud of you. What you did today was a good thing.”

I swallowed and offered him a smile, but inside, I felt like I wanted to cry.

Chapter 45

"Do you like it?"

Gypsy stood in front of a display of black lace embellished bras, her eyes cutting over the patterns like razors.

"This is weird," she said finally.

Her gaze darted around the store, taking inventory of the watchful observers around us. I knew she was anxious, but I was still trying to narrow down why. It wasn't until another woman tapped me on the arm and showboated her pearly white teeth that the mystery started to unravel.

"Excuse me?" The interloper held up two different bras in her hands. "I was wondering if you had these in my size, 34D?"

I stared at her incredulously, but my response wasn't necessary. Gypsy took it upon herself to answer.

"Do you seriously think you're fooling anyone with that, sweetheart? He doesn't work here, so get lost."

The woman stomped off, and Gypsy edged closer, irritation brewing in her eyes. She was marking her territory, being me, and I was just coming to understand what was happening. We were in a store full of women. And some of those women had decided they had an appreciation for me, judging by the sly smiles they tossed my way as I looked around the room.

I knew that Gypsy would find it difficult to believe, but I rarely noticed such things. I had suppressed my sexuality for so long that the lustful gazes

of complete strangers weren’t even on my radar.

For seventeen years, there wasn’t a woman on this earth who could make me succumb to her temptations. At least, not until her. And now I had a decision to make. One that could teach Gypsy a lesson, or one that could make her feel secure. The latter option was wrong, given that I wasn’t here to comfort her. If she grew accustomed to my comforts, then it would only prove to hurt her more in the end.

I wanted more than anything for her to be strong enough to stand on her own. To see that she was smart and capable of living a life she deserved. But I also wanted to hold her and tell her that it was okay. That I was hers.

And it was all wrong.

I pulled her against me and whispered in her ear. “Those women don’t mean anything to me, pet. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Right.” She buried her head against my chest, obscuring her eyes as I petted her hair. “Because I don’t mean anything to you either.”

My hand froze, and unjustified irritation bubbled up inside me at her accusation. Of course, she had every right to say it because it’s exactly what I’d been telling her from the beginning. But when she said it, I wanted to tell her how wrong she was. Already, I’d shown too much weakness as far as she was concerned. I was breaking every rule I’d set and doing everything I promised myself I wouldn’t, so I stayed silent.

It was a coward’s move, yet also, the right move. It might hurt now, but in the end, I hoped she would see I was doing what was best for her.

The car ride home was a quiet one, and even though I’d convinced her to buy some clothes, she’d still have a lot of shopping to do on her own.

I was surprised she didn’t complain when I took her to regular department stores where the price tags were generally under fifty dollars per piece. It wasn’t about the money; it was about the materialistic spell she’d been under for so long. But it seemed that somewhere between the darkness of last night and the dawn of today, that spell had broken.

She picked out the pieces herself. Things I didn't necessarily expect. They weren't as tight or form fitting as her old clothes. They weren't meant to display her body and drive men mad. They were items with purpose and comfort. Tee shirts, jeans, shorts. A few summer dresses and a single pair of flip-flops. After a brief argument over who would pay, I slipped the sales woman my card and won the battle.

Now I had the rest of the day to account for, and a lot of catching up to do on Emmanuel's case. I could have taken Gypsy home, but it occurred to me there was another solution for both our problems. She wasn't the type of woman who could be satisfied with a few hours of schoolwork every day. She needed something to challenge her, and I needed her expertise since I was anything but charming. She'd already signed the non-disclosure agreement, and I had Emmanuel's permission to disclose information to her as my assistant, so I pointed the car in the direction of his old neighborhood.

"I need your help." I turned off the ignition and stared at the small yellow house on the corner. The media frenzy had died down, but there were still signs of the shame Emmanuel's family bore. The windows were boarded up, and there were extra locks on the door. They, too, were living like they were in prison.

"What is this place?" Gypsy asked.

"It's my client's mother's house. I've been trying to get her to speak to me, but it hasn't panned out."

She turned to me, eyes sharp. "And what makes you think I can help with that?"

There were many different answers I could give her. She was a con artist, but that wasn't the label I wanted to use, especially when I'd been steadfast in trying to break her of it.

"There's something about you that makes people take notice," I said. "You are tragic and beautiful, and I have a feeling she will be more receptive to you."

She looked out the window, staring at the house with a softness she didn't often display. "I guess she doesn't know that you're tragic and beautiful too."

I smiled, and Gypsy threaded her fingers through mine. The darkness that seemed to linger between us was tempered, at least for now.

"I'll help you," she said. "Just tell me what I need to do."

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Chapter 46

Gypsy

AFTER A CRASH COURSE IN the need-to-know details in Emmanuel's case, I still wasn't sure how helpful I could be. Lucian explained the terms of the non-disclosure agreement I'd signed and made a point to emphasize that I could never share whatever information we might gather inside that house, whether it was damning or not.

I didn't know left from right in this case, but when I stood next to Lucian on the front stoop of his client's home, I realized something so profoundly simple that nothing else mattered.

I trusted him.

That revelation was enough to spin my world on its axis. I hadn't ever trusted anyone apart from Birdie. She was it for me. But this man took a sledgehammer to my life and demolished the walls I'd built so carefully around myself. When I looked up at him now, tenacious as he was beside me, I had one thing to rely on. Lucian believed in Emmanuel's innocence, and by default, I wanted to believe it too.

Somehow, in a matter of moments, we'd become crusaders for righteousness together. My previous judgments, cast in ignorance, no longer had roots. This was a man who stood for what he believed in. A man who helped others, even if they didn't always want to accept it. I knew with certainty that we wouldn't be here today unless Lucian believed in the

depths of his very soul that an innocent man was about to face a fate similar to his own.

For the first time in my life, I was proud of what I was doing, and I was determined to help however I could. When the door edged open, and two dark eyes peeked out at the visitors on her stoop, I plastered the most genuine smile I could summon on my face.

“Mrs. Morales?” I asked.

“Who are you?” the voice from the other side of the door replied.

There was a note of curiosity as she examined me. Emmanuel’s mother was a petite woman with bleak, exhausted eyes and a bone-weary presence that hit me right in the chest.

“My name is Gypsy,” I greeted her. “I’m Mr. West’s assistant.”

Her eyes moved to Lucian, and she shook her head. “You’re wasting your time. I already told you that.”

She moved to shut the door, but I shot my hand out and jammed it between the frame. “Please, Mrs. Morales. I’m only asking for five minutes of your time. If you don’t like what we have to say, then we’ll leave. I promise.”

She hesitated, her eyes moving from Lucian to me again. “I don’t want him in here. He brings bad press.”

“We’re already here,” I said. “The press knows who is representing your son, and that won’t change. They will find a story to spin, one way or another. But I’m telling you now that I can vouch for this man. He believes in your son’s innocence, or we wouldn’t be here. We only want to help.”

She hung her head and closed her eyes. “You can’t help.”

The quiet lingered between the three of us while I tried to figure out another angle. But as it turned out, I didn’t need to. When Mrs. Morales looked back up, she also opened the door.

“But I guess it won’t hurt to hear what you came to say, as long as you understand that this is my house, and if I ask you to leave, you will.”

“We understand,” I agreed.

She gestured us inside, and Lucian’s hand squeezed mine as we entered and sat down on the small sofa. The house was dark with all the windows blocked off, but it was clean and tidy. Mrs. Morales lived a simple life, and the meager possessions she owned were evidence of that.

“I tried to provide Emmanuel with a good home,” she told us as she sat down opposite and looked around. “I wanted to believe it would overcome

the badness in him. I did everything I could to raise him right and keep him on a straight path, but I always knew this day would come."

Lucian's brows pinched together as he leaned back, examining her carefully. "What badness are you referring to, Mrs. Morales?"

She rocked back in her chair and stared off into the distance as she explained. "I never knew his father. He came at me in the dark one night on my way home from work. Couldn't even tell you what he looked like, truly. But I suppose, he must look like Emmanuel. Or at least that's what I wondered every time I looked at him."

Lucian went rigid beside me, and even though I wasn't a lawyer, I knew this wasn't good. I suspected something like this could be used against Emmanuel at trial. If the media got wind of it, he wouldn't stand a chance.

"Is it your belief that Emmanuel has been predisposed to violence because of his genes?" Lucian asked.

"I read books on it," she answered. "Studies. I kept trying to tell myself that it didn't matter. As long as he never knew, it would be okay. But in the back of my mind, I feared something like this would happen."

"Has he ever shown any violent tendencies prior to this?" Lucian questioned.

"No," Mrs. Morales said quietly. "But that doesn't mean anything, does it? What happened can't be undone."

Lucian folded his hands together and leaned forward. "Mrs. Morales, first and foremost, I want you to know that I'm sorry for what happened to you. I'm sorry that you had to carry that burden for so many years on your own."

Her face was blank, and she didn't issue a response. It was evident that she had sealed away her feelings from that time, and she wouldn't be divulging them now.

Lucian retrieved a pen and notepad from his briefcase. "If you were to remove Emmanuel's genetic makeup from the picture, would you still feel that he was capable of violence based on what you know of him as a person and your son?"

Mrs. Morales clutched her hands together in her lap, her chair creaking as she gave it some thought. "I don't know," she finally answered. "I don't know what to believe."

Lucian nodded, giving her a moment before he moved on to his next question. "Can you tell me what time Emmanuel came home that day? The

day of the murder.”

“It was around three o clock,” she answered. “I know that because my shows were just starting.”

“And he was here all night with you?”

Her foot bobbed up and down as she stared at the carpet. “I thought he was. But the police said he snuck out and went back to that girl’s house. They told me he was stalking her.”

“You never heard him leave?” Lucian pressed.

“No,” she answered. “I didn’t hear him leave. It doesn’t mean he didn’t, though.”

“Had you ever noticed him sneaking out of the house at night before?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I guess not.”

Lucian handed me the pad of paper, silently prompting me to take notes.

“Based on this knowledge, would you consider the possibility that your son might be innocent?”

Mrs. Morales shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“From what he’s told me,” Lucian went on, “he was shy. A quiet kid who didn’t have many friends. If I have any chance of proving his innocence, I need character witnesses who can testify on his behalf. Would you be willing to do that as his mother?”

Her eyes focused on Lucian, studying him as if he were a puzzle she couldn’t figure out. “What makes you so certain he’s innocent?”

Lucian looked at me as he answered. “Because I was in his shoes once. I was accused of a crime I didn’t commit, and I understand that sometimes things aren’t always as clear cut as they may seem.”

“I suppose that might be true,” Mrs. Morales agreed. “But I’m afraid I can’t help you. I wouldn’t be any good on the stand. I can’t find it within myself to lie, even for my own son. As horrible as it might sound, I think that he’s probably right where he’s meant to be now. Somewhere that he’s safe. And those out here can be safe too.”

I swallowed down my own frustration when I heard the pain in Lucian’s voice as he pleaded with her. “He needs you. You’re all he has.”

A tear fell down Mrs. Morales’s cheek, swiftly followed by another. She wiped away the evidence and shook her head. “I’d like for you to leave now.”

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Chapter 47

Lucian

"SHE ISN'T GOING TO SEE anything else?" Gypsy asked quietly. "Is she?"

She sounded defeated, and it reflected my own dark mood since we'd left Emmanuel's mother's house.

"No," I answered. "I don't think she will."

She'd done a noble thing by keeping Emmanuel and raising him, but that didn't mean she hadn't spent her whole life resenting him for it anyway. There was nothing I could do to change that. It was another strike against Emmanuel, and if the prosecutor got a whiff of it, there would be a shitstorm.

The trial was coming up, and I didn't feel as prepared as I should have been. I knew the reason for that was sitting beside me in the passenger seat. I'd told myself I'd be able to manage both, but I wasn't accustomed to dividing my attention.

Regardless, when we came to a stop in the driveway and I glanced over at her, I couldn't regret it. My time with her was limited, and maybe it was a little selfish, but I wanted to enjoy that just as much as I wanted to help Emmanuel.

I still believed I could do both. I just had to find a way.

Chapter 48

Gypsy

I SPENT THE WEEK FOCUSING on my studies, and with every passing day, I was surprised how much I actually enjoyed it. I didn't know why I'd put it off for so long, but Kate made the course better than I'm certain anyone else could have. She never talked to me like I was less than her, and in fact, she was always quick to point out my strengths. During her animated discussions, she'd told me multiple times how well I was progressing. I was breezing through the course, and with our one-on-one time, I'd probably even be ready to test by the end of the month.

Lucian had asked me several times if I'd considered the next step. He even mentioned college, but I wasn't sure about any of that. I told him I was taking things one day at a time, and he accepted that answer for now.

We had settled into a comfortable pattern, and it surprised me how easily I'd adapted to domesticated life. Every morning, we sat down to breakfast together. Every evening, we had dinner together. We slept beside each other, and sometimes showered together, and he read to me in a deep, lulling voice that I'd grown to revere.

I found myself thinking about him often throughout the day, wondering what he was doing. Wondering what came next. When exactly was he going to pull the cord on us? His contract said two years, and I thought about that date often. Would he just wake up that morning and tell me my time was done and I had to leave?

I dreaded it, and I resented it. But when I looked into his dark eyes, those feelings melted and gave way to warmth. He wore his stress on his face. The tired lines from the years he'd been battered by the system and his work. He wanted so badly to help Emmanuel, but I could tell from the constant tension he'd been carrying that he didn't know if he could.

I'd driven to his office a few times this week after class to see how I could help, and he'd given me meaningless tasks to pacify me. But it wasn't enough. I wanted to do more, I just wasn't sure how.

Today, when I found him sitting at his desk, bone-weary and exhausted, I knew the thing he needed most wasn't office work. When he looked up and saw me standing there, some of the tension bled from his face, and it made me feel important.

I still didn't understand how I could have that power over him. How could he ever find any comfort in me? But for some reason, he did. And for the first time in my life, I didn't want to abuse that power or trust.

I walked around his desk and rested my hands on his shoulders as his head fell back against me and his eyes closed.

"You work too much," I told him as I began to massage his shoulders.

He sighed, and his eyes fluttered open for half a second. "That's the life of an attorney."

Maybe that was true, but I think there was always an exception, and Lucian was it. He had dedicated his whole life to helping his clients.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

"What you're doing right now feels pretty good," he murmured. "You can keep doing that."

So, I did. I massaged him until my hands started to cramp, and even then, I kept going. But I wanted to do more to relieve his tension. He'd been avoiding physical contact between us, either from his own guilt or exhaustion, and I missed that intimacy between us.

There was one thing I still hadn't done for Lucian. He'd never asked, and I never offered because when this started, I wasn't in the habit of giving up my power. But right now, it was exactly what I wanted.

I needed to kneel before him and worship him the way he worshipped his God. I needed to feel the push and pull of his doubts and his desires, followed by the inevitable caving in to temptation. There was never any moment more powerful than when I felt him succumb to me. When he'd forsaken his values and dived headlong into the sins of my flesh.

I dragged my fingers through his hair and bent to kiss his throat. He hummed a sound of approval that vibrated against my lips and stirred the devil inside me. His dick was solid and heavy, already straining against the black material of his trousers when I walked around to face him. I kneeled between his parted legs, and he reached down to touch my hair, petting it beneath the palm of his hand while he watched me.

"You are so goddamned beautiful, Gypsy," he murmured. "If I could remember you like this… just like this… I could die a happy man right now."

My lips tilted up at the corners as I fondled his throbbing cock beneath the material. "You don't have to remember it. I'm right here."

A fleeting sadness passed over his features, and I latched onto it. At that moment, I wondered if he regretted his decision to send me away. I told myself there was hope. If he was sad, then it meant things could change. He could still realize he didn't ever have to let me go.

I wanted to tell him, but the words wouldn't come. It was difficult for me to express my emotions, and I often found I was better at showing them. That was my exact intention when I unzipped his pants and drew out his swollen flesh.

He was so hard it felt like it would be painful, and the fat head of his dick was already dripping his arousal. I squeezed the clear liquid from the tip and sopped it up with my tongue. Lucian jolted with an agonized grunt, strangling the sides of his chair as his entire body shuddered.

It entered my mind that this was probably testing the limits of his self-control. He wasn't the kind of man to sit back and simply receive a blowjob. He was the kind of man who wanted to grab my hair and fuck my mouth.

When I looked up into his eyes, I wanted to be that for him, but I knew I couldn't. This was as far as my submission went. I couldn't let him tie me up and whip me or torture me. I couldn't. And I wondered if he needed that.

I hated that I was even thinking about it. I hated that when I drew his cock into my mouth and he groaned, I wondered if it was good enough. So many doubts flooded my mind, and I didn't know how to process them. When I never cared, I didn't have to worry about these things.

But now I did.

I teased the head of his dick with my tongue. He grunted and tangled his fingers in my hair, straining to keep himself in check.

“Use me,” I whispered.

He forced my chin up and touched my face reverently. “You want to be my pet?”

I nodded.

“What if I told you I respect you too much to do that?”

“Then I wouldn’t believe you.”

His eyes chased over my features, seeking out my reasons. I didn’t know why I wanted it. Maybe it would make me hate him. Maybe it would settle this once and for all and cure me of these insufferable feelings I didn’t understand and could barely tolerate.

Lucian’s fingers wrapped around the rosary necklace he’d given me, and he used it to drag me back toward his cock. It was so tight, the tension in my throat triggered an adrenaline response. I trusted him, but I was nervous. Giving up my power wasn’t an easy task, and he had to know it.

“Do you want to know what I think, pet?” He rubbed the head of his cock against my lips, smearing the liquid that had gathered there onto my tongue.

I tried to shake my head, but it didn’t move. He smiled, and it was dark. Filled with promise of what I claimed to want from him. Without warning, he used his grip on the back of my head to shove himself into my mouth until I gagged.

I coughed and dug my fingers into his thighs, clinging to him while he dragged my face up and down the length of his shaft. I was simultaneously enchanted by the sounds of pleasure erupting from his throat and fueled by my desire to tell him to fuck off. But regardless of what my mind wasn’t sure of, my body responded to it. Between my legs, I was wet, and I wanted him inside me. I wanted him so fucking much it physically hurt.

“I think you want to push me away.” Lucian thrust into my mouth. “But I’m not going anywhere. And neither are you.”

A sound of defeat vibrated over my tongue, and Lucian released the chain around my neck to slip his hand down into my tank top, pawing at my breast.

“You’re too pretty for this,” he murmured. “You’re too pretty to have my dick in your mouth like this.”

He sounded tortured, and I was glad he felt it too. But I wasn’t about to let his morals get the best of him. Not when he relaxed his grip on me and started to question everything with his eyes.

I took his dick into my hands again and drank from him like he was holy wine. I worshipped him and tried to exorcise his demons. I bowed before him and offered myself to him in the purest form I could imagine. My complete submission. I needed to please him. I needed to be unpretty with his dick in my mouth and his come spilling down my throat.

I begged him for it, and he gave in, releasing in a violent catharsis as he exploded across my tongue. I swallowed what he gave me, and then nursed him for more until he made me stop, hauling me from the floor up into his lap.

He kissed me, and it felt dirty and wicked at the same time. I wanted him. I needed him. And he knew it.

“It’s your turn, pet.”

I waited for him to do something, to give me some instruction, but instead, he just stared at me with a wicked darkness that I felt deep in my bones.

“I’m going to release you.”

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Chapter 49

Lucian

"Hi, Father."

My head dipped forward and guilt consumed me when I answered her. "Hello."

Silence followed, and I didn't know how long I could keep doing this. I knew it was wrong, but I also knew that I craved this. As difficult as her confessions were, I hung on every word. Outside, she had crafted a shell of togetherness, blending into society like the perfect chameleon. But inside, everything was broken, just like me.

"Why don't you tell me what brought you here today," I suggested.

The soft rapping of her fingers against the wood preceded her answer. "I've been having this dream lately."

"What sort of dream?"

"It's stupid, really." She choked out a laugh for my benefit. "I'm walking down the aisle as if I'm about to get married, and I'm really happy."

"What's stupid about that?"

"It's not in the cards for me," she said. "The whole idea is ridiculous. I don't want to get married. But in the dream, I think I do, and I'm really happy until I get to the end of the aisle."

"What happens?"

“I see his face, and it’s always different, but the same. One of the Johns. And I don’t know their names, but I remember exactly what they did to me.”

Bitterness coated my tongue, and I wanted to tell her to stop. I didn’t need to hear anymore. That would be the selfish thing to do, but she didn’t stop. Once she opened up, the words flowed freely.

“I remember the way they fucked me. A girl who had barely sprouted boobs. They never questioned it. They just told me what they wanted. What they needed. But you know what? They never asked me what I wanted. What I needed.”

Her voice was shaded with quiet rage, and I wanted more than anything to take away her pain. I didn’t know why. I didn’t know how I’d become so hung up on this damaged girl and the intimate secrets of her life. But I collected them, and I kept them stored away in my memory, waiting for a day when the inevitable would happen. She would lure me from the path of righteousness. She would tempt my demons out to play.

“Does this make you uncomfortable?” she asked. “You probably don’t like to hear me say fuck, huh? You probably don’t know what to say when I tell you that I learned how to please a man long before I ever learned how to do basic math.”

“It’s your truth,” I choked out. “It’s not for me to silence.”

“It makes me wonder,” she said. “If there is a God, where was he then? Does your God want me to be powerless? Is that it?”

“No,” I answered. “You have more power than you could ever imagine.”

“Sure, I do.” She scoffed. “Because I took that power, and I made it mine.”

“You’ll never let a man hurt you again,” I supplied for her.

There was a quiver in her voice when she answered. “That’s right.”

“There’s just one problem with that,” I told her.

“What?” she asked.

“It means you’ll never let one love you, either.”

Chapter 50

Lucian

"WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?" Gypsy looked around the same room that I'd first taken her in this club.

"Get undressed," I commanded.

She hesitated, her eyes drifting to the door I'd locked behind us. Tonight was not for show. It was intimate. Something for her and me and nobody else.

"Why did you bring me here?" she repeated.

I moved into her space, my fingers ghosting over the fading redness on her neck. "Do you trust me yet?"

I was desperate to drink the words from her lips, and I hoped she'd say yes, but Gypsy would never admit her vulnerabilities so freely. She didn't know there was beauty in surrender.

I inched the hem of her tee shirt up over her head and tossed it aside. "I'm a man of my word. I've told you many times that I won't hurt you."

Her hands curled into my shirt, clinging to me with a weariness I wanted to extinguish for her. "Don't you think I've heard that one before?"

I unbuttoned her shorts and removed those too. Standing in front of me, in the form of a beautiful woman, was a girl who never got to be. Frozen in her past, I needed a chisel to get inside her. It required delicate work. Layers upon layers of extrication. My skills were that of demolishment, but right now, I needed to be an artist.

I coaxed a kiss from her mouth and led her to the table in the center of the room. “You are safe in my care,” I assured her.

She bit her lip. “Is this what you need from me?”

“I said I wouldn’t harm you,” I answered. “And I meant it.”

Gypsy sighed, one foot planted firmly in front of her and one ready for the door. I would never know if it was her need to please me or her desire to make this work for her sister that drove her onto the table.

She laid down, and I spread her long, chestnut locks out behind her, allowing her hair to swing freely from the edge. The room was silent, but I knew her thoughts were loud when I wandered toward the wall and retrieved what I was looking for. I unwound a piece of thread from the spool, twining it around my fingers and showing it to her as I brought it between my teeth. It tore easily, and that would be the thing that she relied on in this scenario. Gypsy didn’t do well with restraints, but I had something to prove to her.

I wrapped a piece of thread around her wrists and tied the ends in a bow. “You can break them anytime you want.”

The sequence was repeated on each ankle, securing them to the table legs. She didn’t fight me, but there was an obvious change in her breathing already. Tension inched its way into her body as I disappeared from her vision to retrieve a small knife.

I didn’t try to hide the blade from her. That would only cause confusion. I wanted her to see it. I wanted her to process the chaotic thoughts in her mind and let me prove her wrong.

The curved edge of the metal came to rest against her hip, and I met her eyes. “You are safe in my care.”

Her lips parted when I dragged the blunt edge of the blade down between the band of her panties and her skin.

“Repeat it back to me,” I commanded.

Her voice trembled as she responded. “I am safe in your care.”

“Good girl,” I praised her as the knife sliced through the fabric of her panties, splitting them in two.

The action was repeated on the other side before I tossed away the lace I had no use for. Her thighs were sticky with arousal, and I could smell her sweetness from where I stood. I wanted to devour her already, but I’d waited seventeen years for a sin like her, so a few more minutes were nothing.

I drew the knife up over the sensitive flesh of her belly, watching her skin break out in goose bumps as I settled on her bra. The blade sliced through the band with little effort, unwrapping two soft rounded breasts swollen with want and topped off with two cherry ripe nipples.

“Fucking beautiful.” I leaned forward and slurped one of her breasts between my lips, working my jaw as my tongue lashed against the tender flesh.

Gypsy made a noise that got caught in her throat, and I pulled away, leaving her wet and exposed.

“Do you want more?”

She nodded, small but certain.

“I’m just getting started, pet. But you have to play along.”

I left her again to retrieve a couple more items, and when I returned, the drunken want in her eyes clouded over with fear. I didn’t allow her time to let it build. Chopping it off at the root was the only way to handle this, and I wasted no time securing the blindfold around her eyes.

Her body had gone stiff, her knuckles white. I bent to kiss her, murmuring against her lips. “You are safe in my care.”

For a while, I kissed her leisurely, exploring her mouth with my own while my fingers played in her hair. She visibly relaxed, and the pulsing vein in her neck calmed.

“One more thing,” I said, nestling the earplugs between my fingers. “You don’t ever need a safe word with me. Tell me to stop, and I stop. It’s that simple, baby girl.”

Her head bobbed, and I inserted the plugs into her ears. Excitement thrummed through my veins and ignited a fire of renewed pressure inside me. Now it was time to play.

I took a moment to light a candle before I knelt and examined the items in the mini fridge. The usual suspects filled the shelves. Chocolate sauce, whip cream, chilled oil. But in the freezer portion, a tray of ice cubes beckoned me. I grabbed one cube and the chocolate sauce, setting them on the tray beside her.

Pinching the ice cube between my teeth, I leaned forward and waited for the melting droplets to splash against her breasts. She jerked at the first drop, and then gasped when I pressed the ice against her skin, swirling around the soft curve of her breast and over her nipple. I repeated the

sequence in the opposite direction on her other breast before dropping the rest of the cube between the soft globes, leaving it there to melt.

Gypsy's hands came together within the confines of the thread, a position of prayer she probably wasn't even aware of. My cock itched to get inside those hands. To fuck away her sweet innocence and mark her with my wickedness. But this wasn't about me.

When I checked on the wax, I tested it on my own skin first and determined it was ready. Easing a spoonful of the warm liquid from the jar, I teased it over her belly. The first drop forced a breath from her lips, and the second made her arch from the table. She'd never looked more beautiful than she did as she completely caved in and gave herself to me.

I dribbled the liquid over her stomach and breasts, watching it harden, watching her come undone. Between drops, her muscles tensed, and her skin prickled with anticipation. That was when I set the jar aside and reached for the cold chocolate sauce instead. The first trickle of cool liquid against her thigh made her lips part, and a thrill of pleasure vibrated up her throat when I lapped up the mess with my tongue. I repeated the deed just above her clit, a small drop, a tiny taste.

She whined, and I dived face first between her thighs, devouring her pussy like it was my salvation. Her hands broke apart, only to come down and thread through my hair, clutching and pulling as strangled sounds got caught in her throat.

"Lucian," she chanted delicately.

I spread her legs farther apart, squeezing her ass in my palms as my tongue lapped at the moisture gifted just for me. She was wet, and she was broken, but right now, she was free. She came with the force of a hurricane, clinging to me as her body shook and shattered to pieces. It was too soon, and it wasn't soon enough. I tasted her until she couldn't bear another second, and then I unzipped my jeans and pulled out my cock.

I broke the thread around her ankles, spreading her legs apart and resting her feet against the edge of the table. The curve of her ass balanced delicately against the metal, and she was completely exposed and open for me. A warm cavity to be used and worshipped as I desired.

I squeezed her thighs between my palms and plunged my dick inside her. She cried out, and I groaned. "Hard," I managed to get out. "I have to fuck you hard."

It was the only thing I could manage, and it wasn’t a lie. The buildup was too much. Seeing her bound and willing, giving herself to me, I needed to claim her. I fucked her rougher than I ever had, need rising inside me as my balls slapped against her come-soaked flesh. It didn’t matter that I had only fucked her mouth a little over an hour ago. The pressure was already crawling up the base of my cock, desperate to get out.

“Fuck.” I rooted myself as deep as she could take me, and spasms rocked my body as I unloaded inside her.

I stayed there for a while, our eyes locked on each other as our breaths returned to normal. When I pulled my cock out of her and tucked it away, I immediately felt the loss of her warmth. I knew she would be tired and ready to go home. I was exhausted too, but there was one more thing that nagged at me, and I couldn’t let it go.

