

A CAPTOR/CAPTIVE DARK ROMANCE

Cry, Little Dove



I.M. WRAITH

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Author's Note

"Cry, Little Dove" is a pitch black, captor/captive dark romance, so take those content warnings seriously y'all. It's a long list.

To avoid spoilers for readers who want to go in blind and to prevent Zon from banning this story for dark content, ***you'll find the list of content warnings at the back of this book*** and on my website <https://imwraithauthor.carrd.co/>

This book is only for adults. It features explicit sex scenes and heavy kink, but it's not an instruction manual for real life. Don't try this shit at home.

The medical scenes and medical information in this book are not health advice. They're fiction, meant to turn you on and scare you a little. Please don't take them as facts. If you have any medical concerns or health issues, don't take any advice from this book and see a real doctor.

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Dedication

For the dark romance girllies who want a tall, tattooed stalker to kidnap them and force them to be his girlfriend.

Dr. Cain Morrow will see you now...

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She doesn't wake up as the tip of my hard cock drags over her plump lips, my pre-cum painting them like pearlescent gloss. Her tongue darts out, flicking wet against it, and I groan.

Fuck, I shouldn't be here.

Not because it was difficult to pick the lock. Hell naw. All these shitty roadside motels are the same.

Not because I'm afraid of getting caught, either.

Sleeping Beauty is out cold, lying between empty beer bottles and caramel chocolate wrappers strewn across the bed. To be fair, she doesn't look much like Sleeping Beauty. More like Snow White with her long, black hair and almost porcelain-pale skin.

What a fuckin' smoke show.

She's lithe and has perky tits, nipples hardened to points beneath a black t-shirt. Her right arm is tucked under her head, a tattoo of a skull with smoky wisps peeking out. She's lying on her side, legs folded over. The position accentuates her tight waist and makes her ass stick out, red panties caught between those round cheeks.

I wonder what hides between her tattooed thighs. Roses, thorny vines, and gems connected with delicate pearl chains cover the right one, the left bearing the image of two skeletons embracing like lovers, framed by lilies.

By far, she is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Pity to think a pretty lil thing like her is gonna get gutted on my operating table tomorrow night.

I stroke myself while I press my nose into the crook of her neck. The scent of her perfume fills my nostrils and my head spins. Vanilla and cinnamon with a darker, floral note. Spicy and sweet and seductive.

She writhes, turning on her back. I flinch as her mouth brushes mine in an accidental kiss, and I lick her bottom lip, tasting drops of myself, beer, and chocolate. Her change in position has pushed up her shirt, revealing a tattoo beneath her breasts.

The dark, geometric mandala with swooping arches and downward-pointing spires reminds me of a gothic church. A large black widow with a skull on its carapace is inked beneath her belly button, sitting on a web of V-shaped, delicate lace patterns. They disappear under her panties like an arrow pointing to her pussy. Her tattoos are all black and white. No colors. Mine are the same.

Damn, she's so perfect it hurts, but she's not my target. Not originally.

I've never taken an innocent before.

When I started out killing years ago, I laid ground rules for myself to keep the beast inside me in check and stop me from going off the deep end. The most important rule is an eye for an eye.

That means I only harvest scumbags, cherry-picked from classified police reports and court transcripts I buy off the dark web. Assholes who were acquitted under strange circumstances or found not guilty despite overwhelming evidence.

My actual victim lives another hundred miles from here. This motel was supposed to be a quick stop to get a few hours of rest, but then I saw *her*.

She walked into the gas station across the street while I was getting a snack for the road and my brain went haywire. I knew she was my next. It felt like fuckin' fate, and no man should try to defy destiny.

I pulled my hat into my face and crouched behind the newspaper stand, pretending to read the headlines. It wasn't easy for a tall guy like me to hide under the bright store lights, but she was too preoccupied with choosing a drink from the fridge to notice me.

Even in sweatpants she was an apparition. A sliver of her stomach showed beneath a cropped, tight top with a demon girl on it. Her hair was in a messy bun, eyes rimmed with smudged black, and I watched her chew on those full lips until she settled on two packs of the cheapest beer. She

bought some chocolate bars, a few bags of BBQ potato chips, and cup noodles, too.

Boot laces dragging in the dust, she stomped across the street to the motel, a brown paper bag in her arms. She walked with her head down, eyes shifting like she was running from something or somebody.

There was an irresistible duplicity to her. A mix of innocence and damaged intensity, like a white dove with a broken wing. It intrigued me.

That was days ago and I was supposed to leave. But here I am, watching my little dove sleep, touching myself over her unconscious body.

My cock throbs. I stroke faster, my other hand pulling up her top, and I palm her breast, twisting her nipple between two fingers. She squirms, a tiny moan slipping from her lips.

I grit my teeth so hard I think I feel a molar crack, but I don't stop pumping my dick.

Something is fuckin' wrong with me. Well, beyond the usual murderous urges.

Since I laid eyes on this woman, I can't stop thinking about her, blood rushing in my ears and my skin prickling like a current of electricity runs under it. Sleep eludes me almost entirely. All I want is to rip every last shred of purity from her heart, excise every scrap of virtue from her flesh like a tumor and bathe her in my crimson shadows.

I spend too many hours sitting in my pickup truck down the street, looking into her room with binoculars. She often forgets to close the curtains just like she did tonight, though I closed them when I broke in. I need privacy for what I'm about to do to her.

But I'm not attracted to my victims. Never. They are meat. Lambs to the slaughter. Prey.

She's still prey and nothing more, I tell myself. But the kind I wanna sink my teeth into before a blade.

My fingers encircle her throat, and she's so fragile in my grasp I could effortlessly snap her neck. She whimpers when I tighten my grip. I wonder what she's dreaming about. In her dream, is she seeing a stranger with his hand around her neck and his cock against her lips?

A tingle races along my spine. I shudder with determination.

It *has* to be her.

My fingers itch as I imagine cutting into her unblemished skin. Drawing red lines and purple bruises across her body.

I could probably fuck her immediately. Right now. Drunk as she is, she won't wake up.

My balls jerk at the thought of burying myself to the hilt in her pussy. But my height isn't the only large thing about me, and she'll feel it tomorrow if I split her with my dick tonight. She'll know she was violated in her sleep, but I need her clueless for the next part of my plan.

Technically, I could take her home immediately, too. The loaded syringe is in the glove compartment of my pickup, ready to be used, but a part of me recoils at the thought.

I can't abduct her like I did the others.

Not my little dove. She's special.

I'll never find fuckin' peace until I make her mine—*first* with my cock, *then* with my scalpel. It's a risk worth taking, even if I have to be patient.

I climb onto the creaking bed. The mattress dips as I push her legs apart, settling between them, and my eyes go wide. There's a wet spot on her panties.

A grin twists my lips. The slut is soaked from me fondling her in her sleep.

My dick pulses, but I need both hands free to run them along her body. Her skin is soft like velvet, and I savor her heat seeping into my palms, tracing her ribs and her waist. I trail along her hips when my fingers brush something hard underneath her.

I pull out a phone. It's unlocked. She must've fallen asleep with it in her hands and it slipped between the blankets. The notes app is open. I stifle a laugh at the title "*SEX BUCKET LIST*."

For a second, I consider that reading her notes is an invasion of her privacy, but then I remember my leaking cock hovering above her pussy. I shrug. Too late to care about morals now.

My brows jump up to my fuckin' hair line when I read the bullet points beneath the creative title.

< Notes

  Done

SEX BUCKET LIST!!!!!!

- knife play
- scarring
- blood play
- primal
- choking
- somno
- gun play (maybe???)
- toys!
- praise and degradation
- face fucking
- orgasm control
- outdoor sex (car??)
- hookup with a smoking hot stranger



A thrill coils through me. Damn, my instincts were spot on, cause she's naming some of my favorite things on her list. I picked the right woman. She's a fuckin' freak.

Somnophilia, huh? What a coincidence.

I lock her phone and put it on the nightstand. I hook a finger into her panties, sliding them off, and my eyes land on her slick, swollen pussy lips. My breath catches. She's practically begging me to fuck her while she's lying there, asleep and helpless.

I notch my tip at her center, dragging upward, coating myself in her wetness. Trembling with restraint, I come to a rest against her clit. She sighs, hips shifting. Her head lolls to the side as I draw circles on the little nub, and I almost explode from the hushed moans leaving her lips.

I give a few firm, short tugs on my cock while I sink two digits into her tight cunt. Her inner muscles clench and pressure gathers in my balls.

How I wish it was my dick inside her, but that's outta the question—for now.

The bed shakes as I fuck her with my fingers, rubbing against her g-spot. With each thrust of my hand I stroke myself at the same time.

"Yeah, you like that, darlin'?" I grit out even though she can't hear me. "Your pussy is gripping my fingers so hard. It's like you were made for me. You're my dirty little whore."

A strangled moan rises in my chest and I lean forward. I lick over her clit before sucking it into my mouth, circling it with my tongue. She tastes sweet. Salty. I'm instantly addicted.

Her pussy spasms and she unravels against my mouth, her hips bucking. Feeling her come around my fingers is too much for me. I can't hold back any longer. I manage to aim at her chest before my own orgasm hits me like a strike of thunder.

Black dots float in my vision. I think I'm gonna pass out and collapse on top of her as pressure shoots up my length, and I close my eyes while my cock swells. Full body shivers course through me. I erupt.

When I open my eyes again, she's covered in my cum. It's on her thighs and stomach, glazing her tits and her throat. She looks marvelous.

I take my phone from my jeans, tap the camera icon and center her in the frame. The flash is bright as lightning. When I'm sure the picture is clear, I wipe my cock on the thin sheets before zipping up. I put the panties on her again, straighten her top, and get up to open the curtains. I have to leave everything as it was or she'll get suspicious.

After I turn off the light on the nightstand, I hesitate by the bed. She's so heart-achingly pretty bathed in the colorful neon lights from the sign

outside.

My hand finds her flushed face. I brush the straight fringe from her forehead and trail along her temple to her ear. She's got lots of piercings there, from the lobe to the top. Multiple rings, a tiny skull, a black butterfly, and a heart with a dark gem. *Cute*.

She can't hear my promise, but the words come out like I'm gonna choke if I don't say them.

"You're already mine, darlin', even if you don't know it yet." I kiss the spot between her brows. "I'll see you again real soon, little dove. And next time, I'm taking you home."

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I wake up with a pounding headache and a single, painfully sharp thought piercing my brain like an ice pick lobotomy:

I'm going to die tonight.

A hoarse laugh wrenches from my throat. It's true. I *am* going to die, but when you hit rock bottom, all you can do is laugh or cry, and I pick the former.

I suck in a breath of tepid air, thick with the overnight smell of stale beer and half-eaten cup noodles. Nausea rises sour from my stomach, but I swallow the bile and my emotions.

I'm not the type to feel sorry for myself and weep. A childhood in the foster system and bouncing from family to family taught me that crying gets you nowhere. I learned to grit my teeth and get shit done. And I'll get this done, too, even if it's literally the last thing I'll do. It's better than the alternative.

Because I also learned that things can always, *always* get worse, and I have no intention to stick around and find out how much worse. I did that the past months, held out hope and waited for better times, but with every day, I'm in deeper shit.

No, I've had enough.

Enough of trying. Enough of fighting.

I want to get off the ride, and the bottle of not-so-legally-obtained sleeping pills in my handbag is my peaceful ticket out of here.

My sore eyes open to a red glow from the massive neon sign right outside. It lights up the whole room and I watch the word *vacancy* turn green, then blue, and red again.

Hold up, if I can see outside...

It takes a moment for me to register that the curtains are wide open. Again. It happened before, but usually during the day when I'm dressed, not

Shit.

I've been passed out for God knows how long wearing nothing but my panties and a t-shirt. Anyone walking past the window could watch me sleep half naked... anyone like the sleazebag from the reception. I wouldn't put it past him to spy on me. He's the type.

I grimace, remembering his greasy hair, his ripe body odor, and that creepy smile missing a few teeth. The ones he has left are brown. While I checked in, he asked too many personal questions and tried to hold my hand when I gave him the money.

I've been here a few days and he seeks every opportunity to run into me, like when I go to the gas station for food. Once, he even knocked on my door to offer me a bucket of ice and a bottle of screw-top wine I didn't ask for. I declined both.

A spring pokes my side as I turn over. The mattress shifts and empty bottles clink, one rolling off and falling onto the dark brown carpet. A strategic choice of color, probably to hide various bodily fluids splashed all over it. I try not to think about those shows where people search hotel rooms with UV blacklight, but I feel as filthy as the floor looks.

My belly and chest are covered in a mysterious dried substance, cracking like milky white paint on my skin. A shudder races through me. *Fucking disgusting.*

In my drunken stupor, I must have spilled something on myself. Given that I don't remember when I stopped drinking and shout-singing to go to bed, I won't try to figure out what the white stuff is. I need a shower anyway.

I grab my phone from the nightstand, pressing my thumb to the fingerprint scanner. The light of the screen has me hissing. My burning eyes adjust slowly.

9:03pm? I slept the whole day.

A pang of shame worms through me as I recognize the open notes app.

Apparently shitfaced Erica thought it was a fabulous idea to write a bucket list twenty-four hours before offing herself. A bit late. A sex bucket list, no less.

I squint until the small black shapes on the screen become actual letters, forming actual words. As I read about the depravity on my list, murky memories come back to me.

No, not memories. Fragments of a dream.

I recall a tall man, a cowboy hat drawn low into his face. Rolled up sleeves and strong, tattooed arms. Big, rough hands sliding along my body. Calloused fingers around my throat and in my—

“Holy shit!” I gasp and shoot upright.

Bad idea.

The room spins. My headache kicks up a notch, and my stomach heaves. Tangled strands of hair fall over my shoulder as I turn on the lamp on the nightstand to chase away the remnants of my dirty dream.

My pussy clenches. Did I have an orgasm in my sleep?

I’m not sure if that’s cool or awfully embarrassing. Sure, I had a bit of a dry spell since things with Nate ended, but wet dreams are for horny teenagers.

I smack my chapped lips. My tongue is a thick sponge in my mouth, and my whole skeleton is... misaligned. Too big for my skin.

Being hungover is like they show on TV. I feel horrible. Sticky. Dirty. Sick. It’s a miracle I didn’t throw up last night—or now for that matter—but I guess I have a strong liver and hearty constitution.

I stare at the peeling green wallpaper across the room, seeking a pattern in the swirls disappearing behind a sideboard with a microwave on top. A sigh rattles in my chest, and my eyes drop to my phone.

What a stupid list. It reads like I didn’t have fun for a single day in my life and it’s true. I didn’t. I couldn’t afford to let loose.

Being the daughter of good-for-nothing junkies I had something to prove. Namely that I’m stable, not like my parents. I’m a good girl, and good girls don’t get off on being slapped or cut or choked or any of the other perverted stuff on my list.

Despite getting pushed around foster families, I did okay for myself when I was a kid. I went to school and had decent grades. For the first years after

high school, I did random, seasonal work before I eventually ended up as a waitress in a small restaurant. Not exactly a dream job, but I considered myself lucky to find employment at all.

It was enough to live a frugal lifestyle devoid of most pleasures. The one indulgence I allowed myself were my tattoos, a collection of art on my skin I slowly added to over the years. I never touched drugs or a single drop of alcohol until last night.

In hindsight, it all seems pointless. Denying myself. Struggling. Putting on a brave face.

Who am I *really* trying to prove myself to... and why? What good is following the rules of society just to end up like this, anyway?

Angry tears brim in my eyes, but I swallow them, too.

I followed those damn rules all my life. I even scrounged to save up some money in case times got tough. Well, I didn't count on times getting *this* tough.

I didn't expect a shitty boyfriend with a gambling addiction to steal my savings from the shoebox in my closet. Or getting fired right after. Or losing my apartment and living in my car before I settled on going to Mexico. I didn't have a plan what I'd do once I got there, but I needed to set a goal for myself, or I would've lost my mind.

Things went fine until my car broke down in the middle of fuck-ass-nowhere in North Texas and I dragged myself on foot to this awful motel straight from purgatory.

I rub over my face. This is the end of the line for me.

I don't need to check my bank account to know that the balance is zero. My credit cards are maxed-out. Tomorrow I'll end up on the streets, and fuck dying under a bridge. I want control over the way I go out—even if it happens all alone on a stained mattress in a seedy motel.

I slide into my soft, worn-out leather boots and yelp as I slip on a chocolate wrapper, nearly falling on my ass. The scare makes my head throb like a jackhammer is digging into my skull, but at least I catch my balance.

I open the music app on my phone and pick my current favorite playlist titled *Fuck shit up*. It's a mix of everything alternative. Metal, emo, rock, and a little pop punk.

Billy Talent blares from the crackling speakers. I turn up the volume. The heavy guitar riffs sound like they come from a tin can, but it's better than

listening to my thoughts. Unfortunately, the noise does nothing good for my headache. I grab my wallet from my faux leather handbag on the TV stand.

“Dumb bitch,” I curse myself when I find a whole \$2. “Did you think the money magically multiplied overnight?”

With a sigh I toss my wallet back into the bag. How am I supposed to pay for my last meal and some drinks? I don’t want to die hungry, and I sure as hell don’t want to die sober.

Coward, a voice in the back of my head whispers but I ignore it.

I look over my shoulder, out into the darkness beyond the window and the glowing sign. The gas station across the road is still open, but I know from my previous visits that everything there is out of my budget now, too. The vending machine in the motel parking lot might have a snack more in my price range.

My brows rise as I remember a shady dive bar down the street, next to a small diner. This so-called town is basically just a stretch of dusty road with a few run-down buildings. I’d bet a kidney they don’t get many single women here. With a bit of luck, I might be able to charm some horny idiot into paying for my drinks.

And maybe, by some incredible miracle, an eligible bachelor will appear out of nowhere to save me from my dry spell. Or at least someone who still has all their teeth and knows how a shower works.

I open the squeaky closet doors and dig through my messy weekender. All that’s left of my life fits into this bag. How depressing.

I grab a bottle of generic pain killers from the zipper compartment. The pills stick to my dry throat as I swallow them. I suppress the urge to gag, force them down, and put the bottle back. A criminally short and tight, cherry-red dress finds its way into my hands and a black, barely-there lace thong. I toss the clothes on the bed and stumble to the bathroom.

My fist hits the light switch as I close the door behind me.

The fluorescent ceiling light flickers, illuminating my makeup scattered on the grubby counter by the sink. Catching a glance of my reflection in the broken mirror is like watching a gruesome accident. I don’t want to see the dark circles under my eyes or the sharp angles of my gaunt, pale cheeks, but I can’t look away.

I kick off my boots and undress, throwing my shirt and panties onto a pile of dirty clothes in the corner. A cockroach startles from underneath, and I jump as it rushes past me to the crack under the door.

Skin crawling from the encounter, I step into the shower and turn it on. A forceful stream of ice-cold water hits my chest. I squeal before the temperature gets burning hot—only for a few seconds though. Then it's arctic again. Then hot. Cold. Hot.

Teeth chattering, I squeeze the last bit of shampoo from the bottle on the floor and work up a lather between my palms.

One more night to check some things off that ridiculous list. Sure, I'm going to die, but that doesn't mean I can't have some fun before I do—or try to.

Fuck being a good girl.

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My thumb drags across the naked woman on my phone screen. Inside my dark pickup, the device's glow is hypnotizing. I turned the brightness up so I can make out every detail of her incredible body and every drop of my cum splashed over her skin.

A jerk runs through my cock, and I grin, the tip of my cigarette glowing red as I take a drag. I exhale the smoke slowly through my nose.

Folk wisdom says beauty is on the inside, though she has plenty of it on the outside, too. Not that I can say anything about her personality. We've never spoken and I don't know her name. Not yet.

She must be around thirty years old, and the heart of a healthy woman her age sells for a small fortune. Factor in the rest of her organs, too. Eyes. Kidneys. Lungs. But it's not about money.

As a doctor, I turn around most of my harvest myself. That way I can make sure the organs go to recipients who need them the most, those lowest on the transplant waiting lists and those deemed unimportant or expendable. Mainly poor folks.

Years spent working in hospitals and managing a chain of private clinics makes faking the documents a piece of cake. I know the system inside out.

On occasion, when I can't find a recipient in time, I sell to the highest bidder on the dark web. It's a waste to let the organs rot. Masked to protect my identity, I handle the exchanges personally in one of many old

warehouses I own across Texas. I always reinvest the money in my favorite charities.

No, my hunts aren't about cash.

It's about the stalking. The total power. The relief of the kill when shiny steel slices through skin and muscle. Seeing the life drain from my victim's fearful eyes is addictive. The ultimate drug.

A shudder runs through me. I can't wait to do the same to my little dove.

I tear my attention from her picture, lock my phone, and throw it onto the passenger side of the bench seat. Damn, I don't know why I took it in the first place. It's evidence. An unnecessary risk.

I have a room at the motel, but I spent most of the day in my truck again, parked up the street on a slight incline. It's the ideal spot to keep an eye on her.

The memories of her silken skin and wet cunt are like hallucinations floating in my mind. I can't believe I was so fuckin' bold. Bold and stupid.

But last night after I came back from grabbing a bite at the local diner and peeked into her window, she was already drunk. Half-naked, she jumped around with a bottle in hand while she yelled along to *River Below*, one of my favorite Billy Talent songs. The beer spilled when she carelessly put the bottle on the nightstand, dragging herself onto the bed. She just about managed to turn off the music and passed out.

Something inside me snapped, seeing her like that. Vulnerable. Defenseless. The memory is enough to make my pulse spike.

I barely bothered to check that the creep at the reception was busy watching some trashy late night talk show on TV before I found myself at her door, lockpick in hand. That guy rubs me the wrong way, always leering at her. Fuckin' dickhead has no right to look at her.

She belongs to me.

She's my prey and I'm the hunter. I'm in control. Then why did stepping into her room feel like walking into a trap?

A frown furrows my brow. I have a tried and tested routine for my hunts, but it took one glance at her and my strategic planning went out the window like she gripped my heart with an invisible fist and didn't let go.

Fuck me. How can a woman I never exchanged a word with have such a hold on me?

I roll down the window. A coyote howls in the distance as I hang my arm outside, dropping the cigarette butt. The air is cooler than during the day,

but it brings little relief from the waves of heat under my skin.

I hoped last night would calm my carnal urges, but sticking my fingers into her perfect pussy made things worse. My day has been plagued by random hardons and my thoughts circle around her like I'm some obsessed freak.

I raise the binoculars to my eyes. Her room across the street is still dark.

Restlessness trickles down my spine and I shift in my seat. Tonight is the night. Everything is prepared, and my patience has run out. No more games. No more waiting.

But how fuckin' long is she gonna sleep?

I switch on the radio. The speakers crackle as I turn the tuning knob until I find a rock station. I tap my foot in rhythm with the quiet music, focusing on her window again. Thank fuck I do. With the lights off in the room and only the motel sign shining inside, I didn't notice that she's finally awake.

She sits in the bed, staring at the curtains like she just realized she forgot to close them. A deep frown appears on her forehead while she looks at her phone for a few minutes before getting up.

My cock comes to life when I see her ass peeking out under her shirt, and I have to stop myself from jumping out of the car. I want to burst into the room, grab her, and bend her over that bed.

She leaves her phone on the nightstand and stops by the closet on her way to the bathroom. Disappointment cools my desire as she closes the door behind her.

I lean back, dropping the binoculars on the seat. My fingers need something to do if I'm not allowed to dig them into her hips. I grab another cigarette from the crumpled packet on the dashboard when my phone lights up.

MANDY

Don't forget the annual charity
gala for the Little Hearts
Children's Hospital next month

I'll see you there, right?

I groan. If I don't answer, she'll call and I hate phone calls—even if it's my sister. This ain't the time for a chat. I gotta concentrate on my prey.

Yeah, I'll be there

MANDY

Got a girlfriend yet?? I'm sick
of being your plus one.

That's so cringe

I'm working on it. Drop it.

My other life feels universes away. Dr. Cain Morrow, accomplished surgeon, reclusive businessman and philanthropist, doesn't exist in this moment. When I'm on the prowl, I shed my skin like a brutal monster hiding beneath the façade of a good man.

Nobody would recognize me looking like this. Not with the jeans, the hat and the boots, showing off tattoos I normally hide under strict business attire. Not with a five-o'clock shadow darkening my face while I drive around in my dad's banged-up pickup truck instead of my brand-new, luxury SUV.

But this version of me is closest to my true self. I'm more comfortable in the gloom of depravity than in the bright lights of the nice, responsible guy the world expects me to be.

My phone flashes with a new message and I smile.

MANDY

Fiiiiine. 🙄

LA is getting on my nerves. I might catch a flight sooner and stop by the house.

I miss you!! ❤️

Sure, but call me first. You know I don't like surprise visits.

Miss you too, sis.

Movement at the motel catches my eye and the phone slips from my hand, falling to the floor.

It's *her*.

My little dove lingers in the door to her room, wearing a tiny red number so fuckin' tight, it looks like it's gonna rip at the seams. She's still damn short compared to me, but the black high heels add to her height.

Where the hell do you think you're going dressed like this, darlin'?

Fantasies spring up in my mind and I swallow thickly. I imagine her hair wrapped around my fist like a leash, her eyes watering and makeup running

down her face as she chokes on my cock. Then pounding into her sweet pussy, filling her with my seed while she cries out my name.

She locks her door and tucks the key into her bag. Then she stands there, lost. Her head turns.

Is she waiting for somebody?

Her phone hasn't rung once in the past days and she doesn't seem to know anybody in town. She strikes me as kind of a loner. We have that in common, at least when my sister Mandy or work responsibilities don't force me to be social.

I prefer being by myself. Humans are too complicated. Two-faced users, the whole lot of 'em, and none can withstand a glimpse into the bottomless, pitch-black abyss of my soul. It's better to keep my distance.

She fumbles with the shoulder strap of her purse, and I follow her gaze across the street. My hands clench into fists when I realize where she's looking. That shitty bar. I visited the place myself, and it's a den of filthy bastards just waiting to get their grubby hands on a ravishing woman like her.

I shake my head. *Oh no you won't, little dove. Hell naw.*

I spit the unlit cigarette on the floor and lean over to the glove compartment to take out the plastic syringe I prepared. Making sure the cap is on the needle, I tuck it into the back of my waistband, hidden under my loose fleece shirt. Like a reflex, I reach for the hunting knife at my belt and get out of the truck.

I stalk down the dark street, my pulse thrumming in my ears.

She's mine. Mine to take and fuck. Mine to gut. I won't let anybody else lay a finger on her.



The vending machine buzzes and spits out my crumpled dollar note.

“Really? *Again?*” I kick the bottom, grimacing at the pain shooting through my toes. “Just take my fucking money!”

My headache is much better. The shower and painkillers helped, and slapping on makeup and doing my hair always makes me feel put together. But this... *this* is the last straw. How dare this stupid machine stand between me and a little snack?!

I deserve a little snack, dammit!

Cursing, I flatten the bill against the glass and try again. More buzzing. Then finally, the dim LED display shows a \$2 balance. I make my selection and the metal spiral inside the machine turns to release a small bag of off-brand BBQ chips.

I’m about to clap with excitement. My stomach growls like a wild animal and this isn’t a proper dinner, but it’ll have to do. Less food means I’ll get drunk faster, which is a good thing. The crisp packet tilts forward and gets stuck—half caught in the spiral.

“Shit! I can’t fucking believe this!” I whine.

I massage my temples as I scan the motel parking lot and the dark front office. The resident creep must have gone to sleep in the back room earlier than usual, and the thought of waking him to fix the issue makes me wince.

Hoping for a miracle that won't happen, I press the same numbers on the machine again. Nothing moves. I push against the side and attempt to shake the metal colossus, but it won't budge. The air rushes from my lungs. Defeated, I lean my forehead against the cool glass, holding back sudden tears.

How silly to be in pieces about a packet of chips.

I won't cry. I won't cry. I won't—

"Do you need help, darlin'?" a deep, smooth voice drawls.

I jump. My ankle rolls and I trip, losing my balance. Before I fall, a firm grip closes around my wrist, pulling me against something hard. And warm.

A body.

More precisely, a broad chest covered by an open, red flannel with a black t-shirt underneath.

My heart turns upside down as I spot a large, rough hand wrapped around my bare arm, keeping me upright. The fingertips and wide palm are calloused, the dry heat of the stranger's skin searing into me.

A snake's head is tattooed on his wrist, winding through roses along a thick forearm, muscles cording beneath sun-kissed skin. Its tail disappears under a rolled-up sleeve at his elbow. I bend my neck as far back as I can to meet a green gaze glimmering beneath the brim of a black cowboy hat.

The man runs his free hand over the dark stubble along his sharp jaw, drawing my attention to a photorealistic tattoo of a forest and a broad river on this arm. No doubt it continues beneath his clothes.

Christ, two arm sleeves? And so far, all his tattoos are black and white, like most of mine. I've always had a weakness for guys with ink, but monochrome is my favorite kind.

The slight wrinkles around his eyes deepen as he tilts his head and gives me a lopsided smirk. He seems oddly familiar. Do I know him from somewhere?

His height makes me feel small and despite the alarm bells going off in my head as I notice the hunting knife at his belt, I can't help the throb between my legs.

Being this handsome should be a criminal offence.

He oozes a dangerous sort of charm, making the hairs on my arms stand. I want to run away and melt into him at the same time. The longer I stare at him, the stronger that vague feeling of recognition gets until realization hits me like a ton of bricks. My lungs stop.

Oh God, this guy looks like he stepped straight from that dirty dream I had last night!

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you,” he says. “I shouldn’t’ve crept up on you like that, but you looked upset.” He has a Southern accent with a twist, like he trained himself to hide his natural speech mannerisms, but they sneak in anyway.

I blink, stupefied, my pulse hammering in my throat.

“Are you alright?” he asks and tugs gently on my arm.

I snap out of my trance, becoming very aware of his fingers still wrapped around my wrist. With considerable effort, I continue to breathe like a normal person and inhale the scent streaming off him. Tobacco. Whisky. Something woodsy with a hint of musk, perhaps cologne.

Delicious.

I have to stop myself from burying my nose in his chest and sniffing him like a weirdo.

I thank past me for using the last few spritzes of my favorite perfume after the shower. It’s an expensive fragrance called “Sinner” I won from a raffle at a beauty supply store. I hope it’s doing its job, making me seem mysterious and seductive to him, despite literally falling into his arms and gawking at him like a deer in the headlights.

“I, uh—the...” Stammering, I glance at the vending machine. How embarrassing. My brain isn’t great at functioning hungover, starving, and entirely scrambled by the gorgeous stranger holding me prisoner. Figuratively.

His grin turns into full-blown laughter, deepening the cute smile lines on his face. I guess he’s in his late thirties.

“Don’t fret now. I see the problem,” he says and lets me go, gesturing to the vending machine. “If you’d kindly step aside, I’ll give it a try.”

Yes, right. I’m still pressed up against this hot cowboy, and he’s not making me do it anymore. This is all me.

I clear my throat and move away. “Be my guest,” I choke out.

Wow, a full sentence! Congratulations, Erica.

His attention shifts to the machine, giving me a chance to stare at him again while he’s distracted.

Raven-black curls with a handful of stray greys stick out from under his hat, and he has wide shoulders and thick upper arms. A broad back. His strong thighs are covered by slate jeans, and he wears black cowboy boots.

Even through his clothes I can tell that he's muscular, but not like those steroid-jacked gym bros. I hate those. He definitely works out, but he looks more as if he does a lot of heavy lifting, and *that* look I can get behind. Or rather under. Or in front, on all fours with him behind me—

Calm down, I scold myself, but he's the ideal candidate for that one item on my bucket list. *Hooking up with a hot stranger*.

"Aw, damn," he curses under his breath before addressing me. "This might get a lil loud."

"What—"

His fist pummels the side of the machine until the chips drop and a big, fat dent warps the metal. He reaches into the chute and offers the bag to me. The single serving size looks comically small in his hand.

"Here you go."

"Thank you." I take it, flashing him a smile.

His gaze drags from my lips over my breasts to my waist and my hips. Then down my thighs and my bare legs and I swear I can feel it on my skin like a trail of lava.

"Excuse my asking, but do you always dress up like this to get cheap snacks from an old vending machine in a dingy motel parking lot?" he asks, smirking. "Not that I'm complaining. You're a damn sight for sore eyes."

I laugh. "Only when I think I'm going to run into hot cowboys."

He raises a brow as he tips his hat back and tuts. "I hate to disappoint you, but I ain't a cowboy."

"Oh?"

"All this..." He gestures at himself. "It's my dad's influence and a way to honor him, I guess. The hat belonged to him. I inherited a whole collection. Belts, boots, and ties, too." He shrugs, shoving his hands into his pockets. "My dad grew up on a ranch, and let me tell you, that man had style with a capital S. My mother would be spinning in her grave if she saw me now, though."

"Why's that?" I ask.

My question catches him off guard, and frankly, me too. Yikes, can I get any more inappropriate? I just met this guy and I'm already asking about his family history? I should've stuck with stammering instead of whatever *this* is.

His head cocks, eyes rounding. He twists the tip of his boot, bits of gravel grinding on the concrete, and his lips part without a sound, like he's trying

to figure out if he should answer.

“My mother was a proper English lady. She came to Texas for work and fell for my dad,” he says, speaking faster and faster. “But like often, the quirks we find attractive in the beginning end up annoying us. For her, that was my dad’s accent. His looks. What seemed charming at the start turned into an embarrassment for her. Especially ‘round her high-society friends. That’s why she made sure I dressed well, spoke *properly*, and insisted I called her Charlotte instead of mom. She barely tolerated being addressed as mother.”

An awkward buzz hangs in the air, and I fidget with the packet of chips. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked something so personal. I don’t know what came over me,” I say with an apologetic smile.

“Naw, it’s my fault for bringing her up in the first place. I’m probably boring you with my rambling. Not sure why I told you any of it,” he responds, rubbing over the back of his neck, cheeks darkening. “You were making polite small talk and I’m oversharing like hell. Nobody wants to hear a stranger’s family troubles, right?”

My heart squeezes. “I wanted to know or I wouldn’t have asked.”

But *why* do I want to know more about him? What does it matter to me?

He favors me with another, softer smile, and butterflies surge in my belly. He’s not just hot. He’s sincere, too. Sweet. Vulnerable.

The only men I slept with were a handful of boyfriends. One-night stands aren’t my thing, but I have this one chance before I end it all, and I never thought I’d find someone like him in this town. Letting the opportunity pass me by would be such a waste.

“You see, I don’t usually do this...” I attempt to hide my nervousness in a giggle. “But it’s a long night and I’m a little lonely. I have a room here—uh, number one back there—and I wondered if you’d like to... you know...”

He points at my hand, his smile turning into an impish smirk. “If I’d like to share those potato chips with you?”

For the first time since I lost everything, I burst out laughing. “Yes, *that*.” I hold up the bag. “Chips.”

He clicks his tongue, faking concern. “Are you sure that’s enough for both of us?”

I gather my courage and step closer, drawing a finger along his chest. “We can make it work.”

His hand shoots out. I gasp as he clasps the nape of my neck and yanks me against him. My heart jumps into my throat. A shadow crosses his face and his expression shifts, turning hungry. Ravenous.

“Alright then, darlin’.” He lets out a low, foreboding chuckle. “You go on ahead. I gotta grab something from my truck, and then I’ll be right there with you. Hope you’re ready for the best sex of your whole fuckin’ life. But consider this a warning...” He leans down. His nose brushes mine and my stomach flips. “I’ll ruin you tonight.”

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The silence inside the dim room suffocates me, making me second-guess myself. And him.

What if the truck thing was an excuse because he's too polite to decline outright? What if he's not coming back?

I throw my handbag and the chips on the TV stand and turn on the light on the nightstand. Next stop is the bathroom mirror to check my makeup and hair, ensuring none of my red lipstick has gotten on my teeth. Anxiously, I tug my dress down my thighs like I'm not hoping he'll tear it off me the moment he walks in.

If he ever walks in.

I return to the main room and shame hits my face like I stepped in front of a furnace. There are bottles on the bed and the nightstand. Candy wrappers on the floor like confetti. Empty ramen cups stacked on every surface.

I grab the bin by the door and sweep the trash into it, but I don't feel any calmer when I'm done and take my phone from my bag. My fingers tremble as I try to choose some music.

A panicked thought about STDs flickers through my mind, but I disregard it.

It doesn't matter. Not during my last night.

