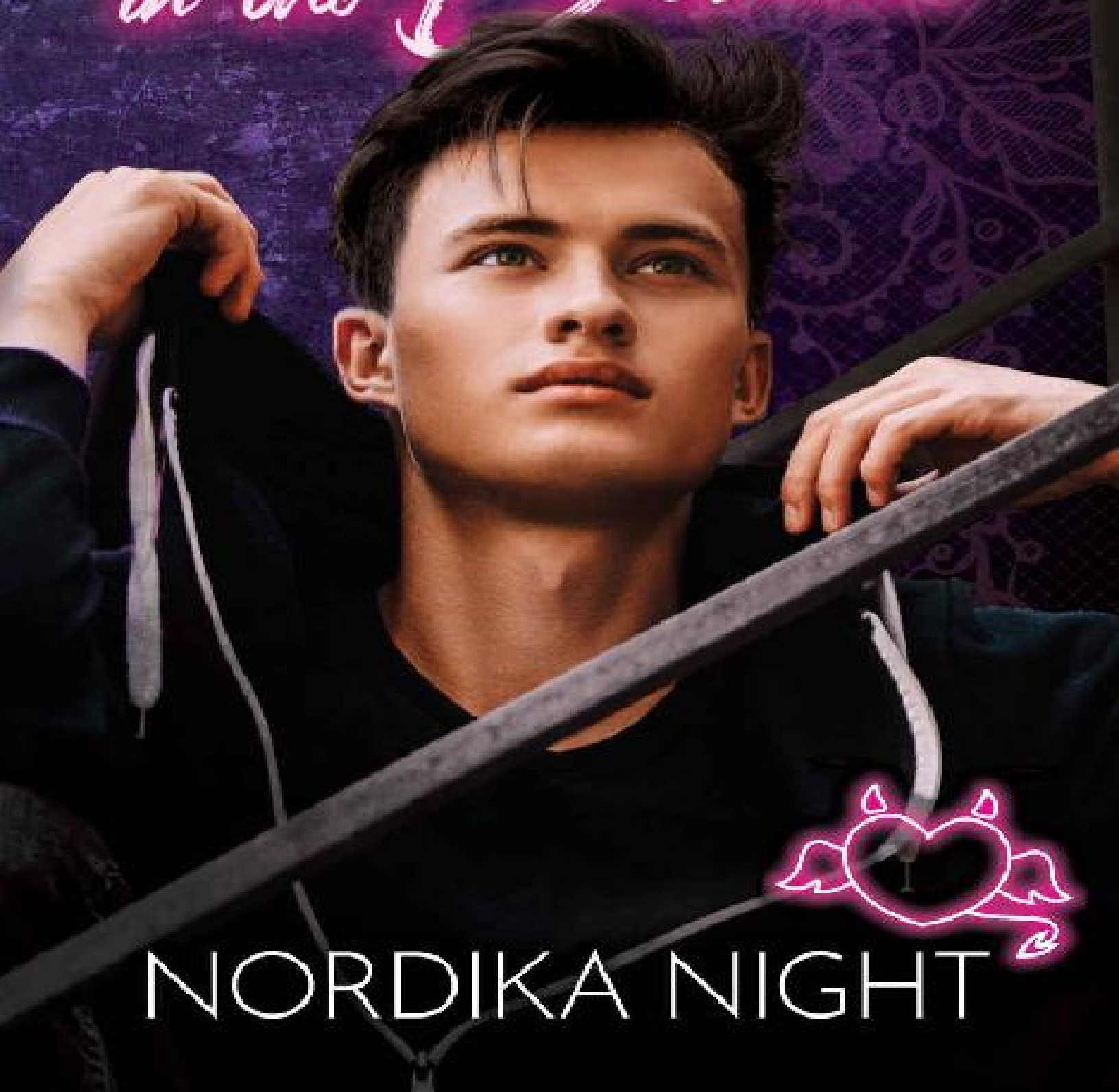


# LITTLE DEMON

*in the Details*



NORDIKA NIGHT

# LITTLE DEMON IN THE DETAILS

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*in the Details*

NORDIKA NIGHT

Little Demon in the Details  
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Also by Nordika Night  
Nordika Night

## CONTENT WARNINGS:

- a main character with childlike coping methods
  - minor dominant and submissive tendencies
    - panic attacks/PTSD
    - abandonment issues
- a manipulative character (more in a fun way)
  - neglectful/absent/cruel parents
    - cum play (a lot)
    - murder
    - some violence
  - sexual coercion/sexual coping
    - explicit language
    - detailed sex scenes
- some instances of degradation/derogatory terms during sex, including during a panic episode

This book contains deep themes that could be triggering to some readers.

Please be advised that Mercer does not have healthy coping mechanisms, and some of them are reminiscent of childhood coping methods.



*BRATTITUDE:*

*a mood or mannerism reflecting brattish or immaturely rebellious  
behaviour.*

*Comes with bitchfits.  
It's a whole personality.*



I'VE NEVER SEEN a guy in lingerie before. From behind, I almost think he's a chick. The way the bodysuit hugs his taut little ass and dips into the cinch of his waist temporarily fools me. But when the cop pulls his hands behind his back, making his hips jut forward, there's no mistaking the bulge in the front of the panties. His skin might be smooth, but it's as toned as it is tight. His legs are slender, but there's a quality to them that isn't soft and curvy. He's masculine in feminine clothing. He's boyish without being girly. The lace and the silk don't downplay his gender but enhance it instead.

"It's a sex club!" he shouts at the cops. There's no malice in his tone. He's playful, almost cocky about the trouble he's landed in. The insolent glint in his eyes suggests this is all a game to him, and the way he's sticking his ass out and biting his bottom lip, giving the gathered crowd a show, proves he likes the attention. *Craves* the attention.

"It's a strip club," the cop tells him sternly. "No sex allowed."

I watch from the sidewalk, narrowing my eyes at this guy in black satin and lace. There's a moment where he's being manhandled, not disrespectfully, and he's contemplating. Thinking. Trying to decide what kind of trouble he wants to get into. His hips *almost* thrust. His ass *almost* presses into the officer's groin. His cuffed hands *almost* cop a feel. I see it all plain as day. The deviance in him and the dislike for authority he's trying to mask in flirty nonchalance.

Then my brother ruins it.

"Goddammit, Ben." He grabs this guy by the bicep, talking to the cop like this has happened before. "He wasn't selling sex. I promise. He's just a bit touchy." The cops back off a little, knowing who my brother is.

*A bit touchy?* The guy is all devil and no angel. His size doesn't make him innocent, and his boyish looks don't detract from his danger. He's a ticking time bomb, but I don't know what his explosion entails. How does my brother know him?

My brother, Bronson, wraps a coat around this Ben kid's shoulders, and I light a cigarette to study the scene before me. Details have always been my thing, but I'm having a hard time deciding what's going on here, how this relates to Bronson, and why we're meeting outside a strip club in the first place.

The guy—somewhere in his late teens to early twenties—continues to treat this whole thing like it's a joke, even going so far as to proposition a cop. Bronson smacks him upside the head for that, and I don't miss the flare of anger in Ben's amber eyes. Deviant little fucker, isn't he?

I inhale nicotine and watch a woman I don't know step in, taking over for my brother. Once she shows up, the cops take their hands right off the boy, almost looking like they wished they'd never been called here. A bunch of apologies are shared, and then the woman is leaving with the kid. He looks over his shoulder, lace-clad ass barely peeking out from the bottom of Bronson's coat, and gives me a mischievous look.

I just take another drag and watch him go.

When the cops leave, the crowd disperses. Half go back into the club and the other half carry on down the busy sidewalk. Bronson runs his hands through his dark hair and shakes his head at me with an exhausted laugh.

"Well, welcome home," he says, pulling me in for a side hug. "Nothing like the threat of arrest as a welcoming party." He claps his hands on my cheeks. "Fuck, you've gotten older, Blake."

"It's been five years," I agree. I'm not typically a sentimental person. Attachments and me don't get along, even ones to my family. I'm loyal to my brothers, but I don't need to see them every day to keep that bond strong. We talk when we need to, and we keep our space when we don't. "Who's the boy?"

"Boy?" Bronson scoffs. "He's a fucking demon. Come on. I'll explain over a coffee."

I look at the strip club he asked me to meet him at, raising a brow in question.

"I never wanted to meet you here. It's just... fuck, it's a long story." He starts walking towards a 24/7 diner down the street, so I smoke and walk

next to him in silence. Five years since I've been in this city. Five years since I've seen my brother and the rest of my family. Five years since I committed my first murder and buried the body where no one could find it, passing a test that led to five years away. Five years since I left to live out my dad's expectations for me. Five years of becoming someone new.

They were life-changing years, and I'm not the same person now as I was back then.

I toss my butt down the sewer and follow Bronson inside. The place isn't as retro as I remember it being the last time I was here. It's had a renovation, an upgrade, and it gives off the country charm appeal in the middle of the city. The sign tells us to seat ourselves, so I scan the packed place, the smell of midnight breakfasts and coffee comforting me.

He picks a booth along the window, which works well for me. I like being able to pay attention to more than one thing at a time, and if my brother is my only focal point, I'll get awkward because eye contact isn't my favourite thing. I'd rather watch than be looked at. With coffees ordered and menus in front of us, I lean back in the booth to really look at him.

Bronson is eight years older than I am, and it shows. He's rugged and worn from whatever he's been doing the past five years, but he covers it in nice clothing and a suitable haircut, appearing classically rich rather than shoddy rich. His dark hair is longer on the top, one of those styles that requires products, and his eyes, the same dark blue as mine, are tired.

"Dad call you back home?" he asks me, even though he already knows the answer.

"Something like that. Who's the kid?"

The waitress drops coffee and a bowl of individual creams at the table, so I doctor up my drink while he takes his time getting his explanation in order. I've never minded shitty coffee. The bitterness speaks to me and the sugar and creamer I put in mask that bitterness like my personality masks the distaste inside me. I'm cynical by default, and I don't know if I learned that mentality or if I was born with it.

"Dad's making me marry someone," Bronson says, looking defeated about it, like he's already gone through all the arguing and fighting with our dad.

"What about Miranda?"

The question hurts him. It's clear by the look on his face and the unabashed pain in his eyes. He schools it a second later, taking a drink of

coffee. “I mean, I’m still with her. The marriage is a business arrangement and nothing more, but she’s only going to go along with that for so long. She’ll leave me, and Dad won’t give a shit.”

“So... the kid?” Is that who he has to marry?

“That’s her brother.” He rubs his temples, clearly more stressed than he is excited to see me. “I’m marrying Olivia Palmerston.”

What the actual fuck? “*The* Palmerstons? Those ones?”

“Those ones.”

Dad *has* been busy while I’ve been gone. The Palmerston family is old money, affluent wealth, and high society. They own over half the land plots in this city, spanning throughout the country, and whatever they don’t own, they have a hand in controlling. They’re shady people who make clean money through even shadier deals, but on paper, there’s nothing evasive or criminal about them. They bully their way to success, and if the person can’t be bullied, they buy them. It’s when they can’t be bullied or bought where our family steps in. While the Palmerstons are rich and clean, we’re rich and dirty.

“A Palmerston and a Carter,” I muse over the union of our families. “Never thought I’d see that.”

Bronson sighs, waving off the waitress to give us a minute. “Apparently, Will Palmerston has been hiring Dad, and even Grandpa, for decades. The whole marriage thing came about when our family took over the natural gas refinery. We aren’t just dirty hitmen for hire anymore, Blake. Dad bought a mine, and with that mine comes government control, funding, and politics. Which pipelines run where and what green bullshit we’re doing to save the planet. With the Palmerstons owning everything else and us owning the mine, I guess that meant it was time to unite our families. Fucking bullshit if you ask me.”

I’d conveniently been left out of all that. The Carter family earned their wealth through illegal work. We’re in the security business. If someone needs to be found, relocated, protected, or killed, you call the Carter family. We are a secret only the elite and wealthy know about, but money doesn’t discriminate against reputation. We’ve worked with mafias and cartels, industrial companies, billionaires, landowners, political figures, and even smaller governments in other countries. We’re a small family, but our reputation over the past century has reached global levels.

“So, I’m guessing you don’t know why you’re home?” Bronson asks.

“He just told me to come home and prove myself. Said he had a job for me.” My dad is the biggest asshole I know, but I don’t hate him for it. He’s had to be harsh in order to raise us to be killers and protectors.

“Things are changing around here, man. And Will Palmerston is losing his shit over the kid. I swear to fuck if he got arrested tonight, we would have been hired to off him. He’s Olivia’s younger brother. He’s twenty-three, but he’s a damn handful, to say the least. That’s why I asked you to meet at the strip club. We got a call that he was there, and... I just knew it’d need monitoring.”

“Ben?” I recall what Bronson called him outside the club.

“Yeah, that’s what he’s called because Will doesn’t want him using his first name. It’s a family name or some shit, and apparently, he hasn’t earned the right to it.” He laughs. “Olivia cares about him, which is why she helped him outside the club tonight. He’s a full-time job, Blake. And I’m sick of watching out for him.”

I wrack my brain for the complete list of the Palmerston family tree, but I’m blanking on who he could be by name. “What’s his real name?” I ask again, not even sure why I’m intrigued. Maybe because I know what it’s like to be the youngest and most overlooked member of the family, or maybe because that lace riding up his ass crack is still on a loop in my head.

“Mercer Bentley Palmerston,” Bronson says. “Goes by Ben.”

Mercer Bentley Palmerston. Pretentious as fuck name. “Why was he in cuffs tonight?”

Bronson snorts. “Because he’s a fucking brat. Pissing off his family and acting out is his hobby. No, his job. You’ll get to meet him this weekend. We’re having an engagement dinner.” He shakes his head at that, calling the waitress back. “You ready to order? Let’s catch up. We’ve been apart for five years, and neither of us is the same.”



MY DAD RIDES that line between military and executive. He’d never be caught dead in a suit, but he wears black tactical gear covered by a nice jacket. He’s rich but likes to get his hands dirty, smart enough to run the business but craves the labour, authoritative and commanding but unhinged and a touch crazy. He’s my role model.

“I got the report,” he says, showing me through his new home. I don’t know when he bought it, but it isn’t the home I grew up in. It’s bigger, fancier, and more secure. A bunker above ground. “You far exceeded your training. Master Nero said he was hard on you, but you took it and found your place.”

I nod because I don’t know what else to do. I haven’t seen this man in five years, but he didn’t even say hello. When we turn twenty-five, as long as our father deems us fit by making us pass a test, we go for training. To learn the things he can’t teach us while running a business. We’re trained under masters, special ops guys, weapons specialists, military leaders, medics, private investigators, and combat specialists first. After we’ve graduated through combat, we’re trained in spy tactics, technology, and team planning.

For the past five years, I’ve learned every way possible to kill someone, find and keep someone alive, torture for information, deal with a hostile subject, and work as part of a team or as a solo entity. I’ve learned how to spy, study patterns, recognize malignancies, and be discreet. I liked the training. Kept me busy and gave me a life skill not many have. Where I draw issue is... my dad. I love him, in the only way he raised us to love, but I do not enjoy the prospect of being at his beck and call. Perhaps I just have to adjust to it. Maybe trusting him is the first step.

“You met with Bronson last night,” he says, not phrasing it as a question because he already knows.

“Yes.”

“And he told you about the engagement to the Palmerston girl?”

Girl? She’s thirty-five. “Yes.”

Dad nods curtly. “Good. This marriage will unite two very powerful families, Blake. I know you’re probably thinking I’m being greedy. Speak freely.”

Hate when he says that. “A little. Bronson is already in love with Miranda. Has been for what, eight years now? Why him?”

“Are you suggesting yourself?”

Fuck no. “You’re greedy to unite families for money. Selfish for demanding your son sacrifice everything for you to have it.”

Dad smiles, liking my honesty. “I’m not doing it for money, Blake. The Carter family is more than enough for me.”

“Then why do it? Why tie us to the Palmerstons?”

“In time. Be patient.” He gestures to the patio out back. “For now, I have a job proposition for you.”

Without so much as a drink offer, I follow my dad to the patio and light a cigarette while he snips the end off of a cigar. I can already tell this meeting won't be casual; it's a business meeting and a welcome home wrapped into one cold encounter. I'm not surprised, and to be honest, I'm more than okay with it. I don't need warm welcomes and fake smiles. I did his training, and now I'm back, ready to be his soldier.

“What's the job?” I ask, ready to get it out of the way.

“The Palmerstons,” he says. “It barely took any convincing for them to agree to this union. I want to know why.”





AN ENGAGEMENT PARTY with the Palmerston family is a big affair. Guys like me don't belong in places like this. Mansions that resemble country clubs with waitstaff, high-end party favours, and decorated gardens aren't my scene, but I've learned the art of blending in.

While the Palmerston family is vast and cultured, the Carter family is smaller and more intimate. There must be over seventy-five Palmerstons here, and that's probably not even all of them, but there are only twelve Carters. My dad and his three sons, my uncle and his four kids, and my aunt and her two children. My aunt is the only one out of my father and his siblings who is married, but her husband is away on a job.

That's it. The entire Carter line. We have a few hired members of our organization, but their identities are known only to a select few of us, and in all fairness, I'm sure I don't even know them all. They don't know my guy either.

As I look around the party, I note all the acting. This is a pissing match more than an engagement party, and the top elite families in the area are here. So why didn't Will offer his daughter's hand in marriage to one of them?

Olivia seems alright, almost as reluctantly accepting of this marriage as Bronson, but the two of them put on a good front. More acting.

"You grew up."

I turn to find my middle brother, Brandt. "I thought you were on a job?" I grin, giving him a quick hug.

"Who says this isn't my job?"

I wouldn't put it past Dad to give us the same job. I'm surprised he put me on this in the first place. Most of us, all my cousins and my brothers, are put on a singular job as a test when we first get back from our five-year training. Dad wants to evaluate us, so we go on a heist, a murder, a torture, or a ransom negotiation to see how we handle it. Why did I get a long con job as my first? Looking into Olivia's family isn't going to be easy, but I've got a few ideas.

"Just be glad that's not one of us," Brandt says, tilting his drink at the head of the garden where Bronson and Olivia are receiving congratulations. "Sometimes it pays not to be the first-born."

I doubt that has anything to do with it. I have a feeling our dad is punishing Bronson for something, or at least trying to prove something to him, and testing me and Brandt to see if we can dig anything up on the Palmerstons. "No doubt."

"Still as quiet as ever." Brandt nudges me. "You've never been a big talker."

Listening is more my thing. People reveal a lot when they talk, even if they aren't blurting secrets. It's all in the tone of their voice, how much enthusiasm they pack behind their words, the hand gestures, and the rambling. The tight lips mean more, but lies are my favourite.

"Don't have much to say," I tell him.

We both turn at the sound of shouting. Something crashes inside, and the sound of hushing follows. Brandt raises a brow at me, but from across the room, my dad gives me a subtle nod. He wants me to check it out. I pat Brandt on the shoulder and head inside, seeking the commotion but being subtle about it.

A younger woman who looks a lot like Olivia has her back to someone and her arms out. She's shielding someone while her mother hisses curses at her. The kitchen staff carry on preparing appetizers and drinks, trained to ignore this.

"He's not allowed to be here, Samantha!" their mother seethes. "I'm calling a service to take him away."

"No!" Samantha shouts. "No, you can't, Mom. You don't understand what they do to him there."

"I don't care. I'm tired of this. I'm tired of him interfering with family business. If he won't follow the rules, he isn't welcome here."

As Samantha keeps arguing, I get a glimpse of the lingerie kid. From my position at the far end of the kitchen, I catch sight of his dark clothing. He's out of place here, neither dressed for the event nor dressed like he was that night outside the club. No lingerie in sight. His hoodie is black and baggy, and his sweatpants are dark grey, but his hands are busy. The little shit is adding something to a mixing bowl right behind their backs. His dark hair peeks out the front of his hood, and he's confident enough to not even check if they're watching him. He's someone who gets away with a lot.

"He's going back to the reform home. Your father will sign off on it."

"No!"

This gets Ben's attention. A look of true fear washes over his face, but he wipes it clean and remains defiant when he looks at his mother. "Fine. Not like I give a shit."

He totally gives a shit. He's terrified. I don't know what kind of reform home they sent him to in the past, but whatever it was, he's afraid of going back. If anyone is going to spill secrets about the Palmerston family...

"Mrs. Palmerston?" I step into view, letting them get a good look at who I am. They know me as Bronson's brother and my father's son, so they respect me. Recognition registers, and just as she's about to tell me she's in the middle of something, I butt in. "I'm here to take Ben."

"Oh," she sighs, her shoulders sagging. "I should have known he'd already have it planned. Very well. You're taking him to the home?"

I nod. I'm taking him to *a* home, but not whatever one she's talking about.

"Please, don't do this," Samantha begs. "I'll watch out for him. I'll make sure he stays in line. Please."

"You've tried. You've all tried. He's... maybe this time will help." Mrs. Palmerston sighs, like it actually does hurt her a little to send her son away. Not enough to stop her, though. "We must make an appearance at the party. Please, make sure he gets there safely."

I nod again, and when Samantha turns to say something to Ben, I wait.

"I hid a phone for you there last time, do you remember where?" she asks him. He rolls his eyes, but he nods. "Call me. I'll find a way to get you out of there, Ben. Just... just be patient. You don't make this easy on yourself." That's about all she has to say to him, and on her way by, I see the worry in her eyes. I stare at her, hoping she can read the silent truth in

my eyes. *I'm not taking him there.* She tilts her head at me, and I nod. Done. Her shoulders sag and she gives Ben one more look before leaving.

The prick glares straight at me while he continues to dump whatever powder into the mixing bowl. No shame. No respect. No remorse. There's even a wicked glint in his eyes as he does it, never once taking them off mine. Bronson wasn't wrong when he called this guy a demon.

"Pack your shit," I tell him.

"They usually ship it there."

"Pack it anyway."

He smirks, knowing I'm up to something. "Going to follow me up to my room to make sure I pack that lacy little number you eye-fucked me in the other night?"

"Mm," I agree, nodding my head at the door.

He scoffs, tosses the little baggie into the trash can, and sways his tiny hips as he walks. All swagger. Too bad his sweats are too baggy for it to have the desired effect. Amateur. I lean against his closed bedroom door while he takes his sweet-ass time packing every item of clothing in his closet. Suits, lingerie, lounge clothes, pyjamas, you name it. He brings it all. He packs a laptop, his phone charger, and some sort of handheld gaming device, and then he stares at me like I'm wasting his time. A part of me wants to demand he carry it all down to my vehicle, but I don't have the time to get crafty with demanding respect. That can come later.

I pick up half the bags and hang them over his shoulders, forcing him to carry his share, and I take the rest. The walk down the hall and out of the estate is infuriatingly slow because he *accidentally* drops all his bags a million times just to bend over and put his ass in my face. I have the patience of a saint, so fuck you, little demon.

I catch Bronson's eye on the way out, give him a little nod, and then do the same to my dad. Without another word, the valet brings my Denali around, and I make him load all his bags in the back. When he complains, I don't give a shit and just tell him whatever he doesn't load gets left behind. No skin off my back. When he goes to open the back door, I slam it shut and nod at the passenger door.

"I'm not a driving service."

"Not rich either. This vehicle is... so common." He cringes at it.

"Good for blending in. Get in. Now."

He digs his heels in, proving once again that he has some form of a problem with authority or orders. Not sure which yet.

I bend down to get in his face, my blue eyes on his amber ones. "I'm leaving. Right now. You're either coming with me or you're going to that reform home with them. You choose." I walk around the hood, climb in, and start the vehicle. When I put it into gear, he huffs and dramatically opens the door, throwing himself onto the seat like it's the hardest thing he's ever done. I take off.

"Seatbelt."

An eye roll, but he does it.

He sulks for a bit. Well, he doesn't say anything. Instead, he fills the silence with huffing, sighing, foot tapping, and fucking with the window button. After he gets tired of that, he asks me where we're going. And he doesn't fucking stop.

"Seriously, man. Are you taking me to some dungeon to fuck the life out of me? Wouldn't put it past my parents to hire someone for that. It'd be poetic, in a way. They hate my sexuality, and so they'd love to kill me with it."

Pretty sure he loves the sound of his own voice.

"Why haven't I seen you before?"

"Are you mute?"

"Take me through a drive-thru. I'm hungry."

"Where the hell are you taking me?"

"I have to piss."

"I will jump out of this vehicle and scream bloody murder if you don't answer me. I'll do it."

I have no doubt he will. He seems like the type. Dramatic, no fucks given to how much the show ruins his life. He wants attention, but only certain kinds of attention. I don't know anything about him, but it's obviously a cry for help. Did his parents ever listen to him, or is he so ridiculous he got their attention and then squandered it? I've been in a vehicle with him for thirty-five minutes and I'm already debating opening the door and shoving him out. His family probably wouldn't mind.

I tune him out and focus on the road. I have a few options for housing. My Dad bought me an apartment for my return, just like all of us get when we complete training. I got to pick it and everything. But do I really want to take this little hoodlum there? I also own a studio apartment, which is my

favourite. It's industrial, wide open, woody and modern, but it's mostly all one big room and I don't know this guy well enough yet.

I turn towards the east side of the city, deciding on the gifted apartment from my dad. At least I'll be within close driving distance to the rest of my family, and the kid can have his own bedroom until I kick him to the curb. That's mostly for my benefit.

By the time I pull into the parking garage under the building, he's gone quiet. I don't trust his quiet because it means he's up to something. I park in my spot and lock the doors as soon as he tries to get out.

"Hey!"

"What have you been doing the past ten minutes?" I ask, voice level, eyes calm but hard.

"Nothing." He gives me the puppy eyes. So I keep waiting. "I was just being a good boy. Don't you want me to be a good little boy?"

Manipulative little fuck, more like. "I'm not letting you out until you tell me. I've got time."

He holds his ground and my eye contact for way longer than I thought he would. He's a fucking brat, but he's the easiest person I've ever held eye contact with, and I don't know what that means. Ten whole minutes later, he scoffs and puts his hands into his hoodie pocket. Out comes my credit cards, the key card to the elevator, about a hundred dollars' worth of cash, and my pack of cigarettes.

I fucking hate that I'm impressed.

I hold my hand out, and he sets everything in my palm, but he makes a show of stealing a single cigarette and tucking it behind his ear, just so he gets away with something. I'll let him have it this time. My wallet, which usually stays in my back pocket, got moved to my jacket pocket for the drive. I hate sitting on it. I won't make that mistake twice.

"Enjoy your cigarette," I tell him. "You just bought yourself the stairs. And all your bags. I'm on the top floor, so you might have to make a few trips."

He crosses his arms and stares at me like he won something. He thinks he can just leave.

I point to the security guard and the cameras, and then I hold up my cell phone. "Hey, it's Blake Carter. There's a guy in my car, dressed in black, and he needs to make his way up to my apartment on his own. Don't let him leave the building."

He produces my lighter from his hoodie and lights his cigarette. “I’ll be all sweaty and sore when I get there. Will you rub me down in the shower?”

I grab the lighter and take his cellphone for good measure, get out of the vehicle, and walk to the elevator. My heart is pumping, but I can’t tell if it’s from frustration, rage, or fatigue.

Also, not sure why my dick’s a bit stiff.



FUCK him for making me do this. If he thinks I'm this easy to humiliate, he's in for a long fucking game. I'm a goddamn master at button-pushing, and it won't take me long to find his. I'm not dumb enough to think he's actually helping me by taking me away from the family who wants to put me into a fucking mad scientist lab. He has an agenda. I'll just have to figure out what it is.

I'm sweaty and exhausted by the time I get all my shit up fifteen flights of stairs. It took me three trips, and the only reason I did it was because I tried to escape first. He has this place on lockdown, and before I make another attempt, I'll have to do more reconnaissance.

I've raised my fist seven times to knock on his door, but I can't bring myself to do it. It feels like letting him win, and I can't stand that. Nevermind the fact that I already did all these steps three times over and practically gave him the win. There's a camera above the door, and I know he's watching me, but the asshole won't make the first move and open the door for me. He's going to wait me out, see how long it takes me to submit, and put the rest of whatever plan he's concocting into place after he learns all my weaknesses. I wish I stole a second cigarette to kill more time. But I wasn't lying when I said I needed to pee, so that, and only that, is what makes me knock.

This asshole, whose name I only learned because I peeked at his driver's licence when I stole his wallet, opens the door with a peace offering. A bottle of water. I take it, hesitant to take a drink because I wouldn't put it past him to roffie it or something. Then I remember I'm the manipulative one, unscrew the cap and chug it until it's dripping down my



chin and neck. Blake watches, but his eyes won't follow the drips. He either has great restraint, is a sadist, or isn't gay. I'll find out eventually.

"Did I pass your test, master? Do I get a gold star?" I blink at him with pure innocence.

His jaw twitches, but he locks it down. Damn. "Grab your shit." He stalks past me to grab a bag and then reconsiders the position. *Smart man*. Won't allow me to be between him and his lockable apartment door. I smirk at that. He grabs the bags closest to him and forces me to carry the rest.

The apartment is furnished but doesn't feel lived in. The furniture all looks and smells new, and the countertops and cabinets barely have fingerprints. It's an open-concept layout with a giant kitchen, a dining area, and a living room with a fireplace and mantel. There's a grand piano in the corner, overlooking the city through floor-to-ceiling windows. Real *Fifty Shades* style. Oh, I hope he makes me his sub. Where's the red room?

After peeing, I sadly learn there's no red room. Just his master bedroom, a bathroom, laundry room, and finally the spare bedroom he drops my bags in. It's a nice room, and everything is tidy and clean, still containing that new furniture smell. The far wall is all windows, looking over the downtown area of the city as the sun sets.

"Did you just move in or something?" I ask, forgetting to be difficult for a second.

"Yes." He pushes the ensuite bathroom door open, showing me it's there. "This room is yours for as long as... until it isn't. Make yourself at home."

"Why?" I ask, heaving all the bags off my shoulders. I'm sweaty and disgusting, and grossed out by myself. "Why bring me here?"

"Would you rather go wherever they were going to send you?"

No. "But why? You don't know me."

"My brother is marrying your sister."

"So, you're doing it out of the goodness of your heart? You know my parents will kill you for this. Probably hire your dad to do it."

"Probably," he agrees. "What's the name of the reform home they take you to? I want to be ready if your parents ask about it. Have a story in place."

"Northern something," I tell him. "Reform for troubled boys who need to find their path to righteousness." Gag. "Gay camp." It's a lie. No point in

telling him about the mad scientist lab on the property because that's where I really get sent, and fuck my parents for it.

He's already got his phone out, probably Googling it. "Not gay camp. Behavioural correction camp." He raises a brow at me and I blush for the first time. Okay, so maybe my parents don't care that I'm gay, and maybe they don't even care that I'm troubled. But they do care about my lack of respect and all the bad press I bring to the family. Or at least, that's what it looks like to my mom. My dad just straight up hates me and my brain.

I hide my guilt and sultry up my voice. "Is this going to be my new behavioural correction camp, Master Blake?"

"Call me that again and it will," he gruffs. "Shower. Get dressed. Meet me in the kitchen in an hour." He leaves without a response. And he still has my phone.

I grew up in luxury that felt like a cell, and this place is no different. It might not be as fancy and over the top as my family home, but it is just another frilly prison with a warden to keep me in line. Did my father hire him to keep me contained, or does Blake Carter have a hidden agenda? He wouldn't be helping me out of the goodness of his heart, so why did he keep me from that facility?

I still have his business card in my pocket. It came out of his wallet with the credit card and I'm not sure why I'm keeping it, but I run my fingers over it and check out my new prison cell. The bedroom is nice, new, and spacious enough for me to get up to no good. The bed is a king, settled with the headboard against the wall, so I'll definitely be changing that. I need a wall on the side to sleep against, and I might be tiny, but I'll find a way to shove it where I need it. There's a little reading nook with a chair and a lamp, and set up like a display item is a violin. Weird. Does this apartment have a music theme or something?

I crease the business card as I walk into the ensuite bathroom. A soaker tub sits in front of more floor-to-ceiling windows, one way glass, I'm assuming. The shower is big enough for three, and the stone and tile work look well done. Spinning, I catch my reflection in the vanity mirror. Still look like a fucking joke, I guess. I put zero effort into my appearance today, wanting to be moody and broody in my hoodie and sweats, but my wild hair matches the vibe, and my puffy eyes show that *zero effort* doesn't apply to my sleep schedule. As in, it takes me a fuck ton of effort to be able to sleep.

I want to defy his order to shower, but I really am gross and sweaty from the trip up here. Fuck him for making me do that. I lock the bedroom door, then the bathroom door, and then wait, listening to see if he's going to do anything about it. When I hear him in the kitchen, pots clanking around and bottles of something clacking together, I relax. Just a bit.

I make the shower hot and fast, wrapping myself in a towel to rifle through my bags. Well, shit. I forgot all my skincare products and there's nothing in the bathroom cabinets but unwrapped toothbrushes, toothpaste, and extra bottles of the same shampoo, conditioner, and body wash from the shower. I'll have to rectify that immediately, and I'm sure I can find a way to make him feel like shit about it.

The shower is a vulnerable place, but not because I'm afraid of showing some skin. Nakedness doesn't scare me; being unaware and slippery does. With that said, I throw on a new pair of sweatpants, acting like I don't give a single fuck about being here, and slip into a tank with massive armholes. Nipple slips are fun and I'm curious to see if he'll look. My radar is a bit off and I can't read him yet. He looked that night outside the club, but I couldn't tell if he was analyzing me like a job or eye-fucking me like I'd accused him of doing.

Just to give the finger to his one-hour stipulation, I wait another twenty minutes.

I leave my feet bare, my toes squishing into the cushy rug of the bedroom and then chilling against the wooden floor of the hallway. He's left his bedroom door open, so I peek inside, trying to get a read on him, but it's as bland and brand new as the rest of the apartment. No clues other than a single open duffle bag with clothing spilling onto the bed.

Blake is in the kitchen, putting together a pre-made salad, and pulling trays out of the oven. I'm sure he just ate at the engagement party, so is he doing this for my benefit? I try to spy on him, but he's impossible to sneak up on.

"Sit," he demands, and my back straightens. My feet stay rooted, refusing to cross the threshold of hardwood to tile that marks the territory line between us—the kitchen and the living area. He doesn't even look at me, focused on the salad, but a ghostly smirk hints on his lips. "You must be hungry," he amends. "Want to sit?"

*Yes, I'm hungry, you dick, and fuck you for already knowing me. I choose to lie. "I already ate."*

“Mm,” he hums, adding nothing.

Mm? What’s *Mm* mean?

When the buzzer rings and Blake goes to the door, I sit at the island while he isn’t looking. Still feels like a win, so I pick cucumbers from the salad and listen to him at the door, secretly hoping it isn’t anyone from my family.

“I can take them. Thanks.” Blake closes the door and returns with bags of groceries. He side-eyes me at the island, munching on cucumbers, but he doesn’t comment on it. He holds up three different salad dressing options, and I pick all three just to be annoying, but he still doesn’t so much as curse at me.

Committed to all three options now, I make myself a little bowl and layer balsamic on top of Greek and mix it all together with sundried tomato. “What’s *Mm* mean?” I ask.

“No meaning. Just a sound.”

“Mm,” I try it out. “A condescending sound.”

“If that’s how you take it.” He puts groceries away like I’m not even here. He’s still wearing his outfit from the party, and as good as he looks in casual partywear, it doesn’t suit his energy. He looks like the kind of guy who should be wearing tactical gear or those sexy spy suits, covered in blood with a murderous high in his eyes. Or a prison suit. He could rock a prison onesie, no doubt. Or a towel, slung low on his hips to show off six abs and a V.

Speaking of blood. I know about the Carter family, and I know what they specialize in. “Am I a job?” I’ve already asked, but I’m waiting on an answer.

“What makes you ask that?” He turns, sliding another salad bowl across the island. “Can you make me a salad?”

“Say please.” I smile at him. He pulls the bowl back and I grab it from him. “Jeez. I’ll make the salad.”

“Doesn’t the childish act get annoying?” he asks.

“Not really.”

“You like reducing yourself to nothing more than an annoying nuisance?”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m something more than that?” I slide his bowl of salad to the stool next to mine. “Am I a job?”

“What makes you ask that?” he asks again.

Ugh, he's hard to distract. "Feels like something my dad would do. Or my uncles. Really any of them. Pretend to ship me off to a reform home and then... *oh, no! Ben never came home!*" I mock my mother's voice. Hate her. Hate her most of all because she feels sorry for me but doesn't have a fucking backbone.

"Ben?" he asks, pulling one more tray from the oven and putting it on a coaster thing on the island. "That's what you like being called?"

I study the assorted finger foods. Nothing classy like my parents would have. It's all chicken fingers and meatballs, and little pastry things with spinach and feta inside. "That's the name I'm allowed to be called." Still stings. Even after all these years.

"I'm not going to call you that," he says, putting balsamic on his salad.

"What're you going to call me? Let me guess! Little boy?"

"Haven't decided yet."

"Sweetheart?"

"Mm."

"You could always go with a classic. Most guys like you just call me babe. Or baby boy."

"I'm sure they do," he says. "Probably also call you pet, brat, good boy, bad boy, and slut."

"Mm." I smirk into my salad and get brave enough for a meatball.

"Mercer," he says, making my head whip in his direction. "Think I'll just call you Mercer. That's your name, isn't it?"

A rush of something fills me up from toes to tits, and I can't place the suffocation of it. Pride? Unworthiness? How can I mix those two up? I've never earned that name, not even when I was a kid. I've been unworthy of the family name right from the start, and I know my parents regret giving it to me and only me. Whoever originally had this name is long dead, and here I am, the little family embarrassment, bringing shame to the legacy of it. I look away from his eyes, not wanting him to catch any hint of vulnerability.

"So, for the twentieth time, am I a job?"

"No," he says. "An impulse. I improvised."

I bite the meatball off my fork, letting my teeth scrape against the tines. "Because this situation somehow benefits you?"

"Mm," he says. "Get me that bottle of tequila and I'll tell you how it benefits me." He nods across the kitchen.

I tilt my head at him, studying.

“I’m good at reading people. You don’t like authority and being told what to do, so here’s my shot at deciding if you work on a rewards system. Gonna go get the bottle in exchange for information, or shall we try the next method?”

“Mm, what’s the next method?” I bat my lashes. Liking this *mm* business.

“I drag you the fuck over there to get the bottle like a *good little boy*, and then you whimper at my feet all night because you might hate orders and authority, but you fucking crave that shit in your sex life like the *little slut* you are,” he says, a timbre to his tone but not a single increase in his volume of voice. “If you want the next method, I can find a way to add in the rest of the pet names. Your choice, *baby*.”

My nips are hard and I’m grateful I wore a baggy tank and pants. With a cute as fuck smile, I slide off the stool and feel his eyes on me while I strut my shit over to the bottle of tequila. I set it on the island and push my ass out while I reach up into the cupboard for glasses, but humiliation soon wins.

“Too short?” he asks, smug as fuck. “Maybe if you stick your ass out a bit more.”

I hate him. Decision made. He steps up behind me, chest to my back and upper thighs to my ass. My breath hitches so I cover it with a scoff, but there’s no hiding the goosebumps on my arms.

“Five foot eight?” he guesses, voice whispering against my ear.

“Five foot nine, thank you.” I spin so we’re face to face, hoping it’ll trip him up. It doesn’t. Like, at all. “Seven? Seven and a half?” I ask him.

He presses his hips against me, letting me feel all seven and a half inches he’s packing. “Eight, thank you.” He comes down with two tumblers and backs away. “Come eat. I know you didn’t eat any of the food at the party. You just poisoned it.”

I snort. “It wasn’t poison. I’m not that... dramatic.”

“Mm,” he says, waiting for me to sit back down. Once I’m on my stool, he goes on. “Two reasons. The first being that reform camp, or whatever the fuck it is, hasn’t worked on you yet, and judging by what your sister said, bad shit happens to you there.” He looks at me, but I give nothing away. “The second reason is that... I don’t fully trust your family and I’m kind of wondering why they agreed to this marriage between Bronson and Olivia.”

I pout my lower lip. "So, it's not a sex thing?"

He eyes me up and down, and when he's done, I can't tell if he thinks I'm pathetic or sexy. Just fucking tell me if you're gay! *Gah!* I'm usually pretty good at telling, but Blake Carter remains a mystery so far.

I pick up a chicken tender and dunk it in my salad dressing. "You think I'm privy to all the inside information with the Palmerston family? If you haven't noticed, I'm the pariah. The black sheep. The family member they shove in a closet and only parade around on occasion so no one assumes they offed me. Oh, and my leash is very tight when they parade me." *And I'm usually drugged.*

"And what, you want everyone to think it's your deviant flirting and cumslut personality that put you in that dark closet?" he asks, almost like he knows it's something else. "I don't buy it. You're acting out. The sluttiness is a direct *fuck you* because of something else."

He really is good at reading people. Luckily, he'll never find my red button because it's been buried so damn deep I can't even find it anymore. "Are you slut shaming? Because being a cumslut is so much more than a personality."

"Sure it is. But in your case, it's a cry for attention."

I toss the chicken on the counter and shove my salad away. "I want Thai food."

Blake simply smiles.



I WAVERED BACK and forth about putting cameras in his room, but in the end, I decided not to. Not because I respect his privacy, but because he wants attention so badly, he'll use the cameras as a chance to put on a show.

After hanging up the phone with a contact who is looking into that reform home for me, I listen to grunting, groaning, and scraping sounds from across the hall. Soon, imaginative curses join in, and after a while, a frustrated groan containing more rage than I thought him capable of having. I climb out of bed in nothing but a pair of sweats, and cross the hall, listening outside his door for a moment. I don't even try the handle because I know it'll be locked, but when I hear him call himself useless, my chest cracks a bit.

I knock. "Mercer?"

"Don't call me that!" Bratty to his very core.

"Need help with something?"

"No. Fuck off."

"Okay." I have no plans to fuck off, but it gets his ass moving to the door. It swings open, and his flushed, sweaty face almost smashes into mine.

"Thought you were fucking off?" He composes himself.

"Thought you didn't need me?"

"Well, it's not my fault your bed weighs a metric fuck ton and your floors are so new that I'm honestly a little guilty about scratching them." He glances behind him where there are actual gouges in the hardwood from the legs of the bed. "Just a smidge, though."



I don't care about floors, but I'll let him sweat it. "Need the bed moved?"

"I... yes." Vulnerability. Just a flash of it. "Against a wall."

I lean against the doorframe and cross my arms. "Okay, no problem. Carry on."

He scowls at me, and the harsh expression looks nice on his pretty face. "Blake."

"Mercer."

"I told you not to call me that."

"Mm."

Wanting to hold his ground and his independence, he gets back to pushing the bed. He leaves even more gouges in the floor, sticks his ass out real nice, and makes sure to look over his shoulder at me every few seconds to confirm I'm still watching. Oh, I'm watching. Taking a break to fan himself, he decides to pull his shirt off, using it to wipe his forehead.

"I'm usually the one on the bed, not thrusting into it," he says, all sultry-like.

"It shows. You have zero strength." When that gets a nice glare from him, I add, "You're pushing with your arms. Get your legs into it."

"They're still shaky from all the stairs," he pouts. "Aren't you going to help me?" Another pout. Puppy dog eyes. Batting lashes.

So fucking cute. "Did you ask for help?"

"No," he scoffs and gets back to pushing. After moving the massive bed less than three inches and gaining another sheen of sweat on his lower back, he mutters a very quiet, "Help."

Not willing to waste yet another opportunity to press up behind him, I lean into his back, put my hands on the bed beside his, caging him right in, and barely contain my boner when he shivers. "Say please," I throw his taunt back at him.

"Help," he mumbles again instead.

"Where are we pushing it? We're not moving in the direction of any wall, so what did you have in mind?"

He presses his ass into my groin, and I bite my lip to hide any reaction. "It's stupid, but..." He points to the wall of windows.

"That counts as a wall?" I ask. "That's safe enough for you?"

He turns his head. "How do you know it's for safety reasons?"

I grab his chin and force him to look at me, all serious now. “Is that safe enough for you? Answer me honestly.”

His breathing stutters for a second, but he lets it out calmly. “I think so. I... I want to try it. It’s the farthest from the door.”

I study his eyes and find them genuine, even though he’s trying to hide it. “Hands on the bed then.” I release his jaw.

Together, but mostly me, we leave a trail of gouges across one half of the room until the side of the bed butts up to the window wall. There’s a small gap where he could roll right through, but he stuffs a few pillows down there and seems satisfied with it. As he sprawls out on his back, chest heaving after all that *hard work*, I step back to... look.

I’ve had two bi experiences, but never with men like him. My experiences start and stop at the athletic type, and Mercer is the farthest thing from a jock. He’s smaller than me by a lot; at least five inches in height and probably a sixty or more pound weight difference. He’s all bite and no brawn, but I don’t think that makes him a weaker opponent.

Mercer has learned how to use his body as a weapon, a distraction, and a taunt, and I have no doubt he’s just as dangerous as I am. He’s slender without being delicate, firm without being overly toned, and graceful while being rambunctious. He’s the bull *and* the china shop. His dark hair is mussed up and messy on purpose, adding to his wild boy image, but it doesn’t overly fit his lingerie energy. Maybe he likes it that way.

He gives off bottomy vibes, but I get the impression he craves more control than he lets on. He’s just never found anyone to experience it with. Sure, he’s submissive, but it’s the fight to submission that riles him up, and I have a feeling that if he wins the fight, he expects to be the dominant one. He’s exciting.

Truly a brat through and through, though. He’s going to find all my buttons and push them without care. He doesn’t give a shit that I’m a trained killer because there’s at least a small part of him that has a death wish. He respects himself to some degree, but he also doesn’t think he deserves that respect, so he neglects and degrades himself, too. He’s a clusterfuck, and disarming him like he’s a bomb is intriguing to all these new parts of me.

Yes, I want answers and information out of him, but I also want him to, I don’t know, rise up stronger than he is right now. His strength is currently

superficial, and I want to teach him how to live and breathe that power and use it as a weapon.

“Well?” Mercer asks, snapping me back to the here and now. “Did you analyze me and figure me out while you were eye-fucking me for the second time?” He makes a show of running his hands over his hips, up past his chest, and around his throat. My eyes follow, but I hide the attraction in my gaze. “Need me to put on something see-through and lacy so you can finish?”

Lace and silk act as body armour to him, but I haven’t yet figured out what he’s protecting himself from if he’s so promiscuous. “I’ll give you the full report when I’m done with it,” I say instead. “Goodnight, Mercer.”

“Don’t call me that.”

I close his door behind me and leave it up to him to lock. I leave my door open, climbing into bed with a hard dick and a filthy mind, and one ear waiting to hear if he locks his. About an hour later, after edging myself unintentionally, the lock clicks and I smile to myself. An invitation, was it?



THE NEXT MORNING, I’m up and agitated by six. Mercer has been fucking around in his room with music blaring for two hours already, and as much as I want to go in there and throttle him, I leave him be. I need him to think he has some control, and when he realizes he hasn’t succeeded in drawing a reaction out of me, he’ll switch gears and try the next thing.

Unlike the diner coffee, the latte I make at home isn’t bitter. Whoever stocked this apartment did so with fine taste, and I resent how delicious the coffee is. On my third one, my phone rings.

“Blake,” I answer, walking with my coffee to gaze out at the city fifteen stories below. “What’d you find?”

“It’s legal,” Aaron says, getting back to me about the reform home. “Well, the part they show to the world is legal... but I did some digging.” Of course he did. That’s his favourite line. “On the outside, it’s a treatment centre for youth with behavioural disorders or borderline personality disorders. Highly rated and recommended, especially among the elite. It’s clean on paper, has a lot of government funding, and is even part of a university study program. Caters to youth, but has an adult wing as well.”

“But?”

“But it’s straight out of *One Flew Over.*”

“*The Cuckoo’s Nest?*”

“Yeah. It has a dark side. Old school methods, sure, but even new ones. Military ones. Dangerous and completely illegal ones.”

“Like?”

“Mind manipulation, brainwashing, mind mapping, and not that I can find proof yet, but I think they’re even experimenting with brain chips. I’ve got someone on the inside now, looking for Ben’s file. Nothing in the computer system, but I wouldn’t expect it to be tied to the main facility. Whatever is in his file there is the standard bullshit about him being manipulative and coercive. Says he’s got borderline personality disorder and frequents different personas to get his way.”

I don’t doubt that, but I don’t think he has a disorder. His manipulations come from a place of protection, and maybe that lines up with a medical condition, but maybe not.

“But that’s just what looks nice on paper. That’s what is on file in case anyone ever looks into it. My girl on the inside is digging, and she never comes up empty, so I’ll get back to you when I know more.”

His girl on the inside is his wife. She’s a therapist, so she’ll have good reason to snoop around, and Aaron is a master at fabricating reasons. I trust them both as if they were family—sometimes even more than family.

When I feel Mercer listening from the hallway, I don’t react. I want him to trust me, so he can eavesdrop all he wants for now.

“Send me a list of doctors and professionals who were listed in that file. Even if they’re fake names or doctors that have never seen him, I want to look into them.”

“I’ll look, too. You got it. No record of any other Palmerston ever being there within the past few decades, but there was a Palmerston there about seventy years ago. Redacted first name, but I’ll find it.”

“What’s the age out? He’s twenty-three, so if it’s a centre for youth, how do they justify sending him there?”

“Twenty-five, with an exception for up to thirty-five if the patient has a child ego, which I’m assuming is a dissociative identity disorder thing. According to his limited file, he was in the youth wing.”

“Alright. Thanks, Aaron. Let me know.”

Information gets me places, but I'm not a hacker. Aaron is one of the only friends I trust with this, especially because I want to keep it from my dad for now.

"It's in a building on the property over from the main facility," Mercer says, standing in the hall without making a sound. "I eavesdropped on that whole conversation, and you're old, so your phone volume is really high. I heard everything."

"Thirty is old?"

"Ancient."

"Feel like telling me everything you know about that place?" I ask, motioning to the kitchen. "If I make you coffee?"

"And breakfast?"

Crafty. "Fine."

He smirks like he won, skipping over to the island in a pair of little shorts and a hoodie, looking like a bedheaded mess. Cute, though. "Also, I need skincare products. I left all mine at home."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him this is his home now, but I bite it back. If his parents are the type to send him to a place like that, I'll never let them get a hold of him again. It has nothing to do with me maybe wanting to fuck him and everything to do with the vulnerability I sometimes see in his eyes.

I pull his phone from the dish towel drawer and slide it across the counter. "Order whatever you want. It's your room. Your space."

"Whatever I want?" It's a dare, but I nod anyway.

"You have money?"

"Tons of it. Hush money."

I figured.

I go searching for frying pans and utensils, having no idea where anything is in this place yet. While he shops and I make breakfast, I ask him questions.

"How many times have you been there?"

"Seven."

"What age did it start?"

"Eleven, I think. Or maybe I turned eleven there." He gasps at something. "So expensive! I'm buying it anyway."

"Do you remember what they did to you? Were you always in the secondary building?" I crack a few eggs in the pan and scramble them

because... fuck over easy. I'm not that good of a cook. The coffee machine finishes, so I slide him a latte.

"I remember everything, *Blake*, but I won't share it all with you. The first time I went, I stayed with another kid in the main facility. I was there for, I don't know, maybe like a few months or something? But when I went home, Mom and Dad weren't happy with whatever way I'd been fixed, and the next time I was in the other building. It's not as creepy as a dungeon, but it has padded cells and white rooms and really bright lights that make you crazy."

I keep my back to him, stirring the eggs and dropping bread in the toaster. "Why'd they send you there?"

"For being gay."

Evasion. "Why'd they really send you there?"

"Because I'm... smart. Or I was."

I turn around to face him, but he keeps his face in his phone. "Smart?"

"A quick learner, good memory, analytical mind, pretty eidetic memory when it comes to numbers and sequences, patterns, things like that. 46125047560925." He glances at me, smirking.

No fucking way. "Is... is that my credit card number?"

"Yes, I'm using it to buy my new things." He grins again. "Want me to ramble off your address, social insurance number, licence number and plates, and the details on your business card?"

"You stole my business card?"

"By accident. But I'm keeping that one as a souvenir."

The toast pops, so I butter it and plate the eggs. Simple breakfast, but whatever. I remain standing on the opposite side of the counter, wanting to keep this conversation going.

"Eat."

"Make me."

Fucking hell, I will if he keeps this up. "Show some respect, and if you can't muster respect, show some appreciation for the breakfast I just cooked for you in the apartment I'm letting you live in to avoid that place."

"Fiiiiine," he complains, dramatically pressing a button on the screen of his phone. "I'm done shopping anyway. And it's not like you're doing it out of the goodness of your heart. You're using me for information."

True.

I join him on the other side of the island. We eat for a little, the silence full of tension and scraping forks. His scraping fork because he's annoying like that. To cover the sound, I ask, "So, your dad didn't like that you were smarter than him?" It's a guess.

Mercer looks at me. "You know, you're the only one to ever think that."

"Am I right?"

"Are you gay?" he asks.

"No."

"Do you wanna fuck me?" he asks with no shame.

"You make my cock hard, but I haven't decided if your personality turns me off yet. Am I right about your dad?"

"Partially right. And you get hard *because* my personality turns you off. Don't act like my attitude isn't an aphrodisiac to you. You're itching to put me in my place."

"Where's your place?"

"Don't you want to knock me down a few pegs? Kick my pedestal? Knock me off my high horse and all that?"

"No. I think you manage that pretty well on your own." His face falls, but he schools it. "I'm not your daddy, Mercer. I'm not here to put you down and keep you quiet."

"Then what?" he asks.

"I'd rather make you *scream*; help you claw your way to the top. You'll need an attitude adjustment to get there, but I don't mind using your own tools against you." I grab his stool and pull it closer to me. "I won't fuck you unless you're begging for it, and we both know your pride won't let you beg. Guess we're at an impasse."

At my limit of restraint, I leave him there to finish his breakfast. I have places to be today, and if he wants to tag along, fine. He's not a prisoner here, but he's smart enough to know his parents currently think he's at that facility. The ruse won't last long, and I'll have to hold my ground when I'm confronted about it.



WITH MY CELLPHONE back and Blake out of the apartment, I call my sister to let her know where I am. By early afternoon, both my sisters have bullied their way into Blake's apartment, and now I can't get them out. I don't hate my sisters because they're stuck in the same life I'm stuck in. The difference is that they're both allowed in that life where I'm not.

I can't hold it against them, but I also can't help being envious. They care, but they also blame me for most of it. They see my rebellion and think it started out of nowhere, so fuck them for having blinders on. Samantha is the only one who ever actually tries to make a difference for me, even if she isn't successful.

I hate pitying myself, but I'm only human. How is it my fault that my dad hates me? Over the years, sure, I've given him plenty of reasons to despise me, but that was only after he sent me to that disgusting place when I was a kid. I hate that man as much as he hates me, and my hatred has nothing to do with him being better than me. He's my father, and he single-handedly ruined me. On purpose. And my bitch of a mother went along with it just to stand at her husband's side. Fuck them all. The whole Palmerston family, even my sisters, at times.

"I don't get it," Olivia says. "Why would he kidnap you?"

Leave it to her to think me so unworthy of saving that someone like Blake Carter wouldn't do something drastic to protect me from a terrible situation. I mean, he has ulterior motives, but even with his sketchy morals, it's more than either of my sisters have ever done for me. The difference? Blake Carter isn't afraid of my family.



“I’m not a prisoner here.” But I’m smart enough to stay put for a few days. If my parents find out I’m here instead of where they want me to be, I really will be kidnapped. I need to win Blake over to my side before that happens. Too bad I’ve learned to be so insufferable that I’ve completely forgotten my people-pleasing skills.

“Yeah, but he’s up to something, right?” Olivia asks Samantha. “It’s a play. It has to be.”

Punch to the little confidence I have left. Thanks.

“I don’t know,” Samantha says. “I saw the look on his face when he took Ben. It honestly seemed like he was just trying to help him. Keep him safe.”

My chest wants to warm at that, but my diminished worth reminds me I’m nothing but a hindrance and an annoyance. Blake doesn’t care about me.

*I’d rather make you scream and help you claw your way to the top.*

I swallow unease and get itchy. My skin is on fire and my thoughts won’t slow down. They’re all too negative and hateful to be productive, and the longer I simmer in them, the more hostile I’ll become. I need a release, a way to burn off this agitation so I don’t become fucking homicidal and stupid. A shaky breath leaves my lips while my sisters bicker unaware.

Nobody cares about me. Life would be easier for Samantha and Olivia if I died, and they no longer had to worry about me. My parents would be pleased with the news, and they’d probably use my funeral as a business strategy to play on sympathy. I don’t have any friends, never went to a traditional school, don’t have any life skills or talents, and I’m not good enough to become someone’s boyfriend. Alone in birth, tortured through childhood, and scared and alone during adulthood. Life has always been bleak, but it’s hitting hard right now.

My sisters talk about me. Above me. Ignoring me.

My teeth chatter with how hard I’m trembling. They don’t notice. No one ever notices. My mind leaves the apartment to delve into different realities where I’m the joke of my own life, and then it comes back to the apartment, reminding me I have no right to be here. I’m sweating, shaking, fidgety as fuck and about to explode. Can I hear anything?

“Get out.”

“But wait! Just let us say goodbye! Tell us what you want with him.”

“Get. Out.”

Time is spinning and my legs are cramping. Am I running? My escape route is so cluttered I can't even find it, but my body is fatigued like I've been sprinting through the maze of it for weeks. The double-walled glass latte mug comes into view, dried milk foam crusting on the inside. How long has it been there? When did I last drink a latte? I'm thirsty. My throat is screaming for a drink, but my mouth is flooding with saliva. Nauseous.

A door slams. I feel it but can't find it. I'm unworthy. I'm nobody. I'm unwanted. I'm scared. Nobody sees me.

"Mercer."

I'm unworthy of the name.

"Mercer, look at me."

I'm looking but I can't see.

"I'm going to touch you." Hands jar me from my state, but not enough to find reality. "Tell me what kind of help you need."

All the help. Or don't help me. Let me die. Let me go. My mind is running, running, running, unable to latch onto a command. I'm telling it to stop, but it won't listen. I have no authority over my own brain, and now I'm spinning out to space with no tether.

"Get on your knees, Mercer." Dominant. Controlling. A command.

Without knowing why, I slip off the stool to kneel. A blanket of calm settles on top of my panic, both battling for the win.

"Look at me." I look at black pants and black boots. "Look up at me, little boy. Now."

*Little boy.*

When I look up through blurry eyes, the calm blanket wins. My trembles lose their vibrancy, and my lungs take in a satisfying breath. Body awareness comes back to me, and the ache in my knees has nothing on the ache in my groin. I swallow the saliva in my mouth and breathe harder than should be required. My body is telling me we fought a war, but I can't remember if I won.

"Better?" Blake asks, voice firm.

I nod and swallow.

"I'm taking you to bed."

"No," I cry.

"You need rest after that. We can talk about it later."

I sink down to the floor, unwilling to walk to my room. I just got my mind back! Don't lock me away to lose it again. "No." My eyes burn, and

my fight-or-flight instinct is all fucked up because they both think survival is on this floor. At this man's feet.

"I'm taking you to bed." He grabs my arm and flips me over until he can pick me up. I ragdoll to make it harder for him, but he's bigger than me. Stronger than me. "Time to sleep."

"No!" I scream this time. "No. Please, no. Not alone." I bury my face in his neck, hiding from him while clinging to him.

He pauses his steps, but I can't look to see where we are. "You're afraid to be alone?" When I don't answer, he strokes a hand through my hair and asks again. "Mercer, answer me."

"Not always. Just right now."

"I'll sit with you on the couch, okay?"

I nod against his chest.

When Blake tries to set me on the end of the couch, my fucked-up instincts keep me clutched to him so hard he can't pry me off. With a sigh, he settles with me on his lap. My fingers end up in my mouth and my cheek gets sweaty against his chest, but I can't move. I can't. Not yet. I don't even know this man, and he's probably more of a danger to me than I know, but I... I don't have anyone else. He's better than a stranger in a club for now.

Blake pulls my fingers from my mouth, but a minute later, I end up sucking on them again. I don't know why. Maybe because it's distracting. Comforting. Familiar. Something to satisfy a few of my senses. Touch, taste, the sound of my sucking. When he pulls them out again, I whimper.

"Shh." He runs a hand down my back and then he's prying my lips open with his thumb hooked on my bottom teeth. I open willingly, letting him push two fingers all the way back to my throat. He pushes them in and out, making saliva drip down my chin to soak into his t-shirt, and then he stops forcing it. He stays still, so I end up holding his hand to keep his fingers in my mouth. A new taste. A new texture.

I squeeze my thighs together and peer up at him. He's watching me, but I can't read the expression on his face. It almost looks caring, but I've never seen it on anyone before, so I can't be sure.

"You okay, Mercer?"

I suck on his fingers and nod.

"Tell me what you need. With words."

He tries to take his hand away, but I hold it there until I'm ready. I release his wet fingers and let drool drip down my chin. "Call me... a pet

name.” *Remind me I’m nobody but look at me while you do it. Show me what caring looks like and let me decide if it’s real.* See me.

He licks his lips, his blue eyes darkening. “Tell me what you need, little demon. What’s going to feel better?” When my thighs squeeze again, he notices. “You need to come, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Such a little slut, aren’t you?”

My legs tremble. “Yes.”

“So fucking desperate for it,” he growls, shoving his fingers into my mouth again. He fucks my throat with them, staring me straight in the eye. When I try to look away, he uses those fingers in my mouth to keep my head from turning. “You’re such a little slut that you’re going to come in your pants, aren’t you?”

I choke on his fingers and love the burn of it. I nod, my hips thrusting into nothing and my thighs squeezing so tight they ache. The material of my sweatpants isn’t restricting enough to rub, but my boxer-briefs do.

With Blake looking at me with heat in his eyes, his fingers in my mouth, and his boner against my ass, I whimper and whine, already losing my resolve in an unsteady state. I slide my thighs together, building that ache in my gut, so fucking desperate to embarrass myself in front of him. When I reach down to rub my cock, Blake shakes his head at me with a growled, “No.”