I grabbed a marker from a drawer, mentally capturing the image of her lying there, unable to move as my come dripped from her pussy. Now she knew that I never needed her pain, only her surrender. The power games were over, but the result would be the same.

The drunken fog in my brain justified my behavior as the marker moved across the skin of her hip. I wasn’t thinking clearly, but when I stepped back to examine my handiwork, it only made sense. My only regret was that it could never be true.

Written in black ink, stamped on her flesh, was the certainty that could never be.

Mine.

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Chapter 51

Lucian

GYPSY STIRRED FROM HER SEAT, the wind curling strands of hair around her neck as she opened her heavy eyes and sat up to glance out the window. “Where are we?”

I turned my attention back to the road ahead, amusement playing across my lips. After the flights and a ferry ride, it was understandable that she had jet lag. It was her first international trip, and I’d somewhat sprang it on her without warning.

“We’re in Santorini,” I told her.

“Greece?” she rasped.

I snuck a glance at her, eyes tired but excited. She looked beautiful, as she always did, but her defenses were down right now, and there was value in that.

“You told me you wanted to travel the world. I thought this would be a good place to start.”

She offered me a sweet smile, the afternoon sun scattering over her skin like a kaleidoscope. We’d been traveling for far too long, and I was eager to get to the hotel where we would be uninterrupted for the next three days.

“If this is where we start,” she said. “Where does it end?”

“You’ll have to see,” I told her.

Her eyes were soft as they wandered over my face, almost repentant. “What about work?”

The trial was coming up in two months, and I had intentionally blocked off this time for that reason. Once the process started, I'd be seeing very little of Gypsy. It was important to me that we had this time together because I was all too aware that the stress of the trial could cause a rapid decline in my health.

"I've been working a lot." I reached across the seat and took her hand in mine. "I thought maybe you finally deserved that honeymoon."

The driver pulled to a stop in front of the hotel, and Gypsy couldn't contain herself. She got out of the car before either of us could open the door, shielding her eyes with her hand as she peeked down at the sea. "This place is unreal," she murmured. "It feels like we're on top of the world."

I took in the moment, watching her with a reverence that I couldn't hide anymore. I wanted to remember her just like this. Beautiful and happy, facing the world with the wonderment of a child that most adults often forgot. I hoped she'd never lose that. I hoped that even when I was gone from her life, she would find contentment in the little things.

The driver removed our bags, and I took Gypsy's hand in mine, following him down the narrow white stairs to the room.

"Don't we have to check in?" she asked.

"No, I had them leave it unlocked. The keys are inside."

Her response got lost in her curiosity as her eyes roamed over the property. The hotel was a group of suites located in the village of Imerovigli where my research told me we could see some of the best sunsets the world over. Perched on top of the island with a direct view of the volcano and the Aegean Sea, I hoped that Gypsy and I might find solace here.

We turned the corner, and Gypsy made a small sound of surprise as she looked around the space. "This is beautiful."

And it was. We were surrounded by a white wash of Cycladic houses and hotels with a spattering of blue church domes. But the suite itself was large and private with a veranda overlooking the water and a plunge pool that extended inside the room. Gypsy already had her eye on it before we even made it inside.

I tipped the driver, and he left us on our own to explore the space. Gypsy walked around the room, touching the walls and examining the artwork before she found the bottle of champagne waiting for us on the table. She popped it with an easy familiarity and poured us each a glass.

"You look like you're in your natural habitat," I teased.

She handed me a glass, and then brought hers against mine. “Cheers to my husband.”

I swallowed, and for a moment, I couldn’t speak. The sudden wave of reality washed over me, and my thoughts moved to a dark place without warning. Every day, these moments with her were dwindling. We had so little time together, and she had no idea. She was comfortable with me now. She had placed her trust in me. Possibly, she even had real feelings for me. I simultaneously wanted it and dreaded it.

“Lucian?” She reached out and touched my hand. “Where did you go?”

I offered her a stiff smile. “Nowhere. I was just trying to remember this moment. How beautiful you look right now.”

Her cheeks pinkened, and she wrapped her arms around my waist, resting her head against my beating heart. I wondered if she could sense it growing weaker, and I hoped she never did. If she knew how much it tormented me to think of leaving her alone, she would try to change it.

“I already told you that you don’t need to remember,” she murmured against me. “I’m right here.”

My answer was to kiss her, which was cheap. She deserved so much more from me. She deserved the truth, but I couldn’t bring myself to tell her. I couldn’t risk that she would run away too early because selfishly, I wanted her in my life until the end.

“Can we sit out on the veranda?” she asked as she toyed with the hem of my shirt. “I bet the sunset is amazing here.”

I led the way, and we found ourselves on a couple of deck chairs, side by side, the ocean breeze gently teasing our senses as we waited for the sun to fall from the sky. It was a comfortable silence, but I could tell Gypsy’s mind was turning, and soon enough, she gave her thoughts a voice.

“Do you ever talk to your family?”

“No,” I admitted. “Since I went to prison, things have been tense between us.”

“That was a long time ago,” she said softly. “And you were exonerated, right? So why wouldn’t they want to talk to you?”

“It was a long time ago.” Gypsy waited for me to explain, but I wasn’t proud to acknowledge that I’d never forgiven them. “They’ve tried to reach out several times, expressing their regret and confusion over the situation. Maybe I should have been a better man, but it’s been difficult to let go of

my resentment. Especially when I consider that if they had listened to me, maybe Dawson would still be alive today."

Gypsy didn't argue or judge me for what I said. She simply nodded. "I can't say that I would feel any differently if I were you. Some things are just unforgiveable, but who knows. Maybe someday it will be different."

"Maybe," I lied.

She pointed her toe over at the plunge pool. "Want to test it out?"

I couldn't deny that. We had full privacy on this veranda, and with no prying eyes, I had some ideas about this pool before we even got here. I drained my glass of champagne and took her hand, helping her up from the chair.

In the middle of the sunset, under a sky of burnt orange and vivid blues, I undressed the goddess of a wife I never thought I would have. I stripped her down until she was naked, and then she did the same to me. Her pupils dilated when she snuck a glance at the cock hanging down between my thighs. Already, blood was moving through my body and swelling uncomfortably as my eyes roamed over her full, soft breasts and curvy hips. I wanted her now, but Gypsy had other ideas as she dipped a toe into the water, testing it before she climbed inside and rested against the jet.

She gestured for me to sit beside her, and together, we leaned over the edge and watched the sun sink into the ocean.

"What does it mean?" I felt her fingers graze the inked skin on my back. "Revelations 21:4?"

"It's for Dawson," I told her. "I got it to remind myself that he's in a better place. That even if I hate every second I'm not with him, he's at peace."

Gypsy was quiet for a moment while her fingertips fluttered over the design, taking it all in. "I guess that's probably the best way to look at it," she said quietly. "Isn't it?"

The torment in her voice made me wonder what was going through her mind. "That's the only way I can look at it. That's how I've managed to survive the past seventeen years."

Her head dipped, and she tried to hide her emotion. "I understand. It's just that, if I were to believe in your God the way that you do, it would mean Birdie and I are going to hell."

I tipped her chin back up and met her stormy gaze. "That's not going to happen, pet."

“How can you be so sure?” she argued. “If you believe what the church tells you, then you have to believe we’ve committed the ultimate sin.”

“That’s an ancient way of thinking, and it doesn’t apply to you,” I assured her. “If anyone is in hell, it’s Ricky. What happened that day was not your fault, and it wasn’t Birdie’s either. Someday, I hope you will come to understand and accept that.”

“Can you ever accept that what happened with Dawson wasn’t your fault?”

My fingers fell away from her, and a dark cloud descended over us. She was within her rights to say it, but it didn’t mean I liked it. “Let’s change the subject,” I said. “And save that conversation for another day.”

She was quiet for a pause before she acknowledged what I’d said. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I know.” Our hands came together in the water. “It’s just a subject that’s better left for another time.”

She nodded and stared off into the distance again. “How did you become a lawyer with a criminal record?”

“It wasn’t easy,” I told her. “After the news picked up the story of Dawson, some of the media outlets began to cast doubt on Nessie’s previous accusations against me. I wasn’t in any state of mind to care if my circumstances changed or not, but those stories were how Nolan found me.”

I felt her eyes on me, studying my face. “He helped you?”

“He saved me,” I said. “If he hadn’t come along, I honestly don’t know where I’d be right now. But he was the only one who had ever really believed in me, and he went to bat for me. He was able to prove that the cell phone records used to convict me weren’t reliable evidence, considering Nessie’s phone had pinged off the same towers. But that wasn’t enough to convince a judge, so he took it a step further by visiting my ex in prison. At that point, she knew she was facing life anyway, and he managed to get a full confession of what she’d done with one caveat.”

“What was it?” Gypsy asked.

“She wanted to see me.” I shook my head in disgust. “That was it. That was all she cared about. She wanted to see me one last time.”

“Did you go?”

“I’m a man of my word,” I said. “As soon as I was released, I went to visit her. And I’m not going to lie; if there hadn’t been plate glass between us, I might have murdered her.”

Gypsy nodded, no judgment in her eyes as she tangled her fingers in mine. “She would have deserved it.”

I didn’t want to discuss that anymore or give her any more minutes of my life, so I moved on. “Legally, I was exonerated, but there were still issues. It wasn’t easy to get my license. I had to pass a character exam, and there were questions. I had to go into details I didn’t want to. But in the end, they determined I was of reasonable character.”

She rested her chin on the edge of the pool and peeked up at me beneath her long dark lashes. “And you’ve been saving lost souls ever since.”

“It didn’t really start out that way,” I admitted. “At first, it took me some time to figure out what my path was. I took on a few cases that I probably shouldn’t have, but it was a learning experience for me. Nolan was my mentor, and with his help, we found a happy medium. I worked for him in the beginning, and he helped me get established until he retired. Then I moved to another firm, and Nolan and I started a foundation for wrongful convictions.”

Gypsy reached up and toyed with a loose strand of my hair. “Do you always believe in the innocence of the cases you take on?”

I stared out over the water, watching the waves ripple back and forth as I tried to find a way to explain it. I never had to justify myself to anyone before, but I wanted her to understand. “It isn’t always that black and white. Some of my clients might not be innocent in the eyes of the law, but morally, I can relate to the crimes they’ve committed in the name of justice. It doesn’t mean I condone what they’ve done, but I can understand it, and I want to help them.”

“Like, for example, someone who kills a child molester,” Gypsy ventured.

She was referring to Ricky, testing the water to see how I felt about the circumstances. Even though she hadn’t committed the crime, she’d taken on the moral responsibility of it.

I met her gaze. “If it had been you, it wouldn’t change anything for me.”

Her eyes moved over my features, trying to discern the truth. It was a dangerous confession to make. In a way, I’d just admitted my feelings for her. I’d done the one thing I said I wouldn’t and given her an out if she wanted it.

“Are you telling me that you don’t care what happened?” she asked.

“I do care.” I sighed. “I wish that the two of you were never put in that situation. I wish that you didn’t have to be the ones to do it. But if someone else had, would I care that he was dead? No.”

“So you never really wanted to put me in prison?”

I wiped away the froth bubbling at the top of the water and gave her an honest answer. “No.”

“I don’t get it,” she said. “I was exactly the thing you should have hated. A con artist. A manipulator. A liar. You should hate women like me after __”

“Don’t ever compare yourself to her,” I snarled. It came out more vicious than I’d intended, and I immediately regretted it. I needed to tread carefully with her. Sometimes, it was easy for me to forget how much shame she felt inside because she didn’t show it often.

I pulled her closer, burrowing my face against her neck. “I believed in you.”

Pain welled in her eyes, and she tried to look away, but I turned her gaze back to me. “I saw too much in you to believe that you were the person you were trying to be.”

“Or maybe you only saw what you wanted to,” she said. “Maybe I’m not as salvageable as you’d like me to be.”

“Then I don’t care,” I murmured against her lips. “Salvageable or not, I want you. Every broken and jagged piece of you.”

Her fingers curled in my hair, and she dragged my lips to hers, hungry, starving. She crawled into my lap, her breasts wet against my chest as she pivoted her hips against my cock. Even in the water, she was wet for me, and I needed to be inside her. I didn’t care if it was wrong anymore. I wanted to be inside her every second that I could until all my seconds were gone.

I hoisted her up into my arms, and she wrapped her legs around my waist as I set her on the edge of the pool and rubbed the head of my cock against her.

“Lucian,” she pleaded.

Nothing had ever sounded as sweet as her voice begging for me. Wanting me. I plunged inside her, and she dug her fingers into my back. We were wet and sloppy and disjointed when we came together, but none of it mattered. We raced toward that invisible line, desperate to throw ourselves off the cliff.

I needed to bury myself inside her and fill her with a part of me that I hoped would stay there forever, embedded in her DNA and chaining us together long after I ceased to exist on this earth.

“Fuck me like you’ll never let me go,” she whispered in my ear.

My chest contracted, and I buried my face in her neck, so she couldn’t see the lies in my eyes.

I fucked her like I’d never let her go.

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Chapter 52

Gypsy

"HAVE YOU ENJOYED YOUR TIME here?" Lucian asked sleepily.

We were lazing on the hammock strung between two trees outside our villa in Nice, the final stop on our trip. I couldn't ever remember feeling so relaxed, and trying to downplay what Lucian had gifted me would be a crime.

"I've loved every minute of it."

Over the past two weeks, we'd been to places I only ever dreamed about seeing. We'd rode the gondolas in Venice, eaten cannoli for breakfast, and gotten lost in the maze of canals as we tried to find Saint Mark's Basilica.

In Paris, we strolled hand in hand down the Champs-Élysées, eating croissants and watching the sun set over the Eiffel Tower. I saw the Mona Lisa, walked beneath the Arc de Triomphe, and kissed Lucian at the top of the Ferris wheel.

It had been a dream, one day blending into the next as we napped, and ate, and made love like the world was coming to an end. They were the best days of my life, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him so.

When I looked at him now, his eyes heavy and satisfied, his body warm against mine, he looked more at peace than I'd ever seen him. Maybe it was because he knew I could have cut and run the moment he told me he never intended to turn me in, but I didn't. I was still here with him, and it was the elephant in the room that neither of us wanted to address.

After everything, it felt like we had the makings for a successful marriage. Even though we hated almost everybody else, we liked each other, and that said a lot. We matched, and I didn’t think I’d ever match with anybody.

But Lucian never talked about the future. He never gave me hope that this could be anything more than two years. And as he’d reminded me multiple times, he was a man of his word.

The thought of this disappearing—slipping from my grasp like dust in the wind—was so depressing I couldn’t bear to think about it. Not when we were like this. I needed to hold onto him just a little bit longer. I needed to believe that, for once, something good could really happen in my life.

Lucian threaded his fingers through mine and gave me a soft, leisurely kiss before he rested his head against my chest. His eyes traced over the still fading ink of the bold statement he’d inscribed on my hip with permanent marker, and something dark seemed to shadow his features.

“We should enjoy this,” he said quietly. “When the trial starts, these moments will be few and far between.”

I nodded against him, already mourning the loss of his presence in a way that ached so profoundly, I couldn’t speak.

Enjoy it while it lasts.

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Chapter 53

Gypsy

I BREEZED OUT THE FRONT doors of the learning center and skipped down the stairs, my backpack swinging loose from one shoulder.

"Gypsy."

I paused and looked up to find that Luna was waiting for me at the bottom, carrying two coffees in her hands.

"Peace offering?" She gave me a soft smile as she approached, extending one of the cups.

"What's in it?" I raised an eyebrow. "A little arsenic? Another spiritual experience for me?"

She looked wounded, and I felt like an asshole, so I took the cup.

"I probably deserved that," she said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"It's been a while since I've seen you." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear in a way that showed her nerves. "I wanted to check in on you. And maybe ply you with coffee and somehow convince you to be my friend again."

There was that word again. *Friend*. She wanted me to be her friend. Even though we'd only hung out once and it was a terrible experience, I couldn't deny that I wondered what it would be like to have an actual friend.

I took the coffee from her and offered a tentative smile. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to try. Although, fair warning, I don’t know if I’ll be any good at it. I tend to be selfish.”

She shook her head, wild curls spilling around her shoulders. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re a product of your environment.”

It irked me that she seemed to know me so well already, but I shrugged it off. “Am I that transparent?”

“Probably not to everybody,” she mused.

We sat down on the stairs, and I took a sip of the iced caramel latte. My favorite. “How did you know?”

“Just a guess, but I like these too.”

“If we’re going to be friends, then you should probably tell me a few things about yourself,” I said.

She giggled, but her amusement slowly drifted away. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“How did you end up here?”

“Probably the same way you did,” she joked. “I looked at a map and thought Vegas sounded good.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Sounds about right.”

She took a sip of her drink and stared ahead, watching the people as they walked by. “Let’s just say I was a good little gypsy girl. I was raised in a strict community and then sacrificed as a virgin at the altar of proper gypsy man with strong Romani blood in his veins.”

I plucked a piece of grass and rolled it between my fingers. “I’m going to take a wild stab and guess that didn’t work out?”

Disgrace etched its way onto her features. “No, it didn’t. I was young and naïve, and boy, was I proud to land him. All the girls wanted him, and I was the one he chose. I thought I was pretty special, but it turned out I was just pretty dumb.”

“Did he hurt you?” I asked.

It took her a while to answer, but she did. “You could say that.”

We didn’t say anything else after that, but as it turned out, we didn’t need to. And I guess that was what having a friend was all about.

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Chapter 54

Gypsy

"How did it go?" Kate chirped as I walked out of the testing room.

"I don't know," I answered irritably.

"It will be fine," she assured me. "No matter what happens, it will be fine. But regardless, you'll know in twenty-four hours. They are quick here."

I wasn't as confident as she sounded about everything being so fine. I'd been anxious throughout the entire test, so certain that I hadn't really learned anything at all and wrote complete nonsense on all the questions.

When Kate told me last week that she thought I might be ready to test, I had several minor panic attacks. I didn't want to go. I wanted to go back to my original plan of pretending I would have failed anyway and just bailing altogether. But I knew Lucian would be disappointed in me if I did that, and I didn't want to disappoint him. I still hadn't told him that I took the test. I figured I would wait until I got the results, and if by some miracle I passed, then I would let him know.

Since we'd returned from our trip two months ago, he'd been working like a dog. He left for the office right after he woke me up every day and returned when I was already in bed. He wasn't getting enough sleep, and I could tell he was worried about Emmanuel's case, but I was worried about him.

The shadows beneath his eyes only seemed to darken every day. He seemed like he had no energy, and I noticed that he'd been coughing a lot again. I mentioned once in the middle of the night that he should go back to the doctor, but he ignored the suggestion entirely. This morning, there was a rash on his chest, and with his shirt off, I realized he'd lost weight too.

"You really don't have to worry." Kate's voice pulled me back to the present. "Even if it doesn't go right the first time, we can call it a practice test, remember?"

"Okay." I shrugged.

Kate frowned, examining me the way I imagine a mother would. "Is something else bothering you?"

Kate was my teacher, but more importantly, she was Lucian's friend, and I wondered how much she knew about him.

"Lucian's been working a lot, preparing for trial. I'm just worried about him."

"Oh, he'll be fine." She waved it off. "He always works like a lunatic before trial. It's nothing to be concerned about."

"I guess so," I murmured. But in my gut, it felt like I should be worried.

"You said your sister was coming next weekend, right?" Kate asked brightly, trying to change my focus.

"Yes, she's coming to visit."

Finally. She'd been pushing it back every time I talked to her. And now that I'd completed my GED program, I wasn't sure what to make of the fact it was taking so long for Birdie to complete hers.

"Why don't we grab a coffee?" Kate suggested. "And you can tell me all about it."

Lucian came home late again, but I'd waited up for him tonight. Beneath my silk bathrobe, I was wearing lingerie, and in my mind, I was determined to steal away a few moments of intimacy with him. But the minute he walked in the door, I saw that wasn't going to be the case.

His face was worn, and his hair messy the way it often was when he ran his fingers through it too much. He was exhausted and beat down, but more than that, he looked worried.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

His gaze drifted toward the couch, registering my face in the dim light. He kicked off his shoes and dropped his briefcase before coming to sit beside me. “How long have you been waiting for me?”

“A while.” I shrugged.

He dragged a hand over his face and shook his head. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here.”

I reached out and took his hand in mine. “You don’t need to be sorry. You’re doing something important, and I get it. I wouldn’t want you to sacrifice that for time with me. We have plenty of time after the trial.”

Lucian looked at the floor, and my gut churned because it was the first time he didn’t agree with me. I reminded him often that I was here, and time was on our side. It was my way of fishing for reassurances from him. Reassurances I desperately craved, and he usually gave. But tonight, he didn’t.

We were both quiet for a while, and I didn’t know what to do. Lucian was the one to break the silence with heavy, serious words. “The prosecution knows how Emmanuel was conceived, and the judge has decided to allow it at trial. I need to tell him.”

“Oh my God.” I could only imagine the devastation this would cause Emmanuel. The sudden realization that even though your mother raised you, she always secretly resented you. It would tear him apart.

“Isn’t there anything else we can do?” I asked.

I said we as if we were a team, but realistically, I knew that the entire burden fell on Lucian.

He shook his head. “I’ve done everything I can. The only option I have now is to tell him.”

I sat back and digested his words. It wasn’t fair. There was so much in the world that was unfair, and it stung my eyes when I thought about the awfulness of it all. My heart ached for Emmanuel and for Lucian too. I knew how difficult this would be for him. “When are you going to tell him?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “First thing in the morning.”

I nodded. “What can I do to help?”

He looked at me, offering a weak smile. “Your presence is all I need.”
“Then you have it,” I whispered.

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Chapter 55

Lucian

EMMANUEL WAS QUIET, AND HE had been for so long, I didn't know if he planned on speaking at all. Inwardly, I understood that he was numb. His eyes were cloudy and unfocused as he stared at the wall. Another cut marred his cheek, and he'd limped his way in here. It was something I told him I'd address, but Emmanuel argued. He didn't want to go into confinement, and I couldn't say that I blamed him. But it was the only way to keep him safe, and now I had to decide what was best for him.

Considering the news I'd just delivered, I didn't think he could handle any additional stresses. There was only so much life could throw at a person before he broke.

"Mr. West?" An eerie calmness settled over his features as his eyes moved to meet mine.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for telling me the truth and believing in me anyway. I know you didn't have to, and that means a lot."

"You're welcome, Emmanuel."

He blew out a breath and shook his head. "I always kinda suspected something was off, you know. My mom got really weird whenever I asked about my dad. She would just shut down."

"I'm sure she didn't know how to tell you."

“Probably didn’t want to hurt me.” He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and slid it across the table. “I wrote that for her, though. Finally found the words I wanted to say. I just hope she’ll listen.”

“She will.” Maybe it was a lie, but I wanted to believe she’d change her mind.

Emmanuel hung his head and stared at the table. “It makes sense if she doesn’t. I get it.”

“Don’t let this define you,” I told him. “Whatever your father was, that isn’t you. You are your own man. I need you to believe that, and I need you to be confident in that one steadfast truth on Monday.”

When his head came up, he seemed to look through me as he nodded. “I won’t let you down, Mr. West.”

I couldn’t tell if his confidence was authentic, but I had no choice other than to accept it.

I gestured to the wound on his face. “Will you tell me what happened?”

“It’s nothing,” he said. “You know how this place is.”

“Let me report it,” I insisted. “It would be best if you had some peace and quiet during the trial.”

Emmanuel drummed his fingers against the table. “I don’t want that. I’ll go crazy if they lock me up in one of those rooms. It’s okay, I swear. I’ll be okay.”

I wanted to believe him, but I was afraid that as timid as Emmanuel might be, he was still capable of blowing up if they continued to provoke him. We didn’t need that. But in the end, it was his call to make.

“We’ll take it day by day,” I said. “If anything changes, you can let me know. I need you to let me know.”

“I will.” He jerked his chin.

I secured the letter in my briefcase before standing. “I’ll deliver this to your mom.”

His eyes were glassy when he nodded. “Thanks, Mr. West.”

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Chapter 56

Gypsy

It was past ten when I wandered toward the kitchen in search of my morning coffee. I'd slept in, figuring it wouldn't make a difference, considering that Lucian was already at work and I no longer had class. But I found that wasn't the case at all when I rounded the corner and saw him sitting at the breakfast bar, paper in hand. He was dressed in his casual clothes, shirt and jeans, and he had an empty cup beside him waiting for me.

I sat down next to him, and he looked at me with a wry grin.

"You're not at work today?" I asked.

I expected him to question what I was doing. Staying home and sleeping in would most definitely be against Lucian's rules, and considering I hadn't told him about the test yet, I was certain he would be angry and assume the worst. But he didn't. Lucian never did, and I wasn't sure when I would finally learn that.

"I took the day off," he said. "Like you."

"I passed my test last week," I blurted. "That's why I'm home."

"I know." His eyes collided with mine, warm and proud.

My heart skipped a beat, and heat gathered in my cheeks. I didn't think I would ever get tired of hearing him say he was proud of me.

"I was wondering when you were going to tell me," Lucian said.

"You were working so much, and I didn't want to burden you."

He turned into me, his knee bumping against mine as the warmth of his hand found my shoulder. “You are never a burden to me. What you’ve done is nothing short of amazing, Gypsy, and I want you to feel comfortable enough to share those things with me.”

“It’s just a GED,” I murmured. “It’s nothing compared to what you do.”

“It’s not just a GED,” he argued. “It’s the first step to whatever you want to do with your life. You’ve proven to yourself that you can conquer your fears, and I hope now you understand there isn’t anything that can hold you back from your goals.”

I gave him a weak smile. The problem was that I didn’t know what my goals were. Lucian wanted me to be something great, but I still wasn’t certain I was capable of that.

“Here.” He reached beneath the bar and picked up a paper bag, sliding it over to me. “I got you something.”

“For passing my test?”

“For the other thing you forgot to mention.” He leaned over and kissed me. “Happy Birthday, pet.”

My chest cavity flooded with warmth, and I felt like I was going to cry as I examined the present on the counter. The last time anyone had given me a real present was before my mom left. When we got older, Birdie would steal me a Twinkie or something, and that was always sacred to me, but this was something else. This was a gift from Lucian, who had remembered my birthday even when he was working himself to death.

“Is that why you took the day off?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “You’re stuck with me for the entire day.”

“That’s why you let me sleep in,” I smirked.

He gestured to the present. “Are you going to open it?”

I brought my trembling fingers to the bag and delved inside, retrieving two separate, small boxes.

The first one that I opened was a simple bar necklace with an engraving of a scripture, Isaiah 43:2. I looked at Lucian in question, and his voice was thick when he spoke.

“There will come a day when you will want to leave me,” he said solemnly. “I’m prepared for it, and I won’t blame you for it. It’s important to me that you know you have nothing to regret. When you do walk away, I want you to carry no shame or guilt.”

Tears burned my eyes as I shook my head, unable to give voice to the words I wanted to say. That was never going to happen. I was so certain of it at that moment, and I wanted to hate him for bringing it up. This wasn't a birthday gift. It was a goodbye gift.

"Gypsy." He stood and wrapped his arms around me, cocooning me against his chest as he buried his face in my hair. "I want you to know that no matter what happens, I love you."

My heart slammed against my rib cage, and the tears I'd tried to hold back fell freely. I didn't understand him. It always felt like he was preparing to send me away yet desperately trying to hold on at the same time. I couldn't return his words. I was terrified and hurt and warm and vulnerable. He'd said the words I never knew I wanted to hear from him more than anything, but they came with a price much steeper than I wanted to pay. Those words were conditional. They weren't timeless. There was a limit to how much he could love me, and for how long, but I just didn't know what those limits were.

"Please open the other box," he said.

I turned away from him and wiped my tears privately, gathering myself together for the next uncertainty he might spring on me. But when I opened the box, there was nothing more than a piece of paper folded together with a scribble inside.

Thank you.

Lucian didn't explain what it meant. Instead, he showed me, lifting his shirt to reveal the fresh tattoo on his chest. It was my name, concealed in the outline of a sparrow, perched upon a morning glory. The entire image was inked in blue, and it had stolen my breath.

"I know you're thinking the worst," Lucian murmured as he brought my fingers to his skin. "You always do. But this is my promise that for as long as I live, and even in death, you will be a part of me."

Chapter 57

Gypsy

"I HATE DOCTOR'S OFFICES." BIRDIE removed a tongue depressor from the jar on the counter for her own amusement.

"You didn't have to come with me," I grumbled.

She'd been here for two days, and already, she was taking over my life again.

"What else would I do?" She popped her bubblegum. "Sit at Lucian's house since you won't let me go anywhere else on my own?"

"It's for your own protection," I snapped.

Birdie blinked at me and shook her head. "You're cranky."

"I'm not cranky. I'm nervous."

I hated doctor's offices too. I always imagined the worst and usually never worked up the courage to go because I was certain they were going to diagnose me with some incurable condition.

