



**ON YOUR
KNEES**

JAYE PRATT

ON YOUR KNEES

MASKED WOMAN NOVEL

JAYE PRATT

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Blurb

The View4U competition was supposed to be fun. A way to help someone live out their fantasy, with no strings or feelings. But then I started to want more from him. I crave it. Crave him.

I didn't expect to fall for the man who offered me a place to stay. Or the broody one who keeps pushing me away even as his eyes plead for me not to go. Then there's the one who started it all, who makes me feel seen in a way I've never been before.

I should leave before they do. Love doesn't stick in my world. People leave, and I've learned it's safer not to hold on. Yet when I slip on my mask, I'm not the girl with baggage. I'm the one in control. No past, no fear. Just the game, the chase, the power.

So what happens when I don't want to run anymore? When these men, all so different and dangerous to my heart, make me want to stay?

I thought I was the one doing the chasing. But now I think I'm the one being caught.

READ ME!

Mum me says,

Do not move in with strangers, stop telling people on the internet about yourself, and for fuck's sake, do not film yourself in compromising positions and post it on the internet. People watching you through cameras is a RED flag. RED, fucking bright RED, waving in your face kinda RED.

Author me says,

Ask yourself: are they hot, tattooed, and do they have that glorious V that points right to the D? If the answer is *yes*, then move in with them, bend over and let them watch you over the security cameras. Take what you want with no apologies. And you know what you can do with those red flags? You can use them as cumrags.

Things in this book that could be concerning:

- Sexy time with strangers
- Unprotected sexy time (she is on birth control)
- CNC
- Controlling behavior between the men

This book is **MMMMF**, and there is a preexisting MM relationship between Ridge and Zeland.

There are lots of sexy scenes between Aspen and the men, and a sprinkle of scenes from their preexisting relationships. This short novella is just one big fuck fest, and it's best to read it for yourself.

Please head over to my website for a full list of triggers. I do not ever write the R word in my books. But there are still some things that could be concerning to some readers.

[Click here for Website](#)



Chapter One

Aspen

“Fuck off, you human equivalents of a participation award!”

Sure, it’s not the best insult I’ve ever thought up, but I’m furious and walking backward, away from the house, while my two ex-roommates watch me leave. I flip them off. Apparently they have wanted to ask me to move out for a while because I make their boyfriends uncomfortable.

Well, fuck their boyfriends!

All because Simon touched my ass, and I gave him a bloody nose. He deserved it, and yet I’m the one being punished. The fuck stain. And what is with fucking S names?

“Just so you know, your boyfriend has herpes. I overheard Lisa saying he blamed her.”

Sunny’s mouth drops open, and her face turns red. Yeah bitch, how do you like that shit? Your boyfriend is a whore and sleeps with the entire female population at Pinehaven University. Though Sunny had to know; she is head cheer bitch.

Honestly, I shouldn’t have accepted the room. It was a pity invite because her mother was best friends with mine back when they were in high school. Well, then my mom had me. But she dumped me on my grandmother’s doorstep and Gran raised me until she was sent to an old-age

home. I work my ass off to make sure she has what she needs. The woman is a damn saint and deserves the best.

“Eat a dick, Aspen,” Sabrina throws back.

My ass bumps into my Uber. “Shit,” I mumble, before turning and jumping into the back, throwing my bag beside me.

I don’t have many possessions. When I moved in with Sabrina and Sunny, the room came fully furnished, and I was grateful I didn’t have to use my small amount of savings to buy furniture. School and work are all I have ever known. From the time I was old enough, I worked at Mary’s hair salon, sweeping floors and cleaning. I think she felt sorry for me, but from there I picked up as many odd jobs as I could. I now work at the local college bar, The Syllabus. It pays well in tips—from horny rich college guys who think they have a shot with me, which they don’t. The last thing I want is to get knocked up and end up like my parents, or more specifically, my mother. I have not heard from her since my sixteenth birthday. I thought she came to see me, but I was dead wrong—she stormed in and yelled at my grandmother and left, without even a “Happy birthday, daughter.” My father? Who knows who he is? She refuses to tell us and I’m probably better off anyway.

For good measure, as the car pulls away from the curb, I rise on the seat and press my ass cheeks to the window. I’m sure that will end up all over social media, and at this point I don’t care. I slump back in my seat and pull the seatbelt on.

Finally looking up, I blink a few times and scream.

This is not my Uber!

Panic sets in, my heart thumps against my chest, and sweat dampens my armpits. It is my worst nightmare come true. This is a Ridez car. They came out last month, a new technological advancement with no fucking driver—that does not sit well with me. The car continues as I hyperventilate. I’m not scared of much in this life, but cars that drive themselves just ain’t right. How the fuck do they know when to stop? Or what if a rogue driver cuts in front? What then?

In front of me is a screen which shows where I’m going and it’s all the way across town—the opposite direction of where I need to be.

Stabbing the emergency button makes a woman’s voice fill the space.

“How may I help you?”

“I—I need you to let me out.”

“I’m sorry, miss. Once the car auto locks you cannot get out until your destination.”

My head is dizzy and I’m on the verge of throwing up. “You don’t understand. I need to get the fuck out of this car NOW. This is not my ride. LET ME OUT!”

“If you would just calm down . . .”

“Calm down. Calm fucking down?! Put me on to someone who can help me, or I will fuck this car up.” Rummaging through my bag, I pull out a pair of nail scissors. They’re not a great weapon, but I can do damage to these leather seats if needed. I won’t do it, or at least I hope it won’t come to that, but I can’t be held responsible for what I will do when in panic mode.

The voice goes quiet.

“Hello,” a male voice says, and his smooth tone momentarily calms my nerves.

His face appears on the screen.

My chest tightens like a steel band is crushing my ribs. I can’t get enough air—each breath comes too fast, too shallow, like I’m drowning. Pins and needles shoot through my fingers as my hands curl in on their own accord. My vision blurs at the edges, dark spots creeping in as the car sways. My throat feels tight, like I’m breathing through a straw. Panic claws at my ribs, pressing harder.

I know I have to slow down my breathing, but my body refuses to listen. The more I gasp for air, the more I feel like I’m suffocating. Fear grips me—am I dying? Is this it?

“If I’m going to die, just lay the truth on me. Eventually, there will be no air left in here and I will suffocate. Fuck, how much air do we get in here?”

“Breathe. Just breathe,” the soothing voice says.

Everything is moving too fast. I try to count my breaths, but numbers slip from my mind. Reaching out, I grasp for something—someone—to ground me.

Oh shit, I’m going to hurl, and it spews from my mouth to coat the plush black carpet.

“You won’t die, I promise. Just keep breathing.”

I do as he says, drawing in breath after breath.

“The car will bring you to a stop very soon.”

The dizziness fades, but my hands still tremble, my skin now cold and clammy. Each breath slowly evens out, but my lungs still ache, as if I've run a marathon. I slump forward, drained, like my body has wrung itself dry. Wetness coats my legs, hands, and even feet.

"Good girl," he praises.

"You could be a phone sex operator."

The man chuckles as I close my eyes and rest my head against the window.

"Oh fuck, did we kill a teenybopper?" comes a different male voice.

That has me opening my eyes and glaring at the screen. "Excuse me, asshole, who are you calling a teenybopper? And what are you—Australian? Throw another shrimp on the barbie, mate."

"I will have you know—"

"Not now, Zeland. I don't need my ass sued."

"Yeah, listen to Mr. Phone Sex," I mumble.

My entire body slumps back, and I hear someone chuckle. Fuck my life. Right when I thought my day couldn't get any worse, I get kidnapped by a self-driving car.

I don't know how long it continues driving, but Mr. Phone Sex keeps talking and I nearly drift off to sleep.

"I think she is asleep," the one called Zeland whispers. "Since when are you nice to anyone?"

"Since I've launched Ridez and this little shit climbed in and fucking vomited all over one of my cars. Do you know how much this will set me back?" Mr. Phone Sex snarls. "Wait until she gets the bill."

Someone snorts. "Yeah, she looks like she has the money to cover that; she barely looks like she can feed herself."

They keep arguing as everything around me goes black.

The issue with panic attacks is they hit hard and fast—anywhere, anytime. I hate small spaces. I hate not feeling in control. But no matter how hard I try, I have zero control, and once they're done, then I black out and sleep hard for a few hours.

“Do you think we killed her?” The whispered question registers as my brain comes back online.

“I fucking hope not—I don’t need this shit right now. You fix it and get rid of her.”

“But look how adorable she is. My cock is so hard right now.”

“Fuck off, Zee. Now isn’t the time for a boner.”

“Then maybe we shouldn’t have dressed her in one of your shirts. I’m a weak man.”

“Fix this! You’re the one who sent the car to collect your hookup. You’re the reason we ended up in this mess.”

I grind my teeth together. “I can hear you assholes,” I snap, opening my eyes.

The light assaults my eyeballs as I gaze up at an extremely attractive man. He’s not a douche jock; rather, he’s the sophisticated suit-wearing type who’s all man. He smiles down at me with his perfectly straight teeth. How tall is this man? Jesus.

“Okay, gigantor, step back.”

The man moves back with a smirk as I sit up.

Looking down, I see I’m now dressed in a white button-up shirt. I know I’m tiny; I stopped growing at a solid five foot one when puberty hit. But in my ass-kicking boots, I’m at least two to three inches taller.

“I’m not that tall. I’m only six foot four. And it’s Zeland, actually.”

With a snort, I stand from the lounge chair.

“Maybe you’re just short,” he adds.

“No shit, Sherlock, you solved the case. Yes, I’m short, but I can still cause major bodily harm. Now where am I?”

“You’re at my house. I redirected the car because, well, you threw up everywhere and now I have to get it detailed. If it goes back to headquarters, it will lock up for the night.”

I shake my head. “So let me get this straight—you sent a car for a hookup, but were sending the poor bitch to your headquarters and not to your house.”

“I don’t need them getting any ideas; women can be crazy.”

My eyes widen, and rage pulses through my veins. “Women are not all crazy! Men are just fucking assholes with no clue.”

His eyes roam over my body, and I wrap my arms around my waist.

“Maybe. But when you have money, you need to separate your real life from the women you fuck. However, I wasn’t hooking up, I was interviewing her for a job. I don’t shit where I eat.”

I raise a brow; I don’t believe a word. “It was nice meeting you, but if you could point me in the direction of my clothes and bag, I will get out of your hair.”

“The housekeeper is washing your clothes—you vomited on everything. It reminded me of my thirteenth birthday and the epic goon bag—”

“Goon bag?”

He sighs. “Never mind, it’s an Australian thing. Your clothes should be done soon, and then you can leave. Would you like something to eat or drink while you wait?”

“Yes, actually I would. After the shit show of a day I have had, I am hungry, thirsty, and fucking horny, and there is fuck all I can do about them on my own except the last one.”

His eyes go wide and then laughter echoes through the room. This place is massive and decorated minimally. Who would want to live in a house where you can hear an echo when you talk?

“I can help you with all three, but how about we start with something to eat?”

I narrow my eyes at him. As if Mr. Rich and Fancy had any chance of getting into my pants—well, if I was wearing any. His shirt falls to my damn knees, but the material is the softest I have ever felt in my life.

“That sounds great—the food, that is.”

Zeland leads me out of the living room, and I try to keep up with his longer stride. Not that I’m complaining about being behind him because he has a fantastic ass. The man is gorgeous, impeccably put together, his blond hair longer at the top and clipped neatly around the sides. He turns back, smirking at me, and the twinkle in his blue eyes screams he is trouble with a capital T.

We reach the kitchen, and he pulls out a stool at the kitchen island. “So, tell me about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?” I shrug. “Because there really isn’t much to tell.”

“Your name would be a good start, and how you ended up in my car a close second.”

His smile is contagious, and it's the only explanation why I smile back. "My name is Aspen. I got kicked out of my share house today. And while I was telling my roommate that her boyfriend has herpes, I jumped into your death trap. And . . . well, you know the rest."

"You got kicked out of your house? Why?"

I snort. "Many reasons, but mainly they didn't like how I punched one of their boyfriends in the nose because he touched my ass."

"Sounds like he deserved it," Zeland replies as he opens the fridge and grabs out a plate, putting it into the microwave. "So what are your plans now?"

I shrug. "No idea. I was heading into work to see if one of the girls would let me crash on their couch until I can find something else."

"Your parents can't help you out?"

I shake my head. "I haven't seen my mother in five years, and she refuses to tell me who my father is. Though I have enough saved to get a place on my own, I would prefer not to spend it. My grandmother isn't doing well, and I help with her expenses, plus I have school."

"School?" he says, scrunching his nose, and I laugh.

"I go to PHU. I do plan to do more than sell myself on the corner."

His eyes go wide, and he opens his mouth, which makes me laugh even harder.

"I'm not a prostitute, if that is what you were thinking. The thought has crossed my mind about becoming a stripper, except I can't dance, I'm really not that sexy, and my tits are way too small to draw a crowd."

The microwave dings and he turns to grab the plate out, then puts it down in front of me. My mouth waters at the sight of the meat and vegetables; it's been a while since I had a home-cooked meal.

"Are you sure it's okay if I eat this? It's not your dinner?" I ask, picking up the cutlery he places down beside the plate. He shakes his head.

"It's Ridge's," he says as I take my first mouthful.

"Ridge?"

He chuckles. "The dick who you thought had a phone sex voice. He is my business partner, best mate, and stepbrother. Or he was my stepbrother for a brief two years."

"And you're letting me eat his food, why?"

"Because . . ." he says, turning his back to me as he gets two bottles of water from the refrigerator. "It's fun to piss him off and knowing that the

girl who derailed his afternoon also ate his food will be hilarious.”

I contemplate feeling guilty but decide against it. These men look like they have more money than sense.

“Plus, he gets rough when he is angry.”

“So you like it rough? And you left out he’s your boyfriend.”

That makes him throw his head back in laughter, and I see the shadow of a tattoo peeking out from under his business shirt.

“Let me see if he’s still here and you can ask him if we are boyfriends.”

“Somehow, I don’t think he will find that funny.”

Zeland leans on the counter in front of me. “No, he wouldn’t. Ridge Ellington doesn’t do commitment, which suits me fine. I like to fuck. If it were up to me, we wouldn’t be talking—we would be fucking right now. I should have been a prostitute, except sucking an old man’s cock doesn’t sound appealing.”

I gag at the thought. That’s a hard no from me. “Hmm, I wouldn’t have pegged you as bi.”

“You could just peg me instead . . . if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“I wouldn’t know what I’m into. I don’t have time for complications or to get knocked up at twenty-one.”

A huge smile creeps over his face. “You’re a virgin, that’s cute.”

I snort. “Now I didn’t say that—I said I wouldn’t know what I like. I’m not the most experienced, and the handful of times I gave in to a jock were less than stellar. If I had to give a review, they would have gotten one star for at least getting it up.”

“Oh, Pocket Rocket, can I keep you? You could be my own personal fuck toy; we could have so much fun.”

“As appealing as that sounds, I have to go house hunting and find a second job.”

He wiggles his brows at me.

“You are not paying me to fuck you. That brings us full circle to the prostitute thing.”

“What if I offered you a room here while you look for somewhere else? It’s the least we could do for trapping you in one of our cars.”

He is a complete stranger—how could I possibly say yes? Though if I look for a room somewhere else, those people would be strangers too.

“You can call it even for not suing us.”

“Why would I sue you?”

“Because the Ridez car door should not have opened if you didn’t have the app on your phone with the booking. So technically, it malfunctioned.”

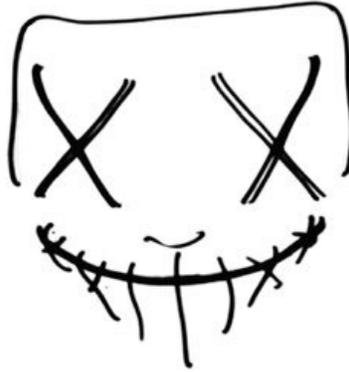
“Oh, well, I still wouldn’t sue you.”

“Please stay, it’s mostly only me here. Ridge stays at the penthouse above the office. We have more than enough room, and I will put you in a separate wing, so you feel safe.”

I’m still skeptical. Why would he offer me a room when he doesn’t know me? But right now I’m in no position to reject his offer. The girls at work barely tolerate me, and I get along with the men, but I know they want to fuck me; most have tried. I have no friends at PHU because I made a point not to make any, as I don’t have time to maintain them.

“Okay, a week max. It shouldn’t take me longer than that to find somewhere.”

That damn smile on his face is fucking contagious.



Chapter Two

Zeland

“YOU. FUCKING. WHAT?!”

I knew asking Aspen to stay would piss Ridge off, but he has been so into work the last year he’s barely come up for breath. He is like a damn robot and it’s not healthy, so recently I tried and failed to get a reaction out of him. Nothing has worked until now. He didn’t come home last night, as predicted, and I found him in his office smashing down a black coffee, probably his third of the morning.

“Come on, what was I supposed to do? She was in your clothes and had nowhere to go. I couldn’t just throw her out on the street.”

“Of course you would keep a stray—you were always bringing home animals. But you are doing this to piss me off, Zee, and I don’t like it. We have too much on the line.”

“Calm down, everything is fine. Ridez is doing fucking fantastic. You had one hiccup, which was my fault.”

Ridge flicks on the wall of screens, our home security system displayed on all of them. We have a smart house—every appliance, every inch of the house. I particularly love talking to Ridge through the refrigerator in my best Arnold Schwarzenegger voice and scaring the pants off him, though he doesn’t like it as much.

“What is she doing?”

I look at the screen and see Aspen in her underwear and a tank top, dancing and singing into a broom handle. “Sweeping the floor?”

“I can see that, genius. But why? We have a housekeeper.”

I pull the app up on my phone. “Pocket Rocket, we have a housekeeper, so there’s no need to sweep.”

Her head whips around as she searches for where the voice is coming from. “To your left, yep right there.”

She flips me off. Aspen is a tiny little thing with a big attitude, and sexy as fuck. She gives off an old-school Keesha vibe, with a raspy voice that makes my cock hard, and bleached-blonde hair, which is probably from a bottle with the way the yellow blends through.

What I wouldn’t give to feature her on my View4U app—it’s my baby and I’m super fucking proud of it. Ridge’s father gave me the start-up money, and I now own a kink app, one where people can film content and make money off other people’s views. Any kink you can think of you will find on there—well, any legal ones, that is. You can’t murder anyone and eat them; we stay within the law and for good reason.

“Stop ogling the homeless girl,” Ridge snaps.

“Fuck no! I like my girls feisty. Do you think she will scratch me?”

“I can’t deal with you right now. Can’t you go to your floor and annoy someone else?”

I step up behind him and grab the back of his neck. He might be a few inches taller than me, but I’m just as strong. When I push him into the floor-to-ceiling windows, he doesn’t fight back.

“Do you need me to relieve some of that tension? You have a meeting at eleven. You can’t snap at them like you do me.”

He moves swiftly, facing me in a split second, then sweeps my legs out from under me. In turn, I fall on my ass and smirk up at him as he unbuckles his belt.

We don’t fuck as much as we did as horny teenagers trapped under the same roof. It started one night after a party, when I drunkenly kissed him, and he told me the only place I could put my lips was his cock. He was probably trying to scare me away, but at the time, he didn’t know I was bisexual. I barely knew myself. Turns out I don’t discriminate who I fuck. Ridge, however, is more conservative in his selections. The asshole doesn’t believe in love; everything is a transaction to him. You would think with that mentality that he had a shitty upbringing, but no, his parents love him

and even their divorce was amicable—they just didn't love each other. Shit, after my mother did a number on his father, they still allowed me to live in their house and Harrison treated me like a son. He still does.

But Ridge has some notion in his head that falling in love will derail his career.

He is just about to undo his fly when his assistant's voice filters through the intercom. "Mr. Ellington, Genevieve Lancaster is here to see you."

I huff and push myself to my feet and Ridge redoes his belt as he walks toward his office phone.

"Let her in."

I whine at the thought of her.

"Don't start with me," Ridge snaps.

"She's the devil dressed in really expensive clothes."

Ridge shakes his head. "She's been our friend since we were kids. She really isn't that bad."

"Mark my words, that woman is going to drug you and take what she wants to get what she wants."

"And what is that?" he snaps.

"Your spawn, so she can trap you."

"Is that right? You Aussie brat," Genevieve purrs as she struts into Ridge's office. "I will have you know I don't need to trap anyone. I'm beautiful, rich, and have a lot to offer."

"Enjoy being woven into her web. I'm off to watch our new houseguest."

I turn and walk toward the door, giving Genevieve a wide berth—even her perfume could trap a man, luring them in to their unexpected death.

"It's illegal, you know," Ridge throws at me.

"Is not, she is in our house. Plus, I plan to make this fun. You remember what fun is, don't you?"

I don't wait for his reply. Instead, as I leave his office, I wink at his receptionist, Carmen; she is adorable, and we may have hooked up once. When I told Aspen I don't shit where I eat, I meant on *my* floor of Ridgeland Global Enterprises. Ridge's floor is fair game. Mainly because it annoys him when I screw his staff, but even more when I take them upstairs to the top floor and into his penthouse apartment. I never stay there; I only stop to fuck. It's a quick commute from the office and I won't have anyone turn up on my doorstep afterward.

I take the elevator down one floor and as the doors open, my grin widens. My office is way more fun than Ridge's. My staff have a fun work environment, and I watch as my assistant Elliott flies past me on a hoverboard and circles back.

"Morning, boss man. I left all of your messages on your desk, though I got a call earlier from your mother—"

I hold up my hand, interrupting him. "And what did she want?"

He smirks at me. "Money, of course. I told her you were out of the country, and I didn't know when you were due back."

"Good man."

"There's also a reporter sniffing around with accusations that there was a minor on your app."

I snort at that. There is no way. Ridge and I—well, mainly Ridge, who is a computer genius—make sure that everyone who signs up provides identification. Then we run it through a program designed by Ridge to make sure it's not fake. All our content is scanned before it's uploaded to make sure it does not have anyone in it who hasn't provided their identification. All our content providers and all our subscribers are twenty-one or older.

"Divert any of their calls to our legal department."

"Already did," he says, circling me again.

"I think you deserve a raise—you leave me no work to do."

"Nah, but I wouldn't say no to a date," he says with a flirty wink.

I chuckle. "You know my rules."

"Yeah, yeah, you don't shit where you eat. You could always trade me to Ridge."

"In your dreams. Now get back to work. I'll be in my office if you need me."

I leave Elliott and head into my office, loosening my tie and slipping off the stupid-ass shoes Ridge brought me—I only wear them to make him happy. If it was up to me, I would wear my converse. Flopping down into my chair, I go through the messages and push them aside. None are overly important and can wait. It's all target audiences, pricing models, developers, blah blah blah. I'm not feeling it today, not when I know there is a feisty blonde waiting in my house.

Pulling up our home security footage, I flick through the rooms, finding her in the games room. I snort when I see her playing some shooting game, turning up the volume to listen.

“Oh, boo-hoo. Rage quit, you little loser.”

She cackles to herself, and I watch as she takes out the others with ease one by one. “Be careful talking that much shit, boy. I will come over there and fuck your dad and become your new stepmom. Oh, he’s dead? Well, I’ll fuck your mom.”

I snort. This girl is something else.

“Come on, Dark Soul, I thought you had my back. You and I could be good friends . . . Fine, I promise I won’t fuck your dad. If you help me win, I’ll fuck you instead.”

I can’t help myself, bringing up the home app on my phone. “You really shouldn’t fuck strangers from the internet.”

Her head whips to the side. “But I should fuck strangers who trap me in their death cars instead?” I see her brow raise. “Fuck. Good save, I’m so fucking you now.”

I jot down this asshole’s username. “Why would you not want to fuck me? I have an enormous cock.”

She doesn’t turn, instead concentrating on playing her game. “The size of the boat doesn’t matter. It’s the motion of the ocean that counts.”

I snort. “Let’s see if you still believe that when I’m ruining your pussy and you’re screaming my name.”

“Why would I want you to ruin my pussy? I like it just the way it is.”

“Uh-huh, we’ll see. I’ll be home around six—would you like to grab dinner with me?”

“Can’t,” she throws back. “I’ve got work, but how do I get back inside once I leave?”

I smirk. “I’ll have Ronny give you a swipe card and the codes. She should be there soon.”

“And who is Ronny exactly?” she asks.

“Only the best woman in the world. She cleans, cooks, and does the laundry. She knows you’re there; she washed your clothes last night. Anything you need, just let her know.”

“I’m a big girl, and I can buy my own things. The room is more than enough.”

I’m not worried about her online safety—she doesn’t know it, but our gaming system is hooked up to state-of-the-art security. Her voice won’t sound like her own, so if she picked a female character, others will hear a generic female voice. Shutting off the cameras, I pick up my phone and dial

a man who is worth exactly the obscene amount we pay him—Ryker Maddox, our hacker. Ridge wouldn't give him that title because hacking is illegal, but that is basically what he does.

“Zeland,” he answers the call. “What can I do for you?”

“I need you to find me some information.”

“Do you have names this time, or just a seedy picture from a nightclub?”

I laugh at him. “That was once, and she had nice tits. I have a first name, Aspen—”

“Ahh, the little blonde staying at your house. Ridge already called last night. I sent him the file this morning. Did you want me to send it to you too?”

“Yes, and I also want some information on a gamer named capital X, little x, DarkSoul01, all one word and then little x and capital X.”

“Done. Give me a few hours and I will email it to you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Send the invoice when you're ready.”

He ends the call with no response; Ryker isn't one for pleasantries. My secure email pings and I open the file Ryker has sent through on Aspen.

It has all the basics:

Aspen Anne Ashcroft

Born on February first

She is twenty-one years old and attends PHU, grew up near here in a small town called Maple Hollow with her grandmother. Father unknown, mother MIA. I'm sure if Ryker dug further, he could find her, but unless asked, I won't pry into her personal life. She has no felonies and leads a fairly boring life. Aspen currently works at a college bar called The Syllabus close to campus. She has five thousand dollars in her account, and her transaction history is mostly at the facility caring for her grandmother. Otherwise, there is minimal spending, which concerns me because it means she isn't eating well. She doesn't appear to own a car, and there is no record of an ex-boyfriend. I don't know why I care, but I find her fascinating. Along with the fact that she is stunning, and my cock noticed.

What I would give to film some content with her. I haven't filmed in so long, as I no longer need to. In the early days of View4U, I put out content to get the app moving. While Ridge made me use a fucking skull mask to hide my identity, it was still some of the most fun I have ever had—even Ridge joined in. I shake the memories from my head.

Chasing girls in masks is not my kink, chasing men is.

They are less fragile, and I love the hunt, but I would make an exception for her.



Chapter Three

Aspen

When Zeland offered me a place to stay, I was skeptical; he had to have an ulterior motive. Yet as the days go by, he doesn't ask for anything. He isn't creepy. Sure, we flirt, but the guy is fucking hot. I've concluded that he has a hero complex; he gets off on helping someone less fortunate than himself. I googled him and Ridge, and choked on my own spit when I saw their net worth—how can two people have so much money? It doesn't seem fair. There is no way they could spend it all in their entire life, even if they stopped earning money. It doesn't mean I will take handouts, though.

This semester's syllabus is busy, and tonight at work a bunch of jocks are celebrating a win. I don't mind because they'll draw a massive crowd who will drink a lot and tip well. While I'm not a huge fan of how handsy some of them get, if you want to tuck a fifty into my bra, I won't stop you as long as you know it doesn't mean I will fuck you. Not after the Jax Wilder incident last year, when I stupidly gave in and went home with a dudebro jock, who had tipped me earlier in the night. After I refused to go back for seconds, he spread around campus that he had paid me. In retaliation, I may have written his number in the bar's male bathroom to "call for a good time." His response was to call me a psycho bitch, and he was very vocal about considering himself lucky he hadn't stuck his cock in me again. Though he was unimpressed when I replied that, with how small

his cock was, I wondered if it had happened again and I didn't realize. He wasn't small, maybe average, but I know how to hit a man where it hurts the most. Especially after the rumors he spread.

Barbie, the co-owner of The Syllabus, said I should have been the bigger person and let it go, but I'm not the bigger anything in this life. If you want to push me, I will push back ten times harder. It's just who I am.

Sweat drips down my ass crack; it's hotter than hell in here tonight. Our uniform is skimpy enough with tight black booty shorts and a V-neck shirt with the logo. For the girls blessed with tits, the V-neck is great, but I need a padded bra to give the girls a pop. I play a role here, my eyes heavily lined and my face caked with makeup. My ass-kicking boots are non-negotiable as footwear, along with the one thing I have that belonged to my mom: her choker necklace from the 90s. It's a flimsy plastic material, but I have worn it since she gave it to me when I was thirteen. It's the one gift she ever gave me, and I keep it as a reminder not to get close to anyone, to not get my fucking hopes up.

"Aspen!" Shiloh, one of the bar staff, shouts over the music. "These are for table thirty. They requested you bring them over personally and they ordered top shelf. Maybe smile a little—the tip could be worth it."

I plaster on a smile, and she nods as I take the tray with two drinks on it. If I had to guess, it would say the golden liquid on ice is whiskey—fancy. Table thirty is a booth on the other side of the bar, away from most of the noise.

As I approach the booth, I hear a vaguely familiar voice, but as I place the drink down and turn to see his friend, I shake my head.

"Zeland, what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see where you work, roomie. It's boring at home without you. You should quit and I'll pay you to entertain me."

In my peripheral vision, Ridge rolls his eyes before taking a sip of his drink.

"I've already told you, I'm not a prostitute."

Ridge coughs. "So this is the reason you dragged me down here. You were bored and wanted to see the stray you brought home."

"Fuck you very much, I'm not a stray," I snap.

He looks up at me, his eyes a deep brown with golden undertones, the type that claw their way into your soul.

"So you have a house?" His stare is unfaltering.

“Well, no, but that’s only because Zeland was nice enough to offer me a room.”

“So you’re a stray. It’s just like always. We were not looking for a roommate—I mean, do we look like the type of men who have roommates?”

“No, you look like an arrogant, self-entitled prick. I’m wishing Zeland would shove his cock down your throat right now so you wouldn’t talk. It really is a shame because your voice is enough to bring a woman to orgasm.”

Zeland throws his head back and laughs, while Ridge dismisses me.

“Oh, before I forget, I brought you this.” He dangles out a set of car keys. “And before you get your knickers in a twist, it’s not a handout, just a loan.”

“You’re lending me your car?”

Zeland scoffs. “Oh god no, I wouldn’t let you drive my baby, Pocket Rocket. This is one I purchased when I was wasted. I don’t even remember buying it.”

Now I roll my eyes. “Wow, isn’t that a problem most of us would love? But when I’m drunk, I accidentally buy two chicken nugget meals from McDonalds, not a fucking car.”

“Maybe some of us just work harder,” Ridge snipes, and I turn my glare on him.

“Let me guess, Mr. More Money Than Sense, you started a business when you were still in college.” Okay, I read that fact on the internet, but he doesn’t need to know. “And I bet daddy gave you the money for the start-up. Well excuse me, but not all of us have parents who will throw money at us. Or parents full stop. I do the best I can to support myself and my grandmother, so you can shove your entitled opinion right up your fucking ass, and while you’re there, remove the stick.”