I’m moaning like a tramp around his fingers, wiggling on his lap, eyes leaking tears, and my face covered in saliva. I don’t stop staring at him, and when he slowly shoves his fingers as far as they’ll go down my throat, my hips move, and the orgasm starts.

“Good boy,” he purrs.

I fucking lose it. I come in my pants, slicking my thighs and my groin while my eyes roll back and my lips part even more. Blake pulls his fingers from my mouth and the most desperate, anguished moan of my life breaks free. I try to bury it in his chest, but he grips my chin and forces me to look at him while I come. It’s extending the orgasm and embarrassing me at the same time, and I have no idea why I’m into this, especially since I just had a fucking breakdown, but I start to shake with the force of it. Exhausted, I slump against him, breathing against his neck, ready to pass out and never think of that again.

“Tell me why that helped,” Blake demands.

I don't have an answer for him. Not one I'm willing to admit.

"Tell me."

"I don't know," I cry out. *Because it was so jarring it forced my brain to stop spinning.*

"Stand up."

He orders me to stand three more times before my shaky legs allow it. I stand right in front of him, between his spread legs, ready to run the hell away and hide in my closet until I can face this. Blake doesn't let me.

"Tell me or show me. Your choice."

I can't tell him because I don't know. I can't admit to him that having him order me around gave my brain the break it needed to think for itself. I can't tell him that the orgasm released all my panic, and that the humiliation of it eased a little of my self-loathing. It doesn't make sense. I'm ashamed, but I'm lighter. Sex usually does the trick for me. A rough, hard fuck with a nameless man and a curt goodbye is more than enough, but nothing has ever calmed me like this. I can't say that. I can't tell him because it's fucking pathetic.

So instead, I pull my sweatpants away from my body, peeling them down to show him my light blue boxer-briefs. They aren't light blue anymore. They're soaked and sticky and warm, and I kind of like the way it feels enough to have my dick twitching again.

"Show me," Blake demands.

Shaking, but getting a little of my defiance back, I lick my lips and unstick my boxers from my body, pulling them down enough to show Blake the slick mess all over my cock, balls, and groin. With him staring at me, my cock hardens fully right in front of him. I'm about to say something snippy, but Blake reaches forward. Without touching my dick, he swipes those same two fingers through the cum on my lower belly and holds them up.

"Suck them clean."

I bend down to suck them, but Blake shakes his head.

"Kneel, little slut."

God-fucking-dammit. I drop to my knees, unsure why I'm following orders now that the panic is over. Especially when it's the one thing I hate most. I'm in a trance, and when I snap out of it, I'll make him pay for this. I take his fingers into my mouth, slowly sucking them. I make a show of licking between them, and when I open my mouth as an invitation for him

to jam them down my throat, I look into his eyes as he does it. He almost grins.

“Feel better?”

I nod.

“Tell me.”

“I feel better.”

“Good. Go clean up. We’re going out to dinner.” He helps me stand. “And, Mercer?” I look back at him. “You will be punished for spending seven grand on my credit card today.”

My lips don’t even fight the smirk, they just let it happen. “Don’t call me Mercer.” I strut my shit back to my room, feeling better than I have in ages.



FAMILY DINNER ISN'T something I've been to in a very long time, but now that I'm home—now that we're all home and through the training—Dad wants to make it a thing. I brought Mercer for multiple reasons. One, he needs to know he isn't a prisoner in my apartment. Two, it's a power move to show my dad I'm doing something. Three, it'll show Bronson that I'm not afraid of babysitting this little brat after he complained about being sick of him. Four, it's a *fuck you* to the Palmerston family and I'm hoping my dad tells them Mercer is staying with me. It'll make Will Palmerston sweat, thinking I know something about the facility. I've got Aaron on it, so if Will tries to make some calls to ensure nothing ties back to him, I'll find out.

Olivia is here, but I can tell Bronson is itching to leave, probably meeting up with Miranda after dinner. He's in love with her, and Olivia knows it, but I can't predict how it's going to turn out. Olivia keeps looking at Mercer, subtly trying to tell him to give a signal if I'm coercing him in any way.

Mercer is a little shit, so he pretends not to notice. He's back to acting cocky and casual, his little meltdown forgotten for the time being. My fingers still tingle from being at the back of his throat.

"Yeah, everyone was really sick towards the end of the night," Olivia tells us. "So the engagement party ended a little early. Some are claiming food poisoning, but no one can narrow down why half the people got ill but others didn't when they were eating the same things."

I glance at Mercer, wondering just what he put in that mixing bowl.

"Shame," he says, faking sympathy.

“So, Ben,” Bronson says from across the table. “How’s it living with Blake? He’s never lived with anyone before.”

I put another half-serving of lasagna onto his plate, and he glares at me. Sue me. He’s skinny and needs to eat more. “He’s a dick,” Mercer says nonchalantly. “But I’m a bigger dick, so it’s okay. The pissing contests are fun.”

My dad watches this like it’s funny. He thinks I’m earning Mercer’s trust and weaselling my way into their family secrets, but I’m not even close. Not yet. It doesn’t surprise me that Will ripped him from the family tree simply for being smarter than him. He used Mercer’s lifestyle and extracurriculars as an excuse to exile him even more. Powerful men are always threatened by other powerful men, and this time, it is his own kid who overpowers him. I have no doubt Mercer rebelled just to piss them all off, which doesn’t make his situation any easier, but he’s living with the cards he was dealt, and to be honest, I think he’s just trying to survive without losing himself.

“But you’re comfortable there, right, Ben?” Olivia asks, trying to get him to admit I’m hurting him. I don’t think she has the right, since she was willing to let him be shipped off to that facility again.

“So comfortable,” Mercer croons. “He loves it when I walk around in my lingerie. Tonight, when we get home, I’m going to model a few new sets for him.” He looks right at me, blinking beautifully. “Isn’t that right, baby?”

His games are fun despite how badly they make me want to choke him. “Mm.”

“Mm.” He licks his lips.

“Eat.”

“Yes, Daddy,” he mutters, just because he knows I hate it.

Brandt snorts and Bronson tries to hide his laugh, but they both fail miserably. Olivia doesn’t know what to think, and my dad still assumes this is all a part of my plan. All in all, I’m glad I brought him to dinner. Things worked out well for me. I also got a new job at the end of dinner. A name on a slip of paper that was burned immediately after I memorized it.

On the drive home, I keep my wallet in my back pocket, unwilling to make the same mistake twice.

“Can we go to a club or something?” Mercer asks after fucking with the music selection and changing every song without letting more than ten



seconds of it play. "I'm so bored."

"I thought you were modelling for me?"

"Mm." He smirks and changes the song.

"Mm."

"I'm just saying, for a whack job psycho killer, you're pretty boring." He tucks his feet up on the seat. "Who has such a badass job and just sits at home drinking tea every night?"

"I don't drink tea, and I've not been home in five years. This is my first week here."

"So live a little!" he says. "Come on, Blakey."

"Don't call me that."

"Don't call me Mercer." What a little shit. "Just drop me at a club then. Actually, take me home first so I can change into a sexy little suit, and then drop me at a club. Or I can take your car, even though I hate this car. I don't even care what club I go to; I just want to dance and get my slut on."

"Do you need something in your mouth to shut up?"

His whole attitude shifts, ready for a new game. The rambling boy is gone and out comes the demon. "I need a cock in my mouth," he says with the voice of a skilled phone sex worker. "Please, Blake."

"Please, what?"

He leans over the console, batting his dark lashes at me and giving me his innocent eyes. I'm three seconds away from offering up my cock for him to warm because he seems like he needs it. Instead, he goads me. "Take me to a club so someone with more than eight inches can shove their cock down my throat."

I try not to make it obvious, but my grip on the wheel tightens. "Okay, baby. Whatever you need."

If that's how he wants to play it, I'll play right back. Mercer leans back in his seat like a victor, but by the end of the night, he'll be eating that victory and rethinking his game.



HE'S A LITTLE TIPSY, but not dysfunctional. And definitely not off his game. There's a swarm of jocks and big burly men surrounding him, eager to take him home and make him their cumslut. I know he lied about being

five foot nine, actually being closer to five foot seven, but I hadn't been lying about eight inches. Maybe even a little more, but anything past that is a waste anyway. He's tiny, and that's half his allure. Guys want to manhandle him, and he wants to take it like a greedy bitch.

Unfortunately, he's all talk. He's a tease, and I don't know if this is normal for him or if it's different because I'm here. He's purposefully leading on an entire entourage of men, pissing them off the more he plays.

I've threatened to leave five times already, and each time, he pretends he needs me for something. Does he know how transparent he's being? His game is seduction and manipulation, but he's not playing with this group of men. He's playing with me, and his victory will only come after I get possessive of him. That's not going to happen. Not externally. Internally, I'm slamming my cock down his throat to choke off all his taunts, making him weep pretty tears for me while I kill every man in this club who has looked at him.

"Blake," he purrs, leaning over my lap like he's having the time of his life. His pants are tight, and his shirt rides up, showing me his toned stomach and smooth skin. "I picked one."

"Which one?" I ask, playing along.

"That one," he says, pointing to an older guy with a ripped body. "Looks like a good daddy with a big cock."

"Mm." I settle my heart rate and lick my lips. "Better go secure him so we can get the fuck out of here. I've got my own plans tonight."

That does it. His amber eyes whip to mine and his dark hair flows with the movement. "What plans?"

"You think you're the only one who can get laid?" I finish my drink and set the empty glass down. It's just soda, but he thinks I'm drunk. "I secured my hookup two hours ago. Just been waiting for you. Didn't know you took so long to pull."

He scowls at me. "That's what happens when you have options, Blake."

"Mm," I hum again. "Hurry up then."

Mercer, predictably, turns into a petulant dick. He pulls the adult version of a hissy fit by getting all moody and saying he's not feeling it. Of course, that's my fault because I ruined his fun. What an asshole I am, eh? He practically drags me from the club, thinking he's preventing me from bringing home whoever I picked, but he's wrong. He's whiny on the drive,

keeps huffing and puffing and telling me what a terrible wingman I am because I ruined his vibe.

When we get home, he strips out of his club clothes and puts on baggy sweats and a hoodie that looks a lot like one of mine. It is mine. Fucking thief. Kind of like how it looks on him, though. Big and enveloping and touching him everywhere my hands want to be.

“Will you make me a snack since you ruined my night?” Mercer asks, pouting like usual.

“I told you I have plans.” I smirk at him. “I’m gonna grab a quick shower.”

I leave him open-mouthed in the living room and jump in the shower. When I hear the buzzer and then the knock on the door, I almost feel sorry for what I know Mercer is about to do.



THIS FUCKING BITCH. *Blake*. Not the scantily clad bimbo standing in the doorway. Rationally, I know she's probably a nice person with a big brain and a good heart, but right now, she's threatening to take what I feel entitled to.

"Hello," I pour on the silk, adding a sweet smile and batting my lashes. "Can I help you?"

"Blake," she says, and I take back all the nice things I thought about her. She's a bitch and so is he. Both of them are just bitchy bitches and I will not stand for it.

"What about him?" I block the door and make sure she notices I'm wearing Blake's hoodie. It's a flex, and I'm more than okay with it.

She notices but isn't deterred. "Look, he called me over. Can you just let me in? I didn't expect there to be a kid here."

I'm twenty-three, bitch! "I didn't expect Blake to be into haggard older women."

Okay, she's not haggard, and she's not even old, but the kid comment hurt. She's somewhere in her late twenties, and her perfectly done makeup and healthy-looking skin show *she* hasn't been missing *her* skincare products for the past few days like I have. Her clothes are label brand, her hair is done all wavy and sultry, and the dark strands fall perfectly around her high cheekbones. I hate her.

"Haggard?" She lifts a sculpted brow at me.

"Desperate? Worn? Been around the block a few times? Whatever you prefer." I rake my eyes up and down her little body, trying to show distaste

even though she's infuriatingly beautiful. "Oh, you're a hooker? That makes more sense."

She steps closer to me, and there aren't a lot of times in my life where I'm bigger than someone, so I straighten to my full five feet, seven inches, and try to act intimidating. "Is this an act? Protective little brother?"

*Possessive little bastard*, more like. I smile at her, showing all my teeth. "Whatever act it is, it's not going to be worth your time. You should go."

"Where's Blake?"

Oh, this one doesn't give up, does she? Female version of me, which makes me like her just a little, but hate her all the more. "Tied up."

"Tied up?"

"Are you going to keep repeating everything I say? Is this a game?"

"Look, you little asshole, I'm..." she pauses, looking over my shoulder like I no longer exist. "Hey, Blake." Her bitchy smile turns seductive and my blood burns.

"Dee," Blake greets her with a calm, gravelly voice. "Come in." His fingers grasp the back of my neck, steering me from blocking the doorway. "Have a fun night?" he asks her, digging his fingers into my neck harder.

"It was alright. Work was busy."

"Prostituting is hard," I say.

Blake's fingers squeeze harder, and I don't even care that he's trying to punish me for that because he's still touching me. "Been a while," he says to her.

"What, five years? Maybe six?" Her grin is flirty, and I want to scratch it off her face. "You look good, babe."

"Babe?" I scoff. "Smart. Better to use pet names so you don't mix up the names of your clients." Dee seethes at me, but Blake's fingers squeeze so hard I wince. "What?"

"Should have brought that daddy home," Blake whispers against my ear, his nose tickling my hair. "Come on, Dee. Ignore him." He releases my neck and takes her hand.

There's a moment of complete defeat. Trauma floods my brain, reminding me how unworthy and completely forgettable I am. *Ignore him. Story of my life. Ben doesn't exist. Ben wasn't there. Ben isn't coming. Go hide Ben. Make sure Ben isn't in the shoot. Turn off Ben's mic. Ignore Ben. He's just acting out; ignore him.*

I get that itchy feeling. It starts in my fingers and spreads up my arms, burning and grating until it envelops my chest and makes it hard to breathe. The prickles infiltrate my lungs, but I refuse to let this bitch see me weak. I breathe in the smell of Blake's hoodie, remembering my former moment of weakness when he comforted me against his body. I hate that it happened, and I hate it even more that he saw me like that, but I've gained a Pavlovian reaction to his scent. It settles me. It coats my lungs in comfort instead of prickles, enough to keep them working, to keep my mind from spiralling. I pull the sleeves over my hands and bunch the fabric in my fists, letting it ease the itchiness.

When I turn around, Blake is steering Dee down the hall, but his eyes are looking at me. Checking on me. Checking in. His eyes ask me if I'm okay, and... just because he cares, I think I am. Unwilling to let his comment break me, I offer him a devil's smirk as a reminder that if I'm not getting laid, he's not getting laid. *Good luck*, my grin says. He has no idea how fucking annoying I can be. So annoying, his former comment to ignore me won't be possible.

Don't forget me.

Don't ignore me.

See me for who I am and notice me because I'm worthy.

Look through the bullshit and accept all my broken.

*Someone. Please. See me.*



THE STANDARD TRICKS don't work. I found the vacuum and ran it outside his door. I blasted kid cartoons on the TV. I knocked and asked a million questions, and Blake answered every single one of them without so much as a huff of annoyance. Dee glared at me every single time and even called me an attention whore. Blake looked annoyed at that. I flooded the bathtub and shouted for help, but Blake just gave me towels and a bucket. I made a show of calling an old hookup right outside his door, but Blake only slammed it in my face. I marched away at that point, but when I came back, the door was wedged open again.

Time for desperate measures.

A grilled cheese sandwich is going to save me from this nightmare. I've been cooking it for twenty minutes already, and the char on both sides is almost ready. It's nearly three in the morning, and the rest of the building is going to hate me, but I can bat my lashes and play innocent pretty well. When I get a good smoulder going, I leave it for another few minutes just to make sure the pan is really rolling with the burning smell, and then I stand on a bar stool and hold it to the smoke detector.

I wince at the first beep, feel victorious at the second, and scramble back to the floor on the third. I shove the barstool back into place and start my acting.

"Oh no!" I gasp, throwing the pan back on the stove. "Oh no. Oh no. Oh no!" Shit, I need a new line. "No good fucking burner. I just wanted a grilled cheese!"

Blake appears half naked and frustrated all to hell, switching the stove off and fanning the smoke detector. "What did you do, Mercer?" he growls at me.

"I was just trying to make a snack." Batting of the lashes. Shuffling of the feet. Twisting of the sweatshirt material in my hands. Pure innocence in the eyes. Throw in a little pout. "I'm sorry." I'm not even a little sorry.

He starts opening windows to air the place out, but it's far too late for that. I hide my victorious grin in his hoodie when the alarm system for the whole building goes off, telling us to evacuate and that fire crews are on the way.

This buys me all of Blake's attention. He grips my chin hard, snarling in my face. "You little shit."

"It was an accident."

"Bullshit." His jaw clenches and I know he wants to say more, but Dee comes out in her dress, doing an early walk of shame with her heels in her hand.

"This isn't worth it, Blake. Sorry." She looks at me with actual respect. "Well played, attention whore." She doesn't even put her shoes on before leaving the apartment and joining the other pissed off residents in the stairwells.

"Go get me a pair of pants and a shirt," he demands. "While I clean up your mess."

Shoved towards his bedroom, I enter it with a satisfying warmth in my chest. I'm going to get a real talking to about this stunt, and I'm really

looking forward to it. But like the little shit he called me, I scan the room for evidence. The condom is still unopened, and the room doesn't smell like sex. But why? They were in here forever. Did Blake stall? Win for me either way. I grab a pair of sweats and a t-shirt from his hamper, drop the t-shirt back in, and walk down the hall. By this time, the building manager is at our door, ushering us out.

"Where's the shirt?" Blake asks, stepping into the pants.

"Oh. I forgot."

He growls at me again, but he doesn't have time to scold me. "It was just a burned grilled cheese. You can call off the fire department." He's talking to the building manager, and I don't think he even notices his clamped grip around my wrist. "I've got the windows open to air it out. I'm sorry. We don't need to waste the fire crews' time."

"They'll come check it out anyway. It's procedure. Just head downstairs and wait at the cluster point until they clear the building. Mind if I grab a key off you to show them the source?" He's in a robe, and I do feel a bit shitty about waking him up.

Blake hands over a key with another string of apologies, and then he's tugging me down the stairs and I'm tripping on accidental purpose into his bare back. He's not a bulky guy, but he's lean-strong. Lots of tone and definition without being the hulk, and fuck me, it's hot. Literally. Every time I touch his obliques because *whoops* I've tripped again, his skin scorches my hands. Halfway down the fifteen flights, he snaps completely, losing his cool.

Like a superhero without the cape and lacking the do-gooder mentality, he hoists me up and carries me piggyback style down the final seven flights. I smile against his neck and don't even try to keep my boner from pressing into his lower back.

"We're having a serious chat about wasting the time of emergency responders, little demon."

Guilt hits me hard, ruining my victory. I hadn't thought of that. I figured they'd clear the building, see the burned sandwich, and tell everyone they could go back home. The fire department never even crossed my mind, and now I feel bad about it. What if someone is in trouble but the fire crews are here because I'm a needy prick with attention issues? I rest my forehead against Blake's shoulder and sigh.

"I'm sorry."



“No you’re not,” he barks.

“I am about the fire department.”

He opens the door outside, but instead of taking me to the cluster point across the street where everyone else is, he takes me down the sidewalk until we’re between two other buildings. Dropping me, he wraps a hand around my throat and pushes me against the brick wall of a café.

“Fuck with me all you want. Play your games, make a fuss, be a fucking brat, I don’t care. But don’t involve anyone else.”

“You involved someone else by inviting her over.” I glare at him because, obviously, this is all his fault. “You did it to rile me. Well, I’m fucking riled, Blake! Not what you were expecting?”

“I don’t mean her. I mean the residents in the building, the manager, and the fire department. No more of that. You want my attention so bad, you find more creative ways to get it without involving anyone else. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He tightens his fingers around my throat, cutting off air and blood flow in one calculated grip. “I am *not* your daddy. You have a daddy, and he’s the majority of the reason you are the way you are, so if you want me to treat you like he treats you, by all means, keep calling me that. It won’t be fun. It won’t be sexy, and you’ll end up more hurt than you already are. If you want my attention, find something else to call me. Understood?”

Reality hits hard. He sees me. Or at least, he sees a part of me. I’ve never had anyone notice that before, and it means more to me than he’ll ever know. I’ll never call him Daddy again. I nod in his grip.

“Tell me.”

“Understood.”

“Good.” He releases my throat, but his eyes keep me pinned to the wall. “You’re volunteering at the next fireman’s breakfast. To make it up to them for this shit show.”

“Blake!” I complain.

“Actions have consequences.”

“Just spank me or something. Tie me up and humiliate me.”

“No,” Blake says with a bite. “You want sexy consequences, you learn to play the game right. If you want to pull bullshit like this again, you’ll join the goddamn fire department and become a firefighter. This is the

consequence of being an asshole to everyone else and wasting their time. Lesson learned?"

Ugh. Fuck Dee. She started this. "Fine." I'd make a terrible firefighter anyway.

Blake looks around the corner of the building when red and blue flashes light up our alley. And his pecs. Jeez, they reflect off his muscles like strobe lights spotlighting everywhere I want to touch. Do not even regret *forgetting* the t-shirt.

"Step one," Blake says to me, gripping my chin again. "You're going to apologize to the fire crews and the residents of the building."

I grit my teeth, holding in a complaint. I *do not* want to do that. I hate taking ownership of my fuck ups.

"If you do, and you do it sincerely, I'll forgive you for ruining my night."

"I don't need forgiveness."

His smile is almost as wicked as mine, and it scares me a little. "Either I forgive you, or I call someone else over to take care of this." He grabs his hard dick. "And I'll gag you and tie you up right where you can see me fuck her. You won't be able to move or speak, and I'll be able to fuck someone like I've wanted to all night."

"No chick is going to go for that, but good try."

"You think there aren't exhibitionists in this city? Think again, little boy. So, are you apologizing to them or am I calling someone over?"

I'm usually more of a strutter, but I stomp my sorry ass over to the cluster point to make all my *sincere* apologies.

Ugh. He didn't fuck her, so I win, but the night did not turn out like I planned. I still lost.



MOST OF MY payments come in the form of cash that gets filtered through family-owned businesses and paid out to me as some sort of wage. The majority of it goes into an offshore account, but I like to keep a steady income of legitimately sourced money. Keeps me clean on paper. And I need to be clean right now.

After finding the guy whose name was on the paper my dad gave me, I make contact with the client and let them know what I found.

He's feeding information to a company in direct competition with his wife's company. That was the job, but now I wait to see if she extends the job. She'll be in touch with my dad, and it'll go from there.

Sitting in my car, building up the level of stoic calmness I'll need to deal with Mercer, Will Palmerston calls my cell. I knew it'd only be a matter of time before he figured out I have Mercer, and I'm not really doing anything to hide it, so I expect the call.

"Blake Carter," I answer.

"Mr. Carter," he greets me, starting this conversation out professionally. "I hear you have my son."

"He's staying with me, yeah." I scrunch up the bag of pastries from the café, not wanting them to cool too much before I get them upstairs.

"He was meant to be somewhere else," Will says.

"Oh? Where?"

"A facility that helps him manage his mental health. He needs to be there. I'm sure you understand."

"Sure. What's the name of the place? I can take him over."

Will doesn't answer right away because he doesn't want to reveal the name. He knows our family deals in information extraction and discreet jobs, and he doesn't want me looking into it. "May I ask why you have him living with you?"

"Just figured our families are going to be joining soon and I'd take the time to get to know him. He doesn't seem so bad."

"So bad?"

"Yeah, he's a smart guy."

"Indeed." There's an edge to Will's voice that pleases me immensely. "Ben is a lot to handle."

"I'm doing alright so far. I'll kick him out if he gets to be too much, and if he wants to leave on his own, he's welcome to."

"I'd like for you to bring him home, please."

"How come?"

"Because he's ill. He needs medication and care."

"I'm capable of getting him those things. Anything else I should know?"

There's a moment of silence where Will gathers himself and weighs his options. He doesn't want to reveal anything too telling, but he also doesn't want to let me get away with this. He hates his son, that much is clear, and now I'm standing in the way of his whipping post. If I send Mercer back there, he'll be degraded, blamed, mentally whipped, and shamed just because Will needs to do it to feel better about himself. When he's done, he'll ship Mercer to that facility in the hopes the experimental medicine will make him forget it all, or that the time there will diminish his self-worth enough that he'll be too timid to confront anything. Will wants compliance, and he wants to belittle Mercer to get it. Not going to happen.

Will clears his throat and lightens his tone. "Just that many have tried to do what you're doing. They've all failed. You'll learn soon enough that Ben is too much to handle."

"I'm looking forward to getting to know him better. Anyway, I better go. I'll let Mercer know you called to say hi."

Will audibly cringes at the name, but I hang up before he can say anything else. Fucking dick. I finish my smoke and steady myself for whatever Mercer has been up to while I've been gone.

Pastries in hand, I ride the elevator to the top, mentally ticking off things I've done and still have to accomplish today. With my phone open

and my eyes reading an email, I walk out of the elevator and trip over a fuck ton of boxes. My phone goes flying and I almost crush the pastries.

“Mercer!” I shout. I’m the only apartment on this level, but my voice is loud enough to be heard seven stories down. “Get out here!”

He swings the door open in a pair of... no wait, it’s a one-piece romper thing. Loose and flowy and oddly sexy. “What?” he snarks at me. “Oh! My shopping!” He bends to pick up the tiniest box in the hall. “Mind grabbing these for me?” He slams the door in my face.

I find my phone and debate taking him to that facility despite what I just told his dad. There isn’t a chance in hell I’m carrying anything for him, but when I glance at the label on one of the boxes, I get even more agitated. It’s from the Secret Locker, a sex shop, and I don’t even want to know what’s in it. Skin care products, my ass.

Stepping over the boxes, I head inside and completely ignore him at the kitchen island, sifting through a box that actually does contain skincare products. After his fire alarm stunt and his increasing brattiness, I’m going to have to find a way to get through to him. I’m also cancelling this credit card.

“Get those boxes to your room or I’m throwing them out. You have ten minutes.” I walk through the apartment and close my bedroom door behind me. With my back pressed to the door, my hand rubs the ache in my pants, trying to decide what to do with it.

Sex has always been a simple transaction for me. A night of fun and then it’s over. Good sex, long and drawn-out fucks, and quickies are all perfectly acceptable. I typically go for someone who puts out those vibes, seems down to fuck, and half the time, they pick me before I pick them. What they all had in common was the fact that they were easy, low-maintenance, and clear about their intentions.

Mercer is none of those things.

He’s the most complicated person I’ve ever met, and I don’t think he knows the root or reason for the things he desires. To be honest, I don’t think he even knows what he desires, just that he has this itch that needs to be scratched. He’s blunt and upfront while still being confusing, and his acts of rebellion and attitude are sometimes real and sometimes fake. Reading and understanding him changes minute by minute, and his needs shift on a whim.

He had a panic attack, or something like it, and the only reason I knew to give him a command was because I learned about brain manipulation tactics in my training. It's a torture method for extracting information, but it worked just as well on Mercer. It stopped the spin of his mind and jarred him into a moment of clarity. Usually, that's the moment an informant spills all their secrets, but with Mercer, he calmed down and gathered himself. But then his needs conflicted themselves again. He required comfort, more gentle than I assumed he'd want, which settled him, but when he got too settled, too calm, he needed to be shocked back to life with dirty talk and an orgasm. He's a mess of instability, and because he's so confusing, he's making my dick hard.

I rub it, listening to him grunt and groan outside my door. Boxes slam into walls and drop on the hard floor, and a second later, he starts talking to himself. Saying dumb shit about the things he bought and calling me an asshole for making him carry it all. My dick gets even harder because that's just fucking insane, and maybe I'm into insane. How dare I make him carry his own shit that he used my money to buy without my permission after he stole and memorized my credit card? *How fucking dare I?*

"I bought the best lollipops," he says, maybe to me, maybe to himself. "I'm sucking one." I hear the wrapper crinkle, and then I hear the hard candy clack off his teeth.

Ah, fuck. The memory of my fingers in his greedy mouth, his tongue slipping between them, the amount of saliva dripping down his chin. I'd rather shove my fingers back into his mouth than let him suck that lolly.

If there's anything I've learned about Mercer, it's that he needs to be held accountable. He's sexually suggestive, and usually, that gets him his way. But I meant what I said. I'm not fucking him until he begs, and if he won't beg, I'll be jerking off like a fucking teen for the foreseeable future.



WAKING up at three in the morning fucking sucks. Especially because it's exactly what Mercer wants me to do. He's not being audibly loud, but his energy is loud, and fuck me, I can't ignore it. Taking a quick piss and throwing on some sweats, I run a hand through my hair and walk past his open bedroom door.

He doesn't hear me because he has headphones on. He's leaning against the headboard of his bed, body angled towards the wall of windows, one leg bent and the other resting on top of it. His foot is bouncing to whatever he's listening to, and his hands are busy with that handheld gaming system he brought from his parents' house. This is angsty teenager Mercer, and he's pretty damn cute.

He's being quiet, so why did he wake me up?

"When I'm not acting out, no one notices me," he says, scaring the shit out of me. He doesn't look at me, and his foot keeps bouncing. "Which means I notice a lot of things because no one remembers I'm around."

The sadness he's trying to mask as nonchalance gets to me. It reminds me of the day I found him in the middle of a panic attack, and then it reminds me of the night Dee came over. His sisters talked over him, about him, without including him in the conversation. I told Dee to ignore him, and the little bit of panic I saw in his eyes when I said that hits me even harder now. He's just a boy who wants to be seen.

"Did you know my father had been trying to buy that gas plant for years?" he asks, but he still doesn't look at me. "He kept getting held up because of permits and red tape, something to do with city bylaws, and then, bam, your dad buys it."

Interesting. I step into his room, and when he still doesn't look at me, I take a chance and sit on the edge of his bed, leaning against the footboard.

"You wanted to know why my dad agreed to the engagement so easily?" he asks rhetorically. "Well, I'd wager a guess and say it has something to do with that mine."

"How's that come into an engagement, though? It's not like Bronson owns the mine."

He pretends not to hear me. "But my best guess is that the Palmerston family is finally running out of all that old money, and the Carter family is coming into new money. The engagement is the first of many proposed business arrangements. You wait a year and see. Your dad trusts my dad as a smart businessman, because on paper, he is a smart businessman. So, with that trust, Will Palmerston will pitch all these ideas to Brendan Carter, and the next thing you know, the Palmerston family will be back in the financial green."

"So, he's building a tie to my family and garnering trust to save himself?"

Again, he pretends not to hear me. “And while the Palmerston family reigns supreme, like it has for generations, he’ll slowly and subtly diminish the credibility of the Carter family. If I had to make a prediction, and I’m pretty good at predictions, Will might slip the Carter name and the family business to less than stellar clients, you’ll start getting calls from low-level thugs and terrorists and people with no discretion, and sooner or later, give or take two to five years, the Carter family business will be in ruins because your reputation will be next to nothing.”

I don’t bother responding this time, but I trust his take. He’s perceptive as shit, smart, and manipulative, but those are all the reasons Will is threatened by him, so they’re all the reasons I’m going to trust him.

“Without the income from your namesake business, your dad will be under a significant amount of stress. With that stress, he’ll start delegating the mine to someone else so he has the time to build up and fix the hitman for hire business, and it’ll give my dear old daddy a clear path to takeover. Brendan will be distracted and agitated, and William will slide right into ‘taking on more responsibility to help out the in-laws’ over at the mine. He’s such a good guy like that, you know? Suddenly, things will be in the Palmerston name. Little things at first, like bills and accounts and contracts, and Will will hold his hand to his heart and say, ‘oh, I had to do it because they wouldn’t let me sign off unless it was in my name. I was just making it easier on you while you dealt with your family stuff,’ and by this time, your dad will be suspicious as fuck.”

Mercer probably knows that my dad is already suspicious, but again, I don’t say anything.

“Eventually... well, you get the picture. It’s a long-con takeover bred by fear of reputation and financial hardship, and we can all guess how that will go.”

I don’t know exactly what comes over me, but I grab his ankle and yank him down the bed. He drops his game, gasps, and stares at me with those shocked amber eyes. I pull him straight onto my lap, force his legs open, and make him straddle me. I remove the headphones and steady his hips.

“I want to make a deal with you, Mercer.”

“What deal? I’m not a very reliable deal maker.”

I don’t doubt that. “What do you want out of life?”

He opens his mouth on a quick-witted reply and then closes it. After a major internal debate that looks like it hurts his brain, he eventually says, “I



don't have a fucking clue."

"You've never been allowed to want anything, have you?"

"Don't psychoanalyze me, Blake Carter."

"I'll do whatever the fuck I want to you, Mercer Bentley Palmerston."

He grins at his full name. "What's the deal? It better be worth my time and the hard-on you just gave me by getting all handsy."

"I'll never ignore you," I tell him and he basically melts on top of me, but he doesn't want to melt, so he swallows and straightens his spine, grinding that hard-on against my lap for good measure. "I'll be honest with you if you're honest with me. I want to help you rise to the top."

"I don't need you to get me to the top. I'm capable."

"I know," I admit. "You have the skills, the smarts, and the mind to be more than... this. The neglected and hated son act must be getting old, yeah?"

"It got old fifteen years ago."

"Then I want to show you how fucking powerful you can be when you aren't hated and neglected. I know you don't need my help, but you need to fucking respect yourself. I can help with that part."

"Why?" He looks at my eyes, my mouth, checking for lies and coercion. "Why do you care?"

"Because I saw your ass in lacy lingerie, and it fucked up all my brain wires." I smirk at him.

"I knew you eye-fucked me."

"Because you don't trust anyone," I tell him the truth. "No one. Not even yourself. Aren't you sick of being beaten down over and over again, being sent to that place, and not having the power to get out from under his control? You're an adult, but you don't get to act like one. It's gotta be tiring, no?"

"Yes," he whispers. "Though it's mostly my fault."

"I know," I laugh. "You egg it on and never actually try to get away because you don't know where the fuck to go. I've been there. I might not act out the same way you do, but I know what it's like to be neglected."

He rolls his eyes at me. "Sure you do." He stays on my lap but grabs a lolly from his pile and shoves it in his mouth. "So, the deal is that we help each other?"

"No." I snatch the candy from his mouth and put it in mine. "The deal is that we learn to trust each other." Shit, this is a good lolly. Strawberries and

cream or something. “Deal?”

“I’ll think about it,” he says, trying to grab the sucker stick.

“Open,” I demand.

“I still don’t trust that my dad didn’t hire you to take care of me as a job. Either keep me out of his way or kill me. Haven’t decided yet.”

“Open.”

“Say please.”

Not a chance. I grip his chin and squeeze until his lips pop open. I lean in until my lips are brushing his, revelling in the feel of his small body trembling with need on top of mine. “Better start begging soon, Mercer.” I lick his lips, and just as he leans in to take more, I shove the lolly back in his mouth and stand up. I set him on the bed and make a point of adjusting my dick right in front of his face. “Night, baby.”



I WON'T BEG. It's not because I'm above it, but because he wants me to. Instead, I'll taunt him until he's desperate enough to give in without me having to beg. He might be strong-willed and stoic, but I'm fucking persistent. Plus, persistence and games will help my mind stay afloat through the emotions I'm drowning in after he said all that shit to me last night.

*I will never ignore you.*

I almost died right then and there. Everyone ignores me. *Everyone*. And now that I've had time to think about it, I know I don't deserve his attention. I've done nothing nice to get it, and eventually, he'll realize that. He'll start ignoring me because the type of attention I attract isn't sustainable long term. For now, I'm going to revel in his promise and push all his buttons to see how committed he is to keeping it.

"Will you open this for me?" I ask, setting a box on the kitchen island.

Blake pours himself a glass of water from the tap like a heathen, standing right over the sink to drink it. "A box? You can't open a box?"

"The tape is really stuck on there."

"Use a knife."

*Take my fucking bait, asshole.* I widen my eyes and make them a little watery. "Please."

He turns his sweaty, post-workout chest towards me, and I try really hard not to ogle his abs. All six of them sit nicely above a deep V and eight inches of pleasure. God. Fuck him for being so goddamn perfect. "Are you begging?"

"I'm asking nicely. Like a good boy."

“Mm,” he hums his favourite non-word. “Sounds like begging.”

So cocky. I tilt my head but keep my eyes on his, flinging open the drawer at my hip. Taking out a random knife, I start hacking at the box. I’m stabbing the damn thing with a serrated bread knife, making a mess, probably puncturing the goods inside, but I don’t care because he’s going to do what I want him to do without me having to beg.

“Jesus fuck,” he groans, grabbing my wrist. He takes the knife from me and sets it down, pulling out a smaller one. “Try this.”

Fucker. I take it, stab at the box again, and he lets me go for all of six terribly placed stabs.

“You are the worst and most obvious manipulator I’ve ever met.” He takes the second knife from me, and I grin in victory. He stands right behind me, and as much as I love the heat of his chest on my back, it’s not the position I was hoping for. I want to see his face. “Not what you were planning?” he says right beside my ear. “I know you’re trying to pull a reaction out of me over whatever’s in this box.” He cuts it open and drops the knife, tearing open the flaps to reveal paper packaging. “Sure you don’t want to do it yourself so I can sit over there and gasp and cringe and fucking gag at whatever the hell is in here?”

I slam my ass back, hitting his groin. “Sure. Go sit over there and start gagging. I can think of other ways to gag you if you prefer.”

“How original. Your cock, I’m guessing?” he asks, moving to stand beside me again.

“Sure.” I shrug, reaching into the box. “Or duct tape, a ball gag, a towel shoved into your mouth. Or this.” I pull out an eight-and-a-half-inch dildo. “Bigger than yours, according to what you claim.”

It’s a big, blue, silicone dick and he doesn’t even shy away from it. It’s still in the packaging, but he takes his time studying it. Suction cup to stick to whatever surface I want fucking me, veins, a big head with all the right ridges. He grins.

“Seriously? That does it for you?”

“Why not?”

“It can’t even come. You’re a terrible cumslut if you think a non-jizzing dildo does the trick.” He snorts like that’s a great insult. *It is!* Fuck him! “Sort of disappointed. I had such high expectations for your slutty boy status.” He shakes his head at me.

There aren't many times I'm rendered stuck for a comeback, but right now is one of them. I act like I'm not secretly scorned by his words and keep going through the box. When I find a bottle I completely forgot I ordered, I hold it up for him.

"They *can* come," I tell him, feeling justified now. "This is cum scented and flavoured lube. You put it in toys that can jizz."

"Interesting," he says, taking the bottle and smelling it. He cringes. "Not my favourite cum scent. Where's the jizzing toy then?"

I didn't order one. "You rushed me to finish shopping that morning, so I didn't pick one yet!"

"Mm," he hums again, refilling his water. "What else ya got in there, hm? What are you trying to rile me with?"

"You're taking the fun out of it," I complain.

"Oh, am I? Sorry, when you stalked out here all prancy and dancy, claiming you couldn't open a fucking box, I just assumed we were playing to win. I don't like losing, so seeing that grumpy look on your face is a nice little bonus. Did I win?"

"I'm not grumpy." I scowl into the box.

"Of course not." He finishes his water. "Want to show me the rest now, or do you need a minute to re-evaluate the game? We can wait until later when you get your swagger back."

I throw the big blue dick at him. "Fuck you, Blake."

He laughs, catching it. "Come on. Get dressed. We're going out."



"YOU CONFUSE ME," Blake says from behind the wheel of his Denali. "With your outfit choices."

I bullied him into taking me through a drive-thru to get a brownie fudge sundae, so I lick the spoon and look down at my outfit. I chose comfort because it resembles how I feel around Blake. Sweats, and a grey hoodie I stole straight from the dryer before he folded his laundry, my feet shoved into socks and slides, and a grey Blue Jays ball cap even though I know nothing about baseball. I just liked the blue jay.

"Why?"

“I got all these warnings about what a sexual deviant you are, and the first night I saw you, you set the standard high in that lingerie. Haven’t seen you in it since.” He shrugs. “You’re more of a lazy hoodlum than a fancy sex symbol.”

“Are you saying my hoodlum look isn’t sexy?”

He grins at the windshield. “No, I’m not saying that. At all.”

The timbre behind those words makes me believe them. “You said we’re going out. In my life, if someone says we’re going out, that means one of two things. The first being that I need to look a certain way, set a standard, comply with the Palmerston dress code because I’m being shown to the public to keep murder theories away. The second being that I’m going to be tricked into something.”

“Like what?”

“Like that behavioural facility or a secluded house so I’m out of the way with a fucking warden keeping an eye on me. In either of those cases, I like to dress for... practicality. If I run, I want to be warm. If I’m attacked, I want to conceal weapons. If I’m stranded, I want my pockets jammed full of burner phones and granola bars, even though I have no one to call except the police. Or a reporter who’d probably get to me faster. So for those cases of ‘we’re going out’, I like pants with lots of pockets and a lot of layers to hide things in.”

“What’s the reason behind today’s choice then?” Blake asks, and I’m not sure if I can admit to him that he makes me comfortable yet.

“You don’t require any effort.” I take a bite of chocolate and brownies and caramel bits. “That’s not the full truth, but it’s the only part you’re getting.”

Blake lights a cigarette and nods to accept that. “Thanks. But what about the lingerie? When does that come back into play?”

“It’s never out of play.” I smirk, lifting my hips a bit. I lift the hoodie and roll down the waistband of the pants a little, showing him a nice peek at a bit of navy-blue lace. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, Blake.”

He smiles for real. “I don’t know why, but that makes me feel better.”

Kill me now for blushing.

I finish my ice cream and then complain about how full I am, but when we pass a McDonald’s, I still ask for a Big Mac. Blake says no, telling me we’re going to dinner after.

“After what?”

“I have a job to do,” he says, pulling into an underground parking garage. I was too preoccupied with staring at him driving to notice what building it is. “Thought you might be interested in helping.”

“Are you going to pay me?”

“Sure. What’s your price, baby?”

“Your dick without having to beg,” I deadpan.

“Mm,” he hums, wheeling into a parking space. “Might want to wait in the car then. I can handle this one without you.”

“A blowjob without having to beg for it,” I compromise.

“You want to give or receive?”

I grit my teeth for a second and then decide to own it. “Give.”

“Alright,” he agrees. “At a time of my choosing.”

We shake on it, even though I feel duped, and then we’re moving around to the back of the vehicle. Blake pulls out a few devices, a few knives, and even a gun. I hold out my hand for one, but he scoffs at me.

“You couldn’t even cut a box open. No.”

“Yeah, I suck at kitchen knives,” I agree. I steal a dagger right from his fingertips, flip it around a bunch of times to be fancy, and then hold it to his neck. “These, on the other hand, are my favourite.”

He swallows, the roll of his throat pressing into the blade. “I’ll take that blowjob now.”

As tempted as I am to drop to my knees in this highly watched parking lot, I grin at him and shake my head. “Job hasn’t been completed yet.”

“Oh? Now you have boundaries?” He squeezes my wrist and takes the dagger from me. “Fuck you for being a cock tease.” He hands it back and gives me three more. “We shouldn’t need them, but it never hurts to be prepared. Any other weapons skills I should know about? Secret black belt or anything?”

“Damn good archer,” I admit proudly. “But no. Knives and daggers are my thing.”

He laughs, closing the hatch. “When I’m done with you, you’ll be good with kitchen knives, too. You need to learn to cook.”

I follow him as he starts into the building. “Never been good at cooking because I hate following directions.”

“I couldn’t tell.”

I smile. A real one. Not a smirk or a grin or anything playful and condescending. It feels so nice on my face I immediately wipe it away.

Blake avoids the lobby and somehow has a key to a private elevator. I feel like a legit spy as we slink along walls and make our way down a corridor with nothing but closed doors with 'private' on the nameplates. He produces another key to unlock one of them, and all that's behind it is a set of stairs. He's sexy when he's in stealth mode, and it's getting harder and harder to walk at this clip with a stiffy.

"For being small, you're louder on your feet than I thought." He pauses to peer around a corner.

"Well, your super dangerous spy game is getting me hard and the lace is rubbing in all the right places. Sue me."

"Serves you right. Your super sexy knife skills put me in the same predicament, but you don't hear my footsteps, do you? Learn faster."

I learn on the go and by the time we get to the final door, Blake is pulling out all the spy movie moves. He has a device with a 3D image of an eyeball, holds it to the retinal scanner, puts on a finger condom to press to the print scanner, and then types in a code. The green light buzzes and we're in.

"A server room?" I ask, even though it's rhetorical. This is obviously a server room, but I still don't know what building we're in. "What is this place?"

"The competition," Blake says, pulling out a camera. "I got hired to find out if this woman's husband was leaking information to a competing company, and it turns out he was. This is the company he leaked information to, so I got rehired to wipe their servers."

"You know computers and tech that well?"

"Not even close. I have someone to do it remotely. I just need to get him some information. This isn't my main job."

"What is?"

"The husband," he says with a wicked smirk. "Whatever she decides to do with him."

"Mm, violence gets you horny, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes. Hurry up. We've got less than ten minutes in here. Use your super brain and start documenting all the main server numbers on the back."

There are way too many servers in here for him to take a picture of them all before ten minutes runs out. "Just move. Put the camera away and get whatever else you need here. I'll do the server codes."



He pauses to look at me.

“If I see them, I won’t forget them. I promise.”

He hesitates for all of one breath and then nods. I don’t know why that means so much to me. He starts plugging things into the main computer, and I start trying to memorize everything I can get my eyes on. My memory isn’t photographic; I can’t recall everything I’ve ever seen, but when it comes to numbers and sequences, even colour codes and patterns, it doesn’t leave me. Ever. I’m a great card shark.

Just as Blake is packing up his equipment at our ten-minute mark, asking if I got everything memorized, the door alarm beeps. I start to panic, but Blake doesn’t. As cool as a fucking cucumber, he snatches me around the waist and pulls me between two very hot control towers. His ass hits the floor and my ass hits his dick. His groan is silent, but my heartbeat isn’t.

“I want 24/7 security on this door,” someone says. “Frank’s wife is getting suspicious, and I wouldn’t put it past her to try to shut us down. Our patent is almost ready.”

Blake hands me his phone, the camera already recording. He nods towards the front of the room, where we can vaguely see two shadows. We can hear fine, so hopefully the camera picks up the audio over the hum of all these machines.

“What’s Frank getting out of this? Other than a divorce.” The second guy laughs.

“Millions,” the first one scoffs. “He’s been stalling her on the patent for months. We’re almost there.”

“Okay, this is going to take me about twenty minutes. I just have to swap these decks out. You can call security and request a detail for this floor starting tonight.”

Things go silent after that, so Blake takes his phone from me and stops the recording. I settle in, knowing we’re going to be here for a while, but again, Blake doesn’t allow that. Silently, he shifts back until his back is pressed to the wall and his ass is on the floor, legs spread, and he taps my hip to turn me around. It’s dark, but I can see the glow of his face, and I don’t trust it. I don’t trust it so much my mouth waters and I keep staring at how fucking hot that look is.

Kneeling in front of him, he pulls my face to his and whispers the same command he gave me the other night. “Open.”

I don't know if I comply or if it instinctually happens when he pushes my head down, but a second later, my tongue hits the tip of his cock and all my senses fine tune or turn off or something. To the soundtrack of humming tech equipment and security being ordered, I finally get my first taste of Blake Carter. And I'm not about to pass it up.

I lick the warm, salty tip of his cock just to tease him, but the insatiable slut in me needs more. With one of his hands on the base of his cock and the other on the back of my head, I dip down to take him into my mouth. My lips run the length of him, feeling all the ridges and veins until I hit his hand on the base. On the way back up, I let my teeth lightly graze him, and I lick the slit when his legs tremble. Oh, fuck yeah. I can read you, Blake Carter.

"Yes, 24/7 security starting tonight. Two stations. One outside the door and one by the elevator."

I remove his hand and suck him all the way down, craving the fill of him in my throat. I have a feeling he kept his hand there so I wouldn't gag, but lucky for him and this stealthy blowie, I'm not a gagger. I swallow around him, constricting the head in my throat. The hand he had there ends up in his mouth to stifle his groan.

The lacy restriction of my panties has my cock trapped torturously, but it only makes this hotter. I'm a sucker for punishment, but more than that, I'm a pleaser. But only when it comes to sex. I want to make *him* beg. Planting my hands on his thighs and trying to keep the sucking noises to a minimum, I bob up and down his shaft, wishing I could drag this out so it never ends. I don't worry about swallowing, just let the drool drip down his cock to soak his trimmed pubes. Love a guy who manscapes. With my nose pressed to his skin and my drool soaking my face, I realize he was being humble about those eight inches. Not by much, but goddamn. Eight and *a half*.

Both hands land on the back of my hood and he holds me there. His hips thrust so he's gently fucking my throat, and I move one hand to my dick, easing the ache just a bit. My eyes water and my throat burns, but my mind delves into such a blanket of calm that I feel entirely safe in this completely unsafe situation. I have no idea what happens if we get caught here, but I'm too comfortable to care. And I trust him. Holy shit, I trust him. Plus, I have knives.

Blake stops thrusting his hips, but he uses his hands on my head to make me fuck his cock with my mouth. I breathe through my nose and try not to make slurping sounds, but honestly, it's harder not to moan. I'm so fucking into this I'm about to come in my pants again. A tiny whimper escapes me, and Blake pulls me up.

Staring straight into my eyes with a look I've not yet seen on his face, he checks in on me. I'm crying, drooling, probably snorting, begging him with my eyes to let me go back down to suck him. "You going to come, baby?" he whispers so quietly I barely hear it.

My hand is still rubbing my cock through my sweats. I nod.

He releases my face, and when I drop down to swallow his dick, he stops me. Pushing me upright, he glances behind me before hooking his thumbs in my pants and tugging them down a bit. My hard cock presses against the panties and Blake bites his lip at the sight of it. "Can't ruin these," he says. "Fuck, Mercer. You aren't ruining these with cum." He tugs them down and puts my hand on my cock. I start stroking on instinct. He leans me forward, angling my body over his, and then he whispers in my ear, "Cover my cock in cum, baby. Then suck it all off."

Oh god. My forehead rests on his shoulder, and I bite the fabric of his jacket to shut myself up. I'm a goddamn three pump chump before I'm damn near crying into the fabric, coming all over his dick. His fingers touch my cock, pointing it right where he wants it, and it makes me tremble so hard I feel like I'm coming again.

"Mmmm." His coat eats my sounds, and his hand soothes my back.

"Good boy," he whispers, pushing me up again. His thumbs swipe the tears under my eyes, and then he looks down at the mess I made all over him. His gaze tells me what to do. His eyes are telling me to be a good little cumslut and clean up my mess. He's daring me, no... commanding me, to be his good boy.

"Two minutes," one of the men says. "All the codes will be changed in two minutes."

He tucks me into my pants and I fall forward, swallowing him into my mouth and sucking the taste of my cum off his cock. I lick all around the base, whimpering for more. When I've gathered it all in my mouth, I show him. Blake squeezes my cheeks to make it drip down my chin with all my drool, and then his tongue licks from chin to lips. I'm going to come again. Jesus fuck.

He pushes me down and I suck him until he's shaking with restraint. Pressing my lips right under his tip and shallowly bobbing my head, he firms up his hold on my hair to keep me there. His release hits my tongue with a warm spurt, the liquid filling my mouth. I swallow what I can and take him deeper until he's done, but the taste of him and the way he trembles set me off again. I've never had a hard time coming more than once in a row, but fuck me, I definitely ruined the lace, even if the load was smaller. I keep it quiet, my little secret, and then I suck in a silent breath, licking him clean. I wait on my knees for him to tell me I did good.

His cheeks are flushed, his dark hair is messier for some reason, and his eyes are calm and chaotic together. He runs his thumb over my bottom lip, and then he pulls me close. When his lips meet mine, it's so unexpected that I freeze. I've never really been kissed before. Quickies don't always like kissing, and even if they did, I don't think it'd be anything like the way Blake kisses. He's slow and calculated, not at all in a rush, conveying how good of a slut I am with gentle caresses and shared tastes. His thumb runs over my lip again, even though he's still kissing me, and when his mouth moves, I know he's mouthing the words, 'good boy.'

"Okay, let's get out of here. It's fucking hot."

"Everything is changed? Even the code to get out?"

"Yep."

The door opens at the same time those words register and ruin our kiss. We don't know the new code to get out. For the first time, Blake looks a little worried. He pushes me to my feet and we both watch the door swing closed in slow motion. He makes a run for it, but I'm faster. Not with my jelly legs, but with my throwing knife. I time it perfectly, and just as the door jars shut, my knife lands between it and the doorframe, preventing it from latching. Okay, I'm impressed with myself. When did I get this cool?

Blake pauses, waiting to see if anyone is going to come back and notice that. When no one does, he checks the door and smiles when it still opens. He puts my knife back in place, tugs up his pants, and kisses me again.

"Fuck, Mercer. You earned a second blowjob for that bit of brilliance. Let's get out of here." He tugs me towards the door. "I don't even care how sweaty we are, I fucking love server rooms all of a sudden."

I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, but I still feel comfortable and safe.



AFTER TELLING Mercer where we're going for dinner, he pulls the world's biggest hissy fit. So bad, in fact, that I end up taking him home to calm down for a minute. Well, at least thirty-eight minutes because my ears are already bleeding from all his complaints, and I stopped replying to them thirty-six minutes ago when I realized they were rhetorical bitch-fests.

I don't care. That blowjob was the hottest shit of my life, and even his asshole voice isn't detracting from it. Those knife skills are also up there on the spank bank list. Goddamn. Feisty little hoodlum on the streets, lingerie wearing badass in the sheets. Literal perfection. I really hope he begs for sex soon.

I don't think he's taken a breath in four minutes, but I let him continue. His cheeks are red and his eyes are glossy, and his little body is all taut and tight and turning me on.

“—send me back there. If you think I'm going to stand for that shit, you haven't seen the best of my knife skills yet, Blake Carter. How fucking dare you spring this on me like it's no big deal? I'm not welcome there! Did you miss the part where my mother tried to ship me off to a brainwashing camp that my dad sanctioned? No. I'm not going. You go. Feel free to stick the turkey knife in my dad's windpipe while you're at it. I'll take leftovers. And don't forget dessert.”

He's pissed, but he still sways his hips down the hall, retreating to his bedroom for safe keeping. Makes me feel pretty good that he feels safe there. I don't bother following. He's pulled this trick three times already, and he always comes back.

I finish the dregs of my latte, really regretting not getting him to write down all those numbers in his memory before springing a formal dinner at his parents' on him. My dad issued the invite, but I knew Will asked him to. This is a test. Will wants to see how much I know and what my relationship with *Ben* is like. Well, he's about to find out. I'll drag Mercer there if I have to.

"You know what?" He's storming my way again, as predicted. This time he has a lolly in his mouth, but he whips it out to use as a prop, embellishing his hand gestures. "Fuck you, Blake!" He points the candy right at me. "You're the only person who knows the truth about that place. I confessed that to you in trust, and even knowing that, you're going to make me go there? You once asked me to respect and be grateful for the breakfast and the apartment you were nice enough to offer me. Well, now I'm asking you to respect the truth I told you and cut me a fucking break!" Lolly, right in my face. Then he sucks it hard, crunching the candy, and tugs it back out. He wants to add more, say more, but I think he's finally hit his word limit.

"You done?" I finish my latte. Shit, this non-bitter coffee is getting addictive.

"No, I'm not done," he snaps, not ready to deflate yet. "I'm far from done."

"You're done," I tell him, standing. I grab his chin and hold it, but the little shit doesn't stop crunching the candy beneath my fingers. "This is your chance to shove it in his face that you won."

"Won?" He smacks my hand away. "How'd I win? I'm in hiding."

"Then come out of hiding. Show him you aren't scared of him."

His eyes drop and his munching stops. He swallows the jagged bits, wincing a little. He doesn't say it, but his actions do. He *is* scared. Of that place, his dad, his situation, and now that I'm noticing more about him, he's also scared of being invisible.

"It doesn't have to all be real, Mercer. Fear is rational, but he's a predator. You're never going to stop being afraid of him if you don't become a bigger predator."

"I can't be bigger, Blake. I'm a twinkie little nobody. I got all my mom's genes and none of his manly ones. He'll always be bigger than me."

"I don't mean in size, you little shit. And if you ever diss your body again, I'll punish you. I mean in lethality. Be more lethal. Or at least be

intimidating enough to make him sweat. How'd you do it before, huh? Your dad hates you. Why?"

"Because I'm smart."

"Right. You threatened him with your brain. You don't need size to beat him. You already have everything you need to win."

He huffs. Or scoffs. Or laughs condescendingly. I can't always tell the difference. "Like what? What do I have?"

"You are the most persistent person I've ever met. You *do not* give up, and that's not an insult. Your attitude is bigger than this world. Use it. Your smarts are right here." I tap his head. "Stop being afraid of them just because he made you hate yourself for them. And while your body might be small, it's fucking deadly with some knives. You have assets and skills. Stop pretending you don't." I grip his chin again. "And this one doesn't matter at all because you're strong either way, but you have me. I know you've been alone in this forever, but you aren't anymore. For whatever that's worth."

He blinks, and his eyes gloss over even more. Then he gets mad. "Stop making me weepy! It's not a good look on me!"

"It's a perfect look on you," I correct. I smack his ass as he marches away. "Put on something that doesn't meet the Palmerston dress code!"

"I am!" he screams. His door slams a second later.



I DON'T UNDERSTAND how anyone can grow up in a place like this. Is it a home or a fucking museum? Will and Penny Palmerston are older parents, having started their family later in life. Because business comes first, right? Whatever. I'm pretty sure Mercer was an oopsie, yet another thing for him to feel shitty about, but that's not his fault. They're old enough to fit the old white money stereotype, and they do nothing to staunch it. They embellish it, live up to it, and literally turned their house into a museum. No wonder Mercer hates it here.

He was all stoic and calm in the car on the way over here, then he had a mini-for-him-freakout, and after that, I let him drive. It took him an additional thirty minutes to get us here, but he did it in the end. We drove around a lot of country blocks until he stopped sweating.

Now, I'm inside, sipping some expensive brandy, and Mercer is waiting outside because he wants to make a dramatic entrance. On his own. All the power to him. I've got my eyes on all his family members, so I know they aren't kidnapping him.

Both my brothers stand with me, neither of them asking where Mercer is. We shoot the shit for a bit, but I'm not the best conversationalist, so I let them talk around me. Dad is chatting with Olivia, Samantha, and Penny, and Will is staring at me. I smile at him like I don't know what the fuck he wants, and eventually he comes over.

"Blake," he greets me. "Bronson. Brandt."

We all say hi, even though it's awkward as hell. I'm not good at being social with anyone, let alone this prick.

"Where's Ben?" His tone is light and casual, but I know the question is anything but. "Couldn't convince him to come?" Ah, there it is, the condescending bullshit I expected.

"Why should I have to convince him to come to his own family's home?"

"He's always been defiant," Will says, waving off my question. "I'm not surprised he's not here."

The stage could not have been set any better for a grand entrance, but Mercer still doesn't come in. I won't be pissed at him if he dipped, but eventually, I want him to face this man, look him straight in the eyes, and tell him to go fuck himself.

"Just let me know when you've had enough of him, and I'll come take him off your hands."

"Oh? You need him for something? I thought he was supposed to be somewhere?"

Will smiles at my brothers. "He'll get there when the time is right. Gentlemen," he says as a goodbye even though we're all still in the same room.

We watch him go and I'm not surprised to find blank faces on both of my brothers. We weren't raised in this kind of wealth. We were well off, but our upbringing wasn't pretentious. We didn't play money games and network at social events. We weren't conducting business meetings over dinner or watching our dad try to schmooze with potential clients. Our business spoke for itself; our dad didn't have to go out there and drum it up, being deceptive and charming all wrapped up in one. My grandpa built the



reputation, my dad expanded on that reputation, and word of mouth spread from there. Dad is a worker and salt-of-the-earth business owner, not whatever Will Palmerston is.

“Why the actual fuck are we marrying into this family?” Brandt asks under his breath, still watching Will. He’s treating his daughters with the most compassionate attention, and my heart hurts a little more for Mercer, who never got that level of love. Or any love.

“I thought it was for money,” Bronson says. “Now I’m not so sure.”

Dad looks over at the three of us, his expression knowing. He can tell what we’re all thinking, and I swear he’s daring us to figure it out. If what Mercer told me is true, Will has already planned the entire takeover of our family business and the natural gas mine, so what the hell does Dad plan to get out of this? I know my dad well enough to understand he’s already sorted through all the details Mercer laid out, but is he missing something? Is he playing another angle?

“You fucking the Palmerston boy?” Brandt straight up asks me.

“Nope.”

“You wanna be?” Bronson asks.

I grin into my brandy glass and lock eyes with Will Palmerston. “If he breaks down and begs me for it.”



WE’RE all seated around the dining room table and Mercer still hasn’t shown up. I don’t fucking blame him because I’m itching to leave.

Just as salads are being placed on the table, the dining room doors bang open and there’s my little brat. Dressed to fucking impress in a leather suit fit for an assassin, he slays his entrance. Leather pants with slits up the sides, showing a little skin, black boots with a small wedge, and a sleeveless black top with a corset cinched up the back. His eyes are lined with black, giving him a catlike look, and his dark hair remains as chaotic as it has always been, just without the hood this time.

His eyes seek mine for a fraction of a second to top off his bravery reserves, and then he’s all snark and sass. “Family,” he greets them all. “Carter boys.”

I half wonder if this is a costume or if he'd actually wear something like this. I mean, he owns the clothing, obviously, since it came from his closet, but where would he typically wear this outfit? I'm kind of in love with it, but then again, I love his hoodies and sweatpants, too. The guy can wear no wrong. I wonder what kind of panties he's got on under there.

"Damn," Brandt whistles at him. "Strut that shit, hot stuff."

Mercer winks at him, not at all giving a fuck that his parents are wide-eyed and currently having heart attacks. I catch Will's eye, and silently remind him of his earlier words. *He's always been defiant.*

Dad nods at Mercer and even shakes his hand, Bronson gives him a grin, and Olivia and Samantha are caught somewhere in the middle. They're happy to see him, annoyed that he is once again making things harder on himself, and worried about what their father will do. He doesn't even smile at them. I pull out the chair next to mine and push it in for him when he sits down.

"Blake," he greets me.

"Mercer," I greet him loud enough for the table to hear. There are a few sharp inhales, but nobody comments on the name just yet.