"Do you think it's a thyroid problem?" Birdie prodded.

"Why would you say that?"

She poked my stomach with her tongue depressor. "You've gotten a little soft around the middle. That's all I'm saying."

"Gee, thanks, B. I can feel the sisterly love."

She scrunched up her nose and shot me a playful smile. "You know I'm just joking around. I'd love you no matter what you looked like."

“Even if I had a huge growth on my face that couldn’t be removed?” I teased.

Birdie made a gagging noise but managed a nod. “Sure, even then.”

She plucked a cotton ball from another jar and tossed it at me right before the doctor entered.

“Having some fun, I see?” the doctor muttered her disapproval.

I shot Birdie a warning look that told her to behave as I sat up straighter in my chair and clutched my purse against me.

“Would you mind getting on the table?” the doctor asked as she looked over my chart and typed in some notes.

I did as she asked, and she went about the process of lifting my shirt and applying some goop to my stomach, explaining that she was performing an ultrasound. Naturally, I assumed that I must have had a tumor or something equally nasty growing in there, and I was so tense I couldn’t relax even though she’d told me to several times.

“Did you find anything?” I wheezed.

A whooshing sound filled the room at a steady interval as she paused. “Yes, I did. Congratulations.”

“Excuse me?”

She shoved her glasses up the bridge of her nose and glanced at me briefly. “You’re having a baby.”

A dry cough got lodged in my throat when I tried to process what she’d just said. “Inside me?”

“That’s usually where babies grow,” she mused.

I looked at Birdie, who had gone white as a sheet, and I could only imagine that I must look the same right now.

“When?”

She moved the wand around a few more times, pausing over the grainy image on the screen before she formulated an answer.

“I’d say you’re about two months along at this stage, which would explain the dizziness. It’s very common in the first trimester.”

“Oh.”

It was the only thing I could manage to get out as she cleaned me up and instructed me to sit up. I felt like my head was underwater when the doctor explained the follow-up appointment and blood tests and all the things that happened next when you were diagnosed with having another human growing inside you.

I barely heard a word of it until she sat down and examined me from her stool. “The other symptoms you described initially could be pregnancy related,” she said. “But they sound more like anxiety. Do you have any history of anxiety?”

Only every second of every day. And now more of a reason than ever, though it felt like my anxiety was about to bleed into a full-on panic attack. My heart pounded against my chest in time to the word.

Baby.

Baby.

Baby.

All I could think about was Lucian’s face at that picnic. The kid with the toy gun. He told me how he couldn’t look at children anymore because they reminded him of Dawson. My heart was sinking in my chest as I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to hold it together.

He didn’t want a baby. He’d been down this road before, and it all ended so horribly, I couldn’t blame him. But I had to wonder why he’d never even mentioned birth control. It gave me another reason to hate him, which I’d been carefully storing up in my arsenal for the inevitable moment when he would tell me our marriage was over and it was time to say goodbye.

But I didn’t want to hate him. And I couldn’t hate this situation, no matter how much he might not like it. I was irresponsible too. We both were. And this was what happened when you played with fire.

We both got burned.

“Gypsy?”

I looked at the doctor and tried to shake myself out of it, but Birdie was the one to answer.

“She’s always been anxious. She has panic attacks sometimes, and she worries too much. She imagines every worst-case scenario, and she’s overly protective—”

“All right, Birdie.” I glared. “She gets it.”

The doctor nodded and scribbled down some notes before returning her gaze to me. “We have several options to cope with anxiety during pregnancy. There are some low-risk prescriptions available, but I’m hesitant to write you a script if it’s not necessary. I’d prefer that you see a therapist first to employ some behavioral therapies instead.”

“I already have a therapist,” I told her.

Birdie arched her brow at me, doubtful, but it was a half-truth. Father Hawk was like my therapist, and even if he wasn't medically qualified, he did help to ease my anxiety. I already knew that when I had a spare moment to speak with him, that was the first place I'd be going.

"Great," the doctor answered. "I'll just need their name."

"Cristian Hawk," I replied quietly.

Her eyebrows pinched together as she scribbled down the name. "All right. I'd like you to see him on a weekly basis for the time being, and we can go over any additional treatment plans at your follow-up visit."

I nodded, and it felt as though cement weighed me down against the table.

"Any other questions?" the doctor asked.

I offered her a pacifying smile. "Nope. I think we're good."

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Chapter 58

Gypsy

"YOU CAN'T TELL LUCIAN."

Birdie looked at me from the passenger seat. "I thought you weren't having sex with him."

I did not want to have this conversation with my sister. We didn't have the normal introduction to the birds and the bees, and it was a topic we'd both avoided at all costs for most of our life. At least with each other.

It was still too raw to discuss. Or at least, that was what I told myself because it was more comfortable that way. I didn't ever want to know the gory details of what happened to Birdie while I was in juvie. That was probably selfish of me, but I didn't think my brain could actually handle it. But if there were ever a day that she came to me and told me she wanted to discuss it, I would have done it. For her.

"We were having sex," I said. "It happened later."

She was quiet for a while, staring out the window while I drove with an iron grip on the steering wheel. When she finally did speak again, her voice was softer. "You know I'll help you. We can get a place together, and I'll learn how to take care of babies. It's going to be all right."

I shook my head. "Lucian's going to help me."

I wanted to believe what I was telling her, but I didn't believe it myself, and I just hoped Birdie didn't sense it.

"Please don't tell me you've fallen for him, Gypsy," she said.

I shot her a defensive look and shrugged my shoulders. “We have a contract, remember? Two years.”

“This isn’t about the contract,” she argued. “I can see it on your face when you look at him. Have you forgotten that this is the same guy who’s blackmailing you? Have you forgotten that he’s a piece of shit attorney who __”

“Don’t say that about him,” I snarled.

Birdie looked at me, eyes wide, and I immediately felt guilty. I’d never yelled at her before. But my limbs were shaking, and now was not the time to have this conversation. I wished she would see that.

“You don’t know the kind of work he does,” I explained. “Nobody does. His cases are more complicated than they sound.”

“Have you considered that maybe you don’t really know him?” Birdie replied. “What if he doesn’t even want kids?”

Her words hit closer to home than she could ever know, and I had to rein in my patience before I answered. “Look, it doesn’t matter, B. You don’t need to concern yourself with this. Lucian and I will talk about it when I’m ready.”

Birdie pursed her lips. “Fine. I guess I’m just chopped liver now, huh?”

I pulled the car into the driveway and turned off the ignition. “Is that what this is about? You think I’m going to forget about you?”

“No,” she shot back. “It’s about the fact that you always treat me like I’m a child who’s never going to grow up. Like I have no clue what I’m talking about.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she held up her hand. “I get that I’ve given you plenty of reason to come to that conclusion. But while you’ve been playing house with Lucian, I’ve been doing just fine, haven’t I?”

“I don’t know,” I answered sourly. “Have you?”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about,” Birdie huffed. “You always believe that I’m up to something I shouldn’t be.”

“That’s because you are!” I shouted.

We both looked away, and several minutes of tense silence followed. Birdie, as always, was the first to crack.

“I know I’m an asshole for not coming to visit you sooner,” she said. “But honestly, I was scared. I thought that if I saw him hurting you, I would fly off the handle and do something crazy. And I didn’t want to disappoint you like that again.”

She looked down at her hands, and I swallowed back a decade's worth of repressed emotions. "You didn't disappoint me, B. You saved us when I couldn't."

She didn't acknowledge the sentiment. "I'm not jealous of him either. I just don't want to see you get hurt. Maybe you don't always see it, but I am looking out for you too."

I gave her a watery smile. "Of course, I see it. You always have. We look out for each other."

The anger in her eyes dissolved and gave way to worry. "Then trust me when I say that you can't fall for this guy. No matter what."

She was so serious it gave me pause since Birdie was rarely ever serious. But I knew I couldn't tell her what she wanted to hear.

It was too late.

I just hadn't admitted it to myself before then.

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Chapter 59

Gypsy

"WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO tell him?" Birdie asked for the third time this week.

I finished loading the dishwasher and pressed the power button, busying myself with cleaning the counter. Birdie had been concocting all sorts of so-called meals, which mostly consisted of ice cream and peanut butter sandwiches, and she'd left a mess everywhere.

"I don't know," I said. "He's got a lot going on right now. The trial is starting in three days. He can't have this heaped on top of him with the pressures he's already dealing with."

"Well, it's kind of important that you figure it out, isn't it?" She propped her hip against the table. "You're already two months in. Before you know it—"

"God, Birdie." I dragged my hands over my face and groaned. "I can't do this right now, okay? I'm doing my best to try to figure it out. But you nagging me isn't helping."

She looked at the floor and rolled the rubber end of her Adidas shoe against the tile. "I found something I think you should see."

Her voice was too scratchy. She sounded emotional, and Birdie never got emotional unless she was in a fit of rage.

"What did you find, B?"

She gestured down the hall. "It's in the safe. In your closet."

I stared at her, dumbfounded. “You were snooping?”

“I saw it, and I thought he might be hiding something in there, and I was right.”

“How the hell did you get in?” I demanded.

“It doesn’t matter how I got in.” She gave me a pointed stare. “All that matters is that I did, and you need to see what I found.”

She moved in the direction of the hall, signaling for me to follow, but I was rooted to the spot. My chest was so tight, it hurt to breathe, and dread curled in my stomach as I imagined all the horrors that might await me in that closet.

The first thing that came to my mind was that Lucian had someone else. It wasn’t logical, but it was pure jealousy and maybe a dash of pregnancy hormones that spurred the notion on. I knew instinctively that would be the most hurtful. I trusted him, and when he told me he was working long hours on Emmanuel’s case, I believed him. But now, I was doubting everything.

“I’m not sure I want to see,” I admitted. I looked weak for saying it, and I knew it.

“You need to see,” she pleaded. “This is important, Gypsy.”

I still didn’t move, and Birdie sighed. “Do you remember how you always used to tell me not to look away during the ugly parts of a movie?”

I nodded stiffly.

“You said you weren’t doing it to be mean, but because you wanted me to be tough. You wanted me to see the worst of things, so that I could always be prepared if anything bad ever happened to me.”

“I remember,” I croaked.

“Well, this is like that,” Birdie said. “I’m not doing it to be mean. I want you to see so you can be prepared.”

She was right, of course. I needed to see whatever was in that closet, no matter how bad it might be. I needed to know what secret Lucian had been keeping, and in preparation, I already felt my heart hardening around itself as I lurched forward and joined Birdie.

We walked together, and she led me into the closet that used to hold my trophies. The material items I’d collected from my victims over the years. Now, it held only department store clothes and Lucian’s lies.

Birdie retrieved a stack of old photos and handed them to me. “Did you know he already has a kid?”

My heart squeezed as I traced over the lines of the angelic baby face staring back at me. It was, without a doubt, Dawson. And he looked so much like his father, I wanted to cry all over again at the loss of him.

“He did,” I acknowledged. “But he passed away.”

I wasn’t in the mood to tell Birdie the rest, and I couldn’t believe she’d been snooping through Lucian’s things, getting me all worked up like this. “You need to put these back where you got them,” I told her. “Now.”

She glared at me. “I will after I show you the rest.”

“The rest?”

She bent down and wedged a finger between the safe door that was already cracked, pulling it back slowly to unveil the thing that would seal my fate with Lucian. My breath had stopped, but it returned when light poured into the small space, at least momentarily.

I stared at the orange bottles and looked at Birdie. “Prescriptions?”

She scooped a couple from the safe and handed them to me as I examined the labels. There was a supply of antibiotics, steroids prescribed for persistent cough, and cough syrup.

“This is what you had to show me?”

Birdie stared at me, exasperated. “He’s sick.”

“He’s not sick,” I argued. “He has bouts of bronchitis. We live in the desert. So what?”

Birdie shook her head, hopeless. “Haven’t you noticed anything else weird going on with him? Anything at all?”

I wanted to chalk this up to Birdie being dramatic, but she had a point. Acid burned the back of my throat as I recalled how sick he’d been when he needed to go to the hospital. The blood he coughed up. How his health had seemed to be declining rapidly lately, and I wanted to believe it was stress. He was exhausted all the time, and he seemed to have a fever every night in bed.

My mind hadn’t connected the dots in a way that could lead me to believe they were all related to one thing. I wanted to attribute those symptoms to his job, and I had. I’d swept them under the rug and choked down Lucian’s assurances that everything was fine. But when I looked at my little sister, it occurred to me that he wasn’t fine. In my gut, I knew it before Birdie even dropped the next bombshell.

“I didn’t want to do this,” she said with a gentleness uncharacteristic of her. “Believe me when I say I didn’t want to do this.”

She pulled something else from the bottom of the safe. A plain green file folder I didn't want to open.

I wrapped my arms around myself. "I can't. I can't look."

I felt like I was going to throw up, and Birdie took pity on me. She helped me back to the bed and let me sit down for a few minutes to process my wild thoughts. Logically, I knew there was no getting out of it. But logic no longer ruled my heart. Logic didn't dictate the way I felt about Lucian and his presence in my life. I was carrying his baby. And now, the universe was about to deliver up another cruel slice of life.

"What is it?" I blurted. "Just tell me, B."

She hesitated before sitting down beside me and staring at the file in her hands. "Hodgkin's lymphoma."

I didn't know what that was. Or at least, exactly what that was. From what little I'd heard on TV, I knew it was a type of cancer , but I wasn't ready to accept that.

I pulled the file from Birdie's hands and began to tear through the pages frantically, seeking out some other possibility. Maybe she'd read it wrong. Maybe this wasn't his. I had a plethora excuses at the ready, but with every page I turned, my reality grew smaller and darker.

"This says he was diagnosed two years ago." My hands trembled, and tears leaked down my face before I could catch them. I wasn't in the habit of letting Birdie see me cry, but it was too late now.

She placed a tentative hand on my back and rubbed in small, soft circles the way that I used to when she was a child. "It also said he refused treatment."

A sob erupted from my chest just before I lunged from the bed and ran to the bathroom, scattering the papers everywhere as I vomited up my lunch in the toilet. When I was done, Birdie was beside me, sitting cross-legged on the tiled floor as she picked up the papers and tucked them away from my sight.

I hung my head against the seat and cried some more. It was uncontrollable at this point, and I didn't care if Birdie saw anymore. Maybe it was about time she learned I was all show, and that deep inside, I was weak.

"It's okay," she whispered. "It's going to be okay. We'll get through this together. I promise you."

Her words pulled me back to reality, and I straightened up, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“No.” I stood and adjusted my shirt in the mirror. “You need to go back to Washington, B. You need to focus on your studies, and I need to deal with this situation on my own.”

“I’m not leaving you alone,” Birdie argued.

“You have to,” I told her. “If you love me, then you will let me do this on my own.”

Chapter 60

Lucian

My phone vibrated against the desk, pulling my attention from the documents in front of me. I hadn't checked my messages all day because Emmanuel's trial was starting tomorrow, and I couldn't afford any distractions. But this was the third time it rang in under ten minutes, and it prompted me to check the screen. I frowned when I saw the number, recognizing immediately who it belonged to.

"Warden," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry for the late hour," he replied. "But I thought that you should hear it from me rather than the chaplain."

My gaze skittered across the room, blurry, as I tried to shake off the exhaustion that had seemed to permanently fog my brain over the past two months. "What is it?"

"Emmanuel Morales had you listed as an emergency contact on his records."

"Yes, that's correct."

"I regret to inform you that this morning, he hanged himself in his cell with a bedsheet."

My grip went lax around the phone, and it almost fell from my hand as I tried to come to terms with what he was telling me.

I didn't want it to be true. We'd worked so hard. Tomorrow, I was ready for the chance to prove his innocence at trial. I'd been working on nothing

else. This was it. My last case. My last chance to help someone. And just like that, Emmanuel had given up on me.

“Thank you, Warden,” I said quietly. “For calling me personally.”

“Would you like to claim the body?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re listed as the only next of kin,” the Warden explained. “I wasn’t certain if you’d like to claim the body, but legally, I have to ask.”

I thought of Emmanuel being laid to rest with nobody there to mourn him. Nobody to make the hard decisions that usually came with death. If he wasn’t claimed, the county would be left to work out a deal with a local funeral home. In the end, he’d most likely be burned in a cardboard box, the state sparing no expense for the cases that were a sad reality in this world.

He’d died alone. And after the media laid him bare, I doubted I’d see many people showing up for a funeral. But that didn’t mean he shouldn’t have one.

I closed my eyes, and my entire body seemed to deflate. “I’ll claim the body, Warden. Thank you.”

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Chapter 61

Gypsy

AFTER A LONG-DRAWN-OUT ARGUMENT, BIRDIE finally agreed to leave on the condition that I check in with her every day and let her know what was happening or if I needed her. I promised her that I would, but even that felt like a lie.

In truth, I didn't want to think about it, but I also couldn't stop. I'd spent the entire day on Google doing my own research before I finally decided to call a cancer hotline for information. So far, what I'd learned about Lucian's condition hadn't been as hopeless as I'd automatically assumed. It was cancer, but it was a highly curable cancer with treatment success even in late stages.

But in my heart, I knew that wasn't the real issue. Birdie told me that Lucian refused treatment, and if the notes I saw in the file were accurate, then it was true. It wasn't something I wanted to wrap my head around. I didn't want to believe that he'd just given up on living, but on reflection, his actions and words told me everything I needed to know.

He'd been preparing me for goodbye since the beginning. Even after he'd told me that he cared for me, he wanted me to know what we had was temporary. I'd been such an idiot.

All this time, I believed that maybe he would change his mind. I saw the affection in his eyes when he looked at me. I felt it in his every touch. And

foolishly, I wanted to believe that I was more to him than something he could just throw away in the end.

I couldn't figure out when it all turned upside down, but it had. I was in love with Lucian West. I was having his baby. And he was ready to give up and leave this world… and me… behind.

I spent the day alternating between hatred and sorrow, trying to determine the best course of action from this point forward. There were really only two options in this scenario.

The old Gypsy would have run. She would have run far, far away and pretended this chapter of her life had never happened, closing her heart and protecting herself from the inevitable pain to follow. But I wanted to believe there was more to me than that now.

I wanted to believe I was braver, smarter, stronger… and most of that was because of what Lucian had done for me. He'd saved me, and I accepted it, never knowing that he was the one who needed saving too.

I stared into the cavernous space of the closet we shared, my eyes moving to the items I'd already folded and packed, then unpacked several times over. I was exhausted and emotional, but this wasn't a time in my life when I could take the easy way out. There was no easy way. If I ran, I'd be deluded to believe that Lucian would ever leave my mind or my heart.

He was my forever, and I couldn't give him up without a fight.

It wasn't just up to him. He didn't get to decide for both of us. I was determined to change his mind. We would get through this ugliness, just like we'd made it through all the ugliness of our past lives. Except this time, we would do it together.

Emmanuel's trial was starting tomorrow, so I made a conscious decision to wait until at least the first day in court had finished before I broached the subject. Even that felt like it would be an awful time, given Lucian's projected exhaustion, but there wouldn't be a good time to discuss it.

We just had to talk about it.

That was the only thing that mattered. At least, I thought it was.

I'd expected Lucian home around eleven. He said he wanted to get at least six hours of sleep before he got up in the morning, and even though he'd been working late every night, he was always home by eleven.

I waited up for him. I'd made him a late snack of fresh berries, just in case he was hungry. I'd showered and dressed in a silky nightgown for him, hoping that I could offer to relieve some of his tension. And then I curled up on the couch and waited.

He didn't come home at eleven.

He didn't come home at twelve.

And when I woke up and checked the time again, it was almost one a.m. and still no Lucian.

My airways felt like they'd sealed shut as I texted him and stared at the screen, waiting for a reply. It didn't come, so I called him. Three times. And all three times, his phone went to voicemail.

I paced the length of the room while I texted Ace, whom Lucian had made me add to my contacts, just in case. Ace texted me back, unconcerned, telling me that Lucian always went a little crazy before a trial. But in my gut, I knew that wasn't it. Lucian should have been home by now, and if he wasn't, there was something wrong.

I grabbed a long coat from the closet and tied it around myself, concealing my nightgown as I snagged my car keys from the hall table. I drove to Lucian's office, but his car wasn't in the lot.

I tried dialing him again, but the phone went straight to voicemail. There were only so many places he could be at this late hour, and I knew from experience the church would be locked. But there was still a possibility he might be visiting with Cristian, so I drove there anyway. His car wasn't there either. And that left only one other place I could check. It was my last resort.

I drove to the club with white knuckles wrapped around the steering wheel. Lucian should have no reason to be there. That was what I kept telling myself as I blasted music with the window down to keep myself from thinking too much. But when I pulled into the lot, I recognized the Dodge Demon with Nevada plates right away. And when I swallowed, it felt like a handful of nails had lodged in my esophagus.

Why was he here?

That was the only question I had because I already knew what he'd be doing. There was only one reason for him to come here, but I didn't know

why. The why was what haunted me as I got out of the car and walked to the door, entering the same pin code I'd witnessed Lucian enter before.

Inside, I was stopped in the foyer, at the ready with an explanation, but the guys at the door were the same ones I'd seen before, and they recognized me immediately.

With a brisk pat down and a nod, I was granted entry into the house, and a part of me almost regretted it. I didn't want to see what waited for me upstairs, but my feet drew me there regardless.

Up, and up, and up, I climbed until I reached that secret room that Lucian had first taken me. I took a deep breath and braced myself as I entered, uncertain how bad it was going to be. But nothing could have prepared me for what I found next.

Lucian was there, but he was alone. Sitting in a chair, staring into the distance at the empty table that was often used to secure his previous pain toys.

"Lucian?"

He looked back at me when I said his name, and I saw something so dead in his eyes, it scared me. This wasn't the Lucian that I knew. This man was empty. This man was cold. And this man had lost all his warmth for me when he spoke. "What are you doing here?"

It sounded like an accusation, and it made me angry. "No, the question is, what the hell are you doing here?"

He didn't answer, so I moved forward, demanding answers. "Thinking of your pain sluts," I snarled. "Is that it?"

He blinked, and for a second, I thought he'd come back to me. "No, I was thinking of you."

Regardless of my anger and confusion, my stupid heart filled with hope. "What are you doing here, Lucian? I've been waiting for you at home."

He turned into me and dragged me against him without warning, his fingers unfastening the knot around my waist before he slipped my coat off. I was in nothing more than a nightgown, and my nipples were already hard for him.

Maybe it was primal, or maybe it was jealousy, but I wanted him, and he knew it. He knew it when he dragged his fingers down over the material around my chest and tucked it under my breasts, exposing me to him.

Part of me wanted to tell him no. I wanted to demand an explanation, but in the end, I could see it wasn't necessary. His eyes told me what he

wanted. They told me what he needed.

“Were you going to fuck someone else?” I accused.

He didn’t look at me as he traced his fingers around the edge of my nipple. “Get on the table.”

“No,” I said, but it was weak.

“You’re supposed to do as you’re told,” he answered flatly.

“And what are you supposed to do? Come here whenever you want even though you’re married to me?”

He didn’t answer.

“Is this the first time, or has it happened before?” I pressed. “Is this where you’ve been when you told me you were working on Emmanuel’s case?”

His eyes snapped up to mine, and they were scarier than I’d ever seen them. “Get on the fucking table!”

I took a step back from him, but he caught me around the wrist before I could really move. I didn’t want to fight with him—that was the last thing I wanted—so I didn’t resist when he led me to the table and scooped me up with his arms, spreading me out like I was his next meal.

“Lucian,” I tried again to find some calm in my voice as he disappeared behind me where I couldn’t see. “Tell me what’s going on.”

He didn’t tell me. Instead, he came back and looked right at me, eyes empty as he latched a leather cuff around my wrists and secured them above my head. My chest rose and fell at an accelerated rate, and I tried to calm myself with reassurances.

I trusted him. He wouldn’t hurt me. This was Lucian. I had no reason to be afraid.

But maybe that meant I had more of a reason to be afraid. Because the truth was, I hadn’t really known this side of him. The part of him he kept hidden away. The sadist filled with quiet rage.

The last time he’d brought me here, he told me repeatedly that I was safe in his care, and I believed him. He told me that I could say stop at any point, and he would listen.

“Lucian,” I tried again, but he worked noiselessly, attempting to secure my feet next.

“Stop.” I tried to jerk my foot away, but it was an empty action that served no purpose. His grip was unyielding, and my words weren’t even

getting through to him anymore. He strapped down both of my legs, and I already felt like I couldn't breathe as I strained against the confinements.

"Please," I begged.

Still nothing. I barely saw a glimpse of his face when he returned before he secured the blindfold around my eyes. This was the worst thing he could possibly do to me, and he knew it. He knew it intimately, and what I couldn't figure out was why he wanted to punish me.

"Lucian—"

I felt the leather edge of a crop as it trailed over my skin before his breath filled the shell of my ear. "I should whip you black and blue."

I began to thrash against the table, fear driving me to overreact. It was a primal instinct. An instinct that made me realize I could never escape my past. It would always be a part of me, and no matter how much I thought I trusted this man, he was still capable of hurting me.

The thick edge of the leather smacked my left breast, and I sucked in air. It wasn't hard enough to leave a mark, and it was nothing like what he did to the other girl when I watched, but I was terrified it might turn into that. I was terrified he was going to hurt me, and it was something we could never recover from.

"Lucian." Tears poured down my cheeks as I shook my head back and forth. "Stop."

He smacked me again, this time on the other breast. "But I'm only just getting started. This is what you wanted, isn't it? You wanted to be what I need? That's why you came here, pet. Admit it. After all this time, you're still trying to prove yourself."

He smacked my thigh, and it made me jump. His words hurt. They hurt because they were so true.

"You can't fucking prove yourself," he snarled viciously. "Don't you get it? This is the way the world works, pet, and you need to understand that. No matter what you do, no matter how much you want something, the universe will find a way to fuck you over. That's what you need to learn."

Whack.

I cringed at the sound of the leather in the air. It didn't hit my skin, and I wanted to believe he was just using it to scare me, but I wasn't sure what to believe anymore.

He continued his rant, making short choppy statements that expressed his fresh rage. A rage that seemed to bloom out of nowhere, something I

couldn’t identify, and something I had no idea how to fix. There was only one way to get through to him, and I would hate myself for it.

The leather dragged over my skin, looking for the next empty space that he could leave his mark. I felt his hand draw back, and I didn’t know if this would be the time he took it too far, but I was done with this game regardless.

“Dawson,” I wheezed. “Dawson.”

It was the closest thing to a safe word I could think of. And when I heard the clatter of the leather on the ground beside the table, I knew it had worked.

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Chapter 62

Lucian

THE ALARM ON MY PHONE went off at six, the same as every other day. But when my eyes rolled up toward the ceiling from my place on the sofa, it wasn't just another day.

Instead of defending Emmanuel in court, I'd be making his funeral arrangements. The thought was sobering when I considered that for the past six months, my focus had been on beating this case.

It was never just about winning. My battles in court didn't bolster my pride. I never counted my cases as victories when, in the end, it never felt like enough. For every case I won, there was another client out there somewhere I couldn't help.

I was one man, and I was tired.

My body was giving out on me, and I always knew this would be my last case. I'd been overconfident in my abilities to help both Emmanuel and Gypsy at the same time. But in the end, I had failed them both.

The sobering light of morning hadn't erased my behavior last night. When I followed Gypsy home from the club, she locked me out of the master bedroom, and I didn't try to soothe the raw wounds I'd created.

Instead, I stood outside the door and listened to her silent sobs as she cried herself to sleep. With every tear that fell on her pillow because of me, it only cemented my belief that I couldn't be what she needed.

Maybe I’d helped her, and Gypsy would probably graciously say that I had, but it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. Because she’d made me fall in love with her. She made me want to stay. And every day, I found myself second-guessing my decisions. The path that had once been so clear was now filled with sharp turns and jagged edges I didn’t know how to navigate.

Gypsy Blue thawed my heart and brought me back to life just when I was getting ready to die.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and walked down to the guest bathroom. Since my release from prison, my routine had been the only thing that kept me grounded. Every morning, I got up at the same time. I showered and shaved and ate my breakfast, and I went to work. But today, I didn’t have the energy to do any of those things. I didn’t see the point.

I had a funeral to plan. And a woman down the hall who would be better off not seeing me at all. It didn’t make it any easier to walk out on her, knowing that it would hurt her when she woke up and discovered I was gone. But during the process of trying to teach her, I’d learned something about myself.

I was a coward.

And Gypsy, whether she knew it or not, would be better off without me.

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Chapter 63

Gypsy

"HELLO?" I ANSWERED SLEEPILY.

"Are you okay?"

I paused to reflect on the voice I'd just heard before I checked the screen, confirming my suspicions.

"Luna?"

"Yes, it's me," she said softly. "Hi."

I didn't know what to say to her, so I didn't say anything at all for a minute. My head hurt, and my eyes were puffy, and all I wanted to do was go back to sleep.

"I hope you don't mind that I called," she said. "But I just felt… like you needed me right now."