I snatch the keys from Zeland. “Thank you for the loan—I appreciate it. I’m only taking it because drunk Joe likes to follow me home sometimes and I don’t want him to know where you live.” With that said, I storm away.

Over the next few hours, I keep serving them, because if Barbie finds out I gave Ridge a tongue lashing, she might actually fire me. Eventually Ridge and Zeland leave, then after that the rest of my shift flies, and I make a decent amount in tips. Barbie lets everyone keep the tips they make. At my last job, they put all the tips into a kitty and split them evenly. I’m not

totally against that idea, but one bitch did zero work and still made the same. There may or may not have been hair pulling when I said as much, and I also got fired for starting that fight.

Zeland left me a huge tip, with way too many zeros, and I will bring it up with him at the house. I clock off and head out to the parking lot, holding up the key and clicking it. When the lights on a fancy-looking silver SUV flash, I almost die. Holy fuck, that is a nice car, but I have no idea what type; my knowledge of cars is restricted to color.

Why he left me a car this size is beyond me. I haul myself up into the driver's side and pull the seat all the way forward toward the steering wheel. I'm not even sure how to work this thing, so I push my foot on the brake, then press the button that says start. The car comes to life.

Thankfully, the car has GPS because my phone is an old piece of crap that I refuse to upgrade until it dies. If I'm honest, it will be soon, but with no friends or family besides my grandmother, and no one who calls or texts me except her facility or Barbie calling me in for an extra shift, it's not a pressing expense.

I can't wipe the smile off my face as I drive through the streets with the stereo blasting "Beautiful Things" by Benson Boone, and I turn the volume up more and belt out lyrics at the top of my lungs. I pull into Zeland's driveway, stopping at the gate, and hold my card against the fancy security box. The light flashes and brings up a numbered pad where I type in the code his housekeeper gave me. The gates slide open and I pull in, driving all the way to the house. I also need to stop referring to it as a house because no house I have seen in my life looks like this one.

The garage door opens as I approach, and I wonder if it's automatic when the car arrives back or if Zeland is watching on his security camera. I flip him off through the windscreen, just in case.

Moving the SUV into the underground garage slowly, I look around and my mouth drops open. There aren't only a couple cars in here, this is like a showroom floor. There are big cars like this one, sports cars, regular-looking cars, trucks. I'm confident there is one of everything down here. Since they seem to be separated by type, I slow near the other SUVs and see a vacant spot. I pull in, parking a little wonky because I was scared to scratch any of them and they are packed in tight.

Thankfully, I'm small and I can slide out, but now I don't know how to get into the house from here. As I walk toward where it makes sense for a

door to be, I spot a large rack with keys and place these back where they belong. The door is where I guessed, and when I twist the handle, it clicks open.

I make my way upstairs into the kitchen. I have already memorized most of the places in this monstrosity of a house that I need: my room, the kitchen, the laundry, and the front door.

Speaking of the kitchen, I stop past and open the fridge to get my dinner. Zeland asked their housekeeper to make a plate for me. Pulling out the burritos, I put them into the microwave. While I wait, I push up onto my tippy-toes and get a glass down, then fill it with water. As I turn, I see a shadow from the corner of my eye, and as a natural reaction, I fling my glass of water at the intruder.

“For fuck’s sake, stray! What the fuck are you doing?”

I clutch my free hand to my chest, feeling my heart race. “Getting a fucking drink and dinner. What are you doing?”

The lights flick on, and I snort to see Ridge’s white shirt stuck to his chest. “I live here.”

“Obviously, dickhead, but why are you here lurking in the dark? Were you watching me?”

“I was *not* watching you. The awful music you were blasting in the drive was loud enough to wake the dead. I came down to get some water.”

“You’re welcome then—it seems the water found you.”

He rolls his eyes as he unbuttons his shirt, shrugging it off his wide shoulders. The man is not only tall, but built. That is a shitload of abs for one person, and his V . . . holy fucking shit, it makes my mouth water. An arrogant asshole should not have all that going on.

“Take a picture, it lasts longer,” Zeland says, appearing out of nowhere. He grabs me by the waist, lifts me effortlessly into the air, before kissing my cheek and depositing me back on the ground as my burritos beep. He walks over to the microwave and removes them, placing the plate quickly down onto the counter.

Seeing Zeland in only sweats isn’t uncommon, but both he and Ridge shirtless short circuits my brain. As Zeland leans back against the counter, his dick print doesn’t go unnoticed, and I move forward to grab my plate.

“Leaving so soon, Pocket Rocket?” Zeland quips.

“Yes, all those tanned abs, arrows to the D, and dick prints are making me hot. I need food, a shower, and to flick the bean before I do something I

will regret come tomorrow. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Zeland calls out. “If you need a hand, let me know.”

I shake my head and scurry as fast as I can from the room.

I will not fuck my roommate because I enjoy living here and Zeland is fun to be around. In no world would this work if we fucked—I would have a one-way ticket back on the street with nowhere to go.



Chapter Four

Aspen

All week, for every shift I have at The Syllabus, Zeland parks himself in the same booth. Normally, the women flock to him and it's hilarious watching them try to get his attention. Up until tonight, Ridge hasn't made another appearance. I've decided it's easier to work when he is around, even if he calls me stray and complains about the slow service—sorry, my legs are short and can only move so fast, douche. Compared to the other nights, there is a lack of female presence at the table. Ridge's "fuck off" vibe is strong and I don't blame them for giving it a wide birth.

Tonight, there isn't a spare seat in the building, and I haven't seen so many people packed in here since I started working for Barbie. She hired a local band to play, and they have a decent following. It's enough to keep us servers on our toes, though the tips tonight have been amazing.

"Hey, baby," some drunk idiot says, grabbing my arm and almost making the empty glasses piled on my tray topple to the floor. "What time do you get off?"

"On the twelfth," I throw back.

"The twelfth?" he asks, puzzled by my response, his drunken state not allowing him to catch the hint.

"Yeah, the twelfth of never."

"You'll change your mind—they always do."

“Ew,” I say, moving away from him a little. “That didn’t sound rapey at all. Maybe you should call it a night, buddy.”

I don’t wait for his response, moving away before I tell the idiot what I really think of men like him. Does he not realize he is the problem? Or do men like him think that just because they find a woman attractive, she should automatically want him back? Yeah, hard pass buddy.

“Two more drinks for your rich friends,” Marybeth, the new girl behind the bar, says as she pushes a tray toward me.

I’m almost positive Zeland has made it clear to everyone that only I am to serve his table. Fucking rich boys have no idea. I’m sure at their fancy clubs it works that way, but here, we have to keep things moving. We don’t have time for me to be their only server.

I place the empty glasses down and take the new tray, making my way across the floor to their table.

“Hey, Pocket Rocket. I haven’t seen you in almost half an hour.”

Ridge scoffs. “That’s because she is working.”

“Thank you, I think that might be the nicest thing you have said to me. Now say it slower in your sexy voice, so I can bank it for later.”

Zeland laughs and Ridge just shakes his head, not even dignifying me with a response.

“I will record him for you later, when I’m sucking his cock and he’s telling me how well I do.”

Ridge snaps his gaze to Zeland, and I laugh. “I think he might punish you now.”

“He knows I like it rough. Spank me, daddy.”

Ridge gags.

“Oh my god. Bite me, daddy,” I say in a fake feminine voice, and he gags again.

“He hates the word *daddy*,” Zeland says with a chuckle.

“I’m only a few months older than you, so the whole daddy thing doesn’t work. It makes me think of my dad and his whore of the month,” Ridge grits out.

“I will call you daddy,” some bimbo purrs, running her nails over Zeland’s shoulder. She appeared out of nowhere.

“Daddy, daddy, daddy,” I say, and both men look at me with a raised brow. “What? I thought if I said it three times another whore would appear.”

“Excuse me?!” the woman screeches.

“You’re excused,” Ridge says in his boss voice, the one he uses when he is on a phone call. It’s his “no room for argument” tone.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” she snaps at him.

“Considering his cock will be in my ass later, you probably should be talking to him,” Zeland says.

I laugh at the way her face contorts. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, bitch.”

“I’m going to speak to your boss,” she whines and storms off.

“Oh no!” I say in mock horror. “Not my boss!”

“You’re not afraid to get fired?” Ridge asks me.

I shake my head. “Why, when daddy has promised to take good care of me?” I laugh harder when he gags again, and I walk off to serve more customers.

But Barbie corners me when I reach the bar. “I had another complaint about you, Aspen. You need to be on your best behavior because you know I only allow three and then I’ll have to fire you.”

I sigh and take a tray handed to me as Marybeth whispers it’s for table eleven. “Barbie, she was harassing customers.”

“If they have a problem, they can make a complaint. You can’t take everything into your own hands.”

“Fine,” I huff, grabbing my tray and walking away before my mouth gets me fired for arguing back.

After an hour, Marybeth calls me over and tells me that the kitchen staff need me to take an order out. Connor, who works in the kitchen, smiles as I approach. “Order for your rich friends,” he says, sliding it toward me.

“Thanks, Con. Can you give me some cutlery? Something tells me one of them will need it.”

He raises a brow. “To eat a burger?”

I nod, since I have a feeling that Ridge doesn’t eat with his hands, no matter the food. Once I have their cutlery, I head toward their table. They are talking animatedly, and I see Ridge smile—damn, that man would be dangerous if he did that all the time.

“What’s wrong with your face?” I ask as I get closer.

“Nothing is wrong with my face,” he says, and I place their tray on the table.

“Are you sure? Your lips are doing something weird.”

Zeland laughs, and Ridge’s usual scowl comes back.

“That’s better—you fixed it. One day the wind will change, and you’ll be stuck like that. You’re lucky I came past when I did.”

“Stray, you’re lucky Zee likes you so much. With the press of a button, I could ruin your life.”

I chuckle at his empty threat. “Why waste your time? I do just fine ruining my own life, thank you very much.”

“You’re impossible,” he mumbles, picking up the cutlery, which makes me smile.

“When do you get a break?” Zeland asks, and I shrug.

“When these two rich pricks stop throwing money at my boss to get me to wait on their table. They’re so needy.”

Zeland takes my arm and pulls me into his lap. “I guess they just really enjoy your company.”

“Zeland, you just want to get in my pants. If I let you in, you would lose interest and shit would get weird.”

“Maybe you would move out,” Ridge grumbles.

I turn to face Ridge. “Don’t lie, you would miss me. And would it kill you to pick your burger up with your hands? The kitchen staff were bamboozled when I asked for cutlery.”

His eyes widen. “You asked for cutlery for me?”

I nod and Zeland wraps his arms around my waist. “I did. I figured a man as sophisticated as yourself wouldn’t eat with his hands like a commoner. You would want to distinguish your class somehow.”

Zeland snorts from behind me and whispers, “You realize the suit I’m wearing costs more than you would earn in a year?”

“About that—who wears a suit to a college bar? Unless the guy wants a hookup with some scrappy college girl who he can throw away the next day.”

“Why would I come to a place like this to find a scrappy college girl when one lives in my multi-million-dollar house free of charge?”

“I’m a resourceful kinda girl—I had it all planned out. Getting in that car, having a panic attack, then vomiting everywhere. It was all part of my master plan to bag a millionaire like you. Is it working?”

Ridge smiles, like an actual full, white-toothed smile, and as I smile back, I realize what I’m doing. Is the grump actually warming up to me?

“Told you he likes you,” Zeland whispers in my ear.

“Alright, boys, I better get back to work. You really should let some of the other girls serve you—they could use the tips.”

“Why would we do that?” Ridge asks. “We only come here because Zeland insists on seeing you, and the more money I give you in tips, the quicker you can move out. He says you won’t take charity, so I can’t just buy you a place. Tipping you well is the next best thing.”

“Thank you, I think. I’m really not sure if you’re being nice or mean, but I will take it as nice.”

Zeland chuckles beneath me, and I stand, straightening my work shirt. As I walk away, I look back over my shoulder and both men are watching me. I sigh and roll out my shoulders—leaving them will be bloody hard. Since leaving Gran’s, I have not lived anywhere I actually liked. They’ve only been places to sleep, and I liked the people even less. Yet I actually enjoy Zeland’s company, and Ridge is growing on me. Under his grumpy exterior, there is something softer, and I want to dig deeper and find out more. And the house, well, who wouldn’t love living in a mansion they didn’t have to clean?

Oh, I’m fucked, royally fucking fucked.

I should leave. I spend the next half an hour of my shift filling orders, while coming up with reasons I need to leave, and yet I don’t want to go through with it. So my inner musing turns into a pep talk about it being okay to be happy. Not everything needs to be so deep, and Zeland and Ridge are fine with me staying at their house. Sure, I know Ridge is put out by it, but Zeland assures me if he didn’t want me there, he would have thrown me out by now. I can tell he isn’t one to do anything he doesn’t want to, and the fact remains that he is home almost every night, which is something Zeland says he hasn’t done in months. I also love gaming with DarkSoul. It’s one of the highlights of my day, when I get to sit down and relax. Some people play sports, some like to read, but me, I love to blow shit up and shoot shit. The highlight is making people feel inferior because they got beat by a woman, one that likes to talk shit and gives back as good as she gets.

By the time my shift winds down, I have decided I will stay as long as they will have me. But I need to start paying rent or at least contributing somehow. Maybe they will let me buy groceries.

“Heyyy, beautiful,” some random drunk douche slurs as I walk past.

“Not interested,” I mumble. I’m tired, not in the mood, and my shift ends in a few minutes. I just want to go home and fall face-first on my bed, which I appreciate feels like I’m sleeping on a soft cloud.

“Hey, why the rush?” he says, coming around in front of me, and I cross my arms over my chest with a sigh.

“I want to go home. They called last drinks. Finish yours and be on your way.”

“You’re going home? Maybe you want company,” he says, stumbling into me and grabbing my pussy.

With a gasp of shock, I push him back, and he laughs. He isn’t as drunk as he is making out, and as I step closer to him, he perks up.

“Maybe I do want some company,” I purr, making him smile in a way that gives me the creeps. I grab his cock lightly. “But you would be the last man on the planet I would take home.”

“You whor—”

He doesn’t get to finish his sentence before I twist his cock so hard he will feel it for days, and he drops to the ground like a sack of shit.

“Fuck, stray, are you okay?” Ridge asks, looking me over.

I nod as my hands shake. Fuck, my anxiety is going to make me vomit.

“Aspen!”

Shit, double fucking shit!

Barbie races over and takes one look at the man lying on the floor. “You know what this means?”

I nod. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fired.”

“Fired? On what grounds,” Ridge demands. “Aspen works harder than anyone else and you are going to fire her after a drunk patron sexually assaults her?”

“Who was sexually assaulted?” Zeland asks, having missed everything that happened.

“Aspen,” Ridge spits. “I’m getting my lawyers on this first thing tomorrow. Good luck running your business by the time I’m done with you.”

Barbie laughs. “I would like to see you try, boy.”

“Don’t waste your breath—it’s not worth it. I can easily find another job,” I say, trying to defuse the situation. “Can we just go, please?”

I’m still shaking as Zeland takes my hand in his, and as Ridge goes to step over the man on the ground, he bends down and snaps a picture of him.

“You’re going to regret touching what’s not yours,” he seethes, and returns to his full height before kicking the man right in his stomach, causing him to groan in pain.

Zeland pulls me away and I follow behind him, his large strides hard to keep up with. When we push through the front doors, I gasp for air. Ridge stands in front of me and places a hand on either side of my face.

“Breathe, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Slowly . . . that’s a good girl.” Ridge keeps talking until the panic releases me from its grip.

“I knew you liked me.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “I just don’t want you to die on my watch, stray. Zeland, you drive her back to the house. I’ll be home shortly.”

“Was already planning on it,” Zeland says as Ridge turns to leave. “Ridge . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t do anything stupid, just come home.”

They stare at each other for a few moments and then Ridge turns and leaves. I don’t ask what that was about; it’s none of my business. Now that I’m no longer in a panicked state, anger is flaring through my bones.

Zeland drives us home in silence. When we get back, he tells me he is going to shower, and I let him know I’m going to game for a while. Tonight was a shitshow, and I shouldn’t have been surprised something happened. It’s not the first time I’ve been fired for reacting badly to being treated like a piece of meat.



Chapter Five

Arlo

Designing video games is my dream job. Working for Ridgeland Global Enterprises has always been my ultimate goal, though landing a job there is not so easy. I have been trying for an entire year, with no luck scoring a callback. I even applied for other positions within the company just to get my foot in the door, but still no luck.

Pulling up the View4U app, I scroll to one of my favorite creators. He doesn't do anything except tell me how to get myself off—and not even just me, but his followers in general. I'm blazed as fuck. I hate the night, and I rarely sleep, spending my time watching the darkness turn into the early morning light.

Instead, I've been beta testing a new game. The pay is half decent for a newer company, and I even convinced them to allow me to bring a friend. I use the term friend loosely since I only know her as UrNewStep_Mom, but damn, I enjoy her company. She is refreshing and can fit in with the guys, giving as good as she gets without having her feelings hurt.

I wish I could meet a woman like her in real life. Not that she would want a twenty-three-year-old man who still lives with his mother, has no real job prospects, and nothing going for him. Besides, I'm not six feet tall with abs for days. I'm five foot ten on a good day, though my body is decent for a guy who doesn't go to the gym, eats terribly, and smokes too

much weed when I get bored. I know the mom part scares people away, but even if I had a job, I would most likely still live here. It's always been us against the world, and as far as moms go, mine is pretty cool.

Wrapping my fingers around my cock, I lean back in my bean bag, my blunt hanging from my lips as I listen to the creator's raspy voice telling me to stroke it slow. I take my time as my mind wanders to UrNewStep_Mom, picturing what she might look like in real life. Is she a brunette, or maybe a blonde? Is she tall—no, with that fiery personality, I think she's a short little thing. Playing against her is like foreplay, and my cock gets hard the second she wipes out an entire team of men.

My headset sparks to life and I grip my cock tighter. "Fucking stupid piece of shit," comes through the speakers.

"Hey!" I chuckle, surprised she is even awake at this time of the morning. "I didn't do anything."

"Oh shit, not you, DarkSoul! My boss fucking fired me. Can you believe that? I really needed that job, and sure, I should have kept my hands to myself, but my temper is my downfall. I can overlook a sneaky ass squeeze, even if I shouldn't, but the motherfucker touched my pussy."

Releasing my cock, I tuck it away, now too invested in wanting to murder someone to continue. "What did you do?"

"I grabbed his dick and twisted it as hard as I could. It served the fucker right. But I feel like I have a sign on my forehead that reads: touch me. You'd think my resting bitch face would scare them away, yet they don't see it when they're drunk."

I snort. "I guess it's a good thing you have to look for a new job. What about those fancy-pants rich guys you live with? Maybe they could give you a job?"

She scoffs. "Oh, I'm sure one would, but my job title would be live-in whore."

I stub out the blunt in the ashtray beside me. "Is your living situation even safe?"

She chuckles, and the way she sounds is weird, almost as if AI is being used to cover her real voice. I don't bring it up—if she wants to protect her identity from strangers on the internet it's a smart thing to do.

"Yes, I'm safe, but thank you for asking. They are very respectful, hot as fuck, and every time I see them semi-naked, my pussy wants to ride them."

“Why don’t you? I mean, it saves finding a hookup.”

She sighs. “Nothing good ever comes from sleeping with a roommate.”

“Didn’t you say it was temporary? Maybe your last roommates were just immature. Set ground rules and see where it goes.”

“You’re wise, DarkSoul.”

“My name is Arlo,” I say. I’ve never shared my name with anyone online before, but something about her calls to me.

“Nice to meet you Arlo, I’m—”

A muted voice in the background cuts her off. “Are you seriously about to tell a stranger on the internet your name? They could be some pervert in their mom’s basement, seeking beautiful women to kidnap.”

She laughs hysterically. “You called me beautiful!”

“That is all you got from that? I don’t know what he sees in you or why he keeps you around.”

“It’s my sparkly personality.”

“Thankfully, with our technology, he won’t even know the sound of your voice. We use the best Ridgeland has on offer. Just be careful.”

“Yes, daddy!” she yells.

I knew the voice sounded a little off. “Everything okay?” I ask as the game loads.

“Yeah,” she says with a sigh. “I think he has it out for me because I threw up in his car. I panic when I’m stressed, and I vomit. It’s not my fault. I think he secretly likes me, though, because apparently he is normally not at home, and since I’ve been here, so has he. Maybe he’s jealous—I know they fuck.”

“Your male roommates fuck?” I ask, not caring that the intro to the game is now on the screen.

“Yup, but they are not boyfriends. Commitment issues or something. Why? Do you not like men fucking?”

That makes me laugh. “No, I prefer men over women. I’m not opposed to a girlfriend one day, but I honestly don’t know if I could ever be happy with only her. I know it makes me sound like a prick to want my cake and eat it too.”

“No judgment here. So you want a poly relationship.”

“I don’t know. I think having a girlfriend and a boyfriend might work for me, but I think I’d want them to have a relationship as well.”

I talk a big game, but I'm not sure I'm ready to tell her how much of a loser I am. Talking to people in real life is a huge issue for me. I say the wrong thing, my cheeks go bright red, and I run. My experience amounts to one blow job from Millie Baker in my senior year of high school, where I came in her mouth after like thirty seconds. She then said, "Is that it?" and I went red as bile rose in my throat. I was so embarrassed I couldn't look at her again and have actively avoided women since. Being a virgin at twenty-three is embarrassing, and I think I might die that way. It's fine, my hand gets a good workout.

"You should do whatever you want, as long as everyone consents."

"You make it sound so easy."

That makes her laugh. "If it's what you want, it could be. Tell me what you look like."

"I don't think it's so much what I look like. I'm average height, about five ten-ish, dark curly hair that could do with a cut, but I won't get it until my mom forces me. Oh, and red flag, I still live with my mom at twenty-three."

"Hey," she states. "Personally, I think it's a good quality if you treat her right. My grandmother always used to say you can tell a lot about a man from how well he treats his mom."

"I treat her well; she is my best friend."

"Tell me more about what you look like," she encourages.

"Not much else to tell. Dark eyes, tanned skin, lots of tattoos. My cousin Joey owns a shop and uses me as his guinea pig. Lucky he's pretty good."

She chuckles. "I'm not hearing a downside, unless you're really an old man in his mother's basement luring in unsuspecting victims."

That makes me bellow out a laugh. "Definitely not an old man. And to lure in a woman, I would have to be able to talk to one."

She gasps in mock horror. "Am I not a woman?"

"*You* could also be an old man in a basement for all I know. I mean, your roommate confirmed the voice I hear is not yours."

"It's not, but they are super privacy freaks, and since I live here, I respect that they want to keep everything private."

My phone dings before I can respond, and I see my favorite creator on the View4U app has signed off. "So what's with your username? Do you have a stepmom kink or something?"

“Nah,” she says as the game starts, and her avatar follows me into it. “I just like to piss off men in the game. Most can’t handle when I’m better than them and I barely have to try half the time. I don’t know if I have any kinks, to be honest. Sex complicates things. I don’t want to let a one-night stand choke me and slap my ass so I can find out, if you know what I mean.” UrNewStep_Mom fires off some shots at the characters behind me, and we keep walking our avatars deeper into the abandoned mall. “Do you have any kinks?”

I hesitate, then shake my head at myself. I can tell her, it’s not like we’ll ever meet. “I like to watch the View4U app. There is one guy who talks you to orgasm step-by-step.”

“Now that sounds like an app I should download.”

I chuckle. “I’m also obsessed with masked men, or women, not that I have come across a masked woman on there before. The thought of being chased and fucked is thrilling.”

“And that’s something you would want in real life? No judgment—I’m just not sure how I would feel about being chased. Like even knowing it’s all make believe, my anxiety would still make me throw up.”

This conversation had taken a turn, and I don’t hate it. “It would be a dream come true for me. I’m so shy in real life, I can’t talk to anyone I’m sexually interested in because I turn bright red and stutter or just run away. The thought of being chased and someone pulling my hair while forcing me to my knees—”

“Damn, hearing you talk like that, I’m going to need to rub one out right now.”

“Y-you could if you wanted to,” I stutter out, then want to slap myself on the forehead for being a creepy idiot, feeling my cheeks heat instantly.

She chuckles. “Do you want to hear me come, DarkSoul?”

I take a deep breath as I spray bullets at an unsuspecting zombie. “I wouldn’t be opposed to it.”

“If you want to fuck yourself, do it in your own room,” a voice booms.

UrNewStep_Mom’s laughter filters through my headset. “Where’s the fun in that?” she says, taunting one of her roommates. “Maybe you shouldn’t spy on me, then you wouldn’t have to see it.”

“It’s not spying when you are in my house.”

“Oh, it’s one hundred percent spying, especially when you should be working. Don’t you have a business to run, yet you’re listening to me talk

about fucking myself?”

“You’re impossible.”

UrNewStep_Mom laughs again and takes out a zombie clawing its way out of a dead carcass, which makes my stomach coil. “Maybe I have a kink after all.”

“I can see the appeal of being watched.” Even though I think it’s super weird that her roommates watch her through their home security cameras.

“I think it would be hot if I never had to look them in the eye again.”

“You have a point. I wouldn’t be able to face a person again who has watched me get fucked. That’s what I like about the View4U app—so many never even get naked. If I wasn’t so shy, I would sign up.”

A knock has me turning to see my mom standing in the doorway of my room. “Hey, baby. I made you some food.”

“Thanks, Ma. I’ll be up in a second.”

Ma works night shifts sometimes, but she always makes me breakfast before she crashes.

She smiles warmly. “Okay, but open a window. It smells like weed and dirty socks down here.”

UrNewStep_Mom chuckles. “Tell your mom I said hi. I’ll talk to you tomorrow—we have a zombie plague to sort out.”

“I will.”

“Talk later,” she says, before signing off.

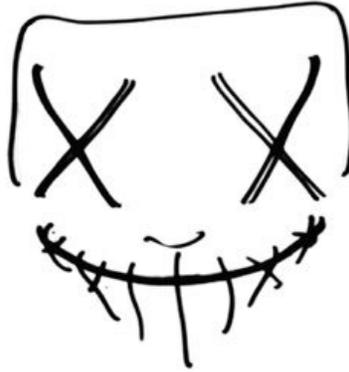
I walk upstairs with a smile on my face. My mom is pulling boxes out of a shopping bag when she looks over at me.

“What’s made you so happy?” I shrug, causing her to huff. “Arlo Atlas Kross, don’t you shrug your shoulders at me.”

I push my glasses up with a smirk. “It’s nothing. I met a girl online and I finally feel like I’m learning to not be a spluttering idiot around someone I’m attracted to.”

“Any girl would be lucky to have you. You’re such a catch, baby.”

That makes me snort, but I don’t correct her. She is my mom and nothing I say will change her mind. She loves me, maybe a little too much, but she is good people, and I don’t care what anyone has to say about me being a momma’s boy.



Chapter Six

Aspen

Now that I'm not working, I'm bored out of my mind. My classes are dull as shit and I'm ready to throw in the towel.

"Why do you look like you're plotting world domination?" Zeland asks as he walks into the kitchen.

"Contemplating ditching classes today to look for a job."

"No luck on the job hunt then?"

I shake my head. After talking to Arlo and his mention of how most of the creators on the View4U app don't get naked, I went down a rabbit hole. I watched the free previews on some accounts, and he was right—there are no masked women.

"Though my friend Arlo mentioned an app called View4U. I've looked into it—maybe that's a viable option."

Zeland splutters and I look over at him. He has spat water down his business shirt. "You want to become a kink creator?"

I shrug. "Maybe. Do you know about the app?"

Nothing good is about to come out of his mouth, judging from the smile on his face. "I sure do. Honestly, I don't know many people who don't. What content would you do?"

"Well, I was talking to Arlo when Ridge went all daddy on me about talking to strangers—well, actually, it was about not masturbating in front

of strangers.”

Zeland laughs. “I so need to hear this.”

“I made a comment about flicking the bean in the gaming room, and he was watching me on the cameras again or listening. The thought of being watched is kind of hot, and that’s now on the list of things that I might like. Anyway, Arlo and I were talking, which turned into him sharing his kinks, and he mentioned the lack of females in masks on the app. The idea intrigues me, but I have no one to chase. I kind of wish I knew where he lived because he has a kink and I maybe want to make content.”

“He actually lives in Meadow Hills, about twenty minutes from here.”

I know where Meadow Hills is—I worked at a bar there in the past. “How do you know where he lives?”

“We take cyber safety seriously and Ridge may have done—”

“Ridge may have done what?” the man himself interrupts, strolling into the kitchen in his impeccable suit. He smells like a million dollars, with not even a strand of hair out of place. I walk over to the counter and hand him a travel mug with the quote: “Despite the look on my face, you’re still talking.”

“You made me a coffee?” he asks, reluctantly taking the travel mug from me.

I roll my eyes. “It’s not poisoned—frankly, because I didn’t think of it before I made it.”

Zeland laughs and pulls his juice from the refrigerator, drinking straight from the bottle. It’s some Australian juice he gets imported.

Ridge reads the quote and smirks. “Thanks,” he gruffs. “Zee, are you driving in with me today?”

“Not today. I hate working late and waiting for you. I was thinking about bringing Aspen into the office.”

“Me? Why? You already told me you wouldn’t give me a job because you don’t shit where you eat and you’re determined to eat me.”

Zeland’s smile takes over his face and Ridge’s brows furrow. “I’m not giving her a job, Zee. It’s bad enough she lives in my house.”

“Our house, and not for a job, Pocket Rocket. You said yourself you wanted to ditch class, so how about a tour of my office?”

“Do I have to get into one of those god-awful cars?”

“He doesn’t own Ridez, I do. And just stay on your floor—I don’t need any distractions today.” Ridge storms out of the kitchen.

“I think he likes me,” I say jokingly.

“He definitely does. He took a sip out of the travel mug, and he would never do that otherwise. He’s very particular about his life. Go get dressed in something comfortable and meet me back here when you are done.”

“Can’t I go like this?” I joke because I’m in a T-shirt, underwear, and socks that go up to my knees, with my hair pulled into a messy bun.

“You could come naked if you want—I don’t mind at all. Just know the office is busy and you might want to wear pants.”

I laugh and nod before walking away. “You’re right, my future husband might work there, so I should make myself presentable.”

“If he works for me, he’s fired. If I can’t get into your pants, neither can he,” he calls out.

“I’m not wearing any pants,” I yell, not sure if he can hear me.

I race to my room, digging through my backpack for a clean pair of jeans and the nicest shirt I own. It’s nothing fancy like they wear and I’m second-guessing my decision to go. After I’m dressed, I apply some mascara and brush the knots out of my hair before I head back downstairs to find Zeland waiting for me in the kitchen. He gives me a once over and smiles.

“I’m not underdressed, am I?”

He shakes his head. “Wait until you meet Missy, she wears her pj’s most days. I run my office very differently to Ridge.”

“Thank god because I don’t have many outfits. I should pick up a few more things once I find a job.”

“We could always see Ridge’s cousin Morgan—they design and make clothes. We can put them on Ridge’s account.”