I know *I* am clean. After my ex-boyfriend Nate disappeared with my savings I immediately got tested. I thought if he was dishonest enough to steal from me, he might have been cheating, too, and the contraceptive implant on the inside of my upper left arm wouldn't protect me from that.

Time ticks by. With each second, my heart thumps faster.

How embarrassing would it be if he bailed?

As I scroll through my playlists for something to set the mood, I wonder what music my handsome stranger would like. Pah, he probably doesn't care. We're hooking up for casual sex, not getting to know each other.

I remember our conversation and pause. Why *did* he tell me about his mother? He could have brushed me off, but I found it adorable to hear him overshare. It created an illusion of familiarity that eased my nerves, and before that bout of word vomit, he was almost too intimidating.

He was still scary when he towered over me, but scary in a good way. In a toe-curling, damp panties kind of way.

I tap on my favorite Marilyn Manson album, set it on shuffle, and *I Want To Kill You Like They Do In The Movies* starts playing. On cue with the first line of the lyrics, the door opens. I spin around, and my breath hitches. The stranger's body nearly fills out the whole frame and he has to duck his head as he steps inside the room.

A wave of wanting rushes through me. *If every part of him is this big...*

He locks up behind him and tips his hat, greeting me with a half-drunk bottle of cheap whisky. The predatory sting of his gaze contradicts the warmth of his smile as he strides toward me.

"What's your name, darlin'?" he asks, his voice slick and dark as oil.

"No names," I whisper.

His chin dips in agreement and he stops in front of me, so close I can feel the heat radiating from him. With a slow twist, he unscrews the bottle and tosses the cap onto the floor. "Open your mouth for me, little dove."

Lightning shoots between my legs. God, his commanding tone is fucking hot. After the sweet talking and the jokes earlier, I didn't think he had it in him, but those last words he said to me by the vending machine should've been a hint.

Then again, many guys talk big but can't deliver when it counts. Does that mean he'll fulfill his promise to ruin me?

And what about that pet name... little dove?

A strange choice for a woman he doesn't know, but I guess he has to call me something else if I don't want to tell him my real name. It's more intimate than baby or honey or another generic word.

It makes me feel special.

My lips part and he grips my chin, tilting my head back. He lifts the bottle above my face and tips it, pouring a thin stream of amber liquid into my mouth.

"Swallow for me," he drawls.

The whisky burns my throat, and I hold back a cough. This is worlds apart from the beer last night. Instant fire floods my body and my veins buzz. Alcohol spreads through the network of my nerves, washing any doubt from my mind.

I want this. And I want him.

That tone, those orders, and the wicked glint in his eyes... He hasn't even touched me down there yet, but I'm soaked.

Am I dreaming again?

"Keep swallowing, darlin'. You'll drink until I say you're done."

I nod, but my movement is too eager and some cool whisky flows onto my chest. I startle, choke, and launch into a humiliating coughing fit. He takes a swig of whisky while his broad hand gently slaps my back until I'm better, but his lips wrapping around the bottle have me hyperventilating for an entirely different reason.

I need to feel them on mine. It's like I'm suffocating without his kiss, like only he can breathe life into me.

The stranger leaves the bottle on the sideboard and pushes up his hat with a knuckle. One hand on my waist, the other around the back of my neck, he pulls me in. The impact against his brawny chest rattles through me and the next moment, his mouth crashes into mine.

I taste copper. He must have split my lip. The scrape stings as he opens his mouth and whisky flows into mine, but I still swallow. His teeth drag over the small wound before his tongue swarms mine. He tosses his hat onto the bed and claims me with his lips like a man who'd rather die than let me go.

This isn't a kiss. It's domination.

His rough hands rove over my body, and I stretch to wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers tangling in the curls at his nape. He tweaks my nipples through my dress, and they pebble into sensitive peaks. His fingers

on my back slide down my spine, palming my ass, pressing my hips against him.

I feel something hard and gasp into his mouth.

Is *that* his dick? A knot builds in my throat. He feels larger than anyone I've been with, and one urgent question shoves into the forefront of my mind.

Will he even fit?

Like a predator cornering his prey before going in for the kill, he pushes me back against the wall. He breaks the kiss and my belly tingles as I see my red lipstick smeared across his mouth. I don't know why, but it reminds me of blood.

He doesn't take his eyes off me while he hikes up my dress and drags a thick finger along my seam. I let out a pathetic whine. My damp panties are the only thing separating us.

"You're practically dripping, darlin'," he murmurs, a dark look flickering across his face. "What makes a pretty lil thing like you scream, hmm?"

God, this man is the devil himself. How obscene. How shameless. How indescribably sexy.

His left hand slips under my panties, and his thumb plays with my clit, circling it slowly. Slower. Even slower. I pant with need, bucking my hips against his palm.

I have never gotten this wet this fast. Normally, it takes a lot of foreplay to get me going. In the haze of lust and whisky, I wonder if I've always been with the wrong guys. But damn, this feels so right.

He parts my pussy lips, slick and ready for him, and pushes two digits into me as far as he can reach, which—given the size of his hands—is fucking far. I twist a hand into his shirt as I clench around him.

"You'll have to take a lot more girth than that to fit my cock into your tight cunt," he whispers. "You're so delicate... I can't wait to break you."

He pulls out just to shove into me again. Three fingers at least. The stretch burns a bit and I groan, but he curls his digits forward.

"Oh, shit... that's good..." I ramble.

His smirk widens, and he starts finger-fucking me. *Hard*. Every brutal upward thrust has me bouncing on my toes, crying out. He scissors his fingers, stretching me, preparing me for him.

I can *hear* how wet I am. I'm so wracked with need, I can't bring myself to be ashamed of the sounds coming from between my legs and out of my

mouth. Squelching. Whining. Whimpers. Moans. My eyes roll and I give in to every sensation when a glint of metal pulls me into reality.

I freeze. My mouth hangs open with shallow breaths.

His hunting knife. It's right in front of my face.

"Aw, darlin', are you afraid?" he mocks, biting his lip as he grips the bone-carved hilt tighter. "The fear on your face makes you even prettier. Maybe I should scare you a lil more, huh?"

"I-I don't—"

I whimper as he brings the knife closer to my neck. A cold caress slides along my throat, and my body lights up with panic and arousal. Every muscle inside me tenses.

The stranger leans in close, still fucking me with his other hand, and his breath is hot on my ear as he whispers, "Oh, my little dove. You just got even tighter. Does a knife against your throat turn you on? Do you get off on death threats?"

I don't dare to move or answer.

The blade scrapes along the front of my neck, leaving a line of heat and a trickle of warmth. Shit, this time he *did* injure me, but it's a precise, careful cut, sending silky shivers of pain along my skin.

He makes violence feel like tenderness.

"Admit it," he rasps. "Admit that you almost came from my knife against your throat." His words shouldn't be as seductive as they are.

I swallow, and my voice comes out hoarse. "It-it's true... your knife against my neck brought me to the edge."

"That's my good, dirty girl," he murmurs and something inside me preens at his praise.

His fingers retreat from my pussy and he lowers the knife to my hips. He slices through my panties, letting them fall to the floor, but he doesn't cut me again. Instead, he rears his hand and the blade back, grinning.

My eyes widen. "W-what are you—"

The knife shoots forward and I cry out, expecting the worst, but a *thunk* sounds. When I glance to the side, my legs wobble from relief.

The blade is stuck in the drywall, right by my head.

"You should see that look on your face," he says, chuckling. "Fuck, you are divine when you think I'm about to murder you." His amusement is cold and sadistic, and my stomach twists. Because he *does* scare me. And because it scares me more that I enjoy this.

The threats. The brutality. The roughness.

He bends to kiss the crook of my neck. His stubble scratches me, and I shudder as his tongue slithers along the cut he carved earlier. “You’re delicious, little dove. I can taste the terror in your blood.”

Oh God, what did I get myself into?

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My skin crawls, but I can't stop wanting him. The pleasure aches pulsing in my core are stronger than my survival instincts.

He grips my ass with both hands, hoisting me up like I weigh nothing at all, and I wrap my limbs around his large body. My fingers burrow underneath his collar, nails digging into his back and he groans against my lips while he kisses me.

"I know you said no names, but I wanna hear you moan my name when you come on my cock," he says, grinding his crotch against me. The pressure on my clit has me back on the edge, but I have another urge inside me. One I can't make sense of.

The undeniable need to please him. To hear him praise me.

"What's your name?" I bring out.

He snickers. "Cain."

Biblical. Much like the way he makes me want to get on my knees and pray to him. Much like the way I want him to defile me. It suits him. Cain, the seed of evil and violence and the first man to murder another.

Using the wall and one arm to hold me up, he unzips his jeans and yanks them down to his thighs at the same time as his underwear. His dick springs free, the tip pressing against my belly button as our bodies mold together.

My heart lurches.

He's every bit as big as I imagined. A bulging vein runs along his thick shaft and beads of liquid pearl from the reddened, broad head, engorged with arousal. It makes my mouth water.

Low moans vibrate in Cain's chest as he repositions me and rubs his length along my slit, moving me up and down. He enjoys teasing me and himself. The constant friction is driving me crazy, but it seems like he could do this all night.

"Ain't no way in hell I'm using a condom when I fuck you, darlin'. I wanna feel all of you. Bare," he bites out.

I laugh breathlessly. "I wasn't going to ask for one."

"That makes it easier for you." He tilts his head with a feral grin. "Because I wouldn't stop anyway."

My pussy throbs. Him saying that should be a gigantic red flag, not a turn on. Clearly, I'm much more messed up than I ever thought.

"Beg," he orders.

"What?"

"I won't fuck you until you call me by my name and beg for my cock."

My thoughts whirl, my mouth going dry. This is so humiliating, I can barely get the words out.

"I want you, Cain. Badly. Please..." My face flames. "I need you to fuck me and stretch me with your big cock. I'll do anything!"

He shudders with pleasure. "That's what I like to hear."

He lines himself up with my entrance, and then, he lets gravity run its course. He impales me.

A cry surges from my throat. My pussy flutters, trying to accommodate his size as he holds himself deep, pressed up against my cervix. I grip his shoulders, my fingers digging into his muscles. With every whine I let out, he twitches inside me.

Cain is getting off on my pain.

"You're so deep inside," I force out. "You're hurting me."

"Oh, I know, darlin'. I meant to hurt you. You're such a lil thing, it feels like I'm gonna rip you in half. But you'd love that, wouldn't you? Only a whore with a death wish would invite a nameless stranger to her room for rough sex. You don't give a damn what happens to you. You wanna get hurt."

My eyes go round. How does he know?

"No, that's not—"

He shushes me. “You don’t have to act coy with me. I’ll give you what you want. I’m gonna pound you like you’re just a hole to use. Just a piece of fuckmeat for me to abuse. I’ll wreck you.”

Before I can get over my shock, he pulls out to the tip and starts to thrust. He moves me like I’m a doll. Long, cruel strokes, burying himself in me, his groans and the noise of slapping flesh in my ears.

It still hurts, but his brutality is precise, and he hits all the right spots, his pelvis rubbing against my clit. After a few tormenting strokes, the ache fades like background noise.

It feels fucking amazing.

Sex has never felt like this before. Richer than pure lust, intensified by the pain. Like dark chocolate, the bitterness brings out the sweetness.

Cain’s teeth graze my throat, trailing kisses. He bites the spot where my neck and shoulder connect, and I moan.

“Louder,” he growls. “I want everybody in this town to hear how well you take my cock.”

He keeps fucking me, and I beg louder. Moan louder. Broken sounds and words bubble from my lips, and when his hips jerk and his dick swells, I tip over the brink with him. Cain’s release floods my insides, my eyes closing at the onslaught of my orgasm. Fireworks dance behind my lids and I whimper his name like a prayer until my voice fades.

Cain slumps forward, but he holds me tightly. Caught between him and the wall, I can barely breathe. Tacky cum drips out of me onto the carpet, adding our mixed fluids to the stains.

I’m a mess. Sticky. Hot. Sweaty. Exhausted.

I’ve never felt better.

For the first time since my life fell apart, I’m at peace—in the arms of a stranger who fucked me brutally after holding a knife to my throat. The irony isn’t lost on me, but I’m too content to care.

“Hell, that was incredible,” Cain says, and the part of my hindbrain that craves his praise purrs in satisfaction. “I bet you agree. Don’t lie to me, little dove. I felt how hard you came.”

I manage a tired laugh. “It was incredible.”

He straightens and my eyes open. I’m met with his broad, lipstick-smeared grin as he tugs up his pants with one hand and carries me to the bathroom. My brows rise with a silent question.

“Let’s get you cleaned up. That cut on your neck needs to be disinfected, too.” He stops in front of the shower. “Unless you want me to fuck off right now?”

I hesitate before I shake my head. Having some more company during my last night sounds nice.

“No, please stay a while, Cain.”

He untangles himself from me and I’m surprised how sharply I feel the loss of him, like a part of myself disconnecting from my body. His cum oozes faster from my pussy as he sets me on my feet. When my legs give in a bit, he holds on to my shoulders to stabilize me.

“Can you stand, darlin’?”

I give a lazy nod.

He unzips my dress and pulls it over my head. I flush as he kneels to take off my heels. Then Cain undresses himself. Boots first, his tops come off second, revealing a drool-worthy upper body.

His forearm tattoos are actually breath-taking full sleeves, covering his impressive biceps up to his wide shoulders. The nature scape on his left arm continues into a waterfall with horses drinking by the river and a mountain range with the sun behind it. The snake on his right arm winds its tail around a skeletal version of itself, coiling over his shoulder to his chest. Its skull sits below his collarbone.

I love his tattoos, but the rest of him is a feast for the eyes, too.

Cain has subtle abs below a toned, broad chest with a shadow of dark hair on it. When he takes off his jeans and boxer briefs, I spot a thin happy trail leading to his well-groomed groin. He turns away to kick his pants into the corner, showing off a horned demon skull covering his muscular back.

How did I get so lucky?

Cain takes my hand and leads me into the shower, making me stand with my back against his chest. His dick twitches at the contact, soon ready for another round. He reaches over me and turns on the water. I squeal as the stream hits me, hot and cold, and when he chuckles, I jab a gentle elbow into his stomach.

The water is kind of nice. Refreshing. The clashing temperatures remind me of the sex we had. Fire and ice. Pain and pleasure.

Cain twists me toward him and frames my face with his hands. He smiles so softly, my knees turn to jelly. “Hold still. Let me take care of you, little dove.”

Nobody has said those words to me before.

Let me take care of you.

“Okay,” I mumble and close my eyes again.

I hear the pop of the body wash bottle opening. His soapy fingers coast over my skin and I lean into his touch. For a few minutes, I want to forget everything but him. Just for a moment, I let Cain wash away my worries.

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The side of my neck itches. Drowsy, I raise a hand to scratch the spot, but my arm doesn't move.

My eyelids are leaden, too heavy to open. The memories of last night are a blur, and trying to piece them together is like watching myself in slow-motion through milky, splintered glass.

Vague movements. Heat in my veins. Lust. Terror. Exhaustion.

Did I take the sleeping pills? Did I end it all?

Did I die?

I try to raise my head, wiggle my toes or bend a single finger. Nothing. I'm a puppet with its strings cut.

Panic spikes in my chest.

My breathing turns shallow, too quick to fill my lungs, but that smell... It's impossible to miss. I want to grimace, but not even the corners of my mouth move.

Such a sharp, chemical scent. Bleach? Or disinfectant? Whatever it is, my motel room never smells like that.

My heart races. Faster and faster. Before I realize it, I'm hyperventilating.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

My senses returning to me, I notice that every beat of my pulse is announced by a shrill beep. Wait, this isn't the lumpy mattress of the

uncomfortable motel bed. This is worse. Hard as stone against my back. Or metal.

Goosebumps rush across my skin. I'm cold, too. So damn cold.

The effort of prying my eyes open feels like moving mountains. When I finally manage it, white light blinds me.

Where the hell am I?

"Aw, darlin'. Don't be afraid," a familiar, dark voice rings out. "Did you think I was gonna let you go after one night? That's cute."

Everything comes rushing back like a full-frontal car crash.

Cain, the handsome stranger from the vending machine. His crooked smirk that made me weak in the knees. The best fucking sex of my life, just like he promised. How he held me in the shower and washed me, carried me to bed. And then, while I drifted off to sleep—

My breath hitches and my heart skips a beat so long, I worry it's going to stop forever. Maybe that would be better than recalling the pinch in my neck and everything going dark.

Now it makes sense. That itchy spot... I've been drugged.

Cain drugged me.

I want to call for help but my vocal cords won't make a sound. In the confines of my skull, I scream and scream and scream. It's no use. I'm a mute prisoner in my paralyzed body.

The light swivels out of my face. A shadow leans over me and crinkling green eyes look down into mine, hinting at a smile hidden behind a black surgical mask. No longer blinded, my gaze snaps around the room.

White tiles on the walls. No windows. I can't even see a door from this angle. A sleek monitor stands by my feet, colorful lines spiking in time with my heartbeat and the beeping. Medical tools glint on a metal cart by its side.

What the fuck? Is this an operating theater?

As if my mind tried to shield me from the horrible reality for as long as possible, I suddenly realize I'm naked. Something is stuck to my chest, likely the electrodes of the heart monitor.

Cain pulls down the surgical mask and grins. It's the same charming smile that made warmth pool low in my belly when we met, but now, it makes my blood curdle. He wears black scrubs, and my position beneath him makes him seem even taller. Monstrously so.

“I know you can hear me, little dove,” he says, honey in his voice. “I need you alert for this.”

Alert for what?

The beeping of the pulse monitor gets faster and my chest is about to explode. A morbid thought crosses my mind.

If this sicko isn't going to hurry up and kill me, I might give myself a heart attack at this rate.

Cain shakes his head, curls bopping. “Try to calm down. You’re wasting your energy. I want you awake, but I can’t have you squirming around. So I had to do something about that.”

Silent tears pearl across my face. I don’t want to die like this. I want it to be peaceful, quietly slipping away. Falling asleep and never waking up again. No anguish. No fear.

Cain’s gloved palm presses against my cheek, black nitril sticking to my skin as he wipes away my tears. He lifts his hand and licks them off with slow strokes of his tongue. Heat flashes through me. I remember the feeling of that tongue in *my* mouth. His fingers in my pussy. His cock stretching me until it hurt. Him fucking me until I started to enjoy the pain.

No. I don't want to remember.

“You’re even lovelier when you cry, little dove.” He takes my right hand and steps closer to the table to push my limp fingers against his groin.

He's hard.

“This is what your tears do to me, darlin’.”

Terror banishes all thoughts from my head. I can’t stop crying.

Cain puts my arm back on the surgical table, tipping my head to the left. He flicks an IV taped into the bend of my elbow and a tiny sting zaps through my nerves.

“Your pale skin and pretty blue veins are a doctor’s wet dream. This needle is your best friend right now because it delivers my special blend of drugs into your bloodstream. That way you stay nice and still but...”

He grazes the side of my breast, drawing inward circles. When he reaches my nipple he runs his thumb over it, and a damning tingle sweeps low in my stomach. Lower. Lower.

Focus, Erica. You are not enjoying this.

“But you can feel everything. Ain’t that right?” Cain asks.

I’m glad I can’t answer, can’t writhe and press my thighs together like I want to.

He smirks, smug as can be. Locking eyes, he works my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Softly at first, then he pinches and pulls. He does the same to the other one. The pain feeds right between my thighs and my clit throbs. Being entirely motionless amplifies the sensation of his touches like a magnifying glass highlighting every traitorous reaction of my body.

My frozen muscles scream with the urge to get away, out of his reach, but wetness gathers between my legs. I pray he won't notice. Desperate, I tell myself that this perverted arousal is a coping mechanism.

I'm not really getting turned on from my kidnapper playing with my nipples.

"I'll give you a chance because I like you, darlin'," he says, caressing my face. "And because you're such a perfect lil fucktoy. Your cunt felt so good squeezing around my cock last night, you deserve a reward."

I wish I could shout at him. My blood simmers with too many emotions at once. Shame and fear and rage and lust and—

He tips my head again, to the other side, and a suppressed frown twitches on my immovable forehead.

Why does he have a freezer box in an operating theater?

I remember a hospital documentary I watched during one of many sleepless nights right after I lost my job. They showed similar boxes when the surgeons performed a kidney transplant. My sluggish brain puts two and two together and a scream lodges in my throat.

This box is for *my* organs.

He's going to gut me.

Cain holds a shiny scalpel above my face. I flinch internally as he tilts it and a flash of my reflection in the blade catches me off guard.

My pallid skin. Pale lips. Red-rimmed eyes.

I look like I'm already dead.

Cain trails the flat side of the cold scalpel down the bridge of my nose, and a shiver courses through me.

"Don't worry, I'm an experienced surgeon," he says calmly. "I've never lost a patient on the operating table. Well, not until I literally steal their heart." He lets out a bubbly laugh like he told a harmless joke.

My chest swells with a sob I can't let out.

He's fucking insane.

I believe his story about being a surgeon, but that doesn't make my situation any better. It makes it worse.

How terrifying that someone sworn to help and heal people is such a depraved monster. I can't imagine how many patients trusted this devil with their lives. How many has he fooled with that sweet smile and his relaxing voice?

"We're gonna have a bit of fun, Miss Erica Dellinger from Kansas," he says, his tone saturated with playful anticipation.

How does he know my name and where I'm from?

Cain clicks his tongue like he can read my mind. "I had a quick peek at your wallet while you were out, sleepyhead. Found your driver's license. The whole anonymity thing you insisted on in the motel is too impersonal for something as intimate as this, don't you think? And it's a very pretty name. I like saying it. E-ri-ca." He cocks his head, every letter melting on his tongue, drawing out the vowels.

Oh no, a part of me likes how my name sounds from his mouth. What is happening to me? Am I losing it?

Cain props my head up with something soft to let me see the rest of my body better, and fresh tears spill when I notice the marks on my skin. Thick lines of black sharpie. I saw that part on TV, too. Doctors always mark their patients before surgery.

Cain's free hand slides between my breasts over my stomach, stopping above my sex by my spider tattoo. A whimper dies in my lungs. I hate how much I want him to go lower and touch me *there*.

It must be the drugs making me feel a million different kinds of unhinged. I can't seriously be into this.

"Now listen, Erica. Blink twice if you are listening."

With no other choice, I blink two times.

"Good girl," he rumbles and my clit pulses. *Dammit*. "I'm gonna claim every single one of your holes. All four, darlin'. I'll fuck you until you forget any other man who has ever been inside you."

Four?

Mouth. Pussy. Ass. That's three. What the fuck does he mean by four?

"In this operating theater, I'm your God. Your life is in my hands, little dove, but I'm willing to show you mercy." He pauses, thumb skimming along my clit. Almost touching. Almost. "If you can hold back your orgasm, you get to keep your organs, and I'll let you live another day. But if you come..."

The scalpel meets my hip, avoiding my tattoos as if he can't bear to mar them. It kind of tickles first. Then it burns.

Blood bubbles from the shallow cut and Cain drags his index finger along the red line. He sniffs my blood like he's smelling an expensive wine before he sticks his tongue out and laps up every drop, a satisfied hum in his throat.

My eyes round with disgust and another emotion I choose to ignore. But the deranged implication lingers in the back of my thoughts.

No man has ever wanted me like this. Every part of me, inside and out.

Cain looks down at me with a hooded gaze and a cruel grin. "If you come without my permission, little dove, I'm gonna cut you open from that slender neck all the way to your tight pussy."

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Cain's heavy-set footsteps disappear behind me, and I hear the squeak of a door opening, leaving me alone with the rapid beeping of the heart monitor. I will myself to move, but blinking is already as strenuous as running up ten flights of stairs.

He returns moments later, carrying a tray covered with a turquoise cloth. A thoughtful hum lingers on his curving lips, and he pushes aside scalpels, spreaders, and forceps on the surgical cart to make space for the tray.

"I've been wanting to try these tools out." He picks up a thin metal rod from under the fabric. My pulse riots as I try to imagine what he can do to me with it and come up blank. "But the time never felt right, y'know? Never the right person, mainly."

He smiles at me as if he expects me to answer, but I still can't command my tongue. He pats my cheek.

"You, little dove... you're special. I know you'll appreciate my toys. This one is for later, though. Let's start a lil easier. I wanna give you a fighting chance."

He puts the rod back and bends toward the operating table, rattling the whole thing with me on top. A clacking sounds, and with a muted curse, he yanks something up on either side. Recognition hollows out my chest with horror.

Those are stirrups like at the ob-gyn.

“Never got to use these, either,” Cain muses. “First time for everything, hmm? I’m gonna get a real good look at your pretty cunt. It’s mine, after all.”

My breath goes thick as he grips my waist and drags me lower on the table, his skin hot through the gloves. He guides my feet into the stirrups, the icy sting of metal biting into my naked soles. My legs are spread as wide as they can go, and the strain makes my hips ache.

Under these bright lights, my pussy is on full display for Cain, and worse, my inner walls clench at the thought of him inspecting me like a breeding mare.

“Goddamn, you’re already so wet,” he says and slips a single digit inside me, making my heart seize. “I know you’re scared, darlin’, but your body doesn’t lie. You show all the telltale signs of arousal. Hard, rosy nipples. Swollen clit. Increased lubrication. Involuntary twitches making your holes pulse. You can tell yourself you’re not enjoying this, but you’re dripping all over my hand. And we haven’t even started yet.”

Fuck you, I want to scream. I hope he sees the defiance in my eyes, though I don’t feel all that defiant with his finger drawing teasing circles inside me. He pushes in further, curling forward, and electricity jolts through my core.

His touch courses through my veins like a deadly illness, a blazing fever corrupting me. I know if I survive this, I’ll never be the same, but there is nothing I can do to stop him.

“Finding your g-spot ain’t the only thing I’m good at,” he drawls, making no effort to hide the lust in his tone. “I’ll teach you what exquisite pain and torturous pleasure a doctor’s skilled hands can inflict.”

His finger leaves me, and he takes something from the tray. Metal clamps with rubber tips, connected by a chain. He rounds the table and I let out a gargled noise as his lips close around my right nipple, his tongue swirling around it.

My insides quake with reluctant desire. It’s so wet and soft—

Cold air hits my nipple when he straightens and then—searing pain. The cry I can’t let out bellows inside my head, thrown back at me by the walls of my skull. He doesn’t give me a break before he attaches the second clamp to my other nipple.

I imagine myself thrashing. Fighting back. Anything but lying there motionless.

“Oh, darlin’,” Cain rumbles. “That agonized expression in your eyes makes me sad that you can’t scream.”

He picks up another object from the surgical tray. Metal, too, with a thick, bulbous tip leading into a thinner stem and a flat, wide back at the end. I know what *that* is... and I know what he’s about to do with it.

He grabs a small bottle and squirts lube on the girthy butt plug. “Have you ever tried anal, either by yourself with a toy or a partner’s cock? Blink once for no, twice for yes,” he says with the neutral, clinical calm of a doctor.

I blink once, nauseous with shame.

“If this is your first time, you might experience a bit of discomfort. It will be easier for you if you relax and let it happen.” Cain says as he steps between my legs and presses the cold, slippery plug against my tight sphincter.

The tip stretches my asshole, feeling bigger than it looked in his hand. It burns. I think I can’t take any more, but he keeps pushing. Tears trickle down my cheeks, not just from the ache, but something buried beneath it, a streak of fire sending tingles through my legs.

Cain’s attention shifts to my face and he smiles the most sickeningly sweet smile. It’s unfair. He’s too gorgeous, too seductive with that glimmer in his green eyes and the soft, black curls I want to bury my hands in.

The devil has no right to look like a fallen angel, and I shouldn’t be so eager to surrender my body to his damnation.

“Cry, little dove,” he whispers. “Convince yourself you don’t want this, but soon, I’ll be rooted so deep inside your body and your mind, you’ll understand that all you need is me. Cry all you want, darlin’, but I’ll take what’s mine.”

It seems like it will never stop, like I’ll rip before he gets past the thickest part of the plug, when the neck slips into place. My ass closes around it, slackening. The ache lessens. It doesn’t feel so bad now. Actually, it feels too good, that weight of the steel plug and the pressure along my inner walls.

Cain’s throat shifts with a heavy swallow. A blush turns his cheeks dark pink and the composed mask of the experienced doctor slips. “Fuck, your virgin ass is tighter than I thought. You’ll break so beautifully when I’m finished with you.”

I don't want to like this sick spectacle, but I'm getting more and more turned on. My pussy drips and my muscles throb around the plug. I wish I knew how to switch off my brain and let everything happen without realizing that I *like* what he's doing to me.

"Damn, if only I had a dick for each of your holes so I could fuck them all at the same time, but I guess my toys will have to do," Cain says and moves around the table to my face. "It's still me doing this to you. Still me claiming you."

He pulls up his top, the other hand yanking down the elasticated waist of his pants to take out his hard cock. Pre-cum leaks from the purple-ish tip and he grips his shaft with one hand, the other grabbing my chin. He tilts my head to the side and opens my jaw wide.

Fresh panic shoots through me. There is absolutely no way I can fit—

Cain shoves himself into my mouth. He hits the back of my throat almost instantly and I gag. He groans as my muscles convulse while he slides down my throat.

I'm nothing but a sex doll to him. An inanimate object for him to use and abuse.

"It feels so good when you choke on my cock, darlin'," he grits out. "Fuck, everything about you is perfect. Your holes were made for me. You're a free-use whore born with a single purpose: to take my cum."

He holds the back of my head with both hands and starts thrusting. His wild moans ring through the operating theater, getting louder the more I fight for air. He allows me small breaths, but never enough to fill my lungs entirely.

Black creeps into my vision.

I pray I'll pass out so I won't have to endure more of his torture, won't have to endure more of my body backstabbing me with its reactions. But Cain knows how to keep the darkness from swallowing me. He wants me to be conscious for every moment of his perverted experiment. He wants me to experience every heartbeat of helplessness, every second of pleasure-laced horror.

And it works.

My clit tingles as drool runs down my cheek and he fucks my face harder, his balls slapping against my lips. With every second, my resistance breaks further. Tiny cracks form in the walls I raised when I woke up in the operating theater.

My ass pulses around the plug, and the fullness sends thrills into my pussy. I clench my inner muscles, imagining Cain fucking my ass and my cunt, too.

I want it all to be over... and I want it to never end.

A part of me hopes he'll finish into my throat and be done with me, but I should know that he wouldn't go that easy on me. He pants as he slides out of my mouth, bracing himself on the operating table. His shaft shines with my spit and a sheen of sweat glistens on his forehead. When his cock jerks, I wonder if he's about to come all over my face. He doesn't.

"That was hole number one." He takes a long breath and his lips twist upward. "Don't look at me with such a ravenous expression in your eyes," he scolds softly. "You'll get plenty of opportunities to taste my seed, darlin'. Tonight, I want to be the first to shoot a load into your ass."

He tilts my head so I can see him better and strides between my legs, his stiff cock bouncing. One hand guiding himself, he slides the broad head of his dick along my sex. He nudges my clit, and I'm seeing stars.

That single bump is nearly enough to make me climax, but he said he'll kill me if I come... how am I supposed to hold back?

Am I going to die because I have an orgasm?

"I've already had your pussy last night, but I can't resist..." Cain muses and sinks into me, claiming my second hole. He doesn't thrust, just pushes as deep as he can.

My cunt flutters from the stinging stretch of his cock and the pressure of the plug in my ass. God, I had no idea it's possible to feel this deliciously full.

"Patience, little dove. You're already squeezing me so tightly. Are you close? Did you get this hot from me fucking your throat?" he asks.

My tears flow faster because it's true. I'm teetering on the brink of an orgasm from being treated like a free-use slut.

Cain pumps his dick in and out so slowly, it's driving me crazy. His hands draw along my thighs in long strokes and my skin pebbles wherever he touches. I don't know how long he takes me like that, deliberately keeping me perched just beneath the peak of my lust.

"Now for hole number three," he says and retreats. I hate that I miss his cock the moment it leaves my cunt, but it allows me a second to breathe—until he pulls the plug from my ass.

It slides out easier than it went in, but I know what comes next. Compared to his dick, that plug is a cakewalk. Cain squirts a generous amount of lube onto his cock, covering himself in it while he fucks his fist. Somehow, I bet it's not going to help much with the stretch.

My heart catapults into my throat when he presses his tip against my rim.

"Take deep, even breaths and try to loosen up. It'll hurt less that way," Cain says and jerks his hips forward.

His eyes glaze over as he penetrates my ass with a sharp thrust. The burning ache makes my breath stick to my throat. He's barely inside, but I'm already at my limit and he doesn't give a shit. My possessive kidnapper only cares about making good on his promise to claim all my holes for himself.

"Don't fight me, darlin'," he grits out, his thick length forcing its way past the resistance of my tense muscles. I think I'm going to tear, but the ache subsides when he starts to thrust. My eyes roll back as my body adjusts to his size and arousal flows like magma through my veins.

"I love that I'm the first man to fuck your ass. You're clenching down on me so hard, I know you like it, too," Cain says, grinning. "Now it's time for my favorite toy..." He picks up the thin rod from the tray again. "Do you know what this is?" He waits until I make a horrible, gargled noise. With an amused snort, he takes the bottle of lube and coats the instrument in it. "I thought not. It's a sounding rod."

My eyes must reflect my confusion.

"It goes inside your urethra. It's a separate hole from your vagina where the pee comes out," he explains matter-of-factly and brings the rod to my center.

Oh nonononononono—

A slight, stretching discomfort permeates my lower belly. Light pain makes fire lick at my insides before full body pleasure shudders along the pathways of my nerves. Colors flicker in front of my eyes as Cain pushes the rod deeper and gently pulls it out again. In and out. In and out.

It's incredible how sinfully good this feels.

There's nothing to compare the sensation with, like my g-spot and my clit are getting directly stimulated from inside me even though he's not even in my pussy. It's unlike anything I ever experienced before.

"That's hole number four," Cain chokes out, his face flushed and his cock jerking violently inside my ass.

I'm not the only one close to the finish line.

He takes up careful, measured movements, his cock and the sounding rod moving in unison. The slower he's fucking me, the more I feel every steely inch of him. Then his other hand tugs on the chain connecting my nipples, and I can't take it anymore.

Screams of ecstasy trapped in my chest, pleasure rips through me with such viciousness I think my heart is bursting. Cain grunts, but he only makes it another few seconds, too.

He holds on to my thighs, his grip bruising. A plethora of curses falls from his lips as he empties his release into me, but I still can't stop coming. My vision dims, my hearing dulls, and my consciousness fades with one last thought:

I'm going to die because I came on my kidnapper's cock.

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I never keep my victims alive.

I never get attached to my victims.

On my operating table, they're not human, they're not men and women. Just meat bags. That's exactly what they drilled into us in medical school. Cold, clinical detachment. When I'm done with 'em, I get rid of the carcass in a medical incinerator I snatched during renovations in one of my clinics.

No victim ever leaves my basement, either. It's my soundproof safe room, far away from the prying eyes of unwanted guests dropping by.

But there she is, sleeping in my bed.

Erica.

In. My. Bed.

I lean down, pressing my nose into her silky hair. The faint scent of that sensual perfume still lingers on her skin, mixing with the sting of disinfectant and floral fabric softener from the fresh sheets. Good thing the housekeeper came by in the early morning while I was tormenting Erica in the basement.

She is the first woman in my bed in years. *Naked* under the covers at that. My cock twitches, and my anger boils over at my lack of self-control.

"Fuck!" I shout.

Erica won't wake up from her drug-induced slumber for a while and we're alone in the house. I can let out my frustration in peace. Living in the

countryside on a 140-acre property has quite a few benefits. No immediate neighbors sticking their noses in my business is my favorite.

I jerk to a stand and pace through the room. From the bed to the armchair in the corner, along the dresser and the vanity, past the fireplace, then back again. I stop by the open window, but I can't stand still long enough to enjoy the glittering river fork and the rich green nature sprawling all around it. Not today.

Not when all I want is to stare at Erica. Feel her. Trace the tattoo I discovered along her spine when we showered together in the motel. It's the only one with a bit of color in it. A slender, black sword piercing a red, faceted gem shaped like a heart.

But I can't touch her again, even if I want to so fuckin' badly it's tearing me apart. If I touch her now, I'm gonna lose the last shred of my damn sanity.

I'm tired as fuck from driving all night and then fucking her in the operating theater, but I can't bring myself to sit down. Rest is out of the question. So, more pacing it is, making myself crazy to the rhythm of my boots thudding on the parquet.