Again, I didn't answer, and she laughed uncomfortably. "I must sound like a nut job to you."

"No," I said finally. "You don't. It's been… a rough couple of days."

"I thought so," she replied. "I'm sure you have a lot going on, but if you're up for it, maybe we can grab a tea or something."

I tried to force a smile for her benefit before I remembered she couldn't see me. "That's a really nice offer, but I'm just not sure I'm feeling up to it right now."

"It's okay," Luna answered. "I get it. But I'll be around the city today, if you change your mind."

“Okay. Thanks.”

We hung up, and I stared at the closed bedroom door. The clock said it was past eight, and I hadn’t heard Lucian get up. He never tried to come in either, and I wasn’t quite sure what I would find when I padded down the hall, but after only a few minutes of investigation, it was obvious I was alone in the house. And suddenly, I didn’t want to be there at all.

I texted Luna and told her I’d changed my mind, and within thirty minutes, I was on my way to tea.

“He has cancer,” I blurted.

“I know.” Luna stared into her cup of tea without moving, and I didn’t want to believe her, but she hadn’t even blinked at my declaration.

“How could you know?”

“I don’t know how to explain it,” she said. “It’s just… a feeling I get. Sometimes dreams. I don’t hear anything crazy like voices in my head. It’s not like that. It’s just… feelings.”

“That’s what you felt that night?” I asked. “Isn’t it?”

She nodded, but it was stiff. I felt like there was more she wasn’t telling me, but I wasn’t sure.

I wrapped my hands around the warm cup of Earl Grey. “What kind of feeling did you get? How did you know?”

“I didn’t know it was cancer.” Her hand moved up to her collarbone, absently rubbing the area. “But I suspected. Something in his chest, right? I felt it.”

“He told me it was bronchitis,” I answered. “But his medical records said there’s a mass in his chest.”

Luna nodded and took a sip of her chai. “I thought so.”

“I’m pregnant too.”

Luna blinked and dipped her head, and a solitary tear fell down her cheek, surprising me. She reached out to touch my arm, and I didn’t back away the way I usually would. “You’re going to be a good mother.”

“I don’t know about that.” I glanced out the window. “I don’t even know how to tell Lucian. I’m afraid he’s going to be angry. And now there are so many uncertainties ahead of us, I’m terrified.”

“He won’t be angry,” Luna assured me. “And no matter what happens, you will get through it. Your blood is strong. You are resilient. I believe in you.”

Her words meant a lot more than she could ever know, and I didn’t realize how much I’d needed to hear them.

“You should do whatever you feel is right,” she said. “Your instincts won’t lead you astray.”

“I wish I could believe that,” I whispered.

“Just trust that everything will work out the way that it’s intended.” She smiled sadly. “What other alternative is there?”

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Chapter 64

Gypsy

I SPENT THE DAY MAPPING out my course of action, confident that it was the right one. When Lucian got home tonight, we would sit down like adults and discuss what happened last night.

After taking some time to digest my thoughts on the incident, I knew something was up with him. I just wasn't quite sure what it was. He usually talked to me if something was bothering him, but this time, it came out of left field and blindsided me. He needed to know that it was unacceptable. And then, he needed to know that regardless, I was there for him.

I decided to broach the subject of his cancer first because that was the most pressing issue. Even as tenuous as things were between us, I wanted to maintain hope. I wanted to convince him that he could and should fight, and I was determined to do it without bringing up the subject of the baby. With his history, the last thing I wanted to do was corner him with the announcement.

Lucian needed to choose life without feeling tricked into it, and I believed he would. I was certain of it. Or maybe, I was just deluded.

When I woke up on the sofa at midnight with still no sign of him, I began to wonder if we were set to have a repeat of the night before. I checked my phone and saw nothing from him, and the fracture in my heart split a little deeper. I sat up and stared at the door, debating what I should do. But when I saw his shoes there, I realized he had come home.

It didn’t take me long to find him. When I wandered down the hall, his office door was open, and he was at his desk. But this wasn’t the Lucian that I knew. His clothes were wrinkled, and his face was covered with a day’s worth of growth that he usually kept clean. That wasn’t what bothered me. What bothered me was the alcohol I could smell from the doorway, seeping from his pores.

“Have you been drinking?” It was a stupid question, considering that the bottle of whiskey sat on the desk in front of him. But I wanted an explanation that would make sense. I’d never seen Lucian drink before.

“What does it matter, pet?” He smiled, and it was lopsided, his gaze moving over my body with a hunger that always managed to stir something inside me, even when I was angry.

We needed to talk, but it was clear it wouldn’t be while he was in this condition. I moved forward, confiscating the bottle of whiskey from the desk, and Lucian laughed.

“Do you think that’s going to stop me?”

“What is going on with you?” I demanded. “Is this because of the trial?”

The humor disappeared from his face in an instant, and his dark eyes settled on my face like a knife. “Don’t talk about the trial. It’s none of your business.”

The viciousness of his voice hit me like a brick, and instinctively, I took a step back. I didn’t know who was in this room, but it wasn’t Lucian. The Lucian I knew was always serious but thoughtful. He was protective and considerate of my feelings. But right now, the man sitting across from me was a stranger.

“I think I should go.”

Without warning, he stood and came around the desk, his fingers locking around my arm. For a split second, there was fear in his eyes. But more than that, there was devastation. So much devastation.

I wanted him to tell me what was wrong, but instead, he just said, “We have a contract. You’re not going anywhere.”

“I meant down the hall,” I murmured.

His grip on me relaxed, and he seemed to shake off his thoughts as he let me go.

“You’re right,” he said solemnly. “You should probably do that.”

The locking mechanism on the office door clicked into place as I retreated, and the agony in my chest uncoiled, spreading throughout my entire body.

As I poured the rest of the whiskey into the bathroom sink, I considered locking him out of the bedroom again. I doubted he'd be coming anyway, but in the end, I realized that I wanted him to have the option just in case.

It felt like the earth had just opened up between us, shifting in different directions and creating a huge divide that neither of us could breach. My head hurt, and I was heart sick, and I wasn't good at dealing with these situations on my own.

I needed my Lucian back. I needed him to tell me that everything was going to be okay because right now it felt like it wasn't. But he didn't come while I brushed my teeth or climbed into bed. He didn't come while I stared up at the ceiling and tried to sleep.

Instead, he came to me in the middle of the night when I was trapped in the clutches of a dream. I thought I was still in another world when I felt him lay his head on my forearm while he balled my nightgown in his fists.

When I opened my blurry eyes, he was kneeling on the floor beside the bed, offering his complete surrender as moisture stained his cheeks. He didn't make a sound, but I knew he was crying.

"Lucian?" I dragged my fingers through his hair and held his face against me in the way I suspected a mother would comfort a wounded child. He was so fragile that I had no idea how to navigate it, but I couldn't bear to let him suffer. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Don't let me push you away," he pleaded.

His grip on me tightened as he said it, and I continued to stroke his hair, kissing his face. "I won't," I promised foolishly. "I won't."

"Emmanuel is dead," he told me. "He killed himself."

The words lodged into my ears like ice picks, and for a moment, I was so stunned I couldn't speak. But then it hit me all at once—the sudden sorrow, so deep and violent—and I stopped breathing. At that moment, Lucian's pain had become my own. His devastation had slithered into my body and adopted me as the next host.

I held him against me as sobs wracked my body, bleeding out my anger over everything that was so unjust in this world. We cried together, and we held each other, but we didn’t speak. It was one of the only moments in my life I could recall when words weren’t needed.

We were in mourning.

And today, the sun would not rise.

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Chapter 65

Lucian

THE SERVICE WAS HELD AT Emmanuel's grave and presided over by Father Hawk. A favor I'd asked of him even though I suspected Emmanuel probably wasn't Catholic.

Beside me, Gypsy held my hand, her face cast in shadow by the large black hat she wore. It reminded me of the day we got married when she came to my office dressed for a funeral. At the time, the irony had amused me, but now, it only brought me pain.

I wished I could have given her something better. I wished we'd had a real wedding with our friends by our sides. To see her blissfully happy one last time would have been all I needed. At least that was what I kept telling myself. But time was running out, and I felt it every day.

I hadn't been taking care of myself. Meals had been skipped, sleep had been sacrificed, and the drinking binge had only managed to accelerate the inevitable. The fever had been ravaging me all morning, but I'd made it through the service. It wasn't until the car ride home that I began to feel delirious.

Gypsy was beside me, still clinging to my hand, gracefully dabbing away any evidence of the emotion she displayed this afternoon. She'd cried for a man she didn't know. She cried for her beliefs in me, so strong that she no longer questioned that Emmanuel could have been anything but

innocent. Even if I her and I were the only ones that walked this earth with that knowledge, it was something.

“Are you okay?” Gypsy asked when I removed my suit jacket and rested my head against the seat.

“I’m fine,” I murmured.

But I wasn’t fine. My chest had filled with garbage again, and I’d been trying to hide it from her. I closed my eyes and felt her hand on my forehead before she gasped.

“You’re burning up.”

I tried to open my eyes, but they were heavy. Too heavy to open. I tried to give her more promises, even if I couldn’t keep them.

“Lucian.” She shook me. “Look at me.”

I wanted to. My God, how I wanted to. She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, and there would never be enough chances to memorize her face.

But it wasn’t meant to be.

My eyes were too heavy, and my body was weak. I felt it giving out on me. I felt the split between heaven and earth, pulling me in different directions.

“Ace,” Gypsy said frantically. “Pull over. Something’s wrong.”

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Chapter 66

Gypsy

DARK EYES FOUND MINE, AND I choked down my fear as I offered him a smile. “Welcome back.”

Lucian glanced around the hospital room, examining the tube in his arm, the monitors keeping track of his vital signs. He was sleepy, disoriented, and I thought maybe it was better that way.

“Lucian, you have pneumonia,” I said. “The doctors need your permission to treat you.”

They’d told me about his advance directives. I’d argued and told them I didn’t care. I played the wife card. But apparently, that didn’t matter. I wasn’t his power of attorney, and Lucian had already made his wishes clear.

I called for the nurse while he propped himself up and tried to get comfortable.

“Please.” I squeezed his hand. “You need to tell her it’s okay. Tell her that you want them to treat you.”

Lucian looked at the nurse that entered, and then his eyes moved back to me. “I’m sorry,” he spoke in a scratchy voice. “Can I have a few minutes alone with my wife?”

My chest restricted as she walked out of the room, and my frustration was boiling over.

“There’s something I need to tell you—” Lucian said.

“I know about the cancer,” I interrupted, swiping at the traitorous tears that spilled down my cheeks. I’d never cried so much in my life as I had in the past couple of weeks.

“How?” Lucian asked.

“Birdie found your pills and the medical records in your safe.”

His eyebrows pinched together, and he looked down at our joined hands. “How long have you known?”

“A couple of days. I wanted to talk to you about it, but then…”

“Then I was an asshole,” he finished for me.

“You weren’t,” I argued.

“I was.” He squeezed my hand. “And I’m sorry, Gypsy. I don’t want our last memories to be tainted by anything bad.”

“They aren’t last memories,” I insisted. “I need you, Lucian. You can’t leave me. Please don’t leave me.”

He laid my head against his chest and stroked my hair as he forced out the words. “I have to, baby girl. I’m so sorry.”

I pulled away and met his lying eyes. “That’s bullshit. You don’t have to. I know that this disease is curable. I know the success rates. Even now, you have a fighting chance. You just have to want it.”

Lucian didn’t answer, but his eyes filled with shame as they looked over me, distraught.

“Why don’t you want it?” I demanded. “Why don’t you want to stay here with me?”

“Because.” He closed his eyes. “This has been my intention since the diagnosis. I can’t change it now. It’s the only way I can see Dawson again.”

And suddenly, everything about this made so much sense. The church. His time with Father Hawk. His delusion that if he left this earth, he would find the heaven he’d been seeking all along.

I took a long time to process before I responded. I needed to choose my words carefully. I needed to make him understand.

My hand found his again, and I didn’t want to let him go. “I’m sorry that Dawson died,” I began. “I am so fucking sorry that happened to you, Lucian. You didn’t deserve it. He didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t fair, and if I could change it for you, I would.”

His fingers brushed over mine like he thought I understood.

“But I’m not sorry you’re alive,” I continued. “You told me that you loved me, and I’m still here. I’m not asking me to choose me. I’m asking

you to choose life. Just for a little bit longer. Just until we're old and gray, and then you can go. That's it."

His face fractured, and this time, he was the one to let go. "I can't, Gypsy. You know I can't."

"You can," I snarled. "But you won't."

We were both quiet then, and I couldn't look at him. I couldn't see the determination in his eyes to leave me so easily. To leave *us*.

He had no idea about this baby inside me. And maybe if I told him, it would make him want to stay. But he would hate me for it. I couldn't let that be the reason. I needed him to choose us. I needed him to choose life.

"You brought me into your life," I said quietly. "You showed me what love is. You can't just take that away."

"I'm sorry," he croaked. "I never meant to hurt you, pet."

"Never meant to hurt me?" I hissed. "What you did was the most selfish thing that anyone could ever do. You are sentencing me to a lifetime of the pain you're trying to avoid."

"You will move on," he said. "It will be difficult for a while, but you will realize that—"

"I will never move on," I answered viciously. "Don't tell me how I feel. Don't pretend that everything is going to be okay for me because that makes you feel better. It won't, Lucian. If you do this to me, it will never be okay again."

"It will," he said, but even he knew it was bullshit.

I had been trying to find the words that would make him stay, but I realized then that there were none. "Are you going to refuse treatment?"

He didn't answer, and that was answer enough.

I pulled away from him. "I can't be here right now."

He didn't argue as I walked out the door, and I think that was what hurt the most.

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Chapter 67

Gypsy

Outside Lucian's room, Father Hawk, Nolan, and Ace all sat quietly. I didn't know which one to target. In their own way, they were all special to him. But in the end, I knew who was the most influential. I asked Father Hawk for a word in private, and he walked down the hall with me.

"You have to do something," I begged.

His eyes were sympathetic to my plight, but in the end, he shook his head solemnly. "It's his decision."

"He doesn't know what he's doing," I choked out. "Isn't it against the laws of the church? It's basically suicide. Can't you explain to him that he won't be saved if he does this?"

I was grasping at illogical threads, but it was all I had left. Lucian believed that if he made his life right at the end, if he did all the things he was supposed to do, he would be transported into some magical place where he would get to see his son again. Maybe it was true, or maybe it wasn't. But right now, I was too angry to believe it myself.

"It isn't suicide," Father Hawk answered. "If he passes, it will be from natural causes. I know this is difficult for you, Gypsy, but you must know that you will see him again too someday."

That was not the thing he should have said to me. I pulled away, and this time, I couldn't bite my tongue. "I don't want to see him again someday," I snapped. "I want him right now. Don't you get that?"

Father Hawk was quiet, and I knew it was fruitless to argue my point. He'd made up his mind the same as Lucian. I understood now that every time Lucian got sick, Father Hawk showed up to provide spiritual comfort while he slowly wasted away.

I wondered how long it would take. I wondered how many times he would come home, and I would have him for just a little while before he got sick again. How many hospital visits would we make before it would be the last? And how on earth was I going to watch him die while I stood by helplessly?

"I can't." My shoulders caved forward as the stark reality of our situation sank in. "I can't do this right now. I just can't."

Father Hawk laid a gentle hand on mine. "It's all right. He understands. From the beginning, he knew it would come to this."

"He made it come to his." I looked up at him through bleary eyes. "What he's asking of me is cruel. It's the worst thing he could ever ask of me."

"He doesn't expect you to stay," Father Hawk said gently. "I will be here with him if you need some time away."

I hated to admit that it was exactly what I needed.

I needed to get far, far away.

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Chapter 68

Gypsy

My thoughts were scattered when I got into a taxi and gave the driver our address. When he dropped me off, I walked inside the empty house, took one look around, and knew what I needed to do. I didn't get any of my belongings. I didn't even change. I left Lucian's watch on the table, and I got into my car and drove.

I drove for two days, sustaining myself on gas station food and pulling into parking lots along the way to rest. I didn't want to stop. I just wanted to get there, and after seventeen hours, I finally did.

"Hello?" Birdie answered the other end of the line.

"I'm here," I said.

There was a slight pause before she responded. "Here, where?"

"Seattle."

"You drove to Seattle?" she squeaked.

"Yes."

"Oh, God… Gyps." She sounded distraught, and I couldn't figure out why.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"I'm… well, I'm still in Las Vegas, actually."

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "I came here to see you."

"I'm so sorry," Birdie said. "I didn't know you were just going to… drive up there. I would have told you."

“Told me what?”

She sighed, and it sounded heavy. “I haven’t exactly been honest with you. I’m still in Vegas.”

She waited for my reply, but I was too exhausted to be angry, and that was how she knew something was wrong.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

It broke me to admit that I wasn’t. Birdie had always seen me as the strong one. The protector. The warrior. But right now, I needed someone to be that for me.

“No, I’m not.” I closed my eyes. “Lucian won’t get treatment. I tried. I tried so hard, Birdie, but he won’t.”

There was a small sniffle from the other end of the line. “I’m flying up there today. We can drive back together.”

“No,” I told her. “I’m too tired. I just want to…”

I didn’t know what I wanted. This whole trip had been a wasted effort. I thought I could run away and pretend my problems didn’t exist the way that I used to, but I had changed. And I was done running. “I just want to come back and see Lucian. I’ll get a flight from here.”

“What about your car?” she asked.

“I’ll figure that out later.”

“Ace could come pick it up later,” she offered. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see me.

“Two o’clock,” Birdie said. “I just booked you a flight. I’ll text you the details.”

I didn’t know when, but somewhere during the span of the past six months, my sister had suddenly grown up.

“Thank you, B. I’ll see you soon.”

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Chapter 69

Gypsy

LUCIAN'S PHONE WENT STRAIGHT TO voicemail, and guilt threatened to suffocate me as I left him a shaky message.

"Hi." Pause. "It's me." Pause. "I just… I just wanted you to know that I'm on my way back. I miss you, and…" Pause. "I love you. I wish I'd told you that before. Maybe that would have changed your mind."

My eyes watered, but I tried to hold it together as the passenger next to me on the flight looked my way. "Anyway, I'll be there in a few hours, okay? I'll see you soon."

The flight attendant gave me a pointed look before reminding all passengers phones must be in flight mode as we prepared for takeoff. I settled into my seat and looked out the window, hoping to find a new way to broach the subject of Lucian's cancer when I returned.

But all that found me was sleep.

Birdie was already waiting for me at the curb, and that was my first indication that something wasn't right.

Birdie was always late.

Always.

But this time, she was here, and she wasn't alone. Beside her car, Ace waited for me, his face drawn as I approached. I didn't even look at my sister. My stomach was roiling, and I couldn't get that sick feeling to go away.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"Let's talk about it in the car," Birdie pleaded.

I glared at Ace, and I wanted to shake him. He wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't make eye contact. He was staring at the ground, and my heart was shattering into a million pieces already.

"Tell me." The words came out on a sob, and it surprised all of us. Inside, I already knew, but I didn't want it to be real. I wanted to rewind three days and do it all over again because this couldn't be happening.

"He's okay," I said. "He was fine. He was in the hospital when I left, but he's fine. He's strong, and there's still plenty of time to change his mind."

"Gypsy, he's gone."

There was such a sense of finality to Ace's words that I couldn't process them. I kept shaking my head, and words wouldn't come out. I didn't feel it, but at some point, I must have collapsed because Ace caught me in his arms and loaded me into the back of the car with Birdie. She held me while he drove, and I sobbed so hard it felt like my ribs were breaking.

"He can't be gone," I told Birdie. "You have to take me to the hospital. There's still time."

"There isn't," Birdie said through teary eyes. "I'm so sorry, Gypsy. He passed away last night, but I didn't know until this morning."

"He couldn't have!" I shouted. "He didn't even say goodbye. He was fine. There were still months, maybe even years."

"There wasn't," she said gently. "It was the pneumonia."

"No." I shook my head again. I didn't want to believe it. This great man had not been taken by a simple case of pneumonia. He was too strong for that. Too much of a warrior to go out like that.

"It can't be true. I need to see him."

Ace pulled into the driveway of Lucian's home, but I wouldn't get out of the car.

"I need to see him," I demanded. "Take me to the hospital."

He stared at the concrete again. “I’m sorry, Gypsy, but I can’t. He isn’t there.”

“Then where is he?”

“He’s been cremated,” Birdie said softly. “Everything was already set up. He didn’t want you to see him that way. He didn’t want you to remember him like that.”

“No.” The word came out too quiet, so I screamed it instead. Birdie tried to comfort me, but there was no comfort to be found. Because at that moment, I wanted to die too. And I finally realized what Lucian meant. I finally realized his pain.

He had left it behind and passed it onto me.

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Chapter 70

Gypsy

THE WEIGHT OF THE BED stirred me from sleep, and I felt his presence beside me. I listened to the sound of his breathing, and the horrible emptiness in my chest seeped away into the blackness as I extended my arm to touch him. “Lucian.”

“It’s me,” Birdie whispered.

My fingers fell away, and my limbs were so heavy I couldn’t move them at all as I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to stop the fresh onslaught of tears. “I thought it was a nightmare.”

And it was. It was a nightmare that would never end.

Birdie held me while I cried because she wanted to help. But I wanted to protect this sacred space where we had slept together. I vowed I would never wash these sheets. I would never lose his scent.

“I’m fine,” I told her. “I just want to be alone.”

“I’m sorry,” Birdie cried. “I don’t know how to help you.”

“You being here helps,” I lied. “But just… not on the bed.”

She understood then, and from that point forward, she and Ace slept on the bedroom floor beside me. Father Hawk was in the living room, and at some point, Luna showed up too. They all kept watch over me, hovering every second like I was liable to take a steak knife to my wrist at any moment. They could have been right, if it weren’t for the baby growing

inside me. I clutched at my stomach, silently comforting the only part of Lucian I had left.

Over the course of three days, I hadn't eaten or slept much. Most of my time had been spent holed up in Lucian's bed, wrapping myself in his tee shirt and praying to a God that I didn't know, begging him to give my husband back if I just believed.

Between those stretches, bouts of paranoia would set in as I patrolled the house and screamed at the guests not to touch anything. Birdie had tried to do dishes, and I snarled at her when she touched the cereal bowl Lucian last ate from. It still had milk in it, and I couldn't bring myself to let it go. I couldn't bring myself to let anything go.

I declared that nothing in the house was to be touched, cleaned, or thrown away, and everyone tiptoed around me as if I might attack at any moment. I didn't know who I had become. I couldn't recognize my face anymore or even feel my own body. I was numb. Heartbroken. And it didn't matter if I was still alive because inside, I was dead.

"We should get some flowers," I said numbly.

"Lucian said he didn't need them," Ace answered. "He already had everything set up."

I stared out the window, battling my silent resentment and appreciation for the man I loved. He had planned everything, just as Ace said. I wanted to hate him for taking those decisions away from me, but I also knew I never would have been able to make them all.

"Just pull over and let her get some flowers," Birdie whispered. "It's what she wants."

It wasn't what I wanted. What I wanted was my husband back. I wanted our life back. The one that we would never get to have. I was lost without him, and I still couldn't believe that today he'd be laid to rest.

Ace pulled over, and Birdie and I picked out the flowers. Blue, like the tattoo Lucian had on his chest. The one he said would keep me with him always. I never even got a picture of it.

As we drove to the cemetery, my fingers traced over the necklace Lucian had given me for my birthday. I'd looked up the scripture that had been engraved on it this morning.

I will be with you when you pass through the waters, and when you pass through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. You will not be scorched when you walk through the fire, and the flame will not burn you.

The day he'd given it to me, I thought it meant he wanted me to believe. He wanted me to have faith that God was always with me. But now I knew that he really meant it was him. Lucian would always be with me. Or at least, that was what he wanted me to think.

We pulled into the parking lot, and I adjusted my dress as I got out. Birdie fussed over my hat and wiped the mascara that had leaked from the corner of my eyes as others joined us from their own cars. I invited everyone we knew, which wasn't a long list, but I didn't want Lucian to be buried alone.

Together, Father Hawk, Ace, Nolan, Kate, Birdie, and Luna walked beside me to the plot where my husband would be sealed away from me. It was still early, but I instructed Father Hawk to go ahead regardless. Everyone who loved Lucian was already there, or so I believed.

Halfway through his service, I looked up to find that several others had shown up. I didn't recognize them, but I knew without asking that they were his clients. The men were rough around the edges. The kind that, at first glance, society wouldn't think twice about labeling a criminal. And over the next twenty minutes, they multiplied. They came in droves until there were no longer enough chairs, and standing was the only option. I looked out over the sea of faces from my place beside the plot, and I wondered who they all were. How Lucian had helped them. I had an urge to hear their stories, and when Father Hawk finished, I told him to give them the chance.

Some paid their respects silently, but others stood to speak. The speeches were short and choppy, but each man gave an emotional display of gratitude to the only man who'd ever believed in them. My eyes watered more than once as I listened to their stories, and my shoes wobbled when it was finally my turn.

I'd spent the entire day prior writing notes about Lucian. I wrote about how beautiful he was. How smart, and generous, and secretly kind he'd been in his life. I wrote about his trials and strength, and the lessons he had

taught me. All of these things were true, but when I stood to read them, another tidal wave of anger came over me that I had to say them at all.

Halfway through my first sentence, I stopped, coughing out a deranged laugh as everybody stared at me. “Would you look at us?” I gestured to the guests. “Who would have thought that this man could bring us all together? A bunch of so-called criminals, a biker, a priest, and a con artist. These are the people who Lucian called friends.”

Birdie stood and grabbed my arm, trying to whisper in my ear, but I wasn’t finished. “And the biggest shame is that we are the only ones who loved him. The world will never know how much good he did. The world doesn’t give a fuck.”

Father Hawk joined my other side then, but he didn’t try to stop me from speaking.

“You know who gives a fuck?” I asked, gesturing wildly around me. “All of us. We’re it. How fair is that?”

Nobody answered my rhetorical question, and since I was already a wrecking ball, I went on. “Fuck the media,” I said. “Fuck anyone who’s ever said a bad word about this man. Fuck them all.”

A burly man in the back with a long gray beard and a biker vest started a slow clap, and soon, the others joined him. It made me feel good. But then I remembered the reason I was here, and my passion swiftly returned to despair.

“He deserved so much more than what he got.” I bowed my head. “It really wasn’t fair. He probably deserved better than the likes of me too.”

My eyes drifted to the small wooden box that held the remains of my husband, and my chest hurt. “But he picked me. And he made me love him. I loved him fiercely.” I sniffled and wiped at my eyes. “I never got to tell him that.”

Everything went silent for a while after that. Nobody knew what to do while I stood there, motionless and wrung out, but I wasn’t finished. The aftermath was only just beginning, and I couldn’t navigate the maze of emotions left in front of me.

“How could he leave me?” I whispered.

Nobody answered. There were a few uncomfortable sounds of throats clearing before I answered myself.

“How dare he give up?” I said. “How dare he leave without saying goodbye to any of us? It’s bullshit. This whole thing is bullshit. And it’s so

fucking selfish of him to do this to us, am I right?”

There was no clapping this time, but I didn’t care. I was done with this crowd too. “And do you know what else? He doesn’t get to dictate everything anymore. He doesn’t get to give his orders from beyond the grave. So I’m taking this with me.”

I stalked forward and grabbed the wooden box off the table and clutched it against my chest, staring out at the crowd. “I dare you to stop me.”

Nobody did.

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Chapter 71

Gypsy

THE GUARD POINTED AT THE empty seat at the table, and I sat down across from her.

Two weeks outside of Lucian's passing, I still wore the burden of grief on my face. But my dress was designer, and the heels were too, and I'd never made an effort to look any better than I had that day.

The visit wasn't a surprise. I had to file an application in advance, and she had to agree to it. That was how it came to pass that I was sitting across from the empty void in prison orange. She was a plain-featured woman with limp, stringy brown hair that had begun to gray at the roots. Her face was without makeup, but even if it were, I doubted it would have improved her appearance.

She was no threat to me, and I wanted to make that clear when I sat up straighter, acting the part of a lady even though I felt anything but. The truth was, at that moment, I wanted to murder her. I had visions of grabbing that stringy brown hair and smashing her head into the table over and over. For a second, I thought it might make me feel better, but the reality was that nothing could. I'd had two weeks to come to terms with that unwavering fact.

"I wondered if I would ever meet you," Nessie said. Her words were deliberate. A play that let me know she was aware of me before I ever gave her a second thought. She picked at her nail, and her lips twisted into a

wistful smile. “My mom still keeps tabs on Lucian. Well, I mean she did, anyway. She used to send them to me whenever there was a new article.”

I forced my fingers around the bench beneath me to keep from wrapping my hands around her throat. I’d given a lot of thought to what I would say when I came here. Initially, I’d set out with the intention of laying into her. I would tell her what a piece of shit excuse for a human she was, and I would express how much I wished she were dead instead of him. But in doing that, I’d be giving her exactly what she wanted. She was still infatuated with Lucian, and my hatred for her would only stoke that flame because it would prove she was something I should care about one way or the other.