I laugh but shake my head. “As much as I love you annoying him, I couldn’t do that, and before you offer, I won’t let you pay either.”

Zeland just shrugs and asks if I’m ready to leave. We head to the garage, where he plucks the keys to an SUV from the row of hooks and leads me to his car of the day.

When he turns it on, the stereo blasts, and while it’s not a band I’m familiar with, I like the vibe.

“What band is this?” I ask.

“Hilltop Hoods. My mom used to listen to them a lot when I was younger.”

“Are you close to your mom?” I ask, and his jaw goes tight for a second.

“I used to be, but we grew apart after her and Ridge’s father got divorced. She was pissed when I wanted to stay with him, and now she only calls when she wants something.”

“Sounds a bit like my mom, except she dumped me on my grandmother when I was born and the last time she came around was when I was sixteen. It sucks, but I’m better off without her around. What about your father?”

“He died when I was young and lived a very go-with-the-flow lifestyle. He loved to surf, and I guess one day he went out and never came back. They never found his body, but Mom said they are positive he drowned.”

“Damn, that sucks. So are you close to Ridge’s father?”

His smile is back, and he nods. “I am. He is the stable parent I needed. He adopted me and I’m his favorite son.”

“He and Ridge don’t get along?”

Zeland laughs. “They get along well enough. Ridge won’t go out of his way to call or visit him, but I still do. Ridge is very work focused and always has been. I think he wants to prove he can make it in the business world alone. He built his company from the ground up, where I asked Harry for some financial help for a stake in the company. He hates that his father has a piece of Ridgeland Global, but it’s about his pride.”

“I googled you both,” I tell him honestly. “You’re both super rich—like you could retire now, drinking cocktails by the pool every day while someone hand feeds you grapes, rich.”

Zeland laughs. “We are, but it’s not about the money. While it helps to not be poor, we donate a lot to charity. I like to give back—I wasn’t used to having everything like I do now. My mom lived pay to pay after my father died.”

The conversation about our parents dies off and I’m grateful. I shiver as we drive past what looks like a lot full of those self-driving cars. If he takes me in there, I will run, and he will never see me again. The trauma is still fresh.

When he drives right past, I sigh in relief and tap my hand on my leg in time to his music. He seems to be in his head, and I don’t want to pry when I don’t know him that well.

“I need to tell you something,” he finally says as we pull into what looks like a private parking garage.

“You didn’t bring me here to kill me. It’s a little too public, and I bet I could outrun you if you let me out of the car.”

He chuckles. “No, I didn’t bring you here to kill you—that’s a little morbid for me. My company has a meeting today on privacy breaches, and I thought it might be something you should attend.”

“Okay, and why would I need to attend?”

He pulls into a parking spot with his name on the wall. “Because I own the View4U app. I want you to understand the implications of putting out videos and how seriously we take the safety of our creators. Some of the app’s top content creators will be present to be informed about what policies and procedures are being put in place for their safety”

My mouth falls open while I stare at him. “You own a kink app?”

He nods. “I do. I started by making videos myself, masked ones to be more specific.”

He slips from the car, and I follow him. “Ridge put you up to this, didn’t he? All because I almost told Arlo my name!”

“Maybe, but he can suck dick so well, and I also think it’s a good idea. I’m all for you starting an account with us—I think a masked woman would make bank. Before you start, though, I want you to see the darker side and make an educated decision. Then if it’s still what you want, I’m happy to help you. I can record you, let you chase me, or I can find you people to chase—all legal of course.”

The thought of Arlo fills my head. I wonder how Zeland would feel about joining me on my chase.

“Though if I help you, please promise me we can do one video where you surprise Ridge. We probably wouldn’t be able to post it, but seeing his face would be priceless, and I’m curious about how he would react. He pretends you annoy him, but he hasn’t been home like this in months. I have been laid so much my ass hurts.”

His words make me lose my resolve, and I’m laughing so hard as we step into the elevator, the woman inside stares at us. Zeland practically snarls at her, then wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me closer to him as the doors close behind us.

“It’s the devil in Prada—if we ignore her, she might go away,” Zeland whispers against my ear.

“I can hear you, and I wasn’t aware it was ‘bring your charity case to work’ day.”

“Excuse me?” I snap, and she has the nerve to smile.

“No offense, darling, but your kind doesn’t belong here.”

I open my mouth to give her a piece of my mind, but Zeland beats me to it. “Ridge seems to like her a lot. Have you noticed how early he leaves the office every night? Oh, even with all that Botox, I can see the jealousy. You might have Ridge fooled but not me.”

“Screw you, Zeland,” she snaps.

“Not even if you were the last pussy on earth. I would chop my cock off before screwing you.”

The doors slide open and Zeland pulls me from the elevator, and I flip the bitch off as we pass. If I ever see her again, I will give her a piece of my mind.

“Sorry about that—she thinks Ridge belongs to her. It grates on her nerves that he fucks me, and I like to remind her of the fact often. She is a family friend, and while she has Ridge convinced she only wants to be his friend, I know better. She doesn’t hold back when he isn’t around.”

“I don’t normally condone violence, but I will totally smack that bitch to repay you for your generosity.”

“As much as the thought of you breaking her twenty-thousand-dollar nose job fills me with glee, she would just buy a new one and her lawyers would eat you alive.”

I snort. “What would they take, the few thousand I have in savings?”

“Boss,” a young man on a hoverboard says. “Did you bring me fresh meat to train?”

“Eliott, this is my new roommate, Aspen. She is attending the meeting with me this morning. Is everyone here?”

“Sure are. They’re waiting for you.”

I follow behind Zeland as he talks to Eliott. When we get to another elevator, Zeland places his hand on a keypad and then grabs my hand and pulls me on with him.

“Have a good meeting,” Eliott says to me and winks.

“That’s your personal assistant?”

“Yes, he can be a lot, but he is the best assistant I have ever had. Now this meeting might be a lot to take in, and most of it will probably be boring, but it’s good to know just how dark the web can be.”

“Okay,” I reply as the doors open, and we walk straight onto a floor that is laid out like a massive boardroom.

Ridge stands at the front next to a man dressed in black who looks like he could take you down in seconds with only his bare hands. Ridge looks over at us as we walk toward him, glancing down at our joined hands.

Zeland squeezes, probably well aware of what this is doing to his best friend, and I'm happy to help a guy out. We pause beside Ridge, who stops talking at our arrival.

"Aspen, this is our Chief Information Security Officer, our Chief Technology Officer, Head of Security and Information Security Manager, our Privacy Officer, our Legal Counsel, and heads of our IT Security, Incident Response, Public Relations, and Communications and HR," Ridge says, introducing me, and though I have no idea why he felt the need to inform me, it makes me smile.

"It's nice to meet you all."

Zeland leans into my side. "You have no clue what any of these people do."

I lightly chuckle. "Besides HR, no clue."

"I told you Ridge likes you, and it annoys him that he does," Zeland replies, bumping my hip with his. "Go take a seat somewhere—this is going to be a long meeting."

"She can sit at our table up the front," Ridge adds, and Zeland pokes me in the ribs.

I hate to break it to him, but there are only two chairs at their table. You can clearly tell it's theirs by the two plaques with their names engraved on them:

Ridge Ellington and Zeland Reid-Ellington

I move to their table and take a seat in Ridge's chair, just because I know it will spark a reaction from him.

"Welcome, everybody. Thank you for coming today. All of you should know me—I'm Zeland Reid-Ellington and that handsome devil is Ridge Ellington." A few people who are seated laugh. "Over the last few months, we have had some reports of privacy breaches, and at least one stalker. You are my top creators, and your safety is our number one priority. You have all been invited to hear what we have been doing to keep you safe and what you can do to keep yourself safe. We have our entire team here today, so this will be a lengthy process, and we appreciate your attendance. We will take questions after each speaker so you can address any direct inquiries you have regarding what they are talking about. Any questions you have for

myself, please write them down and I will address them at the end of this meeting. We are live streaming to our other creators who couldn't be here. Refreshments are at the back of the room, and we will take a break so you can use the restrooms. First, I would like to introduce you to our Chief Information Officer, Amanda Bright.”

No one claps when I do, but screw them—what a boss bitch among all those men. She looks over at me and smiles.

Ridge and Zeland walk toward me, Ridge making eye contact, which I try to maintain because he is intimidating when his sole attention is on me.

“You're in my seat,” he whispers.

“Shh, I'm listening to Miss Bright.”

His jaw goes tight as Zeland sits down beside me, taking my hand and pulling me toward him. I stand and try not to laugh at Ridge.

Zeland guides me to his lap and places his right hand on my stomach. “I knew I would get you on top of me one way or another,” he whispers in my ear.

As I wiggle my ass against his crotch, he groans, and I silently chuckle. I sit and listen as the presenters talk, and the creators ask questions. It's a lot of information and I'm honestly slightly overwhelmed. Zeland rubs my stomach with his thumb. He knows what he is doing—my nipples harden beneath my bra, and I have to adjust how I'm sitting because it's sending a signal to my lady parts. Now is not the time or place, but his thick, hard erection beneath my ass isn't helping.

I lean back against his shoulder. “You play dirty, Mr. Reid-Ellington.”

Our battle continues for what feels like hours. Every time I move, he strokes my stomach with his thumb, or he switches it up and runs a finger down my spine. I never imagined it could be possible to have an orgasm without actually having sex, but I'm so close I might actually combust right here in front of an entire floor full of people.

Ridge leans in close, but doesn't look our way, keeping his attention fixed on the front of the room.

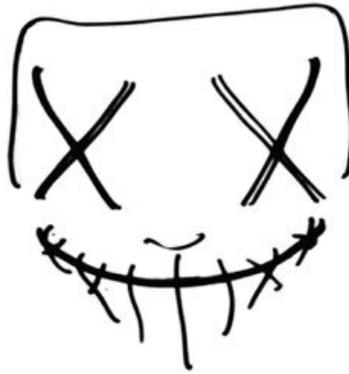
“Will you two stop?! Foreplay is not appropriate right now.”

I feel Zeland silently laugh behind me. “Either join in or be quiet,” he whispers back.

“I'm not fucking your stray,” Ridge retorts.

“As if I would even want you to,” I quip.

I can see why Zeland tries to provoke him. He's so easily riled, especially for someone who claims not to like me all that much. After listening to everyone speak, I should be terrified, but they were all so informative about how to keep yourself safe online. This whole app idea seems too good to be true. A way to make money without taking my clothes off—it can't hurt to give it a go. At least until I find a half-decent job where I won't get fired for standing up for myself and I won't be groped.



Chapter Seven

Ridge

For the last week, my head has been in the clouds. I didn't need a distraction right now, and certainly not the stray Zee brought home. His good-natured heart is one thing I admire about him, but I guess, given his track record, I'm glad it's a stray woman and not an animal. Growing up, the number of injured birds he nursed back to health was annoying. If there was a lost dog, he would do everything he could to find the owner, making flyers and posting them around our neighborhood—as if people with that kind of wealth would own a stray mutt.

My phone dings with the alert indicating there is movement in the house. Today Zee and the stray are starting to film for her View4U account, which I think is a terrible idea. Zee will get attached to her, and as soon as she finds somewhere else to live, she will be gone and he will be heartbroken. It's in his best interest that I intervene. It's why I have been home every day, trying to keep him from falling into her bed. I must say I'm surprised, given his wealth, that she hasn't pursued him. It wouldn't be the first time a woman has tried to lock one of us down.

Flicking through the security cameras, I see them running through what they plan to do for the first video. Zee is using this as an opportunity to add another element to the app. They are taking applications from people to be her target, but he told me it's in the hope that the stoner gamer she has been

spending time with online signs up. Which again, I think is a terrible idea. The kid is twenty-three and lives at home with his mother and has no real career prospects.

I found out he applied to Ridgeland on multiple occasions, but his resume let him down. It doesn't stand out from the hundreds and hundreds of other applicants. Ridgeland has a gaming division and is one of the first aspects of the company that Zee and I worked on together. It was our baby and one we couldn't let go. While neither of us manage it directly anymore, there is an entire floor in our building dedicated to gaming, from coming up with the ideas for the next game, to creating and testing.

I flick his resume off to Theo in hiring on the eighth floor. Honestly, I created a new job title just for him because I want him close. I don't trust anyone, and if Zee is insisting he likes this girl, and she keeps sharing details about her life—and by default ours—with Arlo, then I want to keep a close eye on him.

Zee positions the stray to take some photos, and I can't help but watch their interaction. He is so carefree, drawing out her laughter. I wish I could be like that; I want to be, but then I remember being soft doesn't run a company and Ridez will make me very, very rich.

“Are you even listening to me?” Genevieve snaps, frustration lacing her tone. “You have not been yourself this last week. Are things not good between you and Zeland?”

I can hear the distaste in her voice when she mentions Zee; it's no secret they hate each other. “Everything is fine. I'm just stressed with the launch of Ridez. I need everything to go well since it's still early days.”

She walks over to my desk and perches herself on the edge—if she wasn't a family friend I would push her off. Her father is a very wealthy man and not one you want to piss off if you hurt his baby girl.

“Everything will run fine—you are always ten steps ahead. Now back to what I was saying. My father has personally extended an invitation to you and Zeland to his fiftieth birthday party. And before you decline, as we all know you don't do personal events, just remember he is a big investor, and he looks to you as the son he always wished he had.”

Genevieve is an only child, and you can tell by how spoiled she is. “Of course, we wouldn't miss it. You can tell Carmichael it would be our pleasure to celebrate with him.”

Genevieve claps and smiles as she rises from my desk. “He will be so pleased to hear that. Do you have any plans tonight? We can go out for a few drinks.”

“Actually,” I say as I stand, “I have business to attend to at home.”

She tries to hide her displeasure, and it only shows for a split second. I know she doesn’t understand what is between Zee and me, but she doesn’t have to. The tabloids have speculated because Zee is very handsy, but confusion continues as he is spotted out with women. While I like to keep a low profile, Zee does not. He likes to have a rotation of women, whereas I am happy with him. For me, our relationship serves its purpose, and I trust him with my life. I can’t say that about anyone else, not even my parents. Money is the root of all evil, and my parents are tied up in that, but Zee, he would throw it all away tomorrow if I asked him to, and that is true loyalty. I would like to think I would do the same for him, yet until I face that choice, I don’t really know, and that makes me feel like a horrible person.

“Oh, well, maybe another time.”

“Another time,” I agree, and I gesture for her to walk with me as I leave my office. The floor is silent—no one stays as late as I do unless there is a problem and they have been asked to stay. I might be a firm boss, but I’m not a complete asshole, like some might say. I’m simply not here to make friends or get to know my staff beyond what is on their resume.

Genevieve and I get into the elevator and I press the button for the ground floor. She will need to exit that way, while I could have used my personal elevator that would have taken me straight to the parking garage where my driver Malachi is waiting, but I’m a gentleman and will walk her out. Her father has been good to me and I will repay the favor by looking out for his little princess. I know Carmichael hoped we would fall in love like a fairy tale, but unfortunately for him, I don’t believe in love—it’s all just made-up bullshit you see in movies. I love my parents, because they are my parents, but I don’t get any feelings from that. It just is. Am I broken? Probably, but you won’t convince me otherwise.

When we reach the lobby, Genevieve bats her lashes at me, even though she knows I’m immune to her. All her little tricks don’t work on me.

“I will see you later,” she purrs, pushing up on her toes to press a kiss against my cheek. The smell of her perfume makes my stomach churn, and I realize I haven’t eaten yet today.

I nod and watch as she walks away with a sway to her hips. Genevieve would have no issue finding a wealthy husband, not that she needs the money, but it's what is expected of her. It just won't be me. Yet she only hangs around me because I show her no interest and she has never been told no.

Down in the private parking garage, Malachi is waiting. He is a great employee and does his job well. Zeland refuses to use a driver, but I have too much work to finish so I use the extra time answering the emails flagged as important before I arrive home. Normally, it's why I stay on the top floor, which I had converted into a penthouse. I have the convenience of working late and heading upstairs to crash for a few hours before I get up and work out, then head back down to the office. Zeland hates when I bring work back to our house, and out of respect, I ensure I check out of work mode before I'm home.

Once I reach the car, Malachi opens my door and gives me a nod. He doesn't talk much, and I like that about him. When I take my seat, I pull up the home security cameras. Zee is walking backward, filming the stray who is wielding a bat with nails in it as she walks forward. While I know this is a terrible idea, a masked woman has its merits. There are none on the app and the men are going to go crazy for the concept. I just hope Zee knows what he is doing.

"You have been a bad boy. Do you want me to find you?" she purrs.

Fuck, why does watching the stray in her tutu and boots send a wave of pleasure to my cock? And that voice. It's not her actual voice, but close—thankfully Zee is just as cautious with online safety as I am. While the voice is similar, no one could use it as a voiceprint, as it would come through distorted. Technology is amazing when in the right hands.

Malachi drops me home and I let him know I will message him half an hour before he is needed tomorrow. He gets paid from five in the morning in case I need to go somewhere. Malachi, his wife, and their daughter live on my property in a caretaker's cottage. I've waived the rent on the condition he fixes it up a little.

Coming in via the garage, when I step into the house, all the lights are off. As I walk through, I wonder where they went in the time between me watching them and now. It's unlike Zeland to turn lights off behind himself, and it's one of the reasons I had this house turned into a smart house, so I could turn them off remotely.

Pulling up the app, my heart lurches when I see it's offline.

It is never offline—I control it.

Panic claws under my skin, and I loosen my tie. Neither Zee nor I have enemies who would want to hack our system. I don't bother calling out in case something is wrong, as I don't want to alert an intruder to my presence.

Sliding my phone into my pocket, I slip off my Stefano Bemer leather shoes and creep quietly toward mine and Zee's wing. It's where the safe room is located, and he would have taken the stray with him.

I don't have a weapon and just have to hope the intruder doesn't have a gun. I refuse to keep any in the house. Though I should alert my security team, they wouldn't arrive for another ten minutes. Malachi is ex-military; I will send him an SOS if I need to.

A thump from upstairs has me moving faster, toward the sound, and I am halfway up the flight when Zee appears at the top.

"Fuck, move," Zee hisses as he runs past me down the stairs, and I quickly follow behind him.

"Who the fuck broke in?" I ask as I race beside him, and he motions over his shoulder. Quickly glancing back, I see nothing but darkness behind me. As I hit the bottom step, I hear a voice.

"Don't run from me, baby. I promise I won't hurt you."

Stopping abruptly, I turn to see the fucking stray coming down the stairs swinging the fucking bat. The aqua glow of her mask covers her face, but I know it's her, though the brunette hair throws me off.

"Why are you not running?" Zee asks, circling back around to me.

"Because I thought someone actually broke in."

Zee snorts. "Be a good sport and play along. If she doesn't catch me, I get to have my way with her."

"And if she catches you?" I ask with a raised brow, and he smirks.

"I'll have to get on my knees."

"Then I suggest you run. I am not playing this game with either of you."

With a shake of my head, I storm back up the stairs, past the stray who ignores my presence altogether.

Fuck my life. Seriously, fuck it. My cock is hard and the thought of being forced to my knees has me storming into my room and straight to my laptop. The screen comes to life, and I manually override the system, giving myself access to my app. Fucking Zee only locked me out of my phone app—he planned for me to walk into this mess.

Heading into my en suite, I press the button that turns on the shower, already programmed to the temperature I like. After stripping off my suit, I place it in the hamper, where Ronny will have it sent out to be dry-cleaned.

When I step in, the heat relaxes my muscles, and images of the stray flash before my eyes. I don't know why she is in my head. But I hate how I'm reaching for my cock and wrapping my hand around my length as I imagine her making Zee get to his knees and beg for her pussy. Fuck, now that is something I would watch. Stroking myself, I let my imagination take over—her in her mask, stripped bare as he eats her perfect little cunt with me watching. Her head falls backward as she grabs his hair and thrusts herself against his face, riding him for her own pleasure.

My balls go tight as I picture her forcing him to the ground so she can sit on his cock.

“Fuck,” I growl as I come.

My body shakes from how fast I let myself slide into pleasure. Zee—the prick—better beg for my cock tonight, no matter how much he fucks the stray.

Once I'm showered and in bed, I wonder if they would let me watch them. As quick as I think it, I shut the thought down. That would just complicate my life, and I can't afford any distractions—no matter how much my cock would love it.



Chapter Eight

Aspen

Arlo's advice about hooking up with Zeland has started to make a lot more sense, especially since staying with them will not be a permanent thing. Ridge isn't overly pleased about the situation, and it is his house as well. I'm not a complete bitch, just a regular one.

Zeland is damn hot, and if I was at a club, I wouldn't hesitate to have a one-night stand with him. So when we talked about making content for View4U, and he offered to be my test dummy, I figured why not, as long as he understands the score—it's only for pleasure. I'm not one of those girls who becomes clingy; I won't claim ownership over him. It's simply lending each other a hand, so to speak. But then he went and made things more interesting: If I can catch him within half an hour, I can do what I want, but if he can outrun me, he gets to have his way with me.

The thirty minutes is almost up, and I realize I didn't think this through well enough. He knows this house and the places he can go unnoticed, and I don't know him well enough to predict where he'll be hiding.

I'm slightly disappointed that Ridge didn't want to join us and annoyed at myself for feeling that way. Maybe it's because I have never been rejected by a man. Maybe "rejected" is too strong a word—dismissed is how Ridge makes you feel.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” I call as I walk down a long hallway.

“Ticktock, Pocket Rocket. The thought of your parted lips around my cock is making me hard. You have two minutes.”

His voice comes from the right, but I know this part of the house is a dead end, so I cut left. As I round a corner, I spot him with his back turned to me, and I lurch back. I quietly lay my bat against a wall, then drop to my hands and knees, crawling toward where he is waiting. Once I’m directly behind him, I pop up to my feet and launch myself onto his back. In no world am I strong enough to overpower someone his size, so our agreement was for me to touch him to win.

“Caught you,” I whisper against the shell of his ear. “And now you are going to get on your knees for me.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

I chuckle as he walks us toward the kitchen and places me on the counter. He opens the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of water, taking a large mouthful, then hands it to me.

Sliding my mask up, I take a sip and place the bottle beside me. Zeland moves my legs apart and steps between them, then sets his hands firmly on the counter beside me, caging me in. My breath catches as his body presses closer, heat rolling off him in waves. His dark eyes flick to my lips, and the air between us turns electric. It’s so thick with sexual tension, I swear I can taste it. My pulse pounds when he leans in, his breath teasing my skin, and the anticipation stretches unbearably tight. Just as his lips are about to claim mine, I twist away, my breath shaky and my heart racing.

His exhale is sharp, frustrated, but when I meet his gaze, there’s a promise in it—this isn’t over.

But he doesn’t know what I have in store for him.

Sliding my mask back on, I bring my legs up on the counter, thanking my lucky stars I’m flexible for someone who is allergic to the gym. As I spread my legs, he smirks. “While I wanted to see you on your knees, I think that beautiful face between my legs eating my pussy might be better.”

The fact that Ridge might be watching us has me so wet. I can feel my arousal in a way I never have before, and I can one hundred percent add being watched to my kink list. I don’t know if it’s just the uptight asshole sitting upstairs in his room who gets this reaction from me, or if it’s anyone.

Zeland pushes my body back a little, and I lean back onto the counter more. Thank you, Mr. Wealthy, for these super large counters that serve no real purpose—at least not until now.

He reaches beneath my tutu, hooking his fingers into the waist of my underwear and dragging them at a torturously slow pace down my legs. Once he removes them, he tucks them into the pocket of his sweats.

“This is all I have thought about since the day we met,” he growls out, gazing up at me, his eyes darkening with lust.

His finger traces the shape of my pussy before he dips it inside. I watch avidly as he pulls it back out and brings it to his lips, sliding it into his mouth.

“I could drown in your taste,” he rasps after sucking on his finger. My breath hitches as he leans in, and I feel the warmth of his words against my bare pussy. “So fucking perfect.”

I feel him inhale, followed by the first swipe of his tongue; it has a moan falling from my lips as my head tips back. The wig I’m wearing is itchy, but I can’t be bothered taking it off.

Zeland hooks his arms around my legs and spreads me wider, licking and sucking my pussy lips into his mouth. As cliché as it sounds, no one has eaten my pussy like this before. Never have my legs trembled this hard, nor have I felt the need to thrust into someone’s face, but I want him closer. I spear my fingers into his blonde locks and push my hips upward.

“Fuck you eat pussy so well. If you want to drown in it, your wish is my command for being such a good boy.”

He growls against me and the vibrations have me grinding harder. I lift my ass from the counter, and he focuses more on my clit as I tremble, struggling to hold myself up.

“Oh fuck!” I cry out. “I’m going to come. Don’t you dare fucking stop.”

It is almost like an out-of-body experience—my core clenches, my body trembles, and the instant it hits, my toes curl. Then my body relaxes as waves of pure bliss wash over me.

“Zeland!” I gasp out as I come down from my high.

He pops up from between my legs, leaning over me and caging me between his arms. After removing my mask, he smashes his lips to mine. The taste of my arousal coats his face as our tongues fight for dominance. I’m supposed to be in control, not him, but I lose the fight fair and square as he pulls the wig from my head and drops it to the floor. I wrap my legs

around his waist, and he moves us away from the counter. He pulls back from the kiss, leaving me panting.

“Are you on birth control?”

I nod, like a fucking idiot—I know we shouldn’t do this. I never fuck bare because it’s not worth the risk, but all sense has left the chat. As soon as I nod, Zeland lifts me, and the tip of his cock pushes inside me. His girth stretches me, and the slight burn between my legs has me wanting more.

“Fuck,” he whispers as my back pushes into the fridge, the contents inside rattling as he fucks me hard against the cool surface. “You’re so fucking tight.”

He leans down, pressing his lips to mine as he thrusts inside me, our writhing bodies pressing tight together.

I pull back, remembering the cameras. “Shit, maybe we should take this upstairs. Ridge told me I have to masturbate in private, and I think that also applies to fucking.”

Zeland laughs. “He can watch all he wants.” With a raised voice, he adds, “Come down and suck her pussy from my lips, I dare you.”

I snort. “Do you think he will?”

Zeland shakes his head. “The man has more restraint than a nun.”

Still buried inside me, Zeland walks us upstairs; a woman impaled on his cock is clearly no issue for him. I expect him to take us to my room, but he turns into the hall leading to his wing. I hold on tight, sucking at his gorgeous tanned skin, then nipping his flesh.

We reach his room, and I don’t have time to appreciate how massive this space is before he slides out of me and lays me down on his bed. He helps me out of my tutu and leather jacket, then impressively uses one hand to unclasp my bra—I take longer to do it myself. He wastes no more time before flipping me over and thrusting back into me; I scream his name once again, my eyes rolling at the new angle.

Zeland wraps his hand in my hair, pulling my head back as he leans his body over mine. “You might have been in charge before, but it’s my turn now, and I won’t stop until you’re hoarse from screaming my name.”

He loosens his grip on my hair and his weight is gone from my back as he thrusts inside me.

I arch my spine and push my ass higher into the air to create a better angle, so he doesn’t feel like he is trying to rearrange my cervix. “Fuck, Zeland! Just like that—harder!”

I scream over and over, just like he promised. His bed smashes repeatedly against the wall with loud bangs, but I don't care that Ridge might be next door.

Another orgasm builds. "Zeland, don't stop! I need that cock. Harder."

He increases his pace. My small tits don't bounce on a good day, but they are with the sheer force he is fucking me with. And I'm begging him for more.

"Please, please, please," I cry, unsure of what I am begging for.

"Touch your clit. Let's finish together."

I do as he says, and as I stroke the oversensitive nub, it sends shocks of pleasure through me. "Oh fuck, I'm gonna come. Right there. ZELAND!"

At the last scream of his name, white spots float before my eyes and the arm holding me up collapses, but I remain upright by Zeland's fingers digging into my hips.

"FUCK!" he roars as he jerks into me a few more times before his sweaty body collapses on top of mine. We flop down onto the bed and he chuckles.

After a few moments, he pushes his weight off me and presses a kiss to the side of my cheek.

I roll onto my back and catch my breath. "So you'll help me edit that tomorrow, to remove the fucking?"

He chuckles. "The fucking would make bank, especially with me in it."

A throat clears and we both look over to where Ridge stands in the doorway. His intense gaze has my knees trembling.

Zeland pulls on his sweats and smirks at Ridge. Both men enter a stare off, and I feel like I'm intruding on a moment between them as guilt sinks deep in my stomach. I know their situation, but I still feel like I have done something wrong. That is, until Ridge storms across the room and takes Zeland roughly by the back of the neck. I watch in fascination as Ridge smashes his lips against Zeland's. It's so masculine and rough, and when Ridge's tongue forces its way into Zeland's mouth, I whimper.

Both men pull back and look at me, but I'm not sure I can handle this situation right now.

"I guess I will leave you to it. I'll talk to you in the morning."

With my arms full of my clothes, I run buck naked back to my room, not slowing until my back is firmly pressed against my door.

Holy Fuck, I was not expecting Ridge to actually come and watch, and his possessiveness over Zeland is so fucking hot. Why do I feel like I have just opened a can of worms? But these worms are carnivorous and they're going to eat me alive.



Chapter Nine

Zeland

I never intended to make Ridge jealous. Before now, he never blinked an eye when I fucked my way through his female office staff or had casual hook ups. He can try to hide how Aspen affects him, but I have known him long enough to know better. It's in the way he came to watch us fuck, stormed in, and sucked her taste from my mouth, or even the way he sucked my cock once she ran away all flustered. Normally, I never go back for round two with any women, mainly because I don't want them to get the wrong idea when I have zero intentions of keeping them around. Is it wrong to want to fuck Aspen again just to see how far I can push Ridge? Maybe, but I have an inkling she might feel the same way.

Harry called us into the office early this morning. He knows the only way to have a conversation with his son is before he starts work or he will simply divert his calls and have his assistant tell his father he is in meetings all day. I left Aspen a note on her pillow because when I went into her room to wake her, she told me to fuck off. Clearly, the woman isn't a morning person.

“—inconvenience.”

I tune back into whatever Ridge is complaining about. He hates when his father pops up with little warning. I have reminded him that a father

shouldn't have to schedule a time to talk to their son, especially if said son came to our monthly dinners.

"He will be in and out in five minutes. You know the old man has a date at the golf club."

"I will golf club him," he mumbles, and I laugh.

"Oh, the golf course could be a good place for Aspen to make content. Do you think they would let me book it out?"

Ridge turns to face me. "You can't be serious! You want the stray to run around a place that cost us over half-a-million dollars in initiation fees and two hundred grand a year for membership?!"

I nod. "The money will be worth it if I can fuck her by the tenth hole. That little water fountain on the lake with the lights . . . at night, it would be magical."

Ridge scoffs as his driver, Malachi, pulls into the parking garage at our office. As soon as we are parked, Ridge gets out and fixes his suit jacket. He hates my tie always being loose unless we are in a meeting and complains that my shirts are always wrinkled.

"Admit how hot it would be," I taunt, and he stops abruptly, almost making me run into his back.

"I thought you were a one and done. What makes the stray any different?"

I laugh, and he stalks toward the elevator again. "What makes her different? I think you can answer that one yourself."