To be fair, this *is already* crazy. Absolute madness.

I chew on my thumb. How did I fuck up so badly?

This should've been a normal hunt. I go on the prowl a handful of times a year, and I developed a routine. A routine I already deviated from when I masturbated over her body while she slept, but when I saw her at that vending machine, I felt like my plan was finally back on track.

I was in control again—until she tripped and stumbled right into me, all soft and pliable and warm, looking up at me with wide, emerald eyes. Watching her and touching her while she was passed out in the motel was one thing. But talking to her... damn. That was something else. I didn't expect her to be so...

Charming? Magnetic?

Pure temptation wrapped in a tight red dress.

I kick the door to the walk-in wardrobe as I pass by.

Did she have to be that cute with her melodious voice and sweet smiles and those lil giggles? Did she have to ask about my fuckin' dysfunctional family? And why the hell did I ramble on like an idiot?

I'd rather choke on a box of rusty nails than voluntarily talk to anybody about my parents. Even Mandy has learned to avoid the topic, and if I won't

talk to my own sister about it, why did I open up to a random stranger?

Problem is, Erica doesn't feel like a stranger to me.

She's easy to talk to. Easier than anybody I ever met. When our eyes locked by the vending machine, the words poured from my lips. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from telling her everything I never told another. Every stupid dream or useless hope. Every unimportant fear.

Talking to her feels like she's my best friend, somebody I've been through thick and thin with. Somebody I spent *years* with. That's so damn illogical, it's making my brain hurt. Worse though, that doesn't stop me from feeling like it's the absolute truth.

If I believed in reincarnation or shit like that, I'd think she was mine in a past life, too. At least that would explain my feverish obsession.

After my first nightly visit, I knew full well that she was trouble. I should've stayed away. Should've gotten in my car and driven away. Far away.

But instead, I let my dick do the thinking. I thought I was smarter than that, but nope. My calm combusted when she bit her lip and asked if I wanted to come back to her room. I agreed before I could form even half a rational thought.

My fingers drum a nervous beat on the window frame. I look out over the bluebonnets on the meadow and a bird hopping along the railing of the wooden footbridge across the river. Any other day, watching the deer graze in the distance and the fish jumping out of the water does the trick to soothe me, but it ain't working now.

I'm too furious with myself.

Especially because I only have myself to blame for this complicated situation.

After Erica invited me to her room, I had another chance to get back on track with my plan when I went to my truck. I didn't have a real reason for going there. It was an excuse to try and get my head on straight. And boy, did I have a proverbial angel and devil on my shoulders—or more like two devils. I'm surprised I didn't wear holes in the asphalt pacing in a horny panic.

At that point, I had already decided that I *was* gonna fuck her, even though I never had sex with my victims. But I planned to do it when she was paralyzed in my basement and I had complete control. Just a bit of fun before I got to work.

And then, like a total jackass, I threw all cautious planning into the wind and walked back to her room. *Without* the syringe.

I slap my forehead, dragging my palm across my face.

But God almighty, Erica was everything I dreamed of and more. She didn't question my orders and obeyed me like a good little slut, like she waited her whole life for me to dominate her and make her mine.

I was exactly what she needed. The right man to violate her and make her feel alive. The right monster to balance her pain and pleasure on a knife's edge. And when her pussy got even tighter with my blade at her throat—

The memory sends a surge of pleasure through my balls. My cock grows against the inside of my jeans. I ignore it and shove a hand into my pocket, fumbling with a packet of squashed cigarettes to take one out. The clack of my metal lighter and the whoosh of the flame calm me a little.

I take a long drag, exhaling a cloud of grey smoke through my nose and continue pondering my stupidity. I deserve a good ol' session of self-flagellation.

After the most incredible sex with Erica in the motel, I had yet another fuckin' chance to make it right. I *was* gonna make it right. I sat with her until she was almost asleep and got the sedative. Injected her. Carried her to my pickup. Drove all night to bring her here.

Routine.

And then I fucked up *even worse*.

She was prepped and primed, beautifully still on the operating table like a precious porcelain doll waiting for me to break her... and I couldn't do it. Even with my favorite scalpel in hand, I couldn't bring myself to gut her.

Instead, I *woke* her.

"Motherfucker," I curse and my reflection in the windowpane throws a hostile glance back at me.

In the basement, Erica was my helpless subject. My lil experiment. I savored every tiny reaction to my agonizing touch, drank in her suffering like fine wine, getting high off her torment.

God, I have to stop thinking about her or—

I storm to the dresser where I left her handbag and grab it. Heart racing, I sit on the bed and run my fingers over the peeling fake leather on the shoulder strap.

She doesn't have many possessions. The rest of her stuff is in the walk-in closet, except for her dirty clothes taking a spin in the washing machine. I

couldn't leave her things in the motel, that would be suspicious. But with her luggage gone, the guy at the front desk will simply assume she bailed early. The place is strictly pay in advance and he already has his money.

After one last drag, I stub out my cigarette in a marble ashtray on the nightstand and pour the contents of her handbag on the mattress. Another colossal fuck up on my part because that damn curiosity about her rages like wildfire in my chest.

My other victims remained nameless. I burned their things without hesitation.

But Erica... she has my head spinning and I can't figure out why. As much as I hate to admit it, I want to learn more about her. Everything there is to learn about her.

Why was she all alone in that god-forsaken town? What is she hiding from? Where is her car?

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Her wallet is of no interest to me. I already checked it earlier, finding spare change and credit cards, no doubt maxed-out if I am to judge by her sparse diet and choice of low-end motel. Her driver's license is in there as well, which is useful for her signature if I have to forge it. It shouldn't be hard to copy. Her handwriting is tight and too proper, with a forced neatness to it.

Mother always said you can tell a lot about a person from their penmanship. Of course, hers was cursive and swooping, the very picture of sophistication. I bark a sharp laugh. Not sure if she was right, because none of its elegance hinted at her functional alcoholism.

I rummage through the rest of Erica's things. She also carries a full bottle of sleeping pills, definitely not a proper prescription. A packet of tissues. A small polka-dot bag with drugstore makeup, but it's all cheap shit. Too cheap for an extraordinary woman like her.

Thanks to Mandy, I know my way around makeup brands. That's a perk of having a sister turned online beauty guru with millions of subscribers. Pride hums in my chest every time I think about how far she's come.

Whenever she drops by, she offloads bags of luxury cosmetics from promotional packages in my bathroom. Then she gives me a conspiratorial smirk, wagging her brows while instructing me to gift them to my *lady friends*.

I have no lady friends, and I don't want any, either, but Mandy is more concerned about me finding a wife than I am. It's her favorite topic. She can go on and on about how I'll end up old and grey and alone.

I never know what to do with the stuff she gives me, but throwing it away seems rude and wasteful. On a regular basis, I donate boxes full of it to women's shelters, but it keeps piling up.

Hopefully Erica will like some of the products, even if her favorite perfume isn't among them. I found an empty bottle of it in her weekender, and I already ordered a giftset from Mandy's recommended beauty supply store in San Antonio. For a fee, they do same-day delivery. It'll be here and ready for her when she wakes up.

I dig Erica's phone out from between single-packaged pads. When I read her bucket list, I didn't pay much attention to the model, but it's at least a few years old with a touch button relying on fingerprint technology to unlock it.

My pulse is in my throat as I reach across the bed and take her cold hand into mine. Sparks tingle under my skin wherever we touch. I stare at her slender fingers. The size difference between our hands is startling.

When I prepared her for surgery, I didn't allow myself to look at her for too long. A cowardly part of me knew if I did, I wouldn't release her into death's hold. But I was kidding myself from the start when I thought I could ever go through with selling her for parts.

I freeze, my eyes fixed on the small purple bruise from the IV in the bend of her elbow. My thumb moves on its own, rubbing gentle circles over her soft palm and tracing the lines. I feel the calm beat of her pulse at her slim wrist and follow blue veins flowing like rivers up her arm to her shoulder.

Little dove.

I can't help thinking about the hollow lightness of bones stretching beneath white-feathered wings. So delicate. So breakable.

Determination wrapped in a silken layer of red-hot obsession anchors itself in my chest.

It's too late to turn back. If I can't kill her, I'm gonna keep her, and it's not because I'll go to fuckin' jail if she escapes and goes to the cops.

It's not about overpowering her with my raw, superior strength. That part is easy, almost anybody can do it, and I'm not just anybody.

This is about breaking her spirit, getting into her head and fucking with her mind until all she can think of, all she wants is *me*. I'll make her need

me like the breath in her lungs, make her crave my cock like the blood pumping through her veins.

She'll either learn to enjoy her new life and stay with me of her own free will or she'll lie in chains at my feet. But I know one thing for sure: I'll never let Erica go.

"I'm gonna break you, darlin'," I mumble. "And you'll thank me for it."

I know exactly what I gotta do.

Erica can't stay a captive in my house forever. Sooner or later, somebody *will* notice. Probably Mandy when she comes to visit the next time. She's the best at reading me, though she never found out about my killing habits.

I know how to chain Erica to me and none will be the wiser. Nobody will figure it out. I'll build a cage without bars for my little dove—but a cage, nevertheless.

I push Erica's right thumb to the button on the phone and it unlocks. A small sigh escapes her when I tuck her arm under the covers, and my mouth twitches upward. I reckon she ain't gonna be this calm when she wakes up. She definitely needs all the rest she can get.

I turn my attention to the glowing screen. The reception out here gets a bit dodgy sometimes, but her phone has no connection at all. Why does she carry a phone without a plan?

I start with the photo gallery. I swipe through pictures of landscapes, food, and mirror selfies with a tiny studio apartment in the background, until my finger stops at a snapshot of her with a man.

Tension cords my neck.

The picture is a bit blurry, like she asked a passerby in a hurry to take it. Erica is divinity wrapped in grey skinny jeans, a tight crimson top with a deep v-cut, and a black leather jacket. Her lips are painted red, and she wears those dark combat boots with the silver studs she had on when I saw her at the gas station.

She looks like a fuckin' rock star.

The sleazebag next to her, though... I grit my teeth. Damn, I wanna rip that sly smirk off his face. He has no right to touch her with his greasy hands. And what's with the wrinkled old T-shirt and stained sweatpants?

Disgusting loser.

Can't he put in some effort? Doesn't he know how lucky he is to be standing by her side? And doesn't she know she can do leagues better than this asshat? Doesn't she know she could have any man she wants—

Jesus Christ, I need to calm down.

I take a deep breath and close the gallery app to check her texts. A handful of conversations appear on the screen. Overdraft notices from her bank. A text from her phone provider, announcing the cut-off date for her plan—and the \$230 she still owes. Some older exchanges with people called Kevin, Stacy, and Veronica about swapping shifts at a restaurant. I tap on the chat with “boss” and my head tilts as I read the last message.

BOSS

You can drop by tomorrow to clear out your locker.

Another chat with “landlord.”

LANDLORD

You're two months behind with rent

If you're not out until the end of the week, I'll call the police!

I piece Erica's story together like a puzzle.

She lost her job. Probably couldn't find other work. Many folks have a hard time finding employment nowadays, that isn't so uncommon. Then she got kicked out of her place.

My little dove is broke. Homeless. And alone.

I smirk. Well, not anymore.

I connect her phone to the Wi-Fi and unlock her banking app with her thumb to get her details. Then I grab my own phone and get to work.

With a few swipes and taps her overdrafts are cleared, her credit card debt gone, and her current account shows a healthy 10k balance. A bit of pocket money in case she needs something and I'm not around.

That's the simple part. Money ain't an issue for me at this point in my life, but something is still bothering me. Or rather, somebody.

That guy from the picture.

He gives off the same vibes as those small-time criminals I dealt with when I first got into the organ trade. The kind that thought they could cheat me and were rewarded with a bullet to the head.

I go back through Erica's texts. There are a few more from other work colleagues, talking restaurant business. Then finally "Nate" with a heart next to it.

"Got you, asshole!" I slap my thigh.

The thread of texts with Nate is long and I scroll up to earlier messages to find out more information. I read about cute date nights planned by her to which he unenthusiastically agreed. Lots of rants from him, complaining about one piece of shit friend or another. He never asked about her. Not once.

Typical scumbag behavior.

My heart drops when I get to the latest texts. They're all from her. All left on sent. No replies.

Please be honest. Did you take the shoebox from my closet? That's all the money I have.

I know it was you. No one else has a key to my place. Can you at least admit it?

I lost my job and rent is overdue. If I can't pay, I'll be on the streets.

The more I read, the harder my pulse races. My free hand balls into a fist, shaking with the urge to beat this Nate to a fuckin' pulp and make him eat through a straw for the rest of his short life.

Please give the money back.

No police, I promise.

I know you're in trouble because you lost that big bet, but I can't be homeless. I'll help you to pay off your debt when I find a new job.

Nate, please

I jump up. Rage clouds my vision like a red haze as I rush to my office and drop into the chair behind the desk, leaving Erica's phone on top.

He stole from her. He destroyed her life.

I slam a palm onto the table before tapping on her contacts, scrolling through the names until I find him. It must be an old address or Erica would've dropped by instead of pleading with him via text, but it's good enough. A starting point.

I grab my keys from my pocket and unlock the bottom drawer of the desk to take out a sleek black laptop. I know better than to use the unprotected desktop PC with all my data on it to surf the dark web.

A slow smirk curves my lips.

Nobody except me gets away with hurting my little dove.

"I'm fuckin' coming for you, Nate."

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Aches pulse across my body like I passed out in shattered glass. The bend of my arm hurts. The side of my hip. My throat. My nipples. A dull pain and slight burn throb in my pussy and ass.

On the other hand, I can't remember the last time I was this comfortable.

Fluffy softness covers me like clouds, and something tight and firm is wrapped around me, making me feel safe. A slow thudding vibrates from beneath me, its steady rhythm calming me. The fresh scent of fabric softener permeates my nose... *and* the smell of tobacco and woody cologne.

Oh god.

The feeling of safety goes up in smoke.

I open my eyes and stare right into Cain's sleeping face barely an inch from mine. I'm curled up on his fucking chest like we're lovers and his arms are wrapped around me.

The kidnapping. The operating theater.

Right, I'm living my own, personal nightmare. But how did I end up in a king-sized bed?

I press my palms weakly against his shoulder. "Let me go, asshole!" I croak, my tongue dry and my throat rough.

His lids flutter open, but he doesn't loosen his grip. The opposite. With a lazy smirk, he holds me even tighter. "Good mornin', darlin'," he mumbles,

his accent thicker and his voice raspy from sleep. He lifts his head and presses his soft lips to mine.

Holy shit, the audacity of this guy!

My heart stumbles as I twist and break the kiss.

I vividly remember the most intense orgasm I ever had happening on his operating table, probably multiple in one go. The memories are like a spike of heated metal piercing my brain. His cock in my throat and in my pussy. Then in my ass. The goddamn sounding rod in—

Didn't he say he'd kill me if I came?

I shove the images into the furthest corner of my mind. This is no time to swoon. This is the time to get angry!

I wriggle pathetically. The drugs did a number on me, but given our difference in height and strength, I couldn't fight my way out of his embrace, anyway. I'm Cain's plaything, and he can do anything he wants to me. He's already proven that. Twice over.

"Go to hell!" I spit.

Cain is unimpressed by my rage. "Only if I can take you with me, little dove. Spending the rest of eternity with you would make hell feel like heaven."

I blush. Furiously.

For fuck's sake, why do his lines work on me with a hundred percent success rate? It's absurd! Admittedly being naked on top of him doesn't help the matter, even if he's wearing pj bottoms made from a very nice, silky material.

Cain snickers. "You're cute when your cheeks get all red. You blush so easily. It makes me wanna tease you more."

He bucks his hips and his cock hardens against me. My pussy reacts like clockwork, a pleasure ache winding through my core.

"What do you think this is, Cain?" I hiss through clenched teeth.

"My bedroom."

I groan, shoving at his chest. Does he have a smug answer to everything? But his distraction works, and my eyes scan the large room. Every detail screams rustic luxury, and if I hadn't been brought here against my will, it would be paradise to wake up in a cozy place like this.

The walls are paneled with dark wood and log details to match the floor and the exposed ceiling beams. There's a stone fireplace across from the

bed and a landscape mural above it, mountains and wild forests painted in vivid colors. The scenery reminds me of his left tattoo sleeve.

A leather armchair and a side table are nestled into the corner by tall windows letting in orange afternoon sun. An antique vanity stands against the far wall, complete with a matching, upholstered stool. Around it hangs a collection of cowboy hats in different colors.

“Do you think I’m going to play house with you after you abducted me and put me through the most humiliating, scariest experience of my whole life?” I ask.

He shrugs, the rise and fall of his shoulders shifting me on top of him. “And the *hottest* experience.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I shoot back, but unfortunately, he hit the nail on the head.

No trauma response can explain away how wet I was and how hard I came. There is a disturbing psychological revelation about me somewhere in that whole ordeal, but I choose to disregard it. I have bigger problems to worry about.

“Why don’t you show a lil gratitude for the orgasm I gave you, darlin’? And for not killing you like I said I would.”

I slap on the fakest smile I can muster, putting buckets of sarcasm into my voice. “Thank you so, so much, Cain.”

He graces me with a satisfied nod, glossing over the venom in my tone. “You’re most welcome.”

I glare daggers at him while he sits up, leaning against the headboard to cradle me in his lap. His warm, comfortable lap. Fuck him for being so gorgeous and strong.

He pours a glass of water from a lidded pitcher on the nightstand. From the drawer, he takes a white sachet, ripping it open with his teeth, unwilling to let me go with both arms. He tilts it above the glass and a yellow tablet drops into the water, starting to fizz and dissolve.

“Drink this,” he says, handing me the glass. “Electrolytes and vitamins. You need something to help you get back on your feet... unless you want me to carry you everywhere.” He grins. “Including the shower.”

Why does he care how I am?

I shoot him another sidelong glance while I down the whole thing at once. It’s refreshing, that much I have to admit, and I immediately feel more human and less like a parched sponge. His digits brush mine as he

takes the empty glass from me and puts it back on the nightstand. Meanwhile, I try to disregard the tingles his accidental touches left behind on my skin.

“You have two choices.” He holds up his pointer finger, the other arm still around me. “One, you can stay down in the basement, but I’ll have to do something to keep you nice and docile. I think I’ll keep you chained to the table and pump you full of drugs to put you in an induced coma. You’ll only be awake when I visit to fuck you until you’re sore.”

I can’t hold back a gasp, my pulse fluttering like a tiny bird is trapped behind my ribs.

Cain’s smirk is wolfish, more like a beast baring its teeth. His erection throbs against my ass. “Would you like that, little dove? Would you like to be my fucktoy with one purpose, a motionless doll with holes for me to use?”

“No. Please... please don’t,” I whisper, but wetness seeps from my core. A lot of it. I pray I’m not leaking all over him.

I can’t deny that being paralyzed was indeed the hottest thing anyone has ever done to me. Before I met Cain, I never thought that being used could be so sexy.

A terrifying thought strikes me, short-circuiting my brain.

Has Cain already broken me? Is this the new me, an unhinged bitch molded into the perfect fuckmeat for this deranged man?

“Then there’s always option two.” He raises a second finger. “You can be a good girl. Obey me and I’ll give you the kind of life you never dared to dream of, darlin’. And multiple orgasms as a cherry on top. Every damn day.”

His change of attitude gives me whiplash and a dull headache spreads through my skull.

I scoff. “First, you wanted to harvest my organs and now you’re asking me to move in?”

“What can I say, little dove? I want to own you, and I’m a bad man who gets exactly what he wants. One way or another.”

As much as I secretly enjoyed being his doll, I don’t want to live the rest of my days like that. I resolve to play along until I find a realistic chance to escape.

“Shit. Okay.” I exhale a sigh. “I’ll live with you.”

“I knew you’d come to your senses. You’re a smart woman.” A dark note vibrates through his chest as he presses his face into the crook of my neck to kiss me. “Now, as your doctor...” He shuffles to the edge of the bed and stands up cradling me in his arms. “I prescribe a shower and a hearty meal.”

“But—”

He seals my lips with his. Desire and disgust clash in my chest like fire and oil, stoking a blaze in my veins. When I refuse his tongue entry, he squeezes my jaw until the pain has me opening my mouth to him.

This kiss is brutal, accepting nothing but submission from me, and like a reflex, my hand reaches for his hair. I pull on it and Cain groans, kissing me harder.

“See, you can be nice.” He gives me another of those shit-eating smirks. “You just need to listen to my orders and you’ll be fine, darlin’.”

To my dismay, a smile tugs on my lips, too. I stifle it while the full, catastrophic extent of my situation hits me.

As if being kidnapped and held captive by a crazy doctor—crazy handsome and *crazy* crazy—isn’t bad enough, my body is hellbent on adding insult to injury. My heart is shouting no, but my pussy—that traitorous little slip-and-slide bitch—is screaming yes.

I’m so screwed.



With every minute spent in his home, my captor turns into a bigger enigma.

After getting out of bed, Cain allows me some privacy in the en-suite bathroom connected to the master bedroom. I insist he waits outside, and he obliges, grumbling something about being weak from the drugs and calling him if I need help.

The bathroom is stunning, too. Brown stone tiles, a freestanding copper bathtub, a walk-in shower, and a dark wooden counter with two sinks. Right in the middle between them, as if to make sure I see it, stands a black gift box with a red ribbon around it and a clear front.

My eyes widen as I pick it up, fingers gliding over the embossed golden letters.

Sinner.

It's my favorite perfume with the matching body wash, deodorant, and lotion. This must be a coincidence, but I decide to use it all the same.

A large cabinet occupies a whole wall, stacked with fluffy, dark towels and a metric shit ton of mixed cosmetic products sorted into little wicker baskets. Most are still packaged. I recognize some luxury brands from online window shopping, and my head spins when I try to estimate how much all of it is worth.

Something undefinable shoots through my chest. Does he have a wife or a girlfriend? Why else would he have this stuff?

I shake my head. That's none of my business.

I pick out shampoo and conditioner with scents to complement the perfume and some skin care, too. Standing under the rain shower relaxes my tense muscles and eases the aches. When I'm done, my legs aren't wobbly like a newborn deer's anymore. I can walk normally, except for some dizziness and dull pains.

Dressed in my favorite sweatpants and crop top plus fuzzy socks—Cain washed and dried my sparse wardrobe while I was unconscious—he walks me downstairs, casually explaining the layout of the house as if it's the most normal home in the world.

In the meantime, I have to stop my jaw from dragging across the floor.

Mister Beat-up-truck-and-cheap-whisky lives in an *actual mansion*. A real life, Pinterest board worthy luxury ranch, including multiple guest rooms with their own en-suites, a three-car garage, a home gym, and a landscaped backyard with a pool.

Just how many different versions of him exist in that one criminally attractive, muscled body of his?

Skilled surgeon, dangerous criminal, mischievous wannabe cowboy... and now, what? Millionaire?

Cain brings me to a large living space. French doors lead to a roofed terrace with outdoor sofas and a fire pit. The large pool is further out, glittering invitingly in the setting sun.

A wagon wheel repurposed as an electric chandelier hangs from the high ceiling above a sitting area with a dark green velvet sofa and matching armchairs, centered around a huge brick fireplace. The whole house is decorated in shades of deep green, slate, and earthy tones, mixed with wood. Landscape paintings hang on the walls, joined by various animal skulls.

"You hunt?" I ask, padding after Cain.

"Naw, those were my dad's. But these are mine." He gestures to bookshelves on the opposite wall of the fireplace and an oak dining table with six chairs.

"You bought them?"

He glances at me over his shoulder. "*I made* them. It's a hobby. I have a small workshop in an old outbuilding. The manual labor keeps me in shape better than any workout, which comes in handy when I gotta wrangle rowdy

victims.” He winks and a strange buzz starts in my chest. I clear my throat to get rid of it.

The carpentry explains his muscles and calloused hands. No one gets those from performing surgery.

“Aren’t surgeons usually very careful with their hands?” I ask.

“I’m not practicing anymore,” he says with a decisiveness that makes it obvious the topic is finished.

Is his work a sore spot for him?

Cain stops in an open kitchen and pulls out a bar stool by the island in the middle. I sit with my heart beating fast, pressing my hands to the cold countertop. The kitchen is in keeping with the rest of the house. Dark wooden cabinets and black marble, the perfect unison of rustic charm with a touch of modern sleekness.

Cain fills a tall glass with ice from the family-sized fridge, giving me a chance to ogle him instead of walking behind him like his pet. He wears grey sweatpants and a black T-shirt with an open button down flannel over it, muscles flexing in his forearms, straining against rolled-up sleeves. My eyes are magnetically drawn to the sizeable bulge in his crotch and I blush.

Does he have to be so effortlessly attractive? Being angry would be much easier if my captor was an ugly, unwashed, anti-social cave troll.

“Is soda alright?” he asks, opening the fridge and sticking his head inside.

“Uh. Yes, sure.”

He pours a glass from a fresh bottle and puts it in front of me with a devilish grin. “I’m glad you said yes. You can use a bit of sugar after all the excitement of the past days and it would make me feel like your dad if I had to force you.”

I snort. “I’m not going to call you daddy if that’s what you’re hinting at.”

He laughs. “Not my thing, don’t worry. And I’m not *that* much older than you. Seven years, actually.”

That means Cain is 37. And of course, the asshole knows my age from my driver’s license.

I shrug, trying to seem like I don’t care and grab the glass. The outside is damp from condensation, and I drink in big gulps, suddenly aware of how thirsty I still am. The soda is deliciously sweet and fizzy.

Cain hums. “But sir, master or Dr. Morrow has a ring to it. You can call me any of those, darlin’.”

I choke on my drink. Apparently choking is my thing around Cain, given that it already happened twice.

He slaps my back while I cough—and if looks could kill, he'd be dead on the spot. "I'd rather die," I groan.

He raises a brow. "That can be arranged, but I thought we had an understanding. Don't tell me I'm about to waste an amazing steak on you because you're planning to get yourself killed by being a brat."

The word steak gets my attention.

He notices and takes a bundle wrapped in brown paper from the fridge. Carefully, he puts it on the kitchen island to unwrap it. My mouth waters at the sight of two thick pieces of dark red, delicately marbled beef. This is the kind of expensive cut I've seen on TV or in magazines.

"A5 Wagyu sirloin. My favorite," Cain says. "And by the ravenous look in your eyes, it's about to become *your* favorite, too."

I bristle. "Is it a crime for a grown woman to enjoy a nice steak?"

He shrugs and takes a pan from the cabinets, putting it on the unlit gas stove. With the most self-satisfied grin he turns to me again. "No, but it's the same way you look at *me*, darlin'."

My face is on fire. I huff as I reach into the glass and take out an ice cube, defiantly putting it in my mouth. That way, I don't have to answer. A good thing, too, so I don't say something stupid.

I never look at him like that. Probably not. Hopefully not?

While I sulk in silence, sucking on ice cubes, Cain pre-heats the oven and whisks around the kitchen like a pro.

"Do you have any food allergies or intolerances?" he asks, taking a tray of raw fries from the fridge. They've clearly been cut by hand, slathered in oil and herbs.

"Not that I know of."

"Great!" He nods, sliding the tray into the oven.

For a man who takes such great pleasure in tormenting me, he's sure considerate.

A considerate kidnapper. Who would've thought?

If I ignore all the red flags, Cain is pure husband material. I shake my head, lightly slapping my cheeks. Why am I even considering something so ridiculous?

But Nate would never ask me about allergies. He wouldn't cook for me in the first place, though.

I listen to Cain's gravelly, melodious humming while he washes and cuts ingredients for a salad, tossing them into a big bowl. Lettuce, peppers, red onions, and carrot slices topped with parmesan shavings. In a jar, he prepares a lemon vinaigrette for later.

I add *chef* to my mental list of different men he is.

When I woke up in his basement of medical horrors—and ugh, fine, pleasures as well—the last thing I expected was him cooking for me. But with the way my life has been turned on its head, this isn't the craziest thing to happen.

"Where are we?" I ask, expecting him to make some evasive joke as he usually does.

"Hill Country. Roughly an hour and a half from San Antonio."

My brows arch. He took me far from North Texas.

Since Cain seems to be in a talkative mood, I decide to use the opportunity to get more information out of him. The more I know, the better my chances of escape. After seeing the cosmetics in the bathroom, finding out if he has an accomplice is high on the list of valuable topics, but I can't just ask. I have to be clever about it.

"Your house is beautiful, but so large for one person," I remark. "Doesn't it get a little lonely?"

He washes a bundle of asparagus and a zucchini while he answers. "I enjoy the quiet. When I was a boy, my parents tore down the old ranch house they inherited from my dad's folks and built this one. I had it renovated and redecorated a few years ago."

I exhale with quiet relief. No wife or live-in girlfriend. At least I only have to worry about him, not a whole family of killers trying to murder me. That's what I care about, *absolutely not* that he's single.

"What happened to your parents?" I ask before I can stop myself.

A hitch runs through his hand as he picks up the knife to slice the vegetables. "A drunk driver." He pauses, the thunk of the blade on the cutting board breaking the tense silence. "The drunk driver was my mother. She was pretty good at knowing her limits, but she had too much that day and wrapped the car around a tree like a fuckin' ribbon."

My insides wring tight. If there's one thing I know about, it's the impact of an addict as a parent. The drug habits of mine derailed my life from the day I was born.

I chew on my cheek. “I’m sorry, Cain,” I mumble. It doesn’t feel like the right thing to say, but nothing ever does when the topic is so complex and heavy.

“Don’t worry. I’m a big guy. I can take care of myself,” he says, a somber note ringing in his voice, and a twinge of empathy has me wondering if he’s as lonely as he sounds.

The conversation fizzles, and Cain continues cooking. He cleans the mess in the kitchen while we wait for the veggies to grill and the steak to finish sizzling in the pan. The knife and cutting board are drying on a dish towel by the sink. It seems he likes things to be neat and tidy.

Soon, he puts cutlery wrapped in a linen napkin and a huge plate of steaming food in front of me. My stomach growls when I smell the perfectly seared steak, grilled asparagus and zucchini with garlic, thick, herby fries, and zesty salad. After he refills my drink, Cain gets himself some dinner and a glass of soda, too.

I glance at his plate. He’s given himself the smaller steak.

“Wow. This looks amazing,” I say, grabbing my fork first, then my knife. A sharp, long, serrated steak knife. My eyes narrow.

Cain tuts. “Don’t even think about it, little dove.”

“Think about what?” I flutter my lashes at him.

“Stabbing me.”

“I would *never*.”

He sighs. “I’m faster and stronger than you. You’ll get yourself hurt and then I’ll have to stitch you up. So save us both the hassle and forget about it. Let’s just enjoy the food.”



Cain cuts into his steak with the same precision he sliced my skin with the scalpel. Gently. With elegance. He puts a piece of rare, pink meat in his mouth, chewing slowly, and a twist of heat flows through my center.

Why the hell am I getting wet from watching him eat steak?

Cain's eyes close, the disrespect of the gesture dousing my arousal. He really doesn't consider me a threat. How rude! And probably a correct assessment.

When I try the first bite of juicy meat, I understand why he's savoring it. The beef melts on my tongue. The flavor is rich, earthy and wholesome, incomparable to any steak I had before. I always buy the cheapest cuts, and this doesn't even seem like the same meal.

"Oh my god," I moan, immediately slicing off more. And more. A few bites of the side dishes in between. More meat.

When my plate is empty, I notice Cain staring at me and my cheeks light up. I hide behind my napkin. Has he been watching me the entire time while I was stuffing my face like a starving animal?

"You make the same noises while you eat and when you come," he says too nonchalantly.

I toss the napkin on the counter, seething. "Is that all you think about? Sex?"

“I do think about sex an awful lot when you’re around, Erica. But that ain’t all.”

“Go on then! What else rattles around in that primitive caveman brain of yours?” I lean forward and poke him in the forehead.

His mouth curves as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Don’t ask questions if you don’t want an honest answer.”

“Oh, but I do! What can you possibly say that might shock me? That you’re going to kidnap me? Fuck me? Hold me hostage?” I let out all my flippant anger and confusion in a sarcastic laugh. “Been there, done that, Cain!”

“Alright.” His intense stare sends a shiver down my spine. “Right now, I’m thinking about buying more wagyu because you enjoyed it that much.”

My jaw goes slack.

He gets up to collect our plates and cutlery, sorting them into the dishwasher. “And now, I’m thinking that I’ll have to dust off the unused side of the walk-in closet, so you have a space for your stuff.”

What the fuck? Is he trying to throw me off?

He reaches out in a slow gesture and takes my hand. Tingles sweep through my belly as his thumb caresses over my knuckles until he stops at my ring finger.

“Now, I’m thinking that I forgot to measure your ring size while you were sleeping and I don’t know which size to get for your engagement ring,” he says, voice husky.

“My *what*?” I squeak.

“Well, your wedding ring, too, but that comes later. Step by step, darlin’.” He pats my hand. “Have a lil patience.”

I rip my hand from his. “I am *not* marrying you, curly!”

He smirks, pupils blown as if he’s looking at something super adorable, like a fluffy kitten. The urge to murder him increases by a thousandfold.

“Curly?” he asks innocently.

“Because of your stupid hair.” I gesture at his head.

“Cute.” He takes a sip of his drink. “I like it.”

Fucking great. He likes it.

“You’ve lost your last marbles if you think I’m going to marry you, Cain! I’ve known you for a few days, most of which I was *unconscious*!”

“So?” he asks with the most infuriating calm in his tone. “I know this ain’t exactly the standard procedure for a healthy relationship, but I gave up

on that when I kidnapped you. Besides, the adrenaline speeds up the process of getting closer. It's a natural chemical reaction in the brain. That's why many men suggest something exciting like a horror movie or a rollercoaster ride for the first date."

I slap the counter. "I'm your *captive*. We don't have a *relationship*!"

"Not yet. But you will love me, Erica. Once you get to know me, I'm not so bad."

"I will never love you."

"You'll love me and live freely by my side or you'll die, little dove. Your choice." He reaches into his pocket. "Speaking of freedom..." He puts something onto the counter, and my eyes widen.

"My phone!" I squeal, grabbing it.

"I charged it, put in a leftover sim card from my family plan, and connected you to the Wi-Fi. I saved my number in your contacts, too."

What am I supposed to say to that? I hope he didn't snoop too much and that he didn't find my embarrassing, sexually charged bucket list. That note is manually password-locked though, so I should be safe.

"Thanks, I guess?" I pause, squinting at his smiling face. "You know I could call the police with this and tell them about your organ harvesting and kidnapping deal?"

"You could."

"I could also ask them to send a patrol right away to arrest you."

His chin dips in confirmation. "Absolutely."

"If they see your perverted lair in the basement, you're getting the death penalty faster than you can spell, uh... spleen!"

"That's not a very long or very difficult word, but I see your point," he says.

This is too good to be true. The breath rushes from my lungs and I leave the phone on the counter. Cain is a sadist and an asshole, but he's not stupid. Far from it. I suspect that an intelligent, razor-sharp mind hides behind his casual demeanor and charming drawl.

"What's the catch?" I ask.

He chugs the rest of his soda. With a mocking frown, he swirls the ice around in the glass, making me listen to the annoying clinking until he finally puts it down.

"Call the cops all you want. They won't believe you."

My scoff comes out as a shout. “Okay, I’ll humor you for a second. Why wouldn’t they believe me?”

“Glad you asked,” he says, his tone giddy as if he’s been waiting for this moment. “Stay here. Don’t try to run, darlin’. You might be feeling okay, but you’re still weakened from the drugs. You wouldn’t get far.”

My nails score my palms as his steps grow distant, his boots thudding like he’s jumping up the stairs two steps at a time. He returns in less than a minute.

He’s right, I wouldn’t have had a chance to get far. And where the fuck would I go with no money, no friends, and no car?

Cain throws a brown folder onto the kitchen island. “There you go. I made copies for you in advance. Reckoned you ain’t gonna believe me unless you see the papers with your own eyes. The originals are stored safely where you can’t reach ‘em.”

I don’t remember carrying any documents in my bag. My gaze darts from the folder to Cain and back to the folder. With trembling fingers, I open it.

What. The. Fuck.

Medical files. *My* medical files, listing some minor health concerns I had in the past. A broken arm from when I fell out of a tree as a kid, a sprained ankle from when I slipped in a puddle in the kitchen at work, migraines, but

“This part is all wrong,” I say, tapping the paper. “I don’t have any of those things. Delusions, paranoia, bouts of violent aggression. And I don’t take any of those medications either. Are you trying to blackmail me? Because if you are, you’re stupider than I thought. This isn’t my file.”