I didn’t come here to play her games. I came to play mine.

“Well, here I am.” I flashed her an exaggerated smile. “In the flesh. Was I everything you imagined I would be?”

Her eyes carved a path over my face, my clothes, my body language. She took it all in, and she didn’t like what she saw, but she would never admit it. “Lucian’s always had a thing for brunettes.” She curled a lock of hair around her finger. “Since me.”

I made a gesture to my own hair, intentionally flashing my wedding ring so that she would see. “He loved my hair. Especially the curls. Whenever I wore it curly, it drove him crazy.”

The smile on her lips faltered. Her hair was stick straight.

“I bet you were curious about me too.” She leaned forward. “The first woman in his life. That must be why you came here.”

My shoulder lifted in a dainty shrug. “Lucian never really spoke of you, to be frank. But I guess I was a little curious.”

I laughed, but Nessie didn’t.

My smile ebbed away, and I folded my hands together in my lap. “The truth is, ever since he told me about Dawson, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him. I think about him often. About how I could have been a good mother to him, if I’d had the chance.”

“I was his mother,” Nessie snarled. “Not you.”

“Yes, that’s true,” I agreed. “Unfortunately.”

She was quiet, but her hospitality was wearing thin. I could tell she wanted to direct the conversation back to Lucian. She wanted to make me feel insecure in the time we had together. In the life we were only just beginning to build. But I wanted her to know that she never could.

“Things will be different with this baby.” I placed a hand over my stomach. “He will only ever know love.”

Nessie stared at my stomach, her eyes ablaze with rage and disbelief.

“I was thinking I’d name him after his father,” I added. “And his brother, for the middle name.”

“You can’t do that,” she spat.

I offered her a pacifying smile. “It’s what Lucian would have wanted.”

Her eyes cut into me, and she lowered her voice to a growl when she spoke. “You have no idea what he wanted.”

“I do actually.” I gestured to the guard, alerting them I was ready to leave. “It was me. It was always me.”

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Chapter 72

Gypsy

"I GUESS YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING what I'm doing here," Nolan said.

I wasn't actually. Considering it was past noon and I was still in my pajamas and half-strung out from the lack of sleep, I didn't really care what his reason was for being there. But out of politeness and respect for Lucian's friend and mentor, I sat down across from him on the sofa and waited to hear him out.

Nolan crossed his legs and leaned back. "Lucian asked me to handle his affairs, after the fact."

"Right," I murmured.

That made sense. But again, I didn't really care. Everything that Lucian had to give to me, he gave when he was alive. The rest were just details.

"He wanted to make sure you were provided for," Nolan began. "So the bulk of his estate will belong to you with the exception of a few donations to some charities that he promised to contribute to."

I noticed that Nolan didn't have a will to read from. There was no briefcase. No tablet. And it upset me because I wanted to see Lucian's words for myself.

"Shouldn't there be paperwork?" I asked.

"It really wasn't necessary," Nolan answered. "Your name was on everything anyway. The details are just a formality he wanted you to know."

My disappointment was evident. I wanted there to be something else. Something I could see for myself. I wanted every little piece of Lucian I could get. “When did he talk to you about this?”

Nolan cleared his throat. “As soon as the marriage was legal.”

A burning ache spread through my chest and up my throat. Without intending to, Nolan triggered a memory of that day. The day we were married, I hated Lucian West more than anything and swore I would screw him over at the first available opportunity. I’d read his contract, taking particular notice of the clause that stated if he died before the two years were up, I would be free.

I spitefully told him I wished that were the case. And now, the nastiness of that statement made me shrivel up inside. Even after every poisonous word I’d stabbed him with, Lucian wanted to provide a life for me. He wanted to believe I was still good. A sob broke free as I wrapped my arms around myself. Nolan looked distraught, but he didn’t seem to know what to do.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know how difficult this must be for you.”

“I was just thinking that I don’t deserve any of this,” I answered tearfully. “I never deserved him.”

He smiled then, and it was full of sorrow. “Lucian thought the world of you.”

“If that were true, then he’d still be here.”

Nolan didn’t argue but decided the best course of action was to redirect the conversation back to Lucian’s final wishes. “The house is yours,” he said. “The money in the checking account and both of his cars as well. He asked that you donate whatever personal belongings you don’t want to a charitable cause.”

“I’m not donating anything of his.”

“That’s fine,” Nolan conceded. “Whatever you wish.”

My teeth clenched as I considered it. “I wouldn’t just throw his stuff away. What kind of person does that?”

“You have to remember he set this up when the marriage was still new.” Nolan held his palms up as if to say it wasn’t his fault. “It would only make sense that he might draw that conclusion.”

I didn’t answer because I was too ashamed to admit that he probably drew a lot of other conclusions after all the deplorable behavior that he witnessed from me.

“There is also the option to transfer ownership of the house and vehicles to the wrongful conviction foundation he established,” Nolan said carefully. “If that’s something you think you’d like to do.”

I curled into the sofa, recalling how many nights I’d waited up for Lucian here. How I would watch him come through the front door, and all his tension would melt away as soon as he was near me.

This house was full of memories, everywhere I looked. Memories that I didn’t even know we were making at the time. Now they haunted me. They made me smile, and they made me cry. It hurt so much, but I knew I could never let this house, or anything inside it, go.

My eyes met Nolan’s, empty and lost. “I’m never going to get over him.”

With grief as my constant companion and little interest in anything else, I had begun to dig up every aspect of Lucian’s life that I could find, savoring those little details like they were the only thing that mattered. I guess now, in a way, they were.

My life had drifted from a routine that felt linear and logical into something I didn’t know how to pilot. I was no longer on the course Lucian set for me. Now, I was left to set my own course, and I didn’t know what to do with myself.

Kate offered several times to help me apply to colleges or seek apprenticeships or just talk about what direction my life should go over coffee. She thought it would be helpful for my grief if I had something else to occupy my mind, but the truth was, nothing could draw my attention away from the life of Lucian West.

Day and night, I scoured through the history of his cases. At least, whatever I could access publicly. I’d read all the transcripts and got lost in the news articles detailing both sides. There were times when I found myself attempting to be a keyboard warrior, defending him online to all the trolls who called him names and didn’t know a thing about him. But that became as fruitless as it sounded, and in the end, I realized I needed to do

something bigger. I wanted the world to know who Lucian was, and it set into motion the only thing I'd ever done that had given me purpose.

When Birdie first saw me getting dressed and brushing my hair, she was excited. She offered to take me to coffee or shopping or the spa. All the things we used to do together. And I was a little sorry when her face fell because I refused her, but I explained that I had important things to do.

She thought I was going insane, sitting in front of the computer all day staring at the screen like a zombie. But I was processing every word I read and furiously scribbling notes. Those notes weren't enough. I needed to hear from the people Lucian helped. I needed to hear from those he had changed.

It wasn't easy. At first, I was hesitant given the fact that many of his clients had witnessed my epic meltdown at his service, followed by the ash-napping incident. But regardless, I couldn't allow my humiliation to hold me back.

There was the small matter of getting over my nerves as well. Many of Lucian's clients were somewhat scary looking at first glance. Bikers. Footballers. There was even a professional fighter who had to be inching seven feet tall.

But when I sat down across from them and asked them to tell me about Lucian in their own words, I realized something. They were just men. Men who worked hard and wanted to live their lives in peace away from judgment and stereotypes.

In a short time, they painted a picture for me of something that was very clearly wrong with our justice system. The notion that bias was alive and well, and that one man had the balls to fight for them when everyone else was ready to stone them. I knew it already, but hearing it from them was profound in a way I didn't expect.

Lucian West was a real-life hero, and if I didn't already know it, the proof was in these furiously scribbled page notes.

Chapter 73

Gypsy

"Everything okay in here?" Birdie asked as she popped her head into the bedroom.

It had been three months, and she still came to check on me every night before I went to bed. She worried about me far too much, and a part of me felt guilty that she had to worry about me at all.

"I'm okay," I told her, and I meant it.

The days were long and exhausting, and I still missed Lucian a thousand times every second. But there was one thing I'd never be able to change, no matter how long my grief might last. The world went on, regardless of the day mine ended.

And soon, things would be changing again. I was fat and pregnant now. Wildly uncomfortable to the point that everything ached, and I was only five months along. But the baby was growing and kicking and healthy, and he would be here soon. I would need to set my pain aside because I was all he had.

"Are you really not going to find out the sex?" Birdie asked as I slathered my belly in cocoa butter.

"I don't need to," I told her. "I already know."

"The gypsy blood," she teased.

Birdie smirked and accepted that I was just crazy because I'd already been buying everything in blue. If it did turn out to be a girl, we were in

trouble, but somehow, I just knew it wasn't.

"No offense." Birdie eyeballed my belly. "But I hope I never get knocked up. I'd be such a whiny bitch."

"You already are," I said.

She stuck out her tongue and fluffed the pillows on the bed, flinging herself onto my old side. Once we'd established that Lucian's side was off-limits, we stopped having problems with her invading my space, which was good because Birdie loved to invade everyone's space.

"This bed is comfy." She wiggled her way into the pillows. "Way comfier than the guest room."

"You don't have to sleep there," I told her. "You can go back to…"

It finally occurred to me that I never knew where she was staying. We still hadn't talked about what she was doing in Vegas, or why she had lied to me. I'd accepted the fact that there was something strange going on between her and Ace, given that he never left her on her own for very long, but I didn't know the details. Suddenly, I felt very selfish for not asking her.

"These past few months have been pretty much all about me," I said. "Haven't they?"

"So what? It's about time you learned how to be selfish." She said it as a joke, but I didn't laugh.

"It's just such a surreal experience." I sat down on the bed beside her. "I remember how sad we were when Mom left, but we were so young. It didn't feel like this. It didn't feel like I'd been sucked into this void that I'd never get out of."

"You're doing really well," Birdie said gently. "You've come a long way."

"I know." I stared up at the ceiling. "But I feel like all this stuff has happened around me, and I haven't had the ability to absorb it."

"You've been pretty engrossed in your research lately," Birdie admitted. "I figured it was good for you."

"It is. But I want to know what's going on with you."

"Me?" She blinked. "I thought you were just talking about the world in general."

I pulled the comforter up around me and snuggled into it. If I breathed slowly, I could still smell Lucian there, but that scent was disappearing every day. "The world, in general, is going to hell," I said. "Not much new

to report there. I want to know why you stayed in Vegas after you told me you were going to Washington."

She stared down at her pink polished toes. "It's complicated."

"Complicated, how?" I poked her in the shoulder. "I'm your sister. You should be able to tell me anything."

"I can tell you anything." She poked me back. "But that doesn't mean I want to. Especially when you might be disappointed in me."

"Do you think I have it in me to be disappointed in you right now, B?" I joked. "I'm barely holding it together every day."

She looked at me for a minute before she finally nodded. "All right, well, look… the thing is… I went to Washington. I tried it, Gypsy, I swear I did. I wanted to make you proud of me and all that, but I didn't know anyone there. And it was all nature type stuff, and you know that just isn't me. I missed home, and I wanted to come back, so I did."

I sighed. I got what she was saying, I really did, but she hadn't thought about the possible consequences. "How long have you been back?"

"For a couple of months," she confessed.

"Birdie, you know it's dangerous for you here," I said gently. "It would kill me if—"

"Nothing's going to happen to me," she interjected. "I swear. I wouldn't do that to you. And besides, I have some people watching out for me now. You have nothing to worry about."

"What people?"

"Ace and his club buddies," she groaned. "They've taken it upon themselves to look out for me I guess because they didn't want Lucian to deal with another pain in the ass."

Irritation bubbled up inside me. "So Ace knew you were here this whole time?"

"Well, technically… no." Birdie frowned. "He just happened to see me one night at a casino."

I glared at her. "What were you doing in the casino?"

"You promised you wouldn't get upset with me," she reminded me. "I was just playing some table games. That's it."

I took a breath and shook my head. "I'm not upset. I just want to make sure you aren't in trouble."

"Even if I were…" Birdie held up her hands before I could interrupt. "Which I'm not, it's not for you to worry about anymore, Gypsy. I'm a big

girl now, and I’m responsible for my actions.”

“You still should have told me,” I said. “And Ace should have said something too.”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure why he didn’t.”

“Are you still going to your classes?”

“No,” she admitted sheepishly.

We’d need to address that later, but for now, I had learned what was important. Birdie was alive, she was healthy, and she was happy. Everything else could be figured out.

I picked up the copy of *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Lucian had been reading that book to me before he died. And every night since, I’d been reading it myself. Over and over again. I couldn’t move on from it because I knew he chose it for a reason.

“Do you want me to read to you?” Birdie asked. “I know it won’t be the same, but—”

“It won’t.” I smiled and handed her the book. “But I’d really like that.”

She opened the page I’d left off and found the first paragraph. When I closed my eyes and rested my head against the pillow, a magical thing happened. Because for a minute, I could remember Lucian’s voice. The way the words vibrated against his chest and filled the room as he read to me.

I missed him more than I breathed every day, but somehow, he was right.

He was still here with me.

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Chapter 74

Gypsy

"YOU'RE LOOKING FABULOUS," KATE NOTED as she sat down across from me.

I already had my tea, and she was ten minutes late to our coffee date.

"You lie." I smirked. "But thanks."

"I would never lie to you." She wrinkled her nose playfully. "Not even about your work."

My teeth dug into my lip when she pulled out her notes. Already, I was prepared to sob into the table when she told me how awful it was. I'd mentioned to her a thousand times before I emailed it that it was the first thing I'd ever written. It probably wasn't good. I didn't know what I was doing. The list went on and on. It had been a month of radio silence since I'd sent it to her, and I was quietly freaking out on the inside when she looked up at me.

"I know it's still rough," I said. "But I plan to get a good editor—"

"I have some notes here for you," Kate said absently as she scrolled through the pages of her tablet.

I didn't know if I could do this. It occurred to me then that I was crazy to attempt this now. I was pregnant, emotional, and full of grief, and I was not in any place to handle criticism, small or large.

"Kate—"

"Hauntingly moving and poignant," Kate read as she peered up at me from above her glasses. "That's a direct quote from New York Times

bestselling biographer Kal Langston.”

“What?” I blinked. “You mean—”

“Here’s another.” Her eyes returned to the screen and followed her finger. “Utterly riveting. A moving piece from start to finish. Gypsy captured the essence of a man few really knew behind the media headlines. His life’s work, his heart, his silent foray into redemption under intense scrutiny. A real-life hero, shrouded in mystery.”

My eyes began to water as I brought a trembling hand to my mouth. “He really read my book?”

Kate took off her reading glasses and offered me a gentle smile. “I hope you don’t mind, but I couldn’t help myself.”

I shook my head because I was too emotional to form any words. Kate crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “The world needs to see this book, Gypsy. The world needs to know who Lucian West was.”

That was exactly what I wanted. I wanted the world to know who he really was.

“I know it’s not my place,” Kate continued. “But Kal made you an offer. He wants to help you. He wants to meet you in person.”

I wiped the leaky corners of my eyes and took a fortifying breath. “What kind of an offer?”

“He has his own publishing company. He’s connected, and he’s excited about this project. He’s even talking about a documentary.”

The corners of my lips tilted in a smile that felt rusty on my face. It was exciting, and it was happening so fast. My immediate instinct was to say yes to everything, but that instinct felt vulnerable only a second later.

“What is it?” Kate asked as my smile fell.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “This is everything I wanted, but I just can’t help wondering if it’s what Lucian would have wanted.”

Kate gave me an understanding nod. “He was quite the enigma, wasn’t he? It’s difficult to say how he would feel about it. He never did a good deed for the reward. I suppose that’s why he didn’t boast of his wins or even bother to tally them. In his eyes, it didn’t matter how many people he helped because he always fell short. He was entirely too hard on himself.”

“And he was so private,” I added. “I don’t know how he would feel about having his entire life splashed on print for the world to see.”

Kate was quiet for a moment while she considered it. “I really don’t know. But I know that it would be a shame for such a great man to leave

this world without his legacy ever being heard.”

I stared into my cup of tea, wishing I had the right answer. I didn’t want to do anything that would dishonor Lucian. When I set out with this project, I didn’t know exactly where it was going. I only knew that it needed to be done. And now, I didn’t know what to do with any of it.

“Can I think about it for a while?” I asked.

“Of course.” Kate nodded. “Take some time. I’ll hold off Kal in the interim until you decide.”

“Thank you.” I gave her a watery smile. “For everything.”

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Chapter 75

Gypsy

"Is there something going on with you and my sister?"

Ace looked up at me, an amused expression playing across his face. "Is that why you wanted to talk to me?"

"That's part of it." I shifted, trying to get more comfortable on the sofa. Birdie had made a quick trip to the grocery store for me, and I had a limited window of time to have this conversation with Ace.

"I have a girlfriend," he muttered. "I'm not interested in your sister."

He said it like she wasn't even a blip on his radar, but I saw the way he looked at her sometimes when she wasn't paying attention.

"Well, I just think you should know that Birdie isn't as tough as she seems, okay? She's fragile, and I don't want anyone using her, you included."

A shadow passed over Ace's face as he growled out his response. "I would never use your sister. I told you, I'm not interested in her."

"Well, let's just say in case you ever do get interested," I said. "You shouldn't start anything with her you can't finish because Birdie is hard work. She's vulnerable, and she deserves someone who can see past her when she gets angry. She needs someone who's rock solid, and if you can't be that, then just don't even think about being a part of her life, okay?"

Ace dragged a hand over his face and sighed. "Yeah, okay. I get it, but like I said, I have a girlfriend."

“Well, I’m sure she just loves you being over here all the time,” I mused, “which brings me to my next point. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me over the past few months. I know we aren’t really friends and the only thing we have in common is that we both cared about Lucian, but your presence has meant a lot to me.”

“It’s not a problem, really,” Ace said with a mildness he rarely displayed. I’d come to learn that despite his exterior, he was really just a gentle giant.

“We’ve come a long way since you first held a gun to me,” I joked.

He smirked and scratched at his beard. “Yeah, I guess we have.”

“Anyway, I’m not going to say that I’m fine because I don’t think I’ll ever be that again, but I’m not a complete mess incapable of taking care of myself anymore. And I want you to go back to living your life and doing whatever it is you do.”

Ace gave that some thought before he nodded. “Well, you know I made Lucian a promise. I’m going to look after you no matter what. I’ll be checking in from time to time, but that doesn’t mean you have to wait to hear from me. If you ever need anything, night or day, I want to know about it.”

I dipped my head and nodded. “Thank you, Ace. That means a lot to me.”

We were quiet for a minute, and I was sure he felt like he needed to go drink a beer or do something manly after that conversation, but I wanted to ask him one other thing. “You know the project I’ve been working on?”

He nodded.

“Do you think Lucian would hate it if I published it?”

Ace considered it for a minute before he answered in a way that put me at ease like nothing else really could have. “I think he would hate it if you didn’t publish it after spending all that time and dedication working on it. What have you got to lose at this point?”

“Thanks, Ace,” I said again. “I can see why Lucian liked you so much.”

After calling Kate with the news that I wanted to go ahead with the book, she was elated to tell me that she'd already been secretly working on it with Kal, just in case. Everything happened at lightning speed after that, and I was amazed at the efficiency of it all.

"Things go much faster with small publishers," she told me. "Kal only takes on a few books a year, but he gives them his all. You won't regret it."

I looked over the cover we'd decided on, my fingers brushing over the glossy paper. It was a simple design—a white background with red and black font that displayed the title and tag line next to it. Kal explained that it was current with industry standards, and even though I initially wanted a photo of Lucian on the front, he would never be narcissistic enough to want that. He was a simple man, and this simple cover suited him perfectly.

"LUCIAN," I read the big block letters. "The man behind the mask."

Kal eagerly pointed out that there was also a picture of Lucian inside the cover.

"I can't believe I'm holding it in my hands." I turned it over and examined it. "It seems so surreal."

"It's just a proof," Kal explained. "But we'll host a local event the week before release, and the preorders will be ready. We've already started marketing, and the response has been incredible so far."

"What do I need to do?" I asked.

"Well, there really isn't much at this point," he said. "My publicity team has your social media up and running now, so that's all taken care of. Other than that, we'll just need you ready with a speech for the event, of course."

I was nervous about the prospect of showing my face in public where there would be photos printed in the media. It was a complete one eighty from the way I used to live my life, and even though I'd published under the name Gypsy West, there was always a chance something from my past could come back to haunt me. It was a risk, but in this case, I wanted to believe the reward outweighed that.

"I'll be there." I smiled. "Rain or shine."

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Chapter 76

Gypsy

"Hi."

"Hi, Nolan." I edged open the door. "Would you like to come in?"

He glanced inside the house before shaking his head quickly. "I can't, I'm sorry. I'm running late already, but I just wanted to stop by to make sure you were all right."

The concern in his voice caught me off guard. "Is everything okay?"

"I saw a flyer for your book." His expression was grim, and my stomach soured at the thought of what he might say.

"Oh?"

"It just made me think about the hate mail Lucian used to get," he said. "I thought it might be a good idea to warn you that it could get messy."

My throat tightened, and my voice was barely audible when I responded. "Why?"

"So many strong emotions were involved in his cases," Nolan pointed out. "He received threats on a regular basis. I just worry about you and the baby."

What he was saying made sense, if I stopped to consider it, but I really hadn't. "I don't think it will be an issue. The book is mostly just about how he lived his life. The kind of work he did and his beliefs. There are only small highlights about the cases themselves."

“Still,” Nolan said wearily. “I just want you to be aware of what this book might bring about if you go through with it. I’d hate to see you caught off guard.”

I laid a hand over my belly protectively. “I understand, and I appreciate that. But I can’t cancel the book deal because everything’s already signed. Even if it weren’t, I think it’s important for people to know who Lucian really was.”

“I get that”—Nolan shrugged—“but the public’s perception might be different. The media likes to spin things for dramatic effect, you know that. There might be people who will say you are only turning this tale for the royalties.”

“I’m not,” I insisted. “The royalties are going to the women and children’s transitional house.”

“I’m just telling you what people might say. I’d rather you didn’t face that kind of hostility, but if you’re prepared for it—”

“They can say whatever they want,” I assured him. “All that matters is the truth.”

Nolan didn’t look convinced, but he checked his watch again and frowned. “I have to run, I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t upset you, but I just wanted you to hear my thoughts. And I think it would be in your best interest to keep that in mind.”

“Thanks, Nolan.” I gave him a tight smile. “I appreciate it.”

“You take care now,” he said.

I wanted to. But when I shut the door behind him, I felt miserable all over again.

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Chapter 77

Gypsy

AT EIGHT MONTHS PREGNANT, FOOD dictated my life. I was tired and ached everywhere, and it seemed like every night, I had a new craving that needed to be fed.

Luckily for me, Birdie had stuck around and offered to be my personal shopper, making runs to the grocery store every night for ice cream or whatever else I deemed necessary at the moment.

Tonight, we were supposed to be having dinner with Ace and Father Hawk. It had become our Sunday night ritual, and even though it was a very odd combination to have sitting at one dinner table, it just worked.

But as I prepared the pasta, I couldn't help but notice that Birdie had been gone for a long time. I'd sent her out for garlic bread, and she promised to be back in few minutes. That was over an hour ago. When I walked out to the driveway to check that I hadn't missed her pull up, Ace was already out there.

"She still isn't back yet?" I asked.

He grabbed his helmet and hopped on his bike. "No. I'm going to check on her to make sure she didn't have any car trouble along the way."

He tried to make it seem like that was a logical explanation, but the store was only a couple of miles down the road. If she had car trouble, she could have walked back by now, barring that her phone didn't work, which it definitely did. Per my instructions, she always had a burner phone, and

she always changed it out at the beginning of the month, loading it up with minutes.

“Hang on,” I said. “Let me try calling her really quick.”

I punched in Birdie’s number since habit taught me long ago not to store it in my phone under contacts. Ace waited, watching as it rang several times and then someone picked up. Someone who definitely wasn’t my sister.

“Hello?”

“Hello?” I answered. “Who is this?”

“My name is Tom,” he said. “I’m a medic with the Clark county ambulance service. Can you tell me who this phone belongs to?”

My stomach dropped, and it felt like the air had been punched from my lungs. Ace got off his bike and made it to me just in time before I collapsed against him and grabbed the phone.

“Who is this?” Ace demanded.

The previous conversation was repeated on speakerphone as Ace explained the phone belonged to Birdie, and she hadn’t made it home for dinner.

“It looks like she may have been involved in a car accident,” Tom explained from the other line. “We’re en route to Kindred Hospital now.”

Ace mumbled a few more words and hung up, somehow managing to load my heavily pregnant body into the passenger seat of Lucian’s Dodge Demon. He disappeared inside for a few seconds and returned with the keys.

“He didn’t say if she was okay,” I said. “Is she okay, Ace?”

I didn’t know how I expected him to have the answer to that, but I wasn’t thinking logically at that moment. I couldn’t go through this again. I just couldn’t.

“She’s okay,” Ace promised. “She’ll be okay. Birdie’s tough, remember?”

He gunned it down Summerlin, and I thought about what he said. “She isn’t that tough.”

Ace looked at me from the driver’s seat, his voice as steady and certain as I’d ever heard it. “She is.”

“She has a broken arm,” the doctor said, “a concussion, and a lot of bumps and bruises. But she’s extremely lucky to be alive.”

“Can we see her now?” I asked.

He nodded. “She’s probably a little groggy from the pain medication, but you can see her.”

Ace and I walked into the room, and I nearly broke down all over again at the sight of my sister in the hospital bed. It felt like history was repeating itself, the universe determined to take out everyone I loved.

“Birdie, what happened?”

She blinked as though she was trying to figure it out herself, and her voice was scratchy when she spoke. “Something was wrong with your car.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned.

“The steering wheel.” She made a gesture with her hand. “I don’t know what happened. It felt like something just gave out, and I lost control.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

Beside me, Ace was tense and growly when he spoke. “It does if someone’s been fucking with the car.”

Blood rushed from my head to my heart as I looked at Birdie. “I told you it wasn’t safe here. This is why.”

“It was your car,” she shot back. “So obviously, whoever did it wasn’t after me.”

That thought was sobering. It could have been me. I could have lost the baby or my sister. I sat down while I tried to process that. “Who would do that?”

“Do you think…” Birdie’s voice trailed off as her senses caught up with her and she realized Ace was still in the room.

“I don’t think so,” I answered.

There’s no way it could have anything to do with our past. Or at least, I needed to believe that.

“The book,” she said. “Maybe someone put it together.”

“No,” I insisted. “It must have been an accident. Maybe something was faulty on the car.”

“I’ll look at it,” Ace said. “But either way, I’m calling some of my buddies to keep an eye on you two for now.”

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Chapter 78

Gypsy

AFTER A FEW DAYS, BIRDIE was already going out of her mind being cooped up in the house. We refused to stay at the clubhouse like Ace asked us to, so he'd sent reinforcements to us instead.

I never in a million years thought my life would come to this, but here we were, sitting down to dinner with a bunch of scruffy men in leathers. They weren't much for conversation, so Birdie and I kept it between ourselves until Ace walked in. His shirt was stained with grease, and it was obvious he'd been working on something. I hoped it was my car because I was anxious to hear what he thought.

"What's for dinner?" he asked.

"Pasta," Birdie griped. "Again."

I shrugged. "That's what happens when you let the preggo dictate the menu every night."

Ace dished himself a heaping plate and sat down in an empty space at the table, shoving forkfuls of food into his mouth as though he hadn't eaten all day. I intended to let him finish his meal first, but Birdie had other ideas.

"Have you figured anything out yet?" she asked. "I'm going stir-crazy here."

Ace shot her a pointed look. "It won't kill you to stay out of trouble for a change."

Birdie mumbled something under her breath, and Ace chose to ignore it, though I doubted that happened often.

“I took a look at the car,” he said. “Tore the whole thing apart. It was definitely tampered with.”

My stomach sank, and I set down my fork as I looked at him for answers. “How?”

“The steering shaft was sawed down to the bone. A little bit of torque on the steering wheel caused it to snap clean in two. That wasn’t no accident.”

I looked at Birdie. At this point in the past, we would have run. We would have left town and started fresh somewhere else. But that wasn’t an option anymore, at least not for me. My home was here. I was having a baby, and I couldn’t run anymore.

“What are we going to do?” Birdie asked.

I wanted to give her an answer, but when I looked at her, I realized she wasn’t asking me. She was asking Ace.

“Lucian has a security system,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll figure out who it was.”

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Chapter 79

Gypsy

"I WANT TO THANK YOU all for coming," I spoke into the microphone, and it made an unpleasant screech as I adjusted it.

A flash went off, followed by a few more as I stared out into the sea of faces.

"This may come as a surprise"—I laughed nervously—"but I'm not really one for words, so I'm going to keep this short and to the point."