"Me?" He scoffs as the elevator doors immediately open. No one besides us uses this entrance, so each morning there is no wait.

"Yes, you. And we had a minor mishap. I was promised to be forced to my knees, and we may have gotten sidetracked with the fucking part."

Ridge just shakes his head, and when we get to his floor, we both step off to find his father laughing with his secretary. It's not unusual for Harrison to hit on women our age. It's like as soon as he divorced my mother, he got struck by some early midlife crisis and began dating younger women. But they seem to get younger and younger. Good for him, if he's into the gold-digging type, but Ridge doesn't feel the same way.

"Son, nice of you to join us. It's unlike you to be late to a meeting."

"I wouldn't exactly call you hijacking my day a 'meeting.' You have five minutes."

Harrison laughs. “How are you doing, Zeland? How is that girl you were telling me about?”

“I sealed the deal, but Ridge has ruffled feathers over it.”

“I do not,” Ridge snaps. “If you want to stick your cock into stray pussy, that’s on you.”

Stray pussy my ass. He had no issues sucking her juices off me. I don’t say it out loud, as he won’t want his father to know his business. He never does.

“Sometimes the feral ones are the best kind,” Harry murmurs, and I snicker.

“She isn’t a feral,” Ridge snaps. “Now, is there a reason you’re here?”

Ridge’s secretary has made herself scarce, and I don’t blame her—occasionally things between Ridge and Harrison get a little heated.

“Yes, two things. I hope you plan to be in attendance at Carmichael’s birthday. You know how important it is to make appearances.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” I say, mainly because the vein on the side of Ridge’s head already looks like it’s about to explode.

“You should ask Genevieve to be your date, son. You know how fond of you she is.”

“No!”

I chuckle. I love how Ridge doesn’t beat around the bush.

“What about you, Zeland?”

“No way in hell would I take that snake anywhere. Sorry, old man, but I already have a date.”

Harrison laughs. “Fair enough.”

“You said you had something else to tell us, so let’s move along.”

“Oh, right. I’m getting married. I’ve met the woman of my dreams, and I want you both to come to dinner and meet her and her son. I know it’s quick, but this woman is different.”

Ridge scoffs, but before he can say anything more, I interject. “Of course we will be there. We’re both glad you are happy, even if Ridge can’t show it on the outside.”

“Thank you, Zeland. Without you I fear I wouldn’t have a relationship with my own blood.”

“You know I love you, old man. How about you let Ridge have some time to compartmentalize this and shove it away in a box in his brain? Call me when you pick a night for dinner, and I will make sure he comes.”

“You’re right. I have to meet my future bride for breakfast—she has work in a few hours, so I need to be quick.”

I walk Harrison out of Ridge’s office and wave him off. It really wouldn’t kill Ridge to have a civil conversation with his father.

“At least this one might have some morals if she has a job,” Ridge says as I close his office door. “Hopefully she hasn’t just celebrated her twenty-first birthday like the last one.”

“Why does what he does with his life bother you so much? As far as fathers go, he is half decent. Sure, he could have spent more quality time with you, but he kept me around, which I think was to keep you company—and look how well that turned out.”

He smirks at me. “I don’t hate having you around, though I could do without you bringing strays home.”

I move across his office, stopping in front of him; he reaches out and undoes my tie, then twists the material into a neat knot. “Don’t lie. You don’t hate having Aspen around. I think she’s growing on you.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Maybe I miss having you all to myself.”

I chuckle. “That is a lie and you know it. You’ve been home more since she turned up than you were for the last six months. Just admit you enjoy the verbal sparring you do with her.”

“I’m man enough to admit it is fun. I haven’t met anyone willing to speak to me the way she does, especially not once they find out who I am.”

“See? Not so bad. What’s on your agenda today?”

“I have a meeting with Wells International. Ford has been on my ass to have a meeting with him and hear him out, though I’m really not interested. He believes one of his men has found a flaw in our security system. I had to remind him of the prison sentence if I find out someone was hacking us. I also have to interview someone this morning.”

“Hold up,” I say as he tightens my tie enough it feels like it’s choking me. If he was fucking me, I would ask him to do it harder. “You are personally conducting the interview? Why?”

He stares me dead in the eyes, and I know he is hiding something.

“You are better off just telling me because I will stay here and annoy you until you do. Worse, Aspen will be here shortly. We have to go over the footage and get everything ready for the launch of her page.”

Ridge sighs. “Fine, but if you read too much into this, I will kick you in the balls. I have that Arlo guy coming in for an interview. And before you

even get any ideas, it's because I want to make sure he isn't a threat. He seems to ask her a lot of questions."

"You know as well as I do he's harmless. He is a stoner who lives at home with his mom. Asking questions is how you get to know someone. When did you become so paranoid? And more so than usual. You know your security is the best money can buy, so this has zero to do with us and everything to do with her."

"Fine," he huffs. "Maybe it has a little to do with her, but don't get too excited. She is like a poor little broken puppy that's been kicked one-too-many times, and I feel bad for her. What if he is a pervert and becomes obsessed with her? At least if he works here we can watch him. I heard them talking about his likes and kinks, and now you have put this masked woman shit in her head. How long will it be until she wants to chase him?"

"You are a genius! Good chat, I have to go. Let me know how the interview goes."

I rush out of his office and even use the stairs to race down to my office. When I come barreling out of the stairwell, I also knock Elliott off his hoverboard.

"Hey, boss. You're in early," he says with surprise as he rights himself.

"Can't talk right now. Hold all my calls until I tell you otherwise. Unless it's Aspen—let her straight into my office."

Elliott gives me a thumbs-up and I close my office door behind me. Pulling out my phone, I dial Aspen's number.

She groans. "Zeland, you better be dying. I swear to god, if I knew you would become a stage five clinger after I fucked you, I would have beaten you instead."

I laugh. "Promises, promises, and I am not a clinger, thank you very much. Ridge just gave me an awesome idea, and he spilled his guts about your gamer friend having an interview here."

"Oh, I knew he had an interview, but I didn't know it was with Ridge. He's just doing it to be a controlling asshole, isn't he? Does he even care that working for Ridgeland is Arlo's dream job, one he has been working toward for years? And what, because I'm talking to him—"

"Calm down. Ridge isn't a complete dick."

"Are you sure about that? I'm getting dressed and coming down there to give him a piece of my mind. He doesn't even like me, so why does he give a fuck who I game with?"

“That’s the thing—he cares, Aspen. He simply cares in his own way. That is just Ridge. He may have even referred to you as a puppy who has been kicked too much. Ridge wants to make sure this guy is legit, so just let him do this, and then I will make sure this guy keeps his job. But that’s not what I was calling for. Come in and we can talk. Oh, and can you bring food? Ridge dragged me out way too early. I left a card on the counter in the kitchen for you to use.”

“You seriously think I can’t afford to buy us breakfast? I’m not a total helpless case. I’ll be there soon.”

Soon . . . I’m learning fast that Aspen’s version of soon and mine are totally different. I’m not used to people not jumping when I need something and it’s refreshing. An hour and a half later, she strolls in with coffee and a bag from my favorite deli place down the street.

“I’m here, and I am never going to that sandwich joint again. The man is rude, and I had to wait twenty-five fucking minutes for a sandwich. Next time I will just make one at home. This better be the nicest fucking sandwich I have ever eaten in my damn life.”

I laugh—she’s right, the wait there is always long. It’s why we send our assistants to pick up the orders we have placed earlier in the day. I enjoy seeing her flustered; it makes my cock come to life.

“Come sit down and see what I have spent the last hour and a half doing while I waited for you to get your ass down here.”

She comes around behind my desk and places my coffee and food in front of me. Resting her arm on my shoulder, Aspen leans into me as she looks at the computer screen.

“Holy fuck, is that actually me?! Damn, I look hot.”

I chuckle at her surprise. “Yes, it’s your landing page. It’s where people are sent when they click on your profile. I think we stick with the mask vibe. I have edited some clips, and I blurred my face, but we can use them for promo. Though, watching it back, I remember I was promised to be forced to my knees.”

Aspen scoffs. “Sue me, I was horny. Besides, I’ve never done something like that before. I might have to practice on a few others.”

“Others?”

That makes her laugh. “Kidding.”

“It’s actually not a terrible idea. Ridge told me about your friend Arlo’s fantasies, so what if we run a promo on your page where you offer to chase

one lucky subscriber?”

She raises a brow. “And what if it’s some weirdo?”

I explain how everything works and how we vet everyone first. Plus, I explain how I’ll make sure her link ends up in Arlo’s email.

“I don’t know if I can do it alone. I’m not strong enough to overpower anyone, just look at my size compared to yours. What if, when I do it, you join me? We’ll make it a joint channel. It could be fun—imagine being able to fuck me again.”

“Okay, but I refuse to take a cut. I wonder if we can convince Ridge to watch us? You know, for safety reasons.”

“There is no way he would. He’s way too uptight.”

“Leave it to me. It’s been so long since I have made content for the app, I forgot how fun it is, but we all need to remain anonymous. I can’t stress enough that no one can know it’s me. You would also need to sign an NDA. Ridge would have a hissy fit if I didn’t ask you, and it’s only so you can’t tell anyone it is me on your channel.”

I grit my teeth and wait for the blowup, but she simply shrugs before agreeing.

Where has this woman been all my life?



Chapter Ten

Aspen

Seven in the fucking morning. That's what time Zeland woke me today. Does he not realize that I'm a night owl?! After years of working night shifts, I don't like to be up before nine unless I have a class. But let's face it, without a job, I can't afford to continue attending. I'm not sure how many mental health days one student can take, but I'm sure I'm maxed out at this point. On the plus side, I snuck in a visit with my grandmother today, though it sucks that she doesn't remember me. Today she thought I was my mother, but it was nice to see her somewhat alert.

"Hey," comes from my headphones. I was wondering when he would come online.

"Hey yourself. I thought I would have to take on everyone by myself tonight."

He chuckles. "Nah, I was out with my mom celebrating. I got the job at Ridgeland. Can you believe it?! My dream job."

A twinge of guilt sits low in my chest and squeezes. What if Ridge fires him? It will be my fault that he had his dream job handed to him and then got it ripped out from under him.

"Congratulations, that's amazing!"

"Oh shit, was that insensitive because you don't have a job?"

I laugh. “No, of course not. I bet you’ve worked hard to get a job at a place like that. I don’t imagine they hire just anyone.”

“It’s Ridgeland, and while their game development isn’t the biggest, it’s always been my dream. Did you know that one half of Ridgeland owns the View4U app, and the other Ridez? Some of the technology they use is out of this world. I can’t wait to see what new games they plan to release.”

“I guess that means our late-night gaming sessions are going to end,” I say, feeling deflated at the thought. I enjoy our late-night chats—he’s so easy to talk to.

“Fuck no, chatting with you is the highlight of my day. If you didn’t catch on, I don’t exactly have friends lining up at my door. I’m a bit of an awkward loser.”

“Hey,” I snap, a little harsher than I intend. “You are not a loser. If you are, then so am I, as I have a grand total of two friends—you and the cocky douche I live with. Well, I guess he really isn’t a douche.”

Arlo chuckles. “Well then, friend, I guess you are stuck with me now. Can I ask you something personal?”

I freeze, even though he can’t see me—can I answer a personal question? I know I can’t if it’s to do with Ridge or Zeland, as they take their privacy seriously, hence the million pieces of paper I had to sign today.

“Of course,” I answer, even though I shouldn’t.

“What’s your favorite type of cheese?”

I snort. “I don’t really like cheese, unless the answer is ‘on pizza.’”

Arlo gasps. “I might have to revoke the friendship card. What weirdo doesn’t like cheese?”

“Well, it gives me gas, and there is nothing worse than that feeling. I’m a girl and get enough of that from getting my period every month.”

“Fair point. Man, I would be a little bitch if I had to bleed every month. You deserve an award.”

I chuckle. “I don’t know about the award, but chocolate seems to do the trick.”

It’s so easy to get lost in conversation with Arlo, and we spend forever talking without even playing the game. Our conversation goes full circle back to his new job.

“What do you think I should wear? I was told casual, but to me casual is a pair of jeans, a Rick and Morty T-shirt, and my overworn chucks.”

“Hmm, do you have any button-up shirts, even just a casual one?”

“Um, let me look. I think my mom got me one for Christmas two years ago.”

I hear him move around, ruffling something. “Ah ha,” he says proudly. “I do.”

“Okay, and do you have a plain white or black shirt to wear under it? That way, if the dress code is super casual, you can unbutton it, but if not, you can leave it done up.”

“You are a genius. What would I do without you?”

I chuckle and lie back in the massive bean bag I dragged out of the corner of the room, opting to be comfortable over sitting on the recliners. “Clearly you’d wear a Rick and Morty shirt on your first day of your dream job.”

That makes him laugh and his phone chimes once, then a second time. “Do you need to go?”

“No,” he says and coughs. “It’s an alert for the View4U app. Someone recommended a new creator.”

“Oh yeah?” I say, pulling out my own phone. “I downloaded the app after you mentioned it. I must admit some of the material is amazing for the spank bank. What’s the creator’s name?”

“HideNSeekHottie,” he says with a chuckle.

Fucking Zeland, I curse silently as I pull up the account and see that it’s mine. I thought we settled on MaskedMenace for me and ChaseMeMaybe for him.

“I think our phones have been listening to our conversations,” I say with a laugh. “Isn’t this one of your kinks?”

“Yes, and I’m eternally grateful I have a job now because I just subscribed. A sexy woman in a mask? Yes, please. Holy fuck, did you click the video clip?!”

“No, but I will now.” I click the video and it’s a thirty-second clip of me, dragging the bat along the ground saying, “If I catch you, you’ll get on your knees for me.” The clip ends with me spreading my legs, but the camera view is from behind, so you don’t see anything naughty.

“How hot is that clip!” he blurts out, and I agree.

I want to ask Zeland for the full clip. I have never wanted to watch myself be fucked before, but somehow Zeland has changed my mind.

“Maybe I should let you go and get acquainted with your hand, then get some sleep and be ready for your big day. I actually need to shower and

attempt to sleep as well.”

Arlo laughs. “Are you ditching me to go flick the bean?”

“Busted. Good luck tomorrow. I can’t wait to hear how it went.”

I’m not lying either; I can’t wait. Also, I can’t wait to tell Zeland that I am coming to work with him tomorrow—I want to see what Arlo looks like in person.

“Goodnight.”

“Night,” I reply.

I remove the headset and place it back on the holder and go on a mission. First to find Ridge and threaten him that he can’t ever fire Arlo, then to get Zeland to send the clip to me so I can watch it all the way through.

Weaving through the house, I search all the areas Ridge might be before I venture up to his room. I wonder if he is as anal about people in his space as he is about everything else. When I knock on his door, it’s Zeland’s voice that responds.

“Come in, Pocket Rocket.”

Twisting the handle, I push open the door and see both men in bed. “Shit, you could have told me to fuck off.”

Zeland laughs.

“I told him that, stray, but he just had to invite you in,” Ridge says with a scowl.

“You can join us if you like,” Zeland offers, ignoring the brooding man beside him. “We are watching some boring-ass show about . . . I don’t even know what it’s about. I’ve been playing with his cock.”

I chuckle at his openness.

“Is there something you want?” Ridge deadpans.

Right, I came up here on a mission.

“Yes, you can’t fire Arlo,” I say matter-of-factly, trying to use the tone he does when he is on the phone.

“And why would I do that if he does his job?”

“Well, I didn’t think of that, did I? Honestly, I thought you only gave him the job to be a controlling asshole.”

Zeland chuckles, and Ridge puts him in a headlock since he was lying on Ridge’s arm. My mouth falls open at the bulge of his biceps—fuck, he has gorgeous arms.

“I might have looked into him to know more about the guy the stray Zeland brought home was talking to, but his skills are impressive. Were there any other demands?”

“Yes. Zeland, you’re an asshole! I just saw the username HideNSeekHottie. Really?!”

Zeland laughs. “I’m not sorry. Have you seen how many subscribers you’ve already gotten?”

“That’s beside the point, and can you send me the full video?”

His eyes light up, and he pushes up onto his elbows with a shit-eating grin. “You wanna see us fuck, Pocket Rocket? I can confirm it’s hot.”

“Just send it to me, asshole. And I hope Ridge shoves his cock so far up your ass you walk with a limp tomorrow.”

“You and me both.”

“Will you two please stop?”

“Yes, daddy,” we both say in unison and Ridge gags. I laugh at him and look at Zeland. “Just send me the video.”

I turn and walk back out before I get any bright ideas about actually joining them to watch whatever boring-ass show is on the television. I have come to really enjoy their company, even the verbal sparring with Ridge, and it has become something I look forward to every day.

“I will send it now,” Zeland calls after me. “And clear your schedule—we have more content to film tomorrow.”

I don’t bother telling him I have classes because I’ve already decided I’m ditching them to spy on Arlo. I know it’s wrong—eventually I will have to tell him who I am.

By the time I’m back in my room and showered, my phone alerts me to a new email. When I open the app on my phone, I find there are two emails waiting from Zeland. One I must have missed earlier has my new email address for the View4U app and explains that I don’t want anything related to the app sent to my private email, since it is easily hacked. He set it all up for me and has given me the login details for that and my creator account with instructions. The second email is the video I requested.

I avoid the video I desperately want to watch and quickly set up the email on my phone, and as soon as I do, the notifications go crazy with comments on my video. I log into the app and scroll to the video and read through them.

KINKSTALKER:

I will get on my knees for you baby

SHADOWPEEKER:

New kink unlocked

DARKSOUL_GAMER:

I swear this was made just for me

My heart races as I wonder if I should reply and then think *fuck it*.

HIDENSEEKHOTTIE REPLIES TO DARKSOUL_GAMER:

Maybe it was ;)

I respond to a few others as well, and I almost die when I see I already have a few thousand followers and eight hundred subscribers in a few hours. I click into the privacy tab and navigate to the payment section. Zeland didn't explain exactly how you get paid. They broke it down that we get eighty percent of our subscriber payments, and any private videos we get one hundred percent. Then we also get bonuses based on views.

Well, shit, my interest is piqued right now. Especially after seeing the payment tiers Zeland has set up. Viewers pay to see certain content, but he has added a few others that have a locked symbol. I'm presuming he wants to run them past me first since the highest tier mentions nudity, and I don't know how I feel about porn being on my resume.

I spend way too long flicking through other creators' accounts. Most of the women flaunt their assets, which I'm down for if you have tits; however, I'll need a push-up bra with extra padding to give the illusion I have bigger boobs. The male creators get a little more inventive, some simply get their cocks out and stroke them, some do a striptease, and other content like mine seems to just be shirtless men in all types of masks. I can understand how this app can get addictive.

After mindlessly scrolling for over an hour, I open the email from Zeland, and I skip ahead to when he spreads my legs. Then I watch it all the way through from where he fucked me against the fridge, making me hot and bothered. Sliding my hand down beneath the waistband of my pajama shorts, I tease myself, starting the video again until it ends for a second time. Then I ditch my phone and use my imagination; Zeland's on his knees for Ridge, who has his hand tangled in Zeland's hair, and Arlo is being forced to watch while I sit behind him and stroke his cock. My entire body

tingles at the thought and I work myself to orgasm, thinking about the three men in my life. They're ones I didn't ask for but don't seem to be going anywhere.

I never get attached to anyone. If my own mother didn't want to be around me, why would anyone else? Getting closer to them will no doubt end in heartache, and yet I can't force myself to leave. I want to be around them until they no longer want me, no matter how badly it's going to hurt in the end.



Chapter Eleven

Arlo

I stare at the elevator numbers increasing way too fast, waiting for my heartbeat to catch up. Eighth floor of Ridgeland Enterprises. My first job—like, actual full-time paycheck. In an actual office, with an actual chance to ruin everything before lunch.

When the doors slide open, I suck in a breath and try to channel someone cooler. Someone who doesn't sweat through their dress shirt or overthink eye contact. Someone who's not me.

The reception area is sleek. Way too sleek. With a polished floor, massive windows, and three people standing near a glass table who all look like they just stepped out of a magazine photoshoot for “people who have their lives together.” I recognize Ridge Ellington straight away, his expensive suit and sharp jawline intimidating. Zeland leans casually against the table like he owns the room and maybe the planet. There's a woman with them. Long braid, boots that could kill a man, and eyes that flick over me like she's already decided I'm a puzzle worth solving. Women don't look at me like that and it makes me jittery.

“Arlo,” Ridge greets, his voice deep and clipped.

“Yep. That's me. Fully functioning adult. Allegedly.”

I wince. Out loud, I said that out loud. Why do I do this? He knows who I am; he interviewed me for fuck's sake.

Their expressions barely move, but I swear the woman's mouth twitches like she's trying not to laugh. Zeland raises an eyebrow, and Ridge looks like he's calculating whether firing me now would be paperwork or a mercy.

"I, uh . . . sorry. Just excited. Big fan of . . . buildings. You guys really nailed the, uh, architecture here."

Kill me.

"Hi, I'm Aspen," the woman says, offering me her hand. It's strange—the instant we touch is like out of a movie and my palm tingles.

"Arlo, but you already know that, right?"

She nods with a chuckle.

Zeland steps forward and offers me his hand. I already know who he is as well—it's hard not to when both he and Ridge are my idols. I have followed their careers since they first started out.

"Zeland," he says with a wink. "Red looks good on you."

His words make my cheeks heat even more and I try to hide a smile. "It's an honor to meet you. I have followed you for a long time—I mean your career. I'm not some weird stalker or anything."

"You wouldn't be working here if you were, Arlo Atlas Kross. Born December second, twenty-three years old, and you live with your mother, Rowena."

"Enough with the interrogation, Ridge. We get it. You are the almighty powerful Mr. Ellington who has so much money he can pay someone to get the dirt on people."

"Stray, you have no idea."

Aspen snorts and steps up to Ridge, and as he looks down at her, she reaches around his waist. He jumps back like his ass is on fire. "What do you think you're doing?" Ridge snaps, and Zeland laughs as Aspen points her chin up at him.

"Seeing if I can find that stick wedged up your ass."

I smirk but suck my lips in when Ridge looks my way.

"I don't have time for this nonsense. Welcome to Ridgeland, Arlo. If you are as good as the qualifications on your resume, you will be fine. Though if you ever need a new job, I suggest you get a professional to fix that mess." With that, Ridge strides to the elevator.

"It was nice to meet you, Arlo," Aspen says. "Excuse me, but I have a bone to pick with the boss."

“You too,” I say as she runs off to catch up to Ridge.

“You can pick my bone,” Zeland calls out after her, and she raises her hand in the air and flips him off. “Can you believe it? She’s the only person who speaks to us like that, and yet she is still around.” I don’t answer, simply nod. “So, Arlo, are you excited about working here?”

“I am. My email told me to meet Theo and he would show me around.”

“I can show you around—let’s do the tour. Gem, buzz us in.”

The lady behind the desk smiles as I follow Zeland to the sleek double doors. Once we’re through them, everything changes to a more homely feel, with everyone dressed down. One guy goes flying past us on a hoverboard but circles back around. “Boss, I thought I would find you down here. Oh hello, fresh meat. Is this one on the menu?”

“Elliott, this is Arlo, and no, leave the poor guy alone. It’s his first day.”

Elliott laughs. “Can’t blame me for trying—you’re hot, Arlo. Now, boss, I left your messages on your desk. Harrison called and said it’s urgent and to call him back when you are in your office. Also, can I take off early? I have a date tonight and I have absolutely nothing to wear.”

“You’re a liar—I know your apartment is overrun with clothes. I saw them all when I brought you chicken soup a month ago when you were sick. But yes, you can leave early.”

“Thanks, boss. It was a pleasure meeting you, Arlo.”

“It was a pleasure meeting me too . . . wait, no, you . . . *you* meeting me, I mean. Ugh, I’ll just shut up now.”

Elliott blows me a kiss and Zeland laughs. “You don’t need to be nervous—working anywhere except Ridge’s floor is fun. I watched that Google movie once, and I wanted that vibe, so I created this. Okay, it’s a few extra floors than just Ridge’s, but they are all suits and show everyone who is richer than whom.”

I nod and take everything in as Zeland poorly shows me around—he clearly hasn’t worked here for a long time. He opens doors and pokes his head in and then closes them.

“Thank god, Theo,” he says, waving at a man who looks old enough to be my dad.

“Zeland, you stole our new hire. I thought he was a no show. Theo,” the man says, holding out his hand. I shake it and just supply him with “Arlo” so I don’t further embarrass myself.

“Let me show you to where you will work,” Theo continues. “I have supplied you with an email, and the login details are on your desk. There is an email outlining what you will be working on and what tasks you need to complete. This one is brand new and we can hire more staff if you need us to. Ridge—” Zeland coughs and Theo pauses briefly. “Sorry, Mr. Ellington has allowed a budget for that. He wants you to run point and will pop in every so often to check on your progress. You must be something special for him to take an interest.”

“I’m not,” I mumble.

Zeland places a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t sell yourself short. If Ridge hired you himself, you must be one of the best at what you do. Now I better get back to work. It was lovely meeting you, Arlo, and I have a feeling I will see you again real soon.”

Zeland winks at me, and I push my black-rimmed glasses up my face and smile. “You too.”

I palm my forehead the second he is gone, and Theo chuckles. “You will get used to Zeland—he is a notorious flirt. Since you don’t work on his floor, you’re fair game. If he makes you uncomfortable at any stage, just let me know and I can talk to him, but he is harmless.”

Theo opens the door to the room I’m working in and my mouth drops open.

“It’s fine, honestly. Thank you for showing me to my office.”

“You’re welcome. If you need anything, let me know. You have my email or I will be around on the floor somewhere. I also left your ID card on your desk. It will get you into the staff elevators and through the lobby doors.”

“Thank you.”

With that, Theo leaves and I close the door behind him and do a happy dance while I pull my phone out of my pocket.

“Is everything okay?” my mom asks as she answers the phone.

“It’s perfect. You should see my office, and I’m the lead on this game—me, Mom. Can you believe that?”

“Of course I can, baby. You are so smart and talented. Now go before you get fired for talking on your phone while at work.”

I laugh. “Okay, see you tonight.”

I read over the email Theo sent me, and it’s all easy, nothing I haven’t done before.

A new email pops up. And my eyes almost bug out of my head.

MR. KROSS,

IT WAS A PLEASURE SEEING YOU THIS MORNING. I'VE ASSIGNED YOU AS THE LEAD ON THIS PROJECT. IF YOU'RE ABLE TO LAUNCH THE GAME SUCCESSFULLY, WE CAN MOVE FORWARD WITH NEGOTIATING YOUR CONTRACT. I'VE SENT OVER THE BUDGET, SO PLEASE PROCEED AS NEEDED.

FEEL FREE TO REACH OUT VIA EMAIL IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR REQUIRE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT.

BEST,
RIDGE ELLINGTON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
RIDGELAND ENTERPRISES

I don't respond. Ridge doesn't seem like a man who wants you to reply, and before I can overthink it, another email pops up.

SUBJECT: NICE TO *OFFICIALLY* MEET YOU 😊

HEY ARLO,
IT WAS *VERY* NICE MEETING YOU TODAY. I WASN'T SURE WHAT TO EXPECT FROM SOMEONE RIDGE ACTUALLY HIRED—HE'S NOT EXACTLY KNOWN FOR HIS WARM AND FUZZY SELECTIONS. BUT YOU? YOU WERE A SURPRISE. THE GOOD KIND.

I'M ALREADY LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING WHAT YOU DO WITH THE PROJECT. AND IF I'M BEING HONEST, I'M ALSO LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING *YOU* AGAIN. MAYBE NEXT TIME WITHOUT THE OFFICE WALLS AND AWKWARD INTRODUCTIONS BETWEEN US.

DON'T BE A STRANGER. UNLESS THAT'S YOUR THING.

ZELAND REID-ELLINGTON
COO | RIDGELAND ENTERPRISES

I don't know how to respond to Zeland's email. Is he hot? Fuck yes, but men like him shouldn't be looking at someone like me. I'm just shiny and new and someone like him would eat me for breakfast and get bored fast.

The day goes by quicker than I expect, and when I clock out, I head straight home. The entire day was a dream, but completely overwhelming. Mom is at work when I get home, so I shower and reheat leftovers before I head down to my room and log into my game, not because I want to play but because of her. I want to tell her about my day and I have never had that feeling before.

"Sup, DarkSoul, how was your first day? Don't tell me, let me guess. You were amazing and smashed it out of the park?"

I scoff. "Well, I wouldn't say that exactly. I was a nervous wreck and complimented the bosses on their great architecture. Then I told someone it was a pleasure for them to meet me, and I think one of the bosses was hitting on me."

"So all in all, it wasn't so bad. We all get nervous on our first day, and this is your dream job."

"What should I do about the boss hitting on me? He isn't technically my boss, but he owns half of the company."

"Take that, you pussy bitch," she says as she shoots at the targets. "Well, is he hot? Because the level of hotness can play a part in my answer. And can he fire you?"

"He is more than hot, and if he owns the company, I'm sure he could fire me."

"That's a hard one. Maybe see how it goes—he could just be flirty. I worked with someone like that once; they just flirted and never wanted more. Now tell me everything. What does your office look like? What do they have you doing? . . . You shut your scrawny little mouth. If you don't want to hear me talking to my friend, leave the party. Let's face it, I would smoke your ass anyway. Then you would be embarrassed that you got beat by a girl."

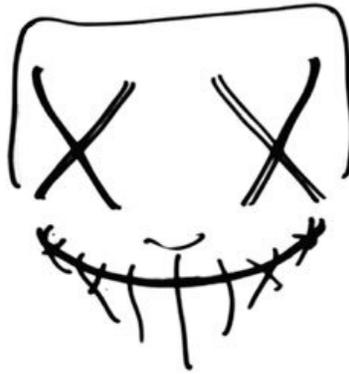
I snort at her as she verbally smites a stranger. He leaves the chat, and it's now just us. Normally we're in a private chat, but sometimes we need to group chat with the rest of our squad. Unfortunately, the teens in this game are all mouth, but she doesn't take their shit.

"Any luck on finding a new job?" I ask her.

She sighs. “I have a few leads, nothing concrete. On the upside, I have more free time. Do you know this obnoxious house has an indoor pool *and* an outdoor pool? Who needs two?”

We talk for a while until one of her roommates needs her help with something and she signs off.

Ever since I met her, my life has completely turned around. Mom always says, “Sometimes people come into your life for a reason and lead you where you’re supposed to be.” And maybe that’s what has happened with her. I might not know her name or where she lives, but she is quickly becoming the one person I want to talk to every day. And it’s nice to have a person who wants to listen.



Chapter Twelve

Aspen

Strolling straight into Zeland's office has become a daily ritual since Arlo started working at Ridgeland.

"What's wrong?" he asks, looking up from his computer screen as I flop into the chair opposite his desk.

"It's official: I'm a school dropout and a weirdo stalker. I'm sure my mother would be so proud that I'm following in her footsteps. All I need now is to have a kid and disappear from its life. Wanna help a girl out?"

His laughter echoes through the room. "As hot as you would look knocked up, I don't think Ridge would be thrilled about having a baby in the house. He doesn't really like noise too much. But let's go back to the first two problems—you dropped out?"