He grins. “It is now.”

My stomach churns with dread. “But it’s wrong, this—”

“I’m Dr. Cain Morrow. You can search for my full name on the internet if you like. I’m a well-respected member of the medical community and advisor on countless ethics boards. I was head of surgery at the university hospital in San Antonio and I own half a dozen plastic surgery clinics across the South.”

“So you have an impressive career, but what does that have to do with this? With me?”

“If I wanna falsify a patient file, I can. Like this.” He snaps his fingers. “And nobody is gonna believe that upstanding Dr. Morrow would do such a

thing. I don't have a criminal record, not even a speeding ticket. And you haven't seen the best part yet."

He slides the last page out of the folder and grips my chin, tilting my head down. The dizziness from earlier returns with a vengeance. I can barely make out the letters between black dots obstructing my vision.

"Look at that, Erica! You named *me*—your loving boyfriend and trusted physician—as your legal guardian if you have another one of your paranoid episodes."

"No!" My shrill yell echoes beneath the high ceiling.

He taps the bottom of the paper. "Ain't that your signature, darlin'?"

I squint. For a second, it feels like I'm falling. For the fraction of a heartbeat, I doubt myself, thinking I've lost my mind, but my body goes rigid when I realize what's really going on.

"You forged my signature!"

"It wasn't too hard. I copied it from your driver's license. But the whole idea..." Pride crosses Cain's face. "You gotta admit it's a pretty neat plan, huh?"

My heart is about to burst out of my chest. "S-so if I call the police..."

"Now you're getting it." With that malicious smile on his handsome face, I expect him to sprout horns like the actual devil. "If you get the cops in here, I'll show 'em the files. If you run away, I'll go to the cops myself and within a matter of hours, the entire country will be searching for you. After all, with these mental health concerns, you're a danger to yourself and others."

I can't hear what he says afterward, his smooth voice background noise beyond the static filling my brain. Pressure compresses my throat like an invisible collar.

Cain doesn't need chains or ropes to keep me as his captive, and there's no way I'm ever getting away from him.



My brain makes a hundred decisions in a millisecond.

One moment, I'm sitting, helpless and lost. The next, I'm on the other side of the kitchen and my palm is wrapped around the smooth handle of the knife Cain used to cut the vegetables.

I don't know when I got up and ran to the sink, but I'm pointing the shaking blade at him.

Cain is still by the kitchen island and turns to me, cocking his head. "What do you think you're doing, darlin'?" He takes a slow step closer, and I back away until I bump into the counter.

"Stay where you are!"

"This doesn't have to end badly, Erica," he says, all sweet. It sounds like he actually cares. "Put down the knife. Don't ruin the nice evening."

"*Nice evening?* You're delusional." I screech a hysterical laugh. "I'm going to fucking kill you!"

He breathes a drawn-out sigh. "I'm warning you, little dove. Don't make me do something you'll regret."

Wow. Just... wow.

"Here's what'll happen," he says, holding up his palms. "I'm gonna count to three and you'll put the knife down."

"Fuck off, Cain."

"One."

“Go to hell, curly.”

“Your voice has this adorable, outraged pitch when you call me that.” His mouth twitches into a smirk. “Two.”

“Suck a donkey dick.”

He laughs. “Three.”

I expect him to come at me, but instead, he reaches behind his back, under his shirt and—

“Drop. The. Knife,” he orders as I stare down the long barrel of a shiny silver revolver.

A cold sweat breaks on my brow. I’ve never been held at gunpoint, but he’s smoking hot, even now. Maybe more so. My focus shifts, briefly distracted by his thick fingers and large hands molding to the metal, knuckles white from his firm grip.

“I don’t like guns,” he drawls. “Shooting is a very impersonal way to hurt somebody, and it brings me no pleasure. But y’see, my dad had the same kinda revolver and I figured I’d keep the family tradition alive. He taught me how to use it, too. I *will* shoot if you force me to.”

I try to put a stoic expression on my face. He doesn’t deserve to see my fear... and whatever else is mixed into it that makes my nipples tighten and a pulse wake between my legs. I plant my feet, infusing my voice with every ounce of defiance left in me.

“Then do it!” I taunt. “Shoot me and end this!”

“Oh, I’m not gonna kill you. You ain’t getting away from me that easily, darlin’. Naw, I’ll punish you. I’ll shoot you, alright, but in the shoulder or the leg, and then I’ll dig the bullet out of your soft flesh with my bare hands before I stitch you up. No anesthesia. No painkillers. It’s gonna hurt. I’m gonna *make* it hurt. Badly.”

The gun clicks as he cocks it and a thrill races up my spine. Traitorous wetness gathers between my thighs. He shifts his stance to aim at my shoulder and I notice the bulge twitching in his pants. I can almost see the perverted ideas playing behind his green eyes like a snuff movie with me in the main role.

Then again, can I really judge him if I get wet when he promises to hurt me?

My kidnapper and I are a catastrophically unhealthy match made in hell. The line between attraction and hatred is a thin one, all too easily crossed and too blurry to define. Right now, I don’t know which side I’m on.

I focus, replaying Cain's words in my head. Something seems off about them, like they're more than a superficial threat. It takes me a moment to puzzle the pieces together.

Cain *does* have a weakness, and he accidentally handed it to me on a silver platter.

He doesn't want me to die.

I lift the knife to my neck, and I laugh as the cold metal brushes my throat. "Fuck you, Cain. I'll kill myself and then you'll never have me. You think you're so fucking powerful, that everything is yours to take, but not me. Not anymore."

He stares at me. Eerily still. Unblinking. His grin is frozen like a mask.

I'm not sure if I mean it, if I'll go through with killing myself if he pushes me. The pills seemed okay, but this method is bloody. Painful. Mostly, I want to keep Cain away from me and buy some time. More so, I want to show him that he's not all that and not everyone cowers before him.

The silence is electric, making the hairs on my arms prickle. That should be my first warning sign, him not trying to get back at me with some off-handed, condescending remark or flirty comment. But the satisfaction of making him speechless for once makes me brave.

Too brave.

"You lose, Dr. Morrow," I say, drawing out his name with a huge smile on my face.

A muscle along his jaw feathers. His charming nonchalance is replaced by something so terrifying, so primal, my blood runs cold when I see it blazing in his eyes.

Raw fury. Hot like lava and hard like steel.

My ears ring with a bang. I panic. A dizzy spell turns the room upside down and my nerves blare. My thoughts whirl. For seconds that might as well be hours, I'm disoriented, caught in a web of blind terror.

That's long enough for Cain.

The knife gets yanked from my limp hand. I want to resist, but my reaction is too slow. Cain grabs me and I whimper, too stunned to scream.

"Enough of your disobedience," he hisses. "I'll make you very, very sorry you defied me, darlin'."

His arm wraps around me like a vise, my back pressed against his hard chest, and my ribs ache as he squeezes the air out of me. He taps the barrel of the revolver under my chin, nudging my head up, and my heart stumbles.

A bullet hole perforates the wooden cabinet, a little higher up than where my head was before.

“Aren’t you lucky I’m a great shot?” Cain lets out a sardonic chuckle. “Now be a good girl and thank me for not splitting that lovely head of yours with a bullet.” He shakes me. “Say *thank you for not killing me, sir.*”

My pussy throbs. Getting turned on is the furthest damn thing from my mind. I don’t want to find his threats arousing, but I’m like a twisted version of Pavlov’s dog, and it’s not a bell making me drip, but Cain’s commanding tone.

He loosens his arm enough for me to take a shallow breath. “Say it, Erica. Now. I ain’t asking again.”

“Thank you for not killing me, sir,” I mumble, a blush warming my face.

A shudder courses through him. “Just like that, my pretty little slut,” he whispers. He tilts his hips, grinding his hard cock against my lower back, and despite the humiliation, my chest swells with confidence.

Cain makes me feel sexy. Wanted. And that intoxicating combination of degradation and praise? I can’t get enough of it.

“You forgot something very important when you put that knife to your neck,” he says, dragging the barrel of the gun down my throat, the tip disappearing under my top and between my breasts. “You belong to me. *Nobody* hurts my little dove except for me. Not even you.”



Cain spins me around and tucks the gun into his waistband, but I don't consider fighting back or going for the knife he left on the counter. I'm outmatched.

His right hand closes around my neck, painfully tight and sure to leave bruises. I can tell from the glimmer in his eyes that he loves the way my pulse hammers against his fingers. His free hand yanks down my pants and underwear in one go.

"Step out of your clothes," he orders.

This time, I obey. As a reward, Cain releases my throat, and I gulp for air. He glances down at my discarded clothes and a smirk lifts his mouth.

"One day you'll have to admit that you're a sick, broken freak like me. Only a disturbed slut soaks through her panties from being threatened with a gun."

Shame curls like an angry serpent through my belly. I don't have to look to know he's telling the truth. The warmth between my thighs is unmistakable.

Cain grips me around the waist and lifts me. He sits me down on the edge of the island, the marble pressing icy cold against my naked ass. He picks up the knife I threatened him with and he spreads my legs wide before stepping between them. His eyes hood with morbid lust as he brushes the tip of the blade under my chin.

“Beg me to cut you, little dove. I know you want it.”

“I don’t.” My meek tone is unconvincing.

He breathes a snicker. “You’re a lousy liar. I knew what you wanted from the moment we met. It was obvious you were looking for pain, somebody to let out the rage and terror you bottle up inside.”

My stomach cramps.

“You might not like it, but I’m the monster you need, darlin’. No other man can make you feel like I do. And when you finally get that through your pretty, stubborn skull, you’ll be on your knees, crawling at my feet and begging me to hurt you.”

He lowers the knife to my thigh, pressing the flat side to it. The cold seeps into my skin, making me squirm.

“Now ask me to cut you,” he repeats.

“Please—” I choke on my embarrassment, and he slaps my leg with the blade. I startle, forcing out the words. “Please cut me, sir.”

“God, your voice sounds incredible when you beg. Hold very still. I don’t wanna slip and nick an artery.”

My breath catches as he drags the blade in a slow curve over the inside of my right thigh, just below my center, avoiding my tattoo. The searing pain is intense, silky and rich. I don’t mean to moan, but I can’t stop it. Every neat cut sends shocks of lust to my pussy and my hand twists into his shirt as my blood drips on the floor.

Cain wields the large knife with the same precision he uses a delicate scalpel, yet I know these wounds are going to leave scars. Being marked by this vicious man should be a terrible thought, but the pulsing between my legs grows. My hips burn with the need to roll and grind, my cunt aching to be filled.

“Done.” Cain takes a step back. “Look at it, little dove.”

Dazed, it takes me a beat to make sense of what I see etched into my skin.

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I stiffen. The possessive asshole carved his goddamn initials into me to mark me as his property! I expected random cuts, but not *this*.

“Do you like it?” Cain asks.

I have no answer for him. I don’t have one for myself, either.

He crouches and pushes his head between my legs, and though he has already seen all of me, I flush. There is something more intimate about this situation than the hookup in the motel or the sex in the operating theater.

His tongue flicks over the fresh wounds and his breath hits my slick pussy. I jerk and he glances up, grinning. The sight of my blood across his mouth has me spiraling deeper into the abyss of insanity. So deep, I'm sure I'll never climb out again.

I want to *kiss* my captor. I want to lick my blood from his lips and taste it from his tongue.

"You look unbelievably hot with fresh cuts and bruises, darlin'," he murmurs. "They're like tiny galaxies in between crimson constellations scattered over your skin. And I'm the God shaping your universe of pleasure and pain, one gentle strike and one careful slice at a time."

Without warning, he sucks my clit between his lips. A moan rips from my chest as I throw my head back, grinding against his face with reckless abandon. I don't care anymore if I seem desperate or if this is morally wrong. He makes me feel too fucking good.

His tongue toys with my clit before he lets it slide out and sucks it back in. He laps down along my slit, probing my pussy.

"Damn, you're so wet, I don't have to get you ready."

"Don't stop, please... I'm close..." I plead, attempting to grab his hair, but he pulls out of reach. His smug grin has tears of frustration burning in my eyes. "Why did you stop?"

"Because you have a lesson to learn." He takes the dish towel from the counter and wraps it around the blade of the knife. "If you wanna play with knives, you're gonna come with your cunt wrapped around one, darlin'."

He pushes the thick handle against my entrance and a pang of adrenaline shoots through me. After the girth of his cock, the smooth wood slides into me with ease, but I'm still sore. I moan as he shoves the hilt deeper and the temptation to look down at myself is too great to resist.

The knife is buried to the base inside me, the wrapped blade sticking out from my pussy. A trickle of red flows from where Cain's hand is holding it, his pinky missing the fabric shield.

He doesn't care if he bleeds so long as he can fuck me.

While his other hand massages my clit, he takes up a punishing pace of thrusts. He pumps the knife handle in and out of me and—oh my fucking God, the shape and slight bend at the end—it hits every orgasmic spot.

"Fuck," I groan. My eyes roll and I lay back on the cool marble. "I think I'm going to—"

My climax tears through me with tidal force. Stars explode under my skin. My shaking legs instinctively wrench shut, but Cain's body keeps them wide open. When the fire inside me has died down, he withdraws the knife.

"I guess I don't have to ask if you liked *that*," he says. He holds my gaze as he licks my shimmering wetness from the handle, and I forget what words are or how to use them like a human being. "You're so damn delicious, I'll eat your pussy as my last meal if they put me on death row."

Confusion muddles my post-climax bliss while he puts the knife in the sink.

Wasn't this supposed to be a punishment? How strange that he didn't ruin my orgasm. Even stranger that he's still hard and doesn't want to get off, too.

Cain picks me up, cradling me in his arms as he walks to the stairs. The warmth of his strong body is relaxing, and I hate to admit to myself that I kind of like it.

"Those cuts have to be cleaned and dressed. Don't wanna risk you getting an infection," he says and kisses the top of my head, speaking soft words into my hair. "But don't you fret. I'll make sure they scar nicely. I don't want you ever forgetting who you belong to."

Who I belong to.

Butterflies surge in my belly. I focus on the sting on my thigh and what it means. Cain has marked me. Forever. As long as I live, I'll carry his initials carved into my skin.

I lean my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. A smile curls my lips, but I wipe it off in an instant.

I'm only playing along, only staying because I have nowhere else to go, I tell myself. Because the house is gorgeous, and my stomach is full, and I get to sleep in a warm, cozy bed. Because I don't have to worry about bills or debt or being on the streets.

I'm only staying until I figure out an escape plan.

Not because I experience a bizarre sense of safety in his arms. Not because he's made me come harder than any other man before him. Not because he makes me feel beautiful and alive.

"Can you stop being so hot and cold? It's annoying," I mumble into his shirt.

His laugh is a low, vibrating rumble. "I thought I'm only ever hot."

I roll my eyes. “I mean things like this. First you threaten me, hurt me, fuck me, and treat me like I’m your toy. But then you carry me, wash me, feed me, take care of me.” My throat tightens when I realize what I said.

He *is* taking care of me, isn’t he?

“I told you I’m obsessed with you, little dove. It’s on you if you don’t believe me.” Cain squeezes me as he climbs the stairs. What he says next would sound ridiculous coming from anyone else, but out of this handsome lunatic’s mouth, it makes perfect sense.

“Besides, torturing you always puts me in the mood to cuddle after, darlin’. It’s all about balance.”

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The azure pool sparkles in the morning sun and in the middle, Erica lounges on a rainbow-colored tube float with her eyes closed. I hang the towel I got for her over my shoulder, pausing inside the patio doors. A smile tugs on my lips as I pluck a cigarette from the packet in my jeans and light it.

Hanging out in the garden after breakfast is a habit she picked up over the weeks she's been with me. She likes to swim a few laps, followed by lazing in the water.

It started when the housekeeper came the first time. With the forged medical documents to blackmail Erica, I'm not worried she'd squeal. I assume she didn't want to make any awkward excuses regarding our unusual *situation*.

The water helps her muscles to loosen, too. She needs it. I'm hard on her, fucking her daily until she's an exhausted mess in my arms. Tiring her out is the only way I can get her to cuddle with me or sleep on my chest. Any other time she argues my ear off.

She looks much healthier, too. Rosy cheeks, a bronze tan. A spark lights up her eyes, and it's brightest when she makes a sarcastic remark or chucks insults at me. I don't mind. I enjoy our verbal sparring, and she's posturing, anyway. All her arguing is an attempt to stave off the inevitable: falling madly in love with me.

How do I know she'll fall for me? Simply because I won't stop fucking her and caring for her until she does.

I stride out onto the terrace, stopping by the side of the pool. "Get outta the water, darlin'."

Erica frowns, keeping her eyes closed. "Go away, curly."

I take a deep breath of smoke and let it out in a laugh. She hopes it'll annoy me when she calls me curly, but I think it's sweet. Nobody has ever given me a pet name. Nobody dared to.

Who has the guts to call serious Dr. Cain Morrow a cutesy ass name? My future wife does.

"You gotta wash off the chlorine in the shower before you get dressed, Erica. Do your makeup and hair if you want, you're beautiful to me either way. But I expect your company tonight."

She rolls off the float with a splash and dives. Her blurry form swims to the edge, and she resurfaces by the metal ladder, slicking her hair back. My cock thickens as she climbs out. Water runs like liquid pearls over her curves, but the best parts are hidden by a black bikini with skulls on it.

I ordered it online for her. To be on the safe side, I got a whole selection of colors and cuts, but this is the one she always wears. It's my favorite, too.

I steal a glance at my initials on the inside of her thigh, two simple letters written in raised, pink scars. The shallow cuts healed fast under my professional care, and my jeans always get too tight around my crotch when I see my claim etched into her flesh.

I whistle and throw the towel at Erica. She catches it with a sneer but not a single word of gratitude. Typical. She dries herself and wraps it around her body, tucking it in at her chest.

"You want me to get done up so you can make me a mess again?" she asks, crossing her arms, but despite her best attempt at seeming pissed off, pink scrawls over her cheeks.

"Don't act coy, darlin'. You love when I turn you into a mess. Lipstick smeared and mascara running, wild hair. Oh, my pretty, slutty mess."

Her nose wrinkles. "You're gross."

My shoulders lift in a shrug. She doesn't mean that.

"We're going out tonight, little dove," I explain.

Her head tilts like she's shaking water out of her ears. "Come again?"

"Surely you don't wanna spend the rest of your life in this house and on this property, never going anywhere?"

She runs a hand along the side of her neck. “I mean—”

“If that’s what you want, I’ll lock you up for good.” I throw away my cigarette and grab her wrist, pulling her in.

“No! I don’t want to stay here all the time but...” She chews on her lip. “Aren’t you worried I’m going to run away?”

“If you wanted to run, you would’ve tried it already.”

She huffs, and I can’t tell if she’s irritated with me or with herself for getting this comfortable this quickly. Little does she know I have safeguards in place if she attempts to escape for real. I haven’t completely disregarded the possibility she might snap and give it an earnest shot.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed.” I tuck a strand of wet hair behind her ear, and the blush on her cheeks darkens. “It’s alright if you enjoy being here. This is a nice house, a peaceful home far away from your worries.”

“Peaceful my ass,” she spits. “Only if you weren’t here.”

“If you say so,” I respond impassively and embrace her. She only resists slightly. “Besides, I wanted you to have some time to get used to me and your new life before we start going out on dates.”

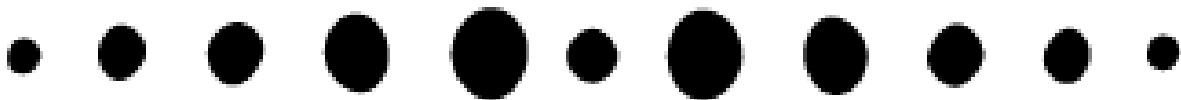
Her eyes grow round like saucers. “D-dates?”

“You’re my girlfriend. Of course I’m gonna take you on dates, darlin’. I don’t wanna hide you like you’re some dirty little secret. I want the whole world to see what a lucky bastard I am to call you mine.”

Her jaw drops and I bite back a smirk. She only does that when she really, really likes what I say and fights a fierce internal battle to not admit it to herself, or worse, to me. The struggle is plain in her slitting eyes.

Erica clears her throat. “I guess I’ll get ready then.” She squirms out of my arms and I miss her the moment she pulls away. Her bare feet leave wet prints on the tiles as she walks to the door. One leg inside, she turns to me. “Oh, where are we going?”

I smile. “That’s a surprise, little dove. I promise it’ll be worth it. All you have to know is this: it’s gonna be a long night of fun.”



I wait for Erica in the living room. First, I answer some work emails on my phone. Even being retired from active practice and outsourcing most of the

clinics' day-to-day operations, I gotta put in a few hours now and then.

After work, I dress in the outfit I prepared and left in the downstairs guest room. My favorite black jeans and boots, a light grey button up shirt, and a slate denim jacket over it. I add one of my dad's bolo ties, braided black leather with a decorative silver clasp, and a belt with a buckle to match.

Topping off the look with my usual black hat, I drop onto one of the armchairs in the living room and turn on the TV above the fireplace. A cooking show is on.

I love to cook, but since Mandy got healthy and moved to Los Angeles, I've rarely made the effort. No point in preparing a fancy meal when I have nobody to share it with. For me, food ain't just about eating tasty things. It's about connection and showing that you care about the people at your table.

Now, with Erica living here, things are different. I have somebody to cook for again.

I smirk as I remember her devouring the wagyu on the first evening—and every other meal I have prepared for her since then, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. My little dove enjoys my cooking. That's enough motivation to brush up on my skills and think of a few new recipes to try, but focusing on the TV is impossible.

I can't stop thinking about my darlin' naked upstairs. If I had my way, I'd go up there and fuck her at least twice, but I know from my sister that most women like some undisturbed me-time while getting ready. Mandy once threw a shoe at me when I interrupted her while she was doing her eyeliner.

When Erica's boots thud on the stairs, my head whips around. I forget to breathe.

Her long legs look even longer in skin-tight leopard print leggings. I lick my lips as I admire the sliver of skin showing beneath a cropped, jet-black velvet top. A studded belt slants across her hips, a bracelet with silver spikes decorates her wrist. She wears multiple layers of necklaces crowned by a leather choker with an O-ring to hide the bruises I left on her neck. Her mischievously glimmering eyes are rimmed with smudgy black eyeliner and her red lips pull into a cocky smirk.

My face turns hot as fire and my cock rises for a standing ovation.

Thank fuck my self-control keeps those animal instincts in check. My dick has entirely other plans than a date, but I genuinely want her to have a good time tonight. There will be plenty of opportunities to make her scream my name when we get home.

“Really? I spent all this time getting dolled up and you’re not going to say anything? Nothing at all?” she asks, raising both hands, nails coated in a fresh layer of black polish.

I tip my hat at her, letting out a strained laugh. “Shit, darlin’, I can’t even think straight with you looking like this. I’m trying my best to stop myself from ravishing you on the spot.” I get up, adjusting my temperamental cock while I walk over to her. Wrapping an arm around her middle, I press my hips into her. “Can you feel what you do to me? A single glance at you was enough to get me rock hard and throbbing. You’re so beautiful, you make me crazy.”

She flushes. “Thank you,” she mumbles, suddenly getting shy. It’s so cute, I can’t stop myself. I lift my hat to kiss the shell of her ear, making her shudder as I nibble along her jaw and blow a breath across her throat.

“If we don’t get in the car this instant, we’re not going anywhere tonight,” I warn.

She pulls away, eyes dragging from the tips of my boots to my face. “You don’t look half bad yourself, cowboy,” she teases. “But you promised me a date, and now I want that damn date!”

“See, I figured you’d say that and I’m not a liar.” I grin as I step back, and a hint of disappointment flashes in her gaze. Taking my truck keys from my pocket, I grab her chin with the other hand. “But don’t you fret. By the end of tonight, I’ll rip off that pretty outfit and stuff you with my cock.”



Erica rides with her feet on the dashboard, humming along to the music.

I let her choose the playlists and I fall more for her with every song. Our tastes are so fuckin' similar, I thank fate a hundred times for bringing me to that shitty town with its shitty gas station and shitty motel.

We talk about our favorite bands, and I can see the surprise in her eyes when she realizes how much we have in common. She quizzes me, asking suspicious questions like which songs I enjoy the most. She even names a few wrong to see if I'll correct her, and I do.

I reckon a part of her rejects that connection between us. She wants to believe that I'm simply the monster who kidnapped her and keeps her as his prisoner—not a man she can get along with and *want* to spend time with.

When I take off my hat and lay it between us on the bench, Erica puts it on. She sticks her tongue out at me, and the zap of electricity running through me almost has me veering into the nearest ditch. Her crystalline laughter makes it too easy to forget we ain't a normal couple.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think she enjoys my company as much as I enjoy hers.

We make a brief stop for food. Erica orders a double cheeseburger with extra pickles, large fries with ketchup, and an iced coffee with vanilla syrup, whipped cream, and caramel on top. I get the same. It's a killer combination.

East San Antonio is busy in the early evening, but I planned the night carefully. A traffic jam can't derail us. With time to spare, we park the car in a multi-story garage. We get into an elevator that takes us to street level, where people stream toward the entrance of the indoor arena across the road.

I've been there a handful of times to watch the local basketball team play, but tonight, a different event is on the schedule. A banner on the side gives away my surprise for Erica—or rather, a part of it.

"Billy Talent?" she asks and grabs my sleeve, yanking on it. "We're going to see Billy Talent? You're kidding me, right?"

I put a hand over my heart in mock offense. "Do I seem like a man who'd joke about something as important as his girlfriend's favorite band?"

She turns tomato red. "How do you know they're my favorite?"

"I stalked you for a while before I kidnapped you. When I stood outside your motel room, I heard you listening to them every day on repeat, more than any other music."

She slaps a hand across her forehead, but that doesn't dull her grin.

"I should be so mad, Cain. So. Fucking. Mad." Her gaze drifts to the venue, and she groans. "But I can't be. Last year when the tickets went on sale, I took a day off to wait online and when I finally got through, they were sold out! Scalpers resold them for a fortune, but that was way out of my league. I never thought I'd get to see them live again! And now we're here and... and—"

Her speechless joy fills my chest with light.

Hurting Erica is like a powerful drug injected right into my veins. It's addictive. I can't live without it. But seeing her happy has me caring about nothing else in the world so long as I can make her smile.

I smirk while I light a cigarette and take the first drag. "Go on. Say it, little dove."

"Damn you." She kicks a pebble onto the road. "Fine." Her eyes roll before they fix on me and she gives me an even sweeter smile. "This is... incredible. I'm seriously grateful. Thank you, Cain."

"There you go. That wasn't difficult at all, was it?"

She glares at me. "Don't push your luck, curly."

I laugh and take her hand, leading her across the street as I smoke. "The concert ain't the most exciting part."

"There's *more*?"

I don't answer. It's better if she sees it for herself.

We cross the plaza in front of the main entrance, but instead of lining up to show our tickets, I swerve to the left. I throw away my cigarette and grab my phone to send a quick text to the band manager's number I've been given via email. He said I should let him know when we've arrived, and he'll take care of the rest.

At first, he was reluctant when I reached out to arrange a meet-and-greet with the band, but everybody has their price, and I simply had to mention the right number. It's an expensive event, sure, but every cent spent on Erica is a worthwhile investment.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks as we round the arena and the noise of the crowd fades. "Are you going to fuck me by the dumpsters to make me pay for this?"

"If you want me to, darlin'." I wink. "But jokes aside, this ain't a transaction. I don't expect anything from you in return for this date night. Is it so unfathomable that I wanna do something nice for you without any ulterior motives?"

She scoffs. "Yeah, it is."

"You know that's bullshit."

Erica grumbles something about kidnapping and drugging but when we approach a metal gate, she quickly perks up. A pair of security guards stand on each side. They look us up and down, one opening their mouth to say something, when his radio buzzes and garbled speech comes through.

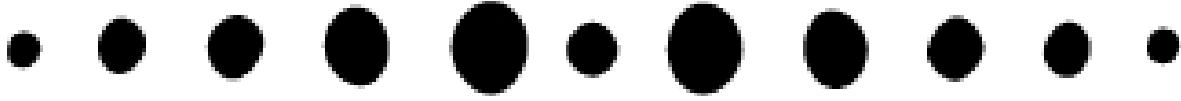
"Understood," he says into the little black box and waves us closer. "Cain and Erica Morrow?"

My heart lifts. God, that sounds like music to my ears. She wears my last name so well.

Erica's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets as she stares at the guard. Her head snaps to me. No doubt she wants to give me an earful for acting like she's my wife, but I answer the man before she can get a word out.

"Yeah, that's us," I say.

The guard punches a code into a keypad on the fence and the gate opens. "Follow me, please."



That adorable, giddy smile hasn't left Erica's face since we walked out of the backstage area and found a spot by the side of the VIP pit in front of the stage. And the entire time I have been asking myself one question:

How did she become even more beautiful?

She clutches a tote bag with the band's logo on it, giggling and shaking her head like she expects to wake from a dream. Her unbridled joy gives her a glow that rivals the lightshow on stage. I can't stop grinning as she rocks back and forth on her heels, listening to the opening act play pop-punk.

Seeing her jaw drop when the band members came out of their dressing room and the lead singer shook her hand was worth every dollar. As I requested, he gave her a swag bag, filled with t-shirts, autographs, and every other kind of merch they had available.

They did a small photo shoot, too, and I volunteered to take the pics. My gallery is filled with pictures of Erica and the band, looking like they've been friends for years. Being around her is easy and talking to her is fun, so no wonder those guys were all over her. A lil *too* all over her for my taste.

My hackles raised when the lead singer pulled her in for a picture, dipping her like he was about to kiss her, but I didn't wanna fuck this up for her. The jealousy grinding along my guts like razor blades wasn't a priority. And beating the shit outta the guy for touching her definitely would've ruined the mood.

The meet-and-greet was a special occasion Erica will remember until her dying breath, and I wanted her to have this memory. Unblemished. It was important to her, and that meant it was important to me by proxy.

Erica teared up when the singer asked how long she's been a fan, and she explained that their songs helped her through difficult times.

Your music saved my life, she said, choking up.

Shit, even *my* eyes had burned a bit. Mostly because I hate to imagine my little dove alone and scared during her lowest lows, with just music as her companion. But I'm grateful, too. If she didn't have her love for Billy Talent, I never would've had the chance to meet my soulmate.

Because that's what she is.

Whether she's all dolled up like tonight or stumbling out of bed, no makeup and messy hair... No matter if she argues with me, hates me, or laughs and jokes with me.

Erica is my soulmate.

I didn't even believe in that shit before I met her. All that woo-woo stuff seemed like powerless people's attempt to pretend they had control over something they could never influence. But there's no other explanation why I have butterflies in my stomach while I watch her bop her head to the music. Or why I no longer only want to fill her pussy, but her heart, too.

I didn't think that a monster like me is capable of this most human of emotions. But for the first time in my life, I'm hopelessly in love—with the woman I abducted to slaughter on my operating table.

With Erica.

I nudge her side. She smiles at me, the genuine affection in her eyes making my pulse jump into my damn throat. I wish she'd always look at me like this.

"Yeah?" she shouts over the bass and guitar riffs.

I speak directly into her ear. "I'm gonna get a drink before the main show starts. Do you want anything? You can indulge because I'm driving, but I'd rather you pick something in a bottle so I can buy them closed and pop the top myself. Safety reasons."

She nods. "Beer, please."

"Alright. I'll be right back," I say, closely watching her reaction.

Erica gives me an energetic thumbs up. If she wants to run away, this is her best shot. I guess this is a test for her. Will she stay or will she flee?

I wait a moment, but she looks at the stage, not an ounce of tension in her posture.

My brows rise. In case she *does* run, the hidden tracking app I installed on her phone will send an alert to mine as soon as she gets out of range. It'll lead me right to her. But Erica doesn't seem to want to go anywhere. She wants to stay right where she is, and I want to believe that has at least a bit to do with me... not just with her favorite band.



My good mood evaporates when I return, carrying a ginger ale for me and a beer for her. The crowd stands in a wide circle around her, and everybody turns away while some mangy bastard is getting in her face. They all act like the stagehands setting up the instruments for the main act are mighty interesting.

Fuckin' cowards.

What has our damn world come to when people won't even help a lone woman getting hassled in public? And where are the fuckin' security guards when you need 'em?

The guy wobbles as he pushes against Erica's shoulder. "Listen bitch, *you* bumped into *me*," he shouts, slurring. "You gotta apologize or I'll put ya in yer place. Got it?"

You just signed your death warrant, buddy, I think and leave the closed bottles on a nearby cocktail table.

Erica puffs out her chest. A proud smile tugs at my lips when she pushes him, too, and he stumbles.

"Now *you* listen, *asshole*," she yells back. "I already said I'm sorry. Fuck off and annoy someone else with your stinky breath!" The man goes red in the face, stammering as he takes another step back.

I chuckle. That's my little dove, feisty as ever. She doesn't need saving. I reckon she can probably scare him off by herself, but she's mine, and I want

to protect my woman. The bastard needs to be taught a lesson in respect.

He's clearly drunk, but that ain't no excuse for harassing my future wife. Actually, that ain't no excuse to harass anybody. This lil shit is a pathetic fucking worm unworthy of breathing the same air as Erica, and I'll make him feel mighty sorry for bothering her.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I grab him from behind and spin him around. The stupid look he gives me is worth gold. Tough luck for him. Now he's no longer dealing with a lady a head shorter than him, but with me—a guy who can eat him for breakfast in one fuckin' bite.

His mouth opens, but my fist is already flying.

My hand connects with his nose and a satisfying crack sounds. He howls. Blood pours down his face and he whimpers when I pull my arm back again. My next punch lands in his solar plexus. He doubles over, gasping from the pain, but I hold him upright by the collar of his fake leather jacket.

Another advantage of being a doctor. I know to hit 'em where it hurts the most.

I dislocate his jaw with a precise strike of my elbow, and the snapping of bone spreads balmy glee through me. When I look up, my eyes meet Erica's. Her cheeks are flushed pink and a bashful smile curves her lips.

She isn't horrified as I expected.

In fact, I know that expression on her face and it's making my crotch swell. She's getting hot and bothered from watching me beat up this punk. I bet if I reached into her pants this instant, I'd find her drenched.

A weight I didn't know I'd been carrying disappears from my shoulders.

For most women my aggression and territorial attitude are a gigantic, waving red flag with matching alarm bells and sirens. It's not like I don't know my flaws. Combined with my unusual kinks, I have plenty of reasons why I stayed far away from serious dating and relationships throughout my adult life.

Occasionally, I hooked up with a random stranger during my hunts. To try my hand at the more hardcore stuff, I visited BDSM clubs using a fake name. No attachments.

But I don't have to hide my true, brutal nature from my little dove. My stomach flutters like it's filled with a bunch of butterflies. She *likes* my possessive affection and violent tendencies.

I gear up to teach the sniffing bastard another painful lesson and give Erica more of a show, when a hand grabs my elbow, and I freeze.

“Sir, I’m going to have to escort you outside,” a man in a light blue uniform says. “We have a zero-tolerance policy for fighting inside the arena.” He points at the security patch on his jacket above a nametag spelling *Smithson*.

I shove the guy who heckled Erica, and he falls on his ass. He holds his face, scrambling to his feet before he disappears into the crowd. I curse myself for not taking his wallet so I can ID him and find him again another day.

“Sir?” the guard says, his hand digging harder into my arm, and I focus my attention on him.

I click my tongue. “You wanna play this game, Smithson? You sure about that, *friend*?”

The guard’s head tilts. His grip loosens in confusion and his mouth gapes like a fish on land.

I rip myself free and jab a finger at his face. “If *you* did *your* job correctly, I wouldn’t have had to step in. My wife was getting harassed by a drunk and nobody helped her.”

“It’s true!” Erica cuts in. “Cain was defending me. He didn’t start the fight!” She dashes toward me and wraps her arms around my waist, pressing herself against me.

Holy shit, Erica is hugging me. Voluntarily.

For a second, I think I can hear the angels sing in perfect bliss... until the idiot guard interrupts the moment.

“I’m still going to have to ask you to leave, sir,” he repeats like a fuckin’ robot, scratching his head.