A few more cameras went off as I tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"You may have come here with the notion that you were here to help me celebrate the release of my book. But the truth is, the reason we're all here tonight is because of Lucian West. He was a man of few words himself, but when he did have something to say, he made sure it was important."

I glanced down at my shoes and tried to hold back the tears that were already threatening. "I wish I'd paid attention to everything he had to say when he was here with me. I wish that I'd taken even a second more to notice and appreciate all the good he did. But life doesn't always work that way. Sometimes, we don't even realize how important the memories we're making are until it's too late."

I stalled momentarily to compose myself, and Kate gave me an encouraging smile from her place at the front of the crowd.

“Anyway, I don’t think I need to tell you that Lucian was an exceptional man, and it was a shame that so few really knew that. So, my hope with this book is that you will read it with an open mind and decide for yourself.”

Kal gave me a thumbs-up, and I smiled, deciding to end it there. “So that’s it, I guess. Thanks again for coming. I really do appreciate it.”

I handed off the mic and stepped down from the stage, my cheeks flushed and my emotions running at an all-time high.

“You did an amazing job,” Kal said as Kate nodded her agreement enthusiastically. “What’s next?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What are you going to write next?” Kal clarified.

“Oh.” I frowned. “I haven’t really given that any thought. I mean, I’m not really a writer—”

Kal laughed and shook his head. “You wrote a book, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but it was mostly just piecing things together.”

“You did an exceptional job at piecing together Lucian’s story,” Kate chimed in. “It could be just the beginning for you, if you wanted it. No pressure, but I hope you’ll think about it.”

“I don’t even know what I’d write about,” I admitted. “This project came so easily to me because it was important.”

“You could write about others who have been wrongfully convicted,” Kal suggested. “Some of Lucian’s clients, maybe. Just an idea.”

“Oh.” Kate snapped her fingers. “That reminds me. Did you hear what happened with the Ariana Sanders case?”

“No, what happened?”

“Another victim came forward,” she said. “She’d been attacked a few months prior to Ariana. Same m.o., same everything. Anyway, as it turns out, she was able to identify the attacker, and they matched his fingerprints to Ariana’s apartment as well.”

My stomach felt like it had jumped into my throat. “So Emmanuel’s name has been cleared?”

Kate gave a bittersweet nod. “New charges have been filed in the case, so if nothing else, at least now the world will know it wasn’t Emmanuel.”

Any relief I felt over that idea was quickly chased away by sadness. “At least the world will know,” I agreed.

I just wished Lucian were able to know it too.

“Everything okay?” Birdie asked as I kicked off my shoes and hung up the shawl I’d worn for the evening.

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “It’s just… a lot.”

“I know,” she said softly. “Kinda bittersweet, huh?”

I nodded.

“Want to eat ice cream and stay up late watching stupid reality TV?” she asked.

“Thanks.” I gave her a weak smile. “But I just want a warm shower and my bed.”

“I get it.” She yawned. “I think I’ll probably crash too then.”

She gave me a hug, and I said good night to Ace, who had resumed his residency on the sofa. It had been a couple of weeks since the car incident, but he still wasn’t any closer to figuring out who it was.

While Lucian did, in fact, have a security system, it wasn’t much help when the person on the screen was wearing a mask. We still had no idea who messed with the car, but I couldn’t get it out of my mind. There were only two logical conclusions to draw.

Nolan was right, and this was just the beginning of the storm I hadn’t battened down for. It could have been a nut following one of Lucian’s cases, or it could have been one of the men Birdie had stolen from. There was really no way to know for sure, and to that end, I couldn’t rule out any of the enemies I’d made over the years either.

Regardless, there wasn’t much I could do about it right now. The only options at our disposal were running or trusting Ace, and running wasn’t an option anymore.

I slipped into a hot shower and washed the day off me for a solid twenty minutes before my eyes were too heavy to stay inside any longer. I toweled off quickly and dressed in one of Lucian’s old tee shirts before crawling into bed.

I was exhausted, but the moment my head hit the pillow, the day caught up with me. Sleep evaded me while I played everything over and over in my mind, wondering if Lucian would hate what I’d written. If he’d be

embarrassed to be on display like that in print. I couldn't tell anymore. But I tossed and turned for half the night, somewhere between consciousness and sleep when I realized there was someone else in the room.

"Birdie?" I called out. "Is that you?"

There was no answer, even when I sat up and looked at the silhouette in the doorway.

"Birdie?" I choked out.

But it wasn't Birdie. I knew that much. It was a man. A tall, imposing figure that left me paralyzed with fear as I scrambled from the bed and put as much distance between us as I could.

I trembled and wrapped my arms around myself. "Whoever you are, there are men outside. If they find out you're in here—"

The light switched on, and all the air punched its way out of my lungs when I met the dark gaze of the man who had come to visit me in the dead of night.

"Lucian?" I brought a hand to my mouth in disbelief, shaking with fear that this wasn't real. That I was dreaming, and if I moved even an inch, he would disappear.

He didn't say a word. He seemed lost, confused, and completely unable or unwilling to remove his eyes from the bulging belly I now carried. He was thinner than I'd last seen him. The darkness under his eyes more prominent. And he was wearing a hat. I couldn't ever remember him wearing a hat before.

"This isn't real," I whispered as I shook my head. "This isn't real. It isn't."

He looked at me then, the cold in his eyes penetrating me even from where he stood. "I'm sorry to inform you that I'm not dead."

A sob erupted from my throat, and he moved toward me with purpose, but something was wrong. This wasn't the Lucian who had left me. This was the Lucian who had been stitched together with injustice and rage over the years.

The first touch of his hand around my arm fried all my nerve endings and short-circuited my brain. "I don't understand," I cried as he took possession of me. "How is this happening?"

"I thought I taught you that you don't always get what you want," he said callously. "But I guess you never learned."

The viciousness of his words penetrated me like a knife, but before I could dig into his anger, our privacy was shattered by the intrusion of Birdie.

“What the… fuck?” she shouted. “What is going on?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “I have no idea.”

“How did he get in here?” she demanded. “Is that really him?”

“Yes,” Ace muttered from behind her as he entered the room. “It’s really him, and I let him in. Now do you mind?” He gestured for Birdie to follow him, but she didn’t move.

“I’m not going anywhere until I have some answers.” She glared. “What the fuck is going on?”

Lucian was the one to answer. “You two really are a pair, you know that? You should have been actresses.”

I looked up at him, confusion playing across my face, but all I saw on Lucian’s was distrust.

“Don’t you fucking talk to her like that,” Birdie snarled. “Do you have any idea what she’s been through because of you?”

Lucian looked at me with arctic eyes. “She got her money, didn’t she? I’m sure the few tears she had to shed were worth it.”

I saw it happening. The rage building inside Birdie. Her red, mottled neck and the way her pupils had taken over her eyes completely. But I was powerless to stop it, paralyzed by my own pain as Lucian flayed me open with his eyes.

There wasn’t time to speak before she lunged at him, destruction in her eyes. But luckily, Ace stepped into action before she could reach Lucian. Birdie was a force to be reckoned with in her fits of anger, but even so, she stood no chance against Ace. He wrapped his tank of a body around her and tackled her to the bed, holding there as he forced her to calm down.

I was in a state of shock as he whispered in her ear, stroking her hair while he held her broken arm so she couldn’t move it. For a split second, I wanted to rush forward and tell him he had to stop. He didn’t know about Birdie’s demons. He didn’t know how damaged she was. But something miraculous happened as I watched them. Birdie closed her eyes and shuddered, and then, to my complete surprise, she stopped fighting altogether.

“Why don’t we take this into the kitchen,” Ace suggested. “Where we can all talk about it like adults.”

Lucian didn’t move until I did, but his eyes were on me, watching me like I might try to pull something at any moment. I trailed down the hall behind Ace and Birdie, my hand clutching my stomach as if to protect the baby from whatever awful thing was about to come.

“Father Hawk?” I came to a halt when I saw him sitting at the kitchen table, his face grim.

“Gypsy.” He nodded in my direction.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“He’s here for me,” Lucian said from behind me. “He’s here as my witness.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, but when Ace pulled out a chair for me, I sat down. Lucian sat directly across from me, his eyes trained on my face while Birdie and Ace took their seats.

I looked at Lucian, desperate for even an ounce of warmth. “I have so much I want to ask you,” I said. “But I don’t even know where to begin.”

He folded his hands across the table and looked straight through me. “Why don’t we begin at the part where you tried to kill me.”

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Chapter 80

Lucian

"WHAT?" GYPSY SOUNDED HORRIFIED BY the accusation, and for a second, I almost wanted to believe her.

"You can drop the act." I looked between her and Birdie. "I know."

"Know what?" Birdie demanded. "It seems like the only thing you know is your own delusions."

I pulled out the printed sheets of search history that had been removed from her ipad, sliding it across the table so we could drop the bullshit.

"Insulin would be a good weapon of choice," I told Gypsy. "But you didn't take into account that I had eaten a meal shortly before the injection, unfortunately for you."

Her hands shook as she read through the printed search history detailing how to kill someone with insulin, and when she looked up at me, her eyes were blurry with unshed tears.

"I didn't do this," she declared. "I never searched for these things."

I wanted to believe her, and I hated myself for it. I hated myself for being weak and for falling in love with her, exactly like she wanted. Her actions had destroyed me, but I couldn't show it. I couldn't show her how much power she had over me, even at that moment.

"I suppose you're going to tell me that even though this search history is on your ipad, you weren't the one to sneak into my hospital room that night and inject my saline bag as well."

Horror painted her features, and it only managed to fuel my ire when she tried to deny it. “I would never.” She choked. “Lucian—”

“What I can’t understand is why you were in such a hurry,” I snapped. “I was dying anyway. Was it really so terrible to wait until it happened naturally?”

Gypsy brought a trembling hand to her mouth as tears spilled free from her eyes. They looked so real, but I’d fallen for that before. It was only after the insulin incident that my eyes had been opened and the truth came to light. She was playing me, just as she’d played every man before me.

“I begged you to stay.” Her hand reached across the table but stopped short. “How could you ever think I would want you to go?”

I couldn’t look at her. I couldn’t allow myself to get sucked back into her lies. So I retrieved my phone and pulled up the financial transactions that had occurred since my supposed death. The evidence was there on the screen, and she couldn’t deny it when I showed it to her.

“What is this?” Her eyes moved back and forth as she examined the documents. “What is this supposed to mean?”

“This is the proof that you’ve been funneling money into an offshore bank account. Cashing out my investments, selling off assets.”

“What assets?” she demanded. “Lucian, this is insane. I don’t know anything about this, I swear. I just… I don’t know how you could believe I did this.”

“How could I not?” I scowled. “It’s the game you play, isn’t it?”

She stifled a sob, and this time, Birdie was the one to answer. “She doesn’t do that anymore, and you have no fucking right to come in here accusing her of—”

“Birdie,” Gypsy pleaded. “Stop.”

“No.” Birdie stood, her blue eyes piercing into me. “For months, I’ve watched her cry herself to sleep. I’ve watched her shrivel up and die inside because she thought you were dead. And where the fuck were you?”

I intended to answer her, but she cut me off as her tirade continued. “Where were you when someone sabotaged her car in an attempt to kill her? Are you going to accuse her of doing that too?”

I looked at Gypsy, my stomach threatening to empty the contents of my meager dinner as I processed those words. “What is she talking about?”

Ace interjected. “Someone cut the steering shaft on the car. Birdie was driving it to the store when it snapped.”

I glanced at Birdie's casted arm, my gut churning as I considered that if this was true, it could have been Gypsy. It could have been my wife, heavily pregnant with my child. Rage burned inside me, threatening the edges of my vision.

"That can't be right," I murmured. "It must have been a mistake."

"It wasn't a mistake," Ace argued. "And to be honest, I think the girls are right, Lucian. I don't think they had anything to do with this."

I looked at my friend, who in my absence, had suddenly been won over by my wife, and betrayal coated my tongue. "How could you know that?"

"Because he's been here the entire fucking time," Birdie snapped. "He's the one looking out for us while you're off in hiding, letting everyone think you were fucking dead like a selfish prick."

"That wasn't my doing." They all looked at me like I was the one who lost my goddamned mind. "I left after I got the letter. What else did you expect?"

"What letter?" Gypsy asked.

"Your letter." I didn't want to show her the crumpled paper in my pocket. I didn't want her to see how many times I'd read it, studying the words while I tormented myself on repeat.

Her voice softened when she replied. "I never wrote you a letter."

I craned my neck back to relieve some of the tension that had gathered there. This bit was tiresome, and I was over it. I wanted her to admit the truth. I wanted to hear the words from her own lips.

I retrieved the folded square of paper and handed it to her. She opened it and stared at the worn ink, her face blank. There wasn't a word said between us as she pored over the letter that described how she wished I'd just let her go in the beginning. How she hated herself for what she had to do, but this was who she was. She described how she dreaded my death because of the burden of guilt it would bring her, but freedom would release her in the end. There were so many personal truths in that letter, and I expected a reaction from her. I expected that this was the evidence she wouldn't be able to deny. But when she finished, she carefully folded it back together before ripping it into two pieces and throwing the remnants into the middle of the table.

"I didn't write that."

"Of course, you didn't." I sighed.

"Who gave it to you?" Birdie glared.

I looked at Father Hawk, who hadn’t said a word so far. I didn’t expect him to. And I didn’t much like bringing him into this either, but I had no choice. Everyone looked at Cristian as I nodded in his direction. He was quiet, his hands steepled on the table while his brows pinched together in concern.

“I brought him the letter,” he admitted.

“But I didn’t give it to you,” Gypsy insisted.

Cristian was quiet for several moments before he inclined his head and shook it. “No, you didn’t.”

His words came as a surprise, and the solidity of my foundation of truth began to shift. He’d never mentioned that Gypsy hadn’t given him the letter directly. He only delivered the letter to me in what he thought would be my final hours, and that was it.

“Who gave it to you?” I asked.

“It was given to me in confidence.” Cristian shifted uncomfortably. “I thought that it was authentic. I had no reason to believe otherwise when I gave it to you.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

He knew that, yet he chose not to answer. He’d given his word to whomever delivered the letter and getting it out of him would be impossible. It went against everything he believed, and the struggle was plain to see in his eyes.

“See?” Birdie said. “That just shows you that you’re wrong. You’re wrong about all of this.”

I wasn’t wrong. I wasn’t ready to believe that yet just because one of the facts was skewed. For all I knew, the letter could have been delivered by Birdie herself.

“Did you know he wasn’t really dead?” I looked up to find Gypsy staring at Father Hawk, betrayal etched into her features.

“No,” he answered. “I didn’t.”

“Everyone thought I was dead because you’d written an obituary and planned a funeral,” I stated sourly.

“Because she thought you were dead!” Birdie shouted. “Because that’s what we were told!”

This conversation was giving me a headache, but still, I indulged her trail of breadcrumbs. “Told by who?”

All three of them turned their gazes to Cristian, and this time, my confusion couldn't be denied.

"He had nothing to do with this," I said.

"He was the one who told us you were dead," Birdie insisted.

Father Hawk bowed his head and released a deep breath as we waited for his response. It was quiet and full of remorse. "I told them you were dead because that's the information I received." He looked up, his eyes cloudy and troubled. "From Nolan."

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Chapter 81

Gypsy

LUCIAN DISAPPEARED DOWN THE HALL and shut himself into his office while the rest of us sat at the table in silence.

He didn't want to believe what Father Hawk had just implicated, and I knew Father Hawk felt horrible for saying it at all. Nothing about this situation was making any sense, but even after all the horrible accusations Lucian had flung my way, I was keenly aware that he was hurting inside. Someone had tried to kill him and set me up, and everything was a huge mess. But Nolan was his oldest friend, and if it came down to it, I didn't know who he was going to believe.

I stood and pushed back my chair, and Ace looked at me. "You better let him figure this out on his own."

"I can't," I said. "And you shouldn't ask me to either. You of all people should know what it feels like to be accused of something you didn't do."

Ace's jaw clenched as Birdie turned her head to examine him curiously. I probably shouldn't have said it like that for everyone to hear, but my mind wasn't in the right place. Everything was so surreal; it was hard to believe this was really happening.

"I just got him back," I declared. "I can't let him go again."

Nobody protested this time when I walked down the hall and opened the door to the office.

Lucian looked up at me from his desk, his face drawn as he listened to the voice on the other end of the line. I knew it was Nolan. I knew I would probably have to defend myself again after this conversation, but if that was what it came down to, I would do it. Because regardless of how angry Lucian was or who tried to separate us, I loved him. I loved him, and I thought that all my chances to say it were gone. But he was here now, and he needed to know it. I needed to make him believe it.

I sat across from him while he ended the conversation with Nolan and hung up. He looked exhausted and thinner than he should have been, and fear clouded my mind as I wondered how long he had left. It wasn't fair that I just got him back and all of this was happening. It wasn't fair that I was already terrified of losing him again.

"Lucian," I began. "Will you look at me?"

He hesitated, but when he looked up, I saw the hurt in his eyes. I saw the pain and confusion and the war raging in his mind. "I suppose you're going to tell me that Nolan did this," he said. "Is that it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know why he would. He's your friend."

Lucian's gaze moved to my belly, his thoughts drifting far away. "This baby," he choked out. "You know I won't let you take that from me. I want to make that clear now."

I had two choices in which I could react to his statement. Anger or understanding. And in my heart, I knew that nobody would ever understand Lucian the way that I did.

"I would never want to take him from you." I placed a hand over our son. "He needs you as much as I do."

Lucian's entire body was stone, and it was clear how torn he was. He'd been down this road before, betrayed in the worst possible way by someone he should have been able to trust. Even though I understood that, it didn't mean his doubts didn't hurt. I wasn't naïve enough to believe this would be resolved overnight, but I had to tell him the truth. I had to say it in case it was the only chance I got.

I hoisted myself out of the chair and moved slowly around the desk, approaching him like a wild animal. Uncertain how close he would let me get, I stopped two feet away, our eyes locked together.

"You left so suddenly." My voice cracked. "I never got to tell you how I really felt."

“Gypsy—” He looked away, hiding his emotions over the words that might come.

“I loved you, Lucian.” Tears leaked down my cheeks as I said it. “I still do. And I didn’t plan on that. I didn’t plan on any of this, but I won’t take it back.”

He swallowed hard and tried to meet my eyes, but he couldn’t.

“Don’t let your past poison what we have,” I pleaded. “I know what I was, but I’m not that person anymore. And you aren’t the person who accuses innocent people of crimes they didn’t commit.”

The last words seemed to jar him out of whatever daze he was in as he blinked and shook his head. “We aren’t going to figure this out tonight. You should be resting.”

I took a tentative step closer, my fingers itching to touch his face. But I was scared of the rejection that might happen if I tried. Instead, I touched his hand with mine, just barely, but enough to feel his warmth again. He glanced down at the place where our skin met, and he seemed too paralyzed to move.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Is your health… okay?”

He cleared his throat and shut his eyes again. “You should go to bed, Gypsy.”

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Chapter 82

Lucian

Gypsy looked at me in question as I walked around the opposite side of the bed. The side that she used to sleep on, but now she was in mine. “I’m going to stay in here tonight,” I told her. “So I can keep an eye on you.”

It was the lie I wanted to believe, and if I was looking for a reaction from her, I got one. Hurt flashed in her eyes as she gave me a stiff nod, and I laid down beside her.

There was only two feet between us, but it felt like so much more. I stayed on top of the covers, fully dressed, afraid that if I even brushed her skin I wouldn’t be able to control myself. It took her a long time to fall back asleep, and even then, she was restless. I doubted the light of morning would bring me clarity. I didn’t know what to believe at all.

For two hours, I listened to the soft sounds of her breathing, too on edge to sleep myself. I was afraid she would try to run. I was afraid of losing her and the baby. But most of all, I was afraid that what she said was true. She had nothing to do with the attempt on my life, and someone else had been orchestrating our demise.

I felt helpless and shaken when I considered it. Had I been so blinded by my own insecurities that I couldn’t see what was right in front of me?

I rolled onto my side and studied Gypsy. I watched the way her rounded belly rose and fell in time to her breathing. My child was inside her, and there hadn’t been time to process it. We hadn’t even talked about it, but I

wanted to. I wanted to reach out and touch her there now. To feel what we made together. Surely, it couldn't have been a lie?

Gypsy jolted in her sleep, her features pinching together painfully as her hand reached into the space between us. She cried out, and I thought she was hurt when she opened her eyes and tears leaked from the edges.

"Lucian," she whimpered as her fist curled into my shirt and clung to me.

"What is it?" I asked. "Are you hurt?"

"I thought it was a dream," she cried. "I thought you left me again."

Sobs wracked her body as she curled into the fetal position, and I had no recourse against the pain that sliced through my chest. If she was lying, it was too convincing even for me. I moved closer and took her in my arms, wrapping her against my chest as I petted her hair and tried in vain to calm her. "I'm here."

"For how long?" she whimpered. "I can't… I don't think I'll survive it if you die twice."

I gulped down the emotions that threatened to spill out and brought my lips against her hair. At that moment, it didn't matter what she did or didn't do. I wanted to promise her things I couldn't give her. I wanted to tell her I would live forever… as long as she'd have me.

"I'm here," I said again.

She wrapped her fingers up in my shirt and pulled me closer, dragging my lips to hers. I thought I could resist, but it was a lie. The minute I felt her against me, I groaned, my need for her ripping through me like a bullet.

"Please." Her palm found the hard bulge of my cock through my jeans, and I bucked against her.

"Christ," I shuddered. "I can't, Gypsy. I can't."

I said this even as I tore at her shirt. My shirt. It came up over her head, and that was the only thing she was wearing.

"Fuck." I drew a hand over my face and tried to block it out. The image of her naked and wanting, swollen with my child and wet between her thighs. It was the most inviting she'd ever looked, and I couldn't find the words to deny her. Gypsy unzipped my jeans and grazed my dick through the briefs I was wearing, and it was all over.

"No." I grabbed her hand in mine, and she blinked at me. "Inside you."

It was the only thing I could manage to get out before she pinned me on my back and climbed on top of me. I hadn't let a woman get on top of me

since before I went to prison, and I couldn’t imagine that I was going to like it now. But seeing her in the early light of morning, her curves silhouetted by the shadows in the room, I didn’t have any further protests. She was the most beautiful temptress I’d ever known, and even I couldn’t resist her now.

She pulled my briefs down and tucked them under my balls, my dick saluting her as she took it in her hand and rubbed the head against her pussy. My eyes fell shut and struggled to open again as I felt her sink down on top of me with a contented sigh. She moved against me, more animal than woman, desperate to get off on my cock.

I didn’t help her. I just watched as she abused the hard flesh, jamming it and out of her wet cunt as though her life depended on it. Her boobs were huge, and I ached to touch them, but I couldn’t give myself permission until she hauled my hands up to cup them.

“Play with me,” she whispered. “Please, Lucian.”

My cock contracted inside her at those desperate, throaty words, and I stroked her nipples beneath my thumbs, watching her eyes roll back in her head.

“Oh, God,” she whined. “Oh God, I need you so much, Lucian. Don’t ever leave me again.”

Her words were punctuated by convulsions that milked my dick, and when she squeezed my hips between her thighs, I couldn’t hold back. Hot jets of come flooded her, filling her with what felt like a decade’s worth of unspent energy.

She collapsed onto her side, still clinging to my body. Our legs were wrapped together, her fingers curled around my biceps. She didn’t want to let go.

I didn’t either.

“Don’t leave me.” Her forehead came to rest against my beating heart. “Please don’t leave me.”

Chapter 83

Gypsy

I WOKE TO THE SOUND of birds chirping and fear ripped the breath from my lungs when I realized the bed beside me was empty. My eyes moved around the room, desperate for any signs that it was real. When I found Lucian's shoes near the door, my heart calmed. I heard the shower running in the master bathroom, and I knew it was him. He was alive, and I hadn't dreamed it.

I didn't know how long it would take for that fear to go away, but until he gave me the answers I needed, it never would.

I wrapped myself up in the bed sheet and padded to the bathroom. Steam billowed from the open shower, and Lucian's back turned to face me. I dropped the sheet and entered behind him, and in the light of day, I knew I wasn't imagining it last night. He was leaner than I'd ever known him to be but still strong. Everything about him seemed different somehow; as though he'd been to hell and back while he was gone. What little hair he had was fuzzy, having been shaved at some point, and I wondered what that meant.

I didn't know what mood he'd be in this morning or where we even stood. But I couldn't tiptoe around, hoping he'd come to realize the truth. There wasn't any time to waste. I stepped behind him and wrapped my arms around his back, enclosing them as I leaned my face against his skin. At first, he froze, and we stayed there like that, silent, for several minutes before he turned me in his arms.

His eyes trailed over my body, lingering on my swollen breasts before moving to my belly. I felt like he wanted to touch me, but he couldn't give himself permission. I took his hands in mine and rested them against the warm skin that was home to our son.

Lucian's focus was intense as he held his palms against me. "When did you know?"

"Before I found out you were sick," I admitted. "I tried to tell you. I wanted to, but the timing wasn't ideal. Emmanuel's trial, and then the cancer… but mostly, I was afraid. I didn't want you to think I'd done this on purpose."

My eyes moved to the floor while I spoke, shame welling up inside me. Lucian removed one of his hands from my belly and brought it to my chin, lifting my gaze back to him.

"I'm sorry you didn't feel like you could tell me," he said softly. "You never should have been made to feel that way."

"You didn't know." I shrugged. "But I wasn't sure how you would react… after Dawson."

He closed his eyes, restraining the visible emotion he felt and confining it inside him. "When I saw you and I realized you were pregnant, I was angry. But it was with myself. I missed everything."

"Not everything," I insisted. "You're here now. You'll be here when he comes into the world. Right?"

"I'll be here," he said emphatically. "That much I can promise."

I should have been happy with that, but it wasn't enough. "And what about his first birthday? Or his fifth? Will you be here then?"

Lucian met my eyes, and there was so much regret in his. "I don't know, but I can tell you that I want to be. I can tell you that I will do everything in my power to make that happen."

"Tell me what's happening," I begged. "Lucian, I can't take this anymore. I need to know. Are you getting treatment?"

His face softened, and he reached out to touch me before he thought better of it. But before he could take it back, I took his hand in mine and threaded our fingers together.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "That's why I've been gone so long."

Relief flooded my chest and my heart as I looked up into his dark eyes. "You are?"

"I just finished chemo. Radiation is next."

“So that’s good.” I smiled. “Right? That means everything will be okay?”

“The prognosis is good so far,” he said hesitantly. “My oncologist is confident that the treatment will work, and he’s happy with the odds. But there’s always a chance it could come back, and if it comes back, it’ll require more aggressive treatment. So I can’t tell you that I’ll be cured forever, Gypsy. I can’t make you any promises, except to say that I’m doing everything I can, and I’ll continue to for as long as I can.”

My throat bobbed as I nodded. That made sense. This wasn’t a sprint; it was a marathon. It would be a lifelong battle to make sure he was healthy, and every time he got even the slightest hint of a cold, terror would wrap its icy hands around my heart. But I didn’t care. He was here now, and he was alive, and I would take every single second that I could get with him, and I would never take them for granted again.

Those were lofty ideals, but I wanted so badly to make sure of it. Because that was what Lucian deserved. He deserved someone who would love him until their heart splintered apart and turned to dust. And nobody on this earth would ever love him more than I did.

“What made you change your mind?” I asked.

He debated his answer carefully before he gave it to me. “When I got my diagnosis, I thought I’d been given an opportunity. After Dawson, there was nothing else I wanted more. I’d been merely existing since he died and little else. I thought this decision would bring me peace. But when you walked out on me, the reality of it hit me. I kept telling myself that you could move on, but the reality was I didn’t want you to. I didn’t want you here by yourself or with anyone else. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t leave you that way.”

“I came back for you,” I told him. “I came back, but you were…” I took a deep breath. “They told me you were dead.”

He held me against him as I composed myself, and when I looked up at him again, I was afraid to ask the next question. “Do you believe me?”

His gaze was cloudy before he refocused on me. “If I told you that I did, would that make me a fool?”

“No,” I whispered.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” he said grimly. “Maybe I am a fool. But I believe you, Gypsy.”

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Chapter 84

Lucian

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO do?" Father Hawk asked.

My fingers beat a restless rhythm against the worn church pew. "I don't suppose you'd like to give me your thoughts."

He bowed his head. "The logical solution I'm supposed to give you is to pray for a resolution."

"But?" I asked.

His eyes drifted to the confessional. "But I've only ever known Gypsy to be honest with me."

I knew she was honest with him. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that I believed her too, and that meant someone else wanted us both dead.

The doors to the church opened, and footsteps echoed down the corridor. Nolan paid his respects by lighting a candle and saying a prayer before he dared to acknowledge me. In all the years we'd been friends, I'd only ever known him to be good. He was my mentor. The man who saved me from myself and set me on the path to righteousness. In my heart, I didn't believe he was capable of hurting me, and it crushed me that I'd even considered the thought for a second.