"Dropped out, kicked out . . . same, same, right? I ran into my ex-roommates today, and I might owe Sunny a new nose. Would you believe she tried to call me out in class for owing her rent? She kicked me out and kept the deposit I paid her. Then she tried to say I hit on her boyfriend, and he agreed. In my defense, I attacked him first for being a lying piece of shit, but she tried to jump in, so really it's all her fault. I just hope she doesn't press charges; I don't need that shit right now."

"Don't sweat it, and if she tries, we will send our lawyers over. She will run scared the second they knock on the door. No bestie of mine is going to

prison.”

“Thank god. Orange is not my color, and I would have to get a wife. I’m not cut out for that life.”

Zeland chuckles. “And what’s this about your stalker tendencies?”

I smile. “All week I have been watching Arlo work. I pretend to be the mail person just to get close enough to smell him. Who even does that? I shouldn’t be so obsessed with someone I’ve supposedly only just met.”

“Is there something wrong with how I smell? You’re free to sniff me whenever you want.”

“Don’t worry, I use your cologne and might have stolen a shirt or two from your room. I figured you knew about it since Ridge has cameras everywhere.”

“Shit, woman, you are making me rethink a lot of things, and I don’t like it.”

I kick my feet up onto his desk, the edge of my boots the only thing holding my legs up. “Yeah? Like what?”

He shakes his head. “Like keeping you. Besides what I have with Ridge, I have never wanted to keep someone as close to me as I do you.”

“Ditto, but I also like what we have now, so let’s circle back to Arlo, since he’s my obsession this week. I’ve already figured out you and Ridge, but he is still a mystery I want to solve. Online he seems so confident but in person he’s shy. I watched him blush when someone told him he was doing a good job. How cute is that? I think I want to run that competition like you mentioned.”

“The one we’re rigging, so you can chase and fuck Arlo?”

I nod. “It sounds perverted when you say it like that, and we don’t have to fuck. I mean, I would be happy just to chase him.”

“Then it’s done. We can film something tonight and upload it, but know I will be there when it happens. Like you said, you’re not strong enough to hold a man down. While he has a clean record, I need to know you’re safe. Do you have any ideas for a backdrop? We can’t film at the house.”

I shrug—I hadn’t thought about it. “What do you think?”

“The carnival is coming to town. I could hook us up.”

I laugh because a carnival seems so cliché, but then again it could make for an interesting chase.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say, and he smiles. “How would Ridge feel about you fucking another man, if it came to that? I’m all for pissing him

off, but crossing boundaries is not something I'm comfortable with."

As if his ears are burning, Ridge strides into the room like it's his office.

"Speak about the devil and he shall appear," I drawl.

Ridge locks eyes with me and his brows furrow. "Talking about me, stray? If I didn't know better, I would think you're obsessed with me."

"In your dreams, big man. I'm just a decent human being and asked Zeland how you would feel about him fucking another man."

Ridge blinks a few times, then stares at Zeland. Oh, hot damn, this was Zeland's plan all along—he wants to make Ridge jealous. Using me worked to an extent, but I was never a genuine threat because I don't have a cock.

I watch as Ridge crosses the room. It's as if I'm not even here, and I wish I had popcorn.

He rounds Zeland's desk and spins his chair until Zeland smirks up at him, so Ridge grabs his chin roughly, using it to push his head back. "Is my cock not good enough for you? Do I need to bend you over this fucking desk and remind you who you belong to?"

"Yes, please," I whisper, and both men turn to face me. "Sorry, please continue."

Zeland laughs. "I didn't plan on letting him fuck me. My ass is reserved for you—unless Aspen wants to peg me, but I figured you wouldn't get jealous of a plastic dick."

Not once in my life have I ever thought about pegging someone, but with the image my mind just conjured up, I'm making a mental note to order a strap on. I'm one hundred percent going to fuck someone with it.

"Good," Ridge states firmly. "If I find out any man has put his cock in what's mine, he will be finished."

"Sweet Jesus, can you be that possessive of me? Come on, Ridge, be a sport. Your voice when it's like that fucking ends me. Poof, I combusted into dust."

Ridge's eyes find mine and he smirks. Holy shit, this man is lethal, and I don't look away as he pushes off Zeland and stalks toward me. I swallow as my mouth becomes dry all of a sudden, and when he reaches me, he drags my chair and turns it to face him. He places a hand on each armrest and leans down so his eyes are level with mine. "You couldn't handle a man like me—I would eat you alive and spit you back out. I don't do feelings, and I don't care about your needs."

“Bullshit,” I whisper. My bravado has completely vanished while I’m stuck in his web. “You just proved you have feelings for Zeland, and you care about my needs—you just won’t admit it.”

“I don’t care. You could walk away today, and I would go about my day as normal.”

“You’re a liar, Mr. Ellington, but maybe you’re also lying to yourself. And it sucks to be you because I’m not going anywhere. Maybe I’m your salvation and I was brought here to save your grumpy ass from yourself because, as annoying as you are, you do fucking care. You checked out a stranger to make sure he wasn’t a weirdo to keep us safe, you gave him a job to further make sure he wasn’t a weirdo, you come home every fucking night, and even if it’s not for me, it’s one hundred percent for Zeland. You’re a good man under all that gruffness.”

“You’re wrong, stray. Everything I do benefits me.”

My heart gallops in my chest, and he doesn’t budge. “Prove it. When I do my next video and run the competition, don’t vet the man I choose and don’t follow us.”

His jaw goes hard. “You’re going to regret trying to get close to me, stray. But you forget, I care for Zeland. He is the *only* person in this world I care about, and he seems to care for you, so that means you get all of me.”

I smirk. “All of you, huh?” I say, looking down. Even though I can’t see his package, he gets the point.

“I don’t fuck strays, but I have no issues watching.”

Shivering at the thought, I have unlocked a new thing I like called exhibitionism. I enjoy being watched, at least watched by him. However, I don’t know how I would feel about a complete stranger watching me. It’s why the content for my page is pretty PG, yet people keep asking to pay for explicit content, though my reservation there is more about the content being on the internet forever in the hands of weirdos.

“It’s a good thing you watching us turns me on. I’ve never had someone look out for me before, Ridge.”

“Be careful what you wish for, stray. Me having that kind of power over you should scare you.”

“It does,” I whisper, and he stands back to his full height.

“Okay, so this has turned me on,” Zeland interrupts. “If you don’t want to fuck me right now, leave my office so I can touch myself. I’m hard and I need to do something about it.”

“Your little obsession is working on finding bugs in our new game. If you want to pretend to be a new hire, I can call down for you.”

A smile takes over my face, and I look at Ridge. “You would do that?”

“To get rid of you so I can bend Zee over his desk, sure. Head downstairs and Theo will be waiting for you.”

I clap and practically run from the room. As much as I would normally make some quick-witted comment about watching them, I need to get a fix of Arlo. The elevator takes forever, but I finally make it downstairs to find Theo waiting for me. “Aspen?”

“That’s me.”

“The boss said you would come in to help run through the new game. I need you to sign a form saying you won’t talk to anyone outside the room about this game.”

“I’m well versed with signing NDAs for Ridgeland.”

Theo hands me an iPad and I sign on the dotted line. He tells me to follow him, and when he gets to a room, he opens the door and Arlo is inside.

“Arlo, we have a new girl here to help run through the game with you.”

Arlo turns and my chest flutters when he smiles, pushing up from the floor where he was sitting. He slides his black-rimmed glasses up his nose and walks over to me. I smile back, noticing he wore his Rick and Morty shirt today. “Hi, it’s nice to see you again.”

“I’m excited to work with you. I’ve heard good things.”

Honestly, I haven’t. Ridge doesn’t say nice things about people he works with. It’s either they’ve done their job well or they haven’t—there is no in between. But I know Arlo will benefit from the confidence boost.

“I trust you can bring her up to speed. Mr. Ellington wants this finished as quickly as possible.”

“Of course, and don’t worry, Theo. I should be done quicker with the help.”

Once Theo leaves, Arlo awkwardly shifts on his feet. “So, a quick tour. PCs, large screen with PlayStation and Xbox, and you can use the recliners, couch, or beanbags—I prefer the beanbags personally. Fridge is over there and is stocked with soda. Kelly brings in snacks and restocks them every day. If you have a preference, you can let her know.”

“Thanks. Should we get to work and maybe you can show me what we’re testing?”

“Right,” he says, his cheeks staining red. I follow him to the beanbags and take a seat beside him.

“We are working on a hyper-realistic online military strategy and survival game, where players control mercenary factions in a war-torn world. Unlike standard shooters, it combines FPS combat, base building, and political alliances. We have to build a squad, and right now we play against the computer, but with you here we can actually build our teams and play against each other, so I will set up the other projector after we go through this. Basically, you train your squad, which you can buy or slowly build using game points. You will be able to form alliances with other teams, but your own characters could turn against you if you are not developing them enough. We will release new maps with our monthly updates. Oh, and you have to treat your squad like humans—they will need to rest and eat.”

“And how does someone win the game?”

“There are a few ways—by dominating the world map at 75%, being the last faction remaining, and there is a peace route, but I don’t suspect that will be popular. At all times, players risk rogue AI mercenaries infiltrating and taking over all the factions and losing the game outright.”

“Okay, I think I have enough information. What do I need to do?”

“Let me get you set up, and you can build your team. Mine is already done, so we can spend a few hours getting yours to the same strength as mine.”

Arlo does just that, spending a few hours sitting beside me as we build up my characters, buying all the things I would need to hold my own against his team. The aim is for us to play it enough to make sure there are no bugs and then it’s sent to the other beta teams, who will play it live from their own homes and send in feedback.

Who would have thought game testing was so fun? I’m tempted to ask the guys for a job. Gaming has always been my way to wind down and relax. Would Zeland be pissed if I ditched the app? Or maybe I could do both; it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve worked more than one job.



Chapter Thirteen

Arlo

Has any human ever hated the weekend, time off from work, or downtime? For the first time in my life, I'm in a conundrum. I have never liked more than one person before. Since my mortifying blow job experience, I haven't actually had feelings for anyone, yet now my thoughts are consumed by multiple women. Aspen has been working by my side and she has a brilliant mind. Then I have my online buddy—the mouthy, fiery woman I look forward to playing with each night—but I really don't know a great deal about her. And then there's my latest obsession, my masked woman, who I know is just an online fantasy, but she is still someone I can't stop thinking about.

“Arlo, what the fuck?!” UrNewStep_Mom yells down the mic. “I thought you had my back.”

“Shit, sorry,” I say. Logically, I know I should shoot my shot with Aspen. But then I think, what if she doesn't go for nerds like me? Then we'll have to work together and shit will get awkward. UrNewStep_Mom has become my sounding board, so maybe she can offer me some insight. “My head is somewhere else.”

“Who are they?”

I laugh. “A girl from work. I barely know her, but it's rare to find someone so beautiful, smart, funny, and into gaming.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” She cackles at herself. “I’m kidding.”

“There are so many variables. If I ask her out and she says no, we have to work together, and I don’t like awkward encounters. What if she has a boyfriend—am I making an ass of myself?”

“Then maybe you need to spark up more personal—but not too personal—conversations to find out more about her. Ask about her job before she started there, or what she did over the weekend. Surely if she has a boyfriend he will come up.”

“You’re too good to me.” Her laughter bursts through the headset. “Hold up, my phone is ringing.” I answer on speaker phone, not caring that UrNewStep_Mom can probably hear. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Arlo Kross?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Marcus from HideNSeekHottie’s management team. I’m calling to let you know you have been chosen to take part in one of her videos. Please check your emails and fill in all the forms. You will receive a text message with the time and date. Make sure the consent form and hard limit forms are returned as soon as possible.”

“Um, okay, thank you.”

Marcus ends the call and UrNewStep_Mom screams in my ear. “Holy shit, isn’t that what you were hoping for?”

“I never thought they would pick me. Not if you saw the video I submitted.” How is this my life? Everything feels like it’s too much and I need to breathe. “Hey, I need to go. Can we chat tomorrow?”

“Sure, get some rest and congrats.”

I remove the headset, then rush toward my bathroom. I twist the faucet and use my hands to catch the water, splashing it on my face.

Holy shit, what have I done?!

This isn’t me; I don’t take risks. The wildest thing I have ever done is apply for a job at Ridgeland. I don’t apply to be chased by a masked woman or chat to strangers on the internet the way I talk to UrNewStep_Mom, and I sure as fuck don’t think about hitting on someone at work. I’m broken and always have been. While I thought I had a handle on things, clearly I do not.

Once I calm myself down, I check my emails, and the forms are just as daunting as I expected. They inform me that for her safety there will be at least one male masked man present. I’m surprised when they ask my

comfort levels of being touched by them, and if interested, how far I would go with a man.

I fill it in honestly. I'm not opposed to the man being involved—I don't know if I have hard limits, but I have a safe word I can use if I think things have gone too far. For privacy reasons, I won't know who the people are behind the masks and must consent to that as well.

Giving myself a pep talk is a hell of a lot easier when I'm blazed. Since starting at Ridgeland, I have cut down. It's my dream job and I no longer feel the need to sit around wasted all day.

"Arlo," Mom calls down the stairs.

"Coming," I yell back.

It's her night off and we always eat together, though we never keep regular hours, so it's not unusual for us to have dinner at ten o'clock at night.

When I get upstairs, she has containers of Chinese food spread out. "Hey, baby. What's wrong?"

I sigh, unable to hide anything from her. It's the downside of being a loser with your mom as your best friend. I just have to figure out how to explain this without actually explaining it. I tell her a lot, but my sexual fantasies are definitely not a topic I'm comfortable talking about with her. Even though I know I could, that she would be supportive, she would also want to talk about them in depth and that's where I draw the line.

"I have been given an opportunity to do something I have always dreamed. I'm scared I will fuck it all up."

She looks at me and purses her lips—it's something she does when she's thinking. "Do you have to quit your job to do it?" I shake my head. "Then my advice is to go for it. You only live once and you don't want to get old like me and have regrets. We are given our twenties to enjoy life to its fullest. If you fuck it up, who cares? You will still have your job, and you will always have me and that girl you play your video games with. She seems to have become a part of your life, though I still think she could be an old man trying to befriend you. The internet is full of perverted people."

I snort. "She's not a man. With how protective her roommates are, I'm pretty confident she is a beautiful woman and they're afraid I'm the old guy in the basement."

"It's not far from the truth."

"Mom!" I say in shock.

“What?” she says with a chuckle. “You do live in the basement, by your own choice. There’s a perfectly fine bedroom up here.”

She keeps teasing me, and we eat until we are so full I couldn’t possibly eat anymore. By the time I head back down to my room, I feel a lot better about my decision to take part in a video, especially when sex is up to the discretion of all parties. The filming is just the chase, and the forms did state that unless I used my safe word, there could be some minor injuries—I suppose it covers their ass. There is also a payment which is determined by how much the content makes, and a bonus if she exceeds a certain number of views.

The date will be set once I send in my blood panel to check for diseases and a background check is performed, both of which I consented to undergo. The View4U app is very strict about who can appear on their content creator channels, and one creator complained she couldn’t do more sexual content because the process takes forever to be screened. I guess it’s better to cover your ass, and Ridgeland is even strict when hiring new staff. The amount of videos I had to watch on how seriously they take their privacy, plus all the forms and NDAs I signed, was overwhelming.

To avoid making myself sick with worry about whether I’ll be laughed at for my inexperience, I decide to jump into a mindless game, one where there are hundreds of teenagers talking smack. The best way to deal with them is to beat them all and laugh at them. Is it petty at my age? Yes. But does it make me feel better? Also yes. If their parents don’t like it, maybe they should monitor what their kids are playing on the internet.

Anxiety plagues me. Earlier I received a message that I will be sent the details of a location tonight. I have been off my game, and I think Aspen knows because she has been watching me carefully for the last half an hour.

“Are you okay? You seem weird today. Not *weird* weird, but different to your normal self.”

I chuckle—she acts like me when I try to talk to girls. “I’m fine. Didn’t sleep well last night.”

I hate lying, but I’m not about to tell her I’m hoping some masked stranger likes the way I look enough to fuck me. It makes me sound

desperate, even if I kind of am. Girls like Aspen don't fall for guys like me. I see the way the bosses look at her and have noticed how they pop down at least once a day, pulling her aside to chat. Men like them get women like her.

My phone pings with an email notification, and I open it to see it's another email from Zeland.

SUBJECT: STILL IMPRESSIVE. STILL DISTRACTING. 😊

HEY ARLO,

I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOUR PROGRESS—ON THE GAME, OF COURSE. I'VE GOT TO SAY . . . YOU'RE MAKING QUITE AN IMPRESSION. THEO IS ALREADY SINGING YOUR PRAISES, AND EVEN RIDGE HASN'T FOUND SOMETHING TO GRUMBLE ABOUT YET. THAT'S BASICALLY A STANDING OVATION COMING FROM HIM.

YOU'RE DOING *SO* WELL, AND IT'S HONESTLY BECOMING A LITTLE DISTRACTING. EVERY TIME I WALK PAST YOUR OFFICE, I CATCH MYSELF WONDERING WHETHER YOU'RE THIS GOOD AT EVERYTHING YOU DO. DANGEROUS THOUGHTS, I KNOW.

KEEP UP THE AMAZING WORK. AND MAYBE LET ME STEAL A MINUTE OF YOUR TIME SOON? FOR *STRICTLY PROFESSIONAL* REASONS. PROBABLY.

ZELAND REID-ELLINGTON
COO | RIDGELAND ENTERPRISES

I blush as I read it. Zeland doesn't even work on this floor, but he comes down to see Aspen, or so I thought. I don't reply, I can't. Risking this job is not an option.

I need to distract myself, and that's when I remember what UrNewStep_Mom said about starting a conversation with Aspen, and while she may not be into me, I need to learn to talk to women without going bright red or saying something weird.

"Did you do anything fun over the weekend?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "Not unless you count doing online shopping for new clothes with my roommate exciting. I prefer a good thrift store find. Why are new clothes so itchy and you have to wear them in?"

Interesting, her roommate helps her shop. “I’m guilty of letting my mom shop for me still.” I feel my cheeks heat as soon as I say it. What woman in their right mind would not see that as a red flag?

“I wish my mom was around to shop with me. You’re lucky if you have a good relationship with her.”

“When I tell people she is my best friend, they normally laugh, but it’s always just been us against the world.”

She smiles at my words. “Keep her close, and fuck anyone who says different. They clearly never had a good parent-child relationship. I’m so glad I at least had a grandparent fill that role.”

The door to the room opens and Mr. Ellington walks in. I straighten my spine, feeling inferior to the man who screams wealth and power.

“S—Aspen,” he says, almost barking at her.

“Mr. Ellington, what can I do for you?”

I hear the tease in her voice. She normally calls him Ridge, but he got pissy and now demands she call him Mr. Ellington at work.

His jaw goes tight. “Have you seen Zee at all today?”

“Can’t say I have. You haven’t seen him anywhere, Arlo?”

I shake my head.

“He stole my fucking shoes.” Both Aspen and I look down, and Aspen laughs at his socked feet. “He left me these sorry excuses for shoes.”

He holds up a pair of chucks and I sheepishly look down at my own worn pair.

“How can I go to a meeting wearing his shoes?”

She smirks at him. “You have an assistant, right? Ask her to go get you a new pair.”

That makes him chuckle and smile at her. I don’t think I have ever seen the man smile.

“Mine are custom-made, and I won’t send a random woman to my house.”

“Hmm, it sounds like you’re in a real pickle. Maybe you need to hunt down Zeland—I mean Mr. Reid-Ellington—or wear his shoes. I happen to think a man in a suit with chucks is hot.”

“Somehow, I don’t think Ford Wells will think I’m hot.”

“Would you like me to call him and see if he will tell me where he is?”

Ridge nods, and Aspen pulls out her phone and holds it to her ear. He must answer because she smiles.

“Where are you? . . . Oh, I know you did. He is here, annoying me while I’m trying to work . . . It’s irrelevant if he’s hot when he is mad. He has a meeting with Mr. Wells and needs his shoes . . . How much caffeine have you had today?” She lowers her voice. “No, I will not repeat that. Unlike you, he can actually fire me. Stop laughing, asshole.”

She ends the call. “Sorry, he said, and I quote, ‘You are being an uptight and overbearing asshole and need to loosen up.’ And apparently he knows exactly how to make you loose.”

I suck my lips into my mouth as Ridge runs a hand over his face. “I’m going to murder him. And you are required upstairs in an hour.”

She raises a brow at him.

“Ford’s fiancée would like to meet you,” he grumbles. “Don’t ask questions—this is all Zee’s fault.”

She shrugs. “Fine. I suggest you find Zeland and make him eat something. He has a case of severe crackhead energy today.”

I laugh and Ridge cuts me a glare, so I avert my eyes to anywhere but him, which helps to calm my nerves. Instead of listening in, I busy myself with tasks that need to be done.

“Sorry about that,” Aspen says. “Being friends with the bosses has its downfalls.”

“You’re friends with them? I thought maybe you were seeing one of them.”

Aspen bellows out a throaty laugh. “Oh god no. Me in a relationship? I’m a walking red flag and I have commitment issues out the wazoo. And I probably have daddy issues as well. I’m too headstrong to deal with things I’d rather avoid, plus my anger issues could be a major problem. I honestly think there is something wrong with me.”

“You seem fine to me,” I say, fiddling with the controller in my hands.

She smiles at me. “That’s because you only see me in my happy place. Wait until I’m pissed off—I throw punches first and ask questions later. Though everyone I have ever punched deserved it. I don’t hit innocent people.”

I have never met a woman like her before—the kind who doesn’t throw herself at the rich men and talks to me like she wants me around. Most women look down at me like I’m some sort of loser they were dumped with just because I’m obsessed with video games, watch way too many animated TV shows, and love my mother.



Chapter Fourteen

Aspen

Throwing up before you're about to film content is not great. Zeland holds my hair back while I dry retch into the toilet bowl.

"If it's too much, we can cancel. Remember, this is all about what you want."

"How do I know what he does and doesn't want? And fuck, is this too stalkery?"

Zeland laughs. "He filled in the consent forms and has taken nothing off the table. He is willing to do anything. His safe word is 'schwifty.'"

I snort, getting the reference since I started watching Rick and Morty out of curiosity, and I must admit it's not bad.

"He really chose that? I guess we'll see how it goes."

"Do you want a safe word as well? That way you can stop this at any point. I'm here to keep you safe above all else—fucking you is just a bonus."

I shake my head as I stand, walking over to the sink and washing out my mouth, then brushing my teeth. "I'll be fine. My anxiety does this sometimes, makes me question things. I wish it would just leave me alone."

"You just have to remember he signed up for this experience, and you're not forcing him to do anything he doesn't want. He holds the power; one word from him and it's all over."

“Maybe that’s why I’m scared. For as long as I can remember, I have always been the one in control. I call the shots because I leave no room for being walked out on again. For some reason, since I have met you, Arlo, and even Ridge, this is the first time I feel like I don’t want to run away. It scares the shit out of me. I haven’t had this before. I barely ever had friends, let alone something more.”

“I’m not going anywhere. If I was, I would have thrown you out after we screwed around. Even Ridge—”

“Speak for yourself,” Ridge says, appearing in my bathroom doorway like freaking magic. “I never wanted her here. Remember, if it were up to me, she would have been pushed out the door after she woke up. But you’ve grown on me, stray, and it’s now not a complete displeasure to be around you. Since Zeland has the organization skills of a toddler, I have had the carnival rigged with cameras, and the staff have all been sent on a work bonding trip for the night, funded by Zeland. The grounds are fully fenced, and they will be locked for the duration of your little competition. I will watch over everything through the security cameras, and if you hear a warning alarm, that means Zeland is to check his phone straight away and you will both be pulled out of there.”

“What about Arlo?” I ask.

“What about him? If you two are pulled out, it’s because he is a crazy pervert or something. And if you’re not comfortable with me watching things get heated—”

I step closer to Ridge and grab his tie, tugging it so his face gets a little closer to mine. “I think we have already established I like you watching me, big guy. But I meant, if something goes wrong other than if he is a pervert, you get him out as well. He is my friend, and I don’t have many of those. I only have you three.”

“Fine, but we are not friends, stray.”

I chuckle and let go. “Okay, whatever you say to help you sleep better at night. But I know you like me.”

Zeland claps his hands. “Let’s get this show on the road. You look fucking hot, and your wig is all good. I have my hoodie and the masks in my car.”

Ridge moves from the doorway and both Zeland and I walk into my room. He is right. We are ready and I can do this. Arlo is my friend, and

maybe if I give him this, he might truly see he is worthy of having whatever he wants.

I have never been to a carnival, especially one like this, with rides and a big-top tent. We could never afford to do things like this, not when my grandmother was struggling to keep a roof over our heads, and now the role is reversed.

The entire place is surrounded by temporary fencing covered with large yellow tarps. We are protected from anyone trying to peek inside. It makes me wonder how much Zeland paid to keep this place empty—actually, I think he is more excited than I am.

Once we clear the gates, he moves us to the side of the entrance into the shadows between two rides. “Lights are strategically turned on, so it’s bright enough to record. I’ve set a timer and have convinced Ridge to help with the countdown, since he plans to watch anyway.”

“Is it wrong that I love the idea of the moody bastard watching me?”

Zeland laughs. “No, knowing his eyes are on you is a turn-on. Before we start, I want to ask for your consent to touch you. Is there anything off the table?”

I think about it for a second. “We’re good, just don’t pull my hair—I can’t lose my wig.”

“Trust me, I can pull your real hair at home.”

I shiver at the thought. Never in my life have I wanted more than a one-night stand, as it meant giving someone the power to leave me. Yet day by day, Zeland is proving that unless I leave he isn’t going anywhere, and it’s a hard pill to swallow. He is handing me the power. Even Ridge might grumble about me being in his space, but he has never actually told me to leave.

Carnival music plays over the speakers, and I guess this is it.

“Step right up! Tonight the rules of the world no longer apply. Here, shadows hide the chaser, masks conceal faces, and excitement of the unknown waits around every turn. You didn’t come here by accident. The moment you stepped through these gates, you became the star of the show,

the one we've been waiting for. Somewhere in the darkness, masked figures are watching . . . waiting.

"Will you run? Will you hide? Or will you surrender and let the night take you somewhere you never dared to go? The choice is yours. The fantasy is real. And if you run . . . there's no turning back."

Zeland hands me my mask. "You can talk. We have our best technology concealing our voices, and the one you just heard was Ridge. Touch the side of your mask and it will turn on, then touch it a second time to turn it off."

I give Zeland a thumbs-up, and we spot Arlo the second he steps through the entrance. The gates creak closed behind him, sealing him inside the carnival's world of shadows and neon lights. He looks nervous—his hands twitching at his sides, his shoulders stiff—but there's something else beneath it. Curiosity. Anticipation.

He steps forward, passing the line of rigged carnival games, and right on cue, the clown heads jolt to life. Their painted faces twist and mechanical laughter echoes as they spin toward him.

Arlo practically jumps out of his skin and excitement sparks in my veins.

I pull my mask into place and switch the neon and voice transformer on, inhaling deeply before letting the words slip from my lips.

"You better run . . . let's see how fast you really are."

Arlo whips his head around, eyes locking on me. For the briefest moment, something flickers across his face, and the corners of his lips curl up in a grin.

He takes off running and I bolt after him, my heartbeat thundering in sync with his footsteps. The carnival blurs around us, flashing lights and distorted music twisting together as he barrels away from us. Zeland could easily overtake him, but he lingers behind me, letting me take the lead in our hunt.

Arlo ducks past the ring toss, weaving through the sideshow alley, his breath sharp and ragged. He's fast, but not fast enough.

"Are you really trying to get away? Or are you just waiting for me to catch you?"

His head jerks slightly at my voice, but he doesn't slow. Good. I don't want this to end yet.

I stay close, watching him react, observing the way his body moves and the tension in his shoulders. He veers right, using the teacup ride as a

makeshift barrier. I slip between the gaps effortlessly, keeping him in my sight.

“Keep running if you dare. It only makes me want you more.”

He mutters something under his breath, probably a curse, and pivots sharply toward the Ferris wheel.

My pulse spikes. He’s desperate now.

I lunge as he reaches the metal gate, but at the last second, he grabs onto the bars and hauls himself onto the moving ride. The cart sways as he climbs in, and he stares down at me.

I tilt my head, lips curving under my mask. He thinks he’s safe, but he’s wrong.

Zeland stops beside me, laughing under his breath. “What now?”

I step closer to the Ferris wheel, my eyes never leaving Arlo.

“You’re only making this more fun for me.”

The ride creaks higher. This game is far from over.

Arlo pops his head over the side. He might need a quick break, but he won’t get away that easily.

“What happens now is we wait for it to descend to a relatively safe height and we stop the ride. Ever fucked in a Ferris wheel?”

Zeland chuckles. “Stop the Ferris wheel when it’s too high to jump out safely, but won’t kill us if we fall.”

I open my mouth to ask Zeland who he is talking to, but then I realize he must have an earpiece and is talking to Ridge.

When the ride eventually halts, I skip forward.

“Is this the best you can do? I expected more of a challenge.”

Turning to Zeland, I place a hand on his chest and whisper, “You wait here, but tell Ridge to start the ride once I’m in.”

“Whatever you want.”

I move closer to the Ferris wheel, then I climb the emergency ladder. Heights have never bothered me, and I love when my adrenaline spikes—I like the excitement of feeling free. When I reach the arm for his cart, I step onto it and hold the crossbars, balancing carefully while my heart beats a million miles a minute. Once I’m close enough, I vault over the railing and land in the seat beside Arlo before he can react. The gondola sways under our combined weight, but I barely notice. I’m too focused on the way his breath stutters, and the way his hands grip the bar as if that could somehow keep him in control.

I lean in, close enough that he can feel the heat of my body, close enough so that if he turned his head even slightly, if I wasn't wearing the mask, our lips would nearly touch. His chest rises and falls rapidly, adrenaline still coursing through him from the chase. But I can tell it's not just the thrill of running that's making his pulse race.

"You think you've won?" I purr, as I drag my gloved fingers up his arm in a slow, deliberate swipe. *"No, sweetheart, all you did was earn yourself a few seconds."*

I shift, pressing closer, my leg brushing his. He tenses, not pushing me away, yet he doesn't pull me closer either.

"If I had caught you down there, I would've had you against the nearest wall." My fingers skim up his chest, tracing the rapid beat of his heart through his shirt. *"My friend would have pinned you to it for me and whispered in your ear exactly what I planned to do to you. How I'd make you squirm beneath me, how he would tilt your head down and make you watch me while I took my time with you."*

Arlo sucks in a breath, his grip on the metal bar tightening.

I smirk beneath my mask. *"But since you were clever enough to make it this far, I'll give you a treat."*

The ride shudders to life. Zeland is waiting, his arms crossed, watching us like he already knows how this is going to play out.

"When those doors open, you get one last chance to run," I murmur close to Arlo's ear. *"Because next time?"* I reach up and run my nails over his jaw. *"Next time, you will drop to your knees for me and be prepared to fuck my pussy with your tongue."*

The Ferris wheel lurches to a stop and the door clicks open.