“No chance. I ain’t leaving because you’re trying to frame me for your negligence.” I wind one arm around Erica who snuggles tighter against me. My other hand gets my phone out. “Now you can either fuck off, Smithson, or I’ll call the band’s manager and let him know about the piss poor security in this venue.”

It’s a bluff, but the man pales, and I know I have him exactly where I want him.

“Bet they don’t want that bad publicity. Y’know, I reckon they’ll never play here again and people in the entertainment industry talk. A lot. Then the owner of this fine establishment will have no choice but to fire the security company you work for. Think your boss will like that much? Think

he'll be pleased to hear you made him lose this huge contract and ruined his reputation, Smithson?"

The guard's Adam's apple bobs and he deflates.

"I-I'm sorry for the mix-up and my uh... mistake, sir. My sincerest apologies for any inconvenience I have caused you and your wife. Enjoy your evening," he mumbles and shuffles off.

I tuck my phone away and grin at Erica. Her eyes shine tenderly, and my heart tumbles into my gut. I've never seen her look at me like this.

"Cain, I—" she says when the band steps onto the stage and the crowd breaks out into cheers. Her expression changes on a dime. "They're here!" she squeals, squeezing me before she lets go to jump and holler with the rest of the fans.

Cool disappointment rushes through me. It seemed like she wanted to tell me something important, but at the same time, this is how I like her best.

Happy.

My disappointment matters little in comparison.

I grab the bottles from the cocktail table and open the caps. Sipping on my ginger ale, I approach Erica to give her the beer. She giggles, squirming as my free hand brushes her hair over her shoulder and I kiss her neck.

Whatever she wanted to say to me, whatever that expression meant... it's gone with the damn wind. But she's still here with me, in my arms, and that's what counts.



Spending most of the concert with Erica on my shoulders left me with a boner that doesn't wanna quit—not even in the car on the way home.

It was a great show, but I couldn't focus on the music with her soft thighs framing my face and the scent of her perfume mixing with her fresh sweat. All I thought about was pounding into her sweet lil cunt and making her body sing with pleasure until we were both spent.

Erica cuddling up against my side since I started driving doesn't help with my raging erection, either. I fuckin' love having her close, but it takes an inhuman amount of restraint to not pull over and bury myself to the hilt inside her.

"Thank you for today. I had so much fun," she says, and I hear the smile in her voice. The yellow streetlights throw shadows across her face, but she still seems lit up from the inside out.

"Told you it'd be awesome, darlin'."

"More than that." She straightens, and I shiver at the loss of her heat. "This was the best day of my life."

She puts her hand on my knee and my brows rise as her dainty fingers trail over my thigh. I shudder when she palms my throbbing cock through my jeans, goosebumps crawling up my back. It's a relief to finally have her touch me, but a queasy knot tightens my stomach.

The woman I love wants to give me a handjob in the car, and I don't feel like it? Am I sick?

"Don't," I say, the pulse drumming in my ears rising above the droning whirr of tires on asphalt.

She pouts. "Why not?"

"You never initiate sex. This is the first time." I grab her wrist, holding firm, but not hard enough to hurt her. "I don't want this to happen because you think you owe me for tonight."

"Fuck no!" She shakes her head, offence plain in her tone. "That's not why I'm doing it!"

"Then why?" I shoot back and immediately want to slap myself.

God, what do I expect her to say? My question is an open invitation to get my fuckin' feelings hurt.

"Because this wasn't just the best day of my life, Cain, but also the best date I've ever been on, and it put me in the mood. Plain and simple."

My eyes go wide.

"It's not about the ridiculous amount of money you probably spent on the meet-and-greet and the tickets. It's because you paid attention to the things that are important to me, and you went through all this effort to make me happy. You protected me from that scumbag, too. But I admit there is one other reason..." She giggles, flicking the brim of my hat. "Because you're hot as fuck with that hat and the tie. Guess I have a thing for cowboys who aren't really cowboys."

I blush so fiercely, my whole head should burst into flames. Idiotic stammering leaves my lips and I let go of her arm.

"Ha, I finally did it! I made you speechless, curly! It's only fair because you do it to me all the time." She grins and turns her body toward me, one leg tucked underneath her ass. "And now, I suggest you focus on the road while I suck your thick cock as deep as I can take it, Dr. Morrow."

I almost burst out of my jeans. Goddamn, I know she's a freak, but until now, she's been pretty silent about her kinky side unless I press her about it.

"I didn't know you had such a dirty mouth on you," I rasp.

"I'll show you what else I can do with it." She switches on the cabin light, letting me see the flush on her cheeks and the seductive shimmer in her eyes in all its glory. "Let's keep the light on. I want you to see my face while you fuck my throat."

“Damn, I could get used to you talking like that, little dove.” I put one palm against the side of her head. “So long as you know your place.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten, sir,” she purrs. “I only want to make my master come like a good girl should.”

She hasn’t even touched me yet, but I can’t stop myself from moaning. I have created a monster, a deviant slut to match my twisted urges.

Erica undoes my belt, then the button on my jeans and opens the zipper. Her hand drifts into the fly of my boxers, curling around my dick, and I jerk like her fingers are made of pure lightning. She licks her lips as she pulls out my cock, eyes fixed on the swollen tip. Her head bows, and the first, slow stroke of her velvet tongue has my hips bucking. I twitch, ripping the steering wheel to the left.

“Oh, shit,” I curse.

The tires screech. I barely stop us from crashing into a tree, but Erica laughs. She licks around and around, teasing me while I leak onto her tongue. A growl rises in my throat, and she laughs harder. I grit my teeth.

The devious bitch knows exactly what she’s doing... and I know exactly how she wants me to react. I’ll teach her what happens to brats who provoke a feral man like me.

The car swerves again as my hand snaps into her hair, the other staying on the wheel. I slow down before I wrap the long black strands around my fist and yank. She gasps, her breath on my tip sending a cascade of tingles down my spine.

“Stop playing around, slut. Open your filthy mouth and suck my cock,” I hiss.

Her red lips part and she hesitates, a challenge glimmering in her eyes. She wants me to make her... and I’m all too happy to oblige.

I shove her down on my cock until I hit the back of her hot throat. She starts gagging, and a surge of pleasure shoots up from my balls as she swallows me. Her hands press against my thighs and she tries to push herself off, but I hold her down, her hair like a leash wrapped around my fingers like I imagined it the night I kidnapped her.

No escape for my little dove.

I force my dick deeper until her lips are against my groin. She panics, but that just makes her throat tighter, squeezing me like a vise. Her groans vibrate against my cock, and my balls tighten. I’m already close. Realizing

that anybody driving by can see what we are doing almost pushes me past the point of no return.

“Is that what you want? Do you want to choke on my dick until you pass out, darlin’?” I mock her, and she makes a desperate, fuckin’ sexy noise. “Do you want me to use your throat as my personal cock sleeve?”

I pull her up, letting her catch her breath before shoving her back down. Sensitized from before, she chokes again, and a thrill bursts along my nerves.

I can’t take much more.

“You made me do this, Erica. You provoked me with your teasing, and you know that brats get punished.”

I move her head up and down, yanking on her hair while I fuck her face. She’s a quick learner, taking breaths whenever I slip out to the edge of her lips, but she can’t do anything about the gagging... and that’s the best part.

Mascara and eyeliner run in black streaks down her cheeks. Blood red lipstick is smeared all over my cock and her lips.

“You’re such a beautiful mess with your ruined makeup and my dick in your throat,” I groan. “Hollow your cheeks, darlin’, suck me harder.”

And fuck me, she does.

Her tongue strokes the underside of my shaft and her lips form a seal. My balls tense and my cock swells. I can barely see the road through flashing dots of light as my cum hits her mouth.

I hold on to the wheel for dear fuckin’ life, but the car swerves over the middle line before I narrowly avoid an oncoming car and get us back in the right lane. If I end up killing us, I’ll die happily to the sound of the other driver honking and Erica’s garbled moans.

“Be a good girl and swallow every drop,” I command. Not like she has much of a choice, though. I’m so far inside her, all she can do is take whatever I give her.

When I let go, she sits up coughing... *and smiling*.

My hand dives into the stretchy waistband of her leggings and under her panties. She’s maddeningly wet, my finger sliding easily through her slit. The heel of my palm presses on her clit and she rocks back and forth against it, slicking my skin with her essence.

“Oh, yes,” she moans. “Keep going, please, sir...” She closes her eyes, hips rolling as she parts her thighs wider, revealing a visible damp spot in her crotch.

I tut. "Look at yourself, darlin'. You've soaked through your panties *and* your leggings like a needy bitch. My little slut got this wet from me fucking her throat. Aren't you ashamed of being so desperate to get fucked by the killer who drugged and kidnapped you?"

Her face takes on a darker shade of red. She really gets off on me humiliating her, but damn, if it doesn't get me going, too. Pity I need a small break, or I'd order her to climb on my lap.

"From the very beginning during our night in the motel, you always know how to drive me wild... how do you do it?" she asks breathily. "No one has ever turned me on like you do. Your touch is magic."

I grin. "I have a sixth sense for whores who want to be dominated, degraded, and fucked until they forget their own name."

And obviously, I saw her sex wish list, but she doesn't need to know that. For now, I'm happy with her assuming I can read her dirty mind like an open book.

Erica attempts to give me a disapproving glare for my joke, but I slip three fingers inside her dripping hole, curling them to hit her g-spot. She hisses and her eyes roll back. Her pussy clamps down on my digits.

"I wanna see you riding my hand like you'd ride my cock," I say.

"Yes, Dr. Morrow, sir." The words haven't fully left her lips when she starts grinding, her hips drawing slow figure eights.

"Show me your perfect tits," I order, and Erica raises her top. She isn't wearing a bra and her breasts sway. "Now pinch your nipples."

I wish I had a free hand to grab my phone and film her as her fingers circle her breasts, sliding closer and closer to the center. She twists her nipples lightly and my dick twitches, giving a commendable effort to return to life.

"Harder," I growl. "If I don't see real pain on your face, you don't get to come tonight."

Her grip on those rosy peaks tightens, her cunt clenching around my fingers. She starts tugging and tweaking them, nails digging in. The lazy circles of her hips turn frantic. Every bounce drenches my hand more, the wet sounds of my fingers plunging into her pussy only overshadowed by her shameless moans.

"Make it hurt, darlin'. Let me hear you," I say, trying to keep one eye on the road while I watch her. "You're doing so well. Are you my good girl?"

“Ah, yes! I’m your good girl, sir!” she brings out, face twisting with desire.

“Then come on my hand.”

It takes about three seconds until an orgasm tears through her. Erica’s pussy ripples, her hips jerking arrhythmically while she seeks pressure against her clit to ride out her pleasure. When she calms down, she wears the biggest smile.

I tilt my head, putting ice into my gaze and steel into my voice when I ask, “Did I say you can stop?”

The grin slips from her lips. “But—”

“I’m still knuckles-deep in your weeping cunt.” I wiggle inside her to make my point, and she flinches. “A greedy hole like yours deserves more than one orgasm, little dove. Now fuck yourself on my hand and come all over my fingers again.”

She gives a quick nod. “Yes, sir.” Her face scrunches as she starts to move, hesitantly rocking back and forth.

She’s sensitive from that brutal first orgasm, and the grimace pulling at her mouth fills me with sadistic satisfaction. Impatiently, I shift my position and start pummeling her, sliding over her g-spot with every quick thrust.

“Cain, stop! This is too much!” She grips my arm, but she’s not making a sincere attempt to stop me.

“You can take it, darlin’. Give me one more orgasm.”

The straight road ahead is deserted. *Lucky*, I think and stabilize the wheel with my knees. It’s an easy thing to do for a tall guy, at least for a moment. Long enough to free up my second hand.

I reach over and find her clit, taking it between two fingers... and pinch. A wave of shuddering ecstasy overcomes Erica and I chuckle. I knew a bit of pain would do the trick.

She lets out a string of muted curses as her slick heat clenches around my fingers. Her legs shake until the orgasm has passed her by like a wild wave leaving behind calm seas. Eyes glazed over, she watches me lick my hand clean.

“I won’t let any drop of you go to waste,” I say and she averts her eyes to the road, fidgeting while she tries to catch her breath. If it was humanly possible, she’d be blushing even harder.

How cute.

Her lust-drunk boldness has transformed into post-orgasm bashfulness. She has no reason to be ashamed, though. She's beautiful in her ruin and I soak in the view.

Top shoved up above her reddened nipples. Flushed face. Hair tousled and trails of black makeup streaking from her eyes down her cheeks, her smudged lipstick painting the skin around her mouth a sloppy crimson.

I put away my cock before I wiggle my phone out of my pocket and open the camera app. The flash makes her jump as I take a picture of her.

"Hey, Cain! What the fuck do you think you're doing?" She scowls.

"What's it look like, little dove? Getting myself a souvenir." I smirk and show her the phone. "Do you see how gorgeous you are? I couldn't resist commemorating the occasion."

She turns her head away, but she glances at the picture from the corner of her eye while she pretends to be busy righting her clothes. "You're a fucking pervert, curly."

I laugh. "Well, that's no news. I wear the pervert badge with pride. If you're trying to insult me, you're gonna have to do much better than that, darlin'."



Cain is still asleep when I slip out of bed and into the bathroom. I admire my ravaged body in the mirror on the back of the door. The naked woman staring back at me is bright-eyed and smiling, not scowling at herself or trying to pick apart every perceived flaw.

There is a lightness inside me, one I haven't felt in a long time. I'm not sure if I ever felt it at all before.

Perhaps I should be shocked by my reflection, covered in bruises. Some fresh, purple or blue, others faded and yellow. There are small cuts, too. A few red and sore, others scabbed and healing. A handful of pink scars.

It's sick, but I love looking at the marks almost as much as I love the way it feels when Cain imprints them on me. They remind me of art. Dots of colors like little flowers and neat cuts like an abstract, geometric painting.

He's careful to only mark me in places concealed by regular street clothes, except for the trail of bruises his fingers regularly leave on the tender skin of my throat. When we went to the concert, I hid those under a wide choker, but not for my sake. I didn't want strangers asking questions.

Quietly singing to myself, I hop in the shower. My mood is disgustingly good, but how can it not be after last night? I had the best date and met my favorite band. Then I had amazing sex in the car and more amazing sex back at home.

Home.

The word rings through me like the tolling of a bell.

Without me noticing, this house has become my home. A home I share with the sicko who kidnapped me and takes great pleasure in hurting me. And I—

I'm enjoying myself. I like it here.

I'm... happy?

Happiness was never a thing for me. Being okay-ish was always the best I could do. Barely getting by was normal, and I considered myself lucky for it. Many people had it so much worse than me, even at my lowest. I had no right to complain.

But then Cain happened.

Suddenly, bare minimum isn't enough anymore. I can't gaslight myself into lowering my standards or accepting misery like I deserve it.

Everything Cain does is thoughtful in the most infuriatingly smug and forcefully caring way. Every day, he prepares healthy, balanced meals for me and makes me drink the recommended amount of water. I don't have to lift a finger around the house. All chores are done by him or the maid, and I'm free to spend my time however I want.

I try not to ask for stuff because I don't want Cain to think I'm after his money. But whenever I do need something, even if I mention it in passing or he catches me looking at stuff online, he doesn't just buy it for me. No, he gets a whole selection so I can pick my favorites.

Like that collection of bikinis in the walk-in closet or the gift set of my favorite perfume I found in the bathroom on the first day. He confessed he bought it especially for me... and another two as backups, in case I run out.

Cain doesn't leave me a choice but to care for myself and treat my body with gentleness. I don't like how warm and tingly my belly gets whenever I think about that.

I drown those complicated emotions in a hot shower, lathering myself up and forgetting about the world. Once I'm done, I slink out of the bathroom, but my brows shoot up when I see that the bed is empty.

A hint of disappointment trickles through me. I planned to wake Cain by rubbing every silky inch of my freshly washed, shaved, and perfumed self all over him. No such luck.

I glance around the room before peeking into the walk-in closet, but he's nowhere to be found. He probably went downstairs to get started on a late breakfast... or more like lunch. My mouth waters when I try to imagine

what delicacies he'll come up with. He's an exceptional cook, and every dish he made for me so far has been incredible.

I put on velvet tracksuit pants and a simple black top before strolling barefoot out into the hallway, when bright laughter has me freezing on the spot.

A woman's laughter.

"Oh my God, Cain! Stop teasing me!" a voice trills.

A sick feeling drops to my stomach.

This isn't the housekeeper. She comes on Monday and Thursday, not Saturday, and she's a middle-aged lady with a raspy voice. I like to think Cain would tell me if he expects any guests. He would want to make sure I keep our story straight and don't get any stupid ideas.

Who the fuck has the audacity to drop by unannounced?

"You make it way too easy," Cain responds, his tone warm and affectionate.

My nails score my palms and bile burns my throat while I follow the sound of the conversation. The door to his office—the one room he usually locks—is open a crack, and I peer inside.

My pulse stutters.

A tall woman stands by a large oak desk and her wavy blond hair sways as she giggles. Her side profile seems vaguely familiar, like I've seen her in a commercial or something.

Her legs are impossibly long and her slender feet fit perfectly into cream suede heels with red bottoms. A designer handbag dangles from her left arm, and she's dressed in an immaculately fitted, all-white pantsuit with rhinestones at the wide collar.

"Don't be mad I didn't call first," she says, putting a dainty hand on Cain's shoulder, gold bangles jingling around her wrist. "I thought I'd catch an earlier flight this week so we can spend some time together. L.A. has been a drag."

Cain grins, running his fingers through his hair. What the fuck is *he* wearing, anyway? A pressed button up shirt, slacks, and loafers... My heart does somersaults.

Did he dress up for her?

"You know you're always welcome here, Mandy, but your timing—" he starts and her melodic laughter cuts him off. The cogs in my brain finally make the connection when she half turns, and I get a better look at her face.

Oh, my fucking God... I *have* seen her.

When I lived alone and couldn't sleep, I sometimes watched makeup tutorials online to help me unwind. That's where I know her from. The fastest growing makeup influencer of the past years and owner of the *MandysMakeupMagic* channel is standing 10 feet away from me. In the flesh.

"Oh, timing shmiming." She waves a hand as she rises on her tiptoes and presses her lips to Cain's cheek, leaving a glossy pink print. "I missed you. Is that not allowed?"

My knees give out.

I have heard and seen enough.

Tears clouding my eyes, I wobble to the bedroom. I feel so stupid.

This house isn't my home and it never can be. I don't fit into the lap of luxury. That's for perfect, beautiful people with perfect lives and perfect makeup and perfect clothes and perfect fucking everything.

How could I ever think that Cain genuinely cares about me? Even just a tiny little bit?

All his stupid talk about making me his wife and keeping me here... what absolute bullshit! A man like him would never be serious about an average nobody like me.

What do I have to offer him?

Of course he's dating a celebrity, someone as successful and rich as he is. And on the other hand there's me, the filthy stray he took in for fun. I'm a cheap toy to play with and discard like trash when he's done with me.

I slip on a hoodie, grab my handbag and take my phone from the nightstand, throwing it inside. Sniffling, I put on my boots and sneak out into the hallway again. Silent tears stream down my face while I skulk down the stairs. I can still hear them laughing in the office when I open the terrace door in the living room.

Hands balled into fists, I run past the pool. The sobs I held back explode from my chest as I cross the footbridge over the river and dash between the trees.

I don't give a shit anymore. Not about his threats, not about his sweet talk, and not about him.



I have nowhere to go, but anything is better than listening to Cain flirt with the most gorgeous woman on the planet.

He can come after me if he wants. He has to find me first, and if he does, he can try his ridiculous ploy with those fake medical records.

I might not think highly of myself, but I have enough self-respect that I refuse to be his fucktoy while his girlfriend is right there. If I knew that he's in a relationship, I never would have let myself enjoy the sex and I sure as hell wouldn't have started something with him in the car. Cheating goes against everything I believe in.

Feet pounding the dirt, I try to get a sense of direction, but the property around the ranch is massive. During my stay, I haven't left the patio and landscaped meadows near the house. I'm lost.

I pass a small outbuilding with the green paint peeling off, and a glance through the dusty window slows my pace. A workbench stands in the middle of the room, and a gazillion tools hang along the far wall. There's a table saw with slats of wood on top, too, and a half-finished bookshelf next to it.

My heart stutters. *This is Cain's workshop.*

"Shit!" I shout into the breeze and force myself into a sprint.

Why does this hurt so badly? Why does my chest ache like someone is driving a rusty knife through my heart?

I stop behind a large tree, leaning against the trunk.

I should be glad Cain gave me an easy reason to hate him and leave. If he didn't, I might've... might've... would I have stayed?

I must get as far away as possible, but my legs don't work anymore. My knees buckle and I sink into the tall grass, hiding my face in my hands as I sob.

He probably won't notice I'm gone. Not when *she* is with him. All it took for Cain to forget about me is a glossy smile and pretty hair.

This is a good thing, I tell myself. I dodged a bullet.

With all his fake kindness, the gifts and the jokes and the mind-blowing sex, Cain has already gotten too far into my head. He made me complacent and soft.

How fucked up is it that I want to stay with my kidnapper? Why am I sad when it turns out I'm just a way for him to pass the time?

Cain is a murderer, for Christ's sake! A full-blown, real life serial killer, but here I am, crying my eyes out because he doesn't want to marry me after all. I should feel sorry for the leggy blond. She has no idea what a monster he is.

But I *don't* feel sorry for her.

I want to take a knife from the kitchen and carve out her perfect doe eyes, cut off those ridiculously plump, heart-shaped lips so Cain wants me instead. So he'll forget about her and—

"Get up, Erica," a dark voice growls, and at first, I think I imagined it. Then a twig snaps and my head jerks up.

Cain stands a few feet away, his revolver aimed at my face. His chest heaves with irregular breaths.

"You lied to me!" I bite out, a torrent of fury pushing away the sadness and fear like a monsoon. He can shoot me if he wants to.

"What the hell are you talking about? You ran away. You decided you had enough of me, huh?" His laugh is bitter. "But that ain't how this works, darlin'. I told you I'm gonna keep you, dead or alive. That's your call."

As if to make a point, his finger tenses on the hammer of the revolver. My throat tightens with a slew of emotions, but my rage wins. Words flow like sour venom from my tongue.

"Why don't you leave me alone and go back to your perfect influencer girlfriend?"

His jaw drops and he lowers the gun. "My *what*?"

I jump up, leaving my handbag in the grass. I stomp toward him and poke my finger against his annoyingly muscular chest, one poke for each word. “Don’t. Play. Dumb.”

His gaze narrows into green slits and he flicks my forehead. “Stop poking me!”

“Only if you stop lying!” I poke him again. “You’re insulting both of our intellects with that stupid act.”

“Erica, I honestly—”

“I mean the gorgeous blond in your office! But you know, I get it...” I drop my hands, slapping my thighs. “I’m just an average, boring, normal woman—”

His head jerks, eyes rounding. Then he laughs, properly. His whole body shakes with laughter. “You got it all fuckin’ wrong. She’s not my girlfriend! That woman is my *younger sister*, Amanda. Mandy for short. And I don’t like you talking badly about yourself. There is absolutely *nothing* average or boring about you, darlin’. You’re the most stunning, exceptional, clever, funny, and smart woman I have ever met. You set my heart racing with a single word or a passing glance.”

His unexpected compliment drives a flush up my neck. I have a difficult time focusing on the topic at hand.

“You have a sister? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t ask.” He shrugs.

Heat spreads to my face, too. Oh my God, I’m a bigger dumbass than I thought.

“Your sister...” I echo. “So, you really don’t have a girlfriend?”

“No, I do have a girlfriend.” He waves the gun at me, a grin sneaking onto his lips. “And she’s being a real fuckin’ idiot right now. I’m a killer, but I draw the damn line at adultery, and I’d rather blow my brains out than cheat on you.” He taps his temple with the barrel.

I huff. “This is *your* fault. How should I have known?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Erica,” Cain says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Maybe you could’ve come in and asked? That would’ve been nice. I wanted to introduce you, but when I realized I had to track you down, I sent Mandy to a hotel in the next town over. Figured you might find it awkward if she stays in the house. You’ll meet her next time, I guess.”

I cross my arms, shushing the giddy voice inside me squealing with maniacal joy. Go me, the psycho killer wants to introduce me to his family!

And why am I happy about that?

“But if she’s your sister, why did you sneak around in the office with her?”

“I didn’t *sneak* anywhere. She dropped in while you were showering, and I didn’t want her to barge into the bedroom when you might step outta the bathroom buck naked at any point. If I meant to hide, I would’ve locked the door and kept my voice down.”

Relief whirls through me, making me lightheaded.

“Fair points... all of them, unfortunately.” I blow out a breath. “How did you know I was gone and where I was? The land around the house is gigantic.”

He shrugs. “On the first day when you were knocked out, I put a hidden tracking app on your phone and paired it with my own. I get a notification as soon as you leave a 300 yard range from my device.”

For fuck’s sake. Of course, a control freak like Cain would put a tracker on me, but I can’t be angry. In fact, I feel like a real asshole for my behavior.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions,” I mumble.

Cain smiles sweetly. Too sweetly. “It’s alright. You’re gonna pay for your disobedience.”

“I will *what*?”

He raises the gun and steps back, pointing it at the middle of my forehead. “I told you that disobedience has consequences, darlin’. You wanted to run from me...” A click sounds as he cocks the hammer, and I choke on air. “Now you’ll get your wish. You better run fast because when I catch you—and I *will* catch you—I’m gonna fuck your tight cunt with this revolver until you’ve learned your lesson, little dove.”



A shot rings out and an explosion of tree bark flies past my face. My knees knock as I stumble backward.

“Next time I won’t miss,” Cain says, his warning tone making my pussy tingle. The heat in his eyes sends a shot of liquid fire through my chest like the cheap whisky we shared in the motel.

Why does he have to be extra hot when he threatens me?

My delayed survival instincts kick in. I twist, tripping over a root, and break into a sprint. Where to I don’t know, just far away from the angry killer pointing a revolver at me...

A revolver he threatened to fuck me with.

Arms raised to shield my face, I veer into the nearest line of trees and flee through the woods. Twigs catch on my hair and my roots sting, but I don’t care.

Run, my brain screams. Run. Run. Run.

Something thorny rips the side of my pants while I push through the underbrush, and I cry out when a bullet whizzes past my head and impacts in a trunk nearby. Over my shoulder, I see Cain’s huge frame bulldozing through the thicket. He’s fucking unstoppable and right behind me.

How is a man of his stature this fast?

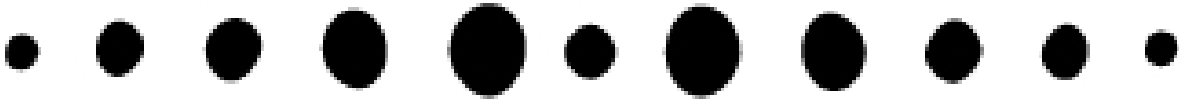
I slow down to duck under a low-hanging branch. Cain swipes at the back of my hoodie, and I yelp, dropping to my knees. I’m sure he could catch

me. Instead, he mocks me with dark laughter, the sound creeping over my skin like icy fingers.

“You belong to me, little dove!” he shouts, amusement thick in his tone as I jump up and keep running. “I’ll track you down to the end of the world if I have to, but you’ll never get away from me. I’ll find you anywhere, from Texas to the depths of hell!”

I try to focus on my cramping leg muscles and my pounding heart, not the dampness between my legs. This is a matter of life and death, and I should be scared out of my mind. A part of me *is* terrified, but another...

I’m not actually getting turned on by my handsome kidnapper chasing me through the forest like prey, right?



It seems like I’ve been running for hours, but realistically, it can’t have been more than ten minutes. The burning in my lungs forces me to stop, and I crouch in the underbrush.

I can’t see Cain anymore. Did I lose him? After I left my bag where he found me sitting in the grass, he can’t use my phone to track me again.

Trees with lush green crowns whisper in the wind, and I lean into the faint breeze, inhaling the earthy scent of the forest. Before my involuntary road trip, I never left Kansas. Traveling was too expensive. I didn’t know how beautiful Texas is. It’s easy to fall in love with the gorgeous land surrounding the ranch house. Those colorful sunsets, the large meadows with vibrant bluebonnets, and the glittering river.

My gasps slow, my shaking legs thankful for the break. The calm nature quietens my thundering pulse and I pick up a new sound.

Rushing water.

I follow the noise, keeping my head low until I step out into a clearing. An instant smile cuts across my face.

Towering cypress trees with knotted trunks form a living roof. Streaks of sunlight filter through the canopy, reflecting off sapphire water dropping from a steep cliff into a lake. Ferns and moss grow like a tapestry over the light brown, jagged rock face. They look soft, and I imagine running my fingers across the tiny leaves.

It's a lovely spot, ideal for a picnic by the lake, eating cheese and fruit and drinking a glass of wine. Then a naked swim after, jumping from one of the branches above the water. A tire swing would be fun, too.

I should show Cain this place, I think and flinch like I got whipped.

A heavy sigh streams from my lips. What if I actually got away from Cain?

My shoulders drop and I pick up a rock, tossing it into the water. I watch the ripples spread, attempting to decipher the vague, cold heaviness in my chest.

Did he give up this easily? Am I not worth the effort of the chase?

A crack comes from behind me, and I turn, eyes wide. Nobody. I'm still alone. It's probably an animal that—

A hand snaps onto my mouth, and a scream dies in my throat. I'm yanked back, against a warm wall of muscle.

Cain.

The ice behind my ribs melts. I breathe in the scent of tobacco clinging to his fingers, and my heart swells. Even as metal presses against my temple, I feel like giggling—with a damn gun to my head.

Maybe Cain is right, and I'm as fucking crazy as he is, but I don't want to waste any thoughts on that.

Only one thing matters in this moment:

Cain didn't give up on me. He found me.

"You shouldn't've stopped running," he whispers, and my skin pebbles, my nipples hardening. "Or do you *want* to be caught, my little dove? Do you want me to break your wings and make you cry again?"

His tongue slithers along my cheek, leaving a wet, hot trail. I make a keening noise as I push my ass against him and he groans, his cock already stiffening.

"I got you all figured out," he drawls. "You're a masochist, but nobody before me managed to drag that part of you into the light. I reckon you didn't know about it or tried your hardest to ignore it. You fantasized a little, but you never thought it was real until I showed you the truth. I think that's why you haven't tried to escape this far and why your attempt now was half-assed. You let me catch you because you're addicted to the pain, and you know only I can satisfy your cravings. Only I understand you."

His words shake me to the core, uprooting what is left of my sanity. A tide of fear and lust rises in my chest, stealing my last breath.

Cain lets go, spinning me around so fast I get dizzy. He aims the revolver at my head. "Strip," he orders.

He's a walking contradiction in his dirt-stained slacks and muddy suede loafers. His right sleeve is torn, the top buttons of his shirt ripped open. His body shadows mine, and I can feel myself falling into those dangerous green eyes.

He's the wolf in sheep's clothing, a villain in the guise of a normal man, and I have never wanted him more.

I undress with shaking hands. My panties come off last and I flush when I notice the dewy spot in the crotch. I stand naked opposite Cain in the middle of the woods, adrenaline rushing through me.

I can't separate terror from arousal any longer.

They feel the same—that breathlessness, the racing heart, the light sweat on my brow—the difference doesn't exist.

"Brace yourself on that flat boulder and bend over," he says through gritted teeth, pointing with his revolver. "If you disobey me again, the next bullet will be in your head."

Pleasure aches pulse in my pussy. I bite my lip, the urge to submit warring with the temptation to provoke him further to see how far he'll go. My need to please him wins.

"Yes, sir," I respond and walk to the boulder, bending over to press my palms against the smooth, sun-warm stone.

"Spread your legs."

I do, but he tuts with disapproval, nudging a foot against the inside of my calf. "Wider," he grunts, satisfied once my thighs are straining from the position. "That's better."

There is movement behind me and crinkling, and when I glance over my shoulder, Cain is slipping a condom over the revolver's barrel. The confusion must be plain on my face because he smirks, giving a one-armed shrug.

"Your pussy is mine, Erica, and I take good care of my things. I don't wanna wreck that perfect, tight hole with a piece of iron. That's what my cock is for." He juts his chin out. "Now look straight ahead and stand still. You don't move until I tell you to."

Cool metal touches the bend of my knee, sliding upward, and the hairs on my arms rise. The thin, lubricated condom lets me feel everything, almost as if it isn't there, but it can't protect me from bullets.

My skin prickles and my breath stutters as the tip of the barrel travels between my legs. He drags it along my center, parting my wet seam, and a shiver rolls through me. I have no brain capacity left to consider how wrong it is that being chased is amazing foreplay to me and I'm literally about to get a gun shoved up my cunt.

"Damn, you're a real deviant," Cain rasps. The barrel nudges my clit, and a moan slips from my lips. "Knives, choking, drugging, sounding. Being fucked in the ass, the mouth, and the pussy, getting bruised and used and cut... and now guns? Is there any fucked up kink that doesn't get you wet, darlin'?"

A flutter of panic stirs in my chest. "I-I'm sorry, I—"

The affection in his chuckle catches me by surprise. "That ain't what I mean. Never apologize for your pleasure. Never hold back. Your perverted brain is one of the things I like most about you. If you weren't such a little psycho, you wouldn't've made it off my operating table alive."

My mouth falls open, but I don't get to answer when his other hand reaches around me, palming my breast. He rolls my nipple between his fingers, his touch setting fire to my core.

"Remember back in the basement when I said I'd kill you if you came?" he asks.

"Uh-huh. Yes."

"That was a test."

"What... what do you mean, a test?" I ask, the words coming out jumbled.

He gives my other breast the same attention. I bear down, trying to get more friction against the revolver, but Cain lightens his touch, denying me relief.

"If you didn't orgasm, I would've gutted you, little dove. But you almost finished just from me ramming my cock down your throat and you took my toys so well when I violated every one of your holes." He shudders against me. "And when the pain and humiliation made you come so hard you passed out, I knew that you were my soulmate, and I could never let you go."

Soulmate?

He straightens, pressing the tip of the barrel against my entrance before sliding it inside. All coherent thoughts leave my skull. I gasp, biting the inside of my cheek.

His dick is so much girthier, but the unyielding hardness of the iron is a struggle. The stretch is unforgiving. My inner walls burn, clenching at the harsh, alien sensation. He pushes in deeper and my brows furrow at the sting.

“Does it hurt?” Cain asks, cruel enjoyment in his voice.

I whimper. “Yes, it hurts, but—”

He picks up the pace, shifting the angle of the barrel. Now, it hits my g-spot with every thrust. Dots of color float in my vision and my blood simmers with lust.

“But it feels good, too, doesn’t it? You’re such a twisted painslut,” Cain rasps. “I wish you could see yourself. Your pussy looks so good stretched around my revolver, darlin’.”

His body curls around mine, and his free hand reaches for my clit. He moves like the gun is a part of him, like it’s his cock sliding in and out of me.

“8 whole inches of cold, hard steel ... How does it feel to have my loaded revolver up your needy cunt?”

“I love getting fucked with your gun, sir,” I answer without thinking.

He chuckles. “Don’t you wonder if I’ve ever killed anybody with it?”

I writhe, my hands on the boulder turning into fists. The thought hasn’t crossed my mind, but now that he mentions it...

“Have you?” I ask between moans.

His lips press hot against my ear before he whispers, “Yes, I shot somebody with this gun, little dove. More than just one man. And with the twitch of a single finger, I can pull the trigger and end you, too.”

His words send me into overdrive.

My legs give out as I come apart. My moans echo through the forest, startling a bird high up in the trees while I collapse forward onto the rock. Cain slides out the gun and tosses the condom on the ground. I recognize the sound of his zipper before the wide head of his cock shoves against my hole. He slams inside, and I cry out, overwhelmed by the sensation.

“That’s it, scream for me,” he growls, impatient thrusts rocking me. His hand closes around my throat and he yanks my weak body up by my neck, fucking into me. “Rub your clit. I wanna feel you squeeze my cock when you come again.”

I shake my head and force out breathless words. “I don’t think I—”

He cuts off my air while his other hand puts the barrel of the gun to my temple. “You have ten seconds to come again, little dove, but if you don’t, I’m gonna blow your brains out.”

A twist of heat surges through my center, and I jerk as my fingertips make contact with my clit. I whimper while I massage gently.

“Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven,” Cain counts, the numbers sounding more like grunts. He’s fucking me like he means to kill me. “Six. Five. Four.”

I rub harder. Tingles sweep down my legs.

“Three. Two.”