"Sorry I'm late," Mercer says, digging right into his salad. Turning to me, he adds, "These people don't even offer three dressing choices."

I laugh at that and pick up my fork. Oh, this is fun. When his bratty attitude isn't aimed at me, I'm rather fond of it. I think I'm fond of it regardless of where it's aimed, to be honest.

"Why are you late?" Will asks, finally opening his mouth. What a way to greet your son, jackass.

"Couldn't get my corset done up tight enough," Mercer says through a full mouth.

"Perhaps that's a sign you shouldn't wear... that."

"Mm," Mercer hums, making me laugh again. Shit, he's kinda funny.

"Mm," I echo. "Looks badass. I hope you have daggers hidden in there somewhere."

Mercer smirks at me, flashing a hilt at his waist. "So, family? What's up?"

I sit back, enjoy all fucking seven courses while Mercer runs this show and doesn't lose his edge even once. By dessert, Dad, Brandt, and Bronson are all laughing with him, Samantha and Olivia have loosened up, and Penny is quietly observing. If I'm not mistaken, there's a little tear in her

eye for the lost family dinners they could have had fun at if they'd only accepted him. Too bad she missed out by being a shitty mom. I can't put all the blame on her because it must be scary being married to a tyrant, but still; she could have helped him in secret.

Will, on the other hand, isn't happy, and for whatever reason makes sense to him, he's looking at me as the one to blame. I'll take it. Gladly. That's right, asshole; I reminded your son he has fucking confidence.

"Ben, I'd like to speak to you in private," Will says at the end of dinner. "It'll only take a moment."

I really don't want that to happen, but I look at Mercer for direction. Whatever he's comfortable with, I'll have his back. "I won't ignore you," I mouth the words to him.

Mercer motions his dad over to the corner of the room, compromising. "Sure."

"In the hall."

"Here's fine."

Will's looking around, making sure my dad doesn't get the wrong—but totally right—impression. He's nervous, not because he cares, but because he's a prideful man who won't settle for a tainted reputation.

"Another time," Will says to Mercer. "I wouldn't want to be rude to our guests."

Mercer's smile is sad yet victorious. "Blake?" I barely catch the wobble in his voice. "I have somewhere to be. Want to go, or shall I steal a vehicle?"

"I'm ready to go," I tell him, placing a hand on his back when I get to him. He's shaking. Maybe not shaking, but agitated. Jittery. "You fucking killed it, little boy."

"I know." He hugs his sisters, says a timid goodbye to his mom, laughs when my brothers and dad say bye to us, and then he's trying way too hard to keep his back straight and his hands steady until we get to the Denali. I don't understand why I get this instinct, but I grab him a hoodie of mine from the trunk. He pulls it over his head and sucks on the sleeves like it's a safety blanket.

We're halfway down the lane when his breathing turns to hyperventilating. His fingers end up in his mouth next, and I call his name three times before he sort of responds to it.

"Seatbelt off," I demand.

On autopilot, he complies, starting to whimper.

“Come here.” He leans over the console, not even looking at me. I stop the car to check on his eyes, and when they start to well with tears he’s not ready to let fall, I reach inside the hoodie and loosen the corset.

“Tell me what you need.”

He trembles, shaking his head.

Again, on instinct, I open my pants, pull out my semi-hard cock, and push his head down. When he releases his fingers and wraps his wet mouth around my dick, his shaking stops.

“You don’t have to suck it, baby. Just stay there and relax until we get home.” I stroke my hand down his back and make sure I drive safely.

Mercer relaxes.



I CAN TELL no one has ever taken care of Mercer before. He has no healthy concept of what comfort is. At some point in his adolescent or adult life, he learned to bury his emotions in sex. That, paired with a self-soothing method bred from a lonely childhood, he's turned thumb-sucking into something sexual and submission into a way to shut down his brain to give himself a break.

I understand it, to an extent. I'm still going to talk to someone about it to learn how not to harm him while he's in this state, but I don't want to dismiss his needs. I promised him I wouldn't ignore him, and that includes right now.

He kept my cock in his mouth the whole drive, even relaxing enough to rest his cheek on my stomach while he did it. As soon as I pulled him off and lifted him from the car, he put his fingers back into his mouth and hid his face in my neck. I carried him up to the apartment, and now we're standing in his bathroom.

I've tried to be gentle with him, helping him to strip down to get in the shower, but he's not responding to that. He doesn't want me to do it, and I'm not sure if it's because he thinks it's a weakness, or if he just doesn't know how to accept a gentle touch.

Trying a different tactic, I lean back against the vanity and watch him stand there like a defeated little doll. Fuck, he's beautiful, even in turmoil, but I never want him to suffer alone. "Take your clothes off, Mercer. Now." I make my voice harder than I feel, but it gets him moving.

He needs a Dom. I'm not a Dom in the BDSM sense, but I can be dominant when he needs me to be. Mercer pulls the hoodie off and drops it

to the floor. The bathroom fills with steam, but he waits, wanting me to command him again.

“All of it,” I tell him. “One piece at a time. Look at me while you do it.”

His eyes are less glossy when they meet mine. He undoes the ties on his leather pants, tugging them down and letting them settle on the tile. Standing there in the corset and a pair of red silk panties, his eyes on mine and his lips glistening with saliva, my cock reacts. I rub it through my pants, nodding at the top. When he turns around to show me all the ties, he looks over his shoulder to keep eye contact. I want to take a picture of him like this and jack off to it until it’s crusty and ruined. Holy shit.

“Come here, little boy.”

He backs up until his ass hits my legs. I undo the loosened ties, then push him away and spin him to face me again. Slowly, he pulls the top off and hooks his thumbs in the band of the red panties.

I stop him. “Let me see your ass in these. Hands on the counter.”

His breath shakes out of him, but he does it. He grips the edge of the vanity and sticks his ass out for me to admire. I step behind him and run my hand over his tight ass, the silk fabric not much smoother than his supple skin. He’s hairless and tight, so fucking smooth, his creamy skin begging for teeth marks.

“Fuck, this ass, Mercer.” I don’t even have to add gravel to my voice. It’s just there, giving away my desire. I press my hips against him, letting my hands skate over his ass, around his hips, and over the hard bulge in the front of the panties. “You have no fucking idea how bad I want to fuck it.”

His eyes meet mine in the mirror, but his voice stays hidden. No begging. Not now. I wouldn’t make him beg right now, anyway. I wouldn’t accept begging in a moment like this, not while he’s still in a vulnerable state.

I slide the silk down his legs to pool at his ankles, letting my cock dig into the crack of his ass. His dick juts out in front of him, nudging the counter and already leaking. “Get in the shower. Right now.”

“Alone?” He finds his voice.

“What do you need?” I spin him.

“Don’t leave.”

“I won’t.” I steer him into the shower and back away.

“Stay close.”

I lean right against the tile, staying in the opening of the shower. When he's satisfied I'm not going to leave, he steps under the water. I try to keep my eyes on his, the liner already running from his tears worsening now under the spray of the shower, but soon, I'm following drops down his chest and flat stomach. His thighs clench together, making his dick stand out even more, and holy fuck, it's going to be hard to stay rooted to this spot.

"Blake," he whispers.

It's begging without manners. I want to give in to it. I won't. "Wash your hair."

While he washes and conditions his hair, the hot water soothes him enough to chase off the majority of his panic. I still don't know if these are panic attacks or PTSD episodes, but I plan to talk to him about them after he rests. He washes his face with his new skincare products, getting rid of all the smeared makeup, and then he soaps up a sponge. When the suds slip over his nipples and he bites his lip, that's how I know he's back to his usual manipulative self.

In a totally unexpected slip of accidental fate, he drops the sponge, and *oh would you look at that!* It lands right by my feet. His pouty lips are fucking sinful, but his eyes are goddamn demonic. With a bit of blackness still smoked around the edges, he's harshly cute, sinisterly sexy, defiantly desirable, and I can't fucking help the groan when he bends down to pick it up and...*oh, no!* He falls forward. Face right into my dick.

"So fucking predictable, Mercer." My hands itch to latch onto his hair and hold him against my pants.

He doesn't even stand back up. He nuzzles his face against my cock, soaking my pants with his wet hair. "Let me suck your cock, Blake."

"Mercer..."

"I *need* it," he whines, mouthing my dick through my pants. "You asked me what I need. I need to suck a dick. Your dick."

"So cock hungry." My fingers snake into his hair, still silky from the conditioner. "Finish washing first."

"Don't make me wait. I can't wait anymore." He looks up at me with his chin on my bulge. "I can't wait, Blake."

"You need to learn patience and delayed gratification." I tug on his hair to pull him off my dick. "Finish showering first."

He sighs as he stands, shooting me a pissed off look. He sulks for a few minutes, making a show of washing his body, and then something happens.

His sulk turns to determination, and I have no idea what's coming. I watch him skeptically, narrowing my eyes while he shimmies to the other end of the shower where he has a little shower caddy.

"Mercer... what're you doing?"

"Maybe you need to learn delayed gratification," he says, turning around with a fucking dildo in his hands. It's not the blue one. It's purple, a lot smaller, and has a suction cup on the base. The length of it is twisted like licorice, and the head of it is a little bigger than the rest, but it's not that thick and definitely not eight inches. Maybe five inches.

"Don't," I warn him.

He smirks at me. "Or what?"

"Or—" I cut myself off, realizing I don't have a fucking threat to stand on. If I deny him my dick, he'll fuck that one. If I give him my dick, he wins because he's the brattiest little shit that ever fucking lived. I'm stuck, giving in and letting him have his way, or suffering through this because I don't want him to have his way. Either way, I lose.

Mercer slaps the dildo to the wall. "Or? Were you finished?"

God, he's like a tiny dog. He's got that little dog syndrome where he's all fucking bark, and I know his bite will be deadly. If I give him an inch now, he'll take a mile later. I'm not slipping up just because he's goading me into it.

"Better make it a good show, baby." I lean against the wall again, my cock aching already. "Right here." I pat the glass wall. "So I can see you from all angles."

"You think you deserve to see me from all angles?" He runs a hand down his length.

"Okay, I'll leave while you fuck that tiny dick."

"Don't leave." A little bit of that vulnerability sneaks back into his voice, so I stay where I am and nod at the glass. I won't threaten to leave him again; scaring him isn't my goal.

The toy pops when he pulls it off the wall, but it suctions perfectly against the glass. He pours water-resistant lube over it, slicking it up and adjusting it until it's at the right height. His fingers dip between his legs, and his lips part on a breathy gasp when he pushes one inside himself. My restraint is already slipping. I want to bury my tongue in his ass and open him up for my pleasure.

"Tight?" I ask, my voice lower.



“Mm,” he hums, adding a second finger. He bites his damn lip and drops his head, looking down at his cock. He works it with his other hand, and then the little shit looks at me through his lashes, and I swear to fuck I almost come in my pants.

“Fuck this toy, baby. Show me how well you can take a cock.”

He pulls his fingers out and rubs more lube over the toy. As he backs up to it, I make sure I’m in the perfect position to watch it enter him. Right at the edge of the glass. He reaches back to hold it steady with one hand, and slowly, so I can see every fucking stretch and pucker of his tight little hole, he pushes back until the purple dildo is buried in his ass.

Fuck, I wish that was my cock.

Mercer moans, and my eyes jump to his face. I grip his chin, tilting his head towards mine. Drunk on pleasure and high on manipulation, he looks at me with the sexiest, lustiest expression I’ve seen in my life. “Tell me what to do.”

*Get off that dildo and fuck my cock.* “Fuck it, little demon.”

Mercer isn’t shy. He gyrates his hips, changes angles, speeds up and slows down until he’s leaking from the tip of his cock. I stand behind the glass, getting a feel for what he’ll look like bent over for me. I stand at the side of the shower, watching it penetrate him. I get soaked when I move inside, wanting to see him from the front as he fucks that thing like it’s the best sex of his life. His moans aren’t forced, and his groans are better music than the piano in my living room. He’s a masterpiece and he knows it.

“Stop,” I command.

He stops, panting but looking at me. “Blake,” he begs me to let him keep going.

“Put it on the floor and ride it. Now.”

He whimpers, moving faster than I thought possible. He sticks it to the tile floor and kneels over it. Right in front of me. Facing me. So fucking hot. His legs shake a little, but he gets his feet under his knees instead of kneeling fully and rides it like he owns it.

“Can I come?” he asks on a hitched breath. “Please. I need to come.” He grabs his cock.

“Hands off.”

He removes his hands and presses them to the walls. One on the glass and one on the tile, me in between. “Mmmmm, Blake. Let me come.”

I want to watch his bouncing cock come without any friction so badly that I nod. "Come, baby."

When he puts his mind to it, or maybe when he's not paying attention at all, he's quick to follow orders. Within seconds, Mercer's movements slow, his breath holds, and his cock twitches. Cum spurts from the tip in two long bursts, and when he wiggles his hips, a third pulse shoots free. He stays quiet, holding his breath until the intensity settles, and then he inhales harshly. I'm leaking in my boxers, and if I don't touch my dick soon, I'm going to come in them for real.

I watch his eyes scan the floor for his cum, but the water is already washing it away. "No," he pouts.

A wicked grin tilts my lips. "What's the matter? My little cumslut need some cum?"

He trembles, still slow fucking the dildo. "Yes."

"Bet you wish you learned some patience, eh? If you had just showered and waited, it could have been my cock in your ass, filling you with the cum that thing can't give you." I rub his cheek. "Poor cumslut."

He whimpers, groaning like he's literally in pain because he doesn't have any cum. "Blake." His eyes look up at me again. Begging. "I'm begging. Fuck, you win. I'm begging. Please fuck me."

I shake my head. I want to fuck him more than anything, but I wouldn't last a pump right now.

He sinks down on the dildo, cock still standing straight and hard. "I need it, Blake."

"Cum?"

"Yes." He trembles. "Please."

To see him on the floor, riding a fake dick, after an orgasm but still so unsettled... I lose my sense of the game. I'm unbuttoning my pants and before they're even down, Mercer's hands are pulling me forward. He frees my cock and takes it into his mouth, letting out a moan of relief.

"Fuck, Mercer." I want to grab his hair, but I force myself not to. "That's it, baby. Your mouth is so fucking perfect."

He's greedy. His mouth feels nothing like it did in the car. That was a comfort thing, this is a needy, desperate, sex-crazed craving to swallow a load. With my cock in his mouth, he starts shaking again. My abs tighten and my balls draw up, ready to fill his mouth and claim him already.

When I look down, his fingers are brushing the top of his shaft, and I almost lose it right then. “You going to come again, baby?”

He nods on my cock. He sucks me harder, and when he moans, white cum shooting from his cock again, it vibrates against me and I roll into bliss. I fill his mouth so full he chokes, and then I press my hand to his head to keep him there. I come down his throat and don’t stop until I can manage to breathe.

Mercer gasps, saliva and cum stretching from his lips to my tip. He licks it all up and then licks the fingers that were touching his own cock. I yank him to his feet, not even bothering to ease him off the dildo. I lick the mess off his lips and kiss him. He whines again, but the sound comes out sounding so satisfied.

“Good shower?” I rasp against his lips, barely coherent.

He grins. “Mm,” he says. “Guess I got my way anyway.”

Fucking fuck! I walked right into that one.



I'VE BEEN STOMPING around my room and the hallway for over thirty minutes. It's the middle of the night and I'm the one who kicked Blake out of my room and bathroom, but now I'm... needy or something equally as pathetic. I hate sensitive intimacy. Or I used to. Why do I seek him for comfort that isn't all about sex and release? What the hell is he doing to me to have me pacing the halls outside his door at the witching hour, seeking the warmth of his body even though I don't *want* to want it?

"Mercer," he groans.

"Don't call me that!" I bark because I'm sensitive and pissy and fucking edgy. *Gah!*

"Are you walking around like an elephant because you want my attention?"

"No." I shake my head at myself. "Yes," I mumble.

He doesn't even say anything. He just lifts the blankets, stays right where he is, and waits. My move now, and I hate making it. With an irritated-at-myself huff, I stalk into his room and settle on the very edge of his bed, my head barely on a pillow. Blake drops the blankets, enveloping me in his warmth.

"I don't cuddle," I say, backing up towards him. Backing up so far that my ass hits his groin and my back hits his chest. "I hate cuddling."

"Okay," he says, half asleep.

I back up a little more because...

"I'll be your wall, Mercer." Goddamn him for getting it. His arm drapes over my hip, and I resent myself for grabbing his hand and forcing it against my chest. I still hate cuddling. "Now go the fuck to sleep."

I debate wiggling just to irritate him, but I'm too tired. Sleep is an evasive bitch, and I need a good romp in the sheets with her.

"Don't tell me what to do," I say to make myself feel better. But I'm drifting, comfortable against the wall of Blake's body, trying to remain impassive about it.



I'M NOT some traumatized victim of a horrific event. My dad never beat me and my mom always fed me. Despite hating the attention I bring to myself and the clothing choices I make, they don't even care about my sexuality too much. My aunts and uncles don't care about me period, so it's not like any particular one of them did anything horrendous to me. My cousins ignore me as much as my aunts and uncles do, and being homeschooled most of my life left me with no real friends. My sisters like me well enough, but not so much as to make much of a difference in my life, and I barely know our older brother. I forget I have an older brother most times. Probably got brainwashed to forget.

There's no particular thing that sparks my trauma, and at this point in my life, I feel like a hypocrite even referring to it as trauma. I might remember everything they did to me at the facility, but none of it was particularly painful, torturous, or degrading. Just little medical procedures that left me with a sore head and a fuzzy mind. Some therapy that made me second guess my own instincts and not trust my own brain, but otherwise, there's nothing as a focal point to explain all my broken bits. They didn't saw my head open or restrain me in torture devices while they poked and prodded at my brain matter.

I'm just a scared, lonely, unwanted guy, and feeling that over the course of twenty-three years left me with cracks in my confidence and holes in my worth. My breakdown happened over time. I never got the chance to become someone because no one was ever watching. No one ever cared. So I learned not to care. When I was a young kid, I'd get in trouble for asking questions and showing up. I stopped doing that. By the time I was a teen, I got the attention I so desperately wanted by being troublesome. I *started* doing that. More and more until I had this reputation I never planned on

having and a moral compass that told me to be a fucking brat in order to gain anyone's attention. Even if it was negative attention.

The panic attacks, or whatever they are, started when I was six. I don't think they're panic attacks, but what do I know? The only therapy I'm familiar with is the kind my dad ordered, and those sessions had nothing to do with healing me and everything to do with reprogramming my mind. Too bad my mind was already too broken to hit the reset button and none of the work they did there helped. Nothing changed me. I morphed into this version of myself solely through trial and error, neglect, rewards and punishments, and a timid personality that craved attention. Any attention. Does it make me a bad person if I secretly wish the therapy and the brain wires worked? If only I could have been the person my dad wanted me to be, then maybe I'd be loved.

But the episodes never went away. They started as itchy moments of uncertainty and grew into agitated whiteouts that left me aware but completely unable to react.

They don't hurt, but they scare me. They don't incapacitate me entirely, but they render me useless. They sometimes go away on their own after hours of trying to snap out of them, or they stay until my body gets too exhausted to handle them and I fall asleep. Sometimes sex helps. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes distractions jarring enough to my senses pull me out of them, but sometimes not. Until Blake Carter commanded me to look at him, I had no surefire way to bring myself out of that state.

His commands work better to reprogram my mind than all the therapy did. His orders give my brain a job, which makes my body able to do the job, and the itching eases. Something about the way he handles me makes me so comfortable I act on trust, which actually makes me really uncomfortable because I don't trust anyone. I don't trust and I certainly don't act on trust.

My mind is waking up. Or maybe my body is. One of them is coming to, and the wall behind me is moving, and something hard is pressing into my ass.

"What the fuck?!" I gasp, shooting upright, kicking out my feet, trying to register the here and now.

"Ohhhhhh."

I shoot to the edge of the bed, looking behind me. Blake's grabbing his balls, burying his face in the pillows, trying hard not to cry, and I'm just

sitting here like a startled deer when it all comes back to me. The elephant stomping, the huffing and puffing, the non-cuddling.

“Kill me now,” Blake groans.

“Shit, I’m sort of sorry!” I squeak at him.

“Sort of? You ruined my chances of having kids, you little demon. My nuts are in my throat.”

I don’t mind ruining the offspring chances. I want him to be mine and only mine anyway. “Maybe if you cough they’ll come out your mouth.”

He groans something that sounds like a *fuck you*, and I do a quick body assessment. My foot doesn’t even hurt, so I couldn’t have kicked him that hard. My knee is a little tender though, not sure what from. Despite the unfortunate wake-up call he didn’t ask for, the night went alright. Well, it must have because I feel rested. Either my on-again-off-again relationship with sleep is back *on*, or... or Blake made me comfortable enough to sleep deeply.

“You drugged me!” I immediately accuse because it’s the only explanation. “You gave me sleeping pills or something.”

He rolls over, mostly on his front, still cupping his junk. “You should come with a warning label. Little Demon: All. The. Hazards. *All of them*. I’m sewing it in all your clothes.”

I’m fond of this new pet name, but I’m not admitting that. “Did you drug me?” I settle into a yoga position, legs crossed, arms relaxed on my knees.

“Sure, Mercer. If it’s easier for you to believe you slept well because I drugged you, go for it.” He hiccups. “I think I’m gonna throw up.”

He has a sexy back. Like, who the fuck has a back like that? There aren’t even any tattoos or remarkable marks. It’s just skin. Tanned, smooth, silky skin shrink-wrapped to muscles that move every time he breathes. His spine sticks out all knobby-like by his neck, and his lower back has those dimples that are like perfect little thumb holders. If I straddled his ass and wrapped my fingers around his hips, my thumbs would fit perfectly there. I shall now call them Mercer’s thumb rests. His ass crack could be a nice little cock warmer, too.

Okay, do not get stiff while he’s suffering ball-busting agony. Which isn’t my fault.

“Walls don’t move,” I tell him. “You said you’d be my wall.”

“I breathe, asshole,” he says, but it’s muffled by the pillow. “Go make me coffee. You owe me.”

“Own you?”

“Owe! Hurry up!”

I climb out of bed, still dressed in all his clothes. “Not a morning cuddler then. Noted.”

Despite his command, I *do not* hurry. I have a very luxurious shower with all my new products and fond memories of last night, then I do a face mask because, why not? Then I spend a considerable amount of time in front of the mirror, trying on ten thousand outfit combinations only to throw on the same sweats and hoodie from pre-shower, and *then* I go make his coffee.

Nothing feels like me anymore. I can’t decide on a style. I’m still feeling all weirdly comfortable and relaxed, so the hoodlum look fits my current mood. Blake is already up and sitting on the couch, still not wearing a shirt, so I make us both a coffee. I like a cappuccino and Blake likes a latte, so I make them right and hold his out to him.

“I already made one because you took too long.” He glares at me, his blue eyes accusatory. He takes it from me anyway and then points at his phone. “My buddy Aaron is on the phone. Aaron, Mercer is here.”

“Hey, Mercer,” this Aaron says, and I squint my eyes at Blake like he’s cheating on me even though I don’t do boyfriends and totally do not want him to be mine. I’m so good at lying to myself.

“Hey.” I plop down and spill hot coffee on Blake’s bare chest.

“Warning label,” he hisses. “You still got all those server numbers and codes in your head?”

I nod and sip.

“Start spouting them off. Aaron is my tech guy.” He leaves his phone on my lap, speaker still on. Blake pulls out a second phone, and here I am, thinking one phone to snoop on is going to be a handful, but this guy has two.

As I’m rambling off numbers, sequences and codes to Aaron, categorizing them all by server and location in the room, something weird happens. Neither Aaron nor Blake questions my memory. Blake is matching up my numbers with the photos he took of the room, and Aaron is jotting them all down and only chiming in to say, ‘okay, next.’ They believe me. Trust me. They aren’t second-guessing me and calling that sort of memory



recall impossible because of who I am and the trouble I bring to myself. For the first time in maybe my whole life, I'm being taken seriously.

The weight of it hits me hard. It's heavy and enlightening together, and I can't decide if I'm floating away or sinking under the responsibility. Blake, of fucking course, notices. None of my little details slip past him. He pulls my feet onto his lap, rubs them through my socks, and doesn't say a word about it. He does point to his dick and make an X with his fingers so I know not to kick there again. Don't Xs mark the spot?

"Okay, got 'em all. Thanks, man. Killer mind." Aaron is no longer on my shit list. "While I have you guys, I got a bit of new information on that facility. Now a good time or you wanna wait until later?"

I look at Blake, wondering what he's going to say. He doesn't say shit. He shrugs his shoulders to ask my opinion. The weight of this day is already more than I'm used to carrying. I need to go back to bed and test my relationship with sleep to make sure it wasn't a fluke last night.

"Okay," I tell Aaron. "Now is good. I dunno what you're gonna say, but if I detect even a hint of pity in your voice, I will find where you live and put your dick in a sausage grinder."

Aaron laughs, but Blake snorts. "Don't believe him, man. He sucks at kitchen utensils. If he ever threatens you with a dagger, run for your life, but kitchen products are generally a safe threat."

I push my foot into the X that marked the spot, and Blake groans again. And gets hard. Sucker for pain or just a responsive cock? I'll find out.

"Okay," Aaron says, cutting in like a buzzkill. "There are a lot of elite kids there. Against their will. It's not just a place that experiments illegally with psychological therapy and minor surgical procedures, but it seems to be a hub for 'training' the kids of well-to-do parents how to act, walk, and talk the way the parents want them to. You weren't the only elite son there, Mercer. Politicians' kids, government officials', CEOs', and even some children with parents in the FBI, CIA, or secret service. Some of their therapy is legit and recorded. It's when those methods don't work that they tend to go off-grid and get sent to the other facility at the back of the property. So, naturally, I want to shut it down."

Blake rolls his head in my direction. "Aaron has a big ol' heart for kids in trouble."

"Fuck you. That's because I was a kid in trouble." Blake smiles at this. "But here's the real kicker. You know that older brother of yours, Mercer?"

The one you never really see?”

“Yeah...”

“He sort of runs the place. He’s the one who makes deals and negotiations with the parents of these kids. He’s basically a recruiter. What do you want to do with that information?”

I’m shocked. Stunned. Don’t even know why. Barely know the guy. Haven’t seen my brother in years. Incapable of talking or responding. I’m processing, and maybe my brain is glitching, but I need a second. Then I need a jump start.

“We’ll call you back. Thanks, Aaron. Be in touch soon.”

Blake grabs my cheeks, making my lips squish out like a fish. “You short circuiting?”

“Maybe,” I mumble through chubby cheeks.

“Do you ever have sex when you aren’t in a negative mind space?”

“What the fuck kind of question is that at a time like this?” I smack his hand away.

Blake laughs, grinning at me with that cheeky look I’m learning to love. Or think fondly of. “Brought your brain back on board, didn’t it?”

Sometimes I forget he is literally trained to read people. “Don’t make me dick-kick you again, Carter.”



MERCER'S EXPERIMENTS with fashion and style have taken a turn tonight. Camped outside the main building of the facility we just found out his brother runs, he looks like... me. He wanted to scope the place out, disappeared into his room, and came back out in tactical gear.

Our jackets are the same. We have the same pair of boots on, but his are a few sizes smaller. His pants are black and full of pockets, but they're almost identical to mine. When I hold binoculars to my eyes, he mimics the motions. It's freaking me out.

"Why do you look like me?" I finally break down and ask.

From the passenger seat of the Denali, he keeps the binoculars to his face and sucks on a lolly. "Because you haven't taken my bait yet, so this is my way of testing my theory."

"What theory?"

"That you're egotistical and want to fuck yourself." He drops the binoculars to his lap. "Is it working? You wanna fuck mini-you?"

"I wanna fuck mini *you*," I snap at him. "You just like playing games too much."

"So, fuck me. Right here. This mission is a bust, anyway. My brother isn't here." He scoffs like he's been dragged into boredom even though this was his idea.

"Was that begging?"

"It most certainly was not." He crosses his arms and shifts the sucker from one cheek to the other. "We both know you're going to stick your dick in me way before I resort to begging, so can we stop pretending otherwise?"

"You begged me in the shower."

“I wasn’t in my right mind. That doesn’t count.”

Of course the rules change when they suit him. Plus, now I feel like I can’t fuck him until he changes out of those clothes, or it’ll prove some point that I want to bang myself. He’s seriously impossible. But there’s no denying I want him. I don’t know exactly what it is about him, or maybe it’s everything about him, but he’s changing my concept of sex and attraction.

The old me would have been beyond annoyed by his manipulative displays. I would have kicked him out of my apartment after the fire alarm incident. The new me wonders how much farther he can take this and if he has any morals or limits when it comes to getting what he wants. He’s making me impulsive and volatile, two things I’ve been trained not to be. I’m calculated and calm, able and skilled at reading people and situations, and patient about the way I handle things. The more time I spend near Mercer, the more my training goes down the drain. Only with him so far, and I won’t let myself slip when it comes to work and jobs.

I put the car in gear and pull out of the lot. We’ll come back another time to do some recon on his brother. Mercer hasn’t said what he feels about the whole thing yet, but he’ll come to a conclusion eventually. He claims not to know his brother and says he hasn’t seen him in over a year. When my phone rings, I try to answer it through the Denali’s Bluetooth, but it doesn’t work because Mercer has booted my phone out and connected his own. He smirks at that.

“Mr. Blake Carter’s line, his little demon speaking. How may I help you?” Mercer takes it upon himself to answer. “I’ll let him know. Anything else?” I’m not even mad he’s taken this role. “Oh, that’s juicy. Will we get to meet in person?”

“What’s he saying?” I cut in.

Mercer shushes me. “Great. We’ll be there. What should I wear?”

We’re almost home by the time he stops gabbing with Aaron, and when he finally hangs up, I’ve smoked three cigarettes and gotten a boner. “What’d he say?”

Mercer’s expression is unsettling. I don’t trust it even a little, but goddamn my dick for getting harder. “Fuck me and find out.”

“You know I can just call him back, right?”

Mercer shoves my phone down his pants. “They’re purple tonight,” he says. “Same colour as that dildo I fucked in the shower. Not lacy, but strappy and satin.” He taps his dick, which almost looks like it’s sitting on

top of my phone, like he tucked my cell under his hard-on and covered it all with panties and pants. “And no, to answer your question from days ago. I don’t typically have sex in a good mind space, but my mind is right and dandy at the moment, so are you going to take advantage of it or not?”

I want to. But I’ll be the master manipulator tonight. He’s going to beg before he gets my dick, so fuck him for thinking he’s going to win.

“Are you submissive?” I ask him.

He scoffs. Or huffs. Or laughs condescendingly. “You seriously think I’m going to tell you that? You haven’t even put in the work to find out. You’re lazy at foreplay, Blake Carter.”

He’s submissive when he needs comfort after an episode, but I don’t know if he’s submissive when he’s in the right frame of mind. But after weeks of build up I’m counting as foreplay, I’m done waiting. I want him, and we both know it, so whatever sex we have tonight is going to come after he begs and shows me just how fucking feisty he can be.



THE BUSIER I make myself appear, the harder Mercer tries to distract me. Aaron called again when we were in the elevator—Mercer almost came when it vibrated against his dick—and apparently, the wife of Frank has another job for us. My family doesn’t know about Aaron, but he has access to all my accounts and devices. But that job will take planning, and right after I hung up with Aaron, my dad called with another job.

Sean Pendleton. Dead. By Friday.

Those were the only words he said. Friday is in two days. Now I have a murder to plot on top of Mercer’s attention to keep.

I’m sitting on a stool at the island, a secure laptop on the surface, and a rum and coke next to it, trying to research Sean Pendleton. Mercer, still dressed like me, is in the kitchen trying to prove to me he can cook something. I accused him of being a useless houseboy, and he loves nothing more than to prove himself to someone who might actually see his worth. The effort he puts into making a snack speaks volumes, but I keep the information to myself. He’s never had to prove himself to anyone before, and now that he’s been given the chance, he’s going to win at it because

he's learning to value himself. But he's going to be a little demon about it. Naturally.

"Blake?" he croons my name in a voice dripping with innocence. I peek up at him over the screen, eyes wide, lips pouty, hair a mess. "How many ounces are in a cup?" He's got mixing bowls and measuring cups all over the place. I don't even know what he's attempting to make.

"Asks the guy who is literally a numbers genius?" I lift a brow.

He fans himself, pretending the oven is making him hot. "Ugh, cooking is warm work. Better take this off." He unzips the jacket and folds it over the back of a chair. "That's better."

Cups and ounces forgotten. I get back to my research, ignoring my cock's needs. After pulling some ingredients from the fridge, he takes his long-sleeved tee off, and my eyes snag on a purple top. It hugs his body and comes up over his collarbones to wrap around the base of his neck like a pretty little collar. Fucking hell.

"So, who is Sean Pendleton?" he asks timidly. The shy-boy act doesn't mesh with his little demon personality, but it's just as sexy. He gets back to mixing ingredients in a bowl meant for salad.

"Some bookie who works with the Six."

"The gang?"

"Yeah. Guess he's been skimming. A lot."

"All that skimmed money and he'll be too dead to do anything with it all. Poor Sean Pendleton."

I click through some online images of this chubby accountant to familiarize myself with his appearance. As I'm scanning his socials and getting a feel for where he spends his time, something crashes.

I look up to find Mercer, lacking pants now too, kneeling on the countertop, reaching for something high up in the cupboard. His fine little ass is on full display because the purple panties he taunted me with earlier are a thong, and the way the string disappears between his cheeks is breaking all my resolve.

"No food in that cupboard, little demon. Whatcha looking for?" There's a plastic bowl still wobbling on the floor where it fell, and Mercer waits until it settles.

"I thought I saw flour up here." He looks back at me, still with the innocent act. "Help me?"

Okay, he's not verbally begging, but this is coercive begging if I've ever seen it. Getting up, I round the island and come up behind him. His ass is right at face level, and I'm not strong enough to resist the temptation of it. My hands run down the front of his thighs and I bury my face in his ass. His skin smells like expensive body lotion, and I bet he tastes like it, too. I graze his cheek with my teeth, nipping him lightly.

"Flour's in the pantry." I nip his other ass cheek. To be honest, I don't think I own flour. "What are you making?" I grab his hips, spin him around, and sit his bare ass on the cool granite. His copper eyes and dark hair go fucking perfectly with this vibrant shade of purple. Everything about him is a pleasure to admire, right down to the way he looks back at me.

"It's a surprise," he whispers, licking his fuckable lips. "I'm trying to make you happy. Aren't I a good boy?"

"Mm," I hum, running my hands up his thighs. Goosebumps rise on his skin, but I rub them away when I drag my hands back down. "Do you want to be a good boy?"

"Yes." He leans against the cupboard, making sure I can see all of him in this two-piece purple ensemble. "I want to be so good for you."

I smirk, leaning in until his legs widen on their own and his hard cock brushes against my abs. I lick his lips and make him whimper before whispering, "Bullshit. You want to be a bad boy. Don't you, little demon?" I pull back to look at him.

The wideness of his eyes narrows. The switch from good boy to bad boy happens instantly. His act goes out the window and familiar defiance joins the party. But his next move actually does surprise me.

From somewhere beneath the purple, he pulls a dagger and holds it to my throat, shifting it until it presses snugly to my pulse point. "So bad," he agrees. "I can be the demon you need me to be. Now fuck me."

"Beg." My cock is so hard it hurts.

"Fuck. Me." He presses the tip of the dagger hard enough to sting.

His amber glare clashes with my blue one, and we're caught in a tense battle of lusty eyes. I want to win by making him beg for it with manners and he wants to win by getting what he wants without begging. We both want to fuck, but we're committed to the game. Our torture is self-inflicted. When the oven beeps to signal its rise to temperature, our heat levels snap. I grip his wrist and twist the dagger away from my neck, but the little shit has

another one pressed to my other side. I glance down at it, panicking just a bit.

“Fuck no. I don’t trust you with that one.” It’s a kitchen knife, probably for chopping vegetables, because it’s much, *much* bigger than the dagger.

“Fuck me before I accidentally kill you,” Mercer demands like a bossy bitch. “I really don’t want to take on the Sean Pendleton job, so you better hurry up before this thing slips.” To exaggerate his point, the knife slides a bit, nicking my skin. “Oops.”

Game on, baby.

I push his hand away and wrap mine around his neck. The knife clatters to the counter, and I use the hold on his throat and a hand under his ass to bring him off the countertop. As soon as his feet hit the floor, I spin him to face the island and bend him the fuck over it. My palm smacks across his bare ass, and for the first time tonight, he moans like he’s winning.

“Mm.” His hands knock ingredients and bowls to the ground. “Spank me, D... Blake.”

Just because he wants to get spanked, I stop. One red handprint on his ass is enough for me right now. I kneel behind him, my hands skimming his skin. I hook a finger in the strap of his thong and pull it from between his ass cheeks, letting it go to snap against his skin.

“Fuck,” he pants.

“Bend over. Chest on the counter.” He complies easily this time. I spread his ass and press my thumb to his tight hole. “Such an eager slut, eh, baby?”

“Yes.”

I run my tongue over his hole and feel his whole body tremble. When I do it again, he pushes his ass against my face and tries to take charge. I love it. I devour him until he’s dripping, tongue fucking him until I know his cock will be leaking just from the build up. My boy’s response to stimulation is so fucking beautiful, and the fact that he can come multiple times just gives me a goal I can’t wait to obtain. When he’s flushed and agitated, wanting more, I stand up.

“Turn around, Mercer.”

He straightens his body and turns to face me. His cheeks are rosy, and his eyes are doing all the begging his tongue won’t.

“Am I still lazy at foreplay?” I ask, palming my cock.



He shakes his head but won't answer. I wait. "Took you long enough to give in to it."

"Is it so hard to say no? To admit you were wrong?"

He clenches his jaw and rubs himself.

"Show me, but leave the panties on."

Mercer grabs his dick and pulls it out, letting the purple thong wrap around it. The tip is glistening, and even the shaft is wet, precum already coating him. I bend down to lick it, and his hands latch onto the counter for balance.

"Ready to get fucked?"

"Yes."

"Beg."

"Blake..."

I grin at his defiance. I lift his hips and set his ass on the island again. "Heels on the counter. Spread your legs." I help him get into position. He's mostly sitting up, cock jutting proudly. When he puts his heels on the counter and opens his legs, I get the most perfect view of his hole with the G-string slid over. He lifts his smooth balls while I eye-fuck him.

"Why are you wearing so many clothes?" he pouts.

I won't be for long. The box of sex toys he stabbed is still on the floor beside the pantry, so I rifle through it. I find the cum flavoured lube but keep rooting around. I want my cum to be the only taste in his mouth tonight. When I find another sample size bottle they probably threw in as a freebie, I flick the lid open and stand in front of him again.

"I want you to finger yourself. Slow. Give me a show."

He snatches the bottle from me like he's going to win this show. He won't win. He'll be begging soon. Mercer is a master of seduction, though. While he fingers himself and I strip, it becomes a fifty-fifty chance on which of us will snap first. By the time I'm naked, he's flushed and leaking. His two middle fingers pump in and out of his ass, curling and stretching and driving me wild. His gaze shifts from my eyes to my cock, and when he moans, he watches the tip of my dick glisten in excitement.

I pull his fingers from his ass and step between his legs. With both hands on his hips, I angle him until my cock presses against his hole. Then I stay still.

"Blake," he whines.

“Mm?” I hum against his wet lips. He kisses me, biting my lips and sucking my tongue like it’s going to tempt me into thrusting. It’s close, not going to lie. “Need something, baby?”

“Fuck me.”

“Hmm?” I bite his lip and nudge him a little more.

His arm wraps around my neck and his legs go around my waist, trying to physically force me to fuck him. I’m bigger and stronger. I kiss down his neck and tangle my fingers in his hair, yanking his head back.

He whimpers and groans, so close to losing. “Blake, fuck.” He tries to tighten his legs again.

“What do you need, little demon?” I press against him a bit more, teasing the fuck out of him.

He groans for so long and with such emotion, I pull his hair again. “Fuck. Fine.” He looks at me. “Fuck me,” he begs.

“Say please.”

He damn near cries. “Please. Please. Please. Please, fuck me, Blake. Fuck me!”

Unable to wait another second, I force his head forward so I can see his face, eyes connected, and slam inside him. Mercer’s eyes widen before rolling back, his choked gasp turning into a moan. His tight hole constricts my cock so hard that my knees quake and my forehead falls forward. His heels dig into my ass, holding me there while he adjusts to my size. A warmth spreads through me, and I can’t decide if it’s a feeling of absolute pleasure, like this is exactly what I’ve been craving my entire life, or if it’s a sense of rightness, like Mercer is mine and he was always meant to be mine. How long have I been unknowingly searching for this bossy little brat?

“Mmmmm.” It’s his outright refusal to mutter praise.

“I knew you’d beg.” I rock a bit, drawing out more of his moans. “You’re my little slut now, Mercer.”

“Fuck, yes,” he groans. “Fuck me like I’m your slut.” His legs release my hips, giving me full permission and free rein to do whatever the hell I want to him. He’s offering himself up as mine—mine to have, to use, to worship, to punish, to praise. Just mine. I’ve never seen a person more worthy of all my attention.

I push him until his back hits the counter, his amber eyes looking up at me with all the praise his words won’t say. *Yet.* He moves my laptop out of

the way and waits to see what I'm going to do with him. I hook his knees over my elbows, drag his small body right to the edge, and slow fuck him until he's nice and worked up—loosened up.

"How much can you take, Mercer?"

"Everything. Give me everything."

"No limits?"

"Blake, if you don't start fucking me real good, I'm going to get that blue dildo." He literally snaps his fingers at me. "No limits. Get on with the fucking!"

Grabbing the purple collar around his neck, I yank him up until our noses brush. "So bossy." I hold him right there and fuck him hard and fast. One hand on his hip, holding him in place, and one wrapped around the collar. Mercer's body bounces, jarring and jolting with each thrust, his mouth sometimes open against mine, and our foreheads clacking together. He's experiencing bliss and I'm experiencing damnation, and the concoction is more than my sensitive dick can handle. Every breath comes out staccato and choked until he reaches between our bodies to fist his dick.

I stop. "No."

"Blake," he begs.

I pull him off the counter and stand him upright, losing my connection with him to prove a point. He can boss me around all he wants, but it's going to delay his satisfaction. This. *This* is the lesson he needed to learn in the shower the other night. He doesn't get what he wants exactly when he wants it, and it's not all about the speedy orgasm. It's about the dynamic we create together, and fuck if he thinks he's going to rush our connection.

"Blake! I didn't play all these games for you to just—"

I shove him to his knees, hook my thumb over his bottom teeth, and yank his jaw open. My cock goes down his throat the next second, and Mercer's fingernails dig into my ass, pulling me in even closer.

"Learned to watch your mouthy attitude yet, you little demon?" I stroke his cheek and hold him in place, suffocating him until his eyes water. "Or are you just a slut for punishment?"

He whimpers around my cock, almost making me come, so I yank him off and watch strings of saliva stretch from his lips to my dick. "Blake."

"How's it taste?" I smack his cheek and hold him off from devouring me like he wants to.

"Like watermelon lube," he snips at me.

I pull him to his feet and fold him over the counter again. "Hands where I can see them," I demand. As soon as they hit the countertop, I sink into him until my thighs touch his ass. "I don't want you coming yet."

"I can come more than once," he says, voice breathy. "Please. I need it so bad."

"There's the begging I asked for." I wrap my fingers around his lean waist, watching my cock push in and out of him. "Fuck, baby. This purple thong is everything." I snap the strap, a bright red line colouring his ass. "Legs together."

Mercer steps his feet together, closing his legs. It makes him constrict my dick harder. All of this, the sight of it, the feel of it, and the fucking energy of it, is putting me in a conflicting place. I want to dominate the fuck out of him and treat him like the brat he is, but it's our first time and I want to treasure him like the good little boy he so badly wants to be. How can I combine both? Since when did I turn sentimental? How many first times have I had with others without caring about making it something special?

My fingers run up and down his spine, loving the way he reacts to a gentle touch even though he claims to hate it. He's touch starved and doesn't even know it. The glide of my cock in his ass is pure perfection, but he's losing his edge because of the tickle of my fingertips.

"Blake, I'm gonna come like this. Let me. Please, let me."

I reach around the front of him, taking his cock in a loose fist. I lean over him and press my lips to the top of his spine. Fucking him, kissing him, and gently stroking him, Mercer loses his mind but remains a good boy.

"Blake. Can I? I can't... I can't stop... fuck."

"Come, Mercer," I whisper. "I give you permission."

Mercer rocks his hips until he finds a good rhythm, his ass fucking my cock and his dick fucking my fist. To know he's eager and confident enough to take exactly what he wants without shame is the biggest turn on I've ever come across. The glide of him along my shaft is exhilarating to my body and mind, and when his dick throbs in my hand, his fingers digging into the granite, I almost come in his ass.

"Mm, Blake." Cum coats my hand in warm pulses, and Mercer keeps his hips moving. He babbles a bunch of sexy sounds, and I clench my ass muscles to keep from coming too soon. His body jolts upright and the back of his head hits my shoulder.

“Such a good boy, Mercer.”

“Call me a demon,” he rasps, lust dripping from his voice.

“My demon. Mine.”

“Mm, yes.”

When he stops fucking himself on my cock, I thrust forward a few times, milking him just a little more. He whimpers, leaning back on me for stability. As impatient as I am to start fucking him again, chasing my orgasm and pulling another out of him, I pause to savour this moment. Mercer, satisfied, pliant, calm, and docile, looking like a wet dream and a beautiful man, touching me everywhere he can because he trusts me. It’s a big moment, and the power of it swells in my chest.

He might be playing a game still, but I’m not. There will be time for rough fucks and punishment later, but right now, I want him to know he’s fucking cherished. I kiss the side of his neck and lick the salt from his skin.

“All tuckered out, little boy?” I suck, leaving a purple bruise just above the hem of the collar.

“No. I won’t be done until I swallow your cum and go to bed with it deep in my ass.” He pushes his ass back onto my cock. “Can your age keep up with me, oh wise one?”

I shove my cum coated fingers into his mouth until he chokes. “Is your bratty attitude all for show or are you going to live up to the expectations I have for you, little demon?”

He slurps on my fingers. “Find out.”



BLAKE TURNED THE OVEN OFF, and then he carried my ass into his bedroom. I mean, a bedroom fuck wasn't really on my agenda, but I can't deny the comfort of his bed in the position he has me in. Face buried in the blankets, wrists pinned behind my back, knees damn near touching my ribs, and ass in the air so he can piledrive me like I'm not breakable. I'm a fucking slut for it. *Fuck me like I'm invincible and treat me like the mouthy brat I am.*

The purple thong drapes over the bedside lamp and this heathen ripped the top when he tore it off me. Naked and unafraid, I bury my moans in the blankets so he doesn't know how much I love this rough fuck. The kitchen sex was softer than I thought it would be, but I caught that spark of sentimentality in his eyes. He wanted the first time to be special. I won't admit it, but it made me feel wanted and appreciated like I never have before. He cares about more than my body and the back-and-forth games we play. I feel it in my chest even though I can't fully comprehend it.

Thankfully, this aggressive pounding is damn near giving me a concussion I'm grateful for because it's preventing me from thinking about anything except pleasure and the desire for more of it. Blake should be like any other guy I've fucked. But he's not. He feels different, and I don't know if that's because of how hard I worked to get his attention or because he treats me differently than anyone else, but I'm so here for it I'm already anticipating a second hookup. A part of me wondered if I'd leave once I got what I wanted from him, but screw my damn mind for wanting more than this hot-as-fuck sex!

Blake's dick hits so deep I fold like a suitcase, the power of his thrusts sending my upper body up the bed. Without my hands free to stop my slide,

I end up flat on my stomach and Blake won't have that. He flips me over like I weigh nothing, folding me in half to slam back in.

"Fuck," I groan, loving this angle. Loving how easily he manipulates my body. "More."

"So fucking desperate for my cum," he growls at me. "Where do you want it?"

Everywhere. I want to bathe in it. I might have a cum kink, but I also have a Blake fetish. Not only do I want his cum inside me, all over me, filling me, but I want *him* all over me. I want his body against mine, his lips connected with mine, and his hands all over my skin. A desperation washes over me and I whimper, needing him everywhere.

"I got you, baby," he says.

He keeps the sex rough, but his mouth turns soft. He fucks my ass so hard our bodies rub together, but the way his teeth graze my lips and his tongue edges with mine adds a level of gentle passion to this filth. Jesus, I'm here for it. How am I craving rough and soft together?

"Blake," I beg, wrapping my arms around his neck to keep his mouth on mine. Never really needed a kiss during sex before, but I can't stop. If he abandons my lips, I might die.

I'm burning up from something. The sex, maybe. The feeling of the sex, probably. The way his body fits with mine and doesn't feel overwhelming even though he's bigger than me. The way he gives me power by seeing me, knowing what I need even though I don't know it, and the way he rasps noises against my lips that sound like a lot more than just moans. They're wordless words that convey a feeling I want to accept but don't want to hear, and that more than anything, is heating me up so much I'm on the brink of too many things. Coming. Falling for him. Needing him for more than his body. I'm teetering on the tip of the dagger, and one wrong move will send my heart slipping down the blade.

"Fuck, Mercer," he groans, sliding a hand under my lower back. "Come with me. Again. Right now, little boy." He pushes up on my lower back and that's it for me.

Cum slicks between our abs and my choked breaths go straight into Blake's moaning mouth. We aren't even kissing, but he doesn't pull away. He fucks his cum into my ass and slides our slippery bodies together until the tension settles into something exhausting and euphoric. A sense of bliss that comes from exertion, like a rush of endorphins and an earned sweat.

I take all of thirty seconds to enjoy the bubble of blissfulness, really sinking into it. Just when I'm ready to pull back and be a mood ruiner because this is *deep*, Blake does it for me. He sits up on his heels, pulls out, and turns full caveman at the sight of his cum leaking out of my sore ass. He stares for so long I almost get self-conscious, but when his eyes meet mine, I see the thoughts inside the blue of them.

He's telling me something better than his words can. He's saying I just turned him into an addict. He's saying that this first fuck is out of the way and stamped into our memories as a good time, and now he's going to go full beast mode because it doesn't have to be gentle and sentimental every time. With his eyes, Blake is daring me, no, warning me, to be exactly who I am so he can have me as myself.

*I will never ignore you.*

He bends forward, tongue salivating to lick his mess from my ass. I sit up and grab his hair, forcing his face right in front of mine. "If you take that cum from my body, you'll be fucking another load into me."

"You want to keep me in there all night, little demon?"

Preferably *all life*. Longer than the night. I want him inside me all the time, and I hate him for making me this way. If I'm always full of him, he can never abandon me. "I'd rather you put your cock back inside me to keep it all in there until you're ready to come again."

Blake smiles, running his thumb over my bottom lip. "Okay. Let me clean you up and take care of you first."

"I don't want you to take care of me. Just stay here with me, all filthy and sweaty."

"At least let me clean off your cum." He runs his fingers through it all over our stomachs. "And get you something to drink. Make sure the oven is really off."

He starts to climb off the bed, and I think I get scared. "Blake..." Don't leave me. Don't ignore me. Don't walk away from me. I'm trying to be sexy and manipulate him into another round, not this emotional mess of neglect issues. "Blake..."

"I'm right here," he says, taking my hand and hoisting me into his arms like I'm special. "I'm not going anywhere."

I try not to cling to him. But I do. I'm a weak-willed bitch.

After rinsing us off in the shower, making me pee and brush my teeth, getting me a bottle of water, and making sure the oven really is off, he



leaves everything else on the counter and brings me back to his bed. I'm yawning by this point, but I don't want him to see it because another good fuck is definitely happening. Or a blowie. Something. I just need him in my body.

He tries to pull the blankets over our bodies, but he's struggling for some reason. I look back at him and realize I'm holding his hand so tight he can't even grip the blanket to pull it over us. He smirks at me but doesn't say anything, not complaining about how long it takes him.

"What were you even cooking out there?" he asks, settling in behind me.

I pull his arm around my body and scootch back until his still-hard dick presses against my ass. "I don't know. I just put a bunch of shit in a bowl to get your attention."

"You got it, Mercer. My attention. Fuck, you've got it." He nuzzles into my neck and I don't hate it. I opposite of hate it.

"Fuck me one more time."

"You're falling asleep." He kisses my neck.

"Please." My eyes close, but I'm still latched onto his hand like he's going to disappear.

"In the morning, baby. Sleep first."

"At least put it in me then. Please, Blake."

"Guess you got over your aversion to begging." He laughs, pulling my hips so he can slide inside me. I'm still recovering, so he goes slow and gentle, and when he's fully seated inside me, I finally feel comfortable enough to trust sleep. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"I hate cuddling," I remind him, holding tighter, feeling more and more relaxed.

"I know." He's calling me a liar. "Don't kick me in the balls again."

"No promises."



I SCRUTINIZE my face in front of the bathroom mirror. My eyes are still the same shape and colour, but something within them swirls differently. My skin is flushed and healthy, and the purple mark on my neck from Blake's hedonistic mouth stands out against the paleness of my complexion, but I

like the look of it all. My hair is the same dark mess, jutting up just how I like it, falling in weird places, acting chaotic because my mind is so messy it affects my hair. But something about me is different.

I don't recognize myself, but at the same time, I'm peeking through my appearance because something about the person glancing back at me from within feels familiar. I've never seen him before, but I get that homey feeling, like a childhood memory still fuzzy in details, but you just *know* it's a good memory. Like a song you swear you've never heard before; you can't sing the lyrics, but you know the music. It's a vibe or a feeling, maybe a sixth sense. It's knowing and not knowing together. Someone is clawing their way to my surface, and I think I want to let him.

I wash and moisturize my face, give my teeth another brush, chug some water because I'm parched, and stare at the mess in the kitchen. I should clean it up...

I skip down the hall to find Blake still in bed. He's sprawled out on his back, chest bare, blankets only pulled up to his V, and damn near sparkling in the sun coming through the windows. He looks restful, and after I woke him up for a quickie that somehow turned into a non-quickie, I know I should let him sleep while I clean the kitchen. But the sun is spotlighting him like he's a prize, and my needy self wants to be close to him.

I crawl onto the bed and pull the blankets down. His semi-hard dick stays flopped on his thigh, and my mouth salivates at the prospect of tasting it first thing in the morning. I lean down to lick it, figuring it needs to wake up as much as he does. I pop the head into my mouth and give it a swirl around my tongue, pleased when he hardens fully.

"This is so much better than a kick to the balls," he says, sleepy but happy sounding.

"I like to keep you on edge." I suck him down without any real intent. Just to taste him, maybe even to feel close to him. "Why'd you fuck me without a condom?"

"Because I made Aaron hack your medical records and I know you get regular checks and stay on PrEP."

Nosy bastard. "What about my reassurance of your health?"

"Didn't hear you asking about it last night."

I nuzzle my face into his groin, laying down on his legs. "You make me irresponsible."

“Mm,” he agrees. “I printed off my last test results. It’s in the kitchen drawer if you want to look at it. I haven’t hooked up with anyone in... a while.”

“Not even Dee?”

“You know the answer to that,” he says, eyes still closed. “Which reminds me. That fireman’s breakfast is tomorrow. I signed you up. You gotta be there at five.”

“In the fucking morning!?”

“Mm.”

Now I want to bite his dick instead of lick it.

“Then I have to do the Sean Pendleton job. Then we’re going to that gala.”

Okay, full sulk mode engaged. I don’t want to do the breakfast. I don’t want to miss him when he goes to meet Sean Pendleton. I don’t want to go to the gala. I drop his dick and sigh.

“Come here.” He tugs me up his body and rests my head on his chest. His fingers tingle down my spine and my sweatpants get all bunched up, but I like the position. “Your dad specifically asked me not to bring you to that gala.”

“Good. Then I won’t go.” Which pisses me off because I don’t want Blake to be there without me. He’s going to look all hot and irresistible in a suit, and I can’t have anyone thinking they can get up in there.

“Oh, you’re going. And he’s going to be distracted all night because we defied him, and it’s going to give my brother a chance to snoop on him.”

“Bronson?”

“Brandt,” he answers. “Bronson has to remain the good boy because he’s engaged to your sister.”

“Pretty sure my sister is gay but would never say it because it would upset Daddy’s plans.” My fingers trace the ridges of his chest. “Why do you care about me? Is it just to piss my dad off?” Yep, that was an insecurity straight from my mouth.

“Don’t ask me questions you’re not emotionally ready to hear answers to, Mercer.”

My heart sinks. I forgot it was in my chest there for a bit, but bam, there it is. Bleeding all over the place, reminding me it was sitting on that dagger point. “Right. I’m a job.”

Blake snorts a laugh, but his fingers keep tickling my spine. "Sometimes I don't think you know yourself. You're Mercer Bentley Palmerston, for fuck's sake. What kind of answer is going to make you get all squirmy and weird? Think about it."

Well, taunts and jibes and being neglected are the norm for me. Harsh barbs and passive-aggressive insults aren't anything new. Being a task or a job is a role I'm familiar with, and being a letdown is basically my status quo. What would make me uncomfortable is... depth. The heartfelt kind. Feelings deeper than sexual attraction and mutual orgasms. The spark of sentimentality in his eyes last night when we finally had sex for the first time.

*Why does he care about me?* Because I mean something to him. Not to his dad or my dad. Not for a job. Not because he wants to rescue me or heal me. He just cares. About me. Mercer Bentley Palmerston.

He's right. That does make me uncomfortable because my instincts tell me not to trust it or believe it. Lies are pretty when they're bred from insecurities and come from sexy lips. But I want to hear it so badly. I'm craving that discomfort.

I told him not to make me weepy!

"But you took me because you wanted information about my family, right?"

"Sure," he says. "I saw an opportunity and took it."

"But?" I ask, feeling stupid for being so desperate to know.

"No buts." He shifts his body until he's sitting up, leaning against the headboard. Tilting my chin, he adds, "I saw the opportunity, but you caught my attention before that moment in your parents' kitchen. Honestly, I might have created the opportunity just because I wanted to see you in the black lacy thing again." He smirks. "Where'd that one go?"

"It's dead. My dad probably burned it. Olivia took me there that night and all I got was a disappointed look and a demand to take off the ridiculous outfit." Which is the sad part. I don't even merit a firm scolding or an angry yell. I'm not even worth that effort anymore. "How would you punish me?"

"What do you mean?"

"If I did something you didn't like, how would you react?"

"Depends what you did," Blake says. "If you waste emergency responders' time, I'll make you volunteer." He laughs, pushing me onto my

back and hovering above me. “If you accidentally on purpose poisoned an entire engagement party...” He shrugs, tugging my pants down. My cock springs free, and I start to breathe a little harder. Almost nervous. “I might reward you instead of punish you.” He notices me tense up and stops immediately. “Talk to me, Mercer.”

I shake my head because it’s fucking dumb. “Nothing.”

“Mercer.” He pulls my pants back up.

“I’m just... it’s new to me to be... fuck.” I run my hands down my face, mortified. “I don’t stutter!”

Blake laughs, pulling my hands free. “Out with it, demon.”

“I’m usually where you are,” I tell him, eye contact and everything. “I’m not used to being the one on the... receiving end.”

His eyes soften a little. “You’ve never been blown?”

“I mean, not really. I’ve had a mouth on it, but not like a full...” Kill me now. I’m a twenty-three-year-old slut and I’ve never gotten a blowjob.

“You don’t want it? Not interested?” He tilts my chin. “Be honest. No wrong answer.”

“I’m self-conscious, I think.”

“You?” Blake grins. “Mercer Bentley Palmerston? Guy who struts his shit in lingerie, sets a fire alarm off at three in the morning, and has no fucking shame about baking a batch of nothing just to get noticed?” He lifts a brow.

I smack him. “I like to perform. It gets me off to be the one *doing* the *doing*, you know? I don’t have to worry about anything other than taking it, making it feel good, and enjoying it myself because the other person is so focused on their own pleasure. But a blowjob... that’s all their attention on me and how I’m reacting. It’s dumb because I seek attention, but... not that kind. I get stage fright or something, like I’m supposed to respond a certain way.”

“You don’t have to respond any certain way. Not with me. But it’s okay if you don’t want it. Explain this servicing kink to me.” He settles in beside me and honestly expects me to talk about it. He even plays with my fingers.

Well, okay then. “It makes me so hard to see you react to me. That’s what gets me off. Yeah, it’s you. Everything about you. I want you like...” I shut myself up because this isn’t what he asked. “I like to fight for your attention, and then I like it when you force me to do something. So, when you asked if I was submissive before? Yeah, no, I’m not. Only if I lose the

fight, and to be honest, I don't mind losing. It's the fight I like, and when I lose it to someone like you who can actually take control and steer a sexy situation, that's when the servicing thing comes into play. After you've earned the right to put me where you want, then I get to shine by putting *you* where *I* want. I get to be the one to draw all the reactions out of you, control what you feel and how you feel it, and make you come by playing into how well I can read you. It's not a game, but it's a puzzle or something, and I love solving it. You. I... like solving you."

Blake doesn't say anything for a while, but when I look at him, he's deep in thought, actually thinking everything I'd said over with an open mind. "You become submissive to manipulate the dominance," he laughs. "Fuck, you really are a genius. And a manipulative little brat. So impressed." He turns his head to look at me. "I get it. I respect it. But I have an idea."

"What?"

"I want to be the one to suck your cock first. So, when that happens, we'll do it when I have something else to focus on, too. That way, you don't have to worry about responding a certain way, and I get to taste you. We'll sixty-nine or something. Or fuck, I don't care, you can shove a vibrating plug up my ass and draw all my attention there."

Um, what? "You'd bottom?" I gasp, not at all expecting that.

Blake shrugs. "Maybe." He pauses. "Okay, probably not, but I'd at least try a toy. Would you top? Are you vers?"

"Maybe. With a strong preference for bottoming." I pause this time. "Okay, whatever. I'm a full-time bottom."

Blake licks his lips, then mine, then his again, savouring the combined taste of us. "Maybe we try the blow job thing first?"

I roll my eyes at him. "Okay."

"Okay? That's it?" He acts shocked. "When did you become so compliant, Mercer?"

"You're tricking me into it."