I lean back, flicking my fingers toward the exit. *"Go on, sweetheart."*

Arlo doesn't hesitate. He bolts.

"You let him go? I was looking forward to joining you."

I lift up the bottom of my mask slightly to speak to him normally. *"As much as I wanted to fuck him on this ride, I need to know he wants this. I want him on his knees for me, plus it will make for good content. Looks like we've gotta run again."*

We easily catch up to Arlo, watching as he twists sharply, skidding through the arched entrance to a maze of mirrors. As we follow behind him, the lights flicker, and his reflection stretches and multiplies, warping into

endless versions of himself. We follow him, the click of my boots echoing around us.

“Nowhere left to run, sweetheart,” I tease.

Arlo spins, trying to find the real me, but I’m everywhere. I can tell he is getting tired, the ache now burning in his veins. Sadly for him, I know exactly where he is.

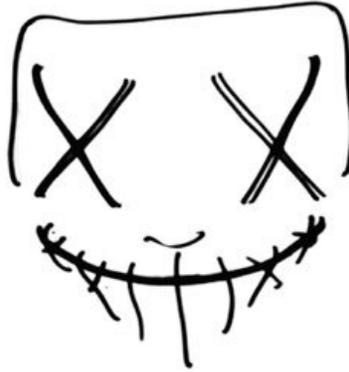
Moving swiftly, I slide in beside him as Zeland’s hand fists into his shirt, yanking him back into his body while I step around them, so Arlo is staring at my glowing neon mask.

“On your knees.” The command is soft, almost gentle, but there’s no mistaking it for anything less than an order. It’s hard to separate this man from my friend.

He resists for a second. A last shred of defiance. But Zeland places his hands on Arlo’s shoulders, forcing him down.

As the floor meets his knees, I slide a finger beneath his chin, tilting his face so he is looking at the masked version of me.

“That’s better,” I whisper, stroking his jaw, and he shivers beneath my touch. *“You run so well, but I think you look even prettier like this.”*



Chapter Fifteen

Arlo

Sweat drips down my temple as I gaze up at the masked woman. The masked man behind me twists his fingers in my hair, forcing me to stop looking at her and turn to him.

“Tell her how much you want her pussy. Beg her for it.”

“Please,” I whisper, my cheeks heating as my embarrassment rises to the surface. I’m so inexperienced I shouldn’t have done this.

The masked man behind me rips my head back by my hair. I can see his reflections in the mirrors surrounding us, and he pushes his erection against the back of my head.

“You can do better than that. Don’t be scared, even if you do look pretty with pink cheeks.”

“Please,” I say louder. “Please let me lick your pussy. I want to taste you.”

“What a good boy. Good boys get rewarded. When he lets go of you, I want you to lift my tutu and take what you want.”

The masked man lets go of my head and my eyes widen when I notice another shadow in the room standing by the door with his arms crossed over his chest and his mask turned off.

When the masked woman notices, she says, *“Couldn’t stay away, huh?”* He doesn’t answer her, and she turns her attention back to me. *“He wants to*

watch you eat my pussy, so how about you give him a show?"

With trembling hands, I lift her tutu and see she is bare beneath her stockings. Leaning forward, I inhale, smelling how turned on she is and trying to remember this moment—the first pussy I have ever come close to—and fuck I want to taste her. Letting go of the tutu, it falls back over my head, and I focus on how to get the stockings off. I find a hole and rip the seam between her legs as she bucks her hips toward me, her pussy right where I need it.

Gripping her ass, I lick her softly and she moans. The sound has me burying my face in as far as I can, and I stop worrying about doing it wrong. With the sounds she is making, I know she is enjoying it.

"Oh fuck," she gasps out as I suck her clit into my mouth hard.

I have watched enough porn to get the gist, and the View4U app has a creator who has a "sex for dummies" channel where she teaches you how to please a woman.

Moving one hand from her ass, I slip a finger inside her, and her warmth has me almost coming in my pants. Memories flood back and I shake.

"Don't stop. Oh fuck, don't stop," she cries, and it snaps me out of whatever place my mind went to.

She bucks forward as she screams my name, and a sense of accomplishment replaces the shame. I just made her come all over my face. Once she rides out her orgasm and steps back, a wide smile takes over my face, reflected all around me.

"What a good boy, making me come so hard. I want to watch you come now. My friend is going to help you with that."

The man behind me fists my hair and tugs me to my feet, his front still pressed against my back. He lifts the back of my shirt and helps me remove it. I shake with anticipation; tonight is a lot of firsts for me, and they know it—I had to disclose my sexual history.

The masked man runs his hand down my stomach, and my cock is so hard it feels like it might combust.

"Let's get these out of the way," he says, unbuckling my jeans and pushing them and my boxers down my legs. When they hit the ground and I step out of them, he wraps his hand around my length, and I hiss at the way his skin feels against mine. *"Then you get to make a choice: do you want to fuck her from behind while I finger your ass, or do you want her to ride you? Your first time should be special."*

He strokes my length as the masked woman watches. As expected, I explode within seconds, and my face goes beet red.

“Don’t be embarrassed. How do you want to fuck her?”

“Ca-can you fuck her first so I can watch? And then I think I want to fuck her from behind with your fingers in me.”

“Good choice. Now I want you not to touch your cock, you only get to watch. If you touch yourself, I won’t let you fuck her. I will fuck you instead, and trust me when I tell you, you won’t like how much it hurts with no prep.”

“Oh fuck,” I whisper, and he chuckles. He steps back and walks around me, and the masked woman jumps into his arms. He uses one to hold her up and the other to undo his pants as he walks them toward the mirrors. Her back hits one with a thud and he lines his cock up and thrusts into her. She looks tiny, hidden behind his body, and he fucks her savagely. In every mirror I can see the way their bodies connect, and exactly how thick his cock is as he slowly draws himself out and thrusts back in. Her tutu is now pushed up around her tits.

She talks him through it, telling him how good he fucks and how turned on she is with me watching. The second masked man appears beside me. He doesn’t say anything, and his sheer presence feels intimidating as he watches. I want to get on my knees and take his cock in my mouth and that thought alone has my cock coming back to life.

With an epic scream, she shudders around him, and her body goes almost limp. He doesn’t give her time to come down, turning them around and sliding his cock out of her, then he tucks it back into his pants before lowering her to the ground. The masked man turns her toward me as he fixes her tutu and flips it up at the back, so I have a full view in the mirrors of his cum pooled in her pussy, almost leaking out.

“Go lick her clean,” the man beside me says. *“See how well you can clean that little cunt before you fuck it.”*

His words are dirty, and I love it. I move toward her and get back down on my knees, using my hands to spread her ass cheeks as I lean forward, then I lick the cum as she moans. Eating another man’s come from her is something I never in my wildest dreams thought would happen tonight but here we are, me tongue-fucking her as salty cum laces my taste buds.

“I need you to fuck me,” she pants.

Pulling back, I rise to my feet, palming my cock, then swipe the head through her pussy lips to make sure she is ready. When the head of my cock slips inside her, I feel like I have died and gone to heaven. I instantly understand the obsession men have with fucking, and I grasp her hips, digging my fingers into her flesh. I tentatively move forward, and when I do, one of the masked men slides in behind me. He leans around and slowly pushes his fingers inside the woman—beside my cock—and my eyes roll.

“Fuck, your cock is stretching me, you’re so big. Fuck me, sweetheart, and show me how much you want me.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I pull back and thrust hard, causing her to scream. Every time she makes a noise, my balls tighten, and even though I have come once already, the second time won’t be far behind. She is so snug and her muscles clench so tightly around me.

The masked man presses a finger to my ass, and instinctively I freeze. He slowly pushes inside, and I gasp at how good it feels.

“Fuck her, and I will follow your lead.”

I slowly find my rhythm again and he keeps his finger buried inside my ass, stroking me. Occasionally, he hits something that makes me groan and push back against his fingers.

“Oh, fuck yes, keep fucking me hard and I will come all over your huge cock. Yes, yes, YES!”

If I thought it was a tight fit before, she squeezes me so hard my eyes roll back in my head, and I grunt out something as my balls tighten. The man behind me presses the sweet spot inside me, making me see stars, and incredibly my cock hardens more. Then I’m coming right after her until my entire body twitches and my muscles relax. I’ve come so deep inside her, she won’t be able to wash it out anytime soon.

When I pull out, I pull her tutu down before stepping back on wobbly legs with a chuckle.

She pushes up straighter and comes to stand in front of me. *“You were perfect, sweetheart.”* And she bops me on my nose. *“Such a good boy.”*

My smile almost breaks my face. Good boy and sweetheart—fuck me, her words make me weak. Who would have thought I would love praise so much, but it strokes my ego to hear her say I did a good job.

With that, the masked men whisk her away, and I watch them vanish. I’m on cloud nine as I get dressed and leave the carnival, the gates already open when I reach them.

I'm no longer a virgin. Arlo Atlas Kross can stop being embarrassed about the fact that he was a twenty-three-year-old virgin. Did I fuck a stranger for content? Sure, but it wasn't as if I was saving my virginity for the love of my life. I was a fucking pussy who got embarrassed over one stupid sexual encounter that still haunts me to this day.

I get into the old beat-up shitbox my mom bought me for my eighteenth birthday. It's my pride and joy because I know how hard she worked to save up for it, even though I insisted I didn't need a car. I blast the stereo and sing at the top of my lungs all the way home—I swear no one could ruin my mood tonight. As I pull up to the curb, all the lights in the house are off, meaning Mom is at work already. “I Got a Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas is playing as I turn off my car, and I hum the tune as I walk up to my door.

Tonight was a damn good night.



Chapter Sixteen

Ridge

Mistakes are a funny thing; in hindsight, you know what you should have done. Can it really be a mistake when it's something you want so fucking badly, yet the mistake is because it goes against everything you believe in?

I should never have watched Aspen on the security cameras; it has become an obsession. She dances around my house in her underwear, cleaning, even though we have a housekeeper. I know she does it because she enjoys being watched; she is vocal about it, which only feeds my obsession.

I should never have watched her and Zeland fuck. It just made the itch worse. And I should definitely not have come down to observe her with Arlo. Seeing her like that—it took a lot of willpower not to step in and pull the mask from her face simply so I could see how she looks when she comes.

But these are all mistakes I can learn from.

“Are you ready?” Zeland asks, popping his head into my room as I pull my tie into place. I nod, though I can think of a hundred things I would rather do than attend Carmichael's birthday party.

“Good, let's get this party started.”

I don't dignify that with a response. For Zeland, any excuse to party is all he needs. We walk downstairs together, and I shake my head at him in a

tux with his stupid shoes. I still haven't forgiven him for making me wear them to a meeting with Ford, which actually went surprisingly well. His girlfriend sat in the corner, whispering with Aspen, and I still haven't asked what they were talking about, even though I watched discretely the entire time while one of her boyfriends, Zeph, explained a minor flaw in our security systems. He claims he found it by accident. Accident my ass—Ford has wanted to meet with me for a while, and he finally found a way to score one.

I pause at the top of the stairs, staring at Aspen, who stands at the bottom dressed in a tight black halter dress with a gold strip around the middle. Her hair is pulled into a high ponytail and her makeup gives her a seductive look. I blink a few times to disperse the lust.

“She looks fucking hot, right?”

I clear my throat. “You invited her?”

“Of course I did—I'm not getting stuck with the snake. I told your father I had a date.”

“Will you two old ladies hurry already? Lenny is going to be there tonight, and we have things to talk about.”

“Lenny?” I ask Zeland, and he laughs.

“Elena—Ford's girl.”

That weasel is using his woman to get to mine. No, not *mine*, but he knows what he's doing and I don't like it one bit.

“Calm down,” Zee whispers. “Lenny was just telling her how she met Ford and the others. It's actually a funny story.”

“Don't care,” I snap as I reach the bottom step. Zee pushes past me and takes Aspen by the arm, then leads her outside to where Malachi is waiting.

I need to get myself in check; I don't lust after women—I barely ever fuck them. They are a complication I do not need, nor want. Yet day by day Aspen gets under my fucking skin. She is an enigma—one I want to break apart, then put back together just to see how everything fits. And I really don't like not knowing what makes a person tick, especially when they are close to me. It leaves me vulnerable, and that makes you weak.

Zee helps Aspen into the limo, and I slide in after them. I pull out my phone and mindlessly scroll through all my unopened emails to stop myself from staring as Zee tips champagne into Aspen's mouth. They both laugh, and as I look up, Zee is licking the liquid from the side of her neck. I'm not jealous—if I want Zee, he'll come running, but it takes everything in me not

to spread her legs and feast before we arrive as I try not to wonder how she would feel beneath me.

With a shake of my head, I look back down at my phone. I'm Ridge Ellington, and I do not fantasize about strays in the back of limos—that is not who I am. People fall at my feet and beg for whatever scraps I'm willing to give them.

Malachi pulls up to the obnoxious mansion that Carmichael lives in, where everything is over the top, and I know tonight it's going to be so much worse.

"Holy fuck," Aspen whispers as we wait in line to be let out. "Is someone here royalty? They have a red carpet and photographers."

"That would be the she-devil's doing. Calling in the paps to make her feel more special than she is."

"Zeland," I snap. "You know that's not true. They're an influential family, and it comes with the territory."

Zee rolls his eyes as we pull up, and someone opens my door. I step out to find Genevieve waiting and her smile widens. I give her a brief one back before Aspen slides closer to the door. I reach for her hand to steady her as she steps out of the limo—nothing more—but the second our skin connects, a sharp current runs through me, hot and unwanted. Her fingers are soft, warm, and too damn right. Cameras flash around us, and the paparazzi call my name, but for a split second, all I feel is her. I should let go. I should step back. Instead, my grip tightens, just slightly, like some part of me isn't ready to lose the contact between us. It's nothing, it has to be, but as she looks up at me, her eyes catching the lights, I already know I'm in trouble.

"Mr. Ellington, who is your date tonight?"

"Is she your new girlfriend?"

"Are the rumors true? Are you going to ask Miss Lancaster to marry you?"

Zee slips out behind us and stands on the other side of Aspen, posing for the cameras with his toothy smile.

Aspen squeezes my hand but doesn't let go. Her fingers become clammy, and I know she is panicking a little. Leaning in closer, I whisper, "Just keep your head up and follow my lead. Inside it will be quieter." She nods and points her chin up. "Good girl."

She shivers and Zee chuckles. "I'm going to find the bar, then be right back. Keep an eye on Aspen."

With that, he takes off, leaving me in the path of Genevieve.

“Ridge, daddy has been waiting for you to arrive.”

I’m sure he hasn’t. Genevieve looks Aspen up and down, and one thing I really fucking hate is a judgmental woman.

Aspen smiles as she looks at Genevieve. “You look beautiful.”

Genevieve scoffs. “This old thing? Why don’t you go mingle with the rich and powerful while you have the chance, so Ridge and I—”

“Do not speak to my date like that. She will not go mingle with those old men who take advantage of women just because they have money.” I don’t mean for my tone to come out the way it does, and even Genevieve is shocked.

“I thought she was a cheap date Zeland brought along so your father couldn’t push him toward the eligible women.”

“Well, you thought wrong. Clearly, if he had, she would be on his arm and not mine. Now if you’ll excuse me, I would like to get my date a drink and find our table. Tell your father I will speak to him as soon as I’m free.” We then move past Genevieve and walk into the house.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Aspen whispers.

“I know I didn’t, stray. Zee has claimed you, and by default, you get my protection. What’s mine is his, and what’s his is mine.”

“Oh,” she squeaks.

Men and women I don’t know or don’t remember say hello as we walk through the mansion and into the ballroom. The women look down on Aspen and the men look at her like a piece of meat. The dress she is wearing isn’t as expensive as what the women here are used to, so they see her as cheap and not worthy of their time, while the men see her as an easy target. I know they are all wondering why she is holding my hand and not Zee’s—he is notorious for bringing working girls to these parties. He likes the theatrics of keeping these snobby assholes on their toes. He doesn’t want to marry a woman whose only life goal is to find a wealthy husband and tend to his every need.

The celebration drags on and I have kept Aspen in sight all night; she has spent most of it laughing with Elena. Zee has drunk his body weight in alcohol, as he normally does when we attend a fancy party. Aspen has paced herself, which is not what I was expecting. She smiles politely when anyone approaches her and starts up a conversation, but no one has dared to touch her. They all believe she is mine and that thought burns in my chest.

When Zee teases the buttons on his shirt, I know it's time to go before he gets naked—he has no qualms about being front-page news tomorrow morning.

Aspen finds me as I'm saying goodbye to Carmichael, linking her arm with mine, and she pushes up on her toes to whisper in my ear. "I think we should go. Zeland just mentioned swimming in the water feature outside."

I smirk. "Carmichael, it was lovely celebrating your birthday. We need to catch up for a round of golf soon."

"I will get my secretary to call yours and set something up."

I nod in response, then we hurry outside, where we find Zee shrugging off his shirt, and Aspen runs over to him. "How about we save getting naked for when we get home?"

"You wanna see me naked?" he slurs, and she laughs.

"I think most women would like to see you naked, Zeland. It just might not be ideal for the front-page news."

"You're right. And imagine if the water is cold and I get shrinkage. Can't have that."

I snort as I grab my best friend, and he wraps an arm around my shoulder. "You stole my date," he practically yells, and I shush him. He then attempts to whisper, "I know you like her, and guess what? I think she likes you back."

I look over at Aspen, but her expression gives nothing away. She walks over to the limo as Malachi pulls up and opens the door so I can get a very drunk Zee into the back. Once we have him inside, he sings Hakuna Matata, repeating the same part over and over, and by the time we reach the front of our house, Aspen is rubbing her temples. Malachi pulls a now thankfully snoring Zee from the limo, somehow managing to scoop the big idiot up bridal style, and walks him into the house.

Aspen scoots over and I help her from the limo again and our eyes connect. "Thank you for letting me come tonight. It was insightful to see how the other side lives."

"And was it everything you expected?" I ask as we walk up the front steps.

She snorts. "Yes and no. I would much prefer a bar. It was nice to feel like Cinderella for a night, but I'm ready to lose my glass slippers. I want to check on Zeland first, and make sure he isn't drowning in his own vomit, if that's okay."

“You don’t need to ask my permission when it comes to him, stray. He’s his own man.”

She ascends the stairs before me and my mind drifts to taking her and fucking her right here, but I behave.

“I know, but I feel like I’m doing something wrong when it comes to him because I know he’s yours. You may say he isn’t, but I can see the truth.”

She reaches the top of the stairs and I grab her ponytail, using it to pull her back into my body.

“He is mine, but I don’t mind sharing him with you and your new little pet.”

She twists around and pushes me in the chest. With the couple of drinks under my belt, I stumble and fall into the armchair that sits here on the side of the landing for decoration. I go to stand up, but she uses her heel to keep me pinned. I sink back into the chair, my pulse a slow, dark thrum as Aspen presses the sharp point of her heel against my chest. She’s testing me, pushing just enough to remind me she’s in control, for now.

My hands find her ankle, and my fingers skim over soft skin as I drag them up, slow and deliberate. I want her to feel what I feel.

I could rip her shoe off and make this a power struggle. Instead, I move forward and press a kiss just above the strap. Then another, higher this time, my lips barely brushing her calf as I unbuckle the heel with infuriating patience. Her breath catches, so quiet I almost miss it. When I finally pull her shoe free, I glance up at her. “Will you wear the mask for me?”

She tilts her head, a wicked smile curving her lips. “Will you get on your knees for me?”

“If that is what you desire. But make no mistake, I am going to fuck you.”

Pushing her foot down, I slide from the chair and kneel before her, undoing her other heel and sliding it off her foot, then discarding it beside the other. “I have no issue getting on my knees if I get to taste your wet little cunt.”

Pulling her dress up over her hips, I lean forward and press my nose to her pussy. It’s covered by only a very thin scrap of lace and I nip at her through the material.

She squeals as I stand and lift her straight over my shoulder. Having a moment where I say “fuck it” is huge for me, but I need to be inside her, to

get her out of my system so I can think straight again.

Striding for my room, I make a pit stop and open Zee's door. His head hangs off the side of his bed and it looks like Malachi has put a wastepaper basket beside him just in case. I swipe the duffle bag beside the entrance and quietly shut his door.

"Ridge," she giggles. "Put me down, my ass is hanging out."

Holding her over my shoulder, I squeeze the flesh on her perfectly round ass. Once we are in my room, I kick the door closed, slip off my shoes, and slide her down my body. She takes the duffle bag from me and pulls out her mask, dropping the rest to the floor as she slides it over her head. Her dress is still up around her waist, but fuck she looks hot. I almost wish I had left her heels on. She turns her attention to me, flicking her mask on, then she reaches forward and pulls my shirt from my slacks, slowly unbuttoning it.

The smell of her perfume lingers between us, and I lean forward to grab the back of her neck, pressing my nose against her skin. Her smell is intoxicating—a combination of peaches, strawberries, and something sweet like sugar.

I run my nose up the column of her neck and suck her earlobe into my mouth. "I'm going to get on my knees for you, Aspen."

She shivers when I say her name. I call her stray most of the time, but it's more so I keep a line drawn between us, one I have bulldozed tonight.

Sinking to my knees with my shirt wide open, I clench my teeth as my cock presses hard against my zipper.

She looks down at me with her glow mask and I wish I could see the fire in her eyes. As I run my hands up her left leg, I lift it and help her put it over my shoulder. Wrapping my arms around her ass, I pull her closer to me, and that small scrap of material is now the only thing between us. Smelling her again makes my mouth water. I move it to the side and tease her pussy lips before dipping my tongue between them. She is so wet. I want to bend her over my custom-made bed, built to my height, and that makes it all the better for fucking.

Aspen moans and runs her fingers through my hair, pulling at the strands as I suck on her clit. "*Fuck, Ridge, I need you inside me.*"

She doesn't have to ask twice. I pull back and slide her leg down before standing.

"Ass up on the edge of the bed," I demand.

“Oh no, you’re not calling the shots tonight. You up on the bed, and get your cock out.”

I smirk at her as I shrug my shirt from my shoulders, undoing the cuff links and dropping them to the floor before unfastening my belt. Aspen watches as I waste no time getting naked. She doesn’t shy away, taking in my naked form, and I feel her eyes roaming over my thick cock from behind her mask. I lie flat on the bed, my back against the plush sheets.

Aspen climbs up with her dress around her waist and pulls her thong to one side as she straddles my waist. In seconds she has her cunt lined up with my cock, then sinks down, and it’s pure torture how slowly she moves. I want to grip her hips and thrust up hard inside her, but she wants to be in charge.

Her movements are slow but measured, gliding all the way up my length before slipping back down. Her nails dig into my chest as she captures her rhythm, leaning back as she rides me, bucking her clit into me with each movement.

“Your cock is huge. I can feel you everywhere.”

I let her believe she is in charge. Let her ride me and try to make me come. Her speed picks up and I pull at the front of her dress, ripping the halter straight from her neck and releasing her tits. They are small but fucking perfect. Lifting the top half of my body, I pull her chest to mine, and any last shred of control I thought I had snaps. My fingers twist in her hair, tilting her head back just enough to make her gasp. That sound wrecks me.

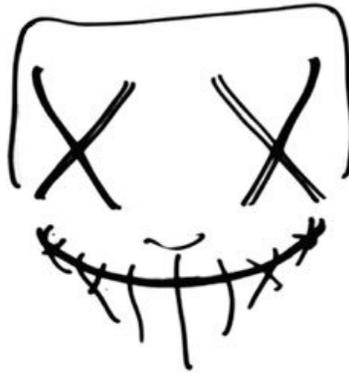
I remove her mask and throw it to the floor, then I don’t ease into the kiss, I take it. My mouth crashes against hers, hot and desperate, dragging a low moan from her as I pull her even closer. Her nails bite into my shoulders, but I don’t care, I want her pressed against me, lost in this—in me. I angle deeper, tasting her, teasing her, until she’s breathless and trembling in my hands. When I finally pull back, just enough to let her catch her breath, her lips are swollen and her eyes dark with lust. I’m not done, though. Not even close.

Lifting her from my lap, I flip her onto her knees and slide her toward the edge. I get off my bed and line her up with my cock. Perfect, like she was the one made for this bed. As I thrust deep inside her, she screams my name, so I pull back and repeat the action, needing to hear her again and again.

“Ridge, fuck me hard, please.”

I oblige, fucking her hard and fast until her screams are a jumbled mess of words and her cunt squeezes me as she comes. She is so fucking wet I feel my balls tighten. I lean over her and wrap my hand around her throat, my thrusts short and sharp until I come.

Pulling out, I shiver when I see my cum leak from her pussy. I want to push it back inside her, hold my claim on her, but the daunting reality is that she isn't mine and she never can be. She collapses on the bed and I fall beside her. Then I drag her up the bed with me and pull her into my body. At least I can pretend for a few hours.



Chapter Seventeen

Aspen

Waking up in Ridge's arms was dangerous for my heart. I felt safe and wanted, hence why I have been avoiding him. I'm not an idiot; I know it was a one-time thing. Zeland sent me the edited video from the carnival, and I forwarded it to Arlo, and I know he has seen my DM telling him to check his email.

Before we left the carnival, Zeland had me look into a camera and record a quick message. *"Don't think this was a one and done. You were mine the moment you stepped through these gates. And you will learn really fast—I always get what I want. What I want is you on your knees for me, begging for my pussy. So be a good boy and wait for me."*

I can see Arlo across the room. He has his earphones in and is watching his phone. I anxiously tap my leg as I wait for a reply, then I see his lips curl into a smile as my heart thumps against my ribs. Does he want this as much as me?

"What ya doing?"

I jump so high my phone flies from my hands, landing in my lap. "Zeland!" I hiss.

"What? Why are you so jumpy?"

I stand, grabbing his tie and using it to drag him out of the room and down the hall to a supply closet before shoving him inside and following

him, shutting the door behind us.

“You probably shouldn’t manhandle the boss like that,” he says with a chuckle. “But I’ll let it slide if I can grope you.”

He touches my boobs, and I slap his hand away. “I sent Arlo the video, and he was watching it. What if he doesn’t want a repeat?”

“He will, you’re irresistible. Do you think we could sneak a quickie?”

Zeland’s phone rings and he laughs, holding it up so I can see Ridge’s name on the screen. He answers it with a smirk.

“Oh fuck, Aspen, just like that. Take my cock in your mouth.”

I try to smother my snort.

“You better not be letting the stray suck your cock in the closet at work.”

“And why the fuck not? You asked me to stop fucking your employees, but she doesn’t work on your floor. Technically, she doesn’t even work here—she loiters here of her own free will.”

“About that, I have contracts for her to sign. I want you in my office today, stray.”

“That sounds like so much fun, *not*. I’d rather watch paint dry.”

“Do I need to bend you over my knee and show you who is boss?”

Zeland wiggles his brows at me. “Yes please, daddy.” And both Zeland and I laugh when Ridge gags over the phone.

“Just get your fucking ass up here on your lunch break, and so help me if I have to come looking for you.” He then ends the call abruptly.

“Do you think he knows I’m avoiding him?” I ask.

“Why did you get that impression? He knows and has been in a pissy mood about it for days.”

I sigh. “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do what?” Zeland asks, brushing my hair back behind my ears.

“Us. Ridge. Arlo. I’m going to get my heart broken. I shouldn’t like you all so much.”

“Do you want to be my girl?”

I eye him suspiciously and shrug. “Honestly, I don’t know what I want. I know I enjoy fucking you and spending time with you. Ridge scares me the most. Waking up in his arms petrified me because I could see myself doing it more often, and that’s not me. And—”

Zeland presses his lips to mine, probably to shut me up, but it works. I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist. We kiss for what

feels like hours, drinking each other in, not needing it to turn more physical. He is showing me he is there for me, however I need him to be. We pull back, both panting, when the door is ripped open and Ridge wedges himself inside with us.

“Be my girl,” Zeland whispers, and I have a profound “fuck it” moment and nod. If I’m going to get my heart broken, I may as well go out with a bang.

“I thought you two were fucking in here, but you’re asking her to be your girlfriend?”

“What’s up, brother husband,” I say as I slide down Zeland’s body. “I guess we share a man now. You’re never getting rid of me.”

Zeland cackles, and Ridge shakes his head. “I guess you’re about to find out what sharing a man with me entails, stray.” Then he grabs my chin and locks eyes with me. “Now you can’t avoid me. Both of you are expected in my office at lunch.”

“Fuck yes, a Zeland sandwich,” Zeland says with a fist pump.

Ridge lets me go and steps back, twisting the handle, and he walks out into the hall. We follow him, but all skid to a stop when we see Arlo standing there, his mouth wide open. Zeland walks up to him and uses his finger to close it before he leans in close to his ear just as I come to stand behind him. “If you’re going to stand there with your mouth open, I can give you something to put in it.”

“Zeland,” Ridge snaps. “That is sexual harassment. Let’s go.”

Zeland cackles as Ridge drags him away. “See you at lunch, girlfriend. And check your emails, Arlo. I haven’t gotten a reply yet.”

I roll my eyes as I’m left standing with Arlo, who just blinks. I grab his arm and drag him back to our office, closing the door behind us.

“You and him . . . Did he just . . .? I’m confused.”

I laugh. “Welcome to getting to know Zeland. When he is not your boss, Zeland can be very inappropriate. If he made you feel a certain way that you don’t like, I can tell him to knock it off.”

“All three of you were in there,” he whispers.

“Yup. Can I tell you a secret that is just between us?”

He nods and I know he can’t repeat anything about either of them because it’s in his NDA, just like it’s in mine.

“Ridge and I are both with Zeland.”

He makes a motion of his mind exploding. “Good for you. Or Zeland, I guess.”

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

Arlo laughs and I want to step closer to him, to tell him the masked woman was me, that I want him as well. To tell him his smell calms me, even if that sounds fucking weird. But Arlo smells so damn good, like sweet oranges and something spicy I can’t quite put my finger on—chili flakes, maybe?

“If you haven’t noticed, I’m a bit of a loner. I don’t have friends.”

I gasp and hold my chest. “I’m offended that you don’t think I’m your friend.”

“You want to be my friend?”

“I do. I came here on that first day as a favor to Zeland.” I lie a little because he thinks I have a boyfriend—well, I do now—and I can’t scare the poor guy. “You see, I don’t actually officially work here yet, and that’s why Ridge was in the closet. He’s bulldozing me to sign or I have to leave. And I like working with you.”

“Shit, okay, I guess we are friends, as long as your boyfriend doesn’t mind.”

I laugh because hearing it out loud sounds crazy. “He doesn’t. If you can’t tell by the dynamics, our relationship is not the norm.”

He clears his throat, and I take a step back, realizing I’m standing way too close to him. We both get back to work looking over the notes some beta testers sent us. When lunch time comes, I head upstairs to Ridge’s office, and his receptionist waves me through, telling me he is waiting for me. What I don’t expect as I open the door is Ridge sprawled in his office chair, his hands tightly gripping Zeland’s hair, who is on his knees.

“Well, isn’t this a nice surprise,” I say, closing the door and flicking the lock. “I think I’m really going to like having a boyfriend who has a boyfriend.”