The gun clicks as he cocks it. My body is on fire.

“One.”

Stars burst in front of my eyes. This orgasm is even worse than the first—in the best ways. A million tiny explosions go off inside me, and the pressure in my pussy makes Cain unravel, too.

His dick swells and throbs deep inside my belly, filling me with a hot stream of his cum. He lets go of my throat and puts the gun on the rock to wrap both arms around me. His body is warm against my back, and I melt into his protective embrace.

Cain shouldn’t make me feel safe, but he does. I can’t help it. He kisses the top of my head and I close my eyes. I inhale his woodsy smell, his fresh sweat making it even more addictive. His cock shrinks inside me and his seed flows from my center, but neither of us move to break our connection.

“Goddamn,” he curses tenderly, speaking into my hair. “I don’t know what hell you crawled out of, darlin’, but I reckon it must be the same I come from. Nobody else can match my darkness like you do.” His laugh is gentle, making me smile, too. “Oh, and Erica?”

“Yes?”

“You see that yellow mushroom growing from the fallen tree on the other side of the lake?”

I turn my head, squinting. “Sure. What about it?”

Cain straightens, picking up the gun. He aims. Fires. My ears ring and the mushroom explodes into mustard-colored splatter. Tendrils of abject horror curl around my throat, choking a startled yelp from me.

Cain gives me a self-satisfied smirk. “I only miss a shot when I want to, little dove.”



Amanda's white SUV waits in the driveway. My hands are clammy as I climb in and fasten my seatbelt. She greets me with a hearty hello and a radiant smile, but she doesn't force a conversation immediately, allowing me a moment to acclimate.

I'm pretty grateful for that.

Saying I'm nervous to spend time alone with Amanda is a gigantic understatement. I'm vibrating with anxiety. It's only been a few days since my awkward—and entirely wrong—first impression of her. But Cain wants me to get to know her while he runs errands, and I owe him as much. The least I can do is make an honest effort to get along with his sister.

To my surprise, my mood lightens soon. Amanda is the exact opposite of what I expected her to be like. It's hard not to relax in her presence on the way to San Antonio.

A sense of familiarity radiates from her while she asks how I like Texas, if I miss Kansas, and if I already tried the local delicacies—especially the ice cream from a mom-and-pop shop in the next small town over. When I say I haven't, she promises to take me there sometime. Then she compliments my perfume and eye makeup and calls me hon.

I can't stop smiling. Her kindness and openness are disarming.

It feels like a drive with a good friend, or rather how I always imagined it. I've never experienced it myself. The closest I usually get to people is the

acquaintance stage, like I did with some of the other waitresses at work.

Warm wind streams through the open windows as the blooming landscape zips past. The smell of new leather seats and Amanda's light, floral perfume is in my nose. Her melodic voice fills my ears, singing along to the radio during a break in our conversation.

She brims with energy. It's a palpable buzz surrounding her. That zest for life is contagious, making my chest feel as bright as the sun burning in the cloudless, blue sky.

She wears all white again. Jeans and a silk blouse with a deep, rippling neckline, making her beautiful tan stand out. A thick, long scar runs between her breasts, accentuated by multiple rows of dainty gold necklaces. I've seen it before in her videos, but it's much darker in real life.

"Go on, ask!" Amanda says, her tone cheery, button nose wrinkling as she grins.

I look at the road, blushing. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stare."

"I wouldn't dress like this if I was shy about the scar. Seriously, you can ask, hon."

I fidget with the seatbelt that is suddenly too tight across my ribs. "Where did you get it?" I mumble.

"See, no big deal." She giggles, slowing down as we exit the highway. "Awesome story, though. I had a heart transplant."

I suck in a harsh breath. "Wow. That's uh..."

"A fucking miracle of modern medicine is what it is!" She taps the steering wheel in rhythm with the music. "Also, bonus cool points because I get to say mysterious stuff like '*I have another person's heart in my chest*'."

Her easygoing attitude makes the heavy topic easier to handle and I chuckle. "That is pretty damn cool."

"Heart failure in your early 20s makes you grow up fast. You re-evaluate lots of things, you know?" She shrugs. "Priorities, goals, relationships. Some folks with transplants live a long, healthy life. Others don't. So when you never know how much time you have left, you spend it on the people and things that matter. I see that as a positive thing."

My throat thickens with emotions, and I nod.

"I know it sounds weird, but I took everything for granted before I almost died," she continues. "I was bored and didn't appreciate everything I had. In a fucked-up way, my illness was a blessing in disguise. It made me brave. It made me love harder, give less shits, and live like every day is my last."

“That makes total sense,” I answer quickly.

I’m fortunate I’ve never been as sick as Amanda, but I understand her on a different level.

Since Cain took me, I feel more alive than I ever have. The terror of getting kidnapped did something to me, shifted my entire mindset. Before Cain, all I felt was grey and numb. Now the world is lit up in neon colors, bathing me in their vibrant shine.

Everything is more intense, and I don’t just mean the sex.

The food tastes better. The air smells cleaner. My heart beats steadier. I laugh louder and fear less. I’m more honest with myself about what I need or want.

And being Cain’s prisoner made me realize one thing with ultimate certainty:

I don’t want to die anymore. For all the horrors I’ve been through at his hands, I’m grateful I never got around to using those sleeping pills. I have *him* to thank for that. If Cain hadn’t kidnapped me, I would be six feet under.

How fucked up that a serial killer saved my life.

But his sister doesn’t know about Cain’s dark side. He told me so himself before I left and I see no point in trying to convince her. There is the matter of the fake medical files that would paint me as a delusional liar. And Amanda wouldn’t believe a woman she’s known for two hours over her brother, anyway.

We pull into a parking lot surrounded by lush greenery. It’s very different from the concrete jungles and malls I know.

“We’re here!” Amanda squeals.

“Aren’t we going shopping?”

“We are! But you didn’t think I was going to take you to a drab old mall, right? No, this is an experience, hon!” She waves her hands like she’s painting a rainbow. “It’s my favorite place to treat myself when I’m in the area. They have *everything*. From designer shops to affordable fashion, all packaged in a convenient, beautiful little village type of deal. It feels like a mini vacation!”

I look down at my ripped grey skinny jeans and the faux leather peeling off my old handbag. My face heats. I’m underdressed as fuck.

“Hope you’re ready to make good use of my brother’s credit card.” Amanda digs into her purse with the letters L and V pressed all over the

cream-colored leather. She takes out a black credit card. "Cain said to make sure you spend at least 100k."

My jaw drops so far, I worry it's going to dislocate. "Excuse me?"

"Come to think of it, what I said just now would be a great test to figure out if you're after Cain's money." She puts the card back and pulls out a pocket mirror and a tube of pink lip gloss. "But you don't seem the gold digger type and I'm like, the *best* judge of character."

My giggle is several pitches too high. I sound like a squeaking mouse. "Ha. Okay that bit about the 100k was very funny. You got me there."

She smacks her lips and fluffs up her hair with a small brush before stuffing everything into the bag again. Her perfectly arched brows curve.

"I wasn't joking. My brother is going to give me a hard time if I don't stick to his instructions and he's super annoying when he goes on one of his rants. He said he knows you won't accept the card if he gives it to you directly and he made me the messenger. Don't shoot me." She laughs, putting her hands up.

Emotions slam into me. I can't untangle the web of anger, surprise, annoyance, and something... warmer, hot and balmy behind my ribs.

Does Cain think he can *buy* my compliance? *Pay* for my affection? The concert and the smaller gifts are one thing, but this... this is too much.

My pulse quickens.

Or is it really too much?

I've always lived tiny paycheck to tiny paycheck and never owned nice things. If I have to play along for the sake of my safety anyway... maybe it wouldn't be so bad to enjoy myself for one afternoon?

"Whenever you're done being shocked, I'm ready to go," Amanda says, a mischievous glimmer in her hazel eyes. She gets out of the car and sticks her head back inside. "Come on! It's going to be fun!"



I grab my bag and jump out before Amanda locks up. She hooks her arm under mine like we've been besties forever and steers me toward the stores. I follow like a lost puppy, overwhelmed by the sights and smells.

Chattering crowds stroll along lit-up window fronts, and the scent of coffee, tea and fresh muffins streams from a stand by a babbling fountain.

"Cain never tells me about his love life. I don't want the spicy details, of course. That's gross." Amanda makes a gagging noise. "I'm just worried he'll end up old and alone being such a recluse, you know? He last had a serious girlfriend before I got sick, but since he told you to use his black Amex, your relationship seems pretty damn serious."

A blush creeps over my cheeks. "I guess."

"You don't have to be shy, Erica. I want my brother to be with someone who makes him happy, and he smiled the whole time while he spoke about you! I've never seen his eyes shine like that."

My teeth clench. I try to chase away the lightness encasing my heart. Why should I care that the unhinged killer holding me hostage smiled when he told his sister about me?

But God, I *do* care. I care a lot. Too much.

Amanda's head tilts as she glances at me from the side. "Sooooooo... I didn't want to ambush you in the car, but I hope you'll forgive my curiosity. I have to ask or I'll explode! How did you guys meet?"

I trip over my boots.

How am I supposed to answer that? *Oh, you know, the usual, Amanda. We hooked up in a seedy motel before your dear older brother fucking drugged and kidnapped me.*

"It's not an exciting story." I chuckle, swallowing hard.

"I still want to hear it! Please, hon?" Amanda flutters her long lashes at me.

Shit, what can I say?

"Um, I was buying a snack from a vending machine and it got stuck. Cain offered to help me. More accurately, he literally punched the thing until my packet of chips fell out." I laugh at the memory. It feels like a lifetime ago.

"Sounds like him. Ever the practical problem solver and he's always been strong as a bear. What happened then?"

"We uh... we exchanged numbers."

"An instant spark meet-cute like in a romance novel? I love that!"

I smile, holding back a wheeze. *Yes, like a pitch-black dark romance novel.*

"How long have you been a couple?" she asks.

God, so many questions.

"Few months," I lie through my teeth. It really does feel like I've known Cain for much longer than the weeks we spent together.

"He is serious about you if he's moving this fast..." Amanda muses, biting her lip. "I can't believe he's been keeping you a secret from me all this time! That's so typical!"

I nod, hoping she won't ask anything else if I look at the first store to my right. My stare locks on a pair of black suede boots with gold buckles in the window, but when I search for the price tags, I find none.

Lord help me.

My phone buzzes, and I free myself from Amanda's hold, turning away to check the message.

CURLY

Remember, little dove: Don't try to run. I'll find you, no matter where you hide.

Shut up Cain! I got the memo.

You're the one who wanted to get rid of me.

CURLY

I'm sorry. I have something to take care of. But I didn't think you'd miss me this much...

OMG!!! I'm NOT missing you!!!

I'm *not* missing him, am I? That tug in my chest since we pulled out of the driveway is social anxiety about being with Amanda, isn't it?

CURLY

Well I started missing you the second you walked out the door, darlin'

See you soon. Don't forget to have fun!



I shove the phone into my bag, trying to stop the ridiculous pitter-patter of my heart.

After a moment, Amanda speaks up again, tone low like she's telling me a salacious secret. "Was that Cain?"

I purse my lips. "It sure was."

"God, you're both so cute! I could tell it was him from that giddy grin on your face and how your eyes lit up while you were typing."

My eyes did what? The giddy what on my face?!

I stiffen, schooling my expression into neutrality and Amanda's smile softens.

"Some people get a little catty and weird about their siblings' spouses, but that's so not me. Maybe it's too early to say this but..." She takes a deep breath. "I hope it works out between you."

A lump tightens my throat. *Can* a relationship like ours work out? What we have isn't even a relationship. It's something wrong, dark, and twisted. Then why does it feel so right?

"Thank you, Amanda," I whisper, my voice coming out too thin.

Her eyes gloss over a window displaying designer bags, but it seems like she doesn't see them at all. She speaks the next words quietly. "Don't tell him I said this, but Cain never puts his happiness first. For as long as I can remember, he's lived his life for other people."

My brows knit. "What do you mean?"

Amanda's hand combs through her hair, sadness ebbing in her tone. "Cain was already sixteen by the time I turned six, and those are my earliest memories. I was a clueless little girl, but I remember that I only ever saw him smile on horseback, taking care of the ranch with dad for a few hours on the weekends. He never said it out loud, but I think that's what he wanted to do with his life."

"Take over the ranch?"

"Yes, but mother pushed Cain to study medicine. She founded the first of the clinics our family owns, and she wanted a worthy heir to take over the empire-in-the-making when she retired. Cain hated it, but he did what was expected of him. When he wanted to become a pediatrician, mother forced him into plastic surgery because *that's where the money is*." She makes air quotes.

My chest cracks. So many heavy expectations resting on such a young man. The pressure must have been immense.

"Mother wanted him to graduate on the fast track, and Cain *is* smart. Very smart. He's kind of a genius, but don't tell him I think so. His ego is inflated enough."

I draw a finger along my lips like I'm zipping them up and Amanda continues speaking.

"But he still had to put in the work. He spent all his time studying and blazed through the undergrad program, medical school, then his residency." She frowns. "When our parents died and I got sick shortly after, he put the life he worked so hard for on hold. He wanted to care for me. My brother loves me, but that was a lot for him. It would be for anyone. And I love him, too, so I'm glad to see him following his heart for once."

Her speech hits me like a punch to the gut, leaving me short of breath.

"Sorry, this is probably not what you want to talk about during a shopping trip." Amanda squeezes my arm. "But that's another thing being sick taught me. To speak the truth when it matters."

"No, I appreciate it. You know how closed off Cain can be."

“Tell me about it.” She giggles, the bright sound clearing the dark cloud hanging above our heads. “Alright now, listen. Cain is a good man, but he’s still... *a guy*.” She rolls her eyes. “If he gives you a hard time or is being a stubborn ass, call me. I’ll set him straight. Better yet, I’ll teach you my tricks so you can do it, too.”

The affection in her voice almost makes me forget the invisible shackles binding me to Cain like a pact with the devil. I sealed my fate the moment I invited him into my room, signed my name in blood and sweat and cum.

Shouldn’t I be more afraid? Shouldn’t dread worm through my stomach instead of those silly butterflies when I think of returning to him tonight? I should want to run instead of missing the warmth of his arms and that stupidly cute, lopsided smirk and the light creases around his eyes or—

My heart drops.

Shit, I really miss that psycho.

“Seriously, though, hon. If you ever need help, give me a holler. Cain obviously trusts you a great deal, and that means you’re practically already family.”

My throat stings. “Thank you...” I whisper.

I’ve never had a family, not a real one. That long line of uncaring foster parents doesn’t count. All those people ever managed to do was make me feel more alone, not less. Yet here I am, talking to a woman I met today, and she’s welcoming me into her family with open arms.

Amanda dabs a careful finger along her lashline. “Enough of this emotional talk, okay? Let’s do what we came here to do.” She gestures at the shops.

Cain is a good man, huh?

I clear my throat. “There is something I could use your help with.”

“Shoot.” Amanda’s eyes shine expectantly as she nods.

I swallow thickly. “Actually, it’s a surprise for Cain.”



The walk-in closet looks like Christmas day in spring and I fuckin' love it.

I stop in the doorway. Erica is blissfully unaware of my presence, standing with her back turned in a heap of half-unpacked boxes and shopping bags. Pop punk blasts from her phone on the closet island.

She lifts a black designer bag from her shoulder and hugs it to her chest, doing a happy wiggle like she has a tail to wag. My heart almost explodes. She's too cute.

"That's what the deliveries were while I was in the shower this morning?" I ask.

Erica yelps, nearly dropping the bag as she spins around.

How fuckin' adorable.

"Guess you couldn't fit everything you bought into Mandy's car," I tease.

"She practically forced me to buy stuff!" Erica stammers, pointing at more shoes, clothes, bags, and accessories already sorted into her side of the closet and spilling into mine. "I just wanted to get a few basics, but she kept showing me things and said how good they'd look on me and the sales assistants were so friendly! They gave me champagne and crackers with caviar and then I got tipsy—"

I grin. "Tipsy is an understatement. You were properly hammered by the time Mandy dropped you off in the evening."

Erica goes red. “Amanda chose a bunch of high-end makeup for me, too. She even filmed herself with her phone while she picked out products for me. I mean, she asked first if it was okay to record the haul, but she didn’t stop putting things in the basket until I had one of everything she recommended.” She worries at her lip. “Seeing all the things I bought laid out like this, I think I went a bit over the 100k...”

“About 50 grand or something. But it wasn’t a limit, it was a *minimum*, little dove. I wanted you to spend my money.”

The blood drains from her face. “I spent one hundred and fifty thousand fucking dollars in one afternoon?” she squeaks.

I hold back a laugh. “Did you ever check your banking app since I gave you your phone back?”

“No?” Her brows squish together, and she eyes me suspiciously. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, on the topic of money, I left a gift in your account and paid off your credit card debt and overdrafts. No strings attached, by the way.” I step across the mess on the floor and grip her chin, tilting her head up. Her lips tremble as I kiss her. “The point is, I don’t care about money, darlin’. I care about you. You can spend it all if you want and I’m not gonna stop you. You enjoyed yourself yesterday, didn’t you?”

She gives a hesitant nod.

“Then I made the right call. I hate spending money on myself, it feels like such a fuckin’ waste. But paying for the things you and my sister want—”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I let out a string of curses as I take it out. Speak of the devil.

“One minute, sorry. It’s Mandy,” I say to Erica, pausing the music on her phone before answering.

“Cain!” Mandy’s voice booms in my ear over the sound of a traffic report. She must be in the car. “I’m calling to make sure you don’t fuck things up with Erica.”

Erica presses a hand to her mouth, stifling a laugh. The way Mandy is shouting, I don’t have to turn on the speaker for her to hear every word. My cheeks turn hot, and I grip the back of my neck. Sometimes my sister’s directness can be damn embarrassing.

“Listen, sis. You have nothing to worry about. I—”

“Well, I do worry!” Mandy clicks her tongue. “Erica is a real treasure. Gorgeous, sweet as a peach, humble, and kind. I’ll smack some sense into

you if you don't spoil her and treat her the way she deserves!"

Now it's Erica's turn to blush, and I chuckle.

"I mean it, Cain! I'm so serious!" Mandy continues. "If you don't put a ring on that within the next year I'll—"

"Mandy? You're breaking up!" I wink at Erica. "Mandy, I can't hear—" I hang up. "Sorry for the interruption."

"It's okay. Amanda is a lovely person and super fun to be around. I didn't expect her to be this easy-going and down-to-earth," Erica says. "We had a great time together."

I loose a breath. "I'm glad you two get along. I admit I was worried after you had such a bad first impression of her, but Mandy is the only other person I care about. It's nice to know she approves of our relationship."

I expect Erica to give me her usual bit about how we don't have a relationship, but instead, her expression falls.

"And if Amanda didn't like me?" she asks quietly. "Would you get rid of me?"

My heart skips a beat, and I clear my throat. I lean against the closet island, trying to play it cool.

That's what she's concerned about? That I wouldn't want her anymore? What the ever-loving fuck happened to getting away from me?

"I adore my sister. She's my whole family—not counting some estranged aunts and uncles and my grandparents from my mother's side, all back in England. But even if Mandy hated you..." I smile. "It wouldn't change a damn thing, little dove. I want you, and I won't let anybody take you from me. If she didn't like you, Mandy would have to suck it up."

An unreadable emotion flickers in Erica's eyes, but before I can ask what it is, the doorbell rings and she jumps.

"More deliveries?" I ask.

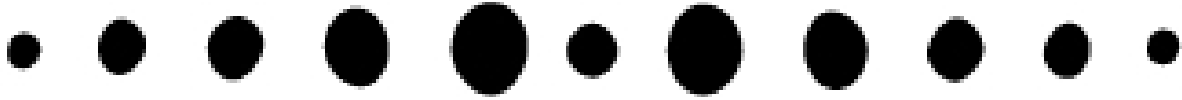
She puts the bag back in its box. "I got it!" she yells, dashing past me. She disappears around the corner, her footsteps thundering on the stairs.

Minutes pass and my brow furrows. I expected her to come right back, but no Erica in sight. It can't take that long to accept some deliveries.

Fuckin' suspicious.

I walk downstairs to find the front door wide open. Instinctively, my fingers close around the hilt of my hunting knife at my belt. Erica's laughter reaches my ears, and I pause. A wave of relief washes through me that she's

okay, but it isn't meant to last when the next thing I hear is a gruff male voice.



I run to stab the motherfucker who is sweet-talking my little dove, but I freeze the second I step outside. This scene ain't what I anticipated.

Erica stands next to two beautiful horses. A golden palomino with a creamy white mane, and a taller black horse with a gorgeous blue sheen to its coat. The manly voice belongs to the driver of a SUV with a horse trailer parked in the driveway. He gestures for Erica to sign some papers and after she does, he tips his hat and gets back into his car before driving off.

Erica turns to me, extending her arms as she smiles. "Surprise!"

I release the hilt of my hunting knife. My jaw might as well drag on the gravel as I stroll toward her and pat the black horse's neck. The majestic animal lets out a gentle huff, nudging me with his soft muzzle.

"Didn't know they sold horses at the mall now," I mumble.

Erica's brows draw together. "They're just borrowed for the afternoon. Taking care of animals is a big responsibility, and I wouldn't put that on you without talking it through first."

"Then... why?" I ask, annoyed at my clumsy choice of words.

"Are you not happy?" She chews on the inside of her cheek. "Amanda said you like to ride. She even helped to put me in contact with the owner of the ranch."

I blink. "*You* arranged this for *me*?"

Erica's head tilts and she raises her hands. "Is that... bad?"

A strange ache squeezes my heart.

"I guess after the concert I wanted to do something nice for you, too, and then your sister mentioned that you loved horses when you were younger..."

I gawk at her. My eyes sting.

Erica planned a horseback ride for *me*? She cares about what *I* like?

"Wipe that sappy look off your face or this is going to get awkward for both of us, curly." She laughs and slaps my arm. "How about you just say thank you, and then we'll get changed and head out?"

Grateful for her attempt at relaxing the situation, I take a deep breath. “Thank you.” A smirk curves my lips. “Are you about to tell me that you know how to ride a horse?”

Erica whips her hair over her shoulder, grinning. “I’m proud to admit that I had a bit of a horse girl phase when I was a teen. It didn’t last very long, but still. So yes, technically I do know how to ride.”

“Ain’t that an unexpected surprise!” I let out a low whistle. “But you know that only makes me want you more, right?”

She shrugs, pretending to check out her nails. “Oh, please. As if you could get any more obsessed with me.”

I click my tongue, tapping my index finger under her chin and her eyes meet mine. “Don’t underestimate me. If I get more obsessed with you, you’re gonna end up as my comatose little fucktoy in the basement after all.”

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Side by side, we ride slowly through the meadows by the main house, and further out past desolate barns, corrals, stables, and silos. The river serves as our guide, the horses walking along the line of gnarled trees, their roots reaching for the water.

My nose fills with the scent of dusty musk streaming from my black gelding and the fragrance of well-kept leather from the saddle. I enjoy the comfortable silence. Just thudding hooves below and twittering birds above, leaves rustling as they jump from branch to branch.

My body moves with the animal's rhythm, muscle memory remembering countless hours spent on horseback when I was a boy. I know instinctively what to do. I also know being this outta practice means that my bones will hurt tomorrow, anyway. It's worth it.

Nostalgia settles like a heavy cloak on my shoulders. I haven't been out here in forever, but the memories of my childhood hang bittersweet in the warm air. I can almost taste them on the tip of my tongue.

Wild nature has reclaimed the lands I roamed with my dad, but I still remember every overgrown path, even after all these years. I know the gentle hills ahead of us and the rough mountains in the distance like the ridges of my knuckles. Every bend in the river is as familiar as the veins on the backs of my hands. They're the same sights that inspired the tattoo sleeve on my left arm and the mural in the master bedroom.

“You seem like you were born in the saddle,” Erica says. “Guess you do this often?”

“Naw, it’s been many years since I last went on a ride. I gotta admit, you’re doing pretty well yourself.”

“Am I? I’m trying my best to keep my ass in the saddle, but I think if I went any faster, I’d be in trouble.” She laughs.

“The cowgirl look suits you, too. Hat and boots and all.”

“Why, thank you! I picked them out myself yesterday.” She runs a hand along her hatband, silver ornaments contrasting the black. “I’m glad this little adventure didn’t turn out super awkward. You had me worried back at the house.”

I raise a brow. “Why’s that?”

“You seemed mad.”

Mad?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to come across as ungrateful or angry. It was...” I rub a hand along the stubble on my jaw. “A big surprise. A good one. I reckon Mandy put you up to this?”

“No, I came up with the idea, but Amanda helped me to convince the ranch owner. She promised him some free promotion on her channel if he let me borrow the horses.”

My stomach flutters. *Erica planned a date for us of her own free will?* Thinking about it, this is downright romantic! *No.* I shake my head, forcing down my excitement. No way she sees this as a date. It’s just her being polite because of the concert, exactly as she said.

I try to relax my tense shoulders and the horse huffs, sensing my anxiety. “You two talked about me, huh?”

Pink scrawls across her face. “A bit.”

What else did Mandy tell her? The last thing I need is embarrassing childhood stories or shadows of the past, dragged from their shallow graves.

“Go on, little dove, tell me what she said.”

“All nice things, I swear!”

I squint at her. “That so? Like what?”

“She said you’re a good man.” The flush on her cheeks darkens.

“Well, she’s wrong about that, ain’t she, darlin’?” I try to catch her gaze, but Erica avoids looking at me, playing with her horse’s mane.

“Not really,” she whispers, almost too quiet for me to hear over the sound of rushing water from the river. “I mean, not *everything* about you is bad.”

Heat radiates through my chest. I tap my hat and give her a wry smirk. “Appreciate the kind lie, but you don’t have to try and spare my feelings. We both know what I am. You’re the only person who has seen the monster in me.”

And I know she *is* afraid of me, like she should be. I’ve given her plenty of reasons to hate me, to be frightened and—

Erica’s eyes widen. “I’m *not* lying!”

I choke on my breath.

“I know what you’ve done, Cain. You’ve kidnapped me, you drugged me, and sometimes you scare me to death. But living with you, getting to know you... it’s as if you’re two different men trapped in the same skin, like... like...” She gestures as if she means to pluck the right phrase out of thin air.

I bark a laugh. “Jekyll and Hyde style?”

“That’s it!” She snaps her fingers. “There’s the sadistic asshole who gets off on my pain...” A coy smile tugs on her lips. “But there’s another side of you. A kind man. And I don’t mean the grand gestures, like the shopping and the concert or the gifts, though those are fun. I mean you cooking for me and making sure I get enough rest. Or that you find out about the things I enjoy and care to remember them. Also, Amanda told me you took care of her when she got sick and I think that’s wonderful.”

My skin tingles and my ribs get too tight.

“For all the brutality, you’re—I can’t believe I’m saying this...” She pauses. “Underneath the violence and the cruelty, you’re kind of sweet. No, you’re *really* sweet.”

My face gets so hot, I should be on fire.

I can handle the dirty talk. I can handle her rude comments and her defiance. But stubborn, snarky Erica being all cute and sincere, talking about how she thinks I’m sweet?

I’m about to have a goddamn heart attack.

“Thank you,” I bring out.

Like she said too much, Erica coughs awkwardly. I can see her panicking, frantically searching for a different topic to talk about.

“Since you like horses and you seem to be good with animals... Why don’t you reopen the ranch?” she bursts out.

Her question nearly knocks me out of the saddle. This is an even worse fuckin’ topic.

“What?” I sputter.

“You’re not practicing as a doctor, right?”

My right shoulder lifts. “I don’t treat patients anymore, if that’s what you mean.”

“You have people working for you in the clinics, and you said you only do some administrative work. Clearly, you make more than enough money and you have lots of free time. I’m thinking why *wouldn’t* you reopen the ranch? Amanda said you didn’t want to be a doctor in the first place.”

For fuck’s sake, Mandy. I make a mental note to send her a text with some choice words when I return to the house.

Worse, though, I have no clue how to answer Erica.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and draw my hat further into my face. From the corner of my eye, I see Erica staring at me. Shit, she isn’t gonna drop this, is she?

“I-I don’t know. It’s a lotta work, and a guy my age... It’s too late to start over.”

Erica shakes her head, braid swinging. “Oh my God, you’re hardly geriatric, curly! You’re in better shape than most men in their twenties.” She lets out a tinkling laugh and I can’t help but laugh along.

“So you’re saying I’m hot.”

“You already know that. Stop avoiding my question.”

“I’m not avoiding—”

“Yes, you are!” Her mouth forms a silent O. “I get it now! Hotshot Dr. Cain Morrow is afraid.”

My head jerks back. “Now what the fuck would I be afraid of?”

“Running the ranch is your dream, but you buried it in the past. And now when you have the opportunity, you’re scared reality won’t measure up to that idealized vision in your head. Maybe you’re afraid you might fail or that you spent decades glorifying and mourning a life you won’t like after all.”

I clutch my chest. Half as a joke, half because it actually hurts like fuck.

“Holy shit, darlin’, shoot me straight through the heart, will ya?”

“Sorry, someone has to say it before it’s really too late.” Erica shrugs. “You know, most folks never get to chase their dreams. No second chances. Lost dreams stay dead and buried, and regret grows heavier each wasted year until it calcifies into a tombstone sitting heavy on your chest, long before you’re even in the ground.” She favors me with a soft smile. “But

here's the deal: if you never try, you'll never know. It might turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to you."

You are the best thing that ever happened to me, I almost blurt out.

She doesn't have to say this. She doesn't have to care about my dreams or my feelings. But she does. Honest to God, Erica cares, and I'm not sure I deserve it.

"You're right, I guess," I admit.

Her head tilts. "Eh, then again, who am I to say? I don't expect you to change your whole life on a dime because of my speech, but you could think about it?"

"Yeah, I will." I reach over, giving her thigh an affectionate squeeze. "Thank you."

She hums and I tilt my head back. The trees tower above us, watching over the land like silent guardians, standing witness to the past and the present. For the first time, I wonder if there is a happy future waiting for me in their shade and maybe, they can already see it.

We ride around a sharp bend in the river, and a hill comes into view. An ancient oak crowns the peak, knotty limbs reaching for the bright blue sky. It's grown even bigger since I was a kid, and I grin as I address Erica.

"How 'bout a break? I wanna show you something, little dove."



Erica squints at the oak's trunk, bracing herself on her knees. "Calamity Cain?" She bites her lip, trying not to laugh while she runs a finger over the jagged letters carved into the bark.

I put my hands on my hips. "Go on. Laugh at a lil boy's dream of being a wild west hero. I blame my dad for watching westerns every Sunday night after dinner."

"No, it's adorable." Her eyes glitter as they shift to me. She smirks. "But I'm calling absolute bullshit on the hero bit. You definitely wanted to be the villain."

"Being a hero is overrated, darlin'. The good guy always sacrifices everyone he loves to save a world full of ungrateful cretins. How predictable and lame. But the villain..." I grab her wrist and she squirms playfully as my other arm winds around her waist. "The villain *takes* what he wants and he protects what's his, no matter the cost." I kiss her and she laughs into my mouth, her fists softly battering my chest.

"You're a villain alright," she says, too much gentleness in her voice to make the insult sting.

"And you wouldn't have it any other way."

She rolls her eyes, but she's still smiling. "Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night."

I let go and take the hunting knife from my belt. “I think it’s high time to update this carving. Don’t look. It’ll be a surprise.”

Erica crosses her arms and turns around, watching the horses tied to a tree down the hill. “That’s a gorgeous knife, by the way. It looks special.”

My heart twists as I put the blade to work. “It was a gift from my dad for my tenth birthday. I think his dad gave it to him when he was around the same age.”

“Must be nice to have something to remember your parents by,” Erica says quietly, and before I can answer, she speaks up again. Louder now, in a cheery tone. A little too cheery. “The view from up here is spectacular. I think I’ve fallen in love with Texas.”

I wish she’d fallen in love with me instead. An affirmative hum in my throat, I continue carving. Birds chirp through a small break in our conversation.

“Spring has been nice so far, but the summer heat scares me,” she chatters, tightening the hair tie at the end of her braid.

“You get used to it.” I pause. “So, what about *your* dreams?”

She makes a confused noise.

“Well, we talked about the ranch, and I got to wondering... what did lil Erica wanna be when she grew up?”

“Normal,” she whispers. “I wanted a quiet, normal life. A tiny sliver of happiness to call my own, nothing more. I never dreamed of big things.”

A sharp pain lances through my chest. I know about the past she tries so hard to hide and leave behind. I did my research. It must be a painful topic for her, but bringing it up serves a purpose, and I hope she understands when I continue talking.

“What if you can do so much better than normal? What if you can have everything you never dared to dream of and more?”

I want her to know she has options. That she can have happiness and not just a sliver, but heaps of it. That she can have dreams and hopes as big as the fuckin’ universe.

Erica scoffs, but it’s a defeated sound. Sad instead of angry. “*You* want to give the world to me?”

“I know you don’t believe me, but in time, I’ll prove myself to you. For now, all you gotta do is wait and see and let things happen.” I put the knife back at my belt and grasp her shoulders, twisting her around. “What do you think of the carving, little dove?”

She scowls before her expression softens and a flush lights up her face. “Emerald Erica and Calamity Cain with a *heart* around it?” She jabs her elbow into my ribs. “You’re secretly such a romantic! But why Emerald Erica?”

“Your beautiful eyes. Their mesmerizing green reminds me of jewels.”

“Oh my God, shut up, curly!” She laughs again, and I want to kiss her. “You know you don’t have to flatter me to make me stay? I don’t have a choice. I’m literally your captive.”

“Exactly. That’s why you never gotta worry about me lying. You’ll always know I mean every compliment from the bottom of my heart.”

Electric silence drifts between us as she looks up at me. Questions lay heavy on my tongue. One in particular I’ve mulled over more times than I’d care to admit.

Why hasn’t she tried to escape?

I’m confident I’ll always catch her eventually, but I gave her enough opportunities. The concert. The shopping trip with Mandy. Even during the horse ride. Every day I let her roam the house and terrace freely. She could leave her phone behind if she’s worried about being tracked.

Before I fucked her with my revolver, I accused her of staying because of the incredible sex. But we both know that ain’t a good enough reason. I was just teasing her.

The time she ran into the wilds doesn’t count. That was a knee-jerk reaction, spurred on by the perceived rejection she felt when she saw me with my sister and thought Mandy was my girlfriend. I still can’t figure out why it bothered her so much, anyway.

The only explanation I can come up with is jealousy. But to be jealous, she’d have to have feelings for me, which is impossible, ain’t it?

Erica takes her phone out of her pocket and snaps a picture of the carving. She smiles as she shows it to me, smugness oozing out of her every pore. “There. Evidence of cruel Dr. Cain Morrow’s sappy, romantic side, preserved for posterity.”

I smirk, but my heart pinches when I remember going through her gallery. There were so few pictures of her and none at all with friends, except for the one with that scumbag ex of hers. He’ll get what he deserves. Very soon.

“Give me that,” I say, pointing at her phone.

“Sure.”

I take the device from Erica. My free arm coils around her, tucking her back against my chest, and I crouch, aiming the front camera at us.

“Smile, darlin’.”

She grins, tipping her head to the side, and I press the button. When I swipe up to look at the picture, Erica gasps.

“Oh my God, we’re smoking hot together!” she bursts out, flinching when she catches herself. “I mean it’s uh, a nice picture.”

And she’s damn right. I know she *feels* like she belongs in my arms, but she *looks* the part, too.

Her smile is as radiant as the afternoon sun, eyes shimmering in the light. She doesn’t seem tense or forced, but genuinely relaxed, like we’re a proper couple, not a kidnapper and his hostage. Like she’s comfortable in my embrace and not even a little scared.

“Yeah, it’s a great one,” I choke out and give the phone back to her. She tucks it into her pocket.

“Alright then, Calamity Cain,” she says. “Let’s ride back home. Emerald Erica is getting hungry.”

I nod, and she marches ahead down the hill. Before I’ve gone too far after her, I turn, stealing one last glance at the heart I carved around our names.

Erica thinks I have the upper hand, but the churning in my gut doesn’t lie. This woman who was supposed to be a quick fuck and an anonymous kill has turned me inside out.

She doesn’t know that I lost control long ago.

Erica cradles my fragile heart in her hands, and I wonder if she’d shatter it if she realized what power she holds over me. She’s the only one who can break me.