"Bullshit. You're too smart to be tricked." He bends down to kiss me, and just when I think it's going to get sexy again, he pulls back, flips me over, and smacks my ass. "Now go clean your mess in the kitchen and I'll watch you houseboy while I drink my coffee." He jumps out of bed with way too much pep in his step.

I should have dick-kicked him again.



BRONSON PULLS UP in front of my apartment and I climb into the passenger seat. I light a smoke and check my phone, making sure my target is still where he's supposed to be. I won't be completing the Sean Pendleton job until tonight, but I need to keep a tracker on him all day in case anything goes awry.

"Why am I picking you up? Don't you have like three vehicles?"

"Mercer took my Denali to the fireman's breakfast, and I need to grab a pickup for tonight. Dad has one ready to go." Sean is still at his pervy buddy's place, so as long as he stays there until mid-afternoon, I should be good.

"Fireman's breakfast?" Bronson laughs.

"Don't ask. It's punishment." Actually, I'm not too into punishment in the literal sense. I'm into consequences. If and when I ever do punish Mercer, it won't be hurtful or shameful. It'll all be a part of the puzzle he plays with me.

"You actually into him, Blake?"

"Yeah," I admit, because there's no point in hiding it. "He's feisty as fuck and I'm pretty into it."

Bronson laughs again. He doesn't stop laughing. He laughs so hard his eyes water and he snorts. Real cool. Would never know he's a fucking serial killer. "If I'd known that you coming home and falling in love with Ben was the key to taming that little brat, I'd have ended your training a year ago."

"His name is Mercer. And I don't want to tame him. I want to challenge him. He hasn't had it easy, man." I pocket my phone. "And I never said shit about falling in love."

“I know he hasn’t had it easy,” Bronson admits, letting the love thing go for now. “That family is so fucked.”

“How so?”

“Well, Olivia and Samantha aren’t shit people, but they’re so compliant to Will’s every wish that it almost makes them shit people. They want to please him.”

“No they don’t. They just don’t want to cause waves.”

Bronson steals a cigarette from my pack. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But because they don’t want to make waves, they let Ben, I mean Mercer, get shit on his whole life. They love him and want to protect him, but they don’t know how, and you have to admit he doesn’t make it easy.”

No. He doesn’t. But I understand why he acts out now that I know him. He’s so much more than a brat. He’s manipulative and resentful, but mostly, he’s afraid of being alone, suffering from a life of neglect, and confused about himself because his redeeming qualities are what drove his own father to send him for medical brainwashing. I wonder if his brother worked on him or even knew he was there. I’ll be finding out.

“But yeah, it’s like they aren’t terrible people, but they’re terrible by proxy. Olivia is more of a bitch than Samantha, but I can’t place her issue. Plus, Penny is the typical battered wife.”

“You think he beats her?” I didn’t get that vibe. Will isn’t the hands-on abusive type.

“Nope. I think he cut her down, made her lose her worth, and turned her into his little minion. She does whatever he says because she’s learned it’s easier than not doing it. Even when it comes to Mercer.”

“Yeah, she was all for sending him to that facility the day of your engagement party. She called it a reform home, though.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know the extent of it,” Bronson says. “That’s what I mean, though. She’s a shell of a person, and I think after all this time, she doesn’t even have the capacity to ask questions anymore. She lets Will run the show and goes along with everything he does.”

Which is a survival tactic. I can’t blame her for self-preservation. Where I can place blame is on her treatment of Mercer. Will must have said he was sick, concocted some bullshit behavioural diagnosis, presented it to Penny, and she never questioned it. She should have fucking questioned it, especially because it was about her son. I’ll never forgive her for that one thing alone. All the rest I can look past, but not that.



“Mercer thinks the Palmerstons are going broke. That’s why they agreed to the marriage.”

Bronson looks at me with a confused expression, so I explain everything Mercer told me about the slow slide into taking over our family’s legitimate businesses while our *family business* goes to ruins to distract Dad.

“Dad’s not dumb. He probably saw this coming. He would have looked into everything about them before even suggesting it.”

“Yeah, which makes me think he’s playing at another angle. I’ve got my guy looking into everything to do with the Palmerston businesses, finances, and accounts. I just want Dad to admit outright what’s going on.”

“He won’t.” Bronson laughs. “He’ll make you and Brandt figure it out while I play the perfect fiancé.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“I don’t know. Supposed to be picking a date this week. Miranda is... fuck, Blake. She’s going to leave me.”

“We’ll figure something out.” I hope. Now that I’m learning what attachments and feelings are, I want to help Bronson keep the woman he loves.

As I’m scanning the tracking app to ensure Sean Pendleton is where he’s supposed to be, a text pops up. I smirk at it even without reading the whole thing. Of course he altered his contact information.

Little Demon: your abs are shit compared to these fire gods.

Blake: if you *\*accidentally\** light yourself on fire to get their attention, I’m not visiting you in the burn unit.

Little Demon: I’d never risk my skin like that.

Little Demon: but I could *\*choke\** on something to get mouth-to-mouth.

Blake: you don’t even choke on an eight-inch dick, but good try.

Little Demon: compliment?

Blake: mm.

Little Demon: mm.

“Not in love, my ass,” Bronson scoffs.



THE REASON it irks me to be a soldier for my dad is because we have a different outlook on morals. If I’m his hitman, my job is to conduct the hit so he can collect the money. That’s it. He doesn’t want me looking into the person more than is necessary to get the job done. But my mind doesn’t work like that. I want to know whose life I’m snuffing out and what kind of destruction it will leave behind. I don’t mind killing, to be honest, but there’s more to a death than just ending a life. There’s an aftermath.

Frank’s wife wants him dead. An accidental death. There are a number of ways it could be carried out. Car accident, medical condition, gas leak, carbon monoxide poisoning, hit and run, you name it. I had no problem stopping him from ruining her life and her business because the proof of his actions were right there in front of me. But does leaking information merit death?

Dad thinks so. Frank’s wife thinks so. Brandt has no issues with it. Bronson says Frank chose his path in life and this is where it led him. But me? I’m not sure. It depends on the situation. It depends on the destruction the death will leave behind.

Addicts aren’t bad people even though they do shit things to get their fix. We don’t turn our backs on them. Thieves steal for reasons that make sense to their situation, but they get let out of prison after serving their time. Even some murders are accidental, and those people suffer for eternity for what they’ve done. People are redeemable. Some people.

Is Frank?

“You made her wait the obligatory four days after the order?” I ask my dad. “To make sure she didn’t change her mind?”

“Yes.”

“And she realizes she’s killing the father of her kids?”

“I think she gets it.”

“Does she? Does she know how it’s going to affect those kids?”

“Blake, what’s the problem here?”

“The problem is that this is our life all over again.” I stare him straight in the eyes.

Dad flinches at my words, but he can’t deny them. “Your mother was a different circumstance altogether.”

“How so? She did something bad, and you had her stopped. She didn’t react the way you wanted her to, and you had her killed. I’ve watched you regret it every single day since it happened. I watched my brothers lose their mother, and if you think it hasn’t turned us into cold-hearted people, you’re mistaken.”

“I know you don’t believe me, Blake, but I did it to protect my sons. All three of you.”

I nod, shoving my hands in my pockets. I’ve heard this a hundred times, but he never elaborates and no matter how hard I get Aaron to dig into it, he can’t find anything. Mom tried to out the family business to the FBI. It backfired because the agent working the case was in Dad’s pocket and had even hired us for jobs. Dad stopped her from trying to ruin us by discrediting her, shaming her, and making her look mentally ill to the public. Apparently, she was schizophrenic and the voices in her head were feeding her lies about our family. Did my mom have a mental illness? Maybe. I might believe that, but I don’t think it was that one. All her medical records have been wiped, so Aaron can’t confirm anything for me.

“Are you ever going to tell me what you were protecting us from?”

“From her.”

“She was our mother!”

“She was a terrible person!”

“Right,” I laugh. “So you keep saying. Maybe someday you’ll tell us why. For now, I want to make damn sure this woman has a full understanding of what it means to kill her husband. I don’t give a fuck if she’s a cold-hearted bitch who wants him gone because he betrayed her. That’s fine. I want to know what his relationship with his kids is like, how it’s going to affect them, and if she’s even a better parent to them. For all we know, we’re taking away the only good parent those kids have.” I pull my smokes from my pocket. “I’ll do my own research. Does she have a deadline for this thing?”

“Not yet.”

I nod again. “Alright. I’ve got the other job to do tonight, and then I’ll see you at the Gala.”

“You don’t question his death?” Dad asks.

“I did my research on him. He’s not a parent, has a record for stalking kids, and when I followed him yesterday, he jerked it to kids on a playground. I have no questions about his death.”

I leave my dad’s kitchen and hop in the truck I’ll be taking to the job tonight. I believe my dad when he says our mom was a terrible woman. I saw the signs, even when I was a kid. I know she was planning to do something to the three of us, her sons, but I don’t know what. What I wish is for our dad to open up to us and tell us what actually happened. Right now isn’t the time to think about it because I have to head home, get ready, and make sure Mercer knows to be ready for the gala when I get back. That in itself is going to be the biggest job of my night.



I NEVER WANTED to be one of the people in Mercer’s life that told him he couldn’t wear something, but... he can’t wear that. Not because I give a shit what anyone will think about it, but because I’ll lose my mind and sport wood all night. Hard wood. Impossible to conceal wood. My mood will plummet because I’ll be single-minded, and then I’ll get edgy and short-tempered, and being around these assholes is enough to test my patience as is. I don’t need Mercer and his badass suit adding to the fraying thread of my restraint.

“Don’t,” he snips at me. “Don’t even try to make me change. I worked on this all fucking day, and if you force me to take it off, I won’t go.” He crosses his arms.

I can’t even place why this outfit is beyond my ability to comprehend. It’s basically just a suit. A black and charcoal grey suit with buckles and decorative buttons all over the place. It’s grungy without being tattered, and classy without conforming. Maybe that’s why I like it so much—it’s his personality in clothing form. The matte black button-up fits so perfectly under the charcoal vest, and the way it all tapers down to his waist and hips, showing off some snaps and fasteners that draw the eye, has my fingers itching to use them as handholds and force him exactly where I want him. Or maybe it’s the way the pants hug his tight little ass, the pockets overexaggerated and not at all detracting from the view.

Every piece of this outfit was made for him, right down to how it gives him a swagger he didn't have before. It's manly and fashionable while being chaotic and edgy. Paired with the subtle liner that darkens his demon eyes, making the amber pop and glisten, and the mess of hair on his head that remains true to his usual form, I'm seriously speechless. I can't even.

I've never reacted like this to a damn suit.

"I didn't expect you to be dressed already," I say because I can't find anything else to say. "I still have a job to do."

"Oh, right. Well, I figured you knew, but I'm totally coming with you on that." His arms uncross, showing me the fit of the vest again.

Fucking hell, I want to rip the buttons open and devour him, but I don't want to ruin the suit because I want him to wear it whenever the fuck I tell him to. "It's a murder, Mercer."

"Yes. I'm coming."

"To a murder?"

"What the hell is wrong with you? Did you forget your brain at your dad's?" He scoffs. Or huffs. Or laughs condescendingly. "I'm coming. I'm starting to think you're just a mediocre idiot who can't form words. I need to see you off some child molester to feel better about you. Trust me, your reputation needs it." He snaps his fingers. "Let's go!"

I grab him by the bicep. Even the fabric feels perfect under my rough hands. "I can't focus on a murder when you look like that."

"Like what?" he asks, smirking because he thinks I'm going to drop to my knees and worship his sexiness.

"Like yourself," I tell him honestly. "This. This whole fucking thing is you." I run my eyes up and down the height of him.

He trips over his attitude for a second, stumbling back because I've shocked him. "Me? You think this is me?"

So fucking much. I lick my lips and turn him around, spinning him in a slow circle to admire every last bit of him. "Mm."

"It's just a suit." Which translates to him saying, 'I'm just me.' "What about my hoodlum look?"

I love his hoodlum look just as much, but it isn't as jarring as seeing him in this because it's more familiar now. This is his confidence and his style. It's his defiance to be different, but his compliance to belong. It's begging for attention while being unsure if he's worthy of it. It's a statement that he's Mercer Bentley Palmerston, and he's no longer afraid. It's

conflicting and confusing and goddamn phenomenal, just like the complicated mess he is. It's proof that he knows he's seen by someone. By me.

"What time is it?"

He looks at the clock on the stove, but before he has time to tell me I have to be at a literal murder in thirty-five minutes, I'm forcing him to his knees and unbuckling my tactical pants. I want to fuck him, but I can't risk getting cum on that suit.

Mercer looks up at me, still trying to decide if he wants to fight me on this. I don't give him the chance. I read his body language, decide he's willing and eager to be forced, and press my dick to his lips. He opens, taking a languid lick that doesn't at all match the hurried and desperate drive in me.

"Wait." He pops off my dick, even though I have a hand on his head, ready to push him where I want him. "I suck you off, you take me to the murder. Yes?" I push on his head, but we both know he's the one in charge here. "No murder, no blowjob."

Taking him on a job is irresponsible, but I can't think straight when he looks like this. It even turns me on that he has the balls to negotiate with me while my cock bobs in front of his face. "Fine. Blowjobs and murder."

"Such a pushover." He gloats.

"So fucking mouthy." I pull his head forward, hoping to surprise him, but my little demon slut has his lips parted and his tongue ready.

I don't know if it's him, the outfit, the time we've been living together, or the games he's been playing, but I'm realizing how much I need him. Need him to push my buttons and keep me on edge, to challenge me and entice me into his game, and to seek me when he needs comfort. I don't know how deep my feelings for him run, but I know that I'm addicted to him.

Not wanting to ruin his eyeliner, I make sure he can breathe tonight. I keep one hand on the back of his head, but let him dictate the pace and depth. His mouth is as greedy as he is, and Mercer doesn't shy away from making noise. He hums around my shaft like he's in heaven, and the enthusiasm and pure enjoyment that sparkles up at me from his glossy eyes is what sets this apart from any other blowjob I've received. Mercer loves to serve, and now that I know that about him, I want to pay attention to him in action. And fuck me, the boy knows how to suck a cock.

I stroke his cheek, making sure his eyes don't water and ruin his look. "You love this, don't you?"

He whimpers around my cock, palming the front of his pants.

"Such a good boy, Mercer. Look at you down there on your knees for me, giving me everything I want. So perfect, baby." I stare at him, unable to look away. He slows his pace, dragging his lips over my cock and then sucking the tip. When he tongues my slit, my thighs clench. "When I come, I need you to swallow. If you get even a drop on this suit, I'll lose my mind. Fuck, you in this suit, Mercer..." I admire the fuck out of him, and when I see his cheeks flush from the praise, my balls draw up.

Mercer knows it. He knows how to read my body. He sucks me like he's desperate for my cum, and when my fist tightens in his hair, he moans along my cock and drinks me down. I refuse to close my eyes. Watching him while suffering overwhelming pleasure caused by him is my new favourite thing to do. My cock pulses, coming down his throat, and Mercer takes it all and begs for more.

"Fuck, Mercer. So. Fucking. Perfect."

Mercer cries out, something between a whine and a moan, and the vibration of it along my cock sends tingles of aftershocks through my body. But when I notice his eyes flutter shut and his body wiggle and jitter, I know exactly what he's done.

I pull out, but Mercer licks me clean before he lets me go anywhere. When he tries to stand, I hold him still. Kneeling with him, I wipe his glistening lips before kissing them. "What'd I tell you about getting cum on this suit?"

"That you'd lose your mind. I didn't waste any," he promises.

"Are you wearing panties tonight?" I look into his amber eyes.

He blushes even more. "Yes."

"You better hope they protect your pants, demon. One drop of cum on them and I'll have to come up with a punishment for you."

Mercer swallows, almost excitedly. "What punishment?"

"Stand up."

I help him to his feet, tucking my dick away while he shuffles from foot to foot. He's trying to hide it, but he knows I know and I don't understand why he's being bashful.

"Show me."

"Blake..."

“Now.” I wait. “And be fucking careful.”

Slowly, he untucks his shirt, undoes the pants, and opens them wide enough to show me the black lace underneath. With shy eyes, he peels down the panties to show me his mess. Fuck, I love how easily he can orgasm. To see him covered in his own cum is the sexiest thing in the world. Especially in those panties and that suit. He’s the ultimate distraction and I wish I had more time to make this creative. Instead, I’m going to delay his punishment until we get to the gala.

“What’s this?” I touch a wet spot on his pants, bringing my finger to my mouth to suck it clean. “You’ve been bad, baby.”

“I know.” Still shy, but there’s deviance in his voice now. “What are you going to do with me?”

I smirk at him. “Right now, you’re going to run and change those panties, clean yourself up, and run back to me. If you aren’t back here in four minutes, I’m going to the job without you. Later, you’re going to pay for this mistake.” I grab his chin and kiss his open mouth. “I can’t wait to watch you squirm all night, Mercer.”

“You think I’ll squirm?” he scoffs. “Please.”

“Mm.” I smile. “Four minutes.”





Turns out, murders aren't for me. *Murderers*, on the other hand, have a sex appeal I had not been expecting. It wasn't the actual killing that attracted me to Blake Carter even more than I already am. It was his mentality. His brutality and his grace, all wrapped up into one sexy killer and the ease with which he completed the job. It was the look in his eyes before he went in there and the different, completely cold-blooded look he cracked for me when he got back to the truck. Blake was in some sort of murder-high, and as soon as he saw the look on my face, he softened up like butter and melted all over me, making sure I was okay.

*Fuck, Mercer Bentley! Do not fall in love with a thirty-year-old assassin!*

Anyway, my dick's been hard ever since and I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but Blake kissed me in the truck, wheeled us out of there all cool and casual, and then we ditched the truck and moved on. He's been his normal, stoic, yet surprisingly kind and thoughtful self ever since. The mind fuck of his personalities—contract killer to attentive lover—has my cock all up in arms, kind of wishing to take him up on his blowjob offer here at the gala.

I'm casually leaning against the bar in the event room, sipping a mocktail because I don't think my jitters could handle a cocktail, unless it was Blake's, when someone bumps their elbow into me.

"Well, if it isn't the attention whore."

I look to my left and narrow my eyes at this bitch. "Says the actual whore."

Dee smirks as she orders a martini. “Still running with the prostitute excuse? Either way, he still called me.”

“And you still left with your heels in your hand.” I sip the fruity little number, loving the pineapple-yness of it. Mangos, maybe? Pineapple-ness? Whatever... it's tropical. “And I got breakfast with a lovely bunch of firefighters from the whole ordeal.”

Dee accepts her martini and spins her back to the bar. Side by side, we eye-fuck this lame party. Blake is with his dad, and my dad is entertaining an entire horde of suck-ups. He loves that shit, so all the power to him.

“Well, you won,” she says, sipping. “And that suit is... fire.”

“I know,” I admit to both those statements. “Your dress is infuriatingly perfect on your disgustingly flawless body.” Might be due for a real cocktail now. “It'd look better with your hair up, though.”

Dee scoffs. Or huffs. Or laughs at me condescendingly. Make up your mind with your sounds, woman! “You into fashion, Mercer?”

“You know who I am?” No one calls me Mercer except Blake, and some of his family now. I look at her, biting my tongue from asking how she got her eyeliner so perfect. Those lines are tight.

“I do now. Sorry for the dad hand you got dealt in life. I'm on his law team, and yeah. He's the fakest person I know.”

I clink my glass to hers. “So, not actually a whore?”

“Asks the slut.” She smiles.

“Touché. I don't know if I'm into fashion. Maybe. Not really. I have no idea who I am.” Okay, what's in this mocktail and why is it making me confess things to my nemesis while my dick is hard about a murderer? “You're a lawyer?”

“A junior lawyer, yeah. I started law school late. Was a marketing executive first.”

“How boring.”

Dee laughs for real this time. “Do you ever filter yourself?”

“Should I?” I look at her.

She shakes her head. “Wouldn't be you if you did.”

Just then, Blake looks at me like he does every three minutes. Noticing me standing with his attempted hookup, he excuses himself from his conversation and undoes a few of the top buttons on his walk across the room.

“Uh oh,” Dee says. “You in trouble?”

I grin at Blake. "I hope so." More likely he's coming to make sure Dee and I haven't started a round of World War Gala. He subtly checks for fire alarms on his way over.

He swapped out his murder clothes for a casual set of dress pants, shirt, and blazer, and he looks damn good in them. Not a speck of blood on him. His eyes barely waver from mine as he crosses the room, not even when people try to catch him in a conversation. He smiles politely but keeps looking right at me, and I swear to all that is holy that this is a form of foreplay. Blake's own special brand, and it's working. If I don't get rid of the boner soon, it's going to get stuck as a permanent fixture on my body.

He doesn't hesitate when he gets to us. One hand slips to my lower back and he takes his place beside me. Not in front of me or angled to block me. Right at my side. "Mercer," he greets me with a deep tone. "Dee. Nice to see you. He isn't being a demon, is he?"

"Oh, he's casually insulting my job and telling me I look nice, but otherwise, he's well behaved." She smiles at Blake, but it surprises me that her smile for me is even bigger.

"Shame," Blake says. "He's fun when he doesn't behave."

"Yeah, I think we have different takes on that night," Dee laughs. "Anyway, nice to see you both. Blake, I'd say call me but your pet here bites, so don't call me. Mercer, if you're ever around..." She leaves it open-ended, and I respect her for it.

"Night, whore."

"Behave, slut."

When she's gone, Blake leans right in against my side, lips almost pressed to my ear. "I'm the only one who gets to call you a slut. My slut."

"She basically saw me in full-blown slut mode, so cut her some slack." I turn, our lips almost grazing.

"Some slack? You cut her no slack that night."

"No. But now that she's not in my way, I'm mature enough to reshuffle the deck." I meet his eyes. "Please be jealous. I've never made anyone jealous before."

Blake grins. "You made your dad jealous of your mind when you were a kid. Maybe we can make him even more jealous tonight. You up for putting on a show?"

"While I'm all for voyeurism and won't deny that exhibitionism intrigues me, I'm not really into sex shows with my dad. Hard pass." I

finish my mocktail and Blake sets my glass on the bar.

“Not a sex show. I’m too possessive of your ass for that.” He grins, making my stomach tighten. “I’m going to introduce you to all the high and mighty people, and while you’re being whatever version of yourself you want to be, your dad will never look away.”

“Yeah, because he’ll be worried I’m tainting the Palmerston name.”

“Exactly. Or winning them over. Either way, his attention has already been on you all night, and I’m up for making him sweat a bit more.” His hand sinks down to my ass. “And if you’re a good boy and keep him distracted while Brandt does his thing, maybe you’ll be in for a reward rather than punishment, baby.”

“You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re the manipulative one in this relationship.” I smirk, but it falls away pretty quickly. What the hell did I just say?

“Mm,” is all Blake says. “Maybe tonight. But I’m not stupid enough to think everything about you right now, from what you’re wearing, to how you’re standing, and what you’re saying, isn’t a form of manipulation.”

“And you’re going to stand there and act like you aren’t being all touchy-feely with me in such a public space because you don’t want my dad to take notice?” I lift a brow.

“Oh, I want him to notice. I want him to know that while he neglected you, I accepted you. That he wasn’t strong enough to handle someone as fucking incredible as you, but I’m strong enough to embrace you. I want him to know that his fuck ups are my rewards. You, Mercer, are mine, and I want him to know it. I caught your relationship slip-up.”

“Poor word choice. You’re still just my jailer.” Jailer I’m falling for, even though it’s a bad idea. Love might ruin the one and only good thing I’ve got in my life.

“Sure, baby. Whatever you gotta tell yourself.” He kisses my cheek and I lock eyes with my dad, who definitely saw that. He’s shocked, and it gives me a thrill. “Be honest with me, though. You doing okay here?”

Always checking in. “So far. If I have a panic attack just... just don’t let my dad see it.”

“I promise,” he says. “And I’ll give you my cock to suck on to calm you down.” He smirks. “Come on, Mr. Demon. Let’s meet some affluent douchebags. There are a few good ones.”

Mr. Demon. I’m a mister now.

For the next few hours, my dad's face gets redder and sweatier the more times I hear Blake lie about being away at school the past five years. I meet so many people, I can't even keep their names straight. People who know about me but have never met me because my family kept me hidden. I get into a routine of following Blake's lead until I get a read on the people, and then I adjust my attitude accordingly. I'm an outright dick to some of them, a pleasure to others, and indifferent to many. Blake never takes his hand off my lower back. He never butts in while I'm talking, and he doesn't try to tone me down or encourage me to say more than I'm willing to. He is the only person in my whole life to treat me with this level of respect, and to be honest, I love it so much it's overwhelming. Verge of a panic attack overwhelming.

I never realized good feels can be just as overbearing as bad ones.

The best part about the whole process is that Dad sees it all. He sees me fit into his world, and his worry spikes. He doesn't trust me, and I can't really blame him for that, but to see him nervous gives my anxiety attack a kick in the ass, booting it away for later. The smug smile on my face doesn't go unnoticed by Blake, and by the time I swap my mocktails for actual cocktails, I'm living on the cloud above cloud nine because this night has been a revelation.

I'm fucking worth something.

But I can only handle so many self-realizations in one night. I'm at my tolerance limit for this party, and I don't even know the occasion for the event. Blake, aware as ever, notices and pulls me away to the side of the room for a break.

"Where's Aaron?" I ask before he can ask me if I'm alright. I don't have an answer to that question right now. "He told me on the phone he'd be here."

"He's here," Blake says, a cheeky smile on his face. "You've met him and his wife."

I narrow my eyes at him. "How'd I act?"

"Bratty and funny." Blake laughs. "He's my guy, not the Carter family's guy. So his identity stays a secret between me and him. I introduced them as a Mr and Mrs so you wouldn't hear their first names," he says, grinning.

"I don't get to know?" I pout, hating how it feels to be on the outside of any inside when it comes to Blake. I'm so needy it's despicable.

"I trust you," Blake says. "I wanted you to meet his wife, anyway."

“Why?”

He ignores the question. “Cock hard?”

It’s been in different stages of hardness all night. Currently, it’s pressing nicely against the satin panties I picked after ruining the lacy ones. “Yes.”

“I have a question. I want you to be honest when you answer. It doesn’t have to be right now, okay?” He turns his back to the room, giving me all his attention. I’ve never felt more nervous and more special at the same time.

“Okay...”

“I know you like the fight. That the build up and the battle for control is an aphrodisiac to you. I get that. And I also get that you like losing the fight to become submissive and control the sex in that role.”

“But?”

“But when you’re not in that mood, you need to be dominated. I saw it that first night you had a panic attack when your sisters were over. You need orders and direction to function.”

My cheeks flush and I don’t know why. He’s already seen me like that on more than one occasion, so it makes no sense to be embarrassed about it now. Except I am. Because living it and talking about it while in the right frame of mind are two totally different things.

Blake lightly grips my jaw, meeting my eyes. “Tell me how to dominate you while never making you feel like you’re less than me. I want you to rise to the top of whatever you see for yourself in life. You’ve been beaten down since you were a kid, and I refuse to do that to you. Tell me the right way to give you what you need without ever making you feel worthless.” He leans in to press his lips to mine. “Think about it, okay?”

“I don’t need to think about it,” I snap at him, falling in love with this murderer with attuned feelings. “I already know the answer.”

“Tell me.”

I grin at him. “Oh, Blake. I thought you knew me better than that.”

“What’s that mean? Tell me, Mercer.”

My hand skims his chest, and my grin turns to one of pure innocence. “Make me.”



HE'S NOT SOFT. He has feelings, but he's not a soft lover like I thought he might be.

Locked away in some fancy changing room, Blake has taken complete charge and put me in place. He didn't do it nicely, and now I'm panting with a hard dick, trying to decide which version of him I'm falling harder for. The thoughtful man who wants to pay attention to all my feelings, or the aggressive dominant who wants to step up to the plate to play my game. I think I love them both because they both see me. No matter which version of himself he's being, he sticks to his promise of not ignoring me.

I'm a fucking slut for it. All of it. The hard and the soft. The way he gives me all his attention.

His blue eyes meet mine, and within them, the order is clear. Don't fucking move. I stay still while he wraps his tie around my wrists, securing them in front of my body. My defiance will come in another form tonight, so I'll let him have this win because he's earned it.

He asked me how to dominate me without making me feel worthless... Well, by loving me. By doing exactly what he's doing. By respecting me. By proving to me that he cares without treating me like I'm broken. I know he hasn't said it, and it's way too soon to even feel it, but Blake Carter loves me. I can feel it. I think it's his love and attention that has this new version of me clawing to the surface, fighting tooth and nail to break free so I can become someone who accepts his love and knows how to love him back.

My mind plays tricks on me, though. It tells me it's his attention I love rather than the man himself. It's the focus he has on me because no one else has ever made me their spotlight. My mind tells me that Blake will get tired

of loving me because once the fun of this game stops being new and exciting, he'll go back to people like Dee who come when he calls and always offer him a no-strings-attached night. I'm all the strings, tangled up like webs. Pull the wrong one and I'll go off the deep end, but keep tugging on them individually and he'll get so caught in my mess he won't be able to leave. Then he'll resent me for it.

"Stop," Blake growls at me, snugging up the tie. "Whatever the fuck you're thinking about, just stop." He lifts my bound wrists over his head to wrap around his neck. With me kneeling on a padded bench in the changeroom, he's still taller than me, but he bends to be at eye level. "Do I need to get you out of your head, demon?"

Yes, please. That's exactly what I need. "You can try."

His smirk makes my nipples harden. He took my clothes off before he got rough with me, claiming he didn't want to ruin them. All that remains are my satin panties and the tie around my wrists.

"Mm," he hums, reaching behind me. "Open your mouth."

When I don't, he bites my lip, making me hiss. I'm not usually one for pain with my pleasure, choosing to make the fight more mental than physical, but damn if that bite of pain doesn't feel nice coming from his teeth. My lips pop open on a gasp when he bites me again, and then he's shoving something into my mouth. Something cold.

"Suck on that and stop thinking," he demands, stepping back to admire his work.

With my wrists tied in the front and my panties pulled taut over my hard and leaking cock, I suck on the ice cube and watch him unbutton his shirt. Blake doesn't have any tattoos, yet his body is my bad boy fantasy. Movies and books taught me to see bad boys as an image, the way they dress and the ink on their skin; their dark hair and brooding eyes. Blake doesn't have any of that. He dresses in whatever suits his needs for the day, his skin is tanned but bare, and his eyes don't brood. They're wide open and attentive, swirling shades of blue at me with an intensity that makes him forceful. His bad boy vibe comes from his actions rather than his look, because what man can look at me like that and actually handle me?

Only Blake.

He's dangerous because of the slow and deliberate way he undresses like I don't warrant hurrying. He's powerful because of the confidence he has in himself, but he's even more powerful because of the confidence he



has in me to handle whatever he throws at me. He's a true bad boy because he asks me what I need and then delivers what I ask for. He doesn't tiptoe around me, chicken out when I'm at my lowest, and he stands his ground when I try to manipulate him. The best part is that he doesn't get offended when I win. Like in the shower that night. Blake is the ultimate bad boy because he knows how to handle himself and he does the work to make sure I'm handled like I want to be.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot, Mercer," Blake says as the ice cube melts to drip down my chin. "Actually, I think *you* got off on the wrong foot."

"How so?" I watch his shirt slide off his shoulders to reveal toned pecs, cut abs, and a V that leads to the best prize of my life.

"You fucked up," he says, starting on his pants. "You mistake respect for softness."

I swallow a mouthful of saliva and water, my tongue cold and my cheeks tight. I did do that. I expected Blake to own me sexually the first time we had sex, but he didn't do that right away. He fucked me how he wanted to, which was respectful and sentimental, and I assumed that meant he was a gentle lover.

"All this attitude you throw around is for something, right? You act out to get attention, but you've never really cared what kind of attention it gets you." He leaves his pants open and takes a slow breath. "What kind of attention did you want from me?"

All of it. Undivided. Love. Understanding. I want him to see me and still look at me because I'm worthy of being looked at. I want him to look under my mask and understand why I wear it. I want him to notice me because every outward part of me shows the truth of all the inward parts of me, and then I want him to peel my layers back and still give me all his attention because the mess he finds underneath is still worth it.

"You wanted me to play your game. You wanted to be a brat and have me tame you, right?" he asks, stepping a little closer. He is right. That's the initial reaction I wanted from him. "I'm not going to tame you, Mercer."

Something hot burns in my gut. It's uncomfortable yet enticing. "Why not?"

He cups my ass and lifts me up. My legs wrap around his waist, and his eyes, too close to focus on, stay locked on mine. "Because you thrive on being unhinged, and I never want you snuffed out. Because, in order to

respect who you are, I first had to get to know you. Guess what I found?" He sets my ass down on the bench and pushes my wet, cold mouth to the material over his cock. "A smart, bratty little boy with so much fire, but no idea how to keep it burning. I'm going to make you burn, Mercer."

A rush of something like adrenaline pulses through me. A desperation tenses my body but entices my mind, and before I know what I need, my hands are working to pull open his pants and tug down his boxers. The ice cube and my cool tongue glide over the head of his cock, soaking him until it melts completely. But before Blake lets me suck him, he tilts my chin up.

"I respect you," he tells me, making me whimper. "But I will fucking use you like you want to be used. I can do both. Understand?"

"Blake," I beg. My body trembles, unable to process the honesty of his words. It's all I've ever wanted, to be respected for who I am and seen *because* of who I am, and Blake does both. "Please."

With a nod, he lets go of my chin. I devour him, unable to suck him down deep enough. I get this need to be filled, choking, suffocating on him because he's the only thing that can fill me with enough pride to get through the day. I gag around his cock, but I can't stop. The feeling of him in my throat, cutting off the air I don't want to breathe, intensifies, making me fucking feral for cum. Proof. Cum is proof I'm enough. He lets me for all of a minute before he takes charge.

"You need to choke, little demon?" he rasps at me.

I hum some desperate sound, reaching for his dick. He doesn't let me. He pushes me until my body lays along the bench, my bound wrists on my chest, and then he tugs me until my head tips off the end. Looming over me, he admires my body for a few seconds, drawing out my agony, teaching me that delayed gratification he keeps going on about, and then he steps forward. Head tilted back, I look up at his straight and proud cock, his balls tight and pulled up.

"Open."

I open my mouth as wide as I can, tilting my head back even more so he can really fuck my throat. Blake bends his knees a little, the tip hitting my tongue. And then he pushes all the way inside my mouth and down my throat, his balls resting against my nose. I'm suffocating blissfully, blacking out from pleasure, and choking on the only man I've ever fallen for.

I choke, coughing around him. Pressure builds in my head, and my hands itch to push him off or pull him closer. When I cough a second time,

my throat on fire, he pulls out. I gasp, but that's about all I manage before he slides his cock back in. This time, he fucks my mouth like he owns it, and the way my body reacts to that is overwhelming. I'm seconds from coming because he's claiming me. It makes me sick, but I'm far past being ashamed of my sickness. Blake thrusts in and out of my throat until I'm clenching my thighs and trying not to come in a second pair of panties.

"Good boy," he purrs at me, pulling out again. "Trust me?"

"Yes." My voice is hoarse. "Yes."

Reaching forward, he grabs my legs and tugs me down the bench a little. Instead of my head hanging over the end, it rests on the padded surface. Blake hovers over me, and when he bends forward, all I can focus on is getting his dick back into my mouth and sucking the cum out of him until he's ready to go again. I lift my hands to grab his shaft, angling it so I can get him deeper. Then I tense.

"Blake."

"Suck my cock, baby."

I do as I'm told and barely hold back from bucking my hips off the table when I feel his fingers slide my panties to the side and his tongue lick my cock. I suction my lips around his cockhead and whimper when he takes me into his mouth. Holy shit, that's good. My legs squirm and my body sweats. Everything feels way too fucking good and way too fast, but I'm a greedy cock whore all of a sudden. With Blake's mouth on me, I'm not overthinking anything. I don't care that he might be too focused on my reactions, because my reactions are all fucking natural. I want to be deeper inside him. I want to watch him. I want to lift my ass off this bench and fuck his throat like he fucked mine.

Blake slides his hands under my ass and pulls up, lifting my hips for me. I moan, knowing this is going to be over way sooner than I want it to be.

"Suck, Mercer."

Right. I lick the tip of him and take him back into my throat. I'm bobbing my head, loving every minute of it, but this is the first time in my life I've sucked a dick without my full attention being on it. There are too many points of pleasure, and I can't pick one to focus on.

But I'm a selfish little slut, and Blake's mouth on me wins out. "Blake," I moan. "Holy fuck."

He squeezes my ass, takes me down his throat, and swallows. I cry out around his cock, coming down his throat and writhing on the bench.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck.”

Blake pulls out of my mouth, and I’m still trembling when he lifts off my body and pulls me into a sitting position. He tugs me until I’m on his lap, straddling him and the bench, and then he kisses me when I pretty much cry for it. His tongue is coated in my cum, and I can’t get enough of it. I’m an emotional wreck, but I think it feels good. Really good.

“Maybe I’m a slut for your cum too,” he says against my lips. “Mm.”

Oh my fuck. He’s infuriatingly perfect. “I hate you.” My forehead rests against his while I try to come back down to Earth. I don’t know why this orgasm is hitting harder than most, but if I had to hazard a guess, and I’m a pretty accurate kind of guy, I’d say it’s because that was my first blowjob and now I’m addicted. To Blake’s mouth. To Blake.

Blake laughs, and just when I think he’s going to kiss me again, he lifts me up. He carries me over to a wall, hooks my tied wrists over a coat hook on the wall, and presses my face against the wallpaper.

“Fuck, this ass is mine now, little boy.” He smacks it. “I’m gonna fuck it until you come on the wallpaper.” He grabs my hips and tugs, angling me so that my ass is sticking out for him. I arch my back to give him better access, basically inviting him to fuck me whatever way he wants. Shit, I want that so badly.

“Blake, hurry up,” I complain, cock already hard and leaking again.

“So fucking greedy, Mercer. How many times have you come tonight?” He smacks my ass again. “Answer me.”

“Twice. Two times.” My wrists pull at the tie over the hook, desperate to touch something.

“You think you deserve a third?” he asks, his fingers brushing the hem of my panties. “You’re nothing but a selfish, greedy little brat who always gets what he wants, right?”

“Yes,” I agree. “Give it to me. Please, Blake. I can beg now.” Because I am a greedy brat and I *do* always manipulate my way into getting whatever I want when it comes to my dick. If begging will get me there tonight, I’ll beg on my knees.

“You got cum on your pants after I told you not to,” he says with the voice of the devil. “That doesn’t earn you a third orgasm, now does it?”

I stick my ass out, hoping to entice him. “No. I’m such a bad boy. Are you going to spank me?”

*Crack!* His palm stings even through the satin. I cry out blissfully, apparently very into pain with my pleasure now.

“You tried to make me jealous with the firefighters, didn’t you?”

Oh god. “Yes.” *Crack!* “Fuck, yes. I tried to make you jealous.”

“Maybe I should go back out there and find Dee to make you jealous.”

Anger overcomes me. Maybe fear. Maybe insecurity because he picked her over me once before. My cheeks heat in either shame or fury, and I spin so hard, twisting the tie another notch around my wrists until my back hits the wall and my pissed off gaze hits his curious one.

“Oh?” Blake mocks. “That’s what did it? A little competition to really bring out the brat in you?” He grips my chin. “Are you jealous, little demon?”

Deep down, I know he doesn’t want her. I know this is a way to get a rise out of me, and fuck me, it’s working. Insecurities are coming to the forefront and that part of my brain that tells me I’m a worthless, forgotten, pathetic little boy, confined to his room and silenced by demand, is taking over my steely attitude. I want the brat to win, but the pitiful boy in me is taking over.

“There he is,” Blake says while I start to panic. “There’s Ben. The boy who can’t cope with being ignored and forgotten. The timid, meek parts of you that win more than you want them to. How does it feel to have Ben back?”

My eyes blur with tears and my breathing can’t decide on fast or slow. Are we having a panic attack or not? My fight-or-flight mode is stuck in anticipation, waiting to see which way this will go. We’re on the verge of something, but I don’t know what and I don’t know what to prepare for. Why is my cock still hard?

“Answer me, Ben.”

“Don’t call me Ben!” I scream at him.

“Wasn’t so long ago you were telling me not to call you Mercer. Who are you? Ben or Mercer?” He leans down, right in my face, scaring me and empowering me. “Ben or Mercer?”

“Mercer!” I yell, and with the declaration of my name, my real name, those tears fall down my cheeks and an anguished cry of self-love that hurts so fucking badly comes straight from my chest. “Mercer.”

Blake unties my hands and the second they're free, my fingers slip into my mouth. I stand there like a pathetic fool, half panicked, half confident, unsure of what to expect next. From him or from me.

"If you're Mercer, why are you scared? Mercer doesn't get ignored. Mercer isn't hidden from the world. Mercer isn't a child." He steps back and I step forward, seeking comfort from him even though he's hurting me. "Mercer is mine. Mercer is yours. Mercer is fucking badass with all the strength in the world. He doesn't need to suck his fingers and hide from his family. My Mercer is the strongest person I know."

I want to take my fingers from my mouth but removing them feels like too much. The taste and sensation are the only things keeping me from spiralling. But maybe they aren't the only things. Maybe Blake is holding me up just by standing there, reminding me who I am and what I'm capable of. I'm crying, but I can still see. I'm scared, but I'm not useless. I'm overwhelmed, but I'm not buckling under the pressure.

"Who's winning? Ben or Mercer?" he asks.

A shaky breath breezes past my wet fingers. "I... I don't know yet." He asked how to dominate me without making me feel worthless. Well, I guess this is his lesson.

"Take the panties off, demon. Now."

My fingers leave my mouth, but the tears don't stop. I shimmy out of the satin and let it settle around my ankles. I whimper, needing him to touch me. Fill me. Take away the emotions too strong for me to handle. I step forward, reaching for him, but he steps back.

"Don't," I beg him, crying harder. "Don't ignore me."

"I'll never ignore you," he states. "Show yourself you can stand on your own two feet."

"I can't. I can't. Blake! I can't!" My fingers go back to my mouth and my knees ache when I crash onto them. I look up at him, needing him to pick me up, hold me close, fill me full of him so I can breathe again. "Don't leave me."

"I'll never leave you, baby. Get up. Stand up, Mercer. Don't let Ben win."

I'm itchy all over. I'm shaking without knowing the source. Agitated and alone, I don't know how to soothe myself, and my fingers aren't helping. I buckle forward instead of standing. On all fours, I stare at the carpeted floor wondering how the fuck this game turned into a healing

journey. Blake said he'd never hurt me, but he's hurting me right now. Maybe healing hurts and he knows it, and a man like Blake isn't afraid to make it hurt if it's going to help me later. Maybe this is therapy, better than anything I've ever had before because it's working.

Yeah, I'm on on the floor at his feet, but I'm not reaching for him anymore. I'm weak and pathetic, but I'm being weak and pathetic all on my own. No aids. No sex. No loss of consciousness. I'm still on my hands and knees, which means I haven't crumpled completely yet.

There's more Mercer than there is Ben.

"Stand up, Mercer."

My chest heaves and my back hurts. Naked and at a low point, I swallow my pride—maybe I swallow Ben—and look up at this man who sees me. There's no disgust or disappointment in his eyes. The blue of them is cool and calm, admiring my effort even if it landed me on the floor.

"Get to your knees," he says, giving me a task to do halfway to standing. "Just your knees."

My arms are jelly, but I push my hands into the carpet and struggle into an upright position. It's exhausting, but it's rewarding, and I think something like my ego gives me enough strength to look at him again. He nods at me, and I don't know what it means, but my mouth seeks his cock and he lets me.

I hold him in my mouth until my eyes stop crying, and then I start to suck him off. The taste of him settles my nerves and the feel of his smooth, hard skin builds me back up, reminding me I'm a greedy little cumslut who belongs to this man. This man who named me Mercer.

Blake's hand runs through my dark hair, and then he steps back. His dick pops out of my mouth and I'm not even surprised when I try to follow it. "Stand up as Mercer and I'll fuck you, baby."

Incentive. Strength. Trust, because I know his promise has merit. Blake will wait in this room with me even if it takes me three days to stand on my own, and no matter how tired, hungry, and drained he is, he'll fuck me because he told me he would. Blake has never lied to me.

When I lift my left foot and plant it on the floor, my chest cracks open with memories of being pushed down. All the times I cowered on the floor because my parents didn't want me to be seen. All the men I let degrade me because I thought it'd build a tolerance to disrespect and, sooner or later, I'd

stop letting it control me. All the pitying looks and sad eyes from my sisters, who wanted to help but never did.

It hurts.

When I press my hand on the carpet to push myself up, I whine, crying for the boy who gripped his blankets and hid in the dark, trying to figure out what everyone hated about him so much. As I push up, I'm reminded of all the times I've been pushed back down. That sudden rises have deadly falls. That words are nice even if they're lies, and sometimes, they only hurt later when you stop believing the lie.

"Blake, don't leave."

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

"I mean ever," I say, knowing it's psychotic. We barely know each other. "You'll break me."

"I won't break you, Mercer. Stand up and look at me."

With one more heave and a shuddering breath, I rise as Mercer Bentley and look at the man who reminded me who the fuck I am. Trembling all over, but not from panic, from pride, I meet his eyes and feel myself get stronger.

"You're going to ruin my life," Blake says with a smile on his face. "And make it fucking fun. You're going to be my brat when you want to be, my partner all the time, and my good little boy when you need to be reminded how fucking important you are. You know what I'm going to be for you?"

I shake my head, crying again. Desperate to know what he's going to be for me. Wondering if he's as psychotic as I am, falling this hard this soon.

"Everything. Yours. You fucking own me, Mercer. I'm not going anywhere."

My chest cracks wide open and my bleeding heart bleeds even more. This bleed is purifying, though. It's cleansing all the tainted blood and filling me back up with the blood Blake pumps through my veins. I can't cope with it all, so instead of crumbling to the floor again, I look him right in the eyes, not ashamed of crying in front of him, and ask for what I want.

"Fuck me." No begging.

Blake's lips are on mine in a second, and his fingers are probing my hole. "Oh, fuck, Mercer. You didn't?"

"I did."



“Such a brat.” He slowly works the small plug from my ass. “You’re prepped and ready for me, baby?”

“Always.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “Fuck me, Blake.”

Usually one to fine-tune the details, everything evades me. One second, Blake’s fingers are in my ass, and then the next, I’m crying out his name as he slams his cock inside me. My back hits that wallpaper and Blake’s mouth never leaves my skin. When his words of praise come, I almost cry again just because they feel so good.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, little demon,” he rasps against my neck, fucking me hard against the wall. “Tell me you’re proud of yourself. Say it.”

“I’m proud,” I admit honestly. “You make me stronger.”

“No,” he groans, wrapping a hand around my throat. “I remind you that you’re strong. Everything else is all you.”

“Blake,” I moan, already about to burst. “You told me you’d fuck me until I came on the wallpaper. Spin me around.”

Blake’s laugh is vile. “You think I’d waste your cum on wallpaper?” Oh my god, he’s perfect. “Cover me in cum, baby. I want to smell like you for the rest of the night.”

I clench up, rolling into physical and emotional satisfaction. My ass clamps down on Blake’s cock and his choked moan fills my mouth as he comes inside me. I slick the front of his body with cum, and the way he keeps rubbing us together spreads my mess. I love a mess, and I love our mess more than anything.

“Mercer,” he moans my name. “Fuck.”

I’m cooked. Done. Dead to the fucking world. Literally cannot hold myself up for one second longer. I ragdoll in his arms and the two of us fall to the floor. We stay there like that for a long time, just breathing and thinking and being close. It’s one of the best feelings of my whole life.

“Blake?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“Thanks for... seeing me.”

He smiles at me, still sweaty and exhausted. “I’ll never stop looking, Mercer.”

I blush like an asshole because holy shit, he’s a romantic murderer.

We take our time cleaning up, even though I don’t let him dote on me, but true to his word, he doesn’t really wash off that well. I’m smug as shit

as we leave that changing room, knowing he's got my cum on him for the rest of the night. Take that, Dee.

"I need to pee," I tell him as we pass the bathroom. "I'll meet you out there?"

Blake kisses my lips. "I'll be at the bar. This thing is winding down. Hurry up." He smacks my ass and I watch him enter the event room again.

Smiling like a dorky kid, I take a pee and enjoy the newfound strength in my appearance in the mirror. Whoever that guy is trying to break through my eyes, he's getting closer and closer every day.

I don't hate galas so much anymore.

I wash my hands and leave the bathroom, only to run right into my dad. Something happens in my chest, but I have armour now. It slides into place, reminding me I'm not ignored. That I'm worthy.

"Ben," Dad says. "I... I wanted to offer you a drink and my apologies." He holds out two glasses, both with a serving of scotch. "It's long overdue."

Hesitantly, I take the drink. "Is it?"

"This," he motions between us, "is long overdue."



I DON'T HATE much about Mercer, but I do hate that he doesn't enjoy aftercare. The little shit doesn't want me to coddle him, or make sure he isn't suffering an emotional drop from that turmoil he just lived through, and he doesn't want pampering. Maybe he'll come around the more he gets used to it, but for now, I let him go to the bathroom for a moment on his own, hoping he'll tell me if he needs anything else. Or at least, brat his way into getting whatever he needs from me. At least he's done that in the time I've known him.

He wanted to sleep in my bed? He stomped his feet in the hallway until I told him he could. He didn't want to be alone in the shower? He goaded me into staying. He's resourceful enough to get what he wants without having to outright ask for it, so I hope tonight is no different.

The event is winding down. My dad and Bronson are just getting ready to leave, but Olivia isn't with them. Brandt must already be gone because I don't see him anywhere, but the entire Palmerston family is still here. Olivia and Samantha are with Penny, chatting to a group of socialites, and Will is... Wait, where's Will?

"You've got a little something there," Dee says, setting her empty glass on the bar top. Yeah, a little something is definitely on my shirt, but fuck it. I don't care. "Not gonna lie, Blake. I never expected you to be bi."

I shrug, scanning the room for Will Palmerston. "Dabbled a bit. Settled here."

"Crash landed, more like," she laughs. "He's such a dick, but I like him. For you. I couldn't date him. He'd be dead inside a week."

I smile at that. I don't underestimate the patience and anger management it might take to handle Mercer. "Oh, I think you might be dead inside a week, too. He makes it fun. Too bad he doesn't have any friends."

Dee scoffs, knowing exactly what I'm saying. "Please! You think he and I can be friends without hating each other in an hour?"

"He told me to take it easy on you when you called him a slut. I think that speaks volumes." I smirk at her. "He'll probably bite you if he sees me talking to you, though."

"So whipped."

Mm. Not even going to deny that. "Have you seen Will Palmerston?"

"No, not in a while. I avoid him whenever I can."

Typically, so would I, but I don't trust him when Mercer isn't at my side. That thought makes me pause for a second. I'm not giving Mercer enough credit. He's strong, proficient, and learning to believe in himself, so he's more than capable of handling his asshole of a dad. Tonight has proved that. Not only did he stand his ground at the gala, but he did it as himself, not even once faking who he is. Mercer is capable of more than anyone has ever given him credit for, and I won't be yet another person to treat him like a child.

I pause for another second.

But on the other hand, he is my *precious little baby* and I will stop at nothing to ensure he is safe.

"I gotta go," I tell Dee. "Time to be the overprotective boyfriend he secretly wants but will never admit to. Text me if you see Will."

"Wait, is he in trouble?"

"Will?"

"Mercer."

I start walking in the direction of the bathrooms. "I don't know yet." But I won't risk not finding out.

Over the past five years, I have been trained to develop many skills. How to read a situation, how to identify the exit points of a room, and how to put together clues to develop a story as close to what really happened as possible. I learned how to read people, how to interpret their intentions, and how to predict their actions before they've acted on them. I was taught how to kill, how to protect, and how to get someone to safety without anyone knowing. I'm a honed and toned assassin, a bodyguard, and a very efficient spy. But more than anything, I learned to listen to the gut instinct ingrained

in me since birth. I became familiar with differentiating a gut feeling from fear. I know how to separate dread from actual instinct, and I'm capable of trusting my gut no matter my feelings on a situation.

Right now, my gut is telling me something is off. But I've also never been in a relationship before, and now I have a new protective impulse to separate from my gut instinct. I'm working through it, trying not to panic while I read the scene.

The bathroom is empty, apart from a tumbler with amber liquid in the bottom; smells like scotch. Mercer isn't inside, and he isn't in the hallway either. Poking my head back into the event room, I scan the room, looking for his dark hair and sexy suit, not seeing him after one sweep. I trust my eyes. He's not in there. If he was, my eyes would have found him immediately.

Olivia, Samantha, and Penny are still where I saw them last, but Will remains missing. Turning away from the event room, I enter the hall again. And run right into Will.

"Blake," he greets me with a smile, noticing the cum on my shirt. "We're just getting ready to head out. Are you and my son sticking around for a bit?"

His voice is steady, and his hands are damp from having just washed them. His smile is the fakest thing about him, but it's the barely there perspiration on his forehead that gives me pause. Will is an exceptional businessman, so he can hold a poker face with the best of them. His eyes won't shift, his voice won't waver, and his hands won't shake. But he's sweating, which hints at physical exertion that no one can hide.

"I was glad to see you brought him despite my protests. He's really thriving under your care," Will compliments me, and that's my first real red flag. This man, who hates the fact that I have his son living with me, wouldn't sink low enough to offer a compliment because, as much as he'd never admit it, Mercer's manipulative personality came from somewhere. Me having Mercer is a game to Will, and no matter how well he does, how much he changes, or how well behaved he seems in my company, Will won't ever admit to it because it is a direct insult to him. I'm accomplishing something he failed to even try, and businessmen are nothing but prideful and proud. Particularly Will Palmerston.

"Are you?" I push. "Never thought I'd see you glad to have your orders defied."

Will chuckles. “Well, Ben is the one area of my life I’ve done poorly with. I am man enough to admit that, and I’m grateful that you’ve taken him on as your... project.”

“I haven’t. He’s pretty fucking perfect just how he is.” My smile is feline. “Where is he?”

Will doesn’t give anything away. “I thought he was with you.” He pats my shoulder with another chuckle. “I’m sure he’ll pop up. Have a good night, Mr. Carter.”

I notice three things when Will passes me. One, he smells like whatever amber liquor is in that tumbler in the bathroom. Two, his phone has not stopped vibrating in his pocket since I ran into him. Three, he’s coming from the one and only exit at the far end of the hall. The distance between the bathroom and that exit is barely twenty steps, and if Mercer was going to be ambushed and taken, this would be the perfect place to do it.

Blake: I need you. Bathroom.

I shove my phone in my pocket and recheck the bathroom first. I sniff the glass and get the same whiff of expensive scotch. Nothing else. No chemical smell, no sediment in the bottom, no oily residue on the top. Doesn’t mean anything. The counter has drips and splashes from the tap, and the basket of towels is dwindled down to only a few. The room doesn’t smell like Mercer, but I know he was in here; I watched him walk through the door.

“Blake?”

I don’t turn to look at Aaron, but I see his blond head and navy-blue rimmed glasses in the mirror. He’s taller than me, but build-wise, we’re the same. I love my brothers with everything I have, but Aaron is the only person in the whole world I trust without question.

“I need you to track Mercer’s phone.” I check the powder room and the single toilet room. “Something’s happened.”

Aaron already has his phone out, plugging something into it from the pocket of his suit. I want to smile at how Mercer treated him when he unknowingly met him a few hours ago. It took him all of a minute to decide he liked the guy and wanted to be his true self, and after that, he was all snark and sass and full-on brat mode. Loved it, and honestly, it reinstated that feeling of rightness with Mercer.

“Says he’s still here,” Aaron shows me. “Heading to the front entrance.”

“Will has his phone then.” I push through the doors and run into Keira, Aaron’s wife. “I’m checking this exit. Will you check the front?”

Aaron nods, taking Keira with him. I run out the side door, seeing nothing except an empty side lane that leads to the back parking lot. No vehicles, no signs of Mercer, and no clues. I text my brother, telling him to check the security footage.

Panic wants to claw its way up my throat, but I swallow it down to remain productive. Wherever the fuck he is, I’ll find him. I don’t care who I have to burn to get there. Mercer is mine, and nothing is going to take him from me unless he wants to leave on his own.

I’ll find you, little demon.

Jogging around front, I’m just in time to see Will and his family climbing into the back of a vehicle. Their driver closes the door, and when I catch up to Aaron, I watch them drive away. I have no proof that Will did anything, but that gut instinct I trained to trust is telling me he is involved in this.

“Is the tracker moving away?” I ask Aaron.

“Yep.”

“Who did Will have contact with in the past few minutes?” I ask him.

“Your dad,” Keira tells me. “And Bronson. They talked for half a minute just before the car pulled up.”

“Blake, your dad was with Trevor Palmerston.” Aaron gives me a look. A look that says my world is about to be turned upside down. A look that hints at deception on the part of my own family. “It doesn’t mean anything, though.”

Trevor fucking Palmerston. Mercer’s older brother. The one who works at that facility.

“Blake!” I turn at the sound of my name, seeing Dee run towards me with Brandt behind her. “Brandt got footage of the side exit camera before it was wiped.” She hands me her phone.

I look at my brother before I watch it, trying to get a read on what the fuck is happening. Whatever is on this screen is going to either push me into a rage or break my fucking heart. He shakes his head at me, as if to say, we have no idea what the hell we’re stepping into.

On the screen of Dee’s phone, I watch an eight-second clip of Mercer, completely unconscious, being put into the back seat of a vehicle. Will is barely in the frame, but I catch sight of him talking to Trevor Palmerston.

A blanket of numbness calms my rage, reminding me that nothing other than a clear mind and a determined heart will help Mercer right now. It doesn't matter who took him. All that matters is tracking him, finding him, and getting him out of there alive. Everything else can come later. Mercer Bentley is my only priority.

Because I fucking love that little brat.



IT'S BACK to my training. Mercer is now a job. A rescue mission like all the others I've been trained for. Except this one has my heart racing and my mind dipping into gutters of hellish outcomes I can't handle. He's a job, but he's the most important job of my life. Because he's mine, and I barely got the chance to claim him.

Through the earpiece, Aaron's voice comes from his station at my apartment. "Will is still at home. Double-checked the camera feed to make sure it wasn't on a loop. It's not. He's there and so is the whole family."

"Trevor?" I ask, fastening all my gear and loading my weapons

"He's there, too. No signs of Mercer ever being there, but I'm trying to run that partial plate number. I've got an alert out if it shows up on any traffic cams."

It won't. Whoever took him is a professional, and it's already been three hours since he went into that bathroom. When I find Mercer and bring him back home to me, I'm never letting him forgo aftercare for a moment alone again. Never.

Will might be at home right now, but if he's planning something with Mercer, he'll lead me to him eventually. For now, I focus on option one.

Brandt signals that he's ready. Dressed in the same dark tactical gear as me, he secures the earpiece and talks to Aaron even though he has no idea who Aaron is in real life. "Get anything back on that tox screen?"

"Roofies," Aaron says. They tested the glass of scotch in the bathroom.

Which means after three hours, Mercer is probably still out or groggy, depending on the dosage. I hope he's out of it so he's not scared, but I also hope he's aware and able to fight back. I hate that this is the only place I know to look for him. I'm banking on Will assuming I don't know about the second facility at the back of the property, because if he thinks I know about



it, he wouldn't have brought Mercer here. And I don't know where else to look. I'm going off the fact that Trevor Palmerston was at the gala, and not much else.

"Let's go," Brandt says.

With Aaron monitoring the property, Brandt leads the way across the lawn. The second facility is a smaller building with none of the charm and fanciness of the main building. This one is a rectangular brick block with no personality, which means it's going to be hard to break into. Because it's unknown to the public, there don't seem to be any outside guards, and even the parking lot is underground. From the air, this place would look abandoned, which is exactly what it's listed as on the land registry site, according to Aaron. It used to be a military barracks until the land was purchased by Northern Horizons.

An internal moral debate isn't even on my mind tonight. When we find a back service door propped open so a man can smoke outside, I kill him without hesitation. Without knowing anything about him. Without caring. A single stab to the jugular, and a quick step back to avoid his blood spray. Brandt drags him by the feet until he's out of sight, and I kick dirt over the trail. Done. Entrance to the building: secured.

Guns raised, we enter a stairwell that doesn't go up, only straight onto this level or down to the next.

"How many sub-level floors?" I ask Aaron.

"Three," he says. "Very bottom used to contain holding cells for hostages when it was a military building. Might be easily renovated into secure patient rooms."

Sold. Brandt nods at me, and we descend the stairs to the very bottom level.

The stairwell echoes, but not near as loudly as my heartbeat in my ears. I tamp it down and steady my breathing, refusing to let emotions cloud my control. I know what I'm doing. I'm trained for this. Mercer is a job.

When we pass the second level, we pause to listen. Hearing nothing other than muffled voices, we keep descending. At the bottom floor, Brandt pauses by the door. He's three years older than me, which means he's three years out of training. He's just as capable as I am, if not more, and I trust his instinct. Once we emerge through that door, we'll be on a ticking clock. There are no cameras in the stairwell, but I'm ninety-nine percent certain there will be cameras on the patient floor. This will have to be a quick

sweep, and the worst part about it is that we don't have key cards, codes, or any way to open each room if there are no windows in the doors.

"Hostage?" I ask Brandt.

"Probably our best bet," he agrees.

We wait by the doors, listening for movement, people, or sounds. Other than random banging, the hum of the electricity, and something being wheeled down the hall, we don't hear anything telling. Until a woman's voice has us alert. She's coming down the hall, pushing something like a cart, and either singing or talking to someone. If she's alone, this will be easier, but if she's not, we're ready.

Brandt puts his hand on the doorknob, and when her cart passes by, he opens the door. She's smaller than me, Mercer's size, so I clamp one hand over her mouth and wrap the other around her upper body, pulling her to my chest. She screams against my gloves, but I muffle the sounds, waiting for Brandt to clear the area. He taps my shoulder, and we pull the woman into the stairwell.

"Key card?" Brandt asks her, keeping one eye through the cracked door to the hall.

She can't speak, so I loosen my hand, ready to suffocate her if she screams. "Lanyard," she says. "It's on my lanyard."

Brandt breaks it off her neck. "It'll get us into all the doors?"