“You know we come as a package deal, stray.”

I hold Ridge’s stare, but it’s like trying to break through solid stone. He doesn’t smirk, nor give anything away, just watches me with a dark, unreadable intensity that makes it impossible to tell if he wants to push me away or pull me closer.

“A package deal,” I repeat, my voice quieter, like I’m testing the weight of his words. He doesn’t explain, but he doesn’t need to—the way he looks

at me tells me he's not joking. I keep my expression neutral, refusing to be the first to crack. "And what exactly does that mean, Ridge?"

The silence stretches between us, thick and unyielding, until I'm not sure if I want his answer, or if I'm afraid to hear it.

"It means exactly what you think it does. If you're his, you're also mine. But be warned, I'm possessive of what's mine, and I don't do love."

Heat coils low in my stomach, sharp and unwelcome. I should walk away, tell him I don't belong to anyone, I'm no one's possession. But with the way he says it, the way he owns it, I don't know if I want to fight him or make him prove it.

"Prove it," I say, deciding to call his bluff.

I get not doing love, it's also not for me, not when the one person who was supposed to love me the most left. It's why I don't do relationships and yet these men have somehow made me want one. Even when in the end they will leave me—everyone does, but this time I want to see if the pain is worth it.

Zeland lifts his head off Ridge's cock. "Hey, baby. Want some lunch? I can confirm his cock is a great snack."

"I hate to break it to you, but his cock is a whole meal. There is no snack about the size of that thing."

"Get your sexy ass over here. I have fifteen minutes until I have a conference call, so I'm going to fuck you while Zee strokes himself and comes on your face."

I want to tell him to make me, but his words hit me straight in the clit and I'm already removing my clothes as I walk toward them until I'm naked and drop to all fours.

"This won't work—she is too small," Zee says, picking me up around the waist. I flail like I'm about to die, and he swipes everything off Ridge's desk. I chuckle, knowing the mess is going to give Ridge an aneurysm.

Zeland lays me face down and Ridge grabs my hips, pulling me back and up onto my knees, which he urges me to spread wide. "This is just right."

He swipes his cock along my pussy, and I moan. Zeland kneels on the desk, and I'm thankful for the quality of the timber as it holds both our weight. He strokes his cock as Ridge thrusts deep inside me.

"Oh, fuck!"

“You need to be quiet, stray. I can’t have anyone knowing what I’m doing right now.”

Biting down on my lip muffles my whimpers as Ridge grips my hips hard, pulling me back as he moves forward. I want more—no, I need it—and I can’t help the noises I make the closer my orgasm comes to spilling over.

“That’s it, baby. Take our man’s cock. You’re so perfect.”

Zeland praises me until I can’t hold on anymore, and just before I can scream, Ridge reaches around, covering my mouth with his hand and stifling his name beneath it.

I feel Ridge pull out of me, and within a moment, wetness hits my back and my face.

“So pretty letting us claim you,” Ridge says, rubbing his cum into my skin. Zeland does the same until I fall stomach-first onto Ridge’s desk to catch my breath.

Zeland jumps off and retrieves some tissues to wipe the cum from my body, then Ridge helps me off his desk. I expect him to disinfect it, but he doesn’t. We all get dressed, then he simply puts everything back where it belongs and I smile as I watch him.

“This is for you to sign,” he says, pushing a folder across his desk.

I open it and read through the contract. It all seems fairly straightforward until we get to the payment.

“You can’t be serious!” I gasp out.

“Do you want to negotiate your salary? I can pay you ten percent more.”

“What, no! This is way too much. I can’t get special treatment.”

“On that note, I’m out. I will be at your office to pick you up at five. We have something special we need to plan for your other boyfriend,” Zeland says.

“He isn’t my boyfriend,” I say defensively.

“No, but he will be ours if we play our cards right.”

I hear Zeland’s words but look at Ridge. “Not mine, stray. It’s you two with feelings for the kid.”

“More dicks for me, but that doesn’t mean he can’t watch. See you in a few hours.” Zeland winks at me and leaves Ridge’s office.

I wait until the door is closed, then face Ridge, who hands me a pen. But as I reach out to grab it, he pulls me onto his lap.

“I know this is new for you, and while I might not believe in love, I still like spoiling what’s mine. Zeland is hard to spoil because he has as much money as I do, but something tells me you are going to be just as hard.”

“Does Arlo earn this much?”

Ridge leans in and whispers, “He earns more. Zeland is going to call him up to his office to give him a promotion. Apparently, the nerdy gamer boy has caught his eye, just as you have ours.”

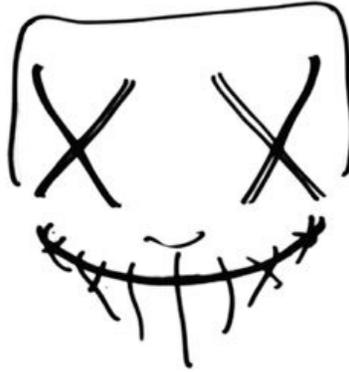
Leaning forward, I sign on the dotted line and then stand, turning around to straddle his waist. “I know I’m a complication you didn’t want, but before you decide anything more, you need to know I’m broken. I don’t want love—getting close to anyone makes me feel sick to my stomach. I will forever be waiting for the other shoe to drop, then for all of you to leave me.”

“It’s too late, stray. For some reason, you weaseled your way under my skin so deep I need to see you. We can be broken together, and on the bad days, Zeland will be the glue that holds us together. He has been my rock for years now.” Ridge places a hand on either side of my face. “You’re mine now, stray, and if you feel the need to leave, just try it, because you won’t be able to hide from me. I’m not going anywhere—not now, not ever. Once I let someone in, it’s forever.”

“So you’re like a wolf, the leader of our pack.”

Ridge smirks. “I’ll be your alpha.”

He nips at my lips before pressing his against mine. Maybe having people around isn’t a bad thing. What if my mother was the defective one, not me? She was supposed to love me unconditionally, but what if those who choose to be around you are the ones you need to hold close?



Chapter Eighteen

Arlo

Laughter echoes down the headset. “Awe come on, a cactus would fuck me harder in the ass. That was pitiful.”

I snort at that. It’s so fun to team up with UrNewStep_Mom against the annoying teenagers who play this game with their foul mouths and insults. I just sit quietly and have her back.

My life has changed since I met her. I have friends now. Sure, one is online and we’ve never met. Then there’s Aspen, who I swear flirts with me even though she is dating my boss, who also endlessly flirts with me through email, but she doesn’t seem bothered by that either. She explained they have a somewhat open relationship since she doesn’t believe in love. Still, making a move on her would be a dick thing to do. I’ve been waiting for the masked woman to send me a new location. She said it would be tonight, but didn’t specify when. She is sending a Ridez to pick me up, and while going to an undisclosed location to meet up with strangers is probably one of the stupidest things I could do, I can’t wait.

My phone buzzes and I almost jump out of my skin.

Be ready in one hour.

My heart flip-flops in my chest. It will take me that long to be ready. I might have researched way too much, but after the masked man put his

fingers in my ass, I needed to know how to clean myself out. It seems a lot more complicated than it really is.

“I’m out,” I say to UrNewStep_Mom.

“Okay, hot stuff. I’ll continue to show these boys what it’s really like to get fucked instead of pretending they have touched a female.”

I chuckle and tell her to have fun before logging off. As expected, it takes the entire hour to get ready, but I’m standing out the front of my house when a Ridez car pulls up. The door automatically unlocks, and I slide into the back seat.

We drive for around ten minutes, and it takes a right into an older part of town, one mainly derelict due to a fire that ripped through here a few years ago. No one could afford to rebuild, and anything not affected by the fire was abandoned a long time ago. The car pulls over in front of the old cinema, which even has a few letters hanging crookedly on the billboard from the last movie ever played here. The building is huge, dwarfing the surrounding wreckage, and it’s such a shame it was left to rot. My mom has told me stories of when she used to come here as a kid. Walking up to the doors, I find them ajar enough I can slip through. Some of the lights flicker on and off, giving off a creepy vibe in a *Five Nights at Freddy’s* kind of way.

“*Are you ready to make a movie with us?*” a female voice asks from my left.

I turn and see her standing there, this time in an oversized man’s white shirt, a black belt tight around her waist, and boots. Her dark hair is pulled up into a messy bun and the mask glows in the darkness. I don’t see either of the men with her this time, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t here.

“Will you ever show me who you are?” I ask her. I obsessively watch her content, and she adds small clips and photos every day. But I can’t help overthinking why she has chosen me.

“*All in good time. This is about living out your fantasies. Tell me, Arlo, what is one of yours?*”

I hesitate, not knowing how to verbalize all the thoughts that have run through my head since our last encounter.

“*Don’t be shy, sweetheart. We are here to serve,*” one of the men says, stepping out from my right and boxing me in.

“I . . . I want to be fucked in the ass while my cock is buried in her pussy.”

“Then you better run,” another modulated voice says from the overhead speakers. *“Because if they catch you, they get to decide what happens. But if you can keep away from them for fifteen minutes, you get to decide.”*

Adrenaline sends my heart rate crazy. I leap forward and rush toward the only door available. But do I want to outrun them? I have always liked a bit of pain, though it’s usually in the form of a tattoo or a piercing, ones I only wear on occasions now, like my nose and ears, but my nipple piercing never comes out. That one really hurt and I won’t risk having to get it done twice.

Through the doors is an open room, with rows and rows of seats. A set of stairs leads down to another level with more seats and exit doors on either side at the front.

Racing forward, I reach the stairs, then descend them two at a time. The heavy thud of my footsteps on the treads echoes through the empty cinema, eventually swallowed up by the vast darkness stretching between the towering rows of suede seats. I vault over a broken armrest littering the aisle—my heart pounding and breath ragged—but I don’t stop, not yet. Not when I can hear them so close behind me. Two sets of footsteps, one light and quick, the other steady and hard. The masked woman moves quietly, while the man follows me with a taunting presence, like he knows I’ll have nowhere left to run, that he could catch me if he wanted.

I dart down more stairs, my fingers grazing the worn wooden railing as I push myself faster. The flickering glow of the exit sign calls to me from the far side of the room, but I don’t go toward it. I want to be caught, but more, I want to make them work for it. An adrenaline-filled laugh slips past my lips, and I glance back just in time to see the masked woman launch her small body over a row of seats, closing the gap between us. The man moves slower, like a predator, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. My pulse pounds harder.

I could run. I could fight. Or I could let them catch me.

I pivot at the last second, veering toward the left exit row instead of bolting for the right door. A sharp inhale echoes behind me and I grin. They weren’t expecting that. My legs burn as I push harder, leaping down the last few steps two at a time. But the moment my foot hits the floor, I feel it—they’re close.

I twist just as the masked woman lunges. I duck, barely slipping past her outstretched fingers as I stumble into the next row of seats. A laugh rips

from my chest. I want to win, but I want to lose, too.

I throw myself forward, ducking down and dodging between seats, my heart hammering against my ribs.

The masked man is ahead of me now, moving with that slow, calculated confidence, cutting off my only escape. He tilts his head slightly, a silent taunt. I could turn back, try to lose them in the maze of broken chairs, but it's pointless. They've boxed me in.

The woman moves first. I feel her presence before I see her, the sharp rush of air as she closes in behind me. I spin, trying to dodge one last time, but she's already there. A firm grip catches my wrist, yanking me back. I struggle for the fun of it, twisting in her hold, but she doesn't let go.

Then the masked man is on me. His hands clamp onto my shoulders, forcing me back against the seat. I suck in a sharp breath, my pulse pounding in my ears as my body thrums with adrenaline.

"*Caught you, sweetheart,*" the woman purrs, her fingers tightening around my wrist.

I swallow hard, my chest rising and falling. A sharp inhale drags into my lungs as I'm forced back down into the seat when I try to stand. The masked woman's grip on my wrist is strong, her fingers digging in just enough to make me aware of how easily she could cut through my skin with her nails. The masked man has moved behind me and keeps his hands firm on my shoulders. He presses down, like he's waiting to see if I'll fight back again or give in.

I test the hold, shifting against their grip, but it only makes the woman tighten her fingers just enough to remind me who's in charge.

"*Struggling already?*" Her voice is almost teasing.

I let out a breath as I battle the overwhelm of my body's conflicting reactions. While I should fight harder, try to get free, the truth is I don't want to.

The masked man leans down, and his breath pushes through the mask to ghost against my ear. "*We told you what would happen if you got caught. You didn't run hard enough, did you?*"

My fingers twitch as heat crawls up my spine and into my cheeks, the embarrassment spreading like wildfire. "Maybe," I rasp, my voice coming out rougher than I expected.

The woman tilts her head, her mask concealing her face. She steps closer, the space between us dissolving as she drags a hand down my chest.

“Maybe,” she repeats. Her fingers trace lower, pressing just enough to make my breath catch. *“Or maybe you wanted this.”*

I don't answer. I don't have to.

The man behind me hums low in his throat. *“If you wanted to be caught,”* he murmurs, his hand moving from my shoulder to my jaw and tilting my head back, *“you should've just said so.”*

The woman moves in at the same time, pressing one knee between my legs, keeping me exactly where she wants me.

“You knew the rules, Arlo,” she whispers. *“And now we get to play by mine. I want you naked, but first I'm going to blindfold you. That's your punishment, me taking away your ability to watch what we are doing to you.”*

The masked man pulls a blindfold out of his pocket and places it over my eyes, sealing me in darkness. *“No peeking or this all goes away.”*

I nod my head. There is no way I want this to stop.

“I'm going to undress you now.”

All my other senses are heightened. I feel her untying my chucks and slipping them off my feet, along with my socks, leaving my feet bare and the cool air prickling against my skin.

My pulse skyrockets when I feel her just inches away as she undoes the button on my pants, then goosebumps rise at the scrape of my zipper and her fingers tucking into the waistband of my boxer briefs. I lift slightly so she can slide them off, but she does it so slowly it's pure torture and leaves my skin hypersensitive. Every nerve ending is on high alert, waiting and wanting more.

The masked man behind me lifts my shirt and pulls it over my head.

I shiver when I feel her fingernails graze along my length. I can't stop the way my body reacts, and my eyes roll back as I enjoy her touch.

“I'm going to suck your cock now, and paint my lips with your precum,” the masked woman says.

I want to protest—trapped in the horror of my past—but before I can form the words, her lips wrap around the head of my dick and the sensation has my ass bucking out of the chair.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper.

This is nothing like the first time. She sucks me down slowly into the back of her throat and slides back up to the tip, running her lips along the head.

“She looks so pretty with your hard cock in her mouth. Tell her how well she is doing.”

My cheeks heat, but his words make me want to be brave. “So good,” I grunt, as she sucks me hard. “Fuck.”

“You don’t have to be a talker, Arlo. I can tell how well she is doing on her knees for you by the way your body tenses. Tasting you, pleasing you. And once you come, I’m going to stretch that ass out so we can fuck you at the same time. Would you like that, sweetheart?”

A shiver spirals up my back and my balls tighten as she cups them, gently applying a little pressure. The masked man strokes my hair and the way they call me sweetheart makes me melt.

“Y-yes. Please. I need to come.”

“Do it. Coat her lips with your cum, so I can lick it off her face.”

I groan, which is joined by a growl that echoes around the room. Someone else has entered and I feel a sense of relief knowing the second masked man is here. He didn’t touch me last time, but knowing he was watching turned me on so much.

“Fuck,” I whisper as she pulls back with a hard suck, and I come so hard my entire body shakes.

“Now, it’s my turn,” the masked man says from somewhere beside me, and before I can respond, I’m lifted like I don’t weigh anything and thrown over a shoulder, a hand clamped on my ass.

How is this my life?

I’m gently placed on the floor on my hands and knees. And I don’t know how I know, but the third presence is close. It’s confirmed when a large hand spears into my hair, using it to pull my head back, and I feel his thigh on my cheek as he squats beside me.

“I’m going to talk you through this while they have their masks off, and I’m going to watch what’s mine fuck you. Do you enjoy borrowing what’s mine?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“I can’t hear you,” he states, dragging my head back further.

“Yes, I love touching what’s yours. Thank you for sharing them.”

“Good boy. They seem to like you, and that makes me happy.”

My knees feel weak, and I shiver as fingers touch my ass cheeks and spread them apart.

“He’s going to lube you up really well. Use your safe word if it hurts too much.”

I nod, my palms and knees digging into the soft carpet as his finger slides into my ass. I’m exposed, every sense alive, wanting more. Then her hand touches my jaw and I freeze, my heart pounding like it might give me away. Her lips brush against mine, just once, and it steals the air from my lungs. I didn’t expect it to feel like *that*—not soft, but electric. Then her mouth claims mine like it needs me, and I kiss her back, craving the connection. The blindfold makes it worse—no, better because I cannot see her, but I can *feel* her. Every second sets my blood on fire.

I moan into her mouth as the masked man pumps his fingers into my ass. It feels incredible, and I don’t know why I waited so long to experience this, but I’m glad I did.

“I think you’re ready for his cock. Don’t worry, he’ll be gentle. Once he’s in, my girl will slip beneath you. Are you ready to be fucked and fuck at the same time? Consider yourself lucky—even I haven’t had them both together at the same time.”

My head is ripped away from the woman and fabric presses against the side of my face.

“I don’t like feeling jealous, Arlo. Should I feel jealous of you?”

I swallow and shake my head, but they wouldn’t be here if they didn’t want this again. It was supposed to be a one-time thing.

“Good, because I think I might enjoy sharing them with you. Now, are you going to take his cock like a good boy?”

“Yes,” I pant as the masked man rims my ass with his cock and then presses against me. It burns slightly as he pushes inside, but he kisses my shoulder, his blunt fingernails feathering against my skin, helping to distract me and turn me on. Once he pushes all the way in, he stills, giving me a chance to adjust to his size. He reaches beneath me and wraps his hand around my length, his thumb gliding across the tip, making me want more.

“I think you’re ready for her now.”

I can’t see what’s happening, but I feel her body slide beneath me. She slips under me perfectly, backing herself up as the masked man lines my cock up with her pussy. My entire world combusts at the connection. He pulls back and thrusts into my ass, setting off a chain reaction of me thrusting into the woman. I have never felt something so magical—it’s

almost like I have stepped through a portal and I'm no longer the nerdy guy who is too scared to talk to people.

We all move together slowly until we find a rhythm. The woman is moaning, not as vocal as normal, and when she comes hard around me, her scream is muffled. Her warmth wraps around me so tightly it sends a flood of euphoria straight to my cock and I explode.

"That's a good boy. You fucked my girl to orgasm, and now it's time for my man to fuck you into next week."

"Mmm," is all I can manage as my hips are grabbed tight and the man thrusts into me hard and fast. It's no longer about my pleasure, but his, and my heart warms as he uses me. It's then that I realize I love being used for pleasure.

The weight of him presses into my back, his bare chest warm against me as he leans in. Breath skims over my skin just before his lips graze my shoulder, followed by the sharp bite of teeth sinking into my flesh, pulling a gasp from my throat. He swells inside me, every inch of him claiming me.

His teeth bite deeper until he fills my ass with his cum. When he releases my flesh, his tongue sweeps across where he has marked me, but when he pulls back, the sting makes me want more. To be marked by them, officially claimed as theirs. I stay where I am and let him take his time, my pulse thundering in my ears, while my body arches under his like it knows exactly who it belongs to. Which is fucking wild because I don't even know who they are. This needs to change, I mentally scold myself. If they seek me out again, I will demand to know who they are. I didn't think I was the type to wear my heart on my sleeve, but apparently I am, and I'm not sorry about it either.



Chapter Nineteen

Aspen

My days off are always busy. Today I managed to squeeze in a visit with my grandmother, but there has been no change. She didn't remember me; she thought I was a new nurse taking her for her walk. I live for the times she remembers me—those days I drop everything and rush down there, but they are now few and far between.

My first payout from the collab content on the View4U app hit my bank account today, and I sent Arlo his portion. I have never seen so many zeros in my life, all from posting clips online, and not even the sex part. I also did some shopping to make myself feel better, but it didn't work. And as I pull into the garage, I realize I'm glad to be home.

Home is a funny word for me. It was always my grandmother who made a house feel like home, and nowhere has ever felt that way since I moved out on my own. Until now.

I unload the car and make two trips upstairs to get everything to my room. Once I'm done, I undress and slip on one of Ridge's business shirts. I do this so that when he watches me, he can see me in his clothes. I love when he gets possessive and growls over the speakers. He and Zeland are off at the golf club or something today. Zeland offered to come visit my gran, but I declined. I need to spend all the time I can with her, and as selfish as it sounds, I don't want to share her time with him.

“Turn on songs I can dance to,” I say to the intelligent audio system, and wait eagerly for it to create a playlist.

“Okay, turning on songs you can dance to.”

“I Wanna Dance with Somebody” filters through the speakers, and I sing and dance my way into the kitchen, opening the fridge and pulling out the cake Ronny made for us. I don’t bother cutting a slice. Instead, I get a fork and eat it straight from the serving plate. Ridge hates it when I do it, but his punishing spansks when he catches me are totally worth it. In fact, all he’s succeeded in doing is make me want to be naughtier.

Grabbing a bottle of water, I hear a throat clear behind me, and I turn with a smile on my face. It quickly falls when I see Genevieve standing there and not Ridge.

“Ridge isn’t here,” I tell her.

She looks me up and down, and I see her jaw tighten when she recognizes Ridge’s shirt.

“I know,” she replies.

“Then why are you here, Genevieve? Ridge doesn’t like people in his space unannounced.”

She chuckles at me. “I’m not just people; I’m his future wife.” She flicks her hand in the air. “This will all be mine very soon.”

“Is that so?” I reply, leaning back against the counter, interested to see where this is going and why she is really here.

“Yes.”

I smirk at her. “He never told me you were coming.”

“Why would he tell a gold digger that his fiancée is stopping by?”

“Look, how about we stop right there. Whatever *this* is, I’m not doing it. Ridge does not strike me as the kind of man to mince his words. If you were really his fiancée, future wife, or whatever you are claiming to be, you would know that every inch of this house is covered by cameras—ones he checks frequently—so I would make sure you have proof to back up your claims.”

Her face morphs into that of a scorned woman, and it’s almost comical to see she clearly hasn’t gotten the reaction from me she wanted.

“I’m not a woman who gets jealous and jumps to conclusions. I’m the kind of woman who will talk to Ridge and ask him myself. He has not given me any reasons not to trust him, nor has Zeland, for that matter. If you were expecting me to run out of here in tears, you thought wrong.”

“You think you can just walk in here, flaunt your cheap ass around, and sink your claws into a rich man? Do you plan to live your life off his money? He will throw you away like yesterday’s trash once he has finished with you. I’m the endgame, and he knows I am here waiting for him when he is ready. Then you and Zeland will be gone.”

At the mention of her wanting to split Ridge and Zeland, I’m like a fucking rabid dog, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end as I push off the counter, closing the distance between us. I might be a lot shorter—she is naturally tall, and in heels even taller—and she may look like a supermodel, but if Ridge wanted her, he would be fucking her and not me and Zeland.

“Let’s get one thing fucking straight,” I spit. “You are fucking delusional if you think you can split up Ridge and Zeland. It’s never going to happen, and if you really loved him, you wouldn’t want to try. Clearly, you can’t see what is right in front of you—Ridge loves Zeland, he doesn’t love you. It’s sad, really, that there are trees out there producing oxygen just so you can breathe. Maybe throw them an apology on your way out.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I hold my hand up. “Get the fuck out of my house before I call Malachi to come throw you out. You are not welcome here, and if you come back again unannounced, I will throw hands. I don’t give a flying fuck how rich you or your father are. You will not come into my house and disrespect MY men. Either of them.”

“This is not your house!” she screeches.

“That is where you are wrong,” a voice booms. She gasps and turns around to see Ridge with his arms crossed over his chest. “This is her house, and if she asked you to leave, I suggest you do it.”

“Can’t you see all she wants is your money?!”

“You can believe what you want, Genevieve, but she has not let me spend a cent on her. Aspen has her own money and supports herself. Now I am asking you politely to please see yourself out. We have been friends for a long time and would hate to have to reevaluate our friendship if you can’t respect my woman or Zeland.”

“Your woman!” She scoffs. “You have lost your damn mind.”

Ridge storms toward her, leaning down into her face. “Maybe I have, but I have never been happier. And let me make one thing very, very clear. I do not love you. I won’t ever love you. And I will never marry you. Now

please leave before I call your father and end our working relationship because his daughter doesn't know her place."

"Screw you, Ridge! If you want to throw away two decades of friendship over a homeless whore, then so be it."

As she huffs and storms away, Ridge doesn't turn to watch her leave. Instead he just stares me up and down in his shirt.

"Fuck, you look hot in my clothes."

"I know," I say with a smirk. Running toward him, I launch myself into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist. "I don't think I like her very much. Were you watching?"

He smiles. "I sure was. I think I'm a little obsessed with you, so I'm always checking in, but this time I heard the gates open, and I wanted to see what she was up to. You believe there is nothing going on between her and me, right?"

I take his handsome face in my hands. "Of course I do. I meant it when I said I'm not a woman who won't come to you first before I believe someone else. But I started losing my temper when she said she wanted to get rid of Zeland. I don't know if she knows you two are together, and I may have let the cat out of the bag on that, but I'm not sorry. You two are meant for each other. He compliments you in ways you need, and vice versa."

"I don't care who knows. We don't put it on billboards, but if people know, they know."

"Hmm, I like the sound of you two on billboards."

He chuckles and walks us toward his room. "I'm sure you do. Zeland's gone to do whatever Zeland does—he disappeared around the fourth hole. I honestly think he is stalking your boyfriend."

"I doubt he's stalking him, but maybe they are hanging out. He mentioned something about coffee."

Ridge snorts as he reaches the top of the stairs to his wing. "We are grown men. We don't 'hang out.'"

I pout. "What, you're too old to hang out with me? I guess that's what happens when you're nearing thirty—all your fun has run out."

"You want me to prove I'm not too old? I will bend you over my bed and fuck the sass right out of your mouth."

I snort as he walks us through his bedroom and into his en suite, placing me on the counter. "They say you're only as old as the woman you fuck, so

I guess you shaved a few years off.”

He smirks at me, and damn, he is handsome. It should be illegal for every part of his body to be in proportion.

I lick my lips as he untucks the fitted polo that stretches tight across his broad chest. He lifts it slightly, teasing a slither of his sun-kissed skin, but doesn't rush as he pulls it over his head and throws it into the hamper.

He steps out of his custom-made shoes and unbuckles his belt. In one pull, he removes it, and wetness pools between my legs at the snap.

I bite down on my lip as I watch him undo his golf pants and slide them down his thick legs. I can't look away, not when every movement feels like an invitation.

Once he is in nothing but his expensive boxer briefs, he steps into me, spreading my legs so he can move between them.

He slowly undoes the buttons on his shirt I still wear as my chest rises and falls in excitement. When he gets to the last button and opens the material, he licks his lips as he looks at my breasts.

“Fuck, you're beautiful.”

I scoff. Accepting the compliment is hard; I'm really nothing special. Ridge drags me down off the counter, flipping me around so I'm facing the mirror, his hand twisting in my hair.

“Repeat after me. I am beautiful exactly how I am.”

Doing as he asks, I repeat the words back to him. He seems pleased and grinds his cock against my lower back.

“I am the kind of woman people don't forget.”

Again I repeat his words, and he growls in approval as he uses his free hand to tug down his briefs before stepping out of them.

“This is the body he can't keep his hands off. I turn him on with just a look.”

My knees wobble and I whisper the words as he leans down to kiss my neck.

He spins me and pulls me back up into his arms, and instinctively I circle my legs around his waist as he walks us toward the shower. Ridge's lips never leave my skin as he sucks and nips everywhere he can reach. “You're ruining me, Aspen, and everything I once believed in.”

“Ditto,” I whisper.

Any walls I had when I moved in here, he and Zeland have smashed through. I no longer care how bad it will hurt if they leave me. Some

wounds are worth it. These men are worth it. Now I need to come clean with Arlo. The longer I drag it out, the more chance he will walk away. He has become such an important part of my life and I don't want to risk losing him.

Ridge steps under the streaming water—I fucking love this shower, with the jets that spray us from every angle. As my back hits the tiles, he uses one arm to hold me up, while his free hand slides his cockhead up and down along my pussy, then he buries himself inside me.

“I will never tire of fucking you,” he growls against my skin.

The warm water washes over us as he thrusts into me, slowly. Ridge isn't fucking me right now—this feels like more, and it scares the shit out of me. But not enough to stop me from coming all over his cock, all the while screaming his name.



Chapter Twenty

Zeland

I have zero impulse control. It's how I found myself stalking, *no*, studying Arlo—where he goes, the places he gets his coffee. It is how I “accidentally” bumped into him last week, and now we have coffee together every morning. Aspen has sent him another location and time, and she wants to tell him it's us, though I've asked her to give me a little more time to get to know him first. She gets to spend most days with him, and he is comfortable around her, but if he found out his boss lied to him and fucked him, he might run. I can't have that.

I don't obsess over people, not until Aspen bulldozed into my life. Now Arlo . . . there's something special about him. Maybe it's his innocence that I like—it's refreshing.

Everyone at Ridgeland blows smoke up my ass. I know it and they know it, yet I let them continue. It's great for my ego.

Arlo seems to be starstruck by Ridge, but not by me. He watches Aspen and me together with an almost curious avarice. I know she has told him about us and how our dynamic works, so here I am putting in the effort to get to know the guy. It's why I'm standing at his front door with a box of pastries and three coffees. I know he lives with his mom, which is adorable. I wish my mother was an actual mother and wanted to be my best friend.

After I knock on the door, a woman early to mid-forties opens it with a smile. “Hello, can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m Zeland. I’m here to see Arlo.”

A smile breaks out over her face. “Come in, I will go get him. He is probably still asleep. My boy works hard, then stays up all night talking to that girl on the internet.”

She chuckles to herself as she leads me through her house. It’s small but homely and has a mother’s touch. I take in all the pictures of Arlo that hang on the walls as she leads me into the kitchen.

“Take a seat. I will be back in a second.”

After sitting down at the table, I remove the coffees from the tray and flatten it out. Why the heck am I nervous? I’m Zeland Reid-Ellington, I don’t get anxious.

A few minutes pass, then Arlo walks into the kitchen in only a pair of gray sweats, his tattoos on full display, and his hair a disheveled mess of curls.

“Sleepyhead was snoring. And how rude of me, I’m Rowena, Arlo’s mom.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rowena. I’m sure you hear this all the time, but you do not look old enough to have a son Arlo’s age.”

Arlo groans. “You didn’t come here to hit on my mom, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. But I did bring you both coffee and pastries,” I say with a laugh as I hand Rowena a caramel frou-frou bullshit the woman sold me at the coffee shop. It’s similar to what Aspen has been drinking this week, since she is trying all the different flavors at the shop next to our office building.

“Thank you, Zeland, that’s nice of you. Elaine will be here shortly, Arlo.”

Arlo groans. “I don’t understand why you are friends with that woman. She is such a bitch and looks down on us every chance she gets.”

“Arlo Atlas Kross, you mind your manners. I wish you would get along with Sunny—she is a lovely girl.”