When I wake up at noon in the president's suite in the most expensive hotel in San Antonio, Cain is gone. A note lies on his pillow.

Good morning, Erica. I'm sorry I'm not there to kiss you awake. I need to take care of some business, but I'll see you tonight, little dove. Can't wait to have you in my arms again. C.

An icy void settles into my chest, and I hug myself. Without Cain, I feel small and foreign in the large room high above the city, but I drag myself out of bed and go for a shower. Just as I'm about to call room service for a solitary lunch, a knock comes from the door. Amanda stands outside, armed with that sunshine smile of hers.

My mood instantly gets better.

From her suite across the hallway, she lugs in two suitcases. She insists on doing my makeup and hair, and I agree enthusiastically. How often do I get the chance of letting a professional work her magic on me? The offer is too good to pass up, and honestly, I'm grateful for the company.

We order food and take our time eating and chatting before she sits me down on a chair in the middle of the living space. *Because that's where the best natural light is*, she claims.

Suddenly, I'm goddamn Cinderella and Amanda is my fairy godmother. It's a role she takes awfully seriously. She's normally such a talkative person, it's startling how quiet she is while she's in the zone.

Amanda chooses a seductive smokey eye with a nude lipstick for me, and she arranges my hair in soft waves around my shoulders. Unlike many makeup artists I've seen online, she takes care to highlight my best features instead of trying to paint on new ones to follow trends.

We picked out my silk gown together during our shopping trip and she helps me to put it on. It's a sleek, forest-green dress with thin straps, a deep V-cut in the front and a high slit on the right side of the skirt. I accessorize with neutral beige heels—red bottoms as Amanda insists—and understated gold jewelry. A designer clutch with rhinestones finishes off my look.

When I'm ready, Amanda disappears into her room for half an hour. She returns wearing a sparkly, figure-hugging dress in a dark shade of crimson. Her hair is in a playful updo, sharp eyeliner and red lips fit for a movie star.

While I gush about her gown and tell her how stunning she is, Amanda ushers me out of the suite and into the elevator. My heart beats out of my chest as we reach the ballroom on the top floor.

A sign in the foyer reads "*VIPs only. Closed celebration.*" Guests in elegant attire funnel toward a roped off entrance, and a lady with a clipboard asks their names before a massive security guard in a black uniform allows them to enter.

My breath quickens. Unless I count prom, I've never been to a formal event and I'm equally anxious and excited about what the evening will bring. Hopefully strong drinks. Maybe dancing.

But what—or rather who—*really* catches my attention is my date for the night:

Dr. Cain Morrow in a fucking tuxedo.

He stands off to the side of the entrance, a deep frown etched on his forehead while he adjusts his cufflinks. He hasn't seen us yet, and I use the chance to gawk shamelessly.

His black tux is a flawless fit, from the collar hugging his strong neck to the jacket draping smoothly over his broad shoulders. He's at least a head taller than anyone else in the foyer and his stance exudes casual, yet unshakable confidence.

Butterflies rise in my stomach and dampness seeps through my lace panties. Getting kidnapped by a man who could grace the front page of any magazine sure is something.

Cain runs a hand over his slicked back curls and finally looks up. Our eyes meet and his brow smooths. His gaze drags along my body like a trail

of fire, making my skin prickle with an invisible touch while he walks toward us. A smirk tilts his lips as he catches my hand and twirls me around, my skirt fluttering.

“Goodness gracious, little dove! Look at you! Your beauty takes my breath away.” He kisses me and my knees weaken as I giggle into his mouth. “The green really brings out your stunning eyes.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, blushing like I’m a teen on a first date with her high school crush.

“I missed you, darlin’. Sorry I’ve been busy all day. A million people from the medical and science industry wanted to speak to me. Everybody’s trying to convince me to invest in their projects or to work for them, but through it all, I could only think of your gorgeous smile.” He kisses me again, deeply and with tongue until I slap his chest, and he stops, grinning.

“Ah, young love is wonderful,” Amanda says and sighs theatrically, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead like she’s going to faint.

Cain shakes his head, but he keeps smiling. “I’m *ten* years older than you, Mandy.”

“And?” Amanda shrugs. “You’re so adorable together, I can’t help myself! But as much as it makes me swoon, you’ll have to save some of the lovey-dovey stuff for later. They’re expecting us inside the ballroom.”

The security guard waves us through a side entrance when he sees Cain. The hall is packed. Crystal chandeliers glimmer overhead, and the soft murmur of conversations drifts on gentle music, played by a string quartet in the corner. Servers with silver trays offer drinks to the guests standing shoulder to shoulder.

“All of San Antonio’s rich and famous are here tonight,” Amanda says. “I’d love to introduce you to some friends, but I have to get on stage to moderate the event. It’s become a tradition because my dear brother refuses to play host.” She scrunches her face and Cain grimaces.

“You know I despise being in the spotlight,” he says with a stony expression.

“Oh, I’m just teasing!” She pouts. “I do enjoy being the host, but most people still only know me as brilliant Dr. Morrow’s little sister, anyway.” Amanda laughs, affectionate pride in her eyes as she looks at her brother. “Don’t forget your speech coming up after my introduction, Cain.”

He groans. “Ugh, how could I forget.”

Amanda kisses my cheek, then Cain’s, and dashes onward into the crowd.

A sour expression twists his features as he glances around the room. "I hate these events and I hate public speaking. If I wanted that, I would have become a politician."

"I don't hate *this*," I say, very obviously sliding my eyes along his body. "It shouldn't surprise me that you pull off a tux as well as you pull off a cowboy hat and boots. But still..." I let out a quiet whistle, and a flush of pink appears on Cain's clean-shaven cheeks.

He leans in to whisper and offers me his arm. "You're gonna be the death of me, darlin'. I almost liked it better when you were vile, cause your compliments got me blushing like a damn schoolboy and there ain't nothing I can do about it. I'm putty in your hands."

"I like making you blush."

"Bet you do." He winks and leads me around the side of the room to a quiet spot by buffet tables stacked with hors d'oeuvres. A server offers us champagne and we each take a glass. I sip from it, humming as I appreciate the fine bubbles and subtle notes of citrus and peach. This is the good stuff.

"Surely, you're no stranger to compliments, curly? I can't imagine you've never been told how devilishly handsome you are," I say, squeezing his arm. "Every single woman in this room has been devouring you with her eyes since we walked in."

He scoffs. "I don't give a damn about any of these people. None of them matter. When will you finally understand that I only want *you*, Erica? I hope that in time, you might want me as well. And maybe, if I'm really lucky, you'll even like me a little, too."

I almost drop the champagne. The words forming on my tongue have my heart racing in tandem with my thoughts.

"Cain, I—"

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please!" Amanda's voice rings out from the speakers.

My lips press into a tight smile and Cain's shoulders drop. Can one be relieved and disappointed at the same time? About what, I'm not sure. At this point, I'm not even certain what I meant to say.

That I already want him, even though I shouldn't? That I like him? That I couldn't stop thinking about him the whole time we were apart? That I felt cold and lost without him today?

The music and conversations quieten, replaced by polite clapping, and the collective focus shifts to Amanda. She practically glows under the stage

lights, the sequins on her dress glittering like rubies while she's basking in the attention.

"Good evening! My name is Amanda Morrow and I'm honored to host this year's Little Hearts fundraiser again. Before we get into the entertainment and cheque writing, please welcome the man whose generous contributions have kept the Little Hearts Hospital open, funded the extensive renovations and the new transplant wing finished earlier this month. My brother, Dr. Cain Morrow!"

My eyes widen. *Contributions as in donations?*

"Excuse me, darlin'," Cain says quietly and puts his glass on a table behind him. The mass of people parts for him as he walks to the stage and climbs the steps by the side. Amanda hands him the microphone, but when he addresses the guests, my heart stutters.

Until that moment, I didn't realize that Cain's special smiles are just for me.

The tilt of his lips doesn't reach his eyes as he glances over the sea of guests. True affection shines in them when he looks at his sister, but it's still different than when he smiles at me. The grins he gives me are softer and lighter, hotter at the same time, and utterly, devastatingly adoring.

Cain wears different masks for the world. Loving, responsible brother for Amanda. Serious businessman and calm doctor for work. It must be exhausting, keeping up the act.

Am I the only person to see his true, unfiltered self?

Cain speaks about the hospital's development and other charity projects he's invested in, encouraging everyone to lend their support to medical research and advancement, especially in the pediatric sector. He talks about how fortunate everyone gathered in the room is, and that it's the responsibility of the lucky ones like them to help those in need.

Every word seems carefully chosen to be diplomatic without losing its bite. His stern charm and passionate appeal work, and many guests already take out their cheque books. Strangely, the cute drawl has entirely disappeared from his speech. His accent is the very definition of academically neutral. It's sad he feels like he has to hide his drawl, but I know how irrationally prejudiced some people can be.

As soon as he has said his bit, Cain gives the microphone back to Amanda and walks offstage to another round of earnest, but polite applause. When he returns to me, he takes my hand.

“I need to get out of here for a bit,” he says, pulling me along to a set of doors leading to a wraparound balcony. “I can’t stand another second with hundreds of eyes following my every damn move.”

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“When were you going to tell me that you’re a philanthropist?” I push a gentle elbow against his side, sipping on my leftover champagne.

The golden sunset frames Cain with an otherworldly glow, and his long shadow moves in unison with him as he shrugs. “Never?”

“But that’s amazing! You must have saved so many lives.”

Cain leans against the railing, taking a fancy cigarette case from his pocket. We’re alone out here, and I don’t miss how his stance relaxes.

“You sound surprised, little dove. Did you think a brutal butcher like me ain’t capable of doing any good in this world?”

There it is again, that charming accent. I can’t stop myself from smiling. “That’s not it. I guess I don’t understand why you do what you do. The things in your basement, I mean. It can’t be for the money.”

He plucks a cigarette from the case before sliding it back into his pocket. Searching my face, he lights it. His cheeks hollow as he takes a deep drag and exhales in a smoke-stained, grey sigh.

“You sure you want the whole story? It might mess up that neat preconception of the evil killer you’ve formed about me in there.” He taps my forehead.

I toss my hair back. “Pah. Try me.”

“The first time wasn’t a choice. I did it for Mandy. She was low on the waiting list for a heart transplant and never would have made it until it was

her turn. The doctors just shrugged.” His hands shake, a shadow of anger crossing his face, but he quickly composes himself. “Our parents were already gone, so mother couldn’t throw her weight around. Money was a little tight after our clinic went into the red.”

“You took care of things yourself.”

He takes another puff. “Damn right I did. Back then I was straight as an arrow and the worst liar in the world, but I couldn’t let Mandy die. I got in touch with a guy I had a few computing classes with in university. Through the grapevine, I heard he became some big shot hacker.”

“That’s how you got into the dark web stuff.”

“Yeah. I asked him how I’d go about buying certain *exotic goods* online. He thought I meant drugs and I didn’t bother to correct him. In exchange for a steady supply of hospital grade morphine to feed his addiction, he set me up with an encrypted laptop. He tried to explain how it works, but I didn’t understand. Didn’t care either. I just needed it to ensure I couldn’t be traced while I looked for surgeons who accept jobs outside of the usual medical bureaucracy.”

My brows rise. “Underground surgery?”

“Naw, I found an upscale private clinic. A reputable doctor there agreed to do the procedure at short notice without the documents and waiting times. But there was a catch. He said hearts were hard to come by, especially this quickly and I would have to provide a suitable transplant organ myself. I improvised.”

He flicks the cigarette butt over the railing. His eyes drift along the orange horizon, a wrinkle between his brows.

“Cain, you don’t have to tell me if this topic is too painful—”

He raises a hand and smiles softly. “I don’t mind talking about it if it’s you.”

I bite my lip, averting my eyes. *He trusts me.*

“You know all that bullshit about the Hippocratic Oath? How doctors aren’t supposed to do harm?” he asks.

“I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, I added my own stipulation to it. An eye for an eye. I decided anybody who hurt others is fair game. From the dark web, I bought information about criminals, but strictly those who were acquitted or released under unusual circumstances. Evidence vanishing, witnesses disappearing, retracted statements, that sorta stuff. I found a woman with

the same blood type as Mandy. She was 26 years old, physically healthy, and accused of suffocating her infant son because he wouldn't stop crying. But the only witness—the boy's father—disappeared before he could testify. She walked."

My stomach squeezes. "Does Amanda know the true story?"

"No. I don't want her to live with that guilt and she won't have to lie for me if I get caught, either." Cain shakes his head. "She didn't suspect anything. The clinic in Mexico was clean and luxurious, the kinda place rich people go to all the time."

"But why didn't you stop after the first murder?" I ask. "Mandy got what she needed and—"

"Killing gives me a sense of freedom," Cain cuts in. "My whole life has been about doing what others wanted me to do. It didn't matter what I wanted or needed, didn't matter what I felt. The pressure inside me became unbearable. But when I took that woman's heart for Mandy, all the pent-up anger and resentment flowed from me like the blood from her veins. It's a release I can't find anywhere else. Pure euphoria." He shudders, rolling his shoulders.

"You're a sick bastard." I let out a laugh, surprising myself how easy it has become to talk about gruesome murder. Then again, the victims ending up on Cain's table seem to deserve it. I gesture toward the ballroom. "All these people in there, they think you're some sort of angel. You're leading a double life."

"I do have a few rules," he says.

"Rules?"

"No kids. No innocents. I do my research very carefully and pick my targets accordingly. Then I use my experience and contacts in hospital management to funnel the organs to donors who need them most, but are low on the waiting list like Mandy was. Every cent I make from selling spare organs goes to the Little Hearts Children's Hospital and a few other charities, on top of my regular donations."

I misjudged Cain. He *is* a murderer, but one with morals. It's a bizarre thought, yet I can't think of a better way to describe the personified contradiction that is Dr. Cain Morrow.

I grin, waggling my brows. "So you *are* an angel."

"I'm the *devil*, Erica."

“Even Lucifer was an angel once.” I shrug, but reflecting on his words gives me pause. “Hold up! *I* don’t fit your MO, Cain. I’ve never committed a crime in my life.”

He favors me with a crooked smirk. “Naw, you don’t fit my MO and believe me, that fuckin’ messed with my head. Badly. You were a problem from the moment I saw you at the gas station. I meant to drive on the next day, had a victim picked and everything... but I couldn’t leave without you. You were mine when I first laid eyes on you, darlin’.”

My belly tingles, a lick of fire flickering between my legs. I wish that his possessive asshole behavior wasn’t such a turn-on for me, but there’s no denying it. And if I’m entirely honest, his secret generosity is damn sexy, too. My clit pulses as I imagine what it’d be like to get bent over that railing with a view over the city while he fucks me.

“My turn to ask a question,” Cain says, yanking me from my dirty daydream. “Now that you’ve seen both sides of me, which version do you like better?” He smooths over his suit jacket, straightening his cuffs. “The wealthy, well-spoken businessman in a custom-tailored tuxedo or the guy in a cowboy hat and boots, driving you around in his beat-up old truck?”

I don’t even have to think about my answer.

“The real you,” I say.

His head tilts. “And which one’s the real me, little dove?”

“I think there’s a bit of the authentic Cain in both. But you seem far more comfortable in your jeans on horseback than at a gala giving speeches in a tux. Me personally, I like seeing you with a spark in your eyes and a genuine smile on your face.” I fidget with the string of the clutch around my wrist. “I want you to be happy.”

Realizing what I said, my mouth snaps shut. Cain’s brows shoot up, and the surprise in his gaze makes my heart tumble into my stomach.

Fuck, it’s true, isn’t it? I didn’t just say that to be polite. *I want my kidnapper to be happy.*

A nervous laugh bubbles from my throat. “Okay, I uh, I think I have to freshen up a little. The champagne is getting to my head. I’ll be right back.”

Cain gives me a long, thoughtful look before he nods and takes out another cigarette. “I’ll be here. Can’t be bothered to run the social circuit yet. I’d rather wait and drag you along for that. It’ll be much more bearable with your pretty self on my arm.” He winks, and his smirk releases some of the tension in my belly.

I smile, too. "Sounds good."

As I open the door to the ballroom, a wave of music and chatter hits me. I walk around the dancefloor when a man cuts out of the crowd, bumping into me. He wears a black suit and dark sunglasses contrasting his grey hair. His expression is grim, mouth pulled down and jaw set.

I bristle. "Excuse me?"

"Sorry, ma'am," he says without missing a beat, not sparing me a glance as he pushes past and heads in the direction of the balcony.

I click my tongue. Yikes, poor Cain. So much for not running the social circuit yet. I hope he can make do without me for a few minutes until I swoop in and save him from what is sure to be an awkward conversation.

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I take a sip of thin, black coffee, tasting more of the paper cup than the coffee.

Bright, fluorescent lights buzz above. One flickers obnoxiously. The clock on the wall ticks away, and I have to stop my foot from tapping in rhythm under the steel table. I put the cup on top of it and lean back in the hard metal chair.

My bow tie feels too tight, but I resist the urge to loosen it.

I can't afford to seem nervous. I *am* fuckin' heart-in-throat, gut-churning anxious, but I don't need the assholes watching me from the other side of the interrogation room mirror to know that. They likely won't let me out of their sight, hoping I'll incriminate myself somehow if they watch long enough.

What they're waiting for, I can't say. That's exactly the issue.

I've been waiting alone in this room for over an hour, watching shadows pass by the windows to the hallway, but I can't see shit because of those damn blinds. Nobody has told me why I'm here, either.

They're doing this on purpose.

It's a strategy to break me and get me to confess or some shit. Well, tough luck. My lips are sealed.

My phone weighs heavily in my pocket. The temptation to call my lawyer grows stronger with every passing minute, but I worry getting him involved

might seem like an admission of guilt, like I have something to hide.

I came in voluntarily to answer a few questions, though the agent who cornered me on the balcony at the gala didn't make it feel very voluntary when he flashed the gun under his suit jacket and shoved his badge in my face. Typical intimidation tactics.

A surge of panic flares behind my ribs. Do they have a warrant to search my house? If they did, if they knew about my crimes, they would've paraded me around in cuffs, right?

Fuckin' FBI.

I wish I could let Erica or Mandy know about this shit show, but I wasn't given time to leave a message for them. On the drive to the nearest police station that asshole agent watched me like a hawk, stopping me from sending a sneaky text.

My pulse races faster as I remember what Erica said. *I want you to be happy.* And right after I went and vanished on her. What awful fuckin' timing. I hope she knows me well enough to realize I'd never ditch her.

The same agent who took me in enters the room and closes the door behind him. He brushes over his grey hair, the deep wrinkles around his eyes creasing into craters as he slides into the chair on the opposite side of the table and drops a file onto it.

"You're a difficult man to track down, Dr. Morrow."

Amused, I raise my brows at him. "Am I? I thought the FBI would have no problems finding a regular citizen. How long have you been searching for me?"

"Weeks. The difficult part was identifying one of San Antonio's most prolific businessmen in such an... *unusual getup.*" He opens the file and takes out a picture, holding it away from me so I can't see it. "This look matches none of your official photographs in the papers or online. The tattoos on your forearms were a surprise, too. I suppose they don't fit your clean guy image. You keep them well hidden."

My chest tightens and I struggle to control my expression as he slides the picture across the table.

Shit. There I am in full color, carrying Erica's limp body through the motel parking lot in the middle of the night.

For fuck's sake, how did the FBI get this? I checked the place for security cameras and found the usual dummies every cheap hole-in-the-wall installs as a deterrent. Then who—

“This picture was taken by a witness at the site,” the agent continues, answering my unspoken question.

Adrenaline rushes through me. That damn creep from the front desk!

While I staked out the motel, he made excuses to walk past Erica’s room and even knocked on her door once to bring her wine. He was into her, but Erica rejected him, disgust written all over her face. I guess he kept watching her anyway, and by extension, watching me.

“That is you, isn’t it, Dr. Morrow?” the agent presses.

I bare my teeth in a cocky smile. “Yes.”

“And why would a wealthy man of your social status be staying in a cheap motel 400 miles from here, dressed like a hillbilly runt?”

Fuckin’ asshole. Like dragging me here isn’t bad enough, he also has to insult my style?

“You’re here of your own volition, Dr. Morrow, but if we have reason to believe you may be involved in criminal activities, we can hold you for questioning for the next 72 hours. It’s in your best interest to cooperate.”

He’s reaching. My tense gut relaxes a fraction. His pushy attitude tells me he has absolutely nothing on me apart from this picture, and that ain’t much to go on. It’s not a crime to wear a cowboy hat, and neither is staying in cheap motels.

“I didn’t catch your name earlier,” I say. My nerves are vibrating with rage. It’s hard to keep up my calm demeanor and neutral speech, but I need him to see Dr. Morrow the trustworthy citizen, not Dr. Morrow the monster.

“I’m Agent Wolfer,” he responds.

I raise my hands, showing him my palms. “Look, Agent Wolfer, I have nothing to hide, but this whole deal is somewhat embarrassing. I never told anyone about my secret vacations.”

His brows quirk, and I hold back a smirk. *Two truths and a lie, motherfucker.*

My stalking of Erica is a bit embarrassing, and I haven’t told anybody about my hunts, but I do have plenty to hide.

“My job and charity work in the community can be very demanding. So, a few times a year, I like to get away. I drive around in my father’s old truck and pretend I’m a regular guy. A nobody.” I rub along the back of my neck. “But what would people think if they knew the pressure got to me? It would make me seem unprofessional. Unreliable.”

Wolfer nods, humming, seemingly satisfied with my answer. “Everyone needs a break sometimes. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.”

I incline my head. “Much appreciated.”

“But...” He pauses, holding my gaze like he’s trying to read my fuckin’ mind. “That doesn’t explain the woman in your arms. For all I know, you might have killed her and this crucial evidence shows you disposing of her body.”

Before I can think it through, the next words already leave my mouth.

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“That woman is my girlfriend, Erica Dellinger. I mean, *now* she is my girlfriend. We met at the motel and spent the night together, then things developed from there. She is *very much* alive and well. I’ll give you her number and you can ask her yourself.”

Another two truths. Kind of. Erica *is* alive and doing great, and in my mind, she *is* my girlfriend. Of course, we haven’t officially defined our relationship. I’m not sure if we can. Maybe she was right when she said it’s impossible.

She’s my captive, and I’m her captor. How can that work out?

I can blackmail her into staying with me, but I can never force her to like me. I can claim her body, but I can never force her to give me her heart.

A heavy cold expands behind my ribs. Fear seeps into my bones like ice.

Worse than being questioned by the FBI, worse than the prospect of being sent to death row, the thought that Erica might never truly love me scares me shitless.

Wolfer clears his throat, still looking at me. I could enter that pathetic staring contest and win. A prideful, petty part of me wants to, but I reckon being combative will escalate things unnecessarily.

“That night at the motel Erica had quite a lot to drink after we had sex. She freaked out and begged me for help, barely conscious. I had stayed

sober and asked if she wanted me to drive her home. She said she had nowhere to go, so I brought her to my house to recover.”

Wolfer’s eyes slit. “You didn’t take her against her will?”

“God, no.”

Wolfer clicks his tongue. He tilts his head from side to side as if he’s weighing up the facts. “Thank you for your statement, Dr. Morrow, but I fear we’re going to have to keep you under arrest until we can verify your story with Miss Dellinger.”

Voices rise in the hallway, loud enough to hear through the door.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry but you can’t go in there!” a man yells.

“Yes I can and I will!” a woman shouts, but I recognize the voice. It’s Mandy. “You have no right to hold my brother! Our family lawyer is on his way here. He’ll make sure none of you inept, overzealous fools involved in this travesty ever work in law enforcement again!”

“Ma’am, please—”

The door to the interrogation room flies open, but it ain’t my sister standing in the frame. My pulse skips.

“Erica,” I rasp.

Her hair is tousled and her chest moves with quick breaths. Behind her, Mandy is poking a finger into a younger agent’s red face, who stammers incoherently. She does a fine job of keeping him out of our hair, leaving only Wolfer for us to deal with.

Agent Wolfer sighs as he looks at the younger man and drags a hand over his forehead. “I’m surrounded by idiots who can’t do their damn jobs. This is what I get for taking a rookie under my wing,” he mumbles.

Erica approaches the table. She hesitates as she notices the photograph, her brows drawing together. She stares at it for a long moment, unmoving, and when she glances up, my eyes meet hers.

Time stands still.

This is it.

She knows what’s on the line. She knows that the tables have turned.

For the first time since I took her, Erica holds all the cards.

The FBI is already suspicious. If she tells them about the kidnapping and the drugging, about the basement and my organ harvesting, about everything I’ve done to her, those fake medical files and her supposed mental illness won’t hold up.

The FBI will get a warrant within the hour, and I'll be fuckin' done. I'll get locked up until they put me down like a rabid dog and I'll never see her again.

That's the worst part, knowing I'd never hear Erica moan my name again, would never hear her call me curly, would never see her smile again.

My heart pinches.

Fuck, I'm a total idiot. I've been so arrogant, so intent on keeping her that I didn't stop to think if I'm actually right for her.

What if I can't make her happy, after all? Erica deserves happiness. She deserves love and affection and everything good in this world. And if my downfall is what it takes... damn, then so be it.

I smile, hoping she can see the words in my eyes.

It's okay. Do what you have to, little dove.

The seconds stretch. Calm comes over me like cool silk draping across my skin. Whatever happens, I'm fine with it. I'm not gonna fight it if that's what my darlin' wants.

Erica shakes her head like she's snapping out of a trance. Frowning, she slaps her hand onto the picture and her eyes flick to Wolfer, blazing with rage. "What the hell is this?" she snarls.

"Ma'am, I'm in the middle of an interrogation, if you could please take a seat in the hallway until—"

"This is unacceptable. Why did I have to hear about Cain's arrest from a security guard who just so happened to see you walking out together?"

Wolfer raises a hand. "Ma'am, please, Dr. Morrow came in for voluntary questioning and—"

"Couldn't you have waited a few minutes to let me know?" Erica cuts in again. "I was worried sick when he disappeared. Until you tell me why you arrested my boyfriend like a common criminal, I'm not leaving."

I swallow the giddy holler rising in my throat. *Boyfriend*. Erica just called me her *boyfriend*.

"You are Erica Dellinger?" Wolfer asks.

She takes her driver's license from her purse and tosses it onto the table. Wolfer picks it up, tutting.

"Well, if you're already here, you could help clear up a few things for us, Miss Dellinger."

Erica crosses her arms. "Go on."

By now, the younger agent has stopped responding to Mandy, who is still berating him while typing furiously on her phone. It looks like she doesn't even take a breath between tirades of insults and legal threats. The man shrinks further and further under her wrath. He'll probably need therapy after this.

"A witness saw your lifeless body being carried out of a motel in North Texas," Wolfer says to Erica. "They took this picture with their phone and alerted local police. When the sheriff found an abandoned vehicle registered to your name a few miles outside of town, it became a missing person's case and was handed over to the FBI. Dr. Morrow is a person of interest."

Erica's jaw drops before she launches into laughter. "Wow!" She laughs some more, wiping tears from her eyes. "That is the most ridiculous story I have ever heard. Did you even do any research on Cain?"

Wolfer blinks. "Naturally—"

"Then you know that he's an altruistic man who uses his wealth to help others. His donations single-handedly stopped the Little Hearts Children's Hospital from closing, and he made further investments to help build an extension, too. And that's only one part of his efforts to care for the community of San Antonio."

"Well..." Wolfer starts, but Erica shoves a hand in front of his face.

"Cain wouldn't hurt a fly. And that picture..." She taps the photo. "That's him carrying me to his car because I was so drunk, I couldn't walk straight. That was *after* we had sex. *Consensually*. It was me who invited him to my room in the first place."

I can't believe my ears, but my heart dances. I wanna jump up and cheer.

My little dove didn't rat me out.

My darlin' protected me.

Wolfer pokes his tongue inside his cheek. "If you weren't kidnapped, why did you abandon your car by the side of the road, Miss Dellinger?"

"That happened before I met Cain. After losing my job, I was flat out broke and had no money to fix my car or even call a tow truck. I had no choice but to leave it."

Wolfer sighs as he picks up the picture, sliding it back into the file. His lips twist into a thin smile and he holds out her driver's license while he speaks in my direction. "We're very sorry for the inconvenience, Dr. Morrow." He stands, straightening his suit. "You're free to go."

Erica glares at him. She grabs her license and stuffs it into her clutch. “Finally. You’ll be hearing from our lawyers,” she says and turns to me, head tilting as she offers me her hand. “Let’s go home, Cain.”

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I pull into the driveway in deafening silence and sitting on fuckin' coals, which is exactly how I felt driving us home in the dark. Fingers tapping the steering wheel, I park the car—a more high-society appropriate, luxury SUV—in front of the house and turn off the motor.

I open my mouth, but Erica gets out and rushes up the stairs to the front door, the motion sensor on the steps turning on the porch lights. She hugs herself, hands rubbing along her upper arms.

I follow her with a sigh on my lips.

It's chilly tonight. Clouds drifted in earlier, hiding the glimmering stars. Slices of moonlight cut through the grim darkness, but are soon overcome by the grey shroud, and the scent of ozone hangs in the thick air. Even the nocturnal animals are quiet.

A storm is coming.

My darlin' looks as gorgeous as she did at the gala. The green silk gown flows like water over her curves, and when I first saw her, I couldn't wait to rip it off her. Now I just wanna sink to my knees to thank her for saving me, but I've never seen her this closed off. Not even when I kidnapped her. At least back then, she was shooting snarky remarks at me like a hail of bullets.

This fuckin' silence feels like a gun to my head.

“You haven’t said a damn word since we left the police station, little dove.” I take the keys from my pocket and unlock the door. “You’re killing me here. Please, say something?”

She glances at me, her expression unreadable. “Someth—”

“Don’t fuckin’ play around, please.”

“I *did* say something earlier. I said I want to go back to the ranch instead of staying in the hotel.” She kicks off her heels and stomps through the foyer, disappearing around the corner.

I groan. “Oh, come on! You know what I mean! And I drove us home like you asked.”

I lock up and hang the keys on a hook by the door. I leave my jacket over the railing of the stairs, loosening my bow tie as I skulk after Erica into the kitchen.

She holds up two bottles of wine. “Red or white?”

I run a hand over my hair, cracking the gel cast slicking back my curls. “Whatever you wanna drink.”

She puts the white on the counter before opening the bottle of red with a corkscrew from the drawers by the oven.

“You’re confusing me, Erica. I can’t make sense of your behavior. What’s gotten into you?”

She takes two glasses from a cabinet and pours too much wine into both before walking past me to the roofed terrace, drinks in hand. I follow again. She sits on one of the outdoor sofas by the fire pit, leaving one glass for me on the side table.

I stop in front of her and throw my arms into the air. “If you hate me, if you don’t wanna talk to me or be around me... why didn’t you turn me in? So you can punish me with silence now? You’re the only person who *really* knows me, and you can’t take that away from me without any explanation. I’m begging you!”

My eyes burn with unshed tears. I blink them away, watching Erica’s impassionate face for a reaction while she takes small sips of wine. She’s staring at nothing.

I grit my teeth, letting my hands fall to my thighs. Does she have to be so stubborn?

I know I’m approaching the topic too forcefully. The more I push, the more she pulls away. I take a deep breath. My frustration ain’t what she needs, but I can’t help the desperation cutting into my heart.

Have I finally lost her?

I make a fire and sit next to her. The flames cast flickering lights across her empty expression, reflecting in her hollow gaze. She seems far, far away.

“We gotta talk about what happened, little dove,” I say softly.

“No, we don’t. It’s no big deal.”

“You can’t be serious.” I rub across my forehead, trying to calm my frayed nerves. The interrogation was stressful, but Erica shutting me out is worse. “You saved my life, and now you say it’s no big deal? It’s a *huge* deal!”

She’s not looking at me, her voice thin and low. “You don’t have to worry about it, Cain. It’s fine. I just repaid the favor.”

“What—repaid what favor?”

She twirls the stem of her glass and a sarcastic grin curls her lips. “The night you abducted me... I was going to kill myself.”

My heart shatters into a million jagged pieces. Thick silence fills my lungs like smoke. I can’t breathe, yanking at my collar to loosen it more.

The untouched sleeping pills... that’s why she had them in her bag?

If I hadn’t met her in that gas station, if she hadn’t thrown me off my axis and stolen my heart at first glance... I would have lost my soulmate before I ever had a chance to find her.

Erica gives me a sidelong glance, putting her empty glass on the table. “Irony, huh? Your plan to kill me saved my life. We’re even now.”

My hand shakes as I lay it on her knee. She doesn’t move, but at least she isn’t repulsed by my touch.

“You didn’t tell the FBI because you think you owe me?” I ask.

Her lips tremble and she clenches her teeth. She’s still avoiding me, like she’s afraid I might see something more in her eyes than she wants me to know.

“You never owed me anything, Erica. Shit, I had no clue. Saving you is the best damn thing I’ve ever done, and I’d do it again, do it earlier, do it better... but I’m a fuckin’ killer. I’m a sick, evil man, and nobody knows that better than you. One word about the kidnapping or the murders and the feds would’ve been all over me.” I shake my head, my throat tight with emotions. “Please, I have to know... why did you protect me?”

Her head snaps to me, tears dancing in her eyes. “I don’t know!” The desperation in her voice makes my blood go cold. “It’s driving me crazy! I

should have told them the truth, but I couldn't! What the fuck is wrong with me?"

Her words drown in sobs and I hug her, cradling her head against my chest. In my embrace, she seems smaller than ever before, so fragile I never wanna let her go out into this cruel world on her own again.

"Nothing is wrong with you, darlin'." I whisper, kissing her hair. "I'm sorry I pushed you too hard. We don't have to talk about it. Not today, not ever. But I want you to know that I'm grateful."

She cries harder, her shoulders shaking, her hands twisting into my shirt. As if the sky cries with her, thunder rolls in the distance and a drizzle speckles the tiles beyond the roof. It's no secret that seeing her suffer usually turns me on and her tears get me hard, but not like this. This feels all kinds of fuckin' wrong. It feels like being gutted with a dull, rusty knife.

I frame her face with my hands and make her look up at me. Her eyes are red and puffy, makeup running down her cheeks.

"I've never been in love, little dove," I say.

"W-what?" she hiccups.

"Y'know, that fuzzy feeling, the blushing and the butterflies? Never fuckin' happened to me. I thought there was something wrong with me, that I physically couldn't fall in love. Reckoned there was a broken part inside me. Crossed wires or switched poles. The one thing that ever came close to the emotion others describe as love was the release of a kill. Buzzing nerves. Rapid heartbeat. A rush of heat."

Her head tilts, confusion playing in her eyes.

"So when I first saw you and my pulse galloped and my whole body felt like I got electrified, I thought I wanted to kill you." I let out a choked laugh. "Instead, from the very beginning, all I really wanted was to love you."

Erica's brows arch, lips quaking. She blinks, stunned by my words.

"I know you think I'm crazy and this between us can never work. But damn, darlin', being without you is like having my heart ripped from my chest. Like I can't breathe. Like I can't fuckin' think or function without you. You're all that's on my mind, no matter where I am or what I do. It's been like this since the moment we met, and it's getting worse every minute of every day."

I kiss her and she lets me in, shaking in my arms like a leaf. She clings to me with the urgency of a woman drowning in an ocean of her own tears.

“I’ve only prayed twice in my life,” I rasp, thumbs trailing over her cheeks. “Once, when my sister got sick, and I prayed she’d make it through. And once more on the morning after the first night you slept in my arms. On my knees, I prayed that one day, you’ll want me like I want you. Because for God’s sake, Erica, I fuckin’ love you with all of my black, twisted heart.”

It’s great to finally say it out loud. Weightlessness flows through me. I feel like I could float right up to the moon.

Erica goes pale. She stammers, pressing a hand to her mouth. “I-I don’t know what to say...”

I comb my fingers through her hair. “You don’t have to say anything. I don’t expect you to answer. I just need you to know how I feel. And to be honest, I don’t want you to say it back because you think I wanna hear it. If you ever say those three words, I want ‘em to be true.”

A bevy of emotions crosses her face. “And what if I never say them?”

Lightning flashes, and the clouds burst. A torrent of rain pelts the roof, rapid as my pulse.

“Then I’ll have to live with that. But I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make you fall in love with me, Erica.”

“Even if I never feel the same, you won’t let me go?”

“You had your chance to get rid of me, little dove, and you didn’t take it.” I tip up her chin, brushing my lips over hers, speaking the words against them. “It almost seems like you don’t want to leave me.”