"Yes. I just deliver midnight medications. Please, don't hurt me."

I zip-tie her wrists behind her back, check all her pockets, and tape her mouth. "Do you know if Mercer Palmerston is here? Ben Palmerston?"

She shakes her head, crying now.

"Has Will Palmerston or Trevor Palmerston been here tonight?"

She shakes her head again.

I tape her ankles together so she can't run, and after making sure she isn't in possession of a panic button or a phone, we leave her in the stairwell.

"Make this quick," Brandt says.

We settle into a rhythm of checking and securing each room. Most of them have young, sleeping patients in them, and when we check their faces, they're either too drugged or too slow to react to us. The rooms are padded and white, with bright fluorescent lights just like Mercer told me. After checking all twenty rooms on this floor, we head to the second floor. Three

nurses and a doctor end up tied in the stairwell, none of them knowing if Mercer is here.

“He knows,” I say to Brandt. “Will knows we know about this place. Mercer isn’t here.”

Just to be sure, we check every floor, every room, and every closet. On the way out, my nerves are shot and my breathing is shaky. I grab the doctor from the stairwell and bring him outside.

Brandt keeps an eye out, knowing there will be security coming any minute now. “Are there other facilities like this one?”

“No! This is the only one.” The doctor trembles, not so tough to be doing illegal work now that he’s held at gunpoint.

“Where would Will Palmerston take his son if he isn’t here?”

“Trevor? He works out of a recruiting centre downtown sometimes.”

Interesting. “Mercer. Ben.”

“Oh. I, uh, I don’t know. Please! I don’t know.”

“But your main job is to brainwash young adults and kids?”

“It’s for their own good!”

Bullshit. A silenced bullet goes through his right eye, and I’m walking across the lawn before his body even hits the dirt.

“Wanna check the recruiting centre?” Brandt asks.

“Aaron, can you look into it? Find out where it might be.”

“On it.”

I’m not one to panic. I handle high-stress situations with a clear, calm mind. A job is a job until it’s complete, and nothing so far has been strong enough to sway me from my path. Fear doesn’t overtake me even though I feel it, but tonight, it might win.

Where the fuck are you, Mercer?

“A building on Sycamore is owned by the Palmerston family,” Aaron says. “Registered as a sub-corp to Northern Horizons. Might be it. No pings on the radar with that partial plate in that area tonight, though.”

“Security cameras?” Brandt asks as we reach the vehicle.

“Looking.”

He drives and I climb into the passenger seat, checking my phone for anything from Bronson or my dad. Nothing. Dad is looking into other buildings Will owns, and Bronson is supposed to be at the Palmerston house with Olivia.

On a whim, I text Mercer’s phone.

Blake: I'm on my way, baby.

If Will has it, I hope he sees it, and I hope he fucking sweats.



I HATE that my fingers are in my mouth. I hate it even more that my dad sees it. No matter how hard I try, I can't pull them out, though.

My mind belongs to me, but it isn't my own. Weird questions and memories are fleeting by too fast for me to come up with answers to them. Like why Blake's apartment is music themed, but I've never seen him play an instrument, or if Dee's open invitation to hang out was a taunt or a genuine offer. But mostly, I'm just wondering if I really was a job to Blake Carter. Was this the end goal? Help me, earn my trust, break down my walls, and then send me back to my dad so his psychotherapy finally works?

I suck on my fingers and blink through the grogginess of my mind. I'm aware but not alert, and I'm scared without being able to do anything about it. My legs don't want to move and my panic attack can't fully come because my body is too lazy to let it.

Through blurred vision, I squint one eye to look around. It's a familiar room, somewhere I've spent a lot of time, but it's also different this time. My dad is here, and I don't think I've ever seen him here before.

"Baby," Dad says, looking at a phone. "He calls you baby. Suits you, since you're sucking your fucking thumb like one."

I force myself to pull my fingers from my mouth. Is that my phone? Did Blake text me?

"I admire your persistence and your ability to bounce back," Dad says. "It's just coming at the wrong time, Ben."

*Mercer.*

“I’ve had plans in place for a very long time, and you being with the youngest Carter boy isn’t good for those plans. I admit, you’ve been dealt a terrible hand in life. This mess started long before you were born, and I *am* sorry you got caught in the crossfire, but I can’t have you earning a backbone right now.”

“Why?” My voice isn’t powerful, reminding me how useless and weak I am. “What do I have to do with any of it?”

Dad smiles at my phone and then puts it into his jacket pocket. He looks at me for the first time, really scrutinizing my appearance. I’m still wearing the suit from the gala, but it’s rumpled and damp, and ruining the couch I’ve been placed on. This living room sits in a cabin, one I’ve been kept at many times before, guarded and secure while my family does something important they don’t want me fucking up. Wonder what it is this time?

Through the haze of the drugs, I’m terrified. More terrified than I’ve ever been before because this is the first time I’ve ever stood up to my dad. I put on a show tonight, blending into his world to goad him, and look how it turned out. I asked for this. I egged it on and brought my own fate just by being... myself. A brat. A hoodlum. A man learning to own his confidence. But Blake isn’t here to save me from fate this time, and despite my progress lately, I don’t know if I have what it takes to save myself.

I’m nobody. I’m Ben.

“You have to do with all of it,” Dad says, giving me his full attention, maybe for the first time in my life. I hate how much I like it. “Because of who you actually are.”

It’s a struggle, but I push myself into a half-sitting, mostly slouching position, like it’s going to help me hear better. Like turning the music down in the car to read the road signs better. It’s useless, but it makes me feel like I’m doing something to stay alert, and I can already tell that whatever he’s going to say will hurt. Whatever meagre bits of armour I have left are sliding into place, but I’m on my own for this one. No Blake. No one to call for help. No one to act out to. Just me, a lonely boy, in a room alone with my father for the first time.

There’s a part of me that feels important, too. Maybe it’s because my dad is going to tell me something truthful for once, or maybe it’s because something I’ve done has caused him to actually worry. Not about me, but about whatever plan he has. I’m not just degrading the Palmerston name

anymore, I'm actually worthy of being a threat. Just like Blake told me to be.

I pull the sleeve of my shirt down over my fingers, balling the fabric up as much as I can instead of sucking my fingers. "Who I am?"

"You're a smart guy, Ben. Too smart for your own good sometimes," Dad says, the chair groaning as he leans back and crosses his legs. "You saw something you shouldn't have when you were a kid. Something that put a few too many pieces of the puzzle together in your mind, and you figured it out. Do you remember?"

Remember what? Saw something I shouldn't have? Something traumatic? I comb through my mind, trying to recall anything he could be talking about, but my childhood is the same monotonous week over and over again until I got sent to the facility for the first time.

"You were ten." Dad laughs like it's funny. "A damn ten-year-old kid almost ruined everything. Do you remember the woman? The one who came to the house to talk to you about the centre Trevor worked at?"

It was so long ago, I barely remember being ten. All I remember about the night he's referring to is a lady with dark hair and red lips, telling me they were going to fix my brain. I can remember the numbers on her licence plate as we walked to the car, the pattern of her necklace, and the number of times her heels clacked against the pavement while she walked ahead of me. Her facial features evade me, and anything she might have said is gone.

"Who was she?"

"She was the woman who helped me buy that place. She took Trevor under her wing and taught him to do what she did. Which was to help young adults find their way to the centre."

"To be mind controlled."

Dad smiles again. It's his charming business smile, and I've never actually seen it directed at me before. It's... nice. Looks good on him. "Business is business, Ben."

*Mercer.*

"Why'd you send me there? What'd I do? I was just a kid."

"A smart kid. A kid who learned the truth somehow, and to this day, I have no idea how you did it."

"What fucking truth? I don't know anything!" My throat burns with the force of my honesty. "I have no idea what you're talking about." I cough, bringing my fingers to my mouth.

“Because we washed it from your memory.” Dad stares at my fingers, so I remove them and fuck with the sleeves again. “Ben, you are the one and only thing standing in the way of everything I’ve ever wanted. Everything I’ve ever worked for. And I’ve put in too much effort and too much time to let you get in my way now.”

“I’m not in your way! I... just let me go. I’ll change my name and leave the family for good. No one wants me anyway.”

“The Carter boy does,” Dad says.

“Dad, please.” I push myself up, not sure what I’m begging for, but getting the feeling my life isn’t guaranteed for much longer. My skin itches and my throat burns, panic rearing its head. “Dad.”

“*Dad*,” he echoes with a huff. “Do you even realize you’re nineteen years younger than Trevor? Twelve years younger than your sisters?”

An uneasy feeling churns in my stomach, and my eyes take in the pattern of the wood panelling on the walls. The hand clock ticks every second, showing 3:59. Then 4:00.

I’ve never been wanted. I’ve never been a part of the family. I’ve been hidden and kept a secret. My name changed to Ben and stayed Ben until Blake found me. “I’m... not yours.” I chew my fingers, biting my nails until they bleed and sucking the blood away to give me something to taste. To smell. To do.

“Not my son,” Dad—Will—says. “My nephew.”

I look at him, ripping my eyes from my pants to search for something real in his eyes. Not his son, but still family. But he still treated me like I was nothing. Like I *am* nothing.

But I’m not nothing, because memories from that night of the lady with the red lipstick came to get me start blurring through my mind like he just unlocked them.

My name. My real name, on a birth certificate with two different parents. The numbers and dates of my birth, and the dates of my parents’ deaths. A final will and testament with my name mentioned in it, and the age eighteen. I figured it out once before, and Will sent me to that place to forget.

“You needed me to turn eighteen for something.”

“Your mother was my sister. Cheryl. Our father’s favourite. Her and her husband, your birth father and the man whose name we refused to call you,



got something I wanted in the will. When they died, they had it set up to go to you when you turned eighteen.”

My mind clears and the answers spell themselves out for me. “You killed them.”

Will sighs, lost in memory. “Tried to kill you, too. You were barely born, but you were in the way, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? For killing your sister and her husband, and attempting to kill a baby?” That unease in my gut worsens and toughens, preparing for where this night ends.

“I don’t take joy in what happened to them, Ben.”

*Mercer!*

“And I don’t have the stomach to harm a child, but...”

“But you’d hire someone to do it.” I laugh, knowing where this is going. “You hired the Carters, didn’t you?”

“Not exactly.” Will rubs his temples. “Not Brendan Carter. His wife.”

The woman with dark hair and red lipstick. Blake’s mom. She was the one who came to get me that night, taking me to the centre for the very first time. “But I was already ten by that point.”

“Yeah, things didn’t go according to plan when you were still an infant. Brendan found his wife with you. He had no idea who you were or where she got you, but he caught her trying to smother a baby. He saved you and committed his wife to that facility for having a manic episode. After that, we worked together to keep you alive but unaware until you turned eighteen. We found the stipulations in your mother’s will, but by the time you turned eighteen, someone had already taken what was rightfully yours. What should have been mine.”

I tilt my head at this man who tried to kill me as a child, tortured me through adolescence, neglected me and abandoned me, and never even cared about me because I was nothing more than a safeguard to a safety deposit box to him.

“What was it?” I ask, my interest in this dwindling by the second. My moments are numbered now. There’s no longer any reason to keep me alive. “I’m twenty-three. Why am I still alive if my eighteenth birthday didn’t get you what you wanted?”

“If you’d have just stayed out of my way, none of this would have had to happen.” He nods at the door to the porch, and a man in black with a gun in his hand walks inside. My grim reaper, come to claim me after far too

much life has been lost and lived. I should have died twenty-three years ago. I should have died at eighteen. I'm young, but I'm past my second—maybe third—expiry date, and tonight, it has come.

Death chills me. I can't even call it fear. Just the ticking clock of fate, run down to the final minutes.

My rise to confidence ends. My games with Blake, gone. My lessons in love are over. That person crawling to my surface, battling his way into my eyes, no longer gets to fight for us. We hit our limit, and as the tears calmly slip down my cheeks, I remind myself that I am worth something. My life might have been pointless, but Blake saw me. He sees me. He understands and respects me, and the few weeks I've spent with him have been enough to settle my breathing, pull my fingers away from my mouth, and meet the barrel of that gun with readiness in my heart.

Blake helped me live, and I'll greet death grateful that I got him in any small capacity. I got to be his little demon.

"I am sorry for this, Ben." Will glances back at me before leaving the cabin like a coward.

Eyes strained but voice strong, I finally correct him. "Mercer."



I WATCH a hitman walk into the cabin, and I see Will Palmerston walk out a few seconds later. The rage inside me wants to kill him, but the heart in my chest knows Mercer is my priority. The heart in my chest *makes* Mercer my priority. Nothing is worth it if he doesn't make it through this.

I don't know the hitman, which means I don't know his execution style. If he's a *walk-in-and-take-the-shot* type, I merely have seconds.

"Go, Blake," Aaron says in my ear. "Now."

There's no one else on the property, and Will's back is to me. Ideally, I'd like him to think his hit worked and Mercer is dead, but if he sees me, none of that will be possible. I don't care.

I sprint to the front porch, not making a sound. My breathing slows, and I refuse to let my heart stutter. On soft feet, I climb the three steps and grip the knob. I pray for silent hinges, but I don't get that. The door squeaks as I open it, and I only have a second to make a decision. Closing it so Will doesn't suspect anything, I take in the scene in a single heartbeat.

Mercer, eyes pointed straight at the barrel of the gun, head held high, tears on his smooth cheeks, ready to die. Over my dead fucking body. The man looks behind him at the same time Mercer notices me. His eyes widen and cry harder, but my eyes take in the vest on the hitman. Bulletproof. I can't shoot him anywhere but the head to ensure he doesn't kill Mercer.

The man whips the gun back in Mercer's direction, and when his finger feathers the trigger, I make a split-second decision to shoot his hand.

My life, and Mercer's, flashes before my eyes. In this fragment of time, grid-locked into an instance where one or all of us dies, I know with absolute certainty that I'm in love with Mercer Bentley. The clarity of it is

astounding, like the fog has lifted and revealed everything true to me. The difficult yet thrilling path life with Mercer will take me on. The comfort he'll seek from me and the strength he'll find all on his own. His lingerie and his hoodlum look, and the way he cuddles me while telling me how much he hates it. The way our lives are going to mesh together like oil and water but the determination to make them fit will be stronger than any chemical reaction. Mercer is mine and I'm his, and he is not fucking dying tonight.

A second gun appears in the hitman's hand, aimed at me.

My bullet pierces the man's palm, and the second one blows off his trigger finger. As I dodge the bullet coming my way, I rip a dagger from my belt. While the gun drops and Mercer blinks, reacting late to the gunshot, I scream his name.

"Mercer! Catch!"

He looks in my direction, but not at me. At the single dagger soaring through the air. His feet push into the floor as he stands, and the hilt of the dagger hits his palm. Tonight, Mercer doesn't hesitate. Tonight, Mercer stands on his own two feet as himself, the guy with knife skills and worth.

I aim for the man's head, but Mercer beats me to it. No sooner than the hilt hits his palm does he flip it around and expertly fling it at the hitman. It pierces the man's eyes, and when he screams, Mercer keeps going. He yanks it free and jams it right into the guy's windpipe, cutting off his scream. Not a breath later, my third bullet, silenced, pierces his skull and he drops to the ground at Mercer's bloody feet.

My breathing fills my ears, but the tick tock of the clock drums loudly. Standing still, holding my breath, we wait. Wait to see if Will is going to check that he is dead after hearing gunshots. Wait to see if another attack is coming. I stare straight into his amber eyes, filling him with strength he doesn't even need because he already has his own. Mercer stares back, showing me how scared he is, but showing me how much he trusts and loves me, too. His chest rises and falls, but the longer we stand here listening, the harsher his breathing gets.

The sound of Will's vehicle leaving greets my ears a moment later, and the body of the hitman vibrates. Mercer, covered in blood, reaches into the man's jacket pocket and pulls his phone out.

"It's... he's asking if the job is done." His eyes water, reality and his near-death experience settling into his bones. His soul. As a contract killer, I

know how to confirm a death. Will wants photo proof.

“Hey, baby.” I smile at Mercer, stepping over the dead body to get to him.

At the sound of my voice and the pet name, it gives Mercer’s mind permission to shut the fuck down. “Blake,” he whimpers, barely holding onto himself. “Blake.”

I catch him as he falls, lowering with him. “I’m right here. I got you.” I cradle him, promising myself I’ll never let him go again. “You did fucking good, little demon.”

His fingers lift, aiming for his mouth, but I tug them to a stop.

“They’re bloody, baby. I need you to do one more thing for me, okay?” I stroke my fingers through his dark hair and try to keep him as calm as possible. “And then we’re getting the fuck out of here.”

He grips the material of my jacket hard, not wanting to let go. He waits, staring with his big, scared eyes, listening for what I need him to do.

“I gotta put you down in all this blood, Mercer. We have to send a photo to your dad to prove you’re dead. Just for now, okay? It buys us time.”

“Blake.”

“If we don’t do it, he’ll turn around and come check. We have to hurry, okay?” I wait for him to nod, even though there’s none of him behind it. He’s just doing what I tell him to do, and for now, I’ll have to accept that.

I put him down on his back, the blood pooling all around him from the hitman. He cries, but he doesn’t move. I turn his head to the side, make sure there’s a pool of blood behind it, and I even put more blood in his hair. I take the phone from his grip and hate this. Everything about it. Everything about the way he looks dead is building something unhinged and lethal inside me. My breath shakes out of me, staccato and scared.

“Say something to remind me you’re alive.” I open the camera app.

“He’s not my dad,” Mercer says.

“What? Close your eyes, baby.”

He closes them and I snap the photo, pulling him up faster than I set him down. I send it to Will and then delete it from the camera roll. Delete it from the trash bin, too.

“I really wanna go home now, Blake. Please.” He shakes in my arms. “Please.”

“Where’s home, Mercer? Tell me where you feel safe.”

“With you.”

A text comes through the phone. *Clean it up. I want him missing, not dead.*

If this story doesn't end with me killing Will Palmerston, I will flip my shit. Actually, if this story doesn't end with Mercer taking his fucking power back and knocking his father down to the gutters where he belongs *before* I kill him, I will flip my shit even more. My mission in life just became Mercer's redemption, and I will stop at nothing to help him get it.

Hauling Mercer into my arms, letting him shake in the comfort of my safety, I glance around the cabin to make sure nothing leads Will to believe Mercer is still alive or that I was ever here. I'll call my dad to order a cleanup as soon as I get him in the vehicle. I snap a photo of the hitman first, just to get an ID on him later.

"How'd you find me?" Mercer asks, voice brittle but still there.

"I texted your phone and your dad was stupid enough to turn it on." I jostle him a bit so I can carry him with only one arm. "No matter what it took, Mercer, I would have found you." I'm just lucky I found him in time. "Ready?"

He nods, and then his arms wrap around my neck when I start walking. I turn off all the lights, close the door behind me, and head into the woods. We've got a bit of a walk, but it'll give my heart time to calm down.

I almost lost him.

I almost fucking lost him.

Rage bubbles up unexpectedly. Rage will get me nowhere, so I tamp it down and focus on walking through the forest in the dark. A job is a job, like I said before, and this job won't be over until Mercer is safely back in my home, clean of all this blood and being a brat again. I thought about taking him to my studio apartment so he isn't seen by anyone for a few days, but it'll look suspicious to Will if I'm not where he thinks I should be. On the other hand, if I go to the studio apartment and essentially go missing for a bit, it'll make Will sweat. He'll assume I'm looking for Mercer, and he now knows I'll stop at nothing to find him.

I tap the earpiece in my ear and say, "Dad?"

"Here."

"I've got him. Will needs to think he was executed. Where should I go?"

"Did you recognize the hitman?"

"No."

“Then come here. We’ll hide Mercer, and having all of us together will make it look like we’re searching for him.”

I look down at the boy in my arms, thankful he’s breathing even though he’s hurting. “Will you come to my dad’s with me for a few days?” I ask him. “While we come up with a plan.”

“You’ll be there?”

“Yes. I won’t leave you.”

Mercer nods, and I convey the message to my dad. “I need a cleanup crew at the cabin. No DNA.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Dad says.

I have too much to think about. Like how Will fooled Aaron with the live feed of their house, and who else he was working with at the gala to get Mercer out of there. And what the fuck Trevor Palmerston has to do with any of it.

The forest is mostly silent, other than insects and rustling leaves, but the loudest sound of all is probably my heart. I’ve never reacted to a job like this before, and even though I have him back in my arms, I can’t shake the fear. Its claws are in me, reminding me how close I came to losing him forever—proving how much he’s come to mean to me. How? How did that even happen? How did I fall for Mercer so quickly, and what the hell was I thinking? It’s no wonder people with my lifestyle marry only for convenience. They say love gives you a weakness, and I learned that lesson tonight, but no part of me wants to pull away from him when he needs me. When I need him. How am I supposed to manage everything all at once?

Mercer intrigued me with lacy lingerie and a smoking grilled cheese sandwich, and now I’m a fucking goner.

“Aaron?” I say after clicking into his channel.

“I heard,” he answers because I gave him access to the channel with my dad. “What do you want me to do?”

“I need to know what Will and Trevor are doing at all times.”

“On it. Patch me into the phone you took from the hitman, and I’ll monitor it, too.”

“Are you still at my apartment?”

“Yeah. We’re leaving, though.”

Smart. Mercer’s dad will be monitoring it now to keep tabs on me, so if Aaron and Keira want to keep their identity hidden, they have to go.

“You’re welcome at my dad’s place. Both of you. They’ll find out who you are, but...”

Aaron laughs. “You act like this is the first time we’ve been in this situation.”

True, but it’s different this time because... I’m in love with the client. This isn’t a random job from a random client. This is my family. It’s personal. It’s a betrayal and the start of a war with no certain ending. This is a battle for love and life, and I’m not the only subject involved. I can’t act on instinct with the Palmerston family because my instinct is to kill them all for what they’ve done to Mercer, morals aside. But Mercer might have a difference of opinion, and I’ll—begrudgingly—have to respect it.

“Just keep in touch and watch your back. Thanks. For everything.”

Aaron says goodbye right as I get to the truck I parked at the edge of the forest. We’re only an hour from the city, but that’s a whole hour Mercer will have to sit on his own, soaked in blood, trembling from shock after the night he’s had. The whole damn day, really. A fireman’s breakfast, a sexy outfit, the Sean Pendleton murder, the gala, the emotional healing and sex in the changing room, and now this? He looked that gun in the eye and greeted the whisper of death, then he stabbed someone twice, and fuck, he’s gotta be exhausted.

“You okay to sit over here on your own while I drive?” I set him on the passenger seat, but he doesn’t let go of my neck. “Mercer, look at me.” I tilt his chin.

He’s not crying. He’s not trembling anymore, either. He’s simply... blank. He isn’t even trying to put his fingers in his mouth. His amber eyes blink at me a few times, but there’s nothing in them except questions I don’t have answers to and pain from everything he’s been through tonight. I don’t know what happened between the gala and here, but I won’t ask until we’re somewhere I can keep him safe.

“Do you trust me?”

He blinks.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, do you hear me? I’ve got you. You’re safe, Mercer.” I cup his cheeks and bend down to be at eye level with him. “We just need to get to my dad’s house.”

Mercer shakes his head, his lower lip starting to tremble. “Blake.” His voice is begging, but it’s more scared than anything. Whatever he learned



tonight, he thinks it's going to change my view of him. I don't know what it is, but that will never happen. Never.



I'VE NEVER LIVED in this house before, but my dad has a bedroom set up for me. He takes one look at Mercer, covered in blood, clinging to me like I'm the only thing keeping him alive, and nods respectfully. Falling for the youngest Palmerston probably wasn't a part of my dad's plan, but he's smart to accept it without commenting. I love my dad, but he won't sway me away from Mercer, even if there is some diabolical plan to ruin the Palmerstons. I'll just make Mercer *not* a Palmerston.

Dad leaves soon after to make sure the cleanup goes to plan, calling Brandt and Bronson on his way out. I want to touch base with all of them, but they aren't my priority right now.

Mercer doesn't protest when I set him on the tiled floor of the bathroom, and he doesn't make a sound as I strip him of his bloody clothing and throw it all in a garbage bag. I fucking loved that suit, so I'll make sure he gets another one just like it. He does, however, protest when I try to put him in the shower.

"No," he whines, clutching my jacket.

"I'm just undressing, baby. One second."

Naked, I wrap my arms around him and step us both into the shower. The water burns on first contact, but Mercer doesn't even flinch. He stands there with his hand constantly on me, shifting with my movements as I wash him, afraid that if he lets go, I might disappear. I scrub under his nails, in every dip and crevice of his body, and triple wash his hair, more for my benefit than his. When I saw him covered in blood with closed eyes for that photo, it shook me. Dead bodies are nothing to me, but this one... it's mine. Mine to love. Mine to protect. Mine to own. And I never want to see it dead again.

Mercer trails me with a towel around his shoulders, his hands still clinging to the one around my waist as I sift through a closet of Brandt's things, looking for something to wear.

"You okay, little demon?" I ask him, sliding sweatpants up his legs.

He holds my shoulders, watching my hands work. "I don't know."

“Wanna talk about it?” I tug a hoodie over his head and help him slip his arms through.

He shakes his head, chest heaving.

“Mercer, whatever happened, whatever you learned, or whatever he said, it won’t make me run. I promise. I’m here, okay? I’m not going anywhere.” I grip his chin and kiss his lips. “Do you hear me?”

“How’d your mom die?” he asks timidly, looking anywhere but my eyes.

“My mom?” I tilt my head, wondering why this is what he asks, of all things. “Uh, she died because she betrayed our family. I don’t really know the details of it. Why?” I stand straight to get dressed in my own hoodie and sweats.

“I think—I think it was because of me.” Mercer looks at me. “I met her. I didn’t know who she was at the time, but I met her when I was a kid.”

What the fuck? “You’re sure?”

Mercer shrugs, so I grab his wrist and drag him to the kitchen because the boy needs to drink something or eat something, despite the hour. I leave him there for all of three seconds, grabbing a family photo from the living room. It’s old, I was only a teen in it, but my mom is there.

“Is this the woman you met?” I ask Mercer, handing him the photo.

He takes it, studying it while his memory works to recall her. I don’t doubt him, and I trust his memory more than anyone else’s, but I can’t for the life of me figure out how my mom relates to him as a child.

“That’s her,” he says, flipping the photo over and setting it face down on the island. “I met her when I was ten, but she knew me as a baby.”

I slide him a can of Pepsi and a bag of chips, sitting down with him. “You can tell me if you want.”

“Do you love her?”

“I did. I mean, she was my mom, but to be honest, I never really knew her that well. She wasn’t healthy, and she spent a lot of time at some hospital.”

Mercer nods like he already knows this. “Yeah, at Northern Horizons, where she met my dad. Well, not my dad.”

“Mercer?”

“Will Palmerston is actually my uncle, I guess.”

I open the can for him and dump a few chips on the counter so he can snack slowly. “I’m listening, baby.”

He crosses his legs on the stool, turns it to face me, and sips the pop. “Will Palmerston killed my parents, his sister and her husband. Cheryl Palmerston, and my dad, Mercer.”

No fucking wonder Will never wanted him to have the name. It’d lead right back to his dead parents, and he couldn’t have that.

He chews a chip, getting a little more life into him. “My grandfather apparently left most of the family money to Cheryl, or at least, something Will wanted, so he killed them because it was supposed to revert to him in the event of their deaths. Instead, it went to their kid. Me.” He spins his stool to face away from me. “And I don’t know how it happened, but your mom was already in my dad’s pocket when I was a baby, and she tried to kill me.”

I spin him back around. “Don’t hide from me, Mercer.” As shocked as I am about all of this, I want him to know I won’t disregard anything he says.

“I’m trying not to taint your image of your mom,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I smile at him. “If my mom tried to kill a baby, I’d rather my image of her be tainted. She failed?” I mean, obviously.

“Obviously,” Mercer scoffs, taking another sip. There’s my boy. “I don’t know how or why she failed, though.”

“I do.”

We both spin on our stools, seeing my dad and brothers walk in. Their clothing is different from when they left, so I know they took care of the cabin.

“I’m sorry for the night you’ve had, Mercer,” Dad says to him, setting some take-out bags on the counter.

“It wasn’t all bad,” Mercer says with a shy little grin just for me.

“You knew she tried to kill Mercer as an infant?” I ask my dad, opening the bags and shoving a bunch of food in front of my little demon.

“I knew she tried to kill a baby, yes.” He stands on the opposite side of the island while Bronson stands with him, and Brandt takes a seat beside Mercer. “I didn’t know it was you, though. Not then. The police took you away, and I stayed focused on my wife. Something was seriously wrong with her, and at the time, I honestly thought she was just mentally ill.”

Are we finally going to get the true story about what happened to our mom? I look at my brothers, seeing their rapt attention on our dad. We’ve been waiting for this truth for a long, long time.

“That place made her ill,” Mercer offers.

“It’d be easier to think that,” Dad says, smiling at Mercer. “But the truth is that she wasn’t the woman I thought she was. She had another agenda, and unfortunately, it had everything to do with Will Palmerston. They were after the Palmerston fortune together, and I didn’t learn that until... later.”

“She took me there when I was ten,” Mercer says. “Came to my house, talked to my parents, and then talked to me about a place that would make me feel better. At the time, I was pretty down on myself because no one loved me, and she convinced me it was a problem with me instead of my family. I went with her.”

If my mom was alive, I’d murder her all over again. I look at my dad, finally understanding why he did what he did. Mom was a terrible person, and even though we’re also terrible people, she fucked over family, and no one fucks over our family.

“I’m sorry,” Dad says to Mercer. “My wife wasn’t a good person, and I’m sorry for what she did to you.”

Mercer almost puts his fingers in his mouth, but he eats a fry instead. “Thank you.”

“So, you fucking knew about this?” Bronson snaps. “And you’re making me marry one of them?”

Dad sighs, rubbing his temples. “I’ve had a plan in place since Mercer turned seventeen. My son falling for him wasn’t a part of that plan, but I think it’s time to fill everyone in.”

Fucking finally.



AFTER THE DAY I've had, I don't even feel guilty about stealing a second cheeseburger from the bag. Near-death experiences and shock impact my appetite, and Blake is shoving food and drinks at me like they're the only things keeping me going, so I'm indulging. Eating gives me something else to focus on, so that's a bonus.

Still, I latch onto Blake's shirt when he tries to leave me. We're moving to the living room to be more comfortable, and Blake is carrying all the food. I hate needing him so much, and I can't fully recall when he became my safety zone, but my world might literally end if he moves too far away from me.

"Take this," he says, shoving paper bags at me. I hold them, and a second later, I realize why. It's so Blake can touch me, steering me to the couch with all my snacks.

He sits us down together, letting me snuggle in close enough to probably annoy the shit out of him with my munching. Blake hands me a to-go cup of soda, but before I even take a drink of it, Brandt holds up a bottle of rum as an offering. I pop the top and let him fill it up, needing the booze to settle me down enough to process without going into an episode.

Holy shit. I haven't had a panic attack. How? How have I not? Am I too shocked to panic?

"Does rum go well with roofies?" I ask, just to be a little shit.

Brandt laughs, but Blake doesn't. He gets grumpier.

"Get on with it, Dad," Blake says. "Mercer needs to sleep."

"I'm not a fucking baby," I snip at him. He grins, and his family snickers. "I can leave if you want to have this as a family thing." Except I

can't leave because I'm glued to Blake and unwilling to let him detach himself from me.

Blake starts to scold me for offering to leave, but Brendan cuts him off. "You are family, Mercer. And this has just as much to do with you as it does us."

Am I goddamn blushing? I pull my hood up to hide my face, grateful Blake put me in my hoodlum look for the night. I mumble a thanks around a mouthful of cheese, bread, and beef.

"Your real parents hired our family when you were born," Brendan says. "I knew your dad from childhood, but had lost touch with him over the years. I knew he married a Palmerston, but other than dealing with Will and your grandfather, I wasn't that close with any of them. When you were born, your mom showed up at my door. Literally. She knocked, barely out of the hospital from having you."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because your grandfather had died a few months prior, and around the time of your birth, his final will and testament were released for the family to read over. When she saw it and learned that she had been given almost everything to do with the Palmerston name, including businesses and estates, she knew her days were numbered."

What a way to be graced with gifts; in danger because of them. I settle against Blake, no longer eating. I set the burger down and focus on the drink instead. "She hired you to kill Will?"

"No," Brendan says, shaking his head. "She used me as a scapegoat, actually. And for a connection. A lawyer. She wanted her will set up and in place before she left my house. She wanted everything in her name to go to you, but she knew that'd put you in danger, so she made a few stipulations. In the event of your death, everything would go to a charity. But if you made it to eighteen, it'd be in your name."

But it isn't. "I'm twenty-three," I remind him.

"There was another stipulation," Brendan says with a smile. "Your mother was a smart lady. On the day of your seventeenth birthday, I got a letter. Everything meant for you, came to me. That's how we became owners of the gas mine and all the subsidiary businesses beneath it. It's also why Will is so pissed at us. And if I had to guess, it's why Will agreed to the marriage between Bronson and Olivia. He wants to rework the legalities of it because that's what he wanted from your grandfather's will."

“What? You’ve owned it all this time?” Blake scoffs, his hand squeezing my thigh. “Why do you own it? And why are you trying to marry into that family?” I can tell Blake is mentally berating himself. He’s a big picture guy, and he has no idea how this all ties together.

“Because Cheryl trusted him to get it to me,” I fill in, picking up on where this is going. “Or to keep me alive long enough to take Will down first to ensure my safety.”

Brendan nods. “And the betrothal gave me an in with the family.”

Bronson stands, snatching the bottle of rum off the sofa table. “You needed an in so you could find out if this is a murder mission or a rescue mission,” he says, putting it all together.

“If Will is acting alone or if the rest of the Palmerstons are in on it, too,” Blake adds.

“I needed to determine if your sisters, uh, cousins, were aware. As well as Penny. I’ve always known Will and Penny weren’t your parents, but it didn’t benefit your safety in the grand scheme of things to make that public knowledge. It would have given away Cheryl’s plan, and if Will was aware I knew anything about it before your seventeenth birthday, he would have attempted murder again. I am sorry for the things you’ve lived through, Mercer.” Brendan smiles at me, and I honestly think he means it.

Blake looks at me, checking in. His blue eyes search the lines of my face, looking for any panic or doubt. When he looks at me like this, I know he loves me. He hasn’t said it, and maybe he won’t, but I feel it. I feel him being the only person to ever truly care about my wellbeing, and me as a person. The real me.

“I’m okay,” I tell him. I’m overwhelmed to high hell, but I’m managing. I guess I do that now. *I manage*. New life skill.

“I became the owner of the gas mine, including the businesses beneath it, but that wasn’t made public knowledge until you turned eighteen. On your eighteenth birthday, Will learned the truth. He figured out that Cheryl had made arrangements to bypass him, and he was not happy about it. So, guess what he did?” Brendan grins.

“He cozied up to you,” Brandt laughs. “Which made it pretty damn easy for you to pitch a betrothal, old man.”

“Hey, watch it. It was supposed to be you getting married to one of the Palmerston girls, but Will wanted it to be Bronson, and I haven’t figured out why.”

“Because he wasn’t single and Will was testing your commitment to joining forces,” Blake says. He looks at Bronson and asks, “So? What’s your take? Do the sisters know? Does Penny know?”

“I think Will believes women should be seen, not heard, so they’re in the dark about most things. They just believe whatever he tells them. Pretty sure they have no idea about the facility Mercer went to, either.”

And I never told them. Why? Because no one fucking believes me. I lost my voice for the truth a decade ago and am only now starting to get it back. I have a question, though, and I’m not sure if it’s my place to ask. I take a sip, let the rum burn my throat, and go for it.

“Why’d you have your wife killed, though?”

“I didn’t, actually,” Brendan admits. “Not to say I wouldn’t have, but it wasn’t me.”

“Will,” I fill in. “She failed at whatever she was supposed to be doing, and he killed her for it.”

Brendan nods, and now it’s my turn to check in on Blake. My dad killed his mom. His mom tried to kill me. We’re woven together in such a bad way, it makes any future between us seem impossible. He leans in until his nose tickles my hair.

“I’m not going anywhere, baby. I promise.” His lips brush my cheek, and he lifts my straw to my mouth before he turns his focus back to his dad. “I was a teen when she died, so what happened then? What’d she do?”

“Mercer was first sent to that facility. All the times I tried to help her mental health by sending her there, she fooled me. She actually worked there as a recruiter under Will’s leadership. She trained Trevor, but Will didn’t want Mercer knowing Trevor worked there. He was still pretty young at the time. So your mom brought Mercer to the facility, and she did it as a ruse.” Brendan sighs. “She tried to double-cross Will. She found out about me being a part of Cheryl’s plans. I’m not sure how, but she thought she could kill Mercer herself, cut Will out of the deal, and come back home to our marriage to reap the benefits coming my way.”

“And Will killed her for it.” Blake shakes his head. “Or hired it, anyway.”

“He tried to hire me,” Brendan laughs. “Told me about my wife’s betrayal, spun a tale, left Mercer out of it, and tried to get me to kill her. When I told him no, he took matters into his own hands, scared she’d come back and tell me who Mercer really was. But I did act on it. I hired someone



to tail her for a few days. It was because of that tail that I know how and when she died, and where her body is.”

“You didn’t tell the tail to intervene if someone attempted murder?” Bronson asks.

Brendan looks his son in the eye. “No, I didn’t.”

The three brothers share a look, and after a few seconds, they all nod. Apparently, they’re okay with that. Sheesh. The security alarm on the wall, partially hidden behind a curtain, blinks the late hour at me, and fatigue sets in despite my nerves being as fried as these french fries are.

“So, what now?” Brandt asks. “How does Mercer get everything back?”

I shake my head. “I don’t really wanna know that right now. I went from sexy firemen to a sexy suit, to almost dying, to straight up murdering someone tonight. I’m just... done.”

“My bullet killed him,” Blake says, trying to take the weight off my shoulders so I don’t have to be a murderer.

I roll my eyes at him. “I know your kill count is high, but mine is now one, thank you.”

He grins. “My murderous little demon.”

“I’m a one-and-done murderer, thanks. I’d rather be the voice in the earpiece from now on.”

Blake smiles again and then looks at his dad. “Thanks for finally telling us, you dick,” he says with a huff of laughter. “You don’t think we would have understood that?”

“I know you would have, but everything comes at the right time for a reason.” Brendan looks between Blake and I. “We’ll talk more tomorrow. When everyone is rested and levelheaded.”

Blake doesn’t hesitate. He snatches me up like I’m his luggage, says a quick goodnight, and carries me and a cheeseburger back to the bedroom while I sip the rest of my drink.

“You still gonna be a brat after this?” he asks, kicking the door shut.

“It’s my personality,” I confirm.

His only answer is a grin.



HE'S STILL THERE. That other guy in my soul—the one trying to claw his way to the surface. I can see him if I lean in really close to the mirror, peering through my fears, my bloodshot eyes, the overwhelming information from yesterday, and the events that changed me for life. To be honest, I don't mind changing since I barely know who I am anyway, but becoming a murderer at twenty-three hadn't been on my list of life goals. Although, murdering my would-be-murderer feels half decent.

It's that half-decent thought that makes me think the real Mercer Bentley is still in there, fighting his way to the surface to meet me for the first time.

I tiptoe away from the mirror in this unfamiliar bathroom, for once not wanting to wake Blake. The skincare products in this place are utter shit, so I steal a toothbrush, splash some water on my face even though I never do that and don't know why some people do, and then silently slink into the bedroom. One look at Blake on his back, arm behind his head, leg cocked, has me rethinking my former plan to be quiet. He's slept long enough and I'm a needy bastard. Pretty shameless about it, too.

I'm not ready to think about everything from last night, but I'm also not ready to let it beat me, so I climb up the bed and settle right on his lap, straddling him.

"Why do you have instruments in your apartment?" I ask. When he doesn't answer, I ask three more times to annoy him because I already know by the pace of his breathing that he's awake. His hand slides up my thigh, and he shifts his body a bit, making it so I'm resting right on his hardening dick.

"Because I want to learn to play them," he says in a sleep-gravelled voice.

"You don't play any of them?" I wiggle on his lap until he blinks his eyes open, showing me that deep blue gaze that's become the lighthouse in all my storms.

"The piano, a little," he says. "But none of the other ones. I like music, but I don't really know a lot about it. Maybe that's why I like it."

He's such a mystery at times, and a completely open book at others. I debate making a joke about him playing the flesh flute last night, but decide that even my street cred can't take that level of lameness. He's watching me, and I didn't have to do anything to get his attention other than sit here. I like the way it feels when Blake looks at me, and despite being an attention whore, I don't want him to ask me if I'm okay. I just want his attention,

maybe his love. I want to be seen by him because he's the only person I feel comfortable being around without fully knowing who I am. I'm not wearing a mask. I'm not faking anything. I'm just me—confused, uncertain, not-okay, bratty me.

"You learned a lot last night," he says instead, fingers kneading my legs.

"Mm." I roll my eyes, using his favourite non-word.

Blake must realize I'm not ready to talk about it because he starts talking about himself instead. "I've never been as afraid as I was last night."

"Why?" Yeah, I'm an insecure bitch and I need to hear him say it.

He bucks his hips a bit, leaning against the headboard and bringing me with him to stay on his lap. "Losing you isn't an option for me anymore."

*Oh. My. Fucking. Gawd.* I choke on feelings and blush from trying to hold them in so hard. But it's no use. My eyes water and my hand smacks this romantic murderer right on his taut pec. "I told you not to make me weepy!" I groan, hiding in my hoodie. I try to climb off him, but he holds me in place. "Blake."

"Where's my bratty demon? Who is this shy boy?" he laughs. "Kinda cute like this."

"Do not call me cute, Blake Carter." I fight him. "I'm sexy! Manly!"

"Adorably manly," he agrees, still laughing. "And so fucking sexy."

I swear to all that is holy, if this man does not stop complimenting me, I will combust. *This!* This is what I wanted, and now I'm cracking under the attention. I'm a terrible cumslut and a horrible attention whore. I wiggle on his dick, just to turn this sexual. I can handle sexual.

"Uh-uh," he says, squeezing my hips to keep me still. "You gotta learn to take the good without getting sex out of it."

"No," I pout.

Blake's laugh is fucking magical. I'm glad when he pulls me down so I can hide in his neck. He wraps his arms around me, rubs his stubbly jaw all over my hair, and just holds me there. Pushing my hood off completely, his fingers weave through my hair, lightly tickling. With the steady beat of his heart against my chest, the warmth of him all around me, and the feeling of absolute safety, I relax and let myself feel things.

I almost died. The man who I thought was my dad tried to have me murdered. And he left instead of watching it happen. For money? How the fuck is it my fault that he didn't get what he was after, and why should I have to die for it? Especially if he knows Brendan Carter is now in

possession of it. What purpose does it all serve, and why am I so insignificant that my life is good for nothing but a well-timed death?

I killed someone. Blake likes to take credit for it, but I know the blade I shoved through his windpipe caused his death. I don't like that I did it, but I'm proud of myself for doing it. It saved my life, and now that I know I have some worth—at least in Blake's eyes—I'm proud that I defended myself. But the reality of it sits a little differently in my mind. Yeah, I killed him when the option presented itself to me, but if Blake hadn't shown up, I would have stared that bullet straight in the eye until it embedded between mine. Does that make me weak?

I'm not the Palmerston I thought I was. I'm Cheryl Palmerston's kid. A woman, a mother I never met, who tried to protect me before she died. And my name... my birth father's name. No wonder Will never wanted to call me that. How do I even begin to mourn for two lives I hadn't known were lost until a few hours ago? Am I expected to mourn for them?

I'm not Ben anymore. I'm not the useless kid who got shoved into his bedroom and forgotten about or shipped off to a facility to force my mind to think a certain way. I'm no longer Will Palmerston's youngest child, and I'm also not a brother. I'm Mercer Bentley... no last name because I don't want to be a Palmerston anymore.

I'm Mercer Bentley.

My eyes water with the realization that literally everything about me, my life, and my uncertain future has changed. I'm dead. Or, at the very least, I'm presumed dead by Will, and soon enough, he'll declare me missing. How long am I going to be in hiding? How long will I be Blake's little secret? How long can I handle being invisible again? I don't even have a home.

Hating it, I cry. Silently and without gumption. I'm sad, but unclear about why. I'm scared, but I can't decide what's terrifying me the most. I'm uncertain and overwhelmed, and everything is ebbing against me in gentle waves, filling me up with doubts and questions until I'm full to bursting with unease.

Blake rubs my back. "This is rock bottom, baby."

Weirdly, it doesn't feel like the lowest I've ever been. I'm not alone this time.

"Remember how I said I wanted to make you scream as you clawed your way to the top?" he asks, massaging my scalp. "This is our starting

point. Me and you, Mercer. Wherever the fuck you wanna go in life, no matter who you are or who you want to be, it's me and you."

"B-but?" I ask.

"Look at me." He tugs on my hair and tilts my chin. His blue eyes meet mine, and with absolute conviction, he says, "There are no buts to the way I feel about you. Do you understand what I mean?"

Tears streak paths down my cheeks and his face blurs in front of mine. I told him once that everyone who claims to love me does it with a *but* attached to the end. Blake is telling me he loves me, and I can't decide if I'm worthy of it or not. But I nod, and Blake's thumb swipes my cheek. The balled material of my sleeves ends up in my mouth, but Blake pulls it free and kisses me instead.

"Fuck knows how you did it, little demon, but you did." His lips move against mine, kissing and confessing together.

"Did what?"

"Made me yours."

A sob rips free from my chest and my arms fly around his neck. I can't get close enough to him. He lifts me up until my legs wrap around his waist, and he holds me just as tightly.

"I'll find a way to get us out of here, Mercer. We're going home."

Home.



AFTER AARON RAN INTERFERENCE, putting up a blocker that would jam any audio or video feed around, in, or near Blake's apartment building, we went back home. Home for now, anyway. I'm trying to accept it without too many questions. Luckily, my mind is fried and my body is even more fried, and since Blake refused me sex all day, I'm crashing hard.

He puts me to bed, settles in behind me, and I'm out before his arm wraps around me.

Somewhere in the depths of my sleeping mind, I'm realizing that maybe someone thought I was worthy. A mom who was killed when I was a baby and a dad who died because she did. Maybe they noticed me. Maybe they loved me. Maybe. But in the forefront of my sleeping mind, I'm remembering that someone notices me *now*. Not maybe. For sure. I'm cherished as myself and seen as the real me. I'm encouraged and empowered because a man took notice of me and reminded me to love myself. His attention sparked my own internal attention, and for the first time in way too long, I'm seeing parts of me I forgot existed.

Like the strength to get through the other night. Like the pride I'm remembering to feel for myself for getting through every single day of my life. Like the understanding I'm showing myself for reacting to things the way I do, for becoming who I am today. The events of our lives shape us, and mine always beat me down, shaping me into a flattened version of a timid boy who just wanted to be seen. But under Blake's penetrating gaze, I remembered that I'm allowed to see myself, too.

Without thrashing, ball-busting, or dick-kicking, my eyes blink open to the most beautiful morning view. Blake's cock. "Hello, handsome," I tell it,

content to just stare at the length of it.

Blake scoffs, standing at the side of his bed. "Move over, sleep demon." He climbs back in and pulls me against his chest. "You snore."

"No. I wouldn't do that."

"Well, you do."

"No."

"Denial?"

"You're just a liar." Snoring is unbecoming and I refuse to believe I do it. Snoring isn't cute. "I'm too cute."

"I thought you were sexy and manly?" he mocks me. "You kept me up all night with it," he insists, continuing to lie. "I think you should give me a massage because you wedged your bony hips into mine all night, and then you should suck my handsome cock and make me a coffee."

I snore.

Blake doesn't laugh, but I feel his lips pull into a smile and his arms tighten around me. The next time I wake up, he's the one snoring, and I take a video just to prove it to him later. On his phone, because I no longer have one. I do a bit of snooping, make sure he's not being shady, and finally drag my ass out of bed. I want to do something special for him before I go back to full brat mode, so I have a quick shower and head to the kitchen.

A while ago, after that night Blake let me have the daggers, I hid a few around his apartment. I snatch one from under the hall table, grip it between my first two fingers, and aim it at my target.

"Morning," I announce myself to this very comfortable couple in the kitchen. Mr. Sexy Blond with Glasses and Mrs. Sexy Blond without Glasses. "Who the fuck are you?"

The blond guy smiles at me, and I recognize him from the gala last night. My brain rapid-fires information at me, and I recall Blake telling me I was bratty and funny to this particular couple. I don't drop the dagger, but I match his smile.

"Well, well, well. We finally meet... properly."

"Actually, we met properly last night," Aaron says. "And you met my wife, Keira."

I lower the dagger and smile at her. "Pleasure is all yours," I say to Aaron. "Your phone voice is sexier." I take his fresh latte right out of his hand and sit down at the island with Keira. "Sorry for the dagger."

"No, you're not." She laughs, and I can't deny that.

“Did you break in, or does my housekeeper know you’re here?” I tug on the sleeves of the hoodie I stole from him, covering my hands completely. The pants are his, too, and maybe the t-shirt I’m wearing also belongs to him. I might have gotten it all out of his dirty hamper because the smell of him is such a fucking comfort and I needed it. I’m whipped.

“Housekeeper?” Blake asks, walking down the hall without a shirt on. As much as I love the view, I’m fucking seething. That body is mine to look at and mine alone. The dagger flies right by his head and sticks into the ridiculous photo of a bunch of piano keys on his wall. He doesn’t even flinch, but he sure as shit smirks deeper. “Morning, demon.” He steals the latte I already stole and yanks his hoodie right off my body and throws it on. He sets a gentle kiss on my sneering lips that feels a lot like a taunt, so I call him a dick and grab a new hoodie from the couch. He steals my spot at the island while I do that.

Okayyyy. Who’s the brat now?

I hip check Aaron out of my way because fuck everyone this morning. I pop my hip, turn my back on the crowd, and revel in the fact that they’re watching me anyway. I press the start button on the coffee machine and focus on the grind of the beans.

I have a lot of things to think about today, but I’d rather be distracted. Which is why my mind is running twenty miles a minute, coming up with all sorts of ways to piss Blake off enough to avoid him asking all the questions he wants to ask. Coming up with an idea on the fly, I undo the drawstring of the sweatpants I’m wearing and stand straighter. If he wants to show off his body to the unwanted company, I can *accidentally* do the same. With my hip no longer cocked, the too-big pants slide right down to my ankles and pool there like a cozy little foot wrap.

“Mercer,” Blake warns.

I watch the coffee drip into the already frothed milk for just a beat too long, making sure Blake knows I’m intentionally defying him, and then I bend forward to pick up the pants. Fortunately for my audience, I’m wearing the best underwear. They’re red briefs, nice and tight against my ass, and right across the cheeks, they say, ‘spank me.’

Pulling them up dramatically slowly, I gasp in actual surprise when a firm hand smacks against my ass, shocking me for real, but feeling blissfully crisp. The sting of it has me turning around, looking at Blake with stunned innocence.



“Careful what you beg for, little boy,” Blake says. “You once told me you were semi-interested in exhibitionism.” He tugs the pants up and ties the drawstring extra tight, double knots it and everything.

“I didn’t beg.”

“Just like you don’t snore?”

“Exactly like that.” I glare at him. “It’s not my fault your pants are so big. You should cut back on the sugar in your lattes.”

“Or you could stop stealing all my clothes and wear ones that actually fit you,” he counters.

I scoff at him. “Please. Stop acting like your caveman parts don’t want me in your clothes.” I pat him on the chest and then pretend he doesn’t exist. “Aaron, what’s for breakfast?”

“Coffee, pancakes, and difficult conversations,” Aaron says without missing a beat.

I tip my head back and groan at the ceiling. “Pancakes first.”

It’s a trick because as soon as Blake and Aaron start making pancakes, Keira makes herself a fresh coffee and sits with me at the island. Blake telling me he wants me to meet Aaron’s wife comes back to mind, and I scrutinize this beauty like she’s the prettiest devil. Well, Dee might also take that title. What’s her deal and why did Blake want me to meet her in the first place?

“I feel like you’re about to con me into something,” I say, sipping. Loudly.

“I am. Sort of,” she says. “Not con, but offer you something you probably won’t want.”

I turn on my stool, deciding to face her fully while she tricks me. “Advice?”

“Not really.”

“Information that I’ll block like I’m blocking everything from last night?” I guess again.

“Actually, more of a way to process all that information,” she says, smiling at me while I scowl. “I work with people who have similar life situations to you, Mercer.”

“Are we talking about a banker who helps invalids manage their newfound billions? A family crisis line that helps sons evade their murderous non-dads? A grief therapist who helps process deaths we never

knew about?" Should I admit I'm a one-and-done murderer, or is that up for secrets?

"I'm a psychologist who specializes in long term PTSD."

Oh. Is that me? Do I have long term PTSD? It can't be me because I don't have any one significant thing that traumatized me. I don't even know if I am traumatized or if I'm just... beaten down a bit. A lot.

"Mercer, you have a strong fear of abandonment, and—"

"I know that." I stand up. "Trust me, I fucking know. I also know how pathetic it is." I forget my coffee and head for the hallway, needing another shower because I feel dirty now. Not dirty. Just messy and childish and fucking dumb.

"It's not pathetic," Keira says. "It's not pathetic at all, Mercer."

I look at Blake, wondering if he set this up. If he did, I will dick-kick him again. I feel little when he looks at me, but once I get over my own shit, I realize he isn't looking at me in any particular way. He's just watching me, loving on me, being all supportive and charming.

"Fuck you, Blake," I snap at him. "Keira, I have a window wall and a bed. Let's go. Pancakes can be delivered to us." I don't check to see if she follows because I kind of hope she doesn't. I hear all three of them laugh a little, and then Keira is handing me my coffee before we enter my bedroom.

Two hours and seven pancakes later, I've learned something. That trauma can be long and drawn out rather than blunt and singular. That the fear of abandonment can start in childhood and morph into something debilitating throughout the course of life. That neglect, belittling, gaslighting, and shame aren't my fault. That even though I wasn't in the war, my life was a war and caused PTSD episodes, which are my panic attacks.

I fear abandonment. I fear neglect. I fear being invisible. I fear being a nobody and then dying. I fear intimacy and honesty because I'm preconditioned to not trust anyone. I have trust issues and behavioural reactions to help me cope with my fears.

Well, goddammit! I'm a brat because it's my coping method! Gah! I really wanted that to be my actual personality, and like hell am I letting it go. The brat life is for me, and I'm not giving it up.

Keira says processing my trauma is a good first step, but learning to trust myself and those around me is another good step. I don't trust anyone, not even myself, but maybe Blake is winning me over a bit in the trust

department. So, that's going to have to be my step one. She says my self-soothing methods are bred from childhood, and that seeking sensory distractions is quite common.

She asked me to practice appreciating good attention and recognizing bad attention.

Yeah, whatever. I'm in a pissy mood after the two blonds leave, and since Blake is the only one around, he's the one I'm going to take it out on.



MERCER WON'T TALK to me, but it's a little bit funny. While giving me the silent treatment, he's being the loudest fucking attention whore I've ever met. I've earned it, I guess. I bombarded him with Keira after a stressful and emotionally upsetting night, and now he's going to make me pay for it. I'll pay whatever price he wants because he actually talked to her and that's more than I ever could have hoped for.

He's 'borrowing' my laptop, which means he's just snooping through it. After a bunch of huffing and some eye rolls, he switches tactics and angles the screen so I can see what he's doing on there. He's researching the next fireman's breakfast, and right there on the screen, he has the volunteer form open and mostly filled out.

He's also terrible at the silent treatment because his bratty mouth wants to run, and he's barely holding himself back from making snippy one-liners that'll punch me right in my pride. Well, time to entice him.

"Busy next Saturday?" I ask, smirking at my phone, doing research on Frank and his wife.

"With abs," he answers. "You wouldn't understand."

When did I become a person who enjoys being talked to this way? He told me I was a puzzle, or at least sex was a puzzle, so maybe it's my turn to play some games with him. I pull my shirt over my head and make sure he gets a nice view of my very hard-earned and defined six-pack.

"Wouldn't I?" I ask, walking by him.

He glowers at me, not liking when the game gets flipped on him. His next move is a pathetic one, but I fucking love it. He takes his sweet ass time finding a porn video he thinks will rile me, and when he puts on

headphones he *accidentally* forgets to connect to the laptop, the man moans and ‘*daddies*’ come straight through the speakers.

I unplug the internet modem, and the screen pauses on a furry chest that I know for a fact grosses Mercer out.

He stands, pulling the headphones off. “You think you can out-brat me, Blake Carter?”

“It’s kind of fun to be an asshole.” I shrug, grinning at him. “I see why you do it.”

“Good fucking luck, *little boy*,” he sneers the pet name, hoping it’ll make me angry. It doesn’t. Especially because he looks jealous. Jealous of his own mouth muttering a nickname meant for him. I kind of love how complicated and hypocritical he is. I laugh, and he smacks my chest.

Oh, this is going to be fun. I have like three thousand things I need to do today, including forcing Mercer to talk about his family, figuring out how to keep him in hiding a bit longer, and unravelling the whole Palmerston family, but this one takes the cake. Because now that Mercer knows who he is, feels safe enough in this apartment, and has an understanding of his mental health, it’s time to get back to our original dynamic.

Mercer gets to be the brat.

I get to put him exactly where I want him.

Let the games begin.



MERCER COMES ON STRONG, not one to let someone intimidate him at his own game. I’m liking the competitiveness he’s showing, but I’m barely holding my fists in check.

Leaning in the doorway like the little demon he is, Mercer bats his lashes and bites his sexy lip like a total flirt, drawing the eyes of the pizza delivery guy. At first, I thought the guy would laugh it off and leave with his tip, but when Mercer casually played with the strings of his hoodie, the guy paused and started to flirt back.

Now I’m holding myself back from knocking out a twenty-year-old delivery prick. If I really wanted to, I could kill him, erase the evidence, and get rid of the body like it never happened. Tempting.

“Oh, you’re too kind,” Mercer feigns modesty and licks his lips. “Do you have to get back right away?”

“Well, uh...” The guy looks over Mercer’s shoulder, catching my murderous look. He swallows hard enough for me to hear it, matching the sound with the roll of his throat and the sweat under his uniform hat.

Mercer looks at me, rolling his eyes. “Oh, don’t mind him. He’s a teddy bear.” Leaning into the guy, he stage-whispers, “Between you and me, he can’t fuck me like I want to be fucked. Maybe you can do better?”

I’m across the room and slamming the door within two breaths, wrapping my hand around Mercer’s throat and tossing the box of pizza to the floor. I press his back to the door and glare down at his victorious smirk.

“Problem, baby?” he asks, his thighs already rubbing together.

“Can’t fuck you like you want to be fucked?” I squeeze his neck a bit tighter. “If I fucked you like I wanted to, you’d cry and beg me to stop. So, say that again, *baby*. Who can’t handle who?”

Mercer drops the innocent act, shoving me in the chest so hard I almost lose my grip on his throat. “Fuck you, Blake! It’s not my fault you treat me like I’m breakable!” He shoves me again, so I use the momentum to take his legs out and push his back to the floor. “Ow! You heavy bitch!”

“Not breakable?” I ask, straddling him. “You’re already breaking, little boy.”

“Yeah, because this is domestic violence. Not sex.”

“Then why’s your dick hard?” I sit on it, pinning it to his body. “Or are you just a cock tease, Mercer? Want me to call the pizza boy back to see if you can tease him hard enough that he actually beats you?”

He scoffs. “You’re such an asshole.”

“Mm,” I agree. “Your move. Or is this all you wanted? Just to make me jealous and have me overpower you?”

“Well, you aren’t fucking me yet, so it’s clearly not all I wanted.” He glares. “And you better thank whatever devil you pray to that the pizza landed upright. I would have been a two-time murderer for that alone.”

Fuck, he’s sexy when he’s full of attitude. He was right earlier. I can’t out-brat him, but I *can* dominate him. That’s the game we play. That’s our dynamic. And over time, I’ve come to crave it as much as he does. When he huffs, his cheeks turning pink, I pin his wrists to the floor and bend over him.

“You think you’re winning, Mercer?”

He grins right in my face. “Who has all your attention right now?” His grin turns triumphant. “Never challenge my brattiness again, baby.”

Everything clicks together and I laugh. “Oh, I get it.”

“What?” He squirms, trying to break free of my hold. “What do you get?”

“You learned that your bratty attitude and attention-seeking behaviour is your way of coping.” I smirk. “And now you’re all bummed out because it’s not just who you are, so you’re upping your game to prove a point to yourself.”

He scoffs. Or huffs. Or laughs condescendingly. “Get out of my head!” he shrieks at me. “Those are my thoughts! How do you know them?” He makes a great effort to slip free, but it’s all for nothing.

“Good at reading people, remember?” I pull him to his feet by his wrists, dragging him away from the forgotten pizza and into the living room.

“Stop manhandling me,” he snaps at me, smacking my shoulder. “Fucking barbarian.”

He’s such a little liar. *My* little liar. This barbarian act is exactly why he acts like a bratty little shit. He wants me to manhandle him. He told me he enjoys the fight for dominance, and he admitted to loving being submissive while manipulating me. When I win the first round and put him on his knees, that’s when he really gets to shine by manipulating everything I feel. I understand him now—get him and the puzzle he pieces together.

But he’s complicated, too. He acts out for attention, not punishment. Mercer has been scolded and degraded his entire life, and despite the tough front he puts on, I know he’s sensitive to being mocked. Which is why I won’t make fun of him, degrade him, tease him harshly, or make him question his actions. I will give him the attention he wants, and I’ll do it all without punishing him for acting the way he does.

I can do puzzles, too, and my people reading skills give me an edge he doesn’t have.

I grin at him, pushing on his shoulders until his tight little ass hits the coffee table. “Stay.”

“Make me.” He stands.

I just glare at him, and he glares back. Our stares contain different energies, though. His is challenging and defiant whereas mine is calm and authoritative. It reminds me of the night I saw him outside the strip club—

that exact look crossed his face when the officer told him what to do. He *does* have a problem with authority, but it's not what I originally thought. It's not an unwillingness to comply; it's the need to fight the system that never made sense to him—that never encouraged him. Mercer wants to fight, and in return, he wants someone to fight back. A worthy opponent who rises to his challenges instead of staunching them.