He sat down beside me, and Father Hawk took his leave. Neither of us looked at each other. The silence that lingered between us was unfamiliar,

and it reminded me of the first time he came to visit me in prison far too many years ago.

“I’m glad to see that you’re alive and well,” he said.

“You knew I was alive and well. Why would you think otherwise?”

He looked at me, eyes shadowed with exhaustion. “You were on death’s door when you left. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“So you decided it was best to let everyone think I was really dead?”

His head dipped forward, a subtle nod of regret. “I believed it was only a matter of time. I wanted to honor your wishes, and I knew if anyone realized you were still alive, they would try to find you and change your mind.”

The explanation was a plausible one. I hadn’t told Nolan I was going to get treatment. I hadn’t told him anything other than the fact I was leaving.

“If I’d known you wanted me to act differently, I would have,” he explained. “But you left in such a hurry, I wasn’t certain what I was supposed to do. We hadn’t planned for that.”

I studied him. “I don’t suppose you’d have any idea who was trying to kill me and my wife then?”

Nolan shook his head, his eyebrows pinching together. “I don’t imagine there was much of an investigation after you told your doctor the insulin was self-inflicted. If they did have their doubts, they never contacted me.”

I knew what he was getting at, and it was a point I didn’t want to argue. At the time, I believed it had been Gypsy. It was an automated response to cover for her, and my doctor already believed I was suicidal, given my constant rejection of life-saving treatments. There was little they could do but keep me under observation for the required amount of time.

“There was no investigation,” I conceded. “At least not to my knowledge.”

Nolan shrugged. “Then it’s anyone’s guess. You’ve made a lot of enemies over the years, and from my understanding, so has Gypsy.”

I considered his suggestion, and it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. There had been incidents over the years when my car was trashed, or the office had been vandalized. Death threats in the mail were part of the job, but nobody had ever taken it this far before.

“Have you considered that your ex could have anything to do with this?” Nolan asked.

My stomach roiled. “It’s crossed my mind.”

“She’s in prison, but she has contacts on the outside. Perhaps she managed to convince someone to help her.”

“It’s possible,” I admitted. “I’m going to look into it.” I couldn’t ever underestimate her ability to fuck up my life again.

Nolan nodded. “If you need my help, let me know what I can do. I’m available.”

“I will.”

I stood, and we walked out of the church together. It was early afternoon, and the sun was blinding in its intensity. I slipped on my sunglasses, and Nolan held a cupped hand over his forehead, squinting at me. “Are we going to talk about where we go from here? Has anything changed with your plans?”

“Nothing has changed,” I said. “My final wishes remain the same. But if everything goes accordingly, you won’t need to execute them for a long while now.”

He blinked at me as he processed my words. “You’re getting treatment?”

“I’m halfway through,” I answered. “Radiation starts on Monday.”

A smile broke across his face, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke. “That’s really good news, Lucian. I’m happy to hear it.”

“Death will have to wait for another day.” I stared off into the distance. “But for now, I guess I should probably let the world—and Gypsy’s publisher—know that I’m still alive.”

Nolan chuckled, but then he scratched at his chin. “Or maybe you should wait,” he suggested. “If someone really is after the two of you, then it might be safer that you stay hidden until you figure out who it is.”

I nodded. “You have a point.”

“I always do,” he answered.

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Chapter 85

Gypsy

"EVERYTHING OKAY IN HERE?"

Lucian looked up at me from his desk, rubbing the tiredness from his eyes as he nodded. "I'm just going through my accounts."

He'd been going through them since his return this afternoon, but I wasn't going to say anything about it. This situation was stressing him out, and he wouldn't stop until he figured out what was going on.

I leaned against the doorframe. "Any leads yet?"

His brows pinched together as he glanced at the screen, and even though he shook his head, I suspected he'd uncovered something.

"Not anything I can prove," he said wearily.

"I'm worried." My hands felt like iron as they wrapped around me. "I don't know if I stirred something up by writing that book."

Lucian blinked, shaking himself from his thoughts as he focused on me. "Come here."

I walked around the desk, and he pulled me onto his lap, leaning me into his chest as he kissed my cheek. I closed my eyes, wishing for more. Since his return, he still hadn't kissed me on the lips. He said he believed me, but tension lingered between us, and I knew he was still protecting himself in case his worst fears about me turned out to be true.

"I'm here, Gypsy," he said. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you or my son."

I laid my head against his shoulder and breathed in his scent. It hit me all over again how much I missed him, and when I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, I didn't want to let him go.

"I'm not the person I was before," I whispered. "I would never want to hurt you, Lucian. Never."

He closed his eyes and leaned into me. "I know."

"If you know, then you can't hold back from me," I argued. "I need you. All of you."

His grip on me tightened as he dragged his nose through my hair and nuzzled against my neck. "I know, pet. I'm sorry. I've been an asshole, and for the first time in my life, I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to make things right."

"Trust me," I said. "Just trust me and be with me… the way things were before. That's all I want."

His fingers brushed over my face, and our eyes locked as he tilted my head up to meet his. "I'm trying, but I know I need to do better."

The vulnerability in his voice gave me the encouragement I needed to press my lips against his. His fingers curled into my nightgown, and he didn't fight me. He gave into me, and before I knew it, we were clawing at each other's clothes, frantic with a need that manifested in him fucking me roughly over the desk until I came twice.

He buried himself inside me and emptied his cock, grunting out his release before he squeezed my ass in his hands.

"I missed this," he murmured.

I laughed, turning over my shoulder to meet his eyes. "Me too."

"We should enjoy it while it lasts," he said somberly. "While I'm still feeling up to it."

He pulled away and cleaned himself up, helping me right my clothes before I propped myself on the desk and observed him.

"What will the radiation be like?" I asked.

"The procedure itself isn't bad," he said. "It's like an X-ray. It only takes a few minutes, but the setup to make sure they target the right areas is what takes the longest."

"And how long will that last?"

"I'll need to go five days a week for a few weeks most likely."

He didn't look like he wanted to think about it, but the guilt of knowing that I wasn't there when he needed me the most consumed me. He felt like

he’d missed everything with the pregnancy, but I’d missed one of the hardest things he’d ever had to do.

I reached out and stroked his arm. “What was the chemo like?”

“It was about as pleasant as you’d probably imagine,” he answered dryly. “I felt like shit. I was tired and sore and a moody asshole for the duration of it. It’s probably best you missed it.”

I looked down at the floor. “I don’t feel that way. I feel like I should have been there, and I hate that I wasn’t.”

Lucian tipped my chin up, brushing his thumb over my cheek. “I’m glad that you weren’t. I wouldn’t have wanted you to see me like that.”

“But that’s my job,” I argued. “I’m your wife.”

His lip tilted at the corner. “Well, you’ll be here for the radiation. So don’t feel like you’ve missed out on everything.”

“I wanted to Google it,” I said. “But I was too afraid I would just freak out if I did.”

“It’s probably better that you didn’t,” he admitted.

“Will you get sick?”

“I’ll be at an increased risk of infection. There will probably be side effects, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

He sounded like Superman when he said that, and I smiled because I didn’t know if he was aware that I thought he really was.

“Whatever happens…” I took his hand in mine. “We’ll get through it.”

“There’s something else you should know,” he said.

“What is it?”

Lucian sighed. “You’re still so young. I honestly never thought when I married you that this would be anything more than a contract. I never planned for it to happen this way. I just wanted to take care of you.”

“I know.” I dipped my head. “But what does that matter now? We fell in love. I don’t care about the age difference.”

“You don’t now,” he said. “But you should have everything you want out of life.”

“I already do.”

Lucian looked away quietly, before he worked up the courage to tell me what was bothering him so much. “Gypsy, I probably won’t be able to give you any more children. The chemo and radiation—”

“I don’t care.” He looked up at me, and I pressed his hand against my belly. “We have this one. That’s all we need.”

He didn’t look convinced, but I knew it was something only time could fix. He thought I would change my mind later and resent him for it, but I knew that I wouldn’t. I never thought I’d be married, and I was. I never thought I’d have any kids, and I was. Lucian had given me more than I’d already dreamed of; he just didn’t know it.

He kissed me, pulled away, and then kissed me again. “You should get to sleep.”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Soon,” he promised. “I just want to finish going through these transactions.”

I squeezed his hand. “Don’t be too long.”

At first, I thought I was dreaming. The sound of Lucian’s voice was muffled and distorted by what I could only assume was a roaring river.

“Gypsy! Wake up, baby.”

This time, his voice carried, and I coughed, keenly aware that something was wrong. So very wrong.

Dense smoke filled the bedroom, and I blinked as I tried to process what I was seeing. Flames had consumed the frame of the bedroom door, and behind them, I could barely make out Lucian’s shape.

My first instinct was to move toward him, but I stopped when the heat penetrated my skin and shook me back to my senses.

“Oh my God.” I couldn’t breathe. The smoke was so thick, I was practically choking on it. “What do I do?” I screamed.

“Gypsy, I need you to listen very carefully,” Lucian yelled. “Grab the bedroom door and slam it shut. Then go to the bathroom and get some towels wet and wrap one over your face. Breathe through your nose. Do you understand?”

“What about you?” I shrieked.

“Put the other wet towels beneath the door crack if you can. You have to be quick, okay? Then get down on the ground and wait for me. I’m going to find a way out. I’m going to break the window so I can get you out, baby.”

I shook my head, terrified. “Lucian—”

“Slam the door,” he begged. “You have to do it now. There isn’t much time.”

I didn’t want to slam the door. I felt like if I did that, I would never see him again. “Promise me it’s going to be okay,” I cried.

“I’m coming for you, Gypsy,” he promised. “Remember what I said.”

I remembered that he assured me he would do anything in his power to stay here with me, and right now, he was putting himself at risk to try to get me out.

“Slam the door, baby. Do it now.”

I looked through the flames, trying to make out his face. “Come back for me.”

“I’m going to be right there,” he insisted.

“I love you.” The words came out in a choked whisper as I reached for the handle and swung the door with all the force I could muster.

Tears streaked down my face as I covered my mouth and ran to the bathroom, soaking as many wet towels as I could carry. I followed Lucian’s instructions, wrapping one around my face and bringing the others to the door. It was already shaking in the frame, flames slipping out from beneath, and I couldn’t push the towels in with my hands, so I flung them against the crack and hoped they would hold.

Then I got down on my knees and crawled over so that I was next to the window, remembering what Lucian said about breaking the glass. It would be the only way in or out, since everything in the house was controlled with electronic locks.

I tried to stay calm, breathing slowly, biting down on the towel so I wouldn’t inhale through my mouth. Within seconds, there was a commotion outside the window, and I tried to pop my head up to see if it was Lucian.

“Stay down,” the voice yelled. “I’m breaking the window.”

I covered my head and waited as the sound of a hard object splintered against the window. It reverberated through the frame but didn’t break. For what seemed like the longest seconds of my life, I listened as the window shook but didn’t shatter. It was reinforced glass. Lucian took his security seriously. Nobody was supposed to get inside, but it also meant without unlocking it, I couldn’t get outside either.

I gulped breaths through the towel, desperately eyeing the bedroom door as it began to burn from the other side. It wouldn’t be long now. This

was no accident. Whoever had tried to kill us came back to finish the job.

A loud crack whistled through the air, and I jolted as glass finally fell to the tile beside me. I tried to stand, but my legs felt like jelly, and when Ace crawled through the window and pulled me up, fear gripped my heart. I tried to ask him about Lucian, but he wouldn't let me.

"Keep the towel on your face," he told me. "Hold on."

He lifted me into his arms and passed me out the window onto the roof of the first story. Ace crawled out behind me, and I looked around, desperate. "Where is he?"

He ignored my question, positioning himself onto the ladder he'd placed and instructing me to follow him down. All I wanted to do was find Lucian, but logically, I knew I couldn't unless I got down safely. I climbed down the ladder after him, and he helped me onto the grass.

"We need to get away from the house." He tried to lead me around the front, down the driveway, but I resisted.

"Goddammit." He grabbed me by the arm. "Do you want me to help him, or not?"

"Yes!" I screamed. "Please."

"Then you have to fucking do what I say. Go stand with your sister and don't move. Do you understand?"

I nodded, gulping in breaths of fresh air. Birdie met me at the front of the house, her face frantic. "It's okay," she said. "It's going to be okay."

But it wasn't. Because I kept staring at the side of the house where Ace disappeared. The entire thing looked like it was engulfed.

"I can't do this again." I shook my head. "I can't do this again."

I almost collapsed, but Birdie grabbed me and helped me down to the ground. "Just sit there and try to breathe. Ace will find him."

She sounded so confident, but I wasn't. Terror had reached its sharp tendrils inside my chest and wrapped around my heart. It was taking too long. Something was wrong. "Where is he?" I demanded. "Where the fuck is he?"

"I'm sorry," a quiet voice spoke from the shadows. "But Lucian's not coming."

My heart leapt into my throat when I turned to find Nolan behind us, a pistol in hand.

"Nolan?" I croaked. "What are you doing?"

He looked right through me. "Stand up."

Birdie stepped in front of me, and I scrambled to my feet as he pointed the gun right at her face.

“Birdie!”

“I don’t want to shoot her,” Nolan said. “But I will if you don’t do what I tell you.”

“Fine.” I held up my hands. “Fine. Just tell us what you want.”

He pointed back in the direction that we came from. “Walk.”

I grabbed Birdie’s arm and tried to pull her along with me, but she shook her head. “He’s just going to kill us if we follow him.”

Nolan cocked the gun, and the desperation in his eyes told me he was serious.

“Birdie, stop it.” I took her hand in mine and tugged her forward. “Just do what he says.”

She squeezed my hand, trying to convey some unspoken message as we walked back along the edge of the house. I didn’t know what Nolan wanted, but when we reached a freshly broken window in the guest bedroom, it became apparent. He waved the gun toward the frame, which was now fully engulfed in flames. “Get inside.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Birdie snarled. “You’d have to shoot me before I climbed in there.”

Without warning, Nolan struck out and cracked the gun across Birdie’s face. I screamed in horror as she crumpled to the ground, scrambling to help her, but Nolan wasn’t having it.

“Get up,” he ordered. “And climb into the window.”

“Why are you doing this?” I yelled. “What the hell is wrong with you? Lucian trusted you!”

“I don’t have a choice.” The end of his gun met the skin on my forehead, cold and unforgiving. “Get back into the house.”

It occurred to me then that he didn’t want to shoot me because he wanted to make it look as though we’d died in the fire. That might have bought me some time, if I didn’t also know that he wasn’t past smashing our skulls in and tossing us in the window himself.

“Nolan, look, whatever’s going on, we can work it out,” I tried to bargain.

“No, we can’t,” he gritted out. “You were never supposed to be a part of this. If you hadn’t come along, everything would have been fine. He would

have died like he wanted, and everything would have been fine. But you fucking ruined it."

Birdie stirred on the ground, groaning, and I tried to kneel to help her, but Nolan wouldn't allow it. "This is your last chance before I put a bullet in her head. I know you don't want to see that."

He wasn't joking. Something was frantic and wild in his eyes, spurring him to do this. The man I'd only ever known to be calm natured was now lost in a sea of despair. "I'm going to count to three, and if you and your sister aren't climbing into that window—"

A blur moved in behind him, tackling him to the ground and forcing the breath from his chest.

"Lucian!" My voice was too hoarse to yell anymore, but I had never been so happy to see anyone in my life.

He'd pinned Nolan to the ground, shoving his face into the dirt with one hand while he struggled for the gun with the other.

"My wife?" he roared. "My unborn son?"

"I had no choice," Nolan grunted.

A shot rang out, and I screamed as both men froze. I didn't know who fired it. I didn't know who had been hit.

"Lucian?"

He didn't respond, but it was Nolan who began to cough. "I was going to lose everything."

"And now, you have." Lucian raised the gun and held it against Nolan's jaw. "Just tell me why."

"The money," Nolan sputtered. "I needed the money." Tears streamed down his face as he shook his head. "I'm so sorry, Lucian. I'm sorry I let you down. Please find it in your heart to forgive me."

Nolan wrapped his bloody hands around Lucian's. I thought he was going to fight, but instead, in a move that surprised us all, he forced the trigger. Blood exploded across Lucian's face, and when my eyes moved to the place where Nolan's face had been, nothing was left but a gaping hole.

Sirens sounded in the distance, and I couldn't catch my breath. Lucian scrambled away from Nolan and moved toward me slowly, haloed by the light of the fire, the avenging angel I had once declared him to be. Blood and soot smeared his clothes, and his hand was clearly burned, but he was alive. He wrapped his arms around me and whispered the three sweetest words I'd ever heard.

“I’m here, baby.”

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Chapter 86

Gypsy

"I'M JUST GOING TO RUN to the store."

Lucian inserted himself between me and the door of the condo we'd rented while the house in Desert Shores was being rebuilt.

"Just tell me what you need, and I'll have one of Ace's men get it."

My fingers brushed over his face, trying to erase the worried lines that formed whenever he felt like I was slipping out his grasp for even a few moments. It had been this way for weeks, and I'd played along for a while, but it was time to address it.

"It's okay," I told him. "Birdie is going with me, and Ace will chaperone. You don't need to worry."

"How can I not?" he snapped. He was tired and irritable, and I didn't blame him. For the past four weeks, he'd been going to radiation religiously, battling the awful side effects while he tried to navigate his own inner turmoil and deal with the detectives' constant questions.

"We need to get back to the business of living," I said gently. "You know it can't be like this when the baby comes. There will be times when you'll have to trust that everything is going to be okay because you can't be here twenty-four seven."

"I know that." He sighed. "But I also know that someone I thought I could trust tried to murder you twice. He tried to take away my wife. My son…"

His voice cracked, and he blinked away the memory of that night while I leaned into him and wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Because of you, I will never have to worry about that again,” I said. “Our son will never have to worry.”

“You can’t be certain of that,” Lucian answered. “Just because Nolan is gone doesn’t mean the threat is.” His eyes looked like a war zone as he thought of all the possible enemies we’d both accumulated over the course of our lifetimes.

“We could spend time worrying about it, or we can be prepared while we carry on with our lives. But if you let them control us, they win.”

Lucian looked down at me, shaking his thoughts away before his forehead pressed against mine. “I know, pet. I just can’t lose you.”

“You won’t,” I assured him. “But sometimes, you have to trust me.”

He blinked, rattled by my words. “I do trust you, Gypsy. I fucked up by ever doubting you. And I want you to know I’ll never make that mistake again.”

My lips brushed against his, and I smiled. “I know you won’t.”

“Let me go with you,” Lucian said. “At the very least, just let me do that if you have to go.”

“You can’t,” I argued. “You’re supposed to be resting, for one. And for another, I’m shopping for your birthday present, so you can’t be there.”

His eyes clouded over, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke. “Birthday present?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what Amazon is for,” he said. “Besides, I already have everything I need. I have you.”

I kissed him again. “True. But I still want to get you something.”

A knock sounded on the front door, and I heard Ace clear his throat behind us as he entered.

Lucian squeezed me as he looked at Ace. The threat was already on his lips when Ace smirked. “I’ve got this, brother. She will be safe in my care. You never have to doubt that.”

“Straight there and back?” Lucian pleaded with me.

I nodded, reaching up on my toes to kiss his cheek. “Now go get some rest.”

Detective Taylor sat down on the sofa, arranging our file and his pen on the coffee table in front of him. “I just have a few more things I’d like to go over.”

They’d been saying that for the past four weeks. Lucian was exhausted and weak, and I really didn’t want him doing this right now, but I also knew he just wanted it to be over. He took my hand in his, squeezing gently to let me know I didn’t need to worry. But I was worried. For the past month, we’d been answering questions while the detectives dug through every facet of our lives.

“According to your statement, you believe Nolan Clark gained access to your home that night with the alarm code, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Lucian answered. “As I’ve told the other detectives before, he was a close friend of mine. I’d given him the access code for emergencies.”

“Ironic,” Detective Taylor mumbled. “And nobody in your home heard him come in that evening?”

Lucian remained steadfast in his responses. “It was the middle of the night. We were all asleep.”

The detective flipped through his notes, reading over a paragraph before scribbling something down and returning to his questions. “Gypsy was in the bedroom, and you were in the office at your desk?”

“Yes,” Lucian grunted. “Where I had fallen asleep.”

“And it is your belief that Nolan took your phone from your desk—where you were sleeping—and locked the house from the inside before disabling the smoke alarms.”

Lucian rubbed at his tired eyes. “That’s the only logical conclusion I could draw, considering my phone was gone when I woke.”

“What woke you?” Taylor asked.

“The sound of the fire.”

“And can you describe to me what happened then?”

“My first instinct was to get to Gypsy.” Lucian looked at me, flinching as he recalled the events of that night. “But when I got to our bedroom, the fire blocked my entry to her.”

Taylor's eyes scanned over the previous notes, probably checking to make sure that the story was the same. "And what did you do at that point?"

"I gave Gypsy instructions to shut the door and hold tight, so I could come in from the outside."

"But you didn't make it outside?" Taylor looked up.

"No." Lucian shook his head. "I didn't make it to her, but she got out on her own."

"Because you encountered Nolan in the hall at that point?" Taylor questioned.

"Encountered isn't the word I would use," Lucian responded in a low voice. "He hit me in the back of the head with a gun."

"And then he left you there?"

"Yes."

"But you managed to get outside on your own when you regained consciousness?" Taylor asked.

"Yes," Lucian repeated.

"At which point of the house did you exit?"

"The front door."

Taylor paused to check the notes. "And then you tackled him to the ground where a fight for the gun ensued, which ultimately resulted in Nolan's death?"

Lucian hung his head. "That's correct."

"It wasn't Lucian's fault," I interjected. "Nolan pulled the trigger himself."

Taylor studied me. "After the first shot, you mean?"

"Yes." I glared. "After the first shot. Right before Nolan almost killed me."

Lucian's hand found my back, rubbing the tension from my shoulders.

"Okay." Taylor nodded. "Is it still your belief that Nolan was motivated by the current state of his finances?"

"Yes," Lucian replied quietly. "That's the only thing that makes sense. I knew he'd struggled with a gambling addiction over the years, but I didn't realize how bad it had become."

"That might be the case, but it's quite an elaborate plan to fake your death, convince everyone you were dead, and then come back to try to kill you all over again," Taylor noted.

“Maybe he would have got it right the first time if we hadn’t been friends for so long.” Lucian scowled.

The detective ignored Lucian’s tone and scribbled down another note before he looked at me. “Gypsy, according to my notes, there were no other witnesses besides the two of you that night?”

My fingers dug into Lucian’s thigh. “That’s correct. It was just us.”

Taylor held my gaze for a few seconds too long, and something in my gut told me he knew I was full of shit.

“As we told you already, the security footage from the house couldn’t be recovered, but there was something else we found.” He removed a grainy photo from the file and handed it over to me. It was surveillance from the community cameras, a picture of Ace and Birdie on his motorcycle, their faces obscured by helmets.

“The entry cameras captured this footage around the same time of the incident,” Taylor noted. “None of the neighbors seem to know who they are. Do you?”

I shook my head on autopilot, forcing the word out like my life depended on it. “No.”

“Well, luckily, we were able to track down the owner of the motorcycle,” Taylor said. “Huck William Fallon, more commonly known as Ace. Does that ring a bell?”

“He’s a friend of ours,” Lucian interjected. “He’s been checking on us often, helping out since I’ve been sick.”

“Funny,” Taylor said. “That’s exactly what he told us too. But it seems he didn’t notice the house was on fire that night. I wonder why that is.”

“We aren’t the only ones who live in this community,” Lucian bit out. “He could have been visiting anyone that night.”

Taylor disregarded him and returned his attention to me. “What about the girl on the back of the bike? Any idea who that is, Gypsy?”

“You’d have to ask Ace. I have no idea.”

“Odd.” Taylor scratched at his chin and set the photo aside. “I wonder who it could be.”

I felt like he was toying with me, but I didn’t respond.

“In your own words, can you tell me one more time what happened that night?”

I was tired of this song and dance, but I knew we had to go along with it. Nobody could know that Birdie was there that night. It was the only way

to ensure she was safe while she recovered from her injuries.

“I was in the bedroom,” I began the story I’d told too many times to count. “Asleep. Lucian was going to come to bed after. I woke up when I heard him screaming from the hall, but it was so loud, it was difficult to tell if it was real at first.”

The detective’s pen traced over the previous version of events I’d given him, looking for any discrepancies.

“The doorway between us was a wall of fire, and he couldn’t get to me. There was so much smoke in the room, I panicked. Lucian told me I had to shut the bedroom door and wait for him to come around to the window outside.”

“Okay, and did he?”

It was a stupid question, considering Lucian answered it only a few minutes ago, but I complied regardless. “No. I broke the window out myself. Lucian was still trapped inside, fighting with Nolan.”

“But you didn’t witness this?” Detective Taylor asked.

“No.”

“The windows were reinforced,” he observed. “Can you remember what you broke it with?”

“Lucian had a special tool in the sill for emergencies,” I lied.

“Okay.” He clicked his pen in rapid succession. “What happened next?”

“I went to the front of the house to find Lucian, but Nolan found me first. He tried to force me back into a window, and that’s when Lucian tackled him to the ground. They fought over the gun, and Nolan forced the trigger.”

“It was still somewhat dark out at that time. Are you certain that’s what happened?”

“Yes.”

Detective Taylor observed me for far longer than I liked before he scribbled down a few more notes. “It looks like we’re going to be finalizing this case. As of right now, the prosecutor has decided not to file charges.”

A breath I didn’t realize I was holding seeped from my lungs.

“We were able to verify the records tied to the foundation,” Taylor informed us. “Nolan had been funneling money to bogus cases for the past three years. In total, we estimate that he collected over two hundred thousand dollars from the foundation alone.”

Lucian bowed his head, shaking it in disgust. “I should have caught it sooner.”

I squeezed his hand. “There’s no way you could have known. You trusted him.”

He looked at me, his eyes a storm of emotion. “More than I should have.”

I hoped he would eventually find the forgiveness he needed for the decisions he’d made that night, but it wouldn’t be today.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Well, now you and your husband rebuild your lives, I suppose.” Taylor stood and offered me his hand. But when I shook it, he didn’t let me go. “I almost forgot. There was just one more thing I needed to ask you.”

“Yes?”

“Naturally, during the course of the investigation, there was some information that came up, and it got me curious. Your maiden name was Gypsy Blue, correct?”

I offered him a stiff smile. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“The stepdaughter of Ricky Montoya, right?”

My face blanched, and he didn’t miss it, but I tried to regain my composure quickly. “Yes.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about his murder, would you?”

At that point, Lucian stepped up beside me, gently removing my hand from the grasp of the detective. “What are you insinuating here?”

“It was a simple question,” Taylor answered, his eyes never leaving me.

“I heard he died,” I forced out. “But I had already left that place far behind when I got the news.”

His features softened, and he didn’t try to hide his sympathy. “There were a lot of accounts of what was going on in that house. If those were true, I might even say that whoever took him out did the world a favor.”

I didn’t answer, and Lucian’s response was to tighten his grip on my hand, a reminder that he was here. He wouldn’t let anything bad happen to me.

“It’s a shame that the state of California didn’t recognize the issues they were dealing with back then,” Taylor continued. “I think you’ll be happy to know that things are a lot different now. The laws have finally caught up with child trafficking. Although, if I had to guess, I would bet your stint in juvie was probably a welcome vacation at the time.”

“That’s enough,” Lucian growled. “If you have a point, get to it, or get out.”

Taylor nodded. “I’m not implying that Gypsy had anything to do with it; however, I would like to follow up with your sister, Birdie, if you could give me her whereabouts.”

My mouth was so dry, I couldn’t speak. I didn’t know how he found about Birdie, but he did. This was what we’d been running from for years, and it had finally caught up with us. For so long, I’d known that when it came down to it, I would take the fall. That was the only option I ever saw that was fair and just. Birdie couldn’t survive prison, and she would have never been in this position if it weren’t for me. The guilt of not doing something myself had consumed me for years.

I was too paralyzed to fix the situation myself, and now Birdie and I were both fucked up. But I didn’t know how to protect her anymore. Taking the blame was out of the question when I had the baby to think about. I wouldn’t give her up either, and when I looked at Lucian, he knew it.

“From my understanding,” he said, “they haven’t spoken in years.”

Taylor’s brows pinched together as he examined me. “Is that true? I have several accounts that the two of you were rather close.”

“We were.” I stared down at my shoes, thinking quick to spin the lie. “She got wrapped up in a guy I didn’t like. We argued about it, and I haven’t heard from her in a while. I figured that whenever she’s ready to talk, she’ll let me know. But I can tell you right now that she didn’t have anything to do with it either.”

Taylor seemed doubtful. “From what I heard, she was prone to bouts of rage.”

“Can you blame her?” I snapped.

Lucian rubbed his hand along my neck, and I did my best to refrain from telling Taylor exactly how repugnant Ricky Montoya was.

“Do you have a phone number for Birdie?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Sorry, I don’t.”

“How about an address?”

I blew out a breath. “That’s anyone’s guess. She could be anywhere in the country for all I know.”