She flinches like I hit a sore spot and my heart jumps.

That is it? That’s why she didn’t rat me out? Because she *wants* to stay my prisoner?

“So... you won’t let me go?” she asks again.

“Come hell or high water, I’ll never let you go, darlin’.”

She sighs and the tension falls from her shoulders. I kiss the corner of her mouth, over her jaw and down her throat, chasing waves of goosebumps across her skin. My lips worship the curve of her breasts at the edge of her dress. Her breathing becomes labored and need swells inside my pants as I sink my teeth into her soft flesh.

“Apart from being hopelessly in love with you, I have another confession to make,” I say, grinning. “You know I like hurting you and I know you’re into that rough stuff, too. But I didn’t just read you that well... I found the sex bucket list on your phone.”

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Erica gasps. “That note can’t be opened with my fingerprint because it’s password locked! You have to enter it manually. How did you—”

“The night before we officially met, I broke into your motel room. You were passed out drunk on the bed with your phone unlocked next to you.”

“Oh my God!” Her face reddens and she slaps a hand across her lips.

“Don’t be ashamed. I made all your kinky wishes come true, didn’t I? And I taught you about some you didn’t even know you had.” I wink.

“This whole time, you *knew* about my secret, perverted fantasies?” she asks, her voice sounding several pitches too high. “So you did it for me? The knife and the gun, the toys, the chase... everything?”

“I ain’t a fuckin’ saint, Erica. I did it for you... *and* because I wanted to. All that fucked up shit is right up my alley.”

She pauses, and I can see the proverbial coin drop. “Oh no...” she breathes. “That orgasm I had in my dream and the weird white stuff all over me when I woke up... Did you—”

I can’t help snickering. “That’s right. While you were asleep, I fucked you with my fingers and glazed you with my cum. Took you damn long to figure that one out, huh? Guess you can cross somno off your list, too, but I’m up for a repeat anytime... if you ask nicely.”

I slide my phone from my pocket, pulling up the picture I took of her in the aftermath, and turn the device toward her. Erica freezes, her breath

stopping. Motion returns to her in the form of an outraged huff as she slaps my chest.

“God, you’re an asshole, Cain! A sick freak! A dirty, filthy, disgusting pervert!”

I put the phone on the side table, her picture still lighting up the screen. “It’s hard to take your insults seriously when you’re blushing like that, darlin’.”

She snuffles, but at least she’s smiling again. “Go to hell and burn, curly.”

“I told you already, only if you come with me.”

“Ugh!” She punches my arm, and I grab her wrist, pressing my lips to her pulse point.

“I still mean it when I say you’ll be mine forever, in life and in death, little dove. But there’s more to me than the cold sadist. If I’m gonna fuck that sweet pussy of yours every day for the rest of our lives, I don’t always wanna cause you pain. Sometimes, I wanna be slow and soft with you.”

I push gently against Erica’s shoulder and she leans back on the sofa. She watches me with feverish eyes as I slide off the seat and hike her skirt up to her hips. A damp spot darkens the middle of her barely-there lace panties and I hook my fingers under the waistband. Her ass lifts as I tug them off. My cock stands at full attention while I admire her dewy pussy. My mouth waters.

“I’m a vicious monster, but I can be gentle, too. You can’t appreciate the dark without the light,” I say and part her knees wider, positioning myself between her thighs. I can smell how turned on she is, her scent melding with the rich petrichor brought by the storm. “When we fuck, you’ll never know what you’ll get. Pleasure or pain. Torture or tenderness. But I promise, darlin’, you’ll enjoy one as much as the other, because your body is a delicate instrument and I know exactly which strings to pluck to make it sing with desire.”

I dive down. My tongue licks in broad strokes along her seam, and I moan at her taste, closing my eyes. I grip her thighs, pulling her flush against my mouth while my lips close around her clit. Her lustful cries rise over the thrumming rain and growling thunder, hands curling into my hair. She yanks on my roots and I suck harder, flicking her nub with my tongue before letting it pop out of my mouth to devour it again.

Erica’s hips roll, her sex suffocating me as she grinds against my face. My tongue spells my love confession on her pussy, letter by letter, and I

invade her with two fingers, twisting them up and forward.

“Oh fuck, Cain,” she moans. “Yes, that’s perfect! God I—”

She jolts, clenching around my digits as she comes, but I keep lavishing attention on her clit, keep pumping my fingers in and out of her. I leak pre-cum into my pants, barely stopping myself from coming, too.

When Erica has drifted down from her high, I sit next to her to undo my pants and take out my impatient dick. I’m throbbing and my balls are ready to burst.

“Get on my lap, darlin’,” I say, reaching for her. “I want you to ride me tonight, but even when you’re on top, I’m the one in charge. Don’t forget that.”

She smiles eagerly. “You’re always in charge, sir.”

She unzips her dress and slips out of it before climbing on top of me. I grip my stiff length with one hand as she hovers above it. When her slick entrance presses against the head, I nearly lose what little self-control I have left. Her essence coats my tip, dripping down my twitching shaft.

“Impale yourself on my cock like the dirty painslut you are,” I command, gritting the words out between clenched teeth. It takes every ounce of restraint to hold back and not thrust upward into her, but I want to see her following my orders.

“Yes, Dr. Morrow,” she breathes and sinks onto me.

Erica obeying me is like a shot of morphine, making me feel hot and fuzzy. My eyes roll back in my head as her cunt slowly envelops me. She’s so fuckin’ wet, I slip easily inside her, at least at first. I can tell she’s still struggling with my size. She pauses halfway, her breath coming in huffs, her inner walls squeezing me.

“You’re doing so well, darlin’.” I hold her face with both hands and pull her into a passionate kiss. “Just a lil more. I know you can take all of me.”

She bites her lip, lowering herself inch by inch. When I’m fully sheathed in her tight hole, she lets out a small whine, and a surge of pleasure lances through my balls.

“That’s my good girl,” I groan. “See, your pretty pussy fits me like a glove.”

One hand on her ass and the other on her lower belly, my thumb circles her clit. I kiss her again. My tongue swarms her mouth while her hips lift, sliding my cock out to the tip before she drops down. Her warmth wrapped

around my dick has me seeing stars. She bounces on my lap, finding a needy, irregular rhythm.

I can't last much longer. But from the way she gets tighter and tighter each time she drives my length into herself, I can tell she's close, too.

I lean in to lick her tits and she arches her back, pushing her breasts into my face. My teeth clamp gently around her hard nipple. I pinch the other one, and her pussy seizes from the light pain.

That's it for me. I explode inside her. Erica throws her head back, coming on my throbbing cock while I empty my cum into her. It seems like it won't stop, wave after wave of my release filling her.

By the time I finish, we're both shaking and out of breath like we've run a marathon. I stay inside her, craving the intimate connection between us. Erica falls forward against my chest. She wraps her arms around my neck, nuzzling her nose into me, and I brush over her hair.

"You know that stupid saying that crazy pussy is always the best?" she asks.

"Sounds like nonsense."

"Well, I think they're onto something because crazy serial killer dick is by far the fucking best I've ever had."

I laugh. "Shucks, you know how to flatter a guy."

"No, I called you *crazy*."

"You also said my cock is the best you ever had." I raise a brow at her. "Do you really wanna get into a discussion about who's the crazier one? The serial killer or the woman lying to the FBI so she can continue getting fucked down by said serial killer?"

She giggles, cuddling into me. "Touché, curly. You win this one."



When Cain brings me to his office, I realize I've never seen it before. Not properly. That time when Amanda visited, I was too distracted by my jealousy to take in the details.

It's the smallest room in the house but it has distinct old money vibes with a cozy touch.

Centered on an oriental carpet in muted shades of red is a large oak desk with drawers. A metallic desk lamp stands next to a computer monitor on top of it, plus a wireless mouse and keyboard, and a leather-upholstered chair behind it. Two walls are occupied by massive, dark shelves, stuffed with medical literature.

"You made these, too?" I ask, pointing at the shelves.

"Naw, I inherited them from my mother. The whole study and all the furniture, actually. She used to lock herself away in here for entire nights, working." He gives a mirthless chuckle. "And drinking."

Unlike the rest of the home, which is decorated with hunting trophies, artwork, and landscape photography of local scenery, a sideboard by an armchair in the corner is dedicated to framed family pictures. It seems like he's hidden them away in here.

Is it because they're important to him or because they evoke too many difficult emotions?

Cain takes my hand, tugging on it as I pause to look at the pictures. Clearly this isn't what he meant when he mentioned a surprise, but I slip from his grasp.

My heart warms as I pick up a photograph of a smiling, blond little girl on a brown pony and a grinning teenage boy with wild, dark curls on a larger, black horse. A tall man wearing a cowboy hat and boots holds the reins of the pony, smirking into the camera. He has a thick, dark mustache and sun-tanned skin.

"You and Amanda were cute kids," I say. "You both seem happy in this picture."

"A ranch is a fun place for children," Cain responds diplomatically.

"And that's your dad?"

"Yeah, Wyatt Morrow in the flesh."

"Handsome fella. You look a lot like him. Same sharp jawline, same strong nose, same pitch-black hair. The curls as well. And he seems tall, too."

"Folks used to say I'm the spitting image of him."

I giggle. "I'm glad you don't have a big mustache like him."

"Not my style."

The familiar click of Cain's lighter comes from behind me before the smell of tobacco reaches my nose. A thin cloud of grey smoke wafts around me as I put down the picture and pick up another.

A family portrait.

"That's my mother Charlotte," he says and points at a stunning woman sitting on a fancy chair. It reminds me of a small throne. She has a regal aura to match, like I imagine someone from a line of noble lords and ladies from England to look.

Long, dark blond hair falls in soft waves over her shoulders, and her legs are crossed at the ankles. Her expression is stern, head held high and proud. She wears a beige two-piece suit with a skirt, an immaculately pressed blouse underneath, and a string of pearls nestled into the collar.

Amanda stands by her side, probably two or three years old. She holds Charlotte's hand and is dressed in a ruffled, cream-colored gown, her hair in two neat braids. Cain is on the other side of his mother. He seems stiff, frowning as if he hates wearing that navy blue suit and a tie, but one person in the picture is decidedly more awkward than him.

His dad.

Wyatt poses behind Charlotte, one hand on her shoulder. He's giving a forced grin like he's trying to hide how much he wants to jump out of his perfectly tailored, dark suit and shiny dress shoes. Clean-shaven and without the hat and boots, he looks like a whole other man.

Cain steps beside me, inhaling a long drag as he takes the picture from my hands. Smoke comes from his mouth in a sigh. "Dad was a good man and I loved him, but he was too soft. He could never say no to mother. He never had the guts to do what he had to do."

"What *should* he have done?"

Cain scoffs. "Not given a shit about our family's reputation and made her go into rehab, right when she showed the first signs of addiction. He should have forced her if he had to. He knew her drinking got worse over the years. All the pressure from her job and the estrangement from her family because they hated dad... I think it was harder on mother than she let on. I should've been there for her more."

Emotions swell in my throat and I put a hand on Cain's arm. "That sounds like such a complicated situation, especially with children caught in the middle of it. But you can't blame yourself, you were just a kid."

"Yeah, I was a kid at first, but then I grew up. If I tried harder to put aside my own frustration as an adult... maybe if I tried to talk to her and convinced her to stop drinking, they'd be here with us now."

The grief in his eyes cracks my chest down the middle.

"It's not your fault, Cain. You can't force someone to get sober, no matter how much you want them to. They have to want it themselves."

He shakes his head, and I'm not sure he heard me when he continues speaking. "And maybe if they were still here when Amanda got sick, I wouldn't have had to—" He cuts himself off with a sarcastic laugh. "Doesn't matter. The past is in the past. I can't undo it, but I can learn from it."

Cain puts the picture back and wraps his free arm around my waist, pressing me against him.

"I might *look* like my dad, but I won't make the same mistakes. I'll do what I must to protect my family and that includes you, Erica. That's why I brought you here today." He kisses my forehead. "You're the most important person in the world to me now, and I'd do anything to make you happy. We might not have met like a normal couple, but I want this to work,

darlin'. No more of this power imbalance. I want us to be partners on a level playing field based on trust, and I think you're ready."

I blink. Cain has talked about marriage before. Of keeping me. And of killing me if I ever run from him. But he's never spoken so openly about trust. The whole time we've been together, I've been his prey, not an equal.

He must have broken me after all, because tears sting my eyes. Not tears of fear or anger, but tears of joy.

No one has ever chosen me. I'm never a priority for anyone, just an option.

But to Cain, I am important. *The most important person in the world.*

His brows flicker, jaw tightening more with each second I don't respond, but his eyes are soft, so gentle I could lose myself in their mossy green depths.

Maybe this thing we have, no, this *relationship* is fucked up. So what if it is?

Maybe he's a depraved killer. So what if he is?

Cain is also a caring and loving man. He protects me, feeds me, clothes me, and gives me a better home than I ever had.

He saved my life.

I remember the photograph of us on the table in the police station. Even when he kidnapped me, he cared in his own, twisted way. He could've thrown me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. But in the picture he carried me like a lover, like I'm something precious and rare.

And in this moment, as he embraces me, Cain *is* a normal person.

He's a guy who wants nothing more than to protect the people he cares about and make them happy. A human with needs and dreams like every other on this planet. A man who longs to be seen and heard and held and loved exactly as he is, with all his sins, all his shadows and all his light.

My belly tingles as I find my voice. "I think I'd like that," I whisper and smile. "A life with you."

I can't believe I just said that and meant it—and apparently, neither can Cain.

His eyes widen, pupils dilated. The cigarette drops from his fingers as he stares at me slack jawed. A wave of anxiety barrels through me, urging me to break the silence.

"Did I say something wrong?" I ask. "I'm sorry if—"

Cain grabs my face, his palms rough against my skin. His mouth smashes into mine, and I let out a giggle as our teeth clack softly. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing myself closer. Closer.

It's a little like our first kiss, laced with desperate need and the taste of smoke. Yet there is much more to it now than the night in the motel. Then, it was pure lust, but this is not just a demanding kiss. It's slow, full of endless yearning and it sends flutters through my stomach.

"Fuck, I love you so much, Erica," he whispers, and the floor gives out beneath my feet. I cling to him, dizzy and hot and weak.

Is that what I feel, too? *Love?*

I always want to be close to Cain. I melt into his embrace, and *his* smile makes *me* want to smile. Calm permeates me when he holds me in bed at night before I fall asleep. His touch sets me alight when he seduces me, and he makes pain feel like a feather's kiss.

Am I in love with my captor?

We look into each other's eyes for what seems like an eternity, until smoke rises between us. Cain's gaze drops.

"Aw, shit!" He stomps on the carpet. When he lifts his boot, it reveals crumpled tobacco, torn cigarette paper—and a walnut-sized hole in the soft pile. He laughs. "Good thing I'm not attached to this old rug, cause you're one hell of a distraction, darlin'."

"You can buy a new one."

"I just gotta be careful I don't burn down the whole house next time you so much as smile at me. But forget about the goddamn carpet." He takes my chin between two fingers. "Do you really want to be my partner and my equal?"

I nod.

"Do you trust me, Erica?"

The shocking truth stops my heart for a split second. "I trust you," I whisper.

Cain grins. "Then are you gonna be my good girl and follow me into the darkness?"

By now, this dynamic between us is familiar and it brings me so much comfort. He commands and I obey. I know what to do, what to expect. The lines are clear cut... unlike my emotions.

"Yes, Dr. Morrow."

He kisses my forehead and walks around the desk, reaching underneath the tabletop. A click sounds. My eyes widen when one of the bookshelves pushes outward, sliding in front of the others to reveal a metal door.

Cain strides toward it. He brings his face to a biometric scanner before inputting a multi-digit number into a keypad. With a hiss and a whirr, the thick door pops open. There's a bright hallway behind it, elevator doors at the end.

Cain holds out his hand and my heart soars when our fingers entwine. He doesn't have to tell me where we're going. We're heading straight into the predator's den, but this time, I'm not afraid.

This time I'm not a victim.

I'm Cain's partner, and I'm determined to prove that I'm worthy of standing by his side.

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“What the fuck? Nate?” I blurt out.

Pulse racing, I step closer to the operating table and the naked man lying on it with an IV in his arm. He looks foreign under the bright white light washing out his brown hair and blue gaze, but it’s definitely him.

My ex’s eyes roll wildly. The beeping of the heart monitor speeds up, but Nate doesn’t move a muscle. He must be getting the same drugs that paralyzed me.

I spin around and bump into Cain. “You knew about Nate? How the hell did you track him down? I tried for weeks with no success.”

Cain clicks his tongue. “I saw the texts in your phone and when I realized he stole from you, I worked some magic.”

“You were with me all day every day, except for once when I went out with your sister. But you can’t have found and taken him in that short time. It was just a few hours!”

“That’s the errand I had to take care of without you.” He smirks. “First, I paid somebody very handsomely to find this scumbag and bring him to San Antonio. While you and Mandy were out shopping, I went to the drop-off, stuffed him in the trunk of my SUV, and brought him here. Ever since, he’s been in this basement in a nice little artificial coma. I woke him earlier today while you were in the shower.”

I suck in a gulp of the chemically scented air. “You *hired* someone to kidnap Nate?”

“From the dark web. You wouldn’t believe the kind of sick shit and disturbed bastards you can find there. Anything is for sale. Drugs. Organs. Murder. Rape. Torture. Snuff. It’s a den of fuckin’ monsters.”

“And you’re one of them,” I mumble and lay a hand on his broad chest, his pulse beating steadily against my fingers.

“You know that. I’m a horrible, cruel man and I deal with other horrible, cruel men in the only two currencies they understand: cash and death.” He lets out a casual laugh. “You didn’t think I was selling the spare organs in broad daylight like girl scout cookies, right? A lung ain’t exactly a packet of thin mints.”

“I never thought about the logistics in so much detail,” I admit with a grin.

“And you shouldn’t, either. I don’t want you anywhere near the dark web or the people I deal with.” He takes a scalpel from the operating cart and presses the handle into my hand. “Time to open your present, darlin’.

“I—what?”

“You wanna be my partner, don’t you?”

More than anything, I think. Is this a test to prove my loyalty?

“You want me to cut Nate?”

“Not just cut him. This is about revenge. Doesn’t he deserve some payback? This asshole ruined your life, little dove,” Cain purrs, his voice dark as velvet, seductive as the devil himself.

Revenge.

Perverse excitement slithers through my chest, winding around my ribs like a treacherous serpent.

Payback.

Tears flow from Nate’s pleading eyes as they ping-pong between the scalpel and my face. I huff. That’s the most genuine emotion he’s ever shown me. The cracked, rose-tinted glasses I used to view him through shatter entirely.

He’s not that handsome. Maybe a lukewarm 4 on a good day, and today is not a good day for him. He isn’t particularly funny or charming, either, and he sucks big time at conversations. Every word leaving his mouth is only about him. Hanging out with him always felt like a chore he reluctantly

agreed to, and the sex wasn't even mediocre. I always had to finish myself off while he rolled over to sleep.

Why did I ever put up with Nate? Just because he was the first guy to pay more than minimal attention to me?

Cain has shown me what I've been missing. What I *deserve*.

I deserve a man who makes an effort. A man who loves me for who I am, all my flaws and my strengths included. A man who commits to me, and you can't commit much more than fucking kidnapping me and holding me prisoner. A man who won't make fun of my fantasies and cares about my pleasure.

A man who *cares about me*, full stop.

Cain's body presses hot and hard against my back. His large frame curves around me while his fingers draw along my neck, gathering my hair and sweeping it over my shoulder. He kisses the side of my throat, a graze of his teeth coaxing a low moan from me.

"I don't know about this, Cain," I murmur.

What a stupid lie. It's not that I don't want revenge. I do.

Fuck, I want Nate to suffer so badly.

When he stole my savings, I often laid awake, fantasizing what I'd do if I ever found his lying ass. Many of those made-up scenarios included a baseball bat and his knees or a pair of bricks taken to his small, wrinkly balls. Imagining his pain while I smashed them was always my favorite part. But even if I got the chance to enact my revenge, I wasn't sure I had it in me, such brutality.

My whole life, I considered myself a good person, and good people don't hurt others. When good people get hurt, they forgive and turn the other cheek. Good people don't hold grudges or imagine crushing their ex's testicles.

It's easier to push aside my socially programmed morals when it comes to Cain. I haven't actually seen him kill so far, which allows a certain level of compartmentalization. And though his callous sadism frightens me, it turns me on equally as much.

A heady rush of adrenaline bursts through me.

Cain is a monster, but he is *my* monster. Now, he wants to turn me into a monster, too. He wants to shape me in his image. It's a one-way street into the darkness, and if I set a foot on this path beside him, I know I will never see the light again.

Cain's tongue slides over the shell of my ear. "You fought so hard to make it, didn't you, Erica? You tried desperately to get away from the stigma of your folks' addictions. All you wanted to prove is that an innocent little girl from the foster system ain't doomed to repeat her parents' mistakes."

My breath hitches. I never told anyone about my past. As soon as I left the orphanage, I put that horrible part of my life behind me and vowed to erase it from my memory as best I could.

Cain continues whispering, his voice soft and warm. "Child Protective Services took you after your mom OD'd and your dad—high as a fucking kite himself—lost his shit when he found her dead in the bedroom. He smashed up your place until neighbors called the police. You probably don't even remember. You were barely 2 years old."

His words cut deep, but they don't wound me. I feel lighter with every word leaving his lips. It's like he's carving out the pressure inside my chest, cutting away the growth of shame on my heart to finally let it beat unburdened.

"Where did you hear about this?" I ask.

"The personal data of random citizens is surprisingly cheap. Finding out more about you was the first thing I did after *correcting* your medical files."

I release a stuttering sigh. If Cain knows of my desolate past and still wants me... if he knows of my wicked fantasies, too, and he still wants me... what do I have left to fear?

My brows squeeze together as I glance down at Nate.

This isn't just a gift for me. It isn't just a test.

Cain is breaking the last barrier between us and he's letting me see the darkest, most twisted side of him, hoping I'll still want him. He knows all of my messed up, broken parts, so why shouldn't I know his? Why shouldn't I accept them?

My fingers tingle with nerves, but I grip the scalpel tighter. "I don't know where to start," I whisper.

"Don't worry, darlin'. I'll show you."



Cain's hand wraps around mine and we hold the scalpel together.

We lower it to Nate's chest, and the beeping accompanying his pulse gets so fast, I expect him to flatline. I gasp as the tip of the blade slips into Nate's skin like a hot knife into butter. Blood rises from the puncture.

"Don't be frightened," Cain says. "You ain't doing this alone, Erica. You'll never have to go through anything alone ever again. I'll always be here to protect you and guide you. I'll always be here to love you and cherish you like you deserve."

He pushes the scalpel in deeper. My heart beats in my throat as we separate layers of flesh and muscle. It's easy. Too easy. I don't know why, but I expected more violence. A brutal struggle to wrench open skin and tissue.

Nausea ripples in waves through my stomach, and I want to look away, but I can't. I don't actually want to, if I'm honest with myself.

It's mesmerizing. Vermillion streaks on pale skin.

"Don't we need gloves?" I ask.

Cain chuckles. "Naw, no need to worry about infections. Before I set him up for you, I ran the full spectrum of tests like I do with all my victims. I have a small lab in the side room because I don't wanna spread around diseased organs. To my surprise, he's clean." His lips brush my cheek. "I wouldn't risk your health."

A small laugh escapes me. "How very considerate."

"I aim to please," Cain says, amusement lacing his tone.

We drag the scalpel over Nate's stomach to his pelvis. A long gash gapes down his middle, trickles of crimson turning into a sea of red on the silver table. Tears stream down his cheeks, terror mirrored in his eyes.

A thrill shoots up my spine. I grin. He can feel every cut. The agony must be overwhelming, and I bet Cain has given him something to stop him from passing out.

"What's it like to know the bastard who ruined you is at your mercy, little dove? Do you feel that raw power, coursing through your bloodstream like a drug?"

I nod, breathless. God, I feel it.

It's a buzz filling my veins, making me feel taller and stronger. My chest almost bursts with confidence, and I can't stop smiling.

"Do you remember when I said that in this room, I'm your God?" Cain asks.

"Yes, Dr. Morrow."

He lets out a guttural moan, pushing his erection against my back and I slide my thighs together as arousal blooms between them.

"Fuck, I love when you call me that." Cain puts the scalpel on the cart and his hand loosely encases my throat. "I'm still your God, but now, you're a Goddess, too, and this pathetic little man is my offering to you. He's a sacrifice to prove my love. You can do anything you want to him."

"D-don't you want to donate or sell his organs?"

"No, darlin'. This one's all yours."

Butterflies start a riot in my stomach, and I giggle. Nate is mine to torment.

Cain interlaces our fingers and trails them along the edges of the cut, turning the tips red and sticky. "Does this get you wet, little dove? And don't lie to me. I already know you're soaked, but I wanna hear it from those sinful lips of yours."

Cain's dirty talk is like a magic spell, switching off my rational brain. When I submit to him like a small animal baring its throat to the sharp teeth of a predator, I am free.

"Yes, sir," I choke out. "I'm wet."

"See, you're just as sick as me," he says, his voice laden with so much affection, I hear his words for what they are.

A compliment. *The truth.* And it's about time I accept both.

From the moment we met, Cain recognized the seeds of darkness buried deep inside my heart, and he tended to them with patience until they bloomed. I can see the world in its vibrant radiance now because of him. Because he grew a beautiful garden of sin inside my chest, and *I* am filled with its colors. *His* colors.

Cain spreads Nate's wound with a metal tool, laying bare vulnerable red organs and white bones. He picks up a small electric device with a round, jagged blade at the end and closes my hand around its hilt. His guidance is steady as he presses a button on the front.

The machine whirrs to life and Cain brings the spinning blade to Nate's breastbone. Goosebumps rush along my arms as the saw makes contact. A high-pitched, grating whine pierces my ears.

I should be disgusted. Afraid. But with Cain by my side, I can only be in awe.

My monster is letting me inside his world. He's making me a part of it, and I've never felt more at home.

When Cain has opened Nate's ribs, he puts the saw aside and grabs my hand. He forces it into the chest cavity, and I twitch, but he holds tight. We brush past soft, warm meat and the ivory hardness of bone.

"Stomach," Cain whispers.

We move deeper, higher. He pushes my fingers into expanding and contracting tissue.

"Lungs. Can you feel them filling and deflating with every breath, little dove?"

My eyes roll as I bite back a moan and nod. How can something this fucked up be so hot?

"You already own *my* heart, darlin', and it will belong to you alone until the day it stops beating," Cain whispers, guiding my hand higher yet. "But how about I gift you this bastard's heart as a trophy, too?"

My fingers touch a large, throbbing lump, and I forget to breathe. Cain wraps our joined hands around it, and the rapid contractions make me dizzy with a rush of power.

I truly hold Nate's life in my hand.

The sound of a zipper startles me and Cain flips up my skirt. His thick cock slides between my thighs, rubbing over my slit in languid thrusts. I'm still wearing panties, but the friction is enough to send fire through my hips.

“Oh my god...” I rasp as I realize what Cain is about to do.

He’s going to fuck me while we’re elbow-deep in my scumbag ex’s open chest cavity.

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Cain's free hand pulls my underwear to the side and his cock presses against my weeping entrance. Everything feels more intense from the adrenaline coursing through me.

His thick tip parting me. His girth stretching my inner muscles. Given the way we normally fuck—rough and fast like rutting animals—the careful intrusion has me nearly coming on the spot. But I need more.

When he's fully inside me, Cain's hand slips around my belly, finding my clit. He massages it and my head falls back against him as he begins to fuck me at a tortuously measured pace. I mewl. My pussy clenches impatiently, and Cain laughs.

"Does my little slut want to get fucked harder?"

"Yes! Please, sir! Please fuck me harder!" I plead.

He doesn't waste any time. His thrusts speed up, turning brutal like a jackhammer, bumping me forward against the operating table. My bones ache. I know I'll find bruises on my hips tomorrow and I can't wait to admire them in the mirror.

His fingers leave my clit, but I'm too busy crying out his name in broken fragments to complain. All I can feel is Cain's cock splitting me and Nate's heart beating frantically in our grasp. My whole world shrinks to the size of this white-tiled room.

“You don’t get to hide behind excuses, anymore, darlin’,” Cain says, voice straining, but he doesn’t slow down. “You no longer get the comfort of lying to yourself and pretending that it’s only me who wants this. That it’s me violating you against your will. Naw, you want me, too. You want me to hurt you. You want me to fuck you. And you want me to keep you as my captive. Admit it!”

“Yes!” My shout bounces off the walls. “I want you, Cain! I want you to hurt me and fuck me and love me!”

His chuckle is tender, making my stomach swoop. “Good girl. I knew you’d come around.”

My vision is hazy from the orgasm barreling toward me, and I barely make out Cain’s hand in front of my face. His fingers are red. Coated in blood.

“Open your mouth and taste his suffering,” he orders.

Before I can think about it for too long and get cold feet, I do as he says. Cain pushes his fingers between my lips. A sour, metallic taste spreads over my tongue. I moan. Fuck, this is disgusting and so goddamn sexy.

Cain forces his digits into my throat, setting off my gag reflex. My cunt throbs and my eyes water, but the urge to please him is stronger. His fingers fuck my throat at the same pace as he fucks my pussy, and my senses go into overload.

I can’t breathe. Can’t move. I can only stand there and let Cain ravage me, let him push me closer and closer and closer to the edge.

“Choke on my fingers like you choked on my cock in the car,” he hisses, and I suck in my cheeks, my tongue swirling. “Show your ex what a dirty slut you are for me. Before I snuff out his pathetic life, the last thing he’ll see will be how hard I make you come. Better than he ever could.”

The pressure within me bursts like a bolt of lightning. My ears pop. I think I’m going to faint from the shockwaves pulsing outward from my pussy. My knees give out, but Cain’s fingers leave my throat and he wraps his arm around me, holding me upright.

“That’s it, little dove. Come for me.” A groan cuts him off. “Damn, you squeeze my cock so tight.”

This orgasm lasts an eternity. Pleasure lights up every nerve inside me like fireworks and I notice that this isn’t one climax. It’s a couple in a row and they just keep happening. My pussy is still convulsing when Cain’s hips jerk, a torrent of his cum painting my insides.

He pulls our joined hands out of Nate's wound. They are coated in warm, thick blood like a red thread around our fingers, binding us forever. I know that even when I wash it off, the invisible taint will always stain us the same shade of vermillion sin.

Cain finally comes down from his orgasm, but he stays inside me as he picks up the scalpel again and pushes into Nate's chest. The frantic beeping of the heart monitor turns into a monotonous, long sound, and with a last gasp, Nate goes limp.

The breath rushes from my lungs in a smile.

Cain killed him for me, but that's not all. Carefully, he takes something from inside Nate's body and my eyes widen.

His heart.

"Didn't I promise I'd give you his heart, darlin'?" he asks.

I brush along the bright red organ as if it's a fragile, exotic flower. It's still warm. It feels *alive*. "Oh, this is beautiful," I whisper and look at Cain over my shoulder. "Thank you."

I'm not just thanking him for the macabre trophy and the sex. I thank him for showing me who I really am.

Nate's death is my rebirth.

The old Erica, the one who tried to be good and turned the other cheek, is gone. I like the new Erica a whole lot more. She's kinky and confident and entirely herself. She's happy. She's living, not just surviving.

Cain puts the heart into a jar with yellow liquid on the surgical cart before he switches off the machines. Silence blankets the room. He leaves me empty, zipping up his jeans while I straighten my panties and my skirt.

In the quiet, we stand motionless opposite each other and a shadow of triumph spreads across his face. I know what he's thinking. The same thoughts fill my head.

I killed with him.

Like I wanted, I have become Cain's equal and his partner in crime. For better or worse, there's no way back now. I shattered the chains he forced on me and bound myself to him again with a crimson tether of my own making.

"I'm proud of you, little dove. It's an honor to watch you spread your bloody wings and fly," he says and his praise heats my chest.

If you asked me all those weeks ago if I could ever see myself falling for a serial killer or if I'd be into fucking while we kill my ex, I would have

laughed at you.

I still know I shouldn't want him. I shouldn't crave the violence and the sex, and I shouldn't yearn for his gentleness and his affection.

But when Cain's head bows and his lips seal mine, clarity washes over me. Despite everything I've been taught about relationships, about right and wrong, about good and evil, there is only one word to describe what we have:

Love.

Bloody, vicious, true love.

We come from vastly different backgrounds, but the same void yawns inside our chests, threatening to swallow us whole. Only the other can fill it with passion as black as tar.

The truth flays me open. I have that in common with Nate on the operating table. Everything inside me is laid bare and I can't hide it any longer. Not from myself, and not from Cain.

I can't imagine my world without him in it. Every version of him.

"Cain, I..."

His smile softens. "Yes, darlin'?"

"You're a sick bastard, but I love you," I blurt out. I expect the words to taste bitter, but they melt on my tongue like candy. Sweet as honey.

Cain's eyes go as wide as they can, and quiet tears well from them. "A-are you sure this ain't the adrenaline talking?" he asks and his voice thins, quivering more with every syllable. "You... you really—"

"Shut up and listen, curly!" I poke him in the chest. "You've created a monster to match your darkness and now it's yours. *I* am yours. I'm madly in love with you, Cain—emphasis on *madly*, because I think I *am* clinically insane—and you won't get rid of me again."

"Shit, I didn't think you'd ever say it." His lips curve into a grin as he bites back a sob. "I love you, too. Goddammit, I love you so fuckin' much." He hugs me, squeezing the air from me as he lifts me and decorates my face with kisses. "Fuck, I can't believe you're mine!"

I squirm, wheezing more than speaking but I'm grinning, too. "Forever and a day, Cain. Come hell or high water, just like you said."

He kisses me again, and we giggle like teenagers while we make out over Nate's corpse.

Cain is fucked up and twisted—and I'm his perfect match.

His toy. His equal. His darlin'.

I'm his little dove, but he doesn't have to break my wings to make me stay. His arms aren't my cage any longer. They're my sanctuary. And one day, when we're old and grey, I'll happily take my last breath in his embrace.

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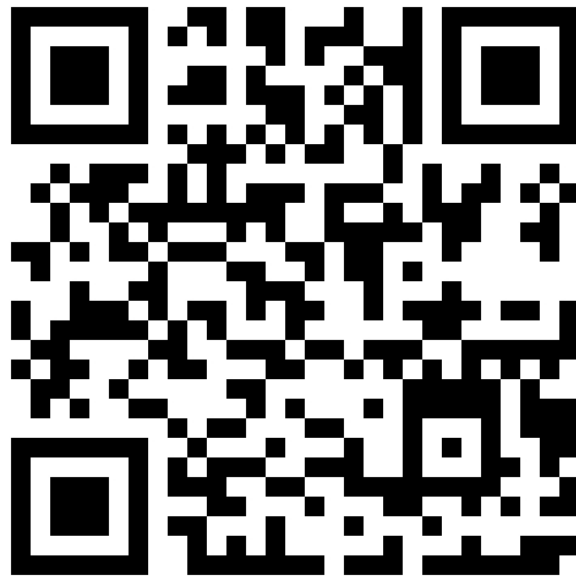
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About the Author

I.M. Wraith writes spicy dark romance books about possessive, morally black men and the strong women they fall for. Her stories thrill and excite you until you're on your knees for the bad guys and begging for more. Wraith is fueled by strong coffee, kinky smut, and dog cuddles. She loves nothing more than a cozy night in with her hubby to watch a movie together.

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Content Warnings

fucking while elbow-deep in her abusive ex's chest cavity
he takes all FOUR of her holes

kidnapping

stalking

somnophilia

noncon/dubcon

drugging (including a paralyzing agent that stops the FMC from moving but
she feels everything being done to her)

knife play

breath play

blood play

cutting, marking, scarring, bruising

gun fucking

knife fucking (with the handle, duh)

possessive serial killer MMC

medical play and light gyno play

adult toys

female sounding

praise and degradation/humiliation

dacryphilia

size difference

deepthroating
nipple play
sex in the car (while driving)
primal play (chasing)
outdoor sex
mind games/manipulation
Stockholm Syndrome
corruption
needles (for an IV)
medical malpractice
alcoholism, and drug addiction (mentions)
dead parents (mentions)
serious heart illness (not the main characters, mentions and otherwise off
page)
organ harvesting (mentions)
OD'ing (mentioned, no details)/planned suicide by pill overdose

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