So instead of making him stay, I give him a job. “Ready to show me what else you ordered in that sex shop box? Mm? I’m ready to gasp and cringe.”

“About fucking time,” he scoffs, strutting over to the kitchen with swagger. The box in question is still on the floor at the end of the island, so he picks it up and brings it back, sitting his ass on the coffee table where I initially commanded him to sit. So easy.

I grin, sinking down onto the couch opposite him. He knows he played right into my hands, but he’s too amped up about the shock value he thinks he’s going to pull out of me with whatever that box contains. I’ve already seen most of it in passing since I used lube from that box, but I’m a willing spectator, and I know he’s going to pull out all the best tricks. As he roots around in there, keeping everything hidden, I eye-fuck the hell out of him.

His hoodlum look might be my favourite one. Especially when he wears sexy underthings beneath it. He’s the epitome of a little demon, from the way his amber eyes hold all the fires of hell, to the way every move is calculated to manipulate. If Mercer chose to, he could con Earth into rotating the opposite way; he just needs to learn to trust his instincts. He’ll get there.

“Just so we’re clear, this is my ‘does Blake bat for my team?’ question box. At the time I ordered it, I didn’t know if you’d dick me down or not, and these treats were ordered specifically to find out.”

“Mm.” I watch him with excitement, honestly curious how he thought some sex toys would bring me out of the closet. Not that I was in the closet, but my bi experiences were few and far between before I dragged him back to my apartment and made him mine. “You’ve set the stage, baby. Get on with the show.”

He side-eyes me. “You’re missing a few,” he says.

“A few what?”

“You’ve used little boy, baby, babe, cumslut, little demon, my personal favourite, and bad boy. You’re still missing baby boy, pet, brat, and



sweetheart.” His grin is fucking vile, and I love it. “Find a way to work those in. You know, really try them all on for size.”

Oh, I will. “Are you stalling?”

He whips out a small box. “I never stall.” Opening it, he removes a little bulbous-shaped thing with a silicone T-bar on the end for easy removal. Also in the box is a little remote with only three buttons. “Intensity. Vibration style. Off button.” He points to them all in turn. He clicks it. “Mm, charged.”

He’s begging for it to go in his ass, so now it’s my turn to shine. “I’m not cringing yet, baby boy.” I smile, tugging on the front of his hoodie to pull him to his feet. The box topples to the floor, and Mercer topples onto my lap.

“Blake,” he complains.

“Brat?” I retort, manhandling him over my lap until his ass is right there, ripe for the smacking. I spank him over his sweatpants and give him a firm squeeze.

“Jesus,” he groans.

I love the way he fits on my lap. Small enough to maneuver easily, but feisty enough to put up a fight. I take the toy from his hand, knowing I should probably wash it, but I shove it into his mouth instead. “Get that nice and wet for me, pet.” I tug the back of his sweats down, exposing his dark grey underwear. Fuck me, he has the sexiest ass I’ve ever seen. Even in boxer-briefs. “No panties tonight?”

“I can’t be sexy all the time,” he whines around the toy in his mouth.

I smack him for saying that. “You *are* sexy all the time, sweetheart. In anything you wear, and completely naked, you are a fucking wet dream.” I tug the boxer-briefs down, running my palm over his smooth ass, already pinkening up from my spanks. I shove him to the side a little, getting his ass right over my lap. “How many times can you come in a row?” I slide my hands all over him, dipping between his cheeks to spread him open. I spit right on his hole, rubbing it in. His dick hardens against my leg.

“On my own or with someone?”

My teeth clench and I don’t answer.

“With someone, usually only once because I flee the scene or don’t feel completely comfortable with them. Plus, tops are selfish and just like to get themselves off.”

I smack him. “Don’t talk about other men in this ass, Mercer. It’s mine now.”

“Mm,” he hums at me, and I can only imagine he’s still grinning. “On my own, if I edge properly, sometimes five times. My record is six, but by that point, barely any cum came out.”

Dry orgasms. Still sexy. I slide my fingers through the spit and into his tight hole. Mercer squirms on my lap, a rasp leaving his lips. “Give me the toy... what name am I missing?”

“None. You used them all.” His voice is breathless now, but there’s still some fight left in him.

“Good. Give me the toy, little demon.”

He moans, popping the toy out of his mouth and handing it to me behind his back. He turns his head to watch me, so I smack his ass again, watching the flush creep over his cheeks—ass and face. Slowly, I work the small toy inside him. It doesn’t go in very deep, but it flares out to fill him and press in all the right places.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” I start, smoothing a hand over his ass before pulling his boxers back up. “You’re going to show me everything in that box, and I’m going to control this toy. The game is willpower. Who will crack first, Mercer? Will I bend you over and fuck you because I get jealous of this toy, or are you going to reach your cum limit without ever begging for it?”

“So, getting fucked means losing?” he scoffs. “I’ll lose. Fuck me now, Blake.”

I laugh, sitting him up and taking his sweatpants completely off. On my lap and facing me, his cheeks are already flushed and his eyes are glowing, living for this challenge. “You can’t touch your cock. I won’t fuck you until you beg. And the game isn’t over until you tell me it is.”

“I can come, though?”

I nod at his dick straining against the material. “Sure. In those.”

A new challenge lights him up, and he laughs at me. “Oh, fucking hell, Blake. I’m allowed to come? You realize that you’re the one who is going to lose, right? If I can come, and you have to watch it, I will use that to my advantage until you’re the one begging.”

That’s my boy. I lean forward, pressing a smirking kiss to his grinning lips. “I expect nothing less. Guess we’ll see who has more control.”



IT'S HIM. He has more control. I'm damn near delusional with need, and Blake is as calm as ever. He's either too good at hiding his desires, or I'm just a weak-willed little slut. I refuse to believe I have no effect on him, so fuck that thought for daring to even graze my mind.

The pizza is cold on the floor by the door, and my underwear is slick and sticky with a combination of two orgasms and way too much precum. I'm sweating, no longer wearing my hoodlum look, and Blake might have a rosy tint to his cheeks, but otherwise, he's cool and collected.

He presses the button on the remote, making my ass clench and my cock jolt. "Next."

I groan, almost buckling forward and falling right off the table. The box is nearly empty beside me, and if I don't start begging soon, I'll be using more of these toys to get the relief he's currently denying me. Yeah, I got off twice already, but I'm greedy! My dick isn't done yet, and he knows it, so now he's denying me the third.

I hold up the next item from the box. I'm hoping it's going to rattle him at least a little. "Bought this one just for you," I tell him, sounding like a drunk floozy. "I know you liked it." I hook the straps over my fingers and unfold it so he can get a good look.

Blake licks his lips, and from beneath the material of his black boxer-briefs, his cock gives an enthusiastic throb. Finally. "Put it on," he demands.

When I don't jump to action, he fucking growls at me. "Fuck," I groan at the sound of it, and then whimper, dropping the lace to squeeze my thighs when he ups the intensity of the rolling vibrations in my ass. "Ah, fuck." I'm panting, squeezing my legs, trying with everything I have not to touch

my cock and lose the game. A bead of precum seeps through the grey fabric and, fuck me, I'm totally going to lose, aren't I?

"Put. It. On."

My eyes lift to watch Blake and his asshole voice. Goddamn, the caveman act is hot. Grinning at him, I muster up the nerve to say for the second time, "Make me."

Blake doesn't hesitate. His hands latch behind my knees and he pulls me forward until I'm on his lap. Selfishly, I grind against him, rubbing my cock all over his legs just to get a little friction going. My wet boxers slide against his leg until he cups my ass to bring me forward, smashing my dick against his abs instead. Even better. I rub against him shamelessly, my eyes on his and his eyes penetrating my fucking soul.

Hooking his thumbs into the waistband of my boxers, he asks, "Ready to beg yet, little demon?"

Yes. Yes, *so ready*. "Not even close." I groan, clenching my ass around the toy. "Are you?" I drop down to wiggle on his dick, but before he can react, he flips me onto my back beside him. Hovering over me, he tugs my underwear down to reveal my shiny cock and the previous two messes I made. He looks, and his eyes darken right before me.

"Maybe," he answers my question. "But I think you'll break first." He grabs the lacy number off the floor and easily maneuvers me into it. Blake slides my legs through the holes, tugs it up and over my ass, and then sits me up to get the straps over my shoulders. I don't assist him at all, but he doesn't let that deter him. He leans back to admire me, and fucking finally, a glistening bit of moisture dampens his boxers.

"Mm," I hum, running my hands over the lace. "You like?" It's the same, or as close as I could find, to the black lingerie I wore the night he eye-fucked me outside the strip club. It hugs my torso, accentuates my hips, and makes my ass look phenomenal.

"Mm," he answers, twisting my legs to flip me over onto my stomach. He smacks my ass in the lingerie, and I hump the fucking couch like a nympho.

I grind my dick against the cushion, letting my hips gyrate and my ass roll. The buzz from the toy, the rock of my hips, the firmness of the cushions, and Blake's eyes on me have me ready to bust again.

"Blake," I moan. "Fuck, I'm gonna—"

He lifts me by my hips, and I'm humping the air on the way up. He situates me on his lap again, my back to his chest, and then he settles into a reclined position.

"Beg me, baby," he rasps against my neck, pulling and tugging on my hips so my ass grinds against his dick. "Beg me to fuck you."

I want to. So badly. "The toy is doing fine."

He clicks it off and pisses me off. "Don't you want my thick cock filling your tight ass, little boy?"

Yes. Yes. Yes.

"Think how easily I could slide these to the side and bury my cock inside you, Mercer." He snaps the fabric, making me gasp. "Or I could stand you up right now and tongue fuck you with that toy still inside until you come all over this pretty lace."

Oh god. "Blake."

"Yeah, baby?" he runs his hands up my legs, bypasses my dick, and continues up my hips and stomach. "Beg. Me."

It's on the tip of my tongue to beg. To ask him to fuck me until I can't think anymore. To beg him to pump me full of cum, cover me with it, force me to swallow it, anything. Instead, I rock on his lap until he inhales harshly. "Are you jealous of the toy yet?" I ask. "It's made me come twice already, and you haven't made me come once." I lean back, wrapping my arms around his neck and resting my head on his shoulder. "It feels so fucking good in my ass, Blake. Even when you turn it off, it still feels so good." I add a moan to embellish. "Mmm, I'm gonna come again so hard. My ass is gonna squeeze the toy so tight. Don't you want it to be your cock?"

He groans, sounding damn close to snapping. "That toy can't come. Don't you want my cum, demon?"

"Yes."

"My little cumslut needs cum, doesn't he?"

"Fuck yes." I grind down hard on him.

"Beg me."

I close my eyes, hyper-fixated on every place his hands touch me, his breath against my neck, and the beat of his heart against my back. My feet dig into the couch and my hands tangle in his dark hair, lost to the sensation of him, the situation, the game, and the best edging of my life. I picture him sliding the panties to the side, his jealousy making him rip the toy from my

ass, and his cock replacing it a second later. One hard thrust and he'd be buried inside me, fucking me like he owns me.

"Ah, fuck," I moan, my cock leaking.

"Beg me to fuck you, Mercer."

I moan louder, thrusting my hips back and forth, so close to coming in this brand-new outfit. "Oh, god, Blake. I can't stop it." I tighten my fingers in his hair.

"Mercer," he growls.

The throatiest moan leaves my lips, and that's how I win the game.

Blake shoves me forward until I crash to my knees on the floor. My hands brace on the coffee table, and he's behind me a second later, pulling the toy out and spanking my ass. "Fuck," he groans, spitting on my hole.

My chest hits the table hard, and my forehead lands on the surface of it. Blake thrusts his hips and buries his cock inside me to the root.

"Fuck." I'm rasping out shallow breaths, trying to move back to fuck his cock, but he's not having it.

He holds me in place, a tight grip on both of my hips, fucking me hard and deep with the panties pushed to the side. "You fucking brat," he accuses, pumping in and out of me. "Such. A fucking. Brat." He slams into me hard.

"Blake!" I scream his name, crashing against the table in a tsunami of orgasmic bliss. He fucks me through it, not giving a single shit that I'm coming in my lacy lingerie. My stomach clenches and my ass clamps hard around his dick. "Fuck me full of cum, Blake. Oh. My. God."

He yanks on my hair, bringing me upright. One arm wraps around my throat and the other wraps around my waist, caging me to him so he can go wild. He picks up the pace, fucking me like the barbarian I called him, and sinking his teeth into the base of my neck.

He growls against my skin, and holy fuck, it breaks me completely. I'm not sure if one orgasm has ended and another started or if this is one massive rolling thing, but I'm trembling all over, seeping through the lace, coating myself in my cum as he fills me with his.

"Fuck, Mercer," he says against my neck, his voice deep and gravelly. "Holy fuck, you're mine."

Goddamn right I am. My legs are shaking and my cum is dripping to the floor, but I keep my hands on the table just in case he lets go and I fall

forward. There isn't an ounce of strength left in me, and I'm pretty sure there isn't a drop of cum left either.

Blake pushes me forward until my chest hits the flat top of the table. "Push."

"No," I whine. "I want it."

"Show it to me, baby. I'll finger it back inside." He smooths his hand over my ass cheek and then pulls out slowly.

The loss of him inside me is jarring, but I push his cum out simply because I love how possessive it makes him. To my utter delight, it's his tongue I feel against me instead of his fingers. He licks his cum from my hole and then shoves it back inside me. My cock is still in semi-mode, but if I orgasm again, I might die. It wants to wake up for this, but I'll have to just enjoy the feeling without getting off to it.

He hums delight with his tongue still buried inside me. The warmth and gentleness of it is the perfect come down from this euphoric high. His hands spread me open, and he keeps licking, trying not to waste any of his cum.

"Sit on your ass, baby." He leans back, helping me turn around to sit with my back against the table. "Stick your tongue out."

I open my mouth and stick my tongue out. The tip of his hard cock rests against it, tasting like cum already. Up on his knees, he looks down at me, slowly stroking his length in front of my face.

"I want you full of me tonight, Mercer." He licks his lips and holds my head in place. "I want my cum in your ass, in your throat, in your stomach, and on your lips for the rest of the night."

Okay, there might be one more orgasm left in me. I whine on the floor, my hand fondling my dick. I lick his slit and make him tremble, a pulse of precum exploding against my tastebuds.

"Are you proud of yourself?" he asks. "For winning."

I nod with my tongue sticking out, proud as shit, thank you.

"It's justified, baby," he says, smirking at me. "You're a fucking brat, through and through."

I run my thumb over the tip of my dick, loving that he said that.

"My brat. All. Fucking. Mine." He groans, his release coating my tongue and sliding down my throat. His hand keeps my head still, and on instinct, I don't swallow, letting it gather on my tongue. Blake's eyes close momentarily, his abs clenching and his hand slowing on his shaft. As soon

as he's empty, he surprises the fuck out of me by bending forward and kissing me with his cum still in my mouth.

I moan into the kiss, swapping it back and forth until I swallow it. He tilts his head down, forehead against mine, and spits whatever is left in his mouth onto my dick. I rub it against my shaft, over the tip, and moan into his mouth as the fifth orgasm washes through me. It's weak and drawn out, but the subtleness of it is exactly what I need to finish this incredible night.

We stay on the floor, coming back to reality slowly. "Was that everything in the box?" Blake asks.

"No. There's one more thing."

He huffs out a small laugh. "Save it for the next time we play." He grips my chin and looks me right in the eye. "I won't lose a second time, baby."

"We'll see." I smirk at him.

He winces and complains when he does it, but he picks me up and carries me down the hall, mess and all. "Where are we going?"

"I'm plugging you, bathing you, feeding you, and putting you to bed."

I scoff. "I don't need the aftercare."

He kicks his bedroom door open. "I don't care. I need it."

*Oh.* I go completely warm. Gooey. Holy shit, I love him. Instead of telling him that, I say, "Then you can heat up the pizza we stole."

"Stole?"

"You slammed the door in his face before I paid him."

Blake laughs, setting me on the edge of the bathtub to start the water. "Poor guy. But next time, no ordering pizza, and no answering the door. You're supposed to be dead, Mercer. Let's keep Will believing that for as long as we can. We need to plan first."

*Right. Reality. Ew.*

"Tomorrow." He kisses my lips.





BRANDT AND BRONSON ARE ‘SEARCHING’ for Mercer, making it look like we’re in hysterics over him being missing. The ruse won’t last because Will is smarter than that, but for now, it gives us a little time. Mercer is taking his sweet time getting ready, and I have no doubt he will be in his hoodlum look when he decides to leave his bedroom. He’s stalling because my dad is here. For the first time.

While I wait for his coffee to brew, my dad paces around my apartment. He spends a lot of time near the piano, probably wondering why I requested it when he was hiring someone to design this place. There’s an instrument in each room, but the piano is my favourite.

“Do you still play?” he asks, fingers brushing the keys.

“A little. I’m not as good as I used to be.” Piano wasn’t really my focus over the past five years while I was away, but I played when I could.

Learning to play the piano is the only memory I have of my dad being solely fatherly. He taught me when I was a kid. I’d been having a hard time focusing, mostly because I was a busybody who didn’t know how to slow down. I was tested for neurodivergence, but never registered anywhere on the scale. I was simply hyperactive and had a busy mind, so my dad taught me to play the piano one summer, and I guess it just stuck. It was the first thing I remember ever calming my mind, and through the course of my life, I’ve learned to channel that calmness in other ways.

“You were never one to half-ass anything,” Dad laughs. “You got so mad when you weren’t instantly incredible at the piano. Glad you stuck with it.”

Not sure what to say to that because father-son conversations aren't our thing, I hand him the coffee and change the topic. "What's Will saying?"

"Nothing yet. It's been two days, so he'll want to wait until you approach him. The public will assume Mercer was with you after the gala, so he's gotta keep that appearance, too. He won't act until you ask him where Mercer is, and then he'll pretend you were the one to bring it to his attention."

I figured as much. He already knows I know, since he read that text message I sent, but I'll have to play this carefully.

"Are you planning to give it back to him?" I ask my dad, needing to know his intentions before this goes any further.

"It's already his, Blake. I'm just the CEO for right now, but legally, he owns it all. The mine, the subsidiary companies, the accounts, all the assets, and even a lot of the properties and businesses that Will thinks he currently owns."

"But Will thinks you own it?"

"He thinks I own the gas plant. I'm not sure what else he thinks." He sips the coffee. "I just want our family business, Blake. I'm not a businessman when it comes to these types of things. They belong to Mercer, and when he decides to do something with them, I already have a contract drawn up to remove my name from everything, if that's what he wishes."

I tilt my head, studying everything about his body language, voice, and reactions. "No greed?"

"Not about this."

"No malicious intent?"

"Not towards him or those companies."

"Why not?"

He sighs, moving to the window to peer out at the city. "For one, I've been hating this fucking mine since it got put into my name. Way more trouble than it's worth. For two, I made a deal with his mother. For three, my only goal in any of this is to ruin Will Palmerston. And fourthly, and this one is the biggest." He turns to face me. "You love that boy, Blake. You love him."

*Yeah, I fucking do.* "Bronson loves Miranda. You had no problem fucking them over."

"I did have a problem with it," he corrects. "I hadn't been planning on involving Bronson, but when Will put up that stipulation, I made a move."

And Miranda, for how much she claims to love him, was more than willing to take a buyout to leave him. Three million if she leaves after they're wed."

Jesus fuck. My poor brother. "You're sure?"

Dad nods, not looking pleased about it. "I have the conversation on video, and her signature on the contract."

"Bronson is gonna be crushed." I glance down the hall, wondering if Mercer is eavesdropping instead of joining the conversation. Avoidance won't work forever, so I'll force him to face it if he doesn't do it on his own. "But he's not marrying Olivia, right?"

"I had never planned to let it get that far, no. I just needed a reason to be closer to Will. And now we have to decide what we're doing with that family."

"Mercer should have a say in that."

Dad nods. "He won't remain dead for long. I give it three days max. Probably sooner."

"I know."

The bedroom door bangs against the wall, and Mercer makes his dramatic entrance. His hoodlum look is nowhere to be found, and my eyes roll when I see what he's decided on. Me. He's dressed like me again. Tactical pants, a jacket with a lot of pockets, the collar popped up, and his Blue Jays ball cap.

"No. Go change." I point down the hall. "No more testing me to see how self-indulgent I am. Go find another look."

He scoffs at me. Or huffs. Or laughs condescendingly. "Relax your ego, bad boy. This isn't my Blake look."

"What is it?"

"This is my..." he pauses, glancing at my dad. "I can't say his name, but it's my 'man in the mic' look. I want to work like your buddy does."

"Aaron?" my dad says.

My head whips to my dad. "You know Aaron?"

"It's your job to read situations and the people in them, Blake. It's my job to read my sons." Dad grins. "I've known about Aaron since you were teens."

I groan, but Mercer is pleased by this news. "Okay, Papa Carter. Do you have an Aaron, or is the job open?" He gives my dad a cute as fuck smile. "I'm pretty smart with numbers, and I'm a fast learner."

Dad laughs. “Won’t you be a little busy managing your billion-dollar corporations?”

Mercer grimaces. Then pouts. With blinky eyes and everything. “Don’t make me do the billionaire thing.”

“You don’t want it?” I ask.

“Do I have to want it?” he asks back.

“No, but it’s yours to do with as you please,” Dad tells him. “You don’t have to make that decision right now, Mercer, but no one else can make it for you.”

Mercer barely thinks about it, skipping over to the coffee machine. “As long as William Douchebag Palmerston doesn’t get it, I don’t really give a shit.” He presses the button for a latte.

I look at Dad, and he looks at me. We both shrug, deciding we won’t press it for now. Mercer can think about it for real and then ask questions about it when he’s ready.

“It’s blood money.”

“It’s a gift from your birth mother,” I correct.

“Who died for me to have it. I almost died because of it. We’re all gonna almost die for it. So, hence, blood money.” He spins to face us. “So, is the Aaron position open?” he asks my dad.

Dad laughs, in a good mood this morning. “If you honestly want training, we can arrange that.”

Mercer beams a victorious smile. “Excellent. So, when do I get to rise from the dead?”

“Three days,” Dad tells him.

Mercer grins. “So, you’re telling me I’m basically Jesus then?”



HE HASN’T RISEN from the dead yet, but we are on a mission together. I call it a job; he calls it a mission. So naturally, now I also call it a mission because I’m the biggest fucking pushover for this guy. It’s pathetic.

Trevor Palmerston is the mission. Mercer’s former elder brother is at an office building downtown, and we’re waiting for him to leave for his next appointment. Aaron was able to tap into his emails and phone, so unless it’s a ploy or a decoy, we have his schedule. Now we wait.

“So, did you ever off what’s her name’s husband?” Mercer asks. “You know, Frank? The leaking information guy who led to me showcasing my dagger skills for you.” He looks at me, blinking his big amber eyes. He’s also behind the steering wheel because he conned me into letting him drive in case there was going to be a car chase, which he claims he’d be good at. I have doubts, but I’m still sitting in the passenger seat like a goon.

Pushover. *Again.*

He’s all confidence and swagger today, and I’m loving it. The timid boy from that eventful night is on lockdown, and in his place, Mercer has added sass, self-worth, certainty, and a big old helping of avoidance. He doesn’t want to talk about it yet, but at the very least, he’s interested in Trevor’s whereabouts.

“No. Pretty sure my dad is going to give that job to one of my brothers instead.”

“Why? Lose your murderous edge?”

“My dad thinks I have.” I huff at that. “Because I have morals.”

“You killed Sean Pendleton without a second thought,” Mercer reminds me, sipping from the thermos I warned him not to bring. If he has to pee, he’s going to have to fucking hold it.

“Not without a second thought. I did my background checks on him and came to the conclusion that I was fine delivering his death. But Frank, he’s a shady person trying to screw over his wife’s business, but he’s a good dad, and his kids love him. From what I’m gathering, they live with him and not their mom, so it comes down to them. Do I want to orphan them by killing their dad, or do I want to enrage a client by not following through on a job?” I look at Mercer. “What would you do?”

“Is it a responsibility thing?” he asks. “Like, you don’t give a fuck if Frank dies, you just don’t want to be the one responsible for it?”

Maybe. Maybe not. “I don’t know. It’s not really one thing or the other. It’s a gut instinct, and I’ve learned to trust those.”

Mercer nods like he understands that. On the third nod, he tilts his ball cap down and shoves his massive thermos onto my lap. “Speaking of gut instinct, this is the fourth time that red car has driven by us. It’s the third time with this driver, but the first time, it was a female driver. I have the plate number if you want to run it.”

Patterns and numbers. Sometimes I forget I have such a valuable brain with me. I dial Aaron and wait for him to speak through the Denali’s

Bluetooth.

“Hey,” he says simply.

“Blondie!” Mercer beams. “It’s Blake’s little demon here, and I have a number for you to run. Ready?”

While Mercer rambles off the plate number and actually gossips with my supposed best friend, I scan the area for any other inconsistencies. Trevor hasn’t left the building yet, unless he tricked us, and his vehicle is still parked up the street. I squint my eyes at it, wondering, not for the first time, why an executive would park on the street instead of in a parking spot with his name on it.

I don’t know much about Trevor other than that my mom supposedly trained him to do this job. She used to do it, according to Mercer, but I can’t figure out what he has to do with any of this. Mercer said he never ran into Trevor when he was at the facility.

“Like, do I need to wear a uniform?” Mercer asks Aaron.

“You’re never seen in this job,” Aaron laughs. “You can be naked.”

“Oh, that’s fun, but I do like being seen,” he pouts. “Isn’t it like the movie montages where they show *Batman* in the field, and then screen flip to *Alfred* in the *Batcave*?”

“If you want to believe this is a movie, sure.”

There’s the red car again. Mercer smacks me on the arm, pointing at it. It’s a female driver again. Mercer smacks me again, and now I see Trevor leaving the building. As soon as he starts walking down the front steps toward his vehicle, the red car slows.

“Get down,” I tell Mercer, drawing a gun even though there’s nothing I can do about it. “Get down, right now.” I push his head down, but he still peeks.

“What’s going on?” Aaron asks.

The passenger window of the red car rolls down, the snout of a rifle poking through. The next second, bullets pierce Trevor’s body, making him jerk around in a death dance while the patrons on the street scream. I keep my eyes on the red car.

“You got that plate?”

“Yes,” Mercer whispers.

It’s probably a stolen car, but why did the driver and the passenger switch seats so often?

Trevor is dead. The car is speeding off. Mercer is looking at me with his hand on the gearshift. “Are we pursuing?” he asks. “Blake! Are we pursuing? Aaron? Can I high-speed chase this?”

“No,” we say at the same time.

“Ohh. Boring.”

I guess he’s completely ignoring the death that just happened. “Go, Mercer. We can’t be here. Drive slow and head west.” He looks at me, blinking those beautiful eyes again, so I add, “Please, baby.”

He smirks, setting off onto the street before it gets completely barricaded.

“Julia Hentz,” Aaron says. “That’s who owns the car. Recognize the name?”

“Hentz?” Mercer asks, taking his thermos back to sip as he drives. “Olivia has a friend named Jules, last name Hentz. Could be her.”

“Any issues with Jules and Trevor?”

Mercer shakes his head. “Don’t know if they even know each other. I barely know Trevor. Knew.”

Mercer has my seat all the way forward, and my mirrors are all fucked up and wonky, but he doesn’t appear to need to swap spots anyway. For once, he’s a blanket of calm. Actually, he’s calm and snarky.

“Hey, Siri,” he says. “Play my road chase playlist.”

The *Fast and Furious* soundtrack starts playing, and Mercer slips on a pair of sunglasses. “Don’t worry, boys. It’s not *Tokyo Drift*.”

Read the situation, Blake. Why would a wayward woman, who may or may not be friends with Olivia, murder Trevor Palmerston in full daylight? Who else was in that car with her? Did us being parked there have anything to do with it? I wouldn’t put it past Will to murder his son and blame it on us.

The screen on the dash of the Denali lights up with an incoming call. “Listen in, Aaron. This is Samantha.” I press the button to pick up the call, silencing Mercer’s road tunes. “Hello.”

“Blake Carter?” she asks. “This is Samantha Palmerston.”

Mercer locks up for a second, but then he scoffs silently, dramatically displaying a gag reflex. I still don’t know how he feels about his sisters not being his sisters because he won’t talk about it, but I can tell there’s at least a little disdain there.

“Yes?”

“I...” She pauses, which makes me sit up a little straighter. “I would like to hire you to complete a job.”

Well, that isn’t what I was expecting. “What job?”

“You handle sensitive information and get it into the right hands, correct?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Well, Mr. Carter, I have some sensitive information. Information that could get me killed.”

Does she know her brother just died? Does she know something about Olivia’s maybe-friend being involved in the murder? Does she know Mercer is missing yet? What the fuck is going on?

“What do you want me to do with it?” I ask.

“I think that you love my brother,” she says, and Mercer’s grip on the steering wheel tightens as he keeps driving. “Not to assume, but I can see it. I saw it, the night of the gala.”

“Okay?” I won’t confirm that because I don’t want Mercer to hear it this way for the first time, even though I’ve sort of already told him.

“I believe he’s missing, and I believe you already know that. You don’t have to confirm or deny it, but I have some information that might be of use to you. To help you find him.”

I look at Mercer, but he won’t look at me. “You think he’s still alive?”

Samantha doesn’t answer me, but she says, “I think my sister and my father had him taken.”

“What makes you think that?” I listen to her breathing, the way the phone shuffles around, the absolute lack of background noise, and the hitch in her voice. She’s nervous, but I don’t know if she’s nervous because she’s lying to me to set me up for something or if it’s because she’s going behind Will’s back to reach out to me.

“A... contract that I found claiming that Ben, uh, I mean Mercer, is actually the sole owner of all Palmerston companies, and that in the event of his death, they revert to my father.”

Mercer’s stabby finger punches the mute button. “That wrinkly old dick fudged me up a fake will? The fucking audacity!”

I unmute the call. “What are you asking me, Samantha?”

“I will pay you to find him before it is too late.”

“I will do that anyway. You have my word. What else?”



“I know the name of the lawyer who created this contract. She’s a woman well known to my family, and I believe my sister is actually... *with* her. I don’t know for certain, but my suspicion is that Olivia and my father are working together. I’ve... I wouldn’t be inclined to tell you this, but since Ben—Mercer’s life is on the line, I have no other choice. I just want my brother home.”

Mercer stabs the mute button again. “Numbers are my thing, Blakey, not this. What’s this bitch getting at? Is she sincere? Do your people reading thingy.”

I unmute the call again. “Before I do anything, I want to know something.”

“Okay,” she agrees timidly.

“You told Mercer you hid a phone for him at the facility, right?”

“Yes.”

“Which means you knew what they did there?”

“It’s a behavioural facility for troubled youth,” she says. “Is that what you mean?”

No. But it proves she doesn’t know what really happens there. Or she’s a good phone actor. Aaron, who is still listening in on this call, sends a live-feed video through to my phone. It’s camera footage from a Mini Mart parking lot where Samantha is sitting in her car. She’s alone, no gun to her head, and her hood is up to hide her face. She’s betraying her father, and seeing her this nervous makes me more comfortable.

“Tell me where the phone is. If I can find it, I’ll trust that you genuinely care about Mercer’s wellbeing.”

When Samantha does her best to explain where the cellphone is hidden, Aaron shoots me a thumbs up. He’s still got Keira on the inside there, so he’ll get her to look for it.

“Okay, I’ll look for it. What’s the lawyer’s name?”



MERCER IS a stompy little shit right now. I’ve never seen anyone huff, scoff, sigh, and groan so dramatically in all my life. He’s sucking on a lollipop, complaining that it isn’t as good as the ones he bought, chewing Aaron’s ear off about anything and everything.

“Who the actual fuck buys peach lollies, Blondie?” Mercer points it at him. “Fucking psychopath.” He shoves it back into his mouth. “Okay, so what does it mean? The phone is legitimately there, which I told you it was because I used it before, and now I’m all up in limbo wondering what the fuck we do next.”

“You need to learn some chill if you want to be the next me,” Aaron tells him.

“I will chill when I get the job!” he shouts. “This mission is my life, so excuse me for not being a goddamn cucumber about it.” He huffs, so I grab him around the waist and plonk him down on my lap. “Don’t get handsy with me while I’m trying to be stern, Blake Carter.”

I tug that lolly right out of his mouth and kiss him just to shut him up. “If you’re going to ramble, use that brilliant mind of yours and ramble useful things, little boy.” I pop the lolly back in, grateful that it’s a step up from his fingers in his mouth. Not that I mind him sucking his fingers, but it’s nice to see progress in his coping mechanisms. He hasn’t broken down once since the gala. He’s attached to my hip and clingy as hell, but I’m more than happy to be his safety net.

“Useful things,” he huffs. “Okay. I want proof of something.”

“What?”

“These wills and end-of-life arrangements are all about Mercer Palmerston, right? Well, apparently, my birth daddy took my birth mommy’s last name, so how do we know that old bastard isn’t still kicking around, and all these monies aren’t going to him?”

Aaron spins his laptop, showing Mercer a bunch of screens. “His death certificate. His body. His middle name was Franklin. These wills name Mercer Bentley Palmerston, with your date of birth. I already looked into it.” Aaron grins. “But now you’re finally looking in the right places. Keep going.”

Mercer preens, proud as punch. “Okay, next. Who benefits from Trevor dying?”

“Olivia,” I answer. “She becomes the eldest heir.”

“Yes, but whyyyyy?” he drones. “Because of the monies?”

*Monies?* Why can’t he just say money like a normal rich kid? “Because her and Will become the sole owners of... everything.”

“Yes, but we all know Will, that weathered fuckwit. And he’s a greedy son of a gun. He won’t allow Olivia to own anything.” Mercer crunches the

candy. “Which means she’s doing his dirty work with this Julia bitch, and when he gets what he wants, she’s off to the chopping block next.”

“We’ve got eyes on her,” Aaron says. “Not really to protect her, though. Do you want her protected?”

Mercer blanches, not having decided that yet. “I kind of want Samantha protected,” he admits. “Even though I don’t trust her yet. I at least want the option to maybe, potentially, in an unlikely twist of fate, trust her. Or at least not hate her.”

“We can do that, baby,” I tell him. Protection is a big part of the Carter business, and if I don’t do it, I can contract it out to any one of my cousins, aunts, uncles, or brothers.

Mercer mumbles a quick thanks before wiggling on my lap just to rile me up. “Why isn’t your apartment this cool?” he asks me, gawking around at Aaron’s place.

It’s industrial, open concept, full of brick walls and exposed beams, and has those old-fashioned windows that tilt up instead of sliding up. It is cool, and I’m glad he likes it, because the industrial apartment I own is right next to this. Me and Aaron always wanted to be neighbours. Aaron grins at me, but he hides it from Mercer.

“Aaron bats for both teams,” I tell him. “Wanna hop on his lap instead?”

To test me, he tries to get up. Not fucking happening. I wrap my arms around his middle and pull him against my chest. “Good try, little demon. You’re mine, and I have no problem staking my claim.”

“Then get a cooler apartment,” he says, but his voice has gone breathy, and his hand conveniently sits on his lap, covering his hardening dick.

“It’s on the news,” Aaron says, turning up the volume and mirroring his screen to the TV on the wall.

We all watch the news, reporting on the gunfire downtown. The red car has been identified, but they’re asking anyone with information to come forward. Trevor Palmerston’s name is left out of it, claiming a sole victim was gunned down and pronounced dead at the scene.

What’s Will going to say next? One son is missing, and one is dead. How does this benefit him? There has to be a bigger picture. Why can’t I see it?

Mercer goes back to gawking at Aaron’s apartment and all the tech equipment he has. So, I run through everything I know in my head.

Mercer purposefully aggravated Will by wearing lingerie and getting into the wrong kind of trouble, bringing attention to himself and the Palmerston family, but Will never did anything except send him to that facility. Why? Why try to kill him now? Is it because of me? Because of the betrothal between Olivia and Bronson? I do believe Mercer when he said Will was setting up for a long con to take over the Carter owned businesses, but something must have happened recently to have him upping his schedule. Knowing that it would sever ties between our family and his. Pissing off the Carter family isn't smart, so Will must have a fall-back plan to take us down. But what?

On top of that, Olivia now seems more involved than I initially thought. That first night I saw her taking Mercer from the police outside the club, she seemed irritated with him, but concerned about him. Does she care, or was she simply playing a part? Samantha doesn't seem to have anything to do with any of it, which is the only reason she's able to look at it from an outside perspective. She notices things between her sister and her father because she's either full of resentment that she's not on the inside, or she's genuinely concerned about Mercer.

Trevor is a wildcard. Other than knowing my mom trained him and he worked at that facility, I have no idea what he had to do with anything. I don't know what his death means, either. Yes, it bumps Olivia to the eldest Palmerston heir, but is that all?

The original will from Cheryl, Mercer's birth mom, played into my dad's hands, but I had Aaron look it over. My dad is only the acting CEO, with everything firmly placed in Mercer's name. He's not getting anything out of this other than having to keep these businesses afloat for my boyfriend while not wanting to do any of it.

I fell in love with Mercer Bentley, and I have no idea if that is why Will tweaked his plans, or if it's because of something else. Mercer has never been protected before, and now he's protected by me and my family. Did that make Will nervous?

Will's end goal is money. Owning all the Palmerston businesses, corporations, estates, and properties. If that's what he wants, Mercer is in his way. My dad is in his way. I'm in his way. Olivia might be his scapegoat, but her days are numbered, like Mercer said, because Will won't be anything less than top dog. If he's already suffering financial hardship

because he doesn't own Mercer's portion, it might be enough to make him act hastily.

Simply put and broken down, Will needs to acquire the mine and everything that comes with it. To do that, he needs Mercer dead. For Mercer to be dead, he needs to silence me and my family. So, essentially, we need to die for his plan to work. Samantha has no part in this, and I'm assuming Penny, Will's wife, has no idea what's going on. Trevor, on the other hand, seems to be a man who enjoyed his job at that facility. He wasn't close with his family and had very little to do with any family businesses other than Northern Horizons, but he was an heir to the fortune.

My fingers drum on Mercer's thigh, a theory forming.

"It's Olivia," I say, working through my theory. "She's thwarting Will's original plan."

"Will's original plan being a slow takeover?" Aaron asks.

"Yeah, like Mercer said. He planned to marry into the Carter family and slowly gain access to everything we own, hoping that it'd never actually go into Mercer's name. Or he already knew it was in Mercer's name and planned to either manipulate Mercer into giving it to him or kill Mercer to take it over."

"How's Olivia change that?" Mercer asks.

"She's her father's daughter. She just killed Trevor, she thinks you're dead, and Samantha will be next. That will make her the only heir."

"Because she has no idea I actually own all that shit, she still plans to marry Bronson," Mercer picks up my train of thought. "And take it all through him because she thinks the Carter family owns it."

"Then she has Bronson murdered, and she gains access to everything he owned through whatever prenup she dictated."

"Then her and her lawyer girlfriend run off into the sunset with everything, while the rest of us are dead or diminished to nothing." Mercer hops off my lap. "Yes. She fucked with Will's plans, and that's why he's making countermoves now."

Aaron shakes his head. "If she's smart enough to do all that, she wouldn't be dumb enough to have her lawyer girlfriend, as Mercer put it, shoot Trevor in broad daylight in her own car."

"Because the legal documents are already completed. She doesn't need the lawyer anymore, and if she goes down for murder, Olivia can cut her

out of the deal.” I mull that over. “Or it wasn’t her who did it. Mercer said the driver kept changing, and I saw it, too.”

Mercer gasps. Three times. “She made her hubby do it! She’ll claim she had no idea what he was going to do, her husband goes away for murder, and lesbo girlfriend and Olivia are free and clear to put the rest of their plan in place without anyone looking over their shoulders.”

“Which means Samantha isn’t safe,” Aaron says. “We should put her in a safehouse.”

I nod to agree, pulling my phone out to call my dad. “What about Penny?”

“Fuck her,” Mercer says. “She’ll side with Will every fucking day because she’s nothing without him.”

Works for me. I climb off the couch to pace, calling my dad. As soon as he picks up, I feel Mercer tugging on the back of my shirt, trying not to get in my way, but being clingy because that’s who he is. A boy with abandonment issues and a fear of being alone. I smooth a hand over his hair, showing him he isn’t bothering me.

“Blake,” Dad answers. “Trevor Palmerston is dead, and no one can find Samantha.”

Fuck.



THE ITCHINESS IS BACK, and it's not for the reason I thought it would be. My breathing is off, my legs are weak, and my fingers are tempted to end up in my mouth.

Blake is leaving me. And I fucking hate that I can't handle that.

"Look at me, Mercer," Blake says at the door to Aaron's apartment. He palms my cheeks, bends down, and swipes his thumb under my eyes. I didn't realize I'd started crying. "I'm coming back."

*Don't forget me.*

"I promise you, baby, I'm coming right back."

*Don't leave me.*

"We're going to get Samantha, and then I'll be right back here. It's safest for you to stay with Aaron."

*But what about your safety?* "Don't go," I beg. My entire family is after his life. "Please, Blake."

Blake smiles at me, pulling my fingers from my mouth. "Nothing, not your fucking family or the fate of the universe, will keep me from you. Do you hear me, Mercer? You're my little demon, and I will never leave you alone."

I cry harder, a mix of fear and emotion. "But?"

He licks his lips, meeting my eyes with his. "There are no buts. Not about this, and not about the way I feel for you. No buts, baby."

I cling to his jacket, gripping it between my fingers, desperate to keep him here. "But what if..." I trail off.

Blake nods at Aaron. "He has an earpiece for you. We can talk the whole time. Does that help?"

I sigh out a shaky breath. Maybe a little, but he can still die out there without me. Not that I'm some hero who can save him, but I don't want him to die without me. How pathetic is that?

"Plus, you're going to have to get used to wearing it if you wanna be the guy in the mic, right?" He smirks. "I'm coming back. I promise." The way he promises tells me that even if he does die, he will come back to tell me he tried. That even if something goes terribly wrong, Blake will find his way back to me because he will never lie to me—will never break a promise to me.

He's been doing this far longer than he's known me, and I need to learn to trust him. I do trust him and his capabilities, but I don't trust the danger out there. Now that we know what's happening, he's a target to more than one person simply because he loves me.

Like Keira said, it's time for me to start trusting myself. "If you don't talk to me the whole time and come back to me when you promised, I will turn full serial killer, and you'll be my first victim."

Blake laughs. "Deal." He grips my chin, pressing his lips to mine. "No buts, baby."

I wrap my arms around him and admit I feel the same. "No buts." *I love you, Blake.*

I stare at the closed door for five minutes after he's gone, contemplating breaking his rule and following him. Realistically, I know I'd only be a hindrance, and my whereabouts need to stay hidden to keep both of us safe, but the temptation is there. I no longer feel safe if Blake isn't around. That asshole became my safe place. He's my wall, the lock on my door, the only person who sees me and loves me because of it.

"Better get over here," Aaron calls. "Blake's already bitching that you aren't talking his ear off." He holds up a set of headphones with a mic. "Time to start training to be me, Mercer."

I'm still shaking, but I ignore the itch and join Aaron at his hacker's paradise set-up. "Do I get a cool code name?" I sit down in a swivelly computer chair. *Shit, that's comfy.* I throw on the headphones, feeling even cooler.

"Little Demon," Blake's voice comes through immediately. "That's your code name, baby. Or Blake's Little Demon. I like that better."

"Mm." My shakes settle and the itchiness mostly goes away. Gosh, it's sick how dependent I am on him. I went from being a scared and lonely boy



to being his shadow, and I don't know how to differentiate the two personalities. My abandonment issues cling to him, but my newfound sense of self reminds me I've got what it takes to stand on my own two feet. *I killed a guy!* I can handle a few hours without my master, surely.

For good measure, I tuck my nose into Blake's hoodie and breathe him in. There. Shakes mostly gone, replaced only by a nervous energy that is more normally associated with worrying about him being a murder target.

"What can this little demon do?" I ask Aaron.

"The biggest thing we can do is clear their path," Aaron starts teaching me. Blake and Brandt are together tonight, and the two of them are heading to Samantha's last known location. They contacted her, telling her to stay put, but she's no longer on the camera feed of the parking lot she was in.

"Okay. Clearing their path," I parrot. "How?"

"Traffic cams, any cameras we can tap into to make sure there isn't anything unexpected waiting for them. On this screen, you'll see everything I can hack into. But on this screen, you'll see the ones we're watching for. Or watching out for, more like."

I see the screen with multiple camera feeds of the roads and areas they're heading into. On another screen, I see Will, sitting down with a detective to either play his part about my disappearance or to talk about Trevor's death. Next to that view, Olivia sits at home, but the image is grainy.

"How are you getting that? Are there cameras in the house?" I ask.

"It's from an open laptop sitting on the kitchen table. I tapped into the webcam."

So fucking cool. I don't even know how to be this cool, but I'm here for it. Kind of wish I had black-rimmed glasses for this moody look. I'd look sexy as a gamer boy.

"On top of that, we're monitoring bank account activity, including offshore accounts. Sometimes it tells us where they are or what they intend to do."

"Or if they've hired a hitman," I scoff.

"Or that, but your, uh, Will never leaves a trail like that. He's too business savvy," Aaron says.

"Are you still alive, Blakey?"

"Mm," he hums.

“And this is security access codes,” Aaron goes on, showing me sequences of numbers that draw my interest. “Northern Horizons, all the businesses Will owns, Olivia’s known locations, your family home, and even the door security alarms at the gas plant. We’re tracking secure employee web portals as well as their lock codes to access parts of the buildings. We want to know all the moving parts. Who is going where and when and why they’re there. If we know where everyone is, we know how to avoid them.”

I let my eyes roam all the different screens, wondering how long it took him to focus on this many things at a time. Patterns, sequences, numbers, and puzzles are where I excel, but this is an even bigger puzzle that my brain wants to learn how to solve.

I match the personal identification codes to names, trying to memorize who has what access to where. The numbers keep shifting as workers at these buildings access different areas or restricted spaces, but my mind snags on one.

“Wait.” I point to it on the screen. “That’s Trevor’s access code at the... what is that building?” I try to scan the list, looking for the ID number on the list of buildings.

“Fuck,” Aaron hisses. “Blake, someone using Trevor’s code just entered your dad’s house.” Aaron pulls up another screen while Blake talks in the background. “Can you tell him?” He nods at the new screen that’s dialling Brendan Carter.

“Carter,” he answers.

“Brendan, it’s Blake’s Little Demon.” I snug the mic up to my mouth, feeling so badass even though Brendan might be in danger. “Someone just entered your house using an ID tag linked to Trevor.” I look at Aaron. “Why would Trevor have an ID code for the Carter house?”

“He doesn’t. But it shows that whoever put in security at the Carter house, also did it at Northern Horizons because the systems are linked illegally. Good catch,” Aaron says.

“I’m tapping into my camera feed,” Brendan says. “But after this, I want it disabled. We’ll redo it tomorrow.”

“Don’t stay there tonight, Dad,” Blake says.

“I won’t.” There’s a pause while both Brendan and Aaron tap into the footage at the Carter home, so while they’re doing that, I keep scanning the traffic cams to make sure Blake and Brandt’s path remains clear.

“Might be nothing,” I start, feeling unsure if this is worth mentioning. “But there is a black SUV parked at every intersection for the next seven blocks.”

On the screen, I watch the vehicle Brandt is driving turn a corner to avoid the area. Brandt curses, then says, “Thanks, Little Demon. It’s not nothing.”

As soon as they divert their route, the SUVs all start moving. “They’re moving.”

“Do you recognize this woman?” Brendan says.

My eyes flick to the security camera screen to see a woman in the kitchen of Brendan’s house. I wait until her face partially catches a camera, like she knows where they all are. “That’s Olivia’s friend, Jules,” I say at the same time Aaron says, “Julia Hentz.”

“Keep an eye on her,” Brendan says. “We’re at the police station.” Brendan and Bronson are keeping up appearances, ready to confront Will at the cop shop to ask about me and my whereabouts. It’s the perfect time to leak that information to see what Will does with it. “Call me if anything happens.”

“Those SUVs are one block east of you guys, spanned out from a few blocks back to a few ahead. Your path to that Mini Mart is blocked,” I say, pulling out a phone Blake gave me to try calling Samantha again.

She’s not with Olivia. She isn’t with Will. Trevor is dead. Julia is breaking and entering. So where the fuck could she be?

“Where’s Keira?” I ask Aaron. “Should we be monitoring her safety?”

“Always am,” Aaron says. “She’s working.” To Blake and Brandt, he adds, “You can cut through the parking garage of the Morrison Hotel. It spans two blocks and will shoot under the road and spit you out on the east side of them. Take a right in 400 metres.”

“On it,” Brandt says. “Julia?”

“Just snooping so far,” I answer. “In the living room now.”

“What’s Dad keep at that house that she’d be looking for in the living room? Most people go for the home office or a safe,” Blake says.

I think back to the night we sat in Brendan’s living room after my big murder night. I remember cheeseburgers and a rum-filled drink, and a really bad case of the *clingys*. What else? As Brandt pulls into the parking garage and Brendan and Bronson enter the police station on all the cameras, my mind reels, trying to recall in perfect memory if anything stood out to me in

the living room of that house. Julia is scanning the hearth, the shelves, the side tables, and picking up all the photos and picture frames. Her hands run along the wall, feeling for something in the dark.

"The security alarm box," I blurt, remembering it blinking the time at me. "It's hidden behind the curtain by the patio door. She's looking for it."

"She's how they're synching them," Blake says. "So fucking smart, baby."

So the security alarm company isn't to blame, Olivia's girlfriend is. But why? "Why, though? What is she hoping to achieve?"

"My dad's whereabouts," Blake answers.

"More than likely, she's tapping into the alarm so she knows exactly when he's home and when he isn't," Aaron makes her screen bigger. "Not sure why yet."

"Are we clear to exit the garage?" Brandt asks.

I scan the traffic cams again, seeing their marker one block east of where the SUVs are. "You betcha, Brandty. They're now one city block west of you."

He laughs, and Blake groans. Wow, my shakes are completely gone and a new sort of buzz is humming me up with energy and the wiggles. "I feel like a badass," I tell them all. "I'm so getting laid when you get back, Blake."

"Mm," he agrees, making me smile. "Watch our back. We're at the variety store." I check the screen, watching Blake get out of the vehicle while Brandt keeps it running. He disappears inside the store for a few seconds, but comes out just as quickly. When he leaves the camera's reach around the back of the building, my shaking comes back, and my eyes fixate on the place he disappeared.

Aaron taps my knee, nodding at a monitor that shows the back of the building. *Oh, phew.* There's his sexy ass in tactical gear and bad boy mode. Blake checks in all the shadowed areas, behind the dumpsters, and inside parked staff vehicles. Nothing. No Samantha.

"I'll pull footage from the past few hours," Aaron says, getting right on it. "Will take me a bit."

The phone Blake gave me starts blaring Latino rap, showing a number I don't recognize. I pick it up, but don't say anything.

"Ben." Olivia's voice snakes down my spine and sets my skin to goosebumps. My eyes shift to the grainy footage of her at the house, sitting

at the kitchen island now with a glass of wine in front of her. She looks straight at the laptop sitting across the room on the dining room table and smiles. “Caught you on camera outside Trevor’s building today. Parked there with your boyfriend. Not dead, after all.”

I don’t know what to do. What does she want? I hate freezing up, but she hasn’t given any indication about her intentions yet, so I stay silent.

“By now, I’m sure you’ve put the pieces together. You were always a smart kid. Smarter than the rest of us. Took me until yesterday to figure out that you aren’t who I thought you were, *cousin*.”

I get sweaty and freezing all at once.

“Dad doesn’t know you aren’t dead yet, and if you want to keep it that way, you’ll meet with me tomorrow at that same cabin. Alone.”

“No. I don’t give a fuck what he knows.”

“Okay,” she laughs. “What about her? Do you give a fuck about her?” She walks over to the laptop we’re spying on her through, tilting the screen down to the floor.

Samantha. Either alive and unconscious or already dead. Olivia nudges her, and she groans, slipping down the wall with no coordination.

“Noon tomorrow, Ben. At the cabin.”

“Mercer,” I correct.

She hangs up on me. I go still.

“Heading home,” Blake says. “I’ll call Dad. Mercer? Listen to me. I’ll be home in twenty-five minutes. No buts, okay?”

Aaron grabs my chair and spins me to face him. “Do not shut down. If you shut down, she wins. This is where you shine, Mercer. This is where you put your mind to use, lean on the rest of us to help you, and figure something out. You are not alone in this, hear me? You are not alone.”

*I am not alone.* For the first time in my life, I have something like a real family. That bitch slaps me back into my body and the brilliant mind I’m learning to use. I crack my knuckles, nod at him, and face the monitors again.

“I want their trip home monitored. I want to know what Julia is doing. And I want every geographic map and aerial footage of that cabin.” My fingers hover over the keyboard, not knowing how to obtain all that. I look at Aaron for another lesson. “Help me, I’m poor.”

Aaron laughs. Blake laughs. Brandt laughs. *My fucking family.*



THE WAY he melts into my body, his back to my chest and his arms reaching back around my neck, does me in. The fit of him. The feel of him. The *fucking* him. There's no bratty attitude and no ulterior motive tonight because this isn't a game. This is—for the very first time—simply sex with Mercer. It's *everything*.

My arms weave around his waist, sliding up his chest to pin him to me as tightly as I can. I thrust my hips upward, fucking him slow and deep while he moans with his head leaned back against my shoulder. His body is a masterpiece; a lean, smooth, beautiful tool he loves using to manipulate. But he's not manipulating me tonight.

As soon as I walked into Aaron's apartment, honestly braced for Mercer's panic attack, he surprised the shit out of me by finishing whatever job he was doing with Aaron before so much as acknowledging me. I mean, I knew he knew I was there because he visibly relaxed, so I kissed him and let him do his thing. When he finished, he took off the headphones, stood up and stretched, and then just... hugged me. No witty snips or mocking comebacks. No taunts or teases.

A healthy reaction to an unhealthy situation, and I'm so proud of him.

I grind into him, my hands wandering his chest and shoulders to keep him as close as possible. The way he's breathing harshly, moaning with each subtle thrust and grabbing at the back of my neck, is pure bliss. My tongue runs up the side of his neck, tasting the sweat on his skin and feeling the way we mingle together. I suck under his ear, leaving a mark to claim him by.

I've never been in love before, and if this is how intense it is, call me a fucking goner, because there's no coming back from this.

"Blake," Mercer moans, twisting his head.

I grip his jaw and turn his head even more, bringing his lips to mine. I suck his tongue into my mouth and drag my teeth over his bottom lip before releasing him. The whine of satisfaction he lets out is the best music to complement the way we're joined. I keep my forehead pressed to the side of his, my free hand sliding down his stomach to grip his cock.

"Mm." He trembles against me.

I stroke him at the same slow pace as I fuck him, making sure he feels every languid drag of my cock inside his tight ass. When he tugs on my hair and lets out a breathy moan, I capture his mouth to taste it.

"Fuck, Mercer," I breathe against his lips.

I don't even know what else to say. Words evade me and feeling consumes me. The sensation of having him like this, knowing he wants it as badly as I do, proves to me he's the one. I didn't know I was waiting for him, but now that I have him, I can't imagine ever letting go.

Dropping his dick and letting my hands wander, I grip his hips and rock him on my cock, gyrating until I find the angle that has precum leaking from his tip.

"Oh, god," he groans, sucking in a quick breath. "Fuck."

When he buckles forward, landing on his stomach, I lean over him and keep my cock buried deep inside him. He meets me with each thrust, lifting his hips and pushing his ass back while he grips the blanket in a tight fist. I love it, all of it, but I hate not being able to see him. I need to see his eyes.

Mercer groans in frustration when I pull out, but it turns into a gasp when I flip him onto his back. Grabbing him behind the knees, I tug until I'm between his legs. He blinks up at me, lip caught between his teeth.

"So swoony, Blake," he mocks with a little smirk.

Yeah, sentimental, more like. I drape his legs over my hips and push inside him to fuck him missionary. There are those amber eyes. Usually so full of either trouble or panic, tonight they relay nothing but absolute comfort and whatever he portrays as love. When he cries out in pleasure, his hands reach around my neck, and he doesn't even have to pull me down. I go on my own, kissing him like he's the only sustenance I need to survive.

One of these days, everything with his family is going to be resolved, and when it is, I'll have to go back to my job. Leaving him for days at a

time seems impossible and I have no idea how I'm going to do it—survive it. I've never been attached to anything before; not a place, a person, or a home. Mercer is all those things to me. He tied me down so fucking tight, I'm going to turn into the needy one.

Against my lips in a raspy whisper, he says, "Fuck me like there are no butts, Blake."

*Fuck me like you love me.*

He keeps his arms around my neck, and I snake one under his lower back. The other tangles in his hair, and I roll my hips, making him tighten his legs around my waist. Every time I fuck him, it's with no butts because I've been in love with Mercer since before the gala, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for him. He fucking has me. For how possessive I get, I know it's him who holds all the power. Mercer is mine, but he has no idea how irrevocably he owns me.

His cock rubs against my abs with every motion of my hips. My mind stays right here with him, not wandering to the trouble coming his way tomorrow. For now, he's all I'm focused on. His little moans and the way his heels dig into my ass have me bending forward to kiss him again. With my lips pressed to his and his ass hugging my cock, I'm on that razor's edge of pure bliss.

"No butts, Mercer. No fucking butts."

He cries out as he comes, his cock spurting between our bodies and his fingers tugging at the back of my neck. When he squeezes my dick with the force of his orgasm, it's over for me.

"Mm, Blake," he moans against my mouth.

I fill him with cum, my hips slowing and my breathing increasing until he completely steals it away with a life-changing kiss. Dipped in bliss and soaked in love, we morph together until the orgasms ebb and the need to stay connected overwhelms. I settle over him, chests flush, wrapping my arms around his back and burying my face in his neck.

"I lov—"

"Don't," he snaps at me, yanking on my hair to look me straight in the eyes. "You got to half-ass say it first, so I get to whole-ass say it first."

I smirk at him, holding in a laugh. "Well, get on with it then, little demon."

"Now there's pressure on it," he complains.

"Alright, then I'll say it. I lo—"



“You shut your sexy mouth!” He slaps a hand over my lips. His amber eyes meet my blue ones, and even though he’s being a little demon, it just makes his declaration mean more. “I love you, okay? With no buts. Fuck knows how that happened, since you were my jailor and all,” he scoffs. His hand leaves my mouth. “You saw me.” He swallows audibly. “And loved me anyway.” Vulnerability and insecurity flash in his eyes, but when he blinks, it’s gone. “I love you, Blake. Sorry?”

I laugh for real. It feels amazing, and I never want this moment to end. “Mm.” I kiss him. “Your love is a lot to handle,” I agree.

“If you don’t say it back within the next five seconds, I will have a full-blown meltdown.”

“You told me not to make you weepy,” I tease.

His eyes water a little. “Make me weepy. I only said that because you’re bound to be an ugly crier and I was trying to be modest because I’m not.”

“Modesty isn’t a good look on you, baby.” I push my weight onto my elbows and stay right in his face. “One of the many things I love about you, Mercer.”

More tears well in his eyes. “Again.”

“I love you, Mercer.”

“But?”

“No buts.”

He struggles not to get weepy, but in the end, he lets out a dramatic whine, covers his face, and doesn’t complain when I uncover it.

“I fucking love you.” I kiss him.

“Love me harder,” he demands.

Any-fucking-time.



AARON OFFERS me a coffee with a grin. “Good night?”

I take the coffee and hide my own grin. Great night. We’re still in his apartment, but I decided not to tell Mercer about the apartment next door until he gets through this day. He doesn’t need anything else to distract him before he meets Olivia at the cabin. Strapped with daggers. Highly tracked. Full of audio and video. In a bullet-proof vest. I’m not taking any chances, and I’ll be less than ten feet away from him at all times.

“He loves me,” I tell Aaron with a smirk. “Said so himself.”

“Kind of flattered it happened here,” he laughs.

“Don’t get smug,” I warn. “Keira make it home?”

“She’s gonna stay with Kev until this is all over,” he says, waving me off.

Aaron and Keira are married, but they have an open relationship. She has another boyfriend named Kevin, and he has a boyfriend named Ian. Sometimes they all hang out together, but I’ve never tried to dive too deep into their dynamics. It works for them, so whatever. It always blew me away because I could barely handle a one-night stand, and here he is, loving life with a wife and a boyfriend. Aaron is nothing if not attention oriented, so maybe that’s why.

But so am I. And now I have a new fixation, who is currently deciding what kind of outfit today will require. I miss his panties and lingerie, but after all this, I’ll get him back in his hoodlum look with all the sexy lacy underthings. Hot damn, he’s fucking perfection.

“Okay, before we dive into what’s happening today,” Aaron says, sitting down at the kitchen table. “Frank.” He raises a brow, asking me what I plan to do with him. “We pissing his wife off or killing him?”

“I thought Brandt took that over?”

Aaron nods. “Yeah, but we both know you’re a control freak and will want the final say.”

I sit down with him, keeping an eye on the hall. Aaron’s apartment has more bedrooms than mine, which means more privacy. Mine only has one actual bedroom, and other than it and the bathroom, everything else is out in the open. I hope Mercer loves it.

“I want to expose him instead. If we incriminate him for leaking secure information, especially to the competition, it’ll benefit her more. The kids get to keep their dad, even if he gets fined or goes to jail for a bit, and her business will flourish with all the media attention. The company he leaked information to will fail, and she’ll be right back at the top.”

Aaron spins a laptop toward me. “Figured you’d say that.” He shows me the whole plan. Evidence, reports, proof of information, and footage of everything except the time me and Mercer were in that server room. Fuck, love him and how well he reads me. “I’ll put it through the fake private investigation company, getting her to sign off on it like she hired them instead of us, and send it through?”

“If she’ll sign it, yeah.” I nod at him. “Thanks.”

“Okay, next thing,” he says, closing the laptop. “Can I actually train Mercer?”

“If he wants to learn it, then yeah.”

“Good. He’s got a fucking brilliant mind. He’d be good at this,” Aaron compliments my boy, making me smile into my coffee. “But are you sure it’s smart for him to work with you? Be your man in the mic, as he calls it?”