“Hmm.” He looked between Lucian and I as he handed over another card with his information. “Well, if you do hear from her, I’d like to speak with her.”

“Of course.” My fingernails dug into my palm. “I’ll let her know if I hear from her, but it’s not likely.”

He nodded. “That’s okay. I’m sure I’ll track her down.”

.

Chapter 87

Gypsy

"I DON'T KNOW YOU ALL that well." My head dipped as I breathed through the pain in my chest. "But I feel like after everything, I can trust you, and I really hope that's true."

"As long as you're Lucian's wife, you have my loyalty," Ace replied gruffly.

I looked up at him, my eyes blurry with hate for what I was about to do. I knew how much Birdie valued her freedom, and she wasn't going to take kindly to this.

"I've tried to think of other options," I said. "I tried to talk to her myself. She doesn't listen. She's reckless, and she puts herself at risk. She still refuses to leave even though it's the best thing for her."

"Leaving won't solve her problems," Ace answered. "Birdie still has a lot of growing up to do."

"I know," I said softly.

Ace got up and walked to the window, looking out into the distance as he offered what I hadn't been able to ask for. "I can take care of her. Keep her safe. She probably won't like it."

My hands trembled as I brought them together in my lap. "Can you give me your word that you'll never hurt her?"

He glanced back at me. "I'm not a good man, Gypsy. I have a low tolerance for spoiled brats—"

“She isn’t—”

Ace narrowed his eyes. “She is. And I get it. She had a rough fucking go of it, but you’ve been trying to overcompensate for everything that’s ever happened to her, and that isn’t working anymore, is it?”

His words triggered my defenses, but at the same time, I had no argument. “It’s easy for you to say, but we did the best we could.”

“And if that hasn’t worked out by now, maybe it’s time for a new approach.”

We stared at each other silently, while I tried to figure out if this was either the best or worst idea I ever had.

“She can live at the compound with me,” Ace said. “But if you want me to do this, that means you have to let me take the wheel from here. I can’t have you trying to interfere every time she calls crying about a rule she doesn’t like.”

“I get that.” I nodded. “I wouldn’t do that. Birdie needs structure. She needs rules.”

“She needs a hell of a lot more than that.” Ace sighed.

I was asking a lot from him, and I hated that I even had to rely on anyone else at all to take care of Birdie. But the truth was, despite his rough exterior, Ace had a soft spot for my little sister. For some reason, I just knew in my gut that he would do anything to protect her.

“You can’t let any of the men at the compound touch her,” I said. “I mean it.”

“That’s not going to fucking happen,” Ace snarled and then shook his head. The viciousness of his statement came as a shock to him, but it didn’t surprise me. His reaction was exactly what I’d been looking for, and the confirmation I needed.

She would be safe.

“Can you have your guys keep an eye on her for a few more days?” I requested. “Just until the baby is born. And then…” I cringed for what I was about to say. “Then you can take her.”

.

Epilogue

Lucian

"AHHH." GYPSY'S GROAN TUGGED ME from my sleep, and I bolted upright when I saw her clutching her stomach.

I laid my hands on top of hers. "What is it?"

"The baby," she rasped. "I think it's time."

I flipped the covers off her and noticed that her water had broken.

"Oh my God," she murmured when she looked down. "That's so gross."

Panic was rising in my chest, but I managed to smile at her reaction. "It's not gross," I assured her.

She cringed and attempted to scoot from the bed on her own. "Don't look at it, please."

I scrambled to help my stubborn wife, wrapping my arm around her waist as she tried to fend me off.

"I have to go clean up, Lucian," she said. "This is ridiculous."

I couldn't figure out why she had shut down until she glanced back at the bed, her shoulders weighted down with shame. She was embarrassed, and when I looked into her eyes, I knew it was because this had unexpectedly triggered a bad memory for her. A memory most likely from her childhood when her control had been taken from her.

I pulled her close despite her protests and kissed her forehead. "You are so beautiful, Gypsy."

She looked up at me, surprised, and then buried her face against my chest.

“I want to be there for every second of this,” I told her. “Please don’t push me away. Nothing I see will ever change the way I feel about you.”

“You say that now,” she grunted as another contraction took possession of her body.

“I say it because it’s true,” I promised. “Remember that this trust thing works both ways.”

Her face softened, and she nodded before the door burst open and Birdie appeared, followed by Ace and Luna.

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” Birdie asked in a panicked voice. “Luna said it was happening.”

“Stop doing that.” Gypsy glared at Luna. “It creeps me out.”

Luna smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. Just a feeling.”

“We need to go,” I announced.

“Right,” Gypsy said. “We should probably do that after I change.”

I wanted to argue, but I knew it wasn’t something she would bend on. I helped her into the bathroom where she’d laid out a set of clothes for this time, so they were always ready.

“Lucian?” She looked up at me and waved her fingers in front of my face.

“Yes?”

“Can I get some privacy please?”

I winced, and she smiled. “It’ll be okay, I promise. Two minutes, that’s all I need. You can wait outside the door if you want.”

I waited outside the door, listening for any sound of possible issues. But Gypsy kept her word and reappeared within two minutes, dressed in yoga pants and a tank top, ready to go. I grabbed the duffle bag we’d packed and slung it over my shoulder, insisting that everyone get into the car immediately.

“Lucian.” Gypsy stopped me again, her smile assuring me she was much calmer than I currently felt.

“Yes?”

“You should probably put some clothes on too.”

I glanced down, and like an idiot, I was still wearing my briefs and nothing else. Angry with myself for wasting precious time, I handed the bag

to Ace while I scrambled into the closet and threw on a pair of jeans and a tee shirt.

“It’s on backward.” Ace pointed at the shirt when I walked out.

“I don’t care.” I snatched the bag from him and took Gypsy’s hand in mine. “Let’s go.”

“Look up,” Birdie sang.

I glanced up at Birdie, and she snapped another picture with her phone.

“You didn’t even smile,” she accused.

I ignored her and went back to looking at my son as Gypsy touched my arm beside me. “Isn’t he the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen in your whole life?”

She was uncharacteristically choked up with emotion, and I was too. I couldn’t stop staring at him, and I couldn’t agree more with her summation.

I had so many conflicting emotions when it came to this baby, remembering what it was like the first time I held Dawson. It was a love you never even knew existed until it hit you in the face like a hammer. For the past few weeks, I’d worried that when I held this baby, there would be guilt if I felt too much. I didn’t ever want to feel like I was replacing Dawson, but I knew now that couldn’t ever be true.

They were so different, but my love was the same. I loved this baby as much as I still loved Dawson. And as difficult as it was to acknowledge that Dawson would never get to meet his brother, I was determined to ensure he would always be remembered.

Gypsy must have known it too when she laid her hand over mine. “I was thinking for a name… maybe Lux Dawson West?”

I glanced down at my wife, who somehow managed to look beautiful even after fifteen hours of war in the delivery room. My throat was too clogged to speak, so I nodded. And even though I was a man, I wasn’t too proud to hide the tears that sprung to my eyes as I kissed our son again.

I heard Birdie snap a few more pictures at that moment, but I didn’t care. When I looked at Gypsy and Lux, I felt an enormous sense of

responsibility to protect them, and I wanted her to know that I intended to do just that.

I leaned down and kissed her, and she smiled against me. “Happy Birthday. Your other present is on my laptop. I’d planned on showing you today, but this will have to do for now.”

She pulled out her phone and handed it to me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Just look,” she instructed.

I did. And after reading over a few of the sentences in the word document she’d offered, I came to understand.

“Emmanuel?” Warmth spread through my chest as I looked down at her. “You’re writing his story?”

She nodded, her teeth digging into her lip. Gypsy still didn’t realize how brilliant she was, even after the success of her first novel. I’d read it from cover to cover several times over, marveling not only at the way she saw me, but the words she’d strung together to create a book about my life.

Since then, I’d encouraged her to keep writing. Hoping she’d find the right story to inspire her, I even offered up several of my past client’s names as potential ideas. But she’d been very secretive about what she was working on until now, and I understood why. It was still a sensitive subject for me, but Emmanuel’s story deserved to be told.

“Is that okay?” Gypsy asked.

“I couldn’t ask for anything better,” I assured her as I handed Lux off to her. “I can’t wait to read it. And I have something for you too.”

She smoothed the baby fine hair away from his forehead and leaned down to breathe in his scent. “It’s your birthday. What could you possibly have for me?”

I retrieved the phone from my pocket and pulled up my email I’d been sitting on since last week. When I showed it to her, she stared at the screen, face blank before it slowly crumpled with emotion.

“Is that real?” she whispered. “I thought you still had one more treatment.”

I tucked the phone back into my pocket. “I don’t actually. It was finished last week, but I wanted to surprise you.”

A sob burst from her throat as tears erupted down her face. I rushed to sit down beside her, pulling her against me. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

“What’s wrong?” Birdie demanded. “What did it say?”

“Nothing.” Gypsy waved her hand in the air. “There’s nothing wrong. It’s just that… everything is so right. Everything is right now. He’s in remission, and we have Lux, and…” The rest came out as gibberish as I held her, and I began to doubt that I should have said anything at all, but eventually, her tears turned to laughter. “I think I’m still a little hormonal.”

“I think you’re probably right.” I chuckled. “But it’s good news, right?”

“It’s the best news in the entire world,” she assured me. “I think it’s safe to say that this is the best day of my life.”

I kissed her, whispering my promise against her lips.

“It’s just the beginning, pet.”

The End. .

Acknowledgments

Writing a book is agony. Doing it again and again could only be considered insanity. For the last six months, I have dragged my masochistic little heart back to this manuscript to toil in my misery. I wrote on plains, trains, and automobiles. I wrote between signings and traveling and birthdays and letting my dogs out to potty 5,394839823 times a day. I wrote in the dead of night, and the buttcrack of dawn (most of which I erased because my brain doesn't function before noon). Most of it was awful, and for the first time in my life, my own book actually made me cry because I felt every emotion from these characters. I took a chance on letting them tell their stories, and I'm grateful you did too.

So to all my perverse, sadistic readers who for reasons I can't fathom continue to love and support my work, thank you. Thank you for keeping me insane because I wouldn't want it any other way. You are the reason I get up every day and stare at my computer screen and string together words that I hope will eventually make a story. I never want to let you down, and I'm so grateful for each and every one of you who actually enjoys the twisted places my mind takes me. I couldn't do what I do without you.

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EXCERPT FROM THIEF-

“Nakya.”

The chill of Nikolai’s voice startles me, and when my eyes rise to meet his, a weighted awareness returns to my chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demands.

The magazine in my hands falls together. I was right to worry. His energy is dark and distinctly volatile. It was out of line barging into his office when he was in a meeting, but to admit it would be a mistake.

“I’m not doing anything.” My voice is too soft, barely audible, but it does not tame the harshness of Nikolai’s features.

“What do you mean to do, coming into my office dressed in…” He gestures to my clothing. “It’s not appropriate.”

If he weren’t so nettled, the irony of his declaration might be humorous, considering there are women leaving this house at all hours of the night in various states of disarray. What unspeakable offense I’ve committed by wearing a leotard is a puzzle only his mind can solve.

When he stalks towards me, instinct triggers me to hunch down and protect my head by curling into myself. My heart is sluggish, and my palms clammy as I wait for the inevitable. But when it doesn’t come, I dare to peek up at him, only to find him frozen mid-step, his expression uncertain and his eyes dazed.

His actions are at odds with the certainty I feel in my gut. Life has taught me well that when the storm comes, you take whatever shelter you can find. When he doesn’t move, I dare to try.

Scrambling from the chair with feverish limbs, I hobble desperately in the direction of my only sanctuary—the bathroom. Deprived of my crutches and too far gone to reach for them, I’m nearly immobile. Even with the brace, pain splinters every step, and tears prick my eyes. Before I’m halfway across the room, my legs give out and I collapse to my knees.

Nikolai watches wordlessly as I totter forward onto my elbows, clutching the carpet between my fingers as I crawl away like an injured animal.

“Nakya,” he bellows. “Stop. Stop this right now.”

Logically, I know I should. But I can’t. I’m too terrified of what will happen if he catches me. And so I go on, dragging my body forward until my fingertips cross over the threshold of the cold bathroom floor. The marble gives me something concrete to grab onto, but it’s of little use when Nikolai’s iron grip catches me around my good ankle.

A strangled cry squeezes from my lungs when he flips me over and pins me down with the overbearing weight of his powerful body. There isn’t a chance in hell that I could fight him off now. His pulse is strong and steady, his muscles unyielding. I’m out of breath and out of hope.

His hand hovers over my face, and I shake my head frantically, pleading to a higher power to save me. Calloused fingers come to rest on my jaw, contracting in warning.

“Stop,” he repeats.

It’s another wasted command, considering I couldn’t move even if I wanted to. The wall of his chest has me trapped. My head spins and my pulse thrashes in my ears. Every breath is a labored struggle, and I think I might pass out.

“I’m not going to hurt you, *zvezda*. Breathe. Relax, and breathe.”

My hands come to rest on his biceps, determined to push him away. I can’t take false comfort in his honeyed assurances. I don’t want to. But right now, it feels like that’s exactly what’s happening.

He’s a liar.

But if it’s true, he’s a convincing one. More skilled than perhaps even me. When my eyes clash with his, the fight in me dissolves.

He is blue. Hazy blue. Electrifying blue. Blue like the sea and the sky and the storms that rule my life. And right now, his blue is ruling over me. In a matter of seconds, he’s rendered me a servant to the breezeless ocean in his eyes. They are soft around the edges, unmarred by the lines of time. Everything about him is harsh, but I did not realize his eyes could be so sedating.

I’m hyper aware of him now. The way he smells of tobacco and cloves and vanilla. His scent is smoky, dark, and faintly sweet. His body is warm and rigid. And I have witnessed men in all their muscular glory on the stage

of the ballet, but I have never been so close to one. I have never felt a man's weight pressing into my body, making me feel small and soft in contrast. I have never stared so intimately into eyes like these while he touches my hair, untangling it from my face the way I imagine a lover would.

I've never had a lover. I've never been touched by a man or even a boy. But there is no mistaking which side of the spectrum Nikolai falls on. He is all man. And his domination of my smaller, weaker frame has left me feeling drunk and slightly disoriented. A battered driftwood wrestling with the tide. Rocking against the waves, desperate for solid ground, he's pulling me farther and farther from the shore. I'm going to drown in his energy.

"Stop." The word rushes from my parted lips, reeking of my desperation and confusion.

Nikolai halts, his hand still tangled in my hair. The air between us is thick and sticky. Hot and humid like an east coast summer. His ocean eyes carve a path to my lips, and he is so close I can taste the cinnamon on his breath. I think that he might kiss me, and it horrifies me that I want him to.

I feel like I've been doused in ice water when he yanks away abruptly and without explanation. In the time it takes me to blink, his face has neutralized, the dangerous chemistry between us expertly defused.

"I'll carry you back to the chair."

His voice is without color or emotion. A man without feeling. Somehow, I am the one who is left feeling wrecked when he lifts me without effort and deposits me into the chair like a child.

This isn't right. None of this is right. When Nikolai stalks out the door without another word, my ankle throbs, and my chest does too.

I knew my captor was dangerous.

I just didn't realize how dangerous he was to *me*.

I'm a good girl.

I live by a code that can't be bent or broken. It is my duty to my family to stay innocent and pure. To marry an Italian man. The stars are already

aligned.

But Nikolai Kozlov re-writes my destiny with five simple words.

You belong to me now.

EXCERPT FROM BLEEDING HEARTS-

I heard the sound of a zipper being undone followed by the rustling of clothing.

“Stand up,” he said softly. “Undress yourself for me.”

From the location of his voice, I could tell he was sitting in the chair across the room. Watching me. The distance between us felt more threatening than when he was actually touching me.

I rose on trembling legs, lifting my dress up without any kind of finesse.

“Slowly,” he chided.

The soft cotton material fell back to my knees, and I clenched it in my fists as I drew it back up over my body. I didn’t know how to be sexy. I didn’t even want to try. But I had to fulfill his request, so I did as he asked, taking my time before I pulled it over my head and discarded it on the floor.

I stood there and waited for him to say something, anything. It took him forever.

“Now the rest.” His voice was thick, and it disarmed me.

I was wearing a simple white cotton bra and panties. There was nothing sexy about me. If anything, I looked virginal. The irony was too painful to consider.

I reached behind my back and unclasped my bra, allowing it to fall to the floor. I tamped down every instinct I had to cover my breasts as the cool air hit them, hardening my nipples. The only thing I could do was focus on the next task, shimmying out of my panties and kicking them aside.

It was all out there now. He could see every part of me. I hated it.

“Now get down on your knees and crawl to me.”

I hesitated, and this earned me a cruel reminder of his control.

“Don’t make me ask twice.”

I sank to my knees and allowed a couple tears to spill from the corners of my eyes. This was the ultimate form of humiliation, and he was getting off on treating me like an animal. I couldn't understand how someone could be so cruel. So callous.

And yet, I crawled. The carpet burned against my knees, and when my cheek grazed his thigh, I jumped.

"So skittish," he whispered, tangling a hand in my hair and jerking my head upward. "I like that."

"Please don't be rough," I blurted.

"You don't get to make those requests," he said. "Remember?"

His response made my blood run cold. Because it implied that he had every intention of being rough and that he would thoroughly enjoy it. More tears came, and I couldn't hide them. He wiped them away with his thumbs before he continued his instructions.

"Stand up and put your palms against the wall."

I rose up again and edged towards the wall, being careful not to trip myself. I only had my hands to guide me, and he made no effort of helping. But as soon as they were planted firmly in place, I felt his presence behind me.

He gripped my hips and pulled back at the same time he kicked my legs apart. I stumbled into the position reluctantly, every muscle in my body tense and ready for a fight. Then his hands were on me. Everywhere.

His touch was confusing. It was gentle and warm, and he didn't even try to hide the sound of his pleasure as his palms roamed over my skin. His pained groans told me he'd been waiting a long time for this moment.

He started at the nape of my neck, drifting down my sides and over my ribs. I shivered when he squeezed my ass in his hands, then glided back up my stomach. When he cupped my breasts, something else flared to life inside of me. A strange sensation that burned in my gut and left me feeling a little bit drunk.

My breathing changed as his lips found my neck, and I couldn't control it. I was panting, hard. My fear had transformed into something else entirely.

"Do you like my hands on your body?" he whispered into my ear.

I whimpered in response, hoping he wouldn't make me answer him. That was too cruel. It wasn't desire, it was biology. My body was adapting to the situation. Doing what it needed to survive. That, I was certain of.

Because if I had liked it, liked the hands of this monster, that would have made me a monster too.

His teeth scraped along my throat, all the way down to my shoulder, leaving a certain trail of red marks. It burned, but it made my heart race faster too.

“I want to do everything to you,” he rasped. “Depraved things I haven’t even thought of yet, but that I certainly will.”

When he knelt behind me and dug his fingers into my hips, I cried out. He laughed and then buried his face between my parted legs. I forgot the pain of his grip when his tongue lashed against me. It was soft and gentle at first, and the traitorous desire that simmered inside of me now boiled over.

A sound of surrender escaped my throat when his tongue pushed inside of me. I’d never been so exposed in front of a man before, and I could only imagine how flushed I must be. Moisture clung to my skin, and my palms grew weak against the wall. I trembled when something zipped up my spine. My belly contracted, and my body grew so stiff I knew I would explode any second.

I squeezed my eyes shut and gasped for air as my toes dug into the carpet. I was so close. So close. Any moment now…

My pleasure fled in a violent shock of pain when he sank his teeth into my inner thigh and bit down. My scream echoed off the walls of the room as I collapsed forward.

He licked at the wound and kneaded my ass cheeks in his hand before he leaned in and drew in a long breath. He was inhaling me, and I wanted to die of shame.

He stood up behind me and pulled my back against his chest as he nipped at my ear. “You didn’t think I would make it that easy did you, Brighton?”

I wanted to cry, but I was in shock. He hadn’t even been inside of me yet, and already I could feel him everywhere. I was certain my hips were bruised from his grip, and he had marked my shoulder and thigh already with his teeth. A shiver ran through me when his arousal dug into my spine.

“Turn around,” he ordered.

I could barely hold myself up, and it showed. I spun in his arms, pressing my back against the wall as he caged me in with his body. He was large. I could feel it now. His body was lean and muscular, and much taller

than mine. I felt his eyes on me, his gaze burning through me as he decided on his next method of torture.

It didn't take me long to find out what that was. He dragged my fingers down to his cock, wrapping my palm around him. It was so thick my fingers didn't even touch, and suddenly I couldn't swallow.

"Stroke me," he breathed.

His anguished voice was unexpected, and it filled me with a strange sort of raw power. I may have been blindfolded, but I wasn't deaf, and it was obvious I was the one getting to him now. I didn't understand it. I was nobody, that's what I'd been told my whole life. But to this man, I was something. Something he wanted very badly.

The warmth of his breath on my cheek surprised me as he smoothed my hair back away from my face.

"I've wanted to do this for a long time now, Brighton." His words skated over my lips, followed by the touch of his mouth.

The kiss was gentle at first, hesitant. And it was confusing. I didn't want to like it, but his lips were soft and inviting, his breath minty and sweet. It reminded me of another time and place, and for a moment, I could pretend it was that man I was kissing.

My lips parted, and he seized the opportunity to taste me. To drink my resistance as if it fueled him. A strangled noise left my throat, and it spurred him on. He cradled my face in his hands as the kiss grew deeper, effectively stealing all the breath from my lungs. Heat coiled low inside my belly as I moved my hand against his rigid flesh. I wasn't sure if I was doing it right, but he didn't complain. In fact, he was making sounds in his throat that seemed to have a direct correlation to my own traitorous body.

Why it should turn me on that I was affecting him this way, I had no idea. This wasn't happening the way I had envisioned. I was supposed to hate him, to feel nothing but disgust, but it wasn't that simple. My body had betrayed me.

When his lips broke away, I actually whined. But then his hands were on me again, rough and possessive as he lifted me up and set me on the table. The wood was cool beneath my skin, and his voice was even colder when he spoke again.

"How easy you are to bend to my will," he observed.

A cold front moved between us as his palms bit into my legs, prying them apart. Whatever had happened between us a moment ago was gone,

and now fear was left in its place.

His mouth surprised me when he captured one of my nipples between his teeth and gave it a tug. I yelped, only to be shocked when his hand curled around my throat.

“You are here for my pleasure,” he growled as he moved in closer. “Don’t forget that.”

On instinct, my hand came up to his, trying to pry it from the delicate skin around my neck. It had only been a few seconds, but already I couldn’t breathe.

“Please,” I begged.

He slapped my hand away and tightened his grip.

“Don’t fucking move.”

His arousal nudged against my entrance as he squeezed my hip with his other hand to hold me in place. Spots flashed inside of my vision as he tore into me in one deep thrust.

A sob escaped me, and he released my throat and froze. I was burning inside, stretched beyond all comprehension from his rough entrance.

He cursed and leaned back, gripping my thighs as he examined the place where we connected with his fingers.

“Brighton,” he rasped. “Are you a…”

“Yes!” I cried out. “I’m a virgin.”

How far would you go to save someone you love? Would you give up your body? Your mind? Your heart?

I did, and it cost me everything.

He says he owns me. And it’s true.

I’ve signed over complete control of my body and life for six months to a man I don’t know. Five years he’s been planning this. They say revenge is a

dish best served cold. But my blackmailer serves it up white hot. He's addicted to my innocence, and I'm addicted to him.

EXCERPT from BEAST-

Before I even open my eyes, a vivid and familiar scent hits me.

Wild roses.

I am surrounded by wild roses. They are the first thing I notice when I come to. And they are everywhere. Crimson and soft velvet perched upon delicate stems riddled with thorns.

My eyes are dry and heavy, but a tear leaks from the corner and spills over onto my cheek. I don't want to accept my reality. I don't want to accept that this is anything more than a dream. But the high arched glass ceilings only confirm that I am trapped in a nightmare instead. A beautiful nightmare, with stars as far as the eye can see.

It's a conservatory. I'm in a conservatory. On a bed. Surrounded by roses and stars.

This is not a place I have ever been. And yet, it feels acquainted to me. A place from my memories.

My father used to speak of a place like this. A mansion in the forest. Moldavia, he said it was called. I didn't know where it was. At times, I often wondered if it even existed, the way he spoke of it.

But I recognize the architectural style. I recognize the trees outside the windows. They are things that I know can't be a coincidence. There is no doubt in my mind that I am at Moldavia. And the person who was leaving rose petals at my door all along was really Javi.

The same man who refused to meet with me. The one I was so desperate to meet before.

I wonder now if Art knew. If he knew how dangerous Javi was and he was just trying to protect me. I can't understand it. Nothing about this makes sense.

Has it been Javi all along? Has he been the one who has watched my every move for… I shudder to think of how long it's been.

That terror seeps into every one of my bones when I try to move and I can't. I am bound by my wrists to the bed frame.

My lungs burn with the need for air, and I can't think. I want to scream, but I am paralyzed.

Javi murdered his own mother. That's what his file said. And now he's going to murder me too. Tears well up in my eyes and I silently curse my father, wondering why he ever brought Javi into his life. Into our lives.

With a jolt, I ride the rollercoaster of emotions. Hatred. Anger. Paranoia. And then, finally, determination.

I'm struggling to pull free from my bonds when the sound of a door echoes through the cavernous space. A draft blankets the room before I ever see the shape of him.

Even then, it is all I can see.

He stalks around the perimeter like the predator he is, remaining shrouded in darkness. His hood is up, and his head is tilted down. A wildly overgrown beard is the only unobscured detail beneath the shadow of his cloak.

The magnitude of his frame increases as he draws near, veiled in jeans and motorcycle boots. Every step is a gunshot to my ears.

My breath has gone still, and my thoughts are careening out of control.

I need to convince him not to hurt me. I need to hurt him first.

I need to escape.

He stops next to the bed, and those notions die a swift and brutal death.

A tank.

The man is a goddamn tank. And I'm going to die without mercy under the weight of those bear paws he calls hands. I don't stand a chance.

"Please," I beg him. "Please, Javi. You don't have to do this."

His name on my lips startles him, at least momentarily.

"You know of me?" his voice echoes through the space and sends another wave of terror straight through my chest.

Javi's file said that he doesn't speak to anyone. That's what Art told me. That's what my father told me. For all the agency knows—he can't speak verbally at all. But it isn't true.

It isn't true at all.

His words are accented with a Spanish lilt. Beautifully so.And he said them to me. A low growl rises from his chest, and I try to curl into myself.

“How do you know of me?” he demands. “How do you know my name?”

“Your file,” I whisper. “I read your file.”

Another growl.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn’t block it out. I can still hear him. He takes a step closer. Then another. And then he is sitting on the bed next to me.

When I open my eyes again, he reaches for me. His fingers touch my face. Rough. Huge. Lethal.

I wait for his wrath. For my death. But it doesn’t come.

His palm drifts down my cheek and over the sensitive flesh of my throat before dipping to my heaving chest. He’s only an inch from my breast when he stops and jerks away.

The impact shifts his hood slightly, and I can see him now. See his wild, golden eyes staring back at me.

The scar that slashes right through his eyebrow. He has the bone structure of a Viking. One who looks as though at any moment, he might pillage my very soul.

“Javi,” I whisper.

Again, his name on my lips seems to knock his senses astray.

He rises and disappears, only to return a moment later, placing a fresh cut rose on the pillow beside me.

“Why are you doing this?” I beg. “Please tell me.”

“Are you ready, beauty?”

“Ready for what?” He smiles. And his teeth are perfect. His lips, sinister.

“To sing me a song.” He touches my arm with a featherlight caress. “With words only I can hear.”

Once upon a time, I believed in fairytales.

But then he took me.

And he taught me that life isn’t a fairytale.

He is scarred. Broken.
A dark and wild thing.
His beauty is violent and his words are cruel.
His heart is a shadowed landscape where nothing can grow.
He tells me he could never care for me, and he proves it every day.
He's destroyed my life.
Tortured me.
And worse…
He's trained me to beg for his affection.
This prison is a place where sunlight doesn't reach.
He taught me that hate is born in darkness.
And then he taught me that sometimes love is too.

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Books by

A. ZAVARELLI

Boston Underworld Series
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REAPER: Boston Underworld #2
GHOST: Boston Underworld #3
SAINT: Boston Underworld #4
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Bleeding Hearts Series
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Standalones
Tap Left
Falling Series

Novellas
An Escort for Christmas
One Last Gift

For a complete list of books and audios, visit www.azavarelli.com/books

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About the Author

A. Zavarelli is a *USA Today* and Amazon bestselling author.

She likes all things chocolate, books that come with warnings, and putting her characters through hell. Her tales have been known to flirt with darkness and sometimes court it unabashedly altogether. Revenge themes and tortured souls are her favorites to write and this gives her an excuse to watch bizarre and twisted documentaries in her spare time.

She currently lives in the Northwest with her lumberjack and an entire brood of fur babies.

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