Yeah, no. Probably not the best idea. Not at the start, anyway. He needs to learn from Aaron because Aaron is the best, but he’d be better paired with one of my brothers or my dad until we learn to separate work from our relationship. I can’t be worrying about him, and he can’t be worrying about me without distractions happening.

Just as I’m about to answer, Brandt, Bronson, and my dad walk in the apartment door without even knocking.

“Alright. What the actual fuck?” I stand up, confused. “I swear I kept him a secret. How do you all know about Aaron?”

“I told you it’s my job to read my sons,” Dad says with a smile.

“I didn’t,” Bronson admits. “Until yesterday.”

I look at Brandt, waiting for him to answer. He shrugs. “We fucked a few times.”

Well, Jesus fucking Christ. I’m not even going to touch that one right now, but I give Aaron a glare for supposedly being my best friend and most well-kept secret and keeping that big-ass lie from me. I rub my temples and drain the coffee, needing another one already.

“Blake’s in love,” Aaron chimes in, getting the attention off himself.

“Old news,” Brandt says.

Bronson laughs. “He’s been in love since he saw that devil outside the strip club in black lacy lingerie.” He grins at me. “Right, man?”

Wrong. I was *intrigued* then, but I didn’t know how incredible the person inside that insanely sexy body would turn out to be. “Can we focus on the cabin job?” We have less than five hours to finish planning it.

“Where’s Mercer?” Dad asks.

Finally taking the intro he didn’t take at that family dinner so long ago, Mercer struts his shit down the hallway. Dressed in tight-fitting black tactical gear and combat boots, he flips a few daggers between his fingers and glares at all of us with dark-lined eyes and thick lashes. With his hair properly messed up and his spine straight, he owns the look.

Lethal. Sexy. In-fucking-charge. That's his look.

"Today is my one and only shot to be the assassin, so I'm dressing the part. After this, I'm back in my hoodlum-slash-gamer boy look to be Little Demon in the mic." He twirls the daggers and sheaths them in holsters strapped to his hips. "Boys," he greets everyone with a saucy smirk. "Blakey."

My cock twitches in my tactical pants, and I debate stripping him from that outfit to fuck him full of more cum to carry into this job.

See? This is what I mean by distractions.



LOOKING AT HER NOW, I wonder how I could have ever mistaken her expressions for compassion. All these years, Olivia made me believe I was my own worst enemy, but she still felt a little sorry for me. Today, I know that's bullshit, and for the first time, I'm not afraid to stare it in the eye.

Everything else? Yeah. Fucking terrified. But not that. Not the blatant dislike and disrespect she has for me. Luckily, I'm a petty bitch and hate her just as much.

Blake is in my ear, but he isn't speaking, and my assassin's look isn't intimidating to Olivia. I don't need her to be intimidated; I just need her to know I'm not that little boy she sometimes checked on in his bedroom.

My eyes shift to Samantha. She's drugged, probably with the same drug Will used on me, passed out on the couch. Her chest is still moving, and every now and then, she makes sleepy sounds, so keeping her on the breathing side of living is my biggest goal. According to Blake, my biggest goal is keeping *myself* alive.

"I'd say it's nice to see you, Olivia, but truthfully, you're looking even more haggard than Dee. Tired, much?" That gets Blake talking—more like reaming me out for running my mouth, but I like his voice in my ear. We've swapped roles today, and I'd much rather be the man in the mic than standing in this bullshit cabin where I almost died and actually murdered someone.

Olivia is aware of the mouth I have on me, so she doesn't take the bait. She leans against the back of Samantha's couch, looking down at her. "She always did have a soft spot for you," she says, as if it made her weak. "Too

bad she didn't have a backbone. One stern warning to drop it from Mom or Dad and she did."

I painted my nails for the occasion. A blackish-purple shade called '*are you jelly?*' It seemed fitting. I made Blake buy it for me on the credit card number I stole. No regrets. I inspect my nails, giving Blake the signal that I'm alright so far.

"And you did?" I ask. "Had that backbone you're accusing her of not having?"

"Yeah, I just didn't have a heart." She laughs. "Well, not really for you, anyway. You made the bed you sleep in."

"Got me in Blake Carter's bed, so... are you jelly?"

Her smile is cat-like and confident. "Guess he won, yeah?" she mocks me, and I don't understand why. "All this time, I thought marrying the eldest Carter was the way to go, but Blake had it figured out before me."

"Don't listen to her, baby. It has nothing to do with money," Blake says in my ear.

"He gets you to fall in love with him, takes everything you own, and then you end up dead anyway. Brilliant. It's what I would have done. Too bad I had the wrong Carter boy."

I hate that my insecurities come roaring to the surface of my skin, prickling my goosebumps to make me itchy. I trust Blake. I *love* Blake. Why the hell are her words piercing my new armour?

"Why'd you want to meet?" My '*are you jelly?*' fingertips tickle the hilt of a dagger. I don't know if I have what it takes to maim or kill her, but having the weapons makes me feel better. Knowing how to use them skillfully makes me feel even better. All that time I spent locked in this cabin as a teen wasn't for nothing.

"We have business to discuss. We can either do it the easy way, which means you give me everything you own in exchange for her." She hooks her thumb at the couch. "Or I get my lawyer to rework the will and company transfer documents for when you die."

"Jules?" I ask, still tickling the dagger. It keeps my fingers out of my mouth. "Isn't she already going down for the murder of Trevor? That's how you set it up, right?"

Olivia's face hardens at the same time the front door bangs open. Julia Hentz, the lawyer, has a gun to Blake's temple and his hands are bound

behind his back. I jump at the intrusion, and as soon as I go to help Blake, he subtly shakes his head at me. He's fine. Maybe this is a part of his plan.

"I didn't kill Trevor," Julia says, pushing Blake inside the cabin and closing the door. "My husband did it in a jealous rage. Thought I was having an affair with him."

Didn't seem like a jealous rage. Five circles of the block and at least two swaps in the driver's seat don't add up. Plus, I'm not as stupid as she thinks I am.

I turn my attention away from Blake, even though it surprises me how angry I am to see him bound with a gun to his head. "So, it's just the businesses you're after?"

"And all the assets and accounts that go along with them." Olivia steps toward me, leaving at least ten feet between us, but it still feels too close. "I want them so Will can't have them."

"He doesn't have them now, and he never will," I say, meaning it.

Olivia laughs. "Really, Ben? You think he won't find a way to kill you or con you into giving him everything he feels entitled to?"

"Mercer," I correct out of habit now. "Why'd Trevor have to die?" I barely knew anything about the man I thought was my brother. He didn't spend much time in my life; I didn't see him at the facility, and he didn't appear to be very close with the Palmerston family, apart from attending functions and events when required.

"Because Julia's husband was jealous," Olivia says, aware that we're both carrying listening devices. She hasn't specifically said anything to incriminate herself, and even offering Samantha's life in exchange for this deal proves nothing. No one knows Samantha is here, and she hasn't mentioned her name.

"Okayyyyy," I drone. "So, to sum it all up, you want me to sign over everything I own or else you're going to kill us both?" I motion between me and Samantha, my nails glistening in the sun through the window.

"Him, too," she mouths, nodding at Blake. "And Brandt to the west. Brendan to the east, and my future hubby just outside."

Good. She doesn't know about Aaron. But I do wonder how she knows the whereabouts of everyone else. Are there others here working with her or does she have surveillance up? If she does, Aaron would have caught on and disarmed it. Unless he's keeping it live for a reason that I haven't figured out yet. Gah, seeing everything is harder than I thought it was.

“What about Will?” And Penny?

“Can we get on with this?” Julia barks at the two of us, shucking up her hold on my man. “We have no idea who else is coming, Liv.”

I glare at her, not liking her touching him. Blake, the fucking bastard, smirks at me. I do more than tickle the hilt this time, tugging it free to rest in my grip at my side.

Olivia waves her off like she means nothing, which only makes her angry. I don’t want her angry with Blake in her grasp, so I turn to my former sister, waiting for her to answer my question.

“Will won’t last much longer. He’s of no concern to you.” She flips her dark hair over her shoulder. “I’m only interested in our deal right now. So, what’s it going to be, Ben?”

“Well, I’m not giving you anything,” I tell her. A lot of hours of research spent with Aaron last night delayed the best sex of my life, and after finding something that stuck, I called my new potential bestie to strike a deal. Potential is a loose term; she’s still my nemesis for the time being. “I have my own lawyer now, and I’m warning you, she’s a savage little whore.”

Olivia widens her eyes at me, unsure for the first time since I showed up. “What?”

“Yeah, she undid all your forged documents and had them declared null and void. Whatever plans you had in place for my death or Will’s death are now undone, so you might want to start again.” I shrug, acting nonchalant even though this dagger is sitting heavy between my fingertips. “On top of that, I have a new executor of my will, and when I die, my assets will go somewhere you’ll never be able to obtain them.” I smile at her.

“Ben,” she seethes at me. “What did you do?” She closes the distance between us, her back to Samantha. I stay my hand and meet her eyes. “What the fuck did you do?”

“I thought this was a *Game of Thrones* type situation? You’re after what’s mine, but you’ll take out the Carters and Will to get it, and in return, Will is also trying to take out the Carters and me to get it. Aren’t we all fighting for the same throne? I didn’t think there were any rules to this game.”

When the last word leaves my lips, the plan—that got slightly muddled by Blake being in here—goes into motion. That dagger between my fingers flies to my left, embedding in Julia’s right hand. Blake knocks the gun from



her grasp, and then my second dagger heads straight for *his* hands. I'm not used to throwing with my nails painted, so it's just a titch too far to the right. Blake catches it... blade first. Blood drips down his fingers, but he works to cut his bindings.

"Warning label," he complains to me.

Meanwhile, as I'm ignoring him, Brandt, Bronson, and Brendan—the B team—already have Samantha secure, and a bag and zip ties are being placed over Olivia's head and wrists.

"A Team? You there?" I ask the mic in my ear.

"Here," Aaron says. "Surveillance all around the property, but no other bodies I'm picking up. She has no men."

Blake's knee is pressed to Julia's spine, and her wrists are being tethered behind her back. He's bleeding all over her, and when he glares his *warning label* bullshit at me, I just blink my big ol' eyes.

"No buts?"

"A fucking but or two today, Mercer," he scoffs at me. "Your aim is impeccable. You did that on purpose!"

I'll take the blame because there isn't a chance in hell I'm pointing fingers at my painted ones. Blake will make me stop wearing the polish, and I've grown rather fond of the colour.

"Exit path is clear," Aaron says to all of us. "Three approaching vehicles from the north. Better move."

And with that, I let them do all the heavy lifting of the ladies and follow them from the cabin. There's no time to do a sweep for bugs and cameras, but Aaron—being the A team, way cooler than this B team—is confident he can remotely destroy them.

Brandt has Olivia over his shoulder, kicking and screaming, and Brendan has Julia in his arms. She might be knocked out because Blake got a bit bloody-handsy with her when he lost his temper with me. I walk behind Blake as he clears our path, and Bronson brings up the rear with a groggy Samantha. Too many unconscious girls around for my liking, thanks.

"You okay, little demon?" Blake asks, eyes scanning the forest.

"Legs are a bit tired. Piggyback?"

"Do not pull a trip move like you did that night on the stairs."

"What night?" I play innocent.

"The fire alarm night."

*Ah, look at all these fond memories we're creating.*

I smile at him to cover up how badly I'm shaking, and when he turns ahead, knowing our exit is more important than my tired legs, I subtly put my fingers into my mouth.



MERCER FUCKS with the window button. He messes with the radio. He gets sick of the radio and complains about not having his own phone to connect to the sound system. He tilts his seat back. He tilts it forward. His feet cross on the seat, then rest on the dash, then stomp on the floor mat. He huffs and fucking scoffs, and then he crosses his arms and puts on a pouty face.

Then he goes quiet. I notice it this time.

“Goddamn you, Blake,” he complains even more. “You ruin all my fun.”

I grin. Yeah, I no longer keep my wallet in my jacket pocket while driving. I tighten my bandaged hand around the steering wheel, looking over at Mercer in his hoodlum look. And I know for a damn fact he has a lacy blue bodysuit on under there.

“I found other fun things,” he says, leaning back to sit in his chair.

In his greedy fucking paws, he has a gun he has no idea how to use, my phone, and the pack of cigarettes I haven’t smoked in a while.

“Mercer, I’m fucking serious about you and warning labels. Put the gun down.” I hold my hand out for it.

With an eye roll, he slaps it on my palm, and I tuck it back into the holster on the opposite side of him. “I’m smoking this. Why don’t you smoke these anymore?”

*Because I don’t want to smell like cigarettes when I kiss you.* It’s not something I’ve ever thought about before, but it’s on my mind now. Maybe also because he’s a better stress reliever than those things.

He lights a cigarette and cracks the window, completing his hoodlum look. So hot. He points my phone at my face to unlock it and then helps

himself. "I'm snooping."

"I figured."

"I also know your password, but thought I'd respect your privacy by making you aware I'm doing it." He clicks into my messages, sifts through them, and then checks my web browser history. He takes a drag. "Why have you been googling men's tailors? Having a suit made for something I don't know about, you secretive dick? No wonder I need to snoop."

"I'm trying to find that suit you wore to the gala," I tell him, pulling into a Starbucks because he whined when I passed the last four. "What do you want?"

"A pumpkin spice latte."

"It's spring."

"A pumpkin spice latte."

"*It's spring*. They don't have that. Pick something else."

"Well, I don't want Starbucks then," he sasses, taking another drag. "I want a milkshake now."

I pull up to the drive-thru and roll down the window. "Do you have pumpkin spice lattes?"

"No, sorry."

I step on the gas and cross the street for a milkshake. Fucking pushover. Mercer grins into my phone, knowing he won. "You won't find that suit anywhere," he says. "I sort of made it when I was bored once. It was a regular suit. I just sewed a bunch of buckles and clasps and stuff on it. Don't judge me. It was a lonely time in my life."

My heart hurts for the life he's lived. "How're your therapy exercises from Keira going?"

He scoffs. No wait. He laughs condescendingly. For sure this time. "None of your business, nosy."

"Says the guy snooping through my phone."

"Hey, I'm the one with trust and abandonment issues. I'm allowed to snoop and be overbearing because it's justified."

I let out a long breath, kind of loving the feeling of being annoyed by him. "What kind of milkshake?"

"Chocolate. A big one. I'm feeling extra salty, so I gotta even that out with some sweets." He takes another drag and taps his purple nails on my phone screen, sifting through all my emails now.

I order him a big chocolate milkshake, settle for a shitty McDonald's coffee, and pull back onto the street. "You ruined me for bitter coffee," I tell him, even though he isn't the one that put that fancy coffee machine in my apartment.

"Thank you, Blake. I love ruining you," he says with attitude and a smile. "I haven't had a panic attack like I used to in a while," he answers my question finally. "They start, but I can sometimes pull myself out of them now. She told me to take notice of good attention and bad attention."

"And?"

He groans. "Don't fish for compliments."

I laugh. "You saying I give you good attention, baby?"

"You might, but you're also draining because you require so much of mine."

"Mm." I can't stop smiling at how big of a hypocrite he is.

"Mm," he echoes. He tosses the cigarette butt and rolls up the window. "Okay, real talk." He looks at me. "What the fuck do I do, Blake?"

About Olivia and Samantha. About Will. About the money and the companies and the gas plant he now owns. About his life being in danger. About coming back from the dead.

"Also, I'm homeless," he adds, sucking on the straw.

"You're never homeless, Mercer."

"You gonna lock me in your ivory tower forever? Because I'm so much more than a sleeping beauty, and those firemen might come for me again."

"I'll fight them off." I look at him. "You're mine now, baby. I'm never letting you go. Wherever you wanna live, I'll be there."

"I wanna live with Aaron," he snarks. "Love that place and all his nerdy shit."

"We can get you nerdy shit." Damn, can't wait for his hacker look. "As for the rest of it, we'll sit down and think it all through. It's in your hands now. We're just here to act out whatever you pick."

"Is it wrong if I don't want it?" he asks. "I know my birth mumsie left it as a gift and literally lost her life for it, but it feels tainted now. It'll never be free of the Palmerstons if I own it. I don't even want to be a Palmerston anymore."

I can think of a way to change his last name, but I keep that thought to myself for now. "What would you rather do with it? If you sell it all, you still get the money."

“Think your dad will keep it?”

I honestly thought so at first. When I first got back from my five years away to notice my dad had purchased a gas mine, I figured he was trying to be as big and mighty as Will. Now that I know he’s only holding onto it for Mercer, I highly doubt my dad wants the headaches that come with being that wealthy and influential. At the end of the day, Brendan Carter is a man who likes to get his hands dirty with actual blood, not political games and business negotiations.

“I don’t know, Mercer. What do you want out of life?”

“What a lame question.” He slurps his milkshake.

“Answer it anyway. You’ve never had the option to decide before.”

“Hot sex. A hacker’s apartment like my new idol Aaron. To be the man in the mic. Sexy outfits.” He tucks his head and mumbles, “You.”

As soon as I try to comment on all that, he turns the radio on loud. *Frank Thomas has been charged and is awaiting trial regarding the Thomas-Henderson breach of information. His wife, Annabelle Thomas, CEO and founder of Thomas Tech Inc, is pressing charges and filing a lawsuit against patent theft. Henderson Industries is under investigation until the trial is over, but we all know there’s probably no coming back from this.*

“Went the high route, I see,” Mercer says. “Do I have to do this? I don’t even like her.”

“She’s on your side now, Mercer. You don’t have to like her.”

“Fine, but you aren’t coming with me. I don’t want you near that whore.”

I roll my eyes and pull over to park on the side of the street. When I try to get out, Mercer stops me with a look. “What?”

“I’m serious. You aren’t coming. Circle the block a few times or something.”

I love to hate him. “You’re impossible.”

“I know.”

Dee rips open his door. “Blake,” she greets me. “Asshole,” she greets Mercer. “You ready?”

He scoffs. She scoffs back. Condescending laughter follows from both of them. Godspeed to their time spent together.

I pull Mercer back by his hoodie, planting a kiss on his lips. “I’m going to meet with my dad. I’ll come pick you up when you’re ready.” I slap a

new phone to his chest. "Call me."

There's a quick flash of fear in his amber eyes. He still doesn't like it when we're apart, and the selfish, egotistical part of me likes that. The compassionate part of me knows that it hurts him. He blinks it away, unwilling to look weak in front of Dee, and then he hands me his milkshake, only a quarter of it gone. "I'm full." He smirks and hops out, slamming the door and sauntering ahead of Dee.

She gives me a head shake through the window and then follows him. "I'll drop him off," she shouts through the cracked window. "Just tell him where and I'll get him there. If I don't kill him first."

I'll kill her if she does. I nod, and get back to driving, sipping the goddamn milkshake that is ten times better than my coffee.



OH, how the mighty have fallen.

Will knows he's fucked. His oldest daughter is unhinged, and now that he isn't in control of everything, he's trying to earn back my dad's favour. I'm just sitting here trying not to slam a knife through his eye socket for everything he ever did to Mercer, but mostly, for attempting to murder him that night in the cabin.

"The situation has gotten out of hand," Will says to my dad. We're in a public place, the facility my mom worked at and where Mercer stayed, because Will isn't dumb enough to be alone with the Carter family right now. "And I'd just like it to end. I've already lost my son."

"You have a heart for him but not for Mercer?" I ask in a calm tone. Outside, I'm a still lake. Underneath, I'm the deepest, deadliest cave in the ocean.

Will avoids the question. "I'd just like my daughters back. Please."

Samantha is being cared for by Aaron and Keira, even though we're unsure how much to trust her yet. Olivia and her lawyer girlfriend are... being held in a secure location. The only reason I'm comfortable having Mercer out of my line of sight is because I know where all his enemies are at this very moment. Plus, I'm tracking him, sort of spying on his conversation through a bug in his phone, and Aaron is monitoring his whereabouts. I might have even discreetly told Dee to call me if Mercer

even blinked wrong. He doesn't need to know how insanely protective of him I am. As long as he knows I'm protective in general.

"Really?" Dad asks him. "You'll stop your plan to obtain these businesses if we give you your daughters back? Somehow, I don't believe that. The Palmerston fortune is dwindling, and you're just as desperate now, if not more so, than you were two years ago when we struck this betrothal agreement."

"My family wasn't in danger then!" Will barks.

"Mercer was," I say, shifting my weight from foot to foot because I'm too pent up to sit down. "How many times have you tried to kill him, Will? How many times did you try to get my mom to kill him?"

And that's the kicker. My mom, the woman who birthed me, tried to kill the man I love. *As. A. Baby.* What kind of evil bitch does that? I understand that money is power in this world, but I've never craved power so strongly that I'd murder a child to gain it. I don't understand the financial games these one-percenters play, and I probably never will. I'd rather be poor in money but rich in Mercer. Does he care about money that much? Would he leave me if I had nothing to offer him but love?

"I don't trust you," Dad says to Will. "I don't trust that Samantha will be safe with you. I don't trust that you won't strike a deal with Olivia to join forces and come after us together. Where's your wife, Will?"

Will's cheeks turn red with rage, and his temple throbs.

"She's here, right?" I ask him, already knowing the answer. "You didn't want her to know about any of this, so you drugged her, which gave her hallucinations, and then you claimed they came from the loss of Trevor, and had her committed to the facility you own."

"To keep her safe!" Will shouts, drawing looks from people in the lobby. We're in an office off to the side, but it has glass panel walls so we can't murder him here. Too bad.

My dad stands, ending this meeting before it really began. That was the point of it. To show Will that we hold the power, and that he is now at our mercy. Whatever we decide to do with his daughters, he can't control. Whatever we decide to do with the businesses and money he feels entitled to, that's on us. We are at the top, and he has no power right now.

"We'll speak with Samantha and give her the option to go back to you, but don't hold your breath. As for Olivia..." Dad zips his jacket and pushes his chair in. "We'll be in touch."



“And what am I supposed to do until then? The media is breathing down my neck about Trevor, and Ben is still missing.”

“He won’t be for long.” I grin at Will.

The paleness of his face is worth everything. Shock registers, and fear quickly follows it. *Yes, that’s right, you coward. Mercer is alive and well, and now you know you didn’t beat us. Fuck you for even trying.*

My baby boy is out there strutting his hot ass around downtown as we speak, and he’ll be pronounced as found anytime now. “But if you ever so much as look at him again, I won’t botch the hit like you did.”

He glares at me, but the roll of his throat shows he’s taking my threat seriously. He knows I know everything, and the way that makes me smile is diabolical.

“We’ll be in touch,” Dad says, holding out his hand.

Reluctantly, even though we didn’t keep up our end of the bargain by bringing his daughters to him, Will slaps a USB drive against my dad’s palm. The non-redacted records of my mom’s time here, including her work history, the patients she recruited, and the families she personally worked with to get their kids into this facility. Dad wants to go through every single one of them to ensure no other babies were harmed or died because of her. After he’s done, Aaron will use the information to shut the illegal part of this place down.

On the way out to the car, Dad asks, “How’s your moral compass when it comes to killing a thirty-something-year-old Palmerston woman who hasn’t had the chance to have babies yet?”

“It’s pointing right at death.” Olivia shouldn’t spawn evil, and my compass has no problem snuffing her out.

With Mercer’s permission? Maybe. Maybe even without it.



OH, she's off her damn rocker if she thinks I'm going to take fashion advice from a raggedy old ho. Despite the combination of sleek black and a shade of purple that complements my *'are you jelly'* nails exceptionally well, I roll my eyes at the outfit she holds up.

"Ew."

"Oh, stop." She shoves the outfit against my chest and pushes me into the changing room. "You know I'm right."

I slide the curtain shut with dramatic flair. "I'm not in my uppity city boy phase right now." I hang the outfit on the wall hook and start stripping.

"No, you're just in your attention whore, twinkly little brat phase," she calls me out.

Always, but I'm not telling her that. "Actually, I'm in my gamer boy phase." I slide on the pants and resent how good they feel against my skin. Expensive material and a snug fit that accentuates my toned ass and lean legs. Damn her. I stare at myself in the mirror, kind of admiring how the pants look with just the navy-blue bodysuit as a top. Then I admire the love bite Blake left on the side of my neck, feeling pretty smug about wearing him in front of Dee.

"Well, you can pair it with grungy shoes," Dee says through the curtain. "Hurry up and stop eye-fucking yourself in the mirror. We all know you're hot shit. You most of all. We have places to be."

"What's wrong with my hoodlum look?" I take the shirt off the hanger and slip it over my head. It's a deep shade of blackish purple that looks nice against my paler skin. It's a sweater, but with only three-quarter sleeves,

and if I'm being honest, that's what makes me the most nervous. What if I can't ball up the material if I get panicky?

"It doesn't belong in a meeting where you want to be taken seriously," she answers. "What's your shoe size?" Dee asks.

"None of your fucking biz."

She huffs and then slides the curtain open, crowding all my space.

"Um, hello?"

"Yeah, hi," she says. "Put these on." She shoves a pair of shoes at me. Matte black slip-ons that I actually love.

"I told you I'm not into fashion," I scoff at her, but put the shoes on. And fuck her again because they complete the look and fit perfectly. I appear as a casually dressed hoodlum who should be taken seriously, and that's exactly what she was going for.

She starts fussing with my outfit. Tucking and untucking the shirt, giving a nod of approval to my lacy bodysuit, and hiking up the pants a bit.

"Are you my fucking mom?" I huff, letting her work her magic.

"Ever had one of those?" she retorts.

Ah, she's the devil. I go back to looking at myself in the mirror. My eyes are bright and not too tired-looking today, despite my lack of sleep last night. That person inside me, the one clawing his way to the surface, appears even closer in the light of this fluorescent dressing room. I smirk at him, willing him to keep on coming. I've never felt stronger than I do lately, even if my whole family is trying to kill me.

"How do you get your eyeliner so perfect?" I ask as she tucks just the side of the sweater into the waistband of my pants, tugging it so it artfully hangs.

"That a compliment, Mercer?"

"A question. If you're going to be a bitch about it, you can just fuck off. I have enough attitude for one dressing room."

She smiles, kneeling in front of me to roll the hem of my pants. "Practice. And the right liner. I'll show you sometime." She stands. "There. Respectable asshole with a chip on his shoulder. My work here is done." She rips off all the tags to take to the cashier and packs my hoodlum look into a bag. "We have twenty minutes to get there. Move it, sassy."

Sassy. I scoff at that. She's the sassy one.



ON THE WAY to this café, I bought a pair of sunglasses. Now I'm hiding behind them, letting Dee do all the talking while I soak in the sun on the patio and pay attention in secret. This place has pumpkin spice lattes, thank the heavens.

"It's a possibility," Dee's lawyer friend says. He's her boss or something, and she wanted to get his opinion and approval before setting anything in stone. "It gives Mercer ownership through a shell company. His name will mostly stay out of everything, but he'll own it all. Or..."

I don't wanna own it all, but I don't know what else to do with it.

"I thought we might set it up so he has majority control, but he isn't the only target if someone tries to come for him," Dee says. "Shareholders."

The guy nods. "He'll get to pick them. Or we can open it to other clients, get a good mix of shareholders."

They both look at me, so I tilt my cup until the foam hits my nose. I don't know anything about running a business, and Dee is trying to set it up so that my businesses are run for me, but I'm still the owner of the holding companies. Or something like that. "Yes?"

"Do you want to gift a portion of your stock to others? Sell it? Pick shareholders? Keep it close in the family?" Dee asks.

"I'll think about it." I lean back in my chair. "They're running themselves right now, aren't they?"

"Yes, and we're vetting all the CEOs currently in place, but it still leaves you as the sole owner of everything. We're trying to put fail-safes in place to protect you if anyone tries to come for it. Shareholders are one option, or dividing business ownership rights with a new incorporation license," Mr. Bigshot Lawyer says. "In the event of your death, no one person would gain ownership. You can will your portion to someone, but it protects the business as a whole. We'd keep you as the majority share owner."

I just want to be the new Aaron. I frown.

"And in place of you, you can hire someone to act as your representative, so you don't have to be publicly or physically involved in meetings and business decisions," Dee adds.

"Like you?"

She leans back and widens her pretty eyes at me. Actually succeeded in shocking the bitch. Finally. “Me?”

“Why not? I’ll pay you more than this guy.”

He laughs. “Are you poaching my lawyers, Mr. Palmerston?”

“Ugh, don’t call me that. Just Mercer. And yeah, if she has the balls to do it.”

Dee stumbles over her words. It’d be cute if she wasn’t so whorish. She ignores me and faces her boss. “I’ll get these drawn up for approval and then we’ll narrow down the specifics of the corporation’s... structure.” She closes her laptop and puts her iPad in her bag.

We say a long and drawn-out goodbye to her boss, so I order another pumpkin spice for the drive. When we get in her Mercedes, she scoffs at me.

“What the fuck was that?” She smacks my shoulder. “What was that!?”

I rub my arm. “Look, lady, you forced me to go to a meeting about a topic I’m unfamiliar with and didn’t have time to research, so fuck you for that. Also, don’t you want to be a millionaire? It sounds pretty perfect to me. You get to be my face, do all your high and mighty bullshit, and run a corporation with the legal smarts to do it well. Plus, you know business and marketing since you did that boring ass job first, right?” I shrug. “And we all know you want to be my face.”

When she just stares at me, I take a sip.

“Ohhhh.” I laugh. “You’d rather just be a prostitute?”

“Oh, fuck you, Mercer,” she snaps at me, starting the car. “The preferred term is escort.”

I grin. “Mm.”

“Ugh.”

“And you made me dress up for a meeting in a coffee shop, which is bullshit. It’s also bullshit that you think he would have taken me less seriously in my hoodlum look. I have the money and the power, so he’ll take me seriously no matter what I’m wearing.”

“It’s your attitude that makes people not take you seriously,” she says, driving down a busy street at rush hour, hitting all the red lights. “Except Blake Carter, apparently.”

“Mm,” I say again.

“I think our hangouts will have to be capped at two hours tops. I’m at my limit with you.”

“Ditto.”



DEE DROPPED me off at Blake’s apartment. When I stepped into the building, he was waiting for me, which made me super suspicious. The whole way up the elevator, I glared at him until he buckled under the pressure of it.

“What?” he had asked.

“She has your number. Make her lose it or get a new one.”

He threw me over his shoulder, spanked my ass, and told me to shut my mouth and pack a bag.

I packed seven bags.

Now we’re standing in the twin to Aaron’s apartment, and I’m swooning and scoffing and speechless. It’s industrial, open concept, wide and spacious, and has a hallway bathroom and a bedroom with an ensuite off to one side. There’re so many windows! That old kind like in Aaron’s apartment, and a massive balcony that faces open space. It’s mostly empty, though. A few pieces of furniture, but definitely not set up.

And that’s not even the best part. Blake, my calm, cool cucumber, is stuttering like a sexy fool.

“It’s, I mean, I bought it forever ago, but I never... and when you said you liked... I just, you know? Like it was meant... to be? Because we’re both... and I want you to feel like it’s yours as much as... fucking hell.” He takes a deep breath, and I watch his whole show instead of the apartment. He straightens his back and composes himself. “I bought it. Never moved in. Will you fucking live here with me, you satanic little demon?”

Oh, yay! My nickname got a descriptor!

“I dunno, Blake,” I muse, pacing around the wide-open space like I’m not pissing myself in excitement. “Where will I put all my things?”

Angrily, he points a stern finger at the bedroom.

“Where will your piano that you never play go?”

Another finger point to the floor space in front of the windows.

“I mean, it’s cute.” I dawdle just to rile him up some more.

“But?”

He's set me up too perfectly. I look at him and let him see the real smile on my face. "No buts, Carter. But I promise you this," I step up to him, poking him in the chest, "you and me in all this open space? It'll be a sexy hell that even you get sick of."

His smile is almost shy. "Then it's a good thing my best friend lives next door."

I recoil at that. "Hell no. Aaron is mine now. Get a new best friend." I already hate the suggestion, and he knows it. "You know what? Fine. You can have Aaron, but I get Keira. No other friends. Ever. Unless they are completely horrendous people you would never be attracted to. I'm talking ugly, terrible personalities, and the works."

He wraps a hand around my throat and uses his thumb to tilt my chin up. "You'll move in here with me?"

"Yes."

"You're sure? You don't like the other apartment better? Want a different place completely? Want a house instead of an apartment?"

"Me and lawn work? Hell no." A thought occurs. "Unless it has a pool. I'd make a sexy pool boy."

"And we'd still have to hire a pool boy who'd do more than just be the aesthetic of it." He kisses my lips and pulls back. "Move in here with me?"

"What temperature do you like the thermostat at?"

"Oh my god," he groans. "Whatever you like it at! We both know I'm a fucking pushover for you."

"Exactly the answer I was looking for." I wrap my arms around his neck and let him pull me into his arms. My legs go around his waist and my dick just gets hard... because how can it not against those abs? "Okay, roomie. As long as you'll be my wall."

"Mm," he agrees. "And I'll fuck you against the rest of them." His lips press to mine, and I smile without meaning to. "What's this?" he teases. "Horny and happy? Guess you do fuck in the right frame of mind."

"It's new."

"You're welcome."

"Less talking. More wall-fucking."



SAMANTHA'S A WRECK. Puffy eyes, snotty nose, tangled hair, and a mountain of used tissues on the table in front of her. She's been crying since she woke up.

But now she's white. As a ghost. "Oh my god!" she shrieks, partly in fear but mostly from shock. "Ben? Ben!" She rushes me.

"Mercer," I correct.

"Mercer!" She flings her arms around me and hugs me. It's weird because, while she's really the only person who has hugged me my whole life, those hugs were timid and empty, but this one is full of love and relief. "I can't believe you're here. Alive, I mean."

I hug her back, feeling both awkward and grateful. "Brandt is a moody dick and kept my life-or-death situation a bit of a secret to see how you'd react." I pat her back. "Wanted to see if you actually cared about me. I'm... kind of surprised that you do."

"Of course I do, Mercer. I always have." She lets me go, smiling at me like a right proper mess. "I've just been more afraid of Dad."

"He's not my dad," I tell her. "He killed my parents and pretended I was his so he could kill me at eighteen and take my fortune."

"Right," she says softly. "What a mess."

"You or this situation? Because damn, girl."

Brandt and Blake are chatting outside the front door of this inconspicuous little house in the suburbs. And by chatting, I mean they're probably standing there silently with the odd word thrown in. Brandt has been watching Samantha, making sure she's okay, and testing her headspace. As per his report—because I'm a guy who gets reports now—he says she's been an emotional wreck over me. Not anyone else. He even had to tell her that Trevor died. I guess she was a bit sad about that, but like me, she didn't know him very well.

"I know. I'm disgusting." She chokes out a weak laugh. "I've been so confused."

So, real lickety-split, I give her the breakdown. "Will wants everything in my name. So does Olivia. She tried to barter with me for your life, but I've got the B team on my side, and we got you out of there. Now we also have Olivia and Julia in the basement of some building, trying to decide what to do with them. Also, my new lawyer is a skank. Escort, excuse me."

"Uh, what?"



“Oh! And Blake bought me an apartment because he loves me with no buts.”

Okay, guess I was a little desperate to tell someone that. Dee wouldn't appreciate it the same way.

“What lawyer?”

“I poached a lawyer from Will's legal team, and now she's mine, but I'm trying to double-poach her to become the acting whatever for all these things I own.” I sit down on the couch and watch her sit across from me. “What do you want to do, Samantha? What's next for you?”

“Do I get a choice? I mean, up until you came in, I honestly thought the Carter family might kill me.”

“I own their moves when it comes to you, and I don't want you dead. You're the only one who ever even tried to help me.” I mean that, too. “Thanks for that.”

“It wasn't enough,” she sighs. “I'm sorry.”

Since I'm in a good mood because of Blake's love, I wave it off. “Bygones. No point dwelling on it anymore, as long as you aren't in this thing with Olivia.”

Samantha sinks against the couch. “She's been off ever since the engagement to Bronson. I don't trust her anymore.” She looks at me, smiling. “I don't have any skills, Mercer. I have a business degree, but I never did anything with it because Dad wouldn't let me. I don't know what I want or what I even can do.”

“Will you go back there? To that house?”

She laughs, sounding tired. “Honestly? I kind of want to walk away and disappear. Dad doesn't care about me enough to come looking. I've always wanted to go to Japan.” She shrugs. “Maybe now is the time.”

Go to Japan and disappear? Wow. I wasn't expecting it to be that easy.

“Okay, how about this?” I turn to face her. “I haven't looked through the whole business profile yet, but there is a hotel chain somewhere in Asia that I own. What if you take that over? I think it's a ritzy one, but there aren't a lot of locations. I can get the business file for you?”

“You just want to gift me a hotel chain?” She laughs. “What have I ever done to deserve that?”

I grab her hand and squeeze it, even though it's probably snotty. “Tried.”

She starts to tear up, so I hug her.

“Just think about it,” I say against her hair. “And for all I know, I could be completely wrong. It might be a restaurant chain or a strip club chain or something. I’m guessing about the hotel business.”

She laughs and hugs me tighter. “Thank you, Mercer. Thank you.”

Okay, so at least I got a happy ending with her. Everyone else? Yeah, not gonna happen.



MERCER IS A TYRANNICAL DICTATOR.

To distract himself from the decision he has to make about Olivia and Julia, he's bossing me around, and making this new apartment his home. I know he's doing it for attention, but I've been fake ignoring him for the past two hours. For one, I have to get back to my actual job, so research is a must, and I'm not going to lie, I've been tracking Samantha to make sure she leaves the country. But mostly, it's just to get him to try harder. I love it when he begs for attention, and it's become a new sort of game to see how far he'll take it.

"Blake!" Mercer shouts.

"Mm?" I keep my eyes on my laptop.

I watch the screen of my laptop fall shut, replaced by Mercer's amber eyes, messy dark hair, and accusatory expression. "There's about to be a few butts, Blake."

"What butts?" I ask, leaning back. Mercer ordered a new dining room set with six chairs—you know, because we're only two people, but *just in case*. The thing is made from reclaimed wood and pipes, definitely fits the theme of the apartment, and probably cost more than my Denali. He says he's in his rustic home phase.

"I love you, but you're ignoring me. I love you, but you're an asshole. I love you, but if you don't treat me like the *new me* I am, I will go to the bedroom to be Ben."

"I have that kind of power, huh?" I grab the front of his shirt and slide his ass down the table until he's right in front of me. "I can turn you back

into Ben? Come on. You're stronger than that, baby." I tug a little more, making him spread his legs to rest his feet on my chair.

"I've never had a home that feels safe before," he says honestly. "I'm trying to nest and you're ruining it." His bottom lip sticks out.

Work vanishes from my mind. His words hit me hard, like he knew they would, and now I want to make this the best house decorating, nesting, homecoming night he's ever going to have.

I slide my hands up his legs and look up at his face. "You have all my attention, Mercer. What do you want me to do? Hang pictures? Move the bed without gouging the floor? Make you a drink and turn on the right music? Tell me."

"Mm," he muses, grinning at me like the devil he is. "A drink sounds nice."

I smile at him and start to get up, but his socked foot lands on my chest to keep me in the chair. "A drink for you," he says, nodding at his dick.

Fucking honoured that he'd let me suck his cock without anything else to distract me from paying too close attention to his reactions like he feared, I lean forward and nip at the inside of his ankle. "Yeah? You gonna come down my throat?"

"If you keep talking like that, I'll come in my pants," he says with a breathless sigh.

Not wanting him to change his mind, I hook my fingers in the waistband of his black sweatpants, encouraging him to lift his ass as I pull them down. His cock springs free, no panties or boxers to hold it in check. Slowly, I pull the pants off his legs, tossing them to the floor and admiring the way his slit glistens with precum. I lean forward and lick it, drawing a cry from Mercer already. His fingers grip the edge of the table, and my tongue runs down his shaft, looking up to meet his eyes for permission.

He rakes his teeth over his bottom lip, shimmying to the very edge of the table and looking like all my fantasies come to life. "New house, new rules," he says right before he reaches forward and pushes my head down.

My hands spread his legs, and my mouth goes willingly. I suck the head, skimming my tongue under his crown until his hands get even more greedy. He pushes, and I slide down his shaft, swallowing as much of him as I can until he groans low and sultry. He's leaking already, and the taste of him has my dick pressing against the front of my pants, dampening the material of my boxers.

Mercer plants one hand on the table behind him, leaning back to angle his hips for better access. With his eyes on me, I thrive. I bob on his cock, tongue flicking over the tip every time I draw my lips upward. His thighs tremble and my chest tightens, hooked on this new experience. Him, for once, at my complete mercy. I won't squander it.

"Blake," he moans when I pull back, letting strings of saliva stretch between us. My fingers dig into his thighs and his eyes darken with lust. "Fuck. More."

Languidly, I flatten my tongue and run it over the tip. "You gonna give me something to drink, little demon?" I mouth his length and come back up again to suck the head.

"If you earn it. This is self-serve. You gotta tap your own keg." He frees my head and uses his hand to lift his hoodie up to his chest, giving himself a better view. "I like how you look down there."

"Mm?" I grin, licking my wet lips to take him into my mouth again. I like how I feel down here.

He groans, and when I bottom out, my nose to his skin, he coughs, choking on a gasp. "Fuck."

I don't give him time to overthink his reaction or make him feel like he has to act a certain way. I find a rhythm, deepthroating him slowly while sucking the head hard every time I pull back, that has him shaking with restraint. He's not going to last, and I already know what I'm going to do with his cum when I get it. When his thighs try to close and he starts squirming, I close off my throat, ready for him to fill my mouth.

"Ah, fucking fuck," he moans, head tipped back.

Mercer comes with a tremble. His breathing stops altogether and his cock throbs in my mouth, giving me the best taste of him. I suction my lips around him, not wanting any to drip out, sucking him through the rest of his orgasm. He's still messy when I pull my mouth away, but his eyes meet mine and he knows I'm up to something.

Standing, I push his chest to make him lie on his back, and then I hook my arms under his knees and fold him in half. With his pretty little hole on perfect display, I spit his cum all over him, watching it drip down his balls and coat his crack. I lick my lips to savour the rest.

"Oh my god," he moans. "You're fucking filthy."

I push my finger and his cum inside him, gathering as much as I can to fill him. "You love it, you little cumslut."

His cock twitches, hardening fully again already. His docile, dazed nod is as sexy as his parted lips and glazed eyes. This is my Mercer. The one who loves cum and uses sex as a coping mechanism. The sexual deviant who knows exactly what he wants, and finally, I know exactly how to give it to him. I add another finger, pushing his mess inside him.

“You want me to fuck you full of cum, little demon?” I curl my fingers and make him writhe in anticipation. “Tell me.”

“Yes,” he moans, legs widening all on their own, eyes on me. “Fuck me full of cum. I need it, Blake.”

“Beg me, baby.”

“Blake, please.” His voice takes on a desperate tone, whining. “Please fill me up. Fuck me so hard I break.”

I tug on the front of his hoodie to bring him to a sitting position. “I’ll never break you, Mercer.” I pull his sweater and shirt over his head. “But I’ll wreck you tonight.”

He whimpers. “Yes.”

Pulling my fingers from his ass, I hook them over his bottom teeth and drag his jaw down. He looks at me with a combination of defiance and submission, still debating which way he wants to go with this. His tongue laps at my fingers, sucking his own taste from them until I pull away.

“Blake,” he whines.

I pull my shirt off and throw it on the floor with his pants. I nod at the floor in front of me. “On your knees.”

Mercer complies, getting to his knees while cum glistens on his inner thighs. His hands reach for my pants, but I step back. He whimpers again.

“You do what I say when I say it, understand?”

Commands. He wants them, even though he wants to fight for control. While a battle of want rages in his eyes, I wait for him to submit or fight back. And now that I know him, even if he does submit, he’ll still be manipulating me through the pleasure he brings me. He’s the perfect conundrum, and I can’t believe he’s mine.

He nods. “Yes, Blake.” A flash of deviancy lights up his whiskey eyes. Atta boy.

“Take my cock out,” I demand.

Mercer doesn’t hesitate because he wants to complete this command. With steady fingers and big eyes, he slides my sweatpants down but leaves my boxers in place. To be a brat, he defies orders by pressing his face to my

cock, mouthing it through the material. His eyes look up at me and the challenge in them is tempting. Before I get the chance to grab his jaw and put him in place, he pulls back like nothing happened and slides my boxers down my legs, grinning at me.

“Now what?” he asks, batting his lashes.

I step out of my pants and tell him, “Open.”

Before his lips are even all the way parted, I shove my cock into his mouth and press on the back of his head. “Get me nice and wet, so I can fuck your tight ass, baby.”

He chokes only once, settling his jaw and loosening his throat. With my hand encouraging him, he sucks my cock and doesn’t try to be sexy about it. He’s sloppy and loud, drooling down his chin and all over my shaft, soaking me like I told him to. He gags silently when I slide down his throat, but he shifts his eyes up to look at me while he does it. So fucking sexy.

Mercer squirms on the floor, his knees sliding together and his fingers itching to touch his cock. He doesn’t, yet. But if I know him, he won’t be able to hold out for long. I tangle my fingers in his hair to fuck his face harder, and when he starts to moan, I go faster.

“So submissive,” I tease him. “Love getting your face fucked by a thick cock, don’t you?”

He hums his agreement around my length, the vibration of it going back to my balls and making my ass clench.

“Reach behind you and make sure that cum is still in your hole, little boy.”

With my cock choking him, he reaches back to comply. Fingering himself with his cum as lube, his eyes leak as much as his dick does. I’ve never seen a more beautiful mess.

“Good boy.”

He cries out around my cock, trembling all over. Okay, my boy loves some praise. Noted.

Grabbing the back of the chair I was just on, I drag it over to where we are and then pull out of his mouth. My cock glistens and drips with spit, and Mercer’s heavy breathing makes him drool down his chin. I sit on the chair and crook my finger at him.

“Come here.”

Mercer stands, his fingers wet. He steps between my legs and waits for his next order. “You think you’re ready to get fucked?” I meet his eyes after

admiring every inch of him.

“Yes, Blake.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, Blake.”

“Better show me. Turn around and bend forward. Show me that ass I own.”

Mercer turns, bending at the same time. Right in front of me, he spreads his ass cheeks and shows me his puckered, glistening hole. My cock aches to be inside him, but my mouth ends up there instead. I hold him by his hips and tongue fuck his ass until he’s begging me to stop.

“Blake, I’m gonna come like this,” he rasps. “Fuck me. Please, fuck me.”

I swirl my tongue once more, gathering his cum and smacking my lips. “You fuck me, baby. Show me you’re ready.” I turn him around.

Mercer straddles my lap, eyes on my lips. I grin to taunt him, and he licks them because he can’t help himself. I smack his ass and squeeze it, loving the way he fits in my palms.

“Fuck my cock, baby. Open yourself up so I can ruin you.”

With one arm over my shoulder for balance, he reaches back to grab my cock, lining it up. Slowly, he sinks down, and I watch every expression on his face as he fills himself full of me. His eyes blink, his lips part, his cheeks turn pink, and then he bites his lip. When his ass hits my thighs, my abs clench with restraint. I want to fuck into him so hard and so fast, but I want to draw this out even more.

“How’s my cock feel, Mercer?”

“So. Fucking. Good,” he whispers.

I put his other arm around my neck and then grab his legs, planting his feet on the sides of the chair. “Then fuck it.”

Using his feet for leverage, he slides up until just the tip is inside him. Meeting my eyes and yanking on my hair, he slams back down.

“Ah, fuck,” I groan. “So good, baby. Fuck me harder.”

Mercer rides my cock with no shame. His dick bounces between our bodies, hard as lead and dripping precum. When his legs get tired, he switches from fucking me to gyrating on my lap, hitting all the right angles and making his face flush harder.

“I’ll come,” he warns.

“Feeling good, sweetheart?”



“So good.”

I grab his dick and squeeze the tip hard, making him bite back a hiss. “No coming yet, Mercer.” I kiss him and give my hips a thrust.

“Mm,” he whimpers.

I grab him under his thighs and stand up with him still on my dick. Mercer wraps his arms around me, sucking his own brand against the side of my neck. The slice from his dagger burns on my palm, salty sweat coating the two of us. Taking him over to where the piano now sits, I set his ass right on the keys, making them shout a discordant tone.

Cocky, Mercer grins at me. “We gonna make music, Blake?”

I smirk back, letting his legs drop to wrap around my hips. “We’re gonna break the sound barrier, baby.” I slam into him, clanging the keys, making him scream, and jarring the piano. I fuck him so hard his eyes can’t stay open and his legs vice around my hips. The sound of skin slapping, keys going off, Mercer moaning, and me grunting have us both sweaty and delusional.

“Blake... oh, fuck, yes.” He’s so close.

So I lift him up and spin him around, forcing him to slap his hands down on the keys. As soon as he’s braced, I thrust into him hard and fast, spit and cum and pure desire making us savage.

“Harder,” Mercer demands.

I slam into him and wrap my hand around the front of his neck. “You think you can boss me around, Mercer?”

“Yes. Fuck me harder, Blake. You haven’t wrecked me yet.” He slams his ass back, taking charge.

I hold him steady and pound into him. My hips piston and his legs weaken. His fingers tickle the ivory, creating music that should sound terrible but doesn’t. When he cries out and his ass clenches around my cock, I pull his hands away from the keys and shut the lid.

“Hold on tight, Mercer,” I warn against his ear. “Come all over this piano.”

Thrusting upward, I fuck him until he bursts. He clamps down on me, his ass spasming all around my sensitive dick. His cum hits the wooden lid of the keys, the back of the piano, and the floor. He cries out in pleasure, and when he starts to breathe again, I reach around and massage his balls.

“Oh, god,” he pants at the extended pleasure. “Fuck. Give me your cum. Please. I need it, Blake.”

“Mm, fucking take it, Mercer.” I bury myself deep and go still, filling him with my pleasure and rubbing his balls at the same time. “So fucking perfect, little boy.”

He moans, another weak spurt of cum shooting from his cock.

I pull out fast and spin him around again, lifting his useless legs and sitting him on the piano. Bending, I lick our cum from his ass, sucking it into my mouth. He’s yanking on my hair, already knowing what I’m going to do, bringing my mouth to his to swap cum like he can’t get enough of it. I spit it into his mouth and he gives it back. It drips down our chins and my fingers swipe through it to shove it back into his mouth.

“There’s my little cumslut,” I purr against his lips. We’re all teeth and tongue and sloppy uncoordinated kisses, and it’s goddamn perfect.

“I want more.” He kisses me. “Fuck me again. Fuck my throat. Fuck anything. Just give me more cum, Blake.”

I kiss him lightly and step back. But I don’t keep enough of a hold on him because his legs can’t hold him up and he slides down the front of the piano. I barely catch him under his arms before he crashes to the floor.

Laughing, I yank him back up. “Wrecked.” I smile at him.

“So wrecked,” he agrees weakly. “Still want more, though.”

I leave my laptop and all that work on the table, carrying Mercer first to the bathroom and then to the bedroom. When I try to set him on the bed, he clings to me harder.

“Finally admitting you want some aftercare, Mercer?” I smooth his dark hair back.

He nods but doesn’t say anything. That’s good enough for me. I tuck him into my chest, his face buried in my neck. “I hate cuddling,” he whispers.

“I know.” I smile at his lie. “If you wanna act like I’m forcing you to be here, you can.”

“Thank you.” He snuggles in. “I...”

I kiss the top of his head. “Love you, too, Mercer.”

“No buts?”

“No buts.” And I’m proud of him. He straight up asked for my attention instead of manipulating me into it. I don’t know if that’s progress or comfort, but it’s something to be admired.



“WHY ARE YOU WALKING LIKE THAT?” Bronson asks as soon as I walk into Aaron’s apartment.

Because I got fucked-down and bred by the god of thunder last night. “Exercise.” I breeze past him and sit at my new station next to Aaron’s. His is cooler, but I’ll get there. “Coffee,” I demand Bronson.

“I’m not your bitch,” he barks at me.

Ugh, these Carter boys will need some training. When Aaron gives me an accusatory look, I try to ignore it, but he wins.

“Ugh, fine,” I groan, getting out of my chair. I’m not supposed to be here for *man behind the mic* duties. I steal Aaron’s coffee and head out to the balcony, slamming the sliding door behind me.

“Morning,” Keira says, smiling at me. Her smile falls a second later. “You okay?”

“I got fucked. Let it go.” I plop onto the patio couch, wincing at my sore ass. “Can we get this over with?” Therapy. No fun. “And if you try to tell me that being a brat isn’t who I am one more time, I will do everything in my power to prove you wrong. Trust me, you won’t like it.”

Keira laughs, setting down her iPad to give me her full attention. “How are things going?”

“That’s such a vague and therapist-esque question.”

“Okay, let me rephrase. Are you keeping your shit together with everything going on, or is it overwhelming you?”

I’m distracting myself by making my new apartment into a home and getting fucked in it like it’s nobody’s business. “I’m overwhelmed, Keira. I’m supposed to decide the fate of my sister and make decisions about a

bunch of companies when I've never had decision-making power before. It's a tad overwhelming, don't you think?"

"I definitely think," she agrees. "So, how are you coping?"

"Meditation and internal thought assessment."

She tilts her head at me.

"Sex and fancy nail polish." I'm on a purple kick, so I repainted this morning because I woke up at the ass crack of dark. "This one's called 'yank my doodle,' and I definitely got my doodle yanked last night. But I feel good about it, even if my legs are jelly and my ass aches."

"Feel good about it, why?" she asks.

I roll my eyes. "Because I didn't have to be a brat to get good attention." I sip the lukewarm coffee. "Doesn't mean I'm not one," I tack on in a mumble.

"How did you get his attention? Or was he already paying attention to you?"

"I asked for it like a mature adult. It was weird."

"But it worked." She laughs. "See? He loves you, and he doesn't need to be manipulated into paying attention to you."

"Maybe not, but he likes being manipulated."

"That's because he's a sadist and a masochist." Dee, that whore, struts a bomb outfit out onto the patio like she belongs here. "And you're his favourite devil."

"He didn't hurt me," I retort, glaring at her for being here.

"Your wince and wobbly walk say otherwise." She sits beside me, not caring that I'm two seconds away from biting her. "And let me guess, you begged him to break you."

I hate her. I hate her for knowing me. "Who invited you?"

"You wanna know how I know Blake?" Dee asks, smirking. "My brother is Keira's boyfriend."

"You have a boyfriend?" I gasp. "How did I not know this? Wait, Aaron?"

"Aaron is her husband," Dee says, like I'm dumb. "Anyway, I'm here because you and I have business to discuss. So hurry up and get *therapied* so we can get down to it. I'll wait."

"Leave." I glare at her.

"No."

I hate that I want her to stay. Keira must sense this because she moves on. “Have you given much thought to what you want to do about your family?”

“Too much thought, but never settle on anything. It might be pathetic, but I sometimes wish something would just happen without me having to give permission so that I can either feel good or bad about it after it’s already done.”

“It’s not pathetic,” Keira says. “It’s displacement. Have you tried talking to Olivia?”

Not since she got locked up wherever the Carters are keeping her. “No. She was going to kill me. How do I talk to her after that?”

“I think you first need to decide if you want to,” Keira says. “How are your panic attacks and PTSD episodes?”

I glance at Dee, but she’s ignoring us in favour of her phone. “I’m getting better at managing them. At least, I think I am. Sometimes they start, but they don’t fully develop. Other times, I surprise myself by not having one. And sometimes I still have a full-blown meltdown with my fingers in my mouth and all the itches.” I shrug. “Depends.”

“And your sleep?”

“Fucked to exhaustion,” Dee says for me. “Better than a sleeping pill.”

She’s not wrong, but I narrow my eyes at her anyway. “I feel safer when I sleep now. Because I trust the person in the house with me.”

“Good. That’s a huge improvement,” Keira says. “You’ve learned to trust someone, maybe even more than one person.” She doesn’t let me correct that. “Are you thinking about how you’re going to prepare for when Blake goes back to work? His job takes him away from home for days, sometimes weeks at a time.”

My cheeks burn and my skin itches. A heaviness presses on my chest, and the cup of coffee in my hand trembles slightly. Blake leaving for work—for anything—is not something I’m ready for, but it’s going to come whether I want it to or not. I know I have abandonment issues, but I thought they’d improve when I developed a level of trust with Blake. I know he’s coming back to me. I know he isn’t leaving me or our relationship every time he walks out the door, but I still feel like it’s the end of the world whenever he walks away from me. I even sat on the counter and chatted his ear off while I painted my nails and he was in the shower this morning

because being in a different room felt impossible. What the hell is wrong with me?

“We can work on some exercises for that,” Keira offers. “Keeping yourself busy is one of them.”

“I can do that,” Dee says. “Since you’re a brat and put ideas in my head about this business arrangement.”

“See?” I tell Keira. “She knows I’m a brat.”

“All too well, Mr. Fire Alarm.”

Best grilled cheese sandwich I ever made.



I THINK it’s the lack of remorse on her face that wants me to just snap my fingers and have my beast murder her. Olivia isn’t sorry; she’s pissed off she got caught. The look in her eyes tells me she’s looking for a way out of this, to get back to her plan, to take what she thinks she can from me without a single regard for my life.

Maybe she never gave a shit about me or my life. If I was dead, she’d have one less obstacle in her way to getting the Palmerston fortune. Maybe she fooled me all these years, pretending to look out for me, picking me up at clubs when I got the family into trouble, and compassionately scolding me while reminding me it was mostly my fault. I thought that was her being a sister—angry at my actions but still caring about me regardless of them.

“All new security systems at Dad’s place and the gas plant,” Brandt tells Bronson behind me.

Bronson doesn’t answer, but he hasn’t said much since a few hours ago when Brendan told him that the woman he’s in love with accepted hush money to go away. Maybe I should offer him the task of killing Olivia just to ease his broken heart. Poor chap.

“What do you think?” Blake asks me as I stare at my former sister through a camera screen. “Want to talk to her?”

Not really, but I should. It might help me make a decision. I slip my hand into his and play with his fingers. “I need you to break it down for me, Blake. None of this ‘whatever you want to do, we’ll do’ bullshit. I need options. Preferably only two options, but three if you must.” Because I can’t

process something so open-ended. I need to narrow it down and think about what the actual outcome is going to be.

“Option one, we kill her and make it look like she died of natural causes. We have doctors on our payroll who can help with that, and it’ll keep the heat off you.”

I nod.

“Option two, you release her. But I’m warning you right now, Mercer, if she so much as looks at you wrong, I’ll be implementing option one without your permission.”

Another nod. I link my fingers with his.

“Option three, we create a set-up.”

“What kind of set-up?”

Brandt comes to stand at my side. “There’re a few ways we can do it, depending on which outcome you want. We can kill her and frame Will, essentially putting him behind bars for life. Kills two birds with one stone.”

“Or we frame them both for white-collar crimes, ruin their reputations, strip them of everything they own, and set them back to the bottom of the totem pole. The government will seize everything in their names, though. Not sure if you’re okay with that. They may or may not go to prison, depending on the case and their lawyers.” Blake squeezes my hand.

“I already have more money and companies than I know what to do with, so I don’t care what happens to theirs,” I say. “So, murder, freedom, or prison. Those are my options?”

“Or freedom with nothing to their names,” Brandt clarifies.

“Will tried to kill me multiple times.” I start running through my choices. “And never with his own hands. He hired people to do it for him.”

Blake’s hand tightens around mine, thinking of his mom.

“I don’t know if Olivia actively tried to kill me, but she would have killed me and Samantha if I didn’t comply with her orders that day.” Luckily, the Carter B team showed up before she could. “So, what do they deserve?”

And whatever choice I make for Olivia, the same fate will have to come to Julia or she’ll nark on us.

“I vote bullet to the brain and a missing body,” Bronson says, stepping up to Blake’s side and adding another option to my growing list. “For her and Will.”

Normally, I'd think that's his bitterness talking since his heart is hurting, but I know it's not. The Carter boys are trained to keep level heads, and nothing deters them from that during a job. Not even when I was missing; Blake kept his cool until he found me and completed the job.

"What's the blowback on that, though?" I ask. "If I'm the only remaining Palmerston, I'll look guilty. Especially because I now own so many of their assets."

"I vote reputational ruin," Brandt says. "Strip them of everything they are, ruin them, leave them with nothing and no allies, no money to pay high profile lawyers, and see how they make out. They might go to jail, but even if they don't, their lives will be over."

Blake nods, squeezing my hand. "That's my vote, too. You're more powerful than they are now, Mercer. It'll be a long and drawn-out case with a huge media following, but it gives you the chance to tell your story. We won't be able to prove Will murdered your birth parents, but we can prove his corruption and collusion."

"How though? He's always been squeaky clean."

"Because Aaron is a fucking boss," Bronson says. "When he digs, he finds what he's looking for. And I just met the guy. Been admiring his work for years without knowing it was him."

"That's why he's my idol." I smile. "What about Julia?"

"We can take her down with them. Or we prove she was an accessory to Trevor's murder. She's not getting out of this intact," Brandt says.

Olivia is pacing like a caged animal in the small room she's being kept in. If I set her free, no matter what happens, she'll come for me. But for the first time in my life, I think I'm prepared for that. I have more power. I'm stronger. And unlike her, I have a fucking family now. A murderous one.

"And now that I have Dee as my CEO and lawyer for the corporations, everything is protected from a single attack," I say, nodding. "I vote reputational ruin and possible prison time."

The door opens and closes behind us, Brendan walking in. "I think that's a great choice, Mercer." He steps up beside his sons. "It'll take us a few days to get everything in order, but it's also a great learning opportunity for you." He looks at me. "Brandt has an opening for his *man in the mic* position. You interested?"

I don't think I've ever smiled wider. "Yes, please. And you won't even have to call me Little Demon." I laugh at Brandt.



Blake bends down and laughs against my lips. "You're still my little demon, Mercer." He kisses me. "I'm so fucking proud of you. I told you I'd help you claw your way to the top, but guess what? You did it all on your fucking own, baby. I love you."

Holy, I love this man. "Thank you."

*For seeing me and loving me anyway.*

*For not ignoring me.*

*For looking beneath my masks and understanding why I wear them.*

"I love you with no buts, Blake Carter."

Bronson groans, not wanting to hear it while he shatters. Brendan stays silent. Brandt scoffs.

"I am not getting laid enough for this," he quips, heading for the door. "Think Aaron can handle a fuck buddy on top of his wife and boyfriend?"

Blake just gives him the finger and says, "Aaron is mine."

I pull back to glare at him. I thought it might be jealousy that eats me up, not wanting Blake to claim anyone but me, but it's not. It's jealousy because Aaron is mine. "Excuse me. I'm weaselling my way in with Aaron, so you can back off a bit, thanks."

Blake grabs my butt. "How's your ass feeling today, little boy?"

Ugh, he always wins. How the tables have turned.



I ROLL my eyes and squish my new company phone between my ear and shoulder, holding up a lavender shade of lace to my torso. It's a one-piece, but there are enough cut-outs that Blake can wedge his way in from anywhere.

"If I wanted to be on the phone with you at two in the morning talking business, I wouldn't have hired you to be me." Maybe I should try the black one. "With my complexion, should I wear lavender lace or a darker shade?"

"The media is breathing down our necks, Mercer. Marketing and media management are fielding calls, messages, emails, and even people showing up to get a statement. This is big news, and everyone wants to hear from you. A darker tone because you're pale. Lavender will wash you out. Go for navy or deep violet."

I drop the lavender and grab the black and navy sets I bought. My hands are shaking, but at this point, it might be nerves, excitement, or panic. Who knows? I've been shaking ever since Blake left six days ago.

"Can't you just handle the interviews?"

"I'm not a media rep, Mercer! They want you. It's your family scandal." Dee must be rolling her eyes at me by now, but I don't care.

I'm going with the navy. It matches the bruise I gave myself three days ago by sliding the driver's seat of the Denali too far forward and smacking my knees on the dashboard. "Okay, fine, but it isn't happening tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah," she scoffs. "Have your day of sex and then call me the fuck back, okay?" She hangs up on me, even more of a brat than I am.

We still have to keep our hangouts to two hours or less. It's for safety reasons.

“It’s more than just sex!” I shout into the phone, even though she’s gone.

I drop my phone on the bed Blake hasn’t slept in since he left, feeling sad without him. I might have called him 127 times since he’s been gone, but he called me at least 42 times, so I call it even. With my undergarments picked, I debate what I’ll wear over them.

My hoodlum look is still my preferred clothing choice when I’m around Blake. He made me comfortable right from the beginning, and he hasn’t stopped since. I take one step towards the closet, ready to rake through all my hoodies even though we all know I’ll wear one of his, when my phone rings again.

I sprint to it, hoping it’s Blake. Diving onto the bed, my face falls when it’s just Brandt.

“Hoodlum,” I answer with my new code name since I joined his team.

“I need an address. Quick,” he says, the sound of his vehicle filling the empty silence.

I hop off the bed and head to the living room where some of my new equipment is set up. I’m still training under Aaron, so I spend most of my time there, but I’ve got a little hacker’s den started. I do a full spin in my chair and switch my phone to Bluetooth with my headset.

“For?”

Brandt rambles off a partial plate number, and a vehicle model and make.

Using my new skills and a bunch of programs Aaron helped me install, I jam all the information into my computer and wait for it to spit out an answer. While I’m doing that, I track Brandt to get eyes on where he is. And also while I’m doing that, I cross my legs because I have to pee like a motherfucker.

“Amy Daniels?” I ask.

“Sure. Address.”

“15599, apartment 42, Westwick Ave. Security cameras at the front door, but don’t seem to be anywhere else.” I spot him on the map, taking a turn to switch directions. “Setting lights to green.”

“Getting good, Hoodlum.”

“I know.” I pull up information on Amy Daniels, my eyes scanning it as fast as my brain will allow. “What’re you doing going after a politician’s daughter?”

“Trying to get laid,” he snarks at me. “Since you’re hogging Aaron.”

“Not sorry.” The clickety-clack sound of my keyboard settles something inside me. I swear it’s better than white noise. So. Fucking. Satisfying. “She’s not home,” I tell Brandt. “Pinged that vehicle parked. She’s at the Vixen in the West End.”

“Well, she’s about to be dead if we don’t do something.”

I pull up footage of the Vixen, a plush lounge for wealthy youngsters. Been there a time or two in my slutty days. The private rooms don’t have cameras, but I’m able to tap into a few devices, running a facial recognition program for Amy. “Julia is there.” I spot her on my screen.

“I know,” Brandt says. “Guess who they’re going after now?”

I laugh into the mic. “Blake is going to love this.”

Amy Daniels is the daughter of a politician, but more important for tonight’s shenanigans, she’s the new CEO of Thomas Tech Inc, owned by Blake’s client and Frank’s wife. Guess Olivia and Julia found their next target.

“Want me to pull the fire alarm?” I ask.

“Nah, just get me in there and keep me off Julia’s radar. I don’t want them knowing we’re onto them yet. We’ll get Amy out, warn her, and then be on our way. Annabelle hired us again.”

Guess she wasn’t too pissed at Blake for refusing to kill her husband. Still hate that lady, though. I dug into her, and she’s all sorts of bitchy.

I settle in for a bit of work, ready to get Brandt in and out of the Vixen Club without Olivia or Julia knowing any better. By the time I’m done, my eyes are straining but my body is wired. And Amy Daniels is safe with Brandt, so long as he doesn’t try to get in her pants.

I hang the headset on the charging rack, rubbing my eyes and putting my monitors to sleep. It’s almost four a.m., and Blake will be home in the morning. I hate sleeping in that bed without him, and my abandonment issues won’t let me stop thinking about all the reasons he might not come back, so I pee and then settle on the couch with a blanket and Netflix.

I’ve had three panic attacks since he left, one full-blown meltdown, and an impromptu meeting with Keira where I got so desperate, I used my spare key and kind of interrupted them in bed. Aaron left with a bunch of complaints, and Keira, bless her therapist’s heart, talked me through my anxiety. And then scolded me for taking advantage of our friendship. Guess I still have a lot to learn about boundaries.

My fingers have been in my mouth a lot, and I've cried more than I care to admit. The fear of him being gone hasn't gotten any easier to manage, but I've taken Keira's advice to find healthy ways to cope with it. Distraction being one of them, and an actual friend to talk to being the other. Fucking Dee became my friend, and I still don't know how I feel about it. She's also my business partner, so maybe that takes the edge off a bit.

She's been fielding reporters about the Palmerston case. Will lost pretty much everything, including his businesses and the licences to run them. He lost the house, his good standing with the Better Business Bureau, and his wife. Penny left his ass after she found out he tried to kill me. After she reached out to me to offer an apology, I almost forgave her, until she admitted to knowing a lot more than she ever let on. Obviously, she knew she wasn't my mother, but she *also* knew that Will was using me to obtain what Cheryl left to me in her final will and testament. I don't have any contact with Penny anymore, and to be honest, I don't even know what she's doing now.

But Will still had a good lawyer on his team. He managed to avoid prison time since most of his crimes were white-collar, and it was difficult to prove he acted individually. But at least he's a nobody now. Or, he is for the time being. He's currently trying to marry some old hag from Europe, preying on her because she knows nothing about him. She's a wealthy woman with no children and a dead husband. All the best to him. I'm done wasting my time worrying about him.

Samantha fucking sucks at running a hotel chain, but Dee helped her hire the right people to help manage it. She's currently learning to speak Mandarin, and we talk on the phone sometimes. We don't talk about family. Ever.

I ball up the sleeves of Blake's hoodie, barely noticing when the material ends up in my mouth. I miss him so much it's hard to focus on anything else, but I have been enjoying my training with Aaron and my partnership with Brandt. I just need my man home. I must doze in and out of sleep because I keep missing vital points in the movie I'm watching and the sky keeps getting lighter, but when my eyes shoot open at a sound, I barely feel rested at all.

Blake's keys jangle in the door, and then he's standing there and I'm sitting here, and we're staring, and I don't know if I should run to him

pathetically because he already knows I'm pathetic, or if I should pretend I have some chill.

Relief floods me with such an overwhelming rush that I can't even stand up. My eyes water from happiness, and my smart-ass mouth won't even form a single word. Instead, I just stare at him and let the tears fall.

He didn't abandon me.

He closes the door and drops all his things, closing the distance between us. I reach for him at the same time he reaches for me, and then he's dragging my body over the back of the couch and I'm clinging to him like he's the only air I need.

"Fuck, I missed you, baby." He hugs me tight, kissing me everywhere he can.

I can't speak because I'm a blubbering idiot. The smell of him is so much stronger than this washed-out hoodie I've been wearing around the apartment for six days. I bury my face in his neck and breathe him in. It makes me cry more, but I don't care. He's here, and I survived it. He came back to me like he promised he would, and my fear of abandonment eases just the smallest fraction.

"Look at me, Mercer." He sits my ass on the back of the couch and grabs my cheeks, looking down at me. "Missed these eyes," he says, smiling. "Say something."

I kiss him instead, snot and tears and all. I kiss him until my eyes stop watering and the relief stops breaking me. When I'm calm, I rest my ear to his chest and listen to his heartbeat. I know he's been travelling all night, and I'm sure he's tired, but I can't let him go yet.

"Thanks for coming back," I whisper.

"I will always come back. I promise." He rubs my back. "Tell me what you need, Mercer."

I wipe my nose and look at him. Deep blue eyes and dark hair are my favourite combination. Sometimes, despite how cocky I am about it to Dee, I can't believe he's actually mine. "I need you to do that thing where you smother me with your body and touch me all over while I sleep."

"You mean cuddle?"

I scoff. "No."

Blake smiles, and I love it. Like, *love it*. No buts. We lock up and turn everything off, heading to the bedroom. When he climbs into bed and holds

back the blanket for me, I tell him I have to pee first. I'm standing over the toilet taking a piss when Blake walks in.

I raise a brow at him.

"My turn to be clingy," he says, leaning against the vanity while I finish. "I'm not letting you out of my sight until I absolutely have to."

Oh, god. Here comes that fucking blush again. Am I swooning, too? Jesus. Do not get more weepy!

"I knew you were just as needy as me," I accuse, flushing the toilet and running my hands under the tap.

Blake crowds me from behind, pressing his dick to my ass. "So fucking needy, you don't even know the half of it, baby. I didn't even jerk off. Been saving it all for you."

I lick my lips and feel my cock stir to life. "Mm." I turn to face him, pretty much becoming down to fuck within six seconds flat.

Blake grips my jaw lightly, pressing his lips to mine. "But later, Mercer. After you've slept for at least four hours."

"You're such a cock tease."

"Hypocrite." He steers me back to bed, and I can't even describe how safe, comfortable, in love, and at home I feel pressed against his strong body with his arms caging me in.

"Can you at least put it in me?" I whisper into the darkness. "I prepped and everything, and I know we're too tired and weepy for sex, but I can keep your dick warm. It's really no trouble."

Blake's smile is felt against the back of my neck, and slowly, not in a rush at all, he nudges me into the right position, buries his dick in my pre-lubed ass, and then scolds me for getting hard and trying to grind on his cock.

"Thought it was no trouble?" he asks in a taunting tone. "I'm not fucking you until you sleep, you demon."

Yeah, we'll see about that. I'll never admit to him how good it feels to have him inside me. Connected. The reason I won't admit it is that he already knows without me having to say it.

"No buts, Blake," I whisper.

"Never any buts, Mercer."

Until he sees my new lingerie and the game I'm going to play with him. I grin as I fall asleep.



HE'S SOAKING THIS UP. For how nervous he was, especially with how much he bitched and moaned about doing it, he's enjoying the hell out of this spotlight.

A hundred cameras point at him, triple that many microphones and recording devices, and the flash of lights show off the twinkle of wanted attention in his whiskey eyes. A press conference daunted him so badly I'd had to physically dress him in that sexy suit while he rag-dolled and acted like a petulant child before dragging him here, but now that he's the centre of attention, he's rethinking his take.

"That boy was made for the spotlight," Bronson says, standing next to me.

The conference is being held on the front steps of the newly acquired headquarters for all of Mercer's owned companies. It's the central location for the business, but he barely spends any time in the building. Still can't believe he picked Dee to be his CEO. I also can't even believe she agreed to do it, but she's managed to unite all the COOs of the individual businesses and set a new standard. The sun beats down on Mercer, spotlighting him like he deserves, making all his words pop and his smile brighten.

"My spotlight," I tell Bronson. "Hate all these people looking at what's mine."

"You know, I truly never guessed you'd turn into a possessive dick. You were always so nonchalant and uninterested in people unless you were studying them for a job."

Mercer is like a job—the best job I've ever taken. To figure him out, peel back his layers, make him happy despite all the monsters in his closet,



and to love him in a way he knows how to accept, and to protect him for the rest of his life. Every part of that boy is a puzzle. Even the easy-to-read, bratty, attention-seeking parts of him are hard to decipher because they change with his mood.

When I first saw him that night outside the strip club, I thought he had a problem with authority. Turns out, he had a problem with himself. He didn't want to follow orders because he didn't agree with the orders given, but he also used commands as a comfort method while he was in a panic attack. Commands that came from me—whether he trusted me then or my orders simply jarred him, I don't know, but he revels in that shit now.

“Love studying him,” I tell Bronson, keeping my eyes on Mercer as he talks to the crowd.

News about Will, Mercer's birth parents, and the whole scandal with the Palmerston corporation has gone global, and everyone wanted to hear from the poor little boy who lost his parents, got kept in the dark and used for financial gain. Well, he's showing everyone that he's no longer that boy. He's no longer Ben Palmerston. He's Mercer fucking Bentley, the man who came out the other side and rose to the top because of his own strength and willpower. It's a sight to behold, and my dick is getting antsy about it.

“Well, watch out,” Bronson teases. “Brandt already fucked your secret friend, and now he's working closely with Mercer.”

“Brandt will die a slow and agonizing death if he even thinks about it.” I fiddle with the pack of cigarettes in my jacket pocket, wanting one but not craving it badly enough to have one. “What's going on with Amy Daniels?”

“She's back home with security and surveillance,” Bronson says. “She's Annabelle's new CEO of Thomas Tech Inc.”

I shake my head at him. “I know.”

Bronson laughs. “Well, shit. I didn't know. You've been in France for six days moving an entire underground gun business. Didn't know if you'd been briefed yet.”

“Yeah, but Mercer calls me thirty-eight times a day and tells me everything from what colour his nails are to the jobs he's working on. In great detail. He told me about Amy Daniels yesterday morning.”

“The nails are new,” Bronson comments.

“I've learned he works in phases. They'll come and go.” Not complaining, though. That sparkly purple polish wrapped around my dick

was a nice sight. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Mercer can wear no wrong. "Anyway, so Amy Daniels is covered? Brandt is on it?"

"Yeah, but Dad got a call from Annabelle Thomas last night. She thinks Frank has a hit out on her, so she wants us to kill him again. Dad's in negotiations."

"It's not Frank. It's Olivia Palmerston."

"Yeah," he agrees. "But Annabelle doesn't know that. Olivia is a dumb criminal."

"Why? She's probably got her lawyer girlfriend on the will to enable a division of company assets. Even if they don't get everything from Thomas Tech, they'll get enough money to get started just because of a falsified contract. Probably take that money and run, which would be best for us."

"Yeah, but she's already got the eyes of the law on her. So, what does she think she's going to do? Discreetly collect a lump sum of cash and assets, and then run off into the sunset to start a new life somewhere else?"

"Probably. She's going after Amy because Amy has the power to divide assets."

Bronson shakes his head. "Nah. Mercer looked over their company contracts. Everything, including CEO duties, requires Annabelle's signature. Olivia is going after a false lead just because she thinks Thomas Tech is weak from Frank's former information leak. She's going to get burned, and *that* is the best thing for us. She'll be blacklisted or imprisoned when she gets caught, and trust me, she will."

We can hope. "Well, either way, we'll keep an eye on all of it." I pull my hand out of my pocket and away from the cigarettes. "See you tomorrow night?"

"Yeah."

Mercer is just wrapping up his Q&A, so I head to the side of the steps to wait for him. Being Mercer, he drags it out as long as he can, soaking up all that attention and making me fucking feral to get him alone. I want him to shine, but fuck, he's mine. For my eyes only. When he finally says goodbye to the gathered crowd of reporters, journalists, media crews, and the general public, I take his hand and lead him to the underground parking garage where I parked. By the time we get to the Denali, he's shaking.

"What's wrong, baby?" I grip his chin and force his eyes to mine. "Why are you shaking?"

He grabs at my jacket, afraid I'll disappear. His hands tremble and his eyes are shifty, unsure of where to focus. His breathing picks up, and his mouth opens and closes without anything coming from it.

"Good attention is overwhelming too, right?"

He lets out a desperate sigh. "Yes."

He's crashing from the adrenaline of that conference, realizing that good feelings can be as triggering as negative ones. He's not used to being in the spotlight, and the crash is already starting. I shove him into the passenger seat and feel my heart break when he begs me not to go. But I have to. I close his door and run to mine, getting in so he doesn't have to miss me for more than a few seconds. By the time I close my door, Mercer has his fingers in his mouth, and his other hand is latched onto my sleeve, tethering himself to me. Someday we will conquer his fear of abandonment, but today isn't that day. Baby steps.

Keira told me to make him voice what he needs. I've been trying that method, and sometimes he answers, but most times he doesn't. "What do you need, Mercer? Anything. I'll give you anything." I push his dark hair off his forehead and pull his fingers from his mouth.

"I don't even know what's wrong with... I'm... why am I scared?" His eyes water.

"Because you just did something new and brave, and it's overwhelming. I'm so fucking proud of you, baby."

"I should be happy!" he shouts, frustrated with himself. "I liked it up there!"

"You are happy," I tell him. "But you're processing now. Sometimes that hurts."

"God," he scoffs. "How fucking long am I going to be like this, Blake? What would all those people think if they knew the owner of Bentley Inc. was a fucking pathetic mess?" He scratches at his sleeves. "How long am I going to have the emotional maturity of a fucking six-year-old?"

He has a wide range of emotional maturity, but I get where he's coming from. He can't cope with overwhelming feelings, good or bad, and his fears eat him alive. The only coping methods he has are ones he learned as a child—crying, thumb sucking that has turned into finger sucking, an overreaction to the situation, and the need for comfort. But he also has a task-oriented mind. Right now, he's spiralling into self-loathing and oncoming panic; he needs something to jar him from that.

“Tell me what you need, Mercer.” I know what he needs, but he needs to know it, too.

His amber eyes glisten with angry tears when he looks at me. His lips are slick with spit and his cheeks are red, and I’ve never seen a more attractive mess. “Take my brain power away, Blake.”

Jar him from his panic. That’s what he’s asking. Last time, I let him hold my dick in his mouth. This time, I’m going to force him to get aroused.

Aggressively, I bend him over my lap. With no politeness, I push his face against my groin, smothering him in the fabric of my pants. He gasps and his hands land on my thighs for balance, but I don’t let up. My cock hardens beneath his face, and all on his own, he mouths it through the material. I relax my hold on his head, letting him pull back just enough to get his hands on my fly.

I love Mercer, and I never want to hurt him, but I fucking love that he can take rough play. He’s not breakable, and he’d hate me for treating him like he is.

He’s whimpering in desperation, his fingers fumbling with my buttons because he’s so rushed. I push my seat back, giving him a bit more room, anticipation already coiling in my stomach. When he pulls my cock free, sliding his hand down the shaft, I don’t give him time to decide what to do. I push on the back of his head and force myself down his throat.

My eyes close in bliss and Mercer gags around me. I hold him there, suffocating the panic from his mind and effectively killing it for the time being. When he strains, needing to breathe, I let him up. And then I grab both sides of his head and fuck his throat like I own it.

The squelching sounds from his throat and the slurping of his lips around my dick fill the vehicle with the best music. Mercer’s neck muscles are strained, and his polished fingertips dig into my thighs, but when I look over at his body, he’s rubbing his legs together. He fucking loves this.

“If I move my hands, can I trust you to be a good little boy and keep sucking my cock like this?”

He nods on my dick, whimpering.

I let go of his face, letting him work on his own. He deepthroats me, burying his nose to my pubic bone. My hips buck on their own, seeking more of the man I love. Fuck, he’s got a mouth on him. My body heats and my stomach coils, desperate to fill his stomach full of cum already.

I grab the back of his suit jacket and pull it so he's on his knees on the passenger seat, leaning over the centre console. Reaching my hand to the front of him, I rub his hard cock through his pants, making him moan around me.

"You're slacking, Mercer. Suck me harder."

He pops off my dick to mouth off, but before he can, I shove him back down and give my hips a few hard thrusts.

"You need to get off, baby?" I rub his dick.

"Mm," he hums his answer.

"I fucking hate this suit compared to your last one," I say, giving his dick a smack. He cries out, but his hips jut forward, seeking more. "I want you to ruin it. Coat it in cum and sit in your mess until we get home."

I push on the back of his head, choking him at the same time as I tap his cock again. He humps the air, sliding his thighs together.

"Such a greedy little boy," I taunt him. "Earn my cum before you fill these panties full of your own." I know they're the red ones he wore before, and I'd love nothing more than to see them darkened with wetness.

His head overpowers my hand, and he pulls up. Saliva drips from his open lips to coat my groin, and holy fuck, he's sexy like this. Fucking lethal and turned on, fighting a battle with me while losing and winning simultaneously.

"Got something to say, brat?"

He narrows his angry eyes at me, not even bothering to lick the mess off his lips. "I hate your suit more," he seethes.

And then he takes charge. Mercer has always been this way. He craves the fight to submission, but today, after everything he's gone through, he isn't willing to submit. He leans back on his knees in the passenger seat, undoing his pants.

"I told you to ruin those," I warn him against taking them off.

"I will, asshole," he snaps, tugging them down to just below his ass. He leaves the front pulled up over his dick, making sure he comes inside them. "Lean back."

Fumbling because his pants are loose, he climbs onto my lap with his back to me. "Mercer," I warn. "I won't fuck you dry without prep."

He leans over the steering wheel and puts his ass right in my face. "Better get me wet then."

I spit on his hole and tongue fuck it into his ass. I lick down to his balls and taint, soaking him with saliva before shoving my tongue inside him again.

“Spit,” he demands. I spit. “More.” I spit again, watching it drip down his crack to coat his hole. When I try to push it inside him with my finger, he stops me. “No. Just fuck me.”

The conviction in his voice has me grabbing his hips and pulling him back on my slick dick. I nudge him, breaking through his tight, clenching hole. “Cock in your pants, baby?”

“Yes,” he growls. Hot damn.

“Good. You’re a filthy brat who deserves to sit in his own mess.” I pull him down on my cock, easing into him faster than I should.

Mercer moans and cries out, but he doesn’t stop. He sinks down until I’m buried inside him and then wiggles around to adjust. “And you’re a fucking savage who fucks little boys in busy parking lots.”

“Mm,” I agree. “Better start moving, little demon. Wouldn’t want the crowd to catch their new favourite businessman getting a punishment fuck in the front seat of such a normal vehicle, as you called it.”

“Disgraceful,” he says.

I snap my hips up, fucking into him deep and hard. He falls against the steering wheel. “Hold on and plant your feet on the floor, Mercer.”

He hovers just above me, feet on the floor and hands on the steering wheel. I grab his hips and fuck him from the bottom. My hips snap upward, my cock sinking deep inside him at a fast pace. When my rhythm becomes predictable, he slams his ass back to meet every thrust. The Denali rocks and the windows fog as we both pant and groan.

“Harder,” he demands.

I press my back into the seat and use the leverage to fuck him harder. “So fucking needy.”

“More,” he cries out, ready to come.

I sweat with the effort, but fuck me is it worth it. My thighs hit his ass cheeks and spit and precum lube his ass with every goddamn thrust of my hips. I fuck him until his groans turn to desperate moans, and when he clamps down on me, I tilt my hips to hit his prostate.

“Fuck!” he cries out, coming in his pants.

I’m seconds behind him, trying my hardest to keep thrusting through his orgasm, but my own makes my movements stutter, burying my load deep in

his ass.

“Ah, fuck, Mercer,” I groan against his back. “Fuck, your ass is so goddamn perfect.” I pull him down to sit on my dick, twitching inside him as the pleasure extends. “Show me your mess.”

I look over his shoulder as he opens his pants to show me red panties and his black dress pants slicked with cum. I reach around and run my hand down the length of him, spreading the mess around. He moans at the touch, head falling back to my shoulder.

“Got another one in ya, baby?”

“No,” he says, but his hips are thrusting a little, pushing his dick through my fist. “Maybe.”

I’ve never met a guy who can come so many times, and I swear to fuck it is my newest fetish. I jerk him off slowly, kissing his neck, and rocking my hips to add a little pleasure from the back.

“My filthy little demon,” I whisper against his skin.

“Yes,” he moans.

“Tell me you’re mine, Mercer.” I tighten my grip just a little, spreading cum up and down his length with my cock still buried in his ass.

“I’m yours,” he breathes, rocking in my lap. “I’m yours, Blake.”

“My greedy little cumslut?”

“Yes.”

“My bratty boy?”

“Mm, yes.”

My dick hardens inside him, making him whimper. I thrust into him gently, pushing up until his cock slides through my hand, and pulling down to circle my thumb over the tip.

“Blake,” he whines. “Can I come?”

“Come, Mercer.” I lightly clamp my teeth onto the side of his neck as he trembles, coming again.

“Mmmmmm.” His head presses against my shoulder, his ass milks my dick, and his cock spurts and throbs in my hand, most of it ending up in his pants again.

So sexy. Holy shit, he’s everything. When he collapses on my lap, I slide my fingers through his mess and shove them into his mouth, making him suck them clean.

“That take your brain power away?”

“Yes,” he whispers. “Still kind of bummed that I didn’t get to taste your cum.”

“You can keep my cock warm on the way home, and I’ll be ready to fill your mouth when we get there.” I kiss his neck. “Love you, Mercer.”

“No buts.” He turns to face me, planting a kiss to my lips.

I make him pull up his pants, mess and all, and when he gets back to his seat, he leans over and puts my semi-hard cock into his mouth, just like I told him to.

Submissive after all. I grin.





OH, he's pissed, and I love it!

Nothing beats that sinister look in his eyes. When he sears me with all the heat of the sun, eye-fucking me with rapt attention, and loving me even though I'm purposefully baiting him, it shows just how right we are for each other.

"We aren't going," he says with determination, pulling his phone from his pocket to call his dad.

"Oh, we're going," I tell him, snatching the phone from his grip.

"Mercer," he warns. "We're staying home. You can't flaunt that in front of me and not expect me to react to it."

"Oh, I was counting on your reaction." I grin, doing a full circle so he can see the navy set I picked out. It hugs my ass, showing a lot of cheek, but frames it perfectly. The lace sits firmly against my skin, trailing up my hips to disappear into cut-outs around my middle. The top rests nicely over my chest, going up around my throat like a collar, similar to the purple one he ruined. Dee was right when she suggested the darker tone. Plus, the navy makes my golden eyes stand out. Didn't even need eyeliner.

"What reaction were you hoping for?" he asks, standing in the bedroom with a hard dick and nothing to stick it in. "Blind rage? Because if you make me sit through a family dinner with a boner, that's all you'll get, little demon."

I strut up to him, pushing my hands under his shirt to fondle his abs. "I'm taking a lesson out of your textbook."

His teeth clench. "What lesson?"

“Remember all those times you tried to teach me delayed gratification?” I smirk at him. “It’s your turn to learn.”

“I don’t need to learn that lesson. I’m pretty fucking familiar with it, Mercer.”

“Oh?” I muse. “Just like you don’t have to get therapy for your trauma, but I do?”

“What trauma?”

“Your mom was murdered, too, Blake Carter! How come I’m the only one who has to get therapy?” I widen my eyes at him. “So, since you snuck your way out of that one, I’m teaching you this one. Delayed gratification is the theme of the night.” I tip up on my toes to kiss his lips. “Still no butts?”

“Mm.” He grips my chin. “You’ll pay for this later, baby.”

*Oh, I’m counting on it.*

Just to be a dirty tease, I bend over right in front of him, pull the lace aside, and show him the diamond end of the snug little plug shoved up there.

He growls.



EVERYONE IS STARING AT BLAKE, and it’s hilarious. His cheeks are flushed all to hell, and he hasn’t said more than six words since we got here. Three of those were my name in a warning tone. We’re eating dessert, and Blake has tried to leave twice already, but I just keep on chatting.

“Yeah, so Brandt calls me in the middle of the night, tells me he’s a bit tied up, and I thought he needed an escape route. Turns out, he was literally tied up, and Blake got jelly when I had to go rescue him naked with a still-hard dick.”

Everyone laughs, even Brandt, but Blake squeezes my thigh under the table. His blue eyes have warnings in them, and I know I’m pushing it. My middle name should be *pushing it*.

“What’s your problem?” Brandt asks Blake.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” I question. “Share with the fam, Blakey. Get it all out.”

He glares at me, but he takes my bait and throws it back in my face. “Okay. My problem is that Mercer is wearing something I want to rip off

under this hoodlum look. My biggest problem is that there is a plug in the ass that belongs to my dick. My problem, *fam*, is that every second that plug sits there and I don't get to pull it out and replace it with my cock, the higher the chances are Mercer won't fucking survive my wrath. Happy, baby?"

Delightfully so.

Everyone else coughs, chokes, holds back laughter, or some combination of all three, but I pretend like it didn't affect me. "So, anyway, we untied him and—Hey! Blake!"

The room tips upside down as my ass goes in the air and my head hangs down Blake's back. I listen to his family mock him, but the firm crack of his palm against my ass has my dick hard and that plug shifting. The door to a bedroom opens and closes, and Blake throws me on the bed.

Bouncing to face him, I laugh. "What happened to you? You used to be so calm and cucumbery. None of my shit ever got to you."

"I fell in love with you," he says with no fuss.

"What's wrong?"

"Mercer, this is going to be fucking quick. I suck at delayed gratification, okay? I just need to fuck you and I need to do it right now. You can draw it out and play games later. Please, baby, just let me fuck you." His eyes beg, and I pause my game.

Okay, hold up. He actually looks on edge. Something is grating on him, and I don't know if it's just edging and sex games, or if something else is going on.

"Blake?"

He tugs my sweatpants down to my ankles, lifts me up, and plants me on my feet. "Nothing is wrong. I just fucking need you, Mercer."

I nod my permission, understanding how that feels. He kisses me quickly, and then turns me around and bends me over. My hands land on the bed and his hand cracks against my ass again. The sting is fiercer now that my sweatpants are gone.

He moves the lacy material aside, his fingers gripping the end of the butt plug. "I'm going insane, Mercer. You in this outfit... with this plug... I just..." He slowly works the plug free. "Can I fuck you hard and fast, baby?"

My cock leaks at the question. "Yes. Fuck yes."

Lube from the plug drips from my ass, and I hear Blake spit on his cock. The next second, I'm being rammed forward as he buries himself to the root inside me. Oh, fuck yeah. Love him desperate.

Blake lets out a strained moan, and then he really does fuck me hard and fast. I plant my hands and let him grip my hips, panting with each hard thrust. It doesn't take long for my back to arch and my cock to drip steadily. He squeezes my hips, spreads my cheeks, smacks my ass, and breathes hard through all of it.

"Fuck, baby. I'm already there." He fucks me harder. "I'm gonna fill your ass and put the plug back in."

Oh, god. "Mmm. Yes."

With another smack, I lose my composure and prove to myself that I suck at delayed gratification, too. My cock ruts against the bed, and in seconds, I'm coming through the lace outfit, coating my dick. Blake groans out his release, burying himself deep and throbbing inside me. He moans my name, bruises my hips, and fucks into me until I fall forward and he lands on top of me.

"I'm sorry," he pants against my neck. "I fucking needed that. I've never been that desperate before."

"I kind of love you like that." I laugh. "Please get desperate and grumpy more often."

He runs his hands up my sides, pushing my hoodie up. "Do you even know how insane you make me, Mercer? Like fucking hell. This lingerie is everything, and you look hot as fuck in it, but it's more than that. It's just you. I need you." He kisses my neck, and I'm blushing again. "I fucking love you, baby."

"I love you, too." I smile widely, not even embarrassed about it.

Blake pulls me up, really does put the plug back in, and then throws a blanket over the cum stain on the bed like it never happened.



BLAKE IS ASLEEP, and I'm staring at him like a creep. Our bedroom is mostly dark, and his breathing is very relaxing, but I've got things on my mind, and I like watching him when he doesn't know it.

"Blake?" I whisper.

He hums in his sleep, his hand seeking my waist under the blanket.

“It’s not just sex for me,” I tell him, knowing he probably can’t hear me. “I know I use sex as a coping method, and I love our sex life, but... it’s you. You’re the only person who ever made me feel safe.”

My maturity knows I should tell him this while he’s awake, but I need a practice run, so this will have to be it.

I admire the stubble on his face. “I just wanted to thank you. For seeing me for who I am, even if I didn’t always know my own identity. For naming me Mercer and making me love it.” I place my hand on his cheek. “For seeing all my broken parts and still deeming me worthy.”

Blake saved me. I don’t even know if he realized he was doing it at the time, but when he practically kidnapped me from the engagement party, he saved me from enduring the facility, Will’s hatred, and the future of being nothing more than a tool until my early death. Blake brought me into his home, made me feel safe there, and worked to understand my actions.

He didn’t get mad at me for acting out. He didn’t reprimand me for being juvenile. He saw me as a brat, and even then, he didn’t try to tame me. Instead, he encouraged me, and I know that it’s his influence that brought this new person to life. He didn’t give me all the answers to take all the credit. No, he reminded me I’m worth something, proved it to me through his actions, and gave me the confidence boost I needed to get there on my own.

“Thank you for believing in me, Blake,” I whisper, feeling warm. I lean forward to press my lips to his forehead. “Thank you for loving me, even when I didn’t know what it meant.” I kiss his hair softly.

Blake’s arms wrap around my back and he holds me close. “Thanks for loving me back, little demon.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to reprimand him while I’m trying to be sneaky. Instead, I hug him back, snuggle in close, and send up a bunch of gratitude to whoever listens, thanking them for this life, and for giving me Blake Carter.



### THREE MONTHS Later

MERCER IS out of his nail polish phase and into his hat phase. He didn't even warn me about it. I got back from eleven days away on a job, walked into the apartment, and found him in a loose tank with big armholes, a small pair of shorts, and a summery, beachy-style fedora. His surfer boy look is hot as fuck, and I am absolutely hoping it hangs on for the rest of the summer.

Currently shirtless and in a pair of purple swim shorts and the fedora, he gives me a saucy look before continuing to chop vegetables for a salad.

"Stop giving me that nervous look," he scoffs at me. "My kitchen knife skills are on point these days, remember? The maturity thing?"

Oh, I remember. He gets mad at himself for reacting like a child, so on top of his beach look, he's been working on being a proper homeowner. Yeah, homeowner, because we put his name on the mortgage so we could be common law and own an asset together.

"It's not the knife I'm worried about, baby. It's whatever you're cooking. You sure you aren't making another batch of nothing to get my attention?"

He smiles, a free and easy one that looks incredible on his face. Tossing the chopped peppers into the salad bowl, he says, "I don't need to bake batches of nothing to get your attention anymore."

“No?” Maybe I need to pretend to ignore him a bit more just to make him try harder. But I promised him I never would, and I won’t break that promise.

“Nope. You’re addicted to me.”

Fucking right I am. Those eleven days away were hell, and I talked to my dad about keeping my jobs closer to home for a bit. Mercer is busy as hell with his ‘man behind the mic’ business these days, plus he reluctantly agreed to bi-monthly work meetings with Dee.

“Am I, now?” I get off the stool and crowd him from behind, caging him in my arms. “You my drug, Mercer?” I kiss his neck and make him laugh.

He spins in my arms, still wielding that kitchen knife. “The only one you’ll ever do,” he says confidently. “And since you stopped smoking, I’m your stress reliever, your vice, your bad little habit, and your boyfriend.”

“And my little cumslut. So many titles to fill,” I tease, kissing his smile. “They seem to make you happy.”

“Mostly.” He drops the knife and runs his hands up my abs and chest.

“Just mostly?”

“Mm.”

I pick him up and sit his ass on the counter, knocking his hat off to look at his eyes. “Tell me how to make you happier.”

“You’ll figure it out.” He licks his lips.

“More cum?” I slide my hands up his thighs.

“I’ll never say no to that, but you’re satisfactory in that department.”

“You want me to be home more?”

“Always, but I understand your job. Even if it gives me panic attacks and makes me pathetic.”

“You’re improving, though. So. Fucking. Proud.” I kiss him between each word.

“Keep guessing,” he says against my lips, still smiling.

“Are you back on the fish tank thing? Because you can get one, but I’m telling you, they’re more work than just putting food in the top and watching them eat.”

“I’m over that. I learned they poop and cloud up the water.”

Sounds about right. I try to think back on our conversations since we moved in here. He’s never mentioned anything about being unhappy unless it’s to do with me leaving for work. Or bitching about therapy. Or Dee. Or

Keira. Or the thermostat. We settled on his demand because mine was too cold for him to wear shorts in the house. We also don't share a bathroom anymore. He keeps all his skincare products and occasional makeup purchases in the one attached to the bedroom, and I keep my toothbrush in the other one.

The oven timer beeps. "Oh, guess you ran out of time." He kisses me before hopping off the counter.

I peek to see what he made, thinking it'll be some elaborate meal because he's been watching cooking shows. I lift a brow at it in question.

"What?" he scoffs. "I'm getting there!"

"Fries?"

"Yeah, but I cut them from *actual*, full-grown potatoes I bought at a *real* grocery store, and then blanched them in water before putting them in the oven, Blake! And I even put oil and salt on them!" he screams at me, defending his cooking. "Shit, I forgot to put in the chicken tenders."

To his credit, the fries actually look nice and crispy, despite how uneven and mismatched in size they are. He sets the tray on the stovetop and heads for the freezer to get the chicken tenders. I grab his wrist and bring him back to where he was between me and the island.

"Fries and salad are enough, baby. They look really good."

He blushes a little. Even his chest is flushed. "I know."

"Tell me what will make you hap—"

The Brandt line rings through the apartment, blocking my question. Mercer presses a button on his tablet, connecting the call to a speaker device.

"Hoodlum!"

"Turn on the news!" Brandt shouts, but he's kind of laughing. "Blake with you?"

"Here," I tell Brandt, clicking the news on the TV.

"Don't call my hoodlum line for fun calls, Brantley!" Mercer rolls his eyes.

"Don't call me Brantley when it's not even my name, Mercer Bentley."

The news finally clicks on at the same time my dad calls, joining Brandt's line, and Bronson is a second behind.

*"Annabelle Thomas, owner and founder of Thomas Tech Inc., has just been rushed to hospital with life-threatening injuries."*



I look at Mercer as the reporter speaks. He shrugs, slipping into my arms in front of me.

*“Annabelle was attacked in her own home, according to police. Two perpetrators, Julia Hentz and Olivia Palmerston, were caught on the live footage from a tech device created and patented by Annabelle and Thomas Tech Inc. The device might just have saved her life, but it certainly did not save Mrs. Hentz and Ms. Palmerston.”*

The screen cuts to Julia and Olivia being cuffed and pushed into the back of an unmarked police SUV.

*“Charges are still being laid, but the big one will depend on Annabelle’s recovery.”* If she dies in the hospital, it’ll be murder. If she doesn’t, it’ll be attempted murder with whatever else they’re being charged with.

*“Fortunately, Annabelle’s two daughters were staying with their father, Frank, when the incident occurred.”*

Mercer looks at me with a smirk. “Guess you and your moral compass saved those kids after all.”

*“Will Palmerston, Olivia’s father and the man involved with the Palmerston-Bentley case, has not replied to police contact for questioning. He doesn’t seem to be in the city anymore.”*

He’s not. He’s in Romania, and he is doing well there. Unfortunately.

*“This is Sheri Jones, reporting live. We’ll be back with more updates.”*

“Did that really just happen?” Bronson laughs through the speaker. “Did Olivia and Julia just solve our Olivia and Julia problem by being dumb as fuck?”

Things really do come full circle. Annabelle created the device that ended up incriminating Olivia. I didn’t kill Frank when she asked me to, which ended up saving his daughters. Mercer didn’t buckle under Olivia’s threats, and instead ruined her reputation, which made her desperate enough to kill Annabelle.

“I just got word from the hospital,” Dad says. “And a lawyer.”

“What’d they say?” Mercer asks, turning his back on the TV to wrap his arms around me instead.

“Annabelle died on the way to the hospital. Julia and Olivia tried to enact a new will agreement, but it didn’t stand. Guess what?” Dad laughs.

I see the whole fucking picture, and I can’t help but laugh, too. “She never changed her will and now everything goes to Frank and the girls.”

Fucking hell, things really did come full circle.

We share a few laughs about that, and then everyone hangs up, and Brandt sets a meeting with Amy Daniels to talk about her future with Thomas Tech.

“This is how you can make me happier, Blake.” Mercer’s chin rests on my chest, his big amber eyes looking up at me.

“How?”

He just smiles at me, waiting for me to figure it out on my own. Now that my mind is working right, I see his big picture, too.

He lost his birth name and became Ben. I renamed him Mercer.

Everything bad in his life has been because of his last name. I can rename him again.

I lick my lips and grin at my little demon. “You telling me you wanna become Mercer Bentley Carter?”

“Mm,” he hums, grinning.

“Mm.”

## EPILOGUE



“Is THIS ‘EURO-BOY CHIC’ enough?” I ask Dee, holding up a man-purse while wearing white trousers and a white and beige lined button-down. Most of the buttons are undone to show off my non-buff chest like all the other boys I’ve seen walking around the Amalfi Coast.

“Yes, but it’s a thousand degrees and you already sweat under pressure. Swap the pants for shorts.” She flings shorts at me, hitting me in the face with them. “And hurry up. I didn’t fly all the way here to watch you play dress-up.”

I don’t even watch her leave the hotel suite. *Good riddance, whore.*

She has a damn point, though. I switch out the white pants for white shorts, slip my feet into deck shoes, and debate a fedora. I mean, my hat phase ended when summer did, and I got sick of picking them up off the floor after Blake got handsy. But they are nice for hiding sweat, even though they make me sweat even more.

*Gah!* I love and hate Italy! So many new fashion options, and I’m buckling under the pressure.

“Mercer!” Blake shouts from the bathroom, steam billowing out of the propped open door. “Did you steal my razors?”

Sure as shit did. I threw them out with the room service trays last night. I like him with scruff, so fuck him for wanting to shave it all off. “No!”

“Mercer Bentley,” he says in his stern voice.

I look over with my innocent eyes, blinking at all the water dripping down his chest and the lack of a towel around his naked hips. Mmm. Two

days and he'll be legally mine, and then he can never escape me.

"Yes, darling?" He tried all my nicknames, so now I'm trying out a few to find one that fits him. Haven't found the winner yet.

"Where are my razors? I packed ten of them and all I can find is this." He holds up an electric trimmer that certainly does not shave down to the skin. I purposefully left that one as a compromise, since I'm mature now.

"You probably forgot them like you forgot your phone."

"You stole my phone, you fucking demon."

Sure as shit did. I threw it on the apartment floor right as we were walking out the door. He's been attached to that thing, researching our wedding venue, being a groomzilla, and taking odd jobs to keep himself sane, and I wanted all his attention on me and only me for this trip. Honestly, by now, he should have expected it.

I blink at him again. "You didn't even compliment my outfit." I pout. "See? My nails are *'seazy breezy.'*" I waggle my blunt ocean-blue nails at him.

His dick takes notice, at least.

And I take notice of it, licking my lips to get him off the razor hunt.

"Don't, you little demon," he warns me. "We have to be out there in ten minutes."

"It's *our* dinner. We can be late if we want to." I drop the man-purse and sway my hips on my way over to him. Blake watches me like I'm going to detonate or something equally as destructive, so I trail a blue nail from his chin to his cock. "Mm."

"Mercer."

I wrap my fingers around his dick and feel it harden fully against my palm. "Yes, fiancé?"

But I don't give him enough brain space to answer. I run my fist over the length of him, watching his eyes the whole time. Blake's chest inflates, and before he lets his breath out, he has an internal debate about time management and being late to dinners. On the exhale, he reaches forward to grab my chin.

"You threw them out, didn't you?"

I pump my fist and bat my lashes. "I would *never*."

"You manipulated your way into making me look how you want me to look." His hips buck, fucking my fist now.

"You always look sexy."

“You made me leave my phone behind.” His cock drags through my loose fist. “You threw out my razors.” He squeezes my chin harder, and now my dick is hard behind the fabric of these white shorts. “You lie and you manipulate; you think you can get one over on me?”

I circle my fingers around the head of his cock and jerk him off with purpose. Just to make him shut up.

He groans. Or moans. Or sighs in agony. So conflicting. “And now you’re making us late for dinner.”

“If you’d just admit defeat and let yourself come, we wouldn’t have to be late.” I smile at him. My charming one.

“You think you get to win all the time, Mercer?” he rasps at me, the tone of his voice not sounding nearly as threatening as he means it to be.

Aww. Such a fluffy unicorn.

“Yes,” I state. With one more smirk, I drop to my knees, stroke just below the head of his dick, lick the slit, and suction my lips around him.

So. Fucking. Predictable.

Blake grips the doorframe, buckles forward, fills my mouth with cum, and curses me and ‘*seazy breezy*’ nail polish.

I swallow his load and stand, gripping his chin this time. “You’re so easy to beat these days, Blake Carter. Might have to start looking for a new man to marry in two days.”

He swats my ass, but I’m already running and giggling and grabbing my man-purse. “Get dressed, heathen! We’re late!”



DINNER IS BORING BECAUSE, even without his phone, Blake is being a wedding details monster. He’s talking to Dee across the table—because like fuck will I let them sit side by side—going on and on about the location and the weather, double and triple checking that no one but our family will be there.

So, I tune that shit out and focus my attention on Aaron and the Carter boys.

“So, like I was saying, Brantley, it would benefit me immensely to get some field experience. Let me go on a quick murder here, a small gang war there, and it’ll really up my *man in the mic* training. What do you think?”

“No,” Blake says, finally surfacing from wedding talk.

“You don’t own me.”

“I will in two days.”

I roll my eyes at him. “How very old-school caveman of you.” I turn my back to the love of my life, just because I can and I know it’ll get me spanked later, and face his bestie. “What do you say, A team? Let me get in on the action.”

“You can’t even shoot a gun.” Aaron serves himself more wine. He never gets to be drunk because he’s pretty much always on the clock or needs to be available, so he’s taking advantage.

“I have daggers, Aaron!”

“In those white shorts?” he scoffs. “Or are they in your purse?”

Everyone laughs, probably at me and my purse, so I open the zipper and whip out a dagger. “Yes, actually. Now, can we go murder someone?”

“You realize this is our wedding trip, right?”

I spin around to face my soon-to-be hubby. “Oh, *what?* Like your constant wedding talk, incessant need to dictate the venue, and creepy Pinterest boards weren’t indicative enough, Blake.” I hit him with another eye roll. “Please.”

Blake grabs my chair, spins it, and forces me to face him. I’m not even mad about it because he’s paying angry attention to me instead of Dee.

“Once I marry your ass, Mercer Bentley, you’ll be a Carter.” His voice is all sex and dominance and possession and it’s giving me chills.

“Yeah, but I’m always gonna be your little demon.” I smile sweetly, and that’s when Blake remembers that I’m holding a dagger. I press it to the white linen of his fancy shirt that honestly looks so hot on him, turning my smile into a wicked smirk. “Take me on a field trip.”

“Are you so bored with life?”

*No, but I want to understand you!* “I’m greedy. You know this.”

“Okay,” Brendan cuts into our stare down and Blake takes the opportunity to disarm me. “Can we have a nice family engagement meal?”

Yeah, we only got engaged like six days ago, and my needy ass demanded a wedding right away. I seriously had no idea how realistically Blake would take that. It was a chore getting the Carter boys, Dee, Aaron and Keira, and Samantha here on such short notice, but we got it done.

As excited as I am to make myself a Carter and tether my life to the murderer of my dreams, I’m itchy for a whole new reason. It’s not panic

this time. It's a gnawing, irritating, increasingly demanding sense of... vengeance. No matter how hard I try to kick everything that happened to me, I can't let it go. I can't move on with my life because William fucking Palmerston got off too easily.

I've never been a vengeful person before. I killed a guy, claimed my one-time-murderer fame, got to be the man in the mic, ruined the Palmerston family and the reputation they had, and got to watch my bitchy non-sister get locked up for life in a separate prison from her bitchy girlfriend. It's a lot. It's enough.

It *should* be enough.

But I'm Blake's little demon, and this demon is turning devilish. I want to sic my hound on my former father, and give the command for him to be ripped apart. I don't think I'll maniacally laugh while Blake ups his murder count, but I might smirk a little bit. Just a tad. Like one of those satisfied, sinister little grins that nobody else notices. Yet everyone will notice because I'll do it with the intention of it being seen because that's just who I am.

"Let's toast," Bronson says. "To Blake finally finding the needy little bastard of his dreams."

I can toast to that. I lift my wine glass, smile at my new family, and let them celebrate me.

"I have an idea for a wedding present, Mercer," Blake whispers in my ear.

"Mm?" I lean into him.

"Fancy a trip to Romania?" he asks.

My skin prickles in anticipation and my eyes shift to his. A trip to Romania. Where Will lives. Oh, Blake Carter, I knew you were perfect.

"On one condition," Blake goes on before I have time to properly practice my sinister smirk. "You're an observer. Bark all the commands you want, but my hands will be the ones doing the killing."

Brandt, who is an eavesdropper extraordinaire, scoffs. "Really? You're going to give him his field experience like he's been begging for over the last few months and you've always said no to? Such a fucking pushover."

"Listen here, Brantley, I am like a mosquito. I will pester and suck you dry until I get what I'm after. You know this."

"He better not *know this*," Blake snips.

Now everyone is in on the conversation, talking about logistics and how bad of an idea it is, while also being weirdly excited about it. Maybe we made a mistake all those months ago when we decided to ruin him rather than kill him, but in my eyes, it was perfect. Because now that Will has married this rich woman, started to get his footing under him again, and revived enough to gain some confidence, it's the perfect time to pull the rug out from under him. And this time when he falls, he won't get back up.

The topic changes from weddings to plotting murders, but Blake's eyes are still on mine. Always attuned, paying attention, checking in.

"Up to you," he says casually.

"I have my own condition," I tell him. "Tomorrow."

"Mercer," he groans. "We can't plan a murder that fast from countries away."

Since I'm pretty heckin' familiar with begging these days, I throw on some pout, water up the eyes, and aim a bunch of blinks at my almost-hubby. "Don't make me marry you in a world where he exists, Blake."

His jaw tics with the force of my manipulation. Yeah, I was perfectly fine to marry him in a world with Will up until this very moment, but it's a good bargaining chip and I'm not above using it.

"Fuck, Mercer," he groans, giving in. "You manipulative prick!" He pulls me onto his lap and I smile, one of my real ones, against his neck.

"No buts?"

"A bit of a but, baby." He laughs into my hair. "And if we don't make it back in time for the wedding I planned meticulously, there'll be such a big but that my firm stance on no punishments will be rethought and reconsidered."

"Don't you dare try to tame me, Blake Carter." I pull back, meeting his blue eyes.

"Never. But I will take pleasure in making you face the consequences of your actions." He grins. "And they won't be as sexy as those firefighters."

If my punishment involves a naked Blake with a twitchy palm and power in his eyes, it'll be a million times better than those firefighters. Gosh, this murder side trip is worth it already.

"What should I wear?"





BECAUSE WILL always took issue with my outfits, I decide to wear one he'll absolutely loathe. Just to send him to the underworld with a sexy me as his final thought. *Ha!*

Lace. Leather. A corset. Eyeliner. Boots with a bit of a heel on them that I made Blake buy me late last night just for the occasion. I'm in my fierce assassin phase tonight.

Outfit aside, I'm in *man on a mission* mode now. Aaron is our man in the mic, and Brendan is with him to ensure all our bases are covered. Bronson and Brandt are with us, Samantha stayed in Italy at the hotel with Keira, and Dee scoffed at me before we left. She usually calls me a slut, but on our way out the door, she called me a murder slut, and I didn't hate it. Still hate her, though. Mostly.

"I can't believe how bullshit this is." I huff with binoculars pressed to my eyes. "He traded in one mansion and got a bigger one. I feel even better about mission 'Whacking Will' now."

"No one calls it that," Bronson says.

"Uh, we all call it that. It's the mission name." I glare at him.

"We never had mission names before you." Brandt tucks some guns into his tactical gear like it's a casual Monday evening. "We never even called them missions. You're tainting the family."

"Improving," I amend.

"Mercer, if you so much as step out of line or somewhere I can't see you and reach you at all times, I will lock you in the car until this is over," Blake says. He grips my chin and forces me to remove the binoculars from my face. "I'm marrying you tomorrow. Don't fuck that up. Got it?"

"*I'm* marrying *you* tomorrow, so give me some fucking credit." I smack his hand away, but he grabs me again.

"I love you, Mercer, but I'm serious. This job is not well planned, and it's dangerous. I trust you, but things go wrong on jobs sometimes. Respect the situation."

I blow out all my witty comebacks and nod. "I'm respecting it. I promise."

Blake presses a kiss to my lips, savours the taste, and then nods. "Then let's move."

Operation 'Whacking Will' is a go.

And I've learned how to walk silently with a boner since the server room job.

Will lives in an old but impressive stone mansion with his rich elderly wife and her two dogs. After Bronson and Brandt secure the hounds by plying them with treats and snacks in the yard, we move inside. Security in a place this old isn't hard to get past, and I'm already getting a super secret spy rush from all the slinking we're doing.

It's kind of fun to hear Aaron in my ear, being me from back in Italy. According to him, the house is empty apart from three live-in staff members, the Romanian woman, who is asleep in her bed, and Will, who is asleep in his own bed.

"Knew you'd show up eventually."

Okay, so not asleep in his own bed. Something squeezes in my chest, but no itches come. I'm not even pulling down my sleeves to ball up the fabric. No. I'm touching dagger hilts and keeping my eyes on the man who ordered my death too many times over. Blake, who has never once stepped in front of me during our entire relationship, does so now. But it doesn't feel demeaning. It's protective, and I love him for it.

"You always were an ungrateful brat, Ben," Will says.

A grateful brat, more like. "It's Mercer. Nice place you have here." I step to the side of Blake, letting him protect me but also letting myself meet eyes with the one and only man I've ever wanted to kill. "Have you started poisoning your wife yet? Plotted her murder? Hired a new hitman who won't botch the job?"

I don't even care that he calls me Ben. To him, I'll always be Ben, and luckily for me, he'll only get to think it for another few minutes until Blake shuts his brain off with a bullet. But when Will smiles at me, something inside me shrinks. Ben is still in there, and sometimes—at the worst of times—he shows up to remind me how neglected and fearful we've always been. This is why I'm the man in the mic. Behind my screens, people like Will can't taunt little timid boys out from beneath my skin. I'm stronger there because I'm in control, important, and powerful. Out here, I'm a liability, and that fact is only just settling in.

"Heard you're getting married," Will says.

From my side, Blake presses his shoulder to mine, reminding me how strong we are together. "Apologize for everything you've ever done to him and maybe I'll make this fast," Blake seethes at Will.

Will snorts. It's a gross sound and gives me the heebie-jeebies. "I can't believe you settled for him. You're Blake Carter. What're you doing with a

scared boy?”

Blake looks at me with love in his eyes and a smile on his face. “He’s not a scared boy. He’s my little demon, and it’s about time you met him properly.”

I’m stunned into awe for a split second, and then I realize that was a lead-in. A lead-in to what? I’m not sure. But when Aaron says something about the drone above us not picking up any approaching heat sensors, and the glint in Blake’s eyes darkens, and Bronson and Brandt move in closer, I act the way I *think* I’m supposed to act. Even though Blake made me promise to be a spectator.

I’ve got fucking knife skills, and I don’t want to spectate this time.

My fingers are nimble on the hilt of the first throwing knife. It soars past Blake’s head and sticks the landing right in the base of Will’s throat. The second one comes with a twist and twirl that I execute perfectly before the hilt wobbles to a standstill right in the middle of Will’s stomach.

“Mercer!” Blake shouts.

“Hoodlum!” Brandt scolds.

“Goddammit,” Bronson mumbles.

“What?” I ask, looking at Will as he stumbles to his knees, bleeding in all the right places. “You set me up to make a move! You called me a little demon!”

Will can’t really talk anymore since there’s a dagger sticking out of the hollow of his throat, and when he falls to his side in a heap of agony, reality sets in.

“I told you *not* to act!” Blake scolds me. “Watch only, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. But I thought you changed your mind when you said that bit about Will meeting your little demon.” I walk towards Will’s body. “Excuse me for getting your signals mixed!” *God. He’s such a dick sometimes.* I kick Will. “You awake?”

Oh no. He’s not awake. He doesn’t move and there’s blood soaking into the fancy rug, and the dogs are snacking outside, and *oh my god.*

He’s dead. I turn my back and stomp around, fingers in my hair, wishing for my hoodlum look. “How dare you, Blake Carter! I told you I was a one-and-done murderer!”

“You did this, demon,” Blake scoffs at me.

“Because you set me up perfectly. I’ve never heard a more perfect intro than that! Now I’m a two-time murderer and that just doesn’t have the same

ring to it! Gosh!” The stress!

“He’s still alive,” Bronson says. “Got a bit of a pulse.”

My eyes shoot to Blake. “You better off him before he dies from my knives. I don’t want a two-time rep, Blake.”

“Fucking warning label,” Blake groans, shooting Will between his closed eyes. “There. Still a one-and-done, Mercer. Happy? Was this climactic enough for you or do you need more flair? We can string him up and bat at him like he’s a piñata if you want. We can waterboard his dead body just to get you that field experience you were after. Hm? Want to cut him open and see all his vile parts just to get an anatomy lesson?”

“I’m sensing some hostility, Blake.” *The piñata option sounds fun, though.*

Blake doesn’t often lose his cool, so he gathers himself on his way over to me. “You manipulated me into this murder, conned me into bringing you here, and broke a promise to me.”

“You offered this as a wedding gift,” I remind him.

“Yes. Wedding gifts usually come after the wedding.” He lifts a brow. “Are you okay?”

I glance at Will’s body. “You’re sure I’m not a two-time murderer?”

“Yes.”

I smile at him. “Then no bats and waterboarding! Let’s go. Don’t make us late for our wedding, Blake!”

“Jesus fuck,” he groans.

I sit on the front steps of the Romanian mansion, feeding the dogs treats and smoking Blake’s cigarettes while the three Carter boys clean up my mess. Apparently, the murder wasn’t supposed to be bloody. Suffocation was the plan, but no one told me, so how was I supposed to know? While they work, I think it all over.

I mean, it was pretty easy. He didn’t even have guards or anything. And these pups are little sweethearts. I’m debating stealing them, but the little old lady in her bed might be heartbroken, so I’ll just spoil them while I have their attention. But like... Will’s dead now, and it feels good, but it wasn’t as dramatic as I thought it would be. He called me a brat, Blake said some swoony shit, and bam, dead. Chapter over. No more men who look at me like I’m still Ben Palmerston.

Blake walks out with sweat on his forehead. Sitting down, he asks again, “You okay, baby?”

“It was kind of boring,” I tell him, offering him one of his own cigarettes that he refuses.

He laughs. “Not all murders are like they are in the movies. What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Like at least one explosion and maybe an evil henchman or something. A death threat right before he died, at the very least. And we can’t even blow the house up or anything because his widow is sleeping so peacefully. I hope she has a touch of dementia and forgets she ever married him.” I take a drag. “Can we steal the dogs?”

“No.”

“Can I steal something?”

“Fine, but make it small. You already packed thirty-seven suitcases.”

I grin. “Can I blow something up?”

“We don’t need the attention.” He squeezes my thigh. “You’re honestly okay?”

I stub out the cigarette and drop it on the ground, but Blake puts it in his pocket because he thinks like a *CSI* actor and claims it has DNA. “I mean, it was a lame murder for sure, and I’m glad I’m not a double-murderer, but... something feels better now that he’s gone. Not just for me, but for anyone else he decides isn’t worth living if they’re in the way of his greed. Maybe we saved the old lady.”

“Maybe.”

“I guess I just feel sorta lighter. That’s all. I thought it was all vengeance and retribution that I wanted, but I think it was just something more subtle than that.”

“Freedom,” Blake says, voicing my feeling. “You are one hundred percent free to be you now, Mercer. It’s not subtle. It’s powerful, and it’s okay to feel it.”

I straddle his lap and look into his eyes. “You sure you wanna marry me? I’m a lot to handle.”

“Mm.” He grins.

“And I lie sometimes.”

“You lie about lying.”

“Not on purpose,” I scoff. “I just want you to be sure you’re making the right choice. I mean, I’ll die if you leave me or change your mind, but at least I’m pretending to give you the option to think about it.”

Blake laughs, squeezing my ass. “I don’t need to think about anything, baby. I was yours the night you wore lingerie outside that club. I’m just glad I got the chance to make you mine, too. I’m marrying you tomorrow. For the rest of my life, it’ll be me and my one-time-murdering little demon. No buts, Mercer.”

Oh my god, I’m so pathetically in love with him. “When we get back to the hotel tonight, I’ll make you a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“Like fuck you will. You are banned from grilled cheeses.” He tilts my head back and smiles at me. “I’m liking this corset, but I miss your hoodlum look.”

“You really like my hoodlum look?” I wrap my arms around his neck.

He nods. “Yeah. You look cute as fuck in it, but also because... you told me I don’t require any effort and that’s why you wear it. It means I make you comfortable.”

I knew he’d figure that out. “Wait until you see what I’m wearing to our wedding.” I smirk. It’s the off-white version of that suit he fell in love with, the one with all the buckles and clasps. Dee helped me make a new one, and I can’t wait for him to see me in it. And peel me out of it.

“As long as you wear lace under it, I don’t care if you wear a hoodie, baby. I just love you and can’t wait to marry you. You’re the neediest little boy I’ve ever fucking met, but I love giving you everything you want.”

My eyes water with the declaration. “*Do not* make me weepy!”

“No buts, Mercer.”

“No buts, hubs.”

Finally, the *perfect* nickname.

THE END



WANT a short and sweet look into their wedding day? Sign up to my newsletter and receive a free bonus epilogue here —> [Little Demon Bells](#)

# ALSO BY NORDIKA NIGHT

## **FROM NOTHING SERIES**

Garron Park, where hope dies and no one ever gets ahead. Until...

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