Arlo snorts. “Never going to happen. She is a conniving bitch who wouldn’t be seen dead with me in public. Zeland, let’s go to my room.”

I get up from my spot. “It was nice to meet you.”

Rowena smiles politely as we leave the kitchen, but I hear her call out to Arlo. “Make sure you leave your door open.”

Arlo shakes his head. “Ma, I’m twenty-three, I don’t need you to protect my innocence anymore.”

Rowena cackles, and it’s then I know she is just trying to embarrass her son.

“Don’t mind the mess,” he says as we head down to the basement.

It’s really not as bad as I thought it would be—there are only a few shirts thrown around the room and maybe a handful of dirty socks.

“So what brings you here? Are you firing me?”

I laugh and take a seat on one end of the battered old sofa lounge, and Arlo sits down on the other, as far away from me as he can.

“No, I don’t actually have that much say in the hiring or firing of people on your floor. If you didn’t notice, I’m a very impulsive person, so feel free to tell me to fuck off if I have stepped out of my lane. As hard as it is to believe, I don’t actually have too many friends, not ones I would tell people I’m friends with anyway. In my world, most of our friends are people who we do business with or could do business with.”

“Sounds lonely.”

He reaches out for his coffee, and as I hand it to him, our fingers brush, the same ones I had buried in his ass just days ago. As he pulls away, I want to reach out and grab him, but I don’t because I try to respect people’s boundaries.

“Is Aspen okay?” he asks.

“She’s fine. She’s with Ridge today. He gets a little possessive and needs to stake his claim.”

“I hope it was okay that Aspen told me about your relationship.”

“Of course it’s okay, and it’s kind of why I’m here. My girl raves about you and it has me curious who this man is that she’s always talking about because he sounds like someone I want to get to know. And before the thought crosses your mind, it’s not because I’m a jealous asshole and I’m here to warn you away. I want to get to know you, Arlo, and maybe hang out.”

He eyes me suspiciously, and he is so damn fucking cute. “But why? I’m nothing special. I’m really very boring.”

“Well, people around me are fake as fuck, so boring sounds perfect. What would you do today if I wasn’t here?”

“Honestly, I would have slept for a bit longer, then probably watched the View4U app.” His cheeks go pink as he realizes he has spoken the

words out loud.

“No shame in that,” I reply. “It’s a good app.” He laughs at my response and nods. “That app was my baby. I started it alone in my office with content of myself, and before you ask, it’s been erased from this planet. It was so cringy I had secondhand embarrassment watching it back. Thank god we have the best of the best working for Ridgeland who could make it disappear forever. So after sleeping and playing with your cock, what else would you do? Unless you want to focus on the playing with your cock part.”

His eyes fly to mine. Wide, innocent, and full of lust. He clears his throat. “I would probably just play online and avoid Elaine. That woman is a stuck-up bitch who thinks her shit doesn’t stink. I don’t even know why Mom is friends with her. They were friends in college, apparently, just before she fell pregnant with me. They were partnered in some class and hit it off. Ever since I hit puberty, they have tried to shove her daughter down my throat, but she looks at me like I’m shit on the bottom of her shoe and tells me as much when I see her.”

I scoot a little closer to him. “Well, today is your lucky day. Let’s go out and do something. I was disappointed when I realized it’s your day off and you weren’t coming for coffee—I really like our morning chats. So get dressed, or don’t, and let’s go to my place. What’s the point of having all the money I do, and all the fun shit in my house, and no friends to share it with?”

Arlo smiles and nods. “Fine, you pulled my arm, mainly because I’m curious about what your house is like. Aspen talks about it all the time.”

“Hmm, does she? And does she also tell you how amazing and handsome I am?”

Arlo stands and walks over to his closet. “No, but she told me how big—”

“My cock is. I know, it’s huge.”

Arlo snorts. “How big your gaming rooms are. And that you have more than one.”

“Oh, yeah, they’re big as well. I might have to tell her to talk up my game. What’s the point of having a huge dick if my girl doesn’t talk about it?”

Arlo gets dressed, and when we go upstairs, his mother’s friend is sitting at the table. She looks vaguely familiar—maybe I do business with

her husband.

“Rowena, you didn’t tell me Arlo was friends with Zeland!” At that exclamation, Rowena looks at her friend, confusion in her eyes. “He is part owner of Ridgeland Enterprises,” the woman continues. “I’m surprised he is on this side of town with someone like Arlo—no offense, but your reputation—”

“I don’t like what you’re insinuating, lady, but I’m here to take Arlo on a date. And your sources must not know me very well at all. I would prefer not to be seen on my side of town or be associated with half of the people there. If it wasn’t for Ridge and his huge cock convincing me to move into the mansion, I would probably live around here.”

Rowena’s mouth has fallen open and Elaine sneers at me as Arlo grabs my arm to pull me away.

“I apologize, Rowena, for the disrespect, but your son is pretty cool, and I won’t have anyone looking down on him around me. And, *Elaine*, tell your husband to call me because I’m sure he knows who I am. I think we need to have a little chat about how his wife treats people.”

With that, Rowena winks at me, and I stop resisting Arlo’s pull on my arm and follow him outside.

Once the door is closed, his laughter rings out. “Did you see her face?! It looked like a cat’s asshole. And date! I love how you threw in that you’re taking me on a date—hopefully that keeps the vapid girl away from me.”

I laugh. “Would you like me to take you on a date, Arlo?”

Arlo’s face goes multiple shades of crimson. He stammers, “W . . . what? You’re, uh, you’re with Ridge and Aspen, and I mean, I value my job—a lot. I’ve worked my ass off to get this position, and I really can’t risk everything for a date. I . . . god, I’m sorry, I just . . .”

“What does your job have to do with a date? Plus Aspen told you about how our relationship works. We don’t really do labels. If someone asks me, I will tell them she is my girlfriend, but we are all happy with how it works. Ridge isn’t crushed down by the thought of love, the same as Aspen really, and I love affection—I love to be touched. And I really, really, love to fuck.”

Arlo swallows hard, and I pull back, ushering him into my car and closing the door on his side. I will drop the subject for now, afraid I have come on too strong and I have scared him away. I do that a lot when I know

what I want, charging full steam ahead until I get it. It's always been that way in my personal life, at work, or in any situation really.

Arlo is quiet on the drive to the house, but when we pull into the gated driveway and wait for the gates to open, I wave to Conrad, who mans them during the day. Arlo's nose is pressed against the glass, taking in everything around him.

"Obnoxious, isn't it? Who needs hedges that fucking manicured? Wait until you see inside."

I park at the front door, rather than in the garage. Normally I would be quick to show off our cars, but I can see he is overwhelmed already.

When we walk inside, the smell of something baking fills the air, and so I lead Arlo to the kitchen. Aspen and Ridge are standing together with their backs to us, Ridge in a pair of my sweats. He never wore them prior to a comment Aspen made about my dick, and now he wears them every chance he gets—damn, that man's ass was sculpted by gods.

Aspen wears one of my T-shirts and it hangs to her knees. "No," she giggles and jumps up onto his back, wrapping herself around him like a spider monkey.

"Should we be spying on them?" Arlo whispers, and I laugh, making Ridge turn around with Aspen still on his back.

"Zeland! Ridge is ruining my cupcakes. They look like deflated boobs."

Arlo laughs.

"Arlo!" She beams. "What are you doing here?"

"We're going to hang out for a bit," I say, and Ridge raises a brow.

"You guys have fun. Ridge and I are going to get these cupcakes right, even if we take all day."

Ridge grunts. "I told you I will just buy you a cupcake shop, and then you can have cupcakes whenever you want."

"If you want, I can show you how to make them before Zeland gives me a tour."

Aspen's eyes light up. "You know how to bake?"

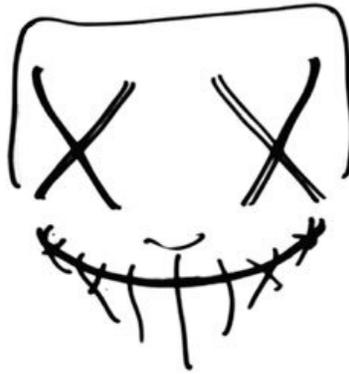
Arlo blushes as he nods, and I lean into his side. "You look fucking edible when you blush like that." Arlo smiles and I place my hand on his lower back, leading him into the kitchen. "I guess we are baking cupcakes. I just know I'm going to be amazing at it."

"Is that so?" Aspen counters. "I bet mine are better than yours."

"You're on. Ridge and Arlo can be the judges."

That is how the rest of the day goes. Arlo shows us how to make cupcakes, and there may have been sabotage—Aspen is a dirty cheat. It's confirmed that I can't use a piping bag when she is sneakily touching my cock; she did it so easily behind the other guys' backs, while Arlo was showing Ridge how to make frosting. It's funny that something this simple is the most fun I have had in a long time. Even Ridge acted like he was having fun, and I don't think I have ever seen the man let loose—he is always in work mode.

Neither Aspen nor I won because our masterpieces ended up thrown at each other, and we both now know we are sore losers. Ridge declared a ban on any future competition between us—the party pooper. Even Arlo joined in the fun until I had to drop him home. I took my sweet-ass time because Aspen will want to talk when I get back, and I already know how this conversation will go, but I still need a little more time to work my magic.



Chapter Twenty-One

Aspen

Did I get Zeland to steal a shirt from Arlo's house for tonight? Yes I did, and it had to be his Rick and Morty shirt. I made it clear to Zeland this is the last night in our masks before we tell Arlo the truth. Shit is becoming too intertwined. Working together, online gaming, and now this. That isn't even the worst part. Zeland gets easily attached—I knew it from the start, and Ridge confirmed as much. When Zeland wants something, he doesn't stop until he gets it. But this is getting a little out of hand. I really like Arlo and I don't want him to be hurt.

We are already waiting for him at the old library on the edge of town, tucked away on the upper level, hidden behind shelves of ancient books. I stand still enough that I can feel my own heartbeat echoing in my chest, and beside me Zeland is crouching low, his eyes on the double doors below. He is grinning behind his mask; I don't have to see his lips to know.

The doors creak open and Arlo steps inside hesitantly, like he's unsure if he is supposed to be here, his fingers tightly gripping the strap of his bag, shoulders drawn up and tense. He pauses near the checkout desk and scans the aisles on the ground floor. He can sense we are here, but he just doesn't know where. Then he walks forward cautiously, and the second he walks past an old cart, Zeland moves. Arlo flinches, his eyes darting around.

I wait until he moves away far enough, then quietly climb over the railing and drop to the carpeted floor.

Arlo darts into the lower stacks with me hot on his tail, and though I can't see Zeland, he won't be far.

I catch sight of Arlo as he ducks between the aisles, but as he rounds a desk, he knocks over a chair. He staggers slightly, then weaves around a pillar.

I creep closely behind him, past a study nook.

A shadow passes by me, and I know it's Zeland. Ridge is lurking somewhere, watching. I follow Zeland, but he is fast. He doesn't want to waste any time tonight, not if this is our last encounter.

The sound of a thud followed by a gasp has me slipping between the shelves in that direction, and after one more turn between the old books, I see Zeland has Arlo pressed to a shelf.

He uses one hand to pin Arlo's hands above his head, while the other grips his jaw. *"I love how you run for me, sweetheart."*

Arlo looks toward me, and his eyes widen as he takes in his shirt on my body. He smiles brightly. Fuck, he is hot.

"But tonight I don't want to chase you," Zeland continues. *"I want to fuck your mouth."*

"You will get on your knees, but not for me," I croon at Arlo.

Zeland looks toward me and nods in appreciation. Tonight is for him, and I am happy to watch Arlo sink to his knees for my boyfriend.

He slides his bag off as he drops to the floor, his hands shaking as he reaches for Zeland's pants. I feel Ridge step up behind me, his finger tracing lines on my spine as we watch Arlo wrap his hand around Zeland's cock, the uncertainty visible as his hands tremble.

Ridge's hand lifts the hem of the shirt and slides around my front, splayed across my stomach. "Are you wet for them?" he whispers, his voice distorter not turned on.

I nod. How could I not be?

His hand dips beneath my thong, his fingers spreading me apart so he can circle my clit as I watch Zeland twist his fingers through Arlo's curls, slowly fucking his face, giving him time to learn. Fuck if it doesn't excite me that he has willingly given all his firsts to strangers, wanting this just as much as we do. My orgasm builds, I can feel it, but I don't want to come

until Zeland. I lean back against Ridge, and he continues to play with my pussy gently.

"Fuck," I whisper as my knees wobble.

Zeland picks up his pace and I watch as he pulls out of Arlo's mouth and comes on his lips, then uses his thumb to spread the cum around.

Ridge grunts behind me, and I explode on his fingers.

"Are you ready for this?" Ridge asks me, and I nod, my stomach coiling in knots as the first wave of nausea hits. Anxiety and vomiting go hand in hand when I freak out, and before I know it, I'm ripping my mask off as Ridge holds my hair back.

When the heaving stops, I hear my name whispered, and I look over at Arlo, who has confusion written all over his handsome face.

He shakes his head and gasps as Ridge's mask drops beside my feet. Arlo whips his head around and looks up at Zeland, who slowly rips his mask away.

"Schwifty!" he yells as tears form in his eyes.

Fuck. What have we done?

Arlo takes off running and Zeland darts behind him.

"We fucked up," I murmur, and Ridge squeezes my shoulder.

"Let's make sure Zeland doesn't do anything stupid."

I point to the vomit and Ridge just moves me away. "I will get it taken care of."

Ridge interlocks our hands and walks us back through the maze of shelves and nooks, and then we see Zeland has Arlo pinned to a study table.

"Let me go," Arlo snaps.

"When you agree to hear us out. It's not what you think."

Arlo laughs. "What, my coworker and bosses didn't trick me into handing over my fucking virginity? I'm not an idiot—this was all some sick and twisted joke on the nerd, wasn't it? I should have known. I'm a loser and always will be."

Arlo tries to push Zeland, but it's no use. Zeland is a lot bigger and slams him back against the table. "You're not a fucking loser. Did we lie? Yes, but you wanted this! You signed up for it and now we want you. And I will let you in on a secret—I always get what I want."

"Not this time," Arlo spits.

Zeland steps back, defeated that he can't push Arlo any further than he has or it will become a crime.

Arlo looks at me. “I want my shirt back.”

I lift the hem and pull it up and over my head, leaving me in nothing but a thong and my boots. Then I walk toward him and press the shirt to his chest.

“You tricked me,” he says.

“You knew the rules of the game. You can blame them all you like, but you wanted to be chased. You were never forced to be here. You had a safe word, and you signed a consent form.” Ridge’s voice is firm.

“It all makes sense now—the job, the attention. Just leave me alone.” Arlo turns his back to walk away, but he needs to leave knowing the full truth.

“Arlo, wait,” I plead. He stops and turns back to face me. “I need to tell you the whole truth.”

“You mean there’s more?” He scoffs. “Of course there is.”

“I’m also UrNewStep_Mom. I’m so sorry. Could you just let me explain?”

Arlo stumbles and I step closer, but he puts his hand up. “There is nothing left to explain.”

With that, he walks away, leaving the three of us standing there, stunned. I don’t call out his name again or beg him to stay.

I just stand there watching Arlo’s back retreat down the hallway, every step pulling something vital out of me. My chest aches with the weight of what I didn’t get to say, and when the door clicks shut behind him, a sob tears free before I can stop it. Loud and broken. It’s the kind that shatters your heart.

Then Ridge is there. No words. No questions. Just his arms around me as he scoops me up, holding me like I am something fragile. Something he isn’t willing to let fall apart. I press my face to his chest as he carries me outside, his grip firm, like he is holding me together until I can breathe again.

Zeland walks beside us, his normal cheery self now filled with silence, and I’m too scared to look over at him. If he is pissed at me, I don’t want to see it, and I wouldn’t blame him if he was.

When we reach Ridge’s car, he slides me into the back and buckles me in, and we all ride home locked in our own thoughts. When we arrive, Ridge picks me up again and carries me inside. Zeland storms off, and I go to wriggle out of Ridge’s arms, but he tightens his hold.

“Just let him have a moment,” he says as he walks us through the foyer and up the stairs toward my room.

The rejection stings. Ridge never brings me to my room—it’s always his. I silently cry against his chest until he places me on my bed.

“Do you think he will ask me to leave?”

“What?” Ridge lifts my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Why would he want that?”

“Because I did what I do best and screwed everything up.”

“Let me get one thing straight—you are not going anywhere. Zeland is not angry at you because you did nothing wrong. I will fill in a few blanks in Zeland’s story. Before now, he has never done relationships. Not because he is afraid of them, but because he knows how easily he gets attached. It’s why we always kept us so casual. I’m sure he says it’s because I don’t do love, and it’s partly true, but mostly it’s because he worries that if he loves someone he will scare them away. So tonight, Arlo running would have confirmed his fears.”

“Damn, we are a messed-up bunch. I have a fear of abandonment, so I never let anyone close, but why don’t you do love? What’s your story?”

Ridge sighs. “There’s not really a story—I just don’t believe love exists. The word is too often used as leverage, affection is normally given with strings attached, and loyalty is bought. It’s just a performance people use to get what they want.”

“Do you really believe that? I know you love Zeland—you would give up everything for him.”

“Would I? Because I have thought about it a lot and I know without a shadow of doubt he would give up everything for me, but I struggle with the conviction that I would do the same.”

“Bullshit,” I snap, and his eyes widen at the force. “I was a fucking stranger and the lengths you went to just to make sure Zeland would be okay around me were borderline creepy. Shit, you employed my online gaming buddy. You’re looking at a hypothetical that will never happen, because Zeland would never ask that of you. If he needed a kidney and you were a match, would you give him one?”

“Of course, but I would do the same for you.”

“Okay, if he murdered me in my sleep, would you call the cops?”

“That’s a question I can’t answer without knowing all the details.”

“Fine,” I huff. “If he walked away and never looked back, would the world feel the same?”

Ridge’s eyes go wide. I doubt he has ever considered Zeland leaving him.

“Maybe now is a good time to talk to him about it, because if he is feeling the way I think he is right now, he needs you.”

Ridge nods. “But he doesn’t just need me, he needs us. You can’t walk away either, stray. I don’t know if I could deal with that.”

I run my fingers through his hair. “I’m not going anywhere—you are both stuck with me as long as you need me around.”

Ridge leans over and picks me up. “We don’t need you here; we *want* you here. No matter if we fight, or if something goes wrong, this is your home and we will always talk things out. I told you once before, but I will say it again: don’t run from me, I will find you. And I have no qualms about locking you up for eternity.”

“You wouldn’t,” I say with a smile. “I would annoy you too much with my quick wit.”

Ridge walks us both toward Zeland’s room and puts me down before he knocks. He doesn’t wait for Zeland to reply before he twists the handle and pushes open the door. Zeland is sitting on the edge of his bed, his hands in his hair, staring at the ground. He glances at us forlornly as we walk in. Ridge drops to his knees in front of Zeland and I sit beside him, taking his hand in mine and squeezing gently.

“You’re not allowed to leave me,” Ridge states, and Zeland looks at him blankly and then at me.

I burst out laughing. Of course Ridge, who is normally good with words, cannot express what he means when it comes to his feelings.

“What I mean is, I never believed in love because of the bullshit examples our world has shown me. They’re not love; extortion is a closer word. But I realize I can’t live my life without you, Zee. If you were not here, neither would my heart be.”

Zeland chuckles and grabs Ridge’s face. “I love you too.”

Like an idiot, I clap as their lips press together. “Yay! My work here is done.”

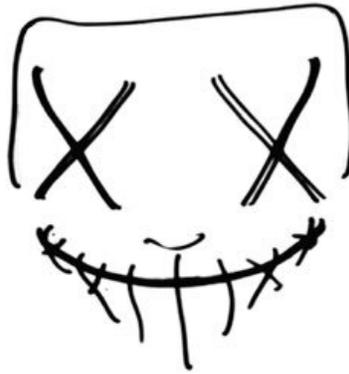
Ridge growls from deep within his chest and grabs my arm as he pulls back from his kiss with Zeland. “You’re not going anywhere. Neither of you are. Give Arlo some time to process what happened and then do what

you like. Right now, we are going to snuggle because I'm all up in my feelings."

"You broke him," Zeland jokes.

"I happen to think I fixed him. Look how perfect he is now, all strong and in his feelings. All we need to do is make him cry—"

I squeal as Ridge grabs my ankle and tries to pull me off the bed. Zeland grins and grabs my arms, and they both pull on me until we all dissolve into laughter. My heart still hurts over Arlo, but Ridge is right—we have to give him time to process this. The ball is in his court and what he does now is up to him.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Arlo

Curled into the corner of the shower, with my knees pressed to my chest, I wrap my arms tight around myself like a lifeline. Warm water beats down my back, but I'm freezing, and every drop feels like salt in an open wound.

Tears blur the tiles beneath me as rough sobs escape my throat. I can't stop the sting in my eyes or the tremor in my hands.

I lost everything that made me feel whole. How fucking stupid am I? A woman on the internet, someone I bared my soul to, turned out to be nothing more than my worst nightmare. Every secret, every confession I thought was safe, she used against me.

My chest feels like it's caught in a vice—tight, unrelenting pain that no shower can wash away. My dream job, the thing I built my life around, was nothing more than a cruel joke.

And here I am, drowning, wondering how I let myself fall for it.

The second I got home, I wanted to put my headset on and talk to her, to tell her what just happened, but she is the same person. They have broken me more than Millie Baker ever did.

After way too long—my skin's all pruney—I drag myself out and wrap a towel around my waist. The only thing I can do is get wasted and pass out.

Hopefully, when I wake up tomorrow, this will all be a bad dream.

It sure as shit was not a dream.

I'm woken by the chiming notification of an email on my phone. I forgot to delete the app, but there is no way I am going to work. How can I show my face there again? I will be the laughingstock of the office when word spreads about what happened. I open the app, intending to sign out.

SUBJECT: MY OFFICE.

ARLO,

BE IN MY OFFICE AT 10AM. I EXPECT YOU ON TIME.

RIDGE ELLINGTON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
RIDGELAND ENTERPRISES

Fuck Ridge, he is as bad as they are.

I ignore his email and throw my phone across the room. He can fuck right off. I should write a nasty reply, but I won't, that isn't me. Maybe I could write a simple *fuck you*.

A glance at my monitor shows it's only eight. I could sleep for a few more hours, but now I don't have a job and I need to apply for more. First, though, I need coffee. I get dressed, simply going through the motions until my normal coffee shop comes into view. Memories of Zeland being there every day and buying me breakfast sting.

There is no way I'm stepping foot in that café.

So I turn on my heels and hurry down the street, mindlessly walking until I smell the sweet scent of roasting beans. As I push through the door, I look around and see it's a gaming café, and a young guy greets me as I walk in.

"Hi, welcome to Game and Grind. How can I help you?"

"Can I get a medium coffee, two creams, one pump of vanilla?"

"Sure thing. I'll bring it over when it's ready."

I find a seat and look around. This place is nice. I swear there used to be a bar here, but maybe I'm wrong. When the young guy brings over my

drink, I ask him, and he says it was called The Syllabus, but it was shut down not long ago.

I sit and drink my coffee while scrolling for jobs, but there is nothing as good as Ridgeland, though I don't think anything would ever compare.

My phone alerts me to another email, and I must be a masochist because I open it.

SUBJECT: NO RESPONSE.

ARLO,

IT'S PAST TEN. I DON'T APPRECIATE BEING IGNORED.

YOU HAVE FIFTEEN MINUTES TO EXPLAIN YOURSELF. IN PERSON. DON'T MAKE ME COME FIND YOU.

RIDGE ELLINGTON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
RIDGELAND ENTERPRISES

I scoff. As if he will be able to find me. Where will he look? At my house? Well, I'm not there and I'm clearly not at the office—that's the end of the line for my known hang-out spots. I shut off my phone as the young guy comes over.

“You should try out the games here, on the house.”

He winks at me and I blush, then a wave of nausea hits me. I nod just so he will go away. Shit, I can't even think of anyone hitting on me, not when it makes me think of Zeland.

The barista's name is Heath, and he sets me up on a computer and gives me one hour of access for free. He told me they have new games they are trialing here. I click on one and pull my headset over my ears, needing to lose myself in the game and forget about everything around me.

I barely hear the ding that tells me my hour's up, just the faint sound of the café's background noise mixing with the static of the game still in my ears. The screen has already faded to the menu, and my fingers have stopped twitching over the keys, but I just sit there, staring like I'm trying to lose myself in the monotony.

Large hands clamp down on my shoulders, and I flinch, then freeze as Ridge leans in, his breath brushing against my neck. He doesn't say

anything until he lifts one side of the headset off my ear like he owns every part of the space I'm occupying. "You didn't show up." His voice is low and hushed. Someone like him doesn't want unnecessary attention. "I waited."

I blink hard. My throat closing as he crouches next to the chair, his body radiating tension.

"I know you're hurting. I get it, but the least you could do is hear Zeland and Aspen out. They're hurting too. Just as much."

I try to swallow down the lump, but it won't budge. "They lied," I whisper, barely audible. "They let me fall for them. All those nights, all my firsts, and they never told me the truth. Not until it was too late."

Ridge doesn't flinch; he just nods. "You have a week. Paid leave. After that, I expect you back at the office. If you don't want a damn thing to do with any of us, we'll respect that." He leans closer, his voice even softer now. "You earned your place there. Don't let what happened take it from you."

I shake my head, but my vision blurs, and I hate myself for my weakness. Tears slip past before I can stop them, and it's humiliating. "They knew who I was," I rasp. "And I didn't even know who I was kissing. Who I was letting touch me. It wasn't just a game—not for me."

Ridge places the headset gently on the desk in front of me, then straightens. "It wasn't a game for them either." He doesn't wait for me to answer, turning and walking away.

I sit there in the blue glow of the café, crying into my hands while the menu screen loops, the vision hazed by my tears.

How could it not have been a game?

I'm frozen, numb, the weight of Ridge's words pressing down on me. They're hurting too. That's fucking rich. They knew—the whole fucking time, they knew who I was. Aspen sat next to me at work, shared coffees and inside jokes. Zeland laughed at the stupid memes I hesitantly sent back in reply to his flirty emails. He smirked when I would stutter at his flirting in person. And Ridge—he may have been cold, unreadable, but he watched everything, as if he masterminded this entire thing.

All the while, they were the ones behind the masks.

Chasing me. Touching me like they already owned me.

They took everything.

All my firsts. It was the first time I ever trusted someone with my body. My submission, my fantasies. All of it I gave freely to these masked strangers, who were never really strangers at all.

God, I would've saved those moments. I would've waited if I knew. I would've made them real. Not part of some twisted fantasy they let me believe was anonymous.

I bury my face in my hands and let out a heaving breath that turns into something jagged, something broken. My shoulders shake and I don't care that I'm in public. I don't care that people are watching me.

The worst part isn't that they wore masks. It's that I didn't realize how much I fell for them until they'd taken them off. And now . . . now I don't know if I can distinguish what was real and what was part of their game.

Ridge saying I have a week of paid leave is laughable—I can't go back. Men like him think they just speak and everyone will jump, but not me. He says they will respect my wishes, but I know Zeland won't—he will rush me like a bull in a china shop the second I walk through those doors. Though I could be wrong. It's not like he or Aspen have tried to contact me, only Ridge, and something seems off about that.

“Hey, man. Are you okay? Was that your boyfriend in here before?”

I wipe my face and look up at Heath. “I'm fine—it's complicated. Thanks for the free game. I have to go.”

I push my chair back and rush out. I need some fresh air and time to think.

The days blur together. Morning, night, it all feels the same. I go through the motions: wake up, stare at my ceiling, and try to pretend I'm not hoping for a message that never arrives. God, I miss them, though I fucking hate that I do. I miss Aspen's smart mouth and the way she'd always beat the teenagers in that stupid game, then smack talk them. I miss Zeland showing up at my favorite coffee shop, pretending it was a coincidence, always with that smirk, like he knew something I didn't. I hate how they knew who I was the whole time. Every moment I thought was real, every look, every touch.

For the first time, I actually felt wanted. If I'd known, if they'd been honest after the first time, I might've saved some pieces of myself. Or maybe not. Maybe I still would've fallen for them. Maybe I already had.

Sometimes I wish they hadn't told me. At least then I could still game with her and pretend she was just the cool girl on the other end of the screen who made me feel seen. At least then I wouldn't feel this hollow ache every time I check my messages and they are empty.

"Okay, that's it!" my mom huffs, coming down the stairs. "I have let you mope, and I have tried not to pry, but it's been days, and you've barely come out of your room. It smells like something died down here. Did you lose your job?"

I shake my head.

"Is it that girl you game with, or the man with the cheeky smile?"

"I thought they liked me, but they don't. Please don't ask me to explain because I have just stopped crying about it. Just give me time."

She nods. "I love you, baby, but you smell. Get your ass up and shower while I strip your bed and clean this mess up a little."

I don't argue; I don't have it in me. Instead, I do as she asks and go shower. The water is scalding, but I let it burn. It's the first thing I've felt in days that wasn't just . . . numb. I lean my forehead against the tiles, water sliding down my back, and for a second I just breathe.

Then it hits me—this can't be it. I can't let *them* be the reason I fall apart.

They already took pieces of me I didn't even know I was handing over, but I won't let them take everything. Ridge said I earned my place, that he didn't give me a job to mess with me. I don't know if I believe him, not yet, but I'm going to prove I deserve it.

To him.

To Zeland.

To Aspen.

And to myself.

I'm going back to work. Not for them, but for me.

Let them keep their secrets and their masks—I'm done hiding behind mine.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Ridge

Their heartbreak makes no sense to me. I don't understand how you can feel something so strong after knowing someone for such a short time. Would I be heartbroken if Zeland left me? I'm sure I would. Aspen, maybe, but not enough that I would need to take time off work. It's why I'm here in the office, and have been all week, while Zeland and Aspen have been home.

I called Theo and told him Arlo would be away for the week. While I know I shouldn't have hacked into his phone and tracked his whereabouts, I did. I don't even know why I fucking care so much.

"Sir, you have a call on line two," my executive assistant tells me.

As I pick up the phone, I already know it's Zeland. "I swear to god this better be important."

Switching on my screen, I pull up the home security system and see Aspen riding Zee. He has the phone tucked between his shoulder and ear as he holds her tits.

"It is very important. Did he come into work today?"

I sigh. "No, he did not," I lie.

Honestly, I haven't checked yet, and even if he does come in, he deserves one day of peace before they start stalking him. They promised not to contact him, to give him the week, but today their promises end.

I watch the screen as he shakes his head, and Aspen stops riding him, curling up flat against his pecs. Maybe the ache in my own chest right now means something—I hate seeing them upset.

“I will deal with it. Just keep fucking our girl and I’ll see you tonight.” With another sigh, I end the call.

I told them I’d given him a week off, but the week has come and gone. I pick up my phone and dial Theo.

“Mr. Ellington, what can I do for you?”

“Did Mr. Kross come into the office today?”

“Actually, he did. He just walked in. Would you like me to send him up to see you?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.” I end the call and wait. After about fifteen minutes, there is a knock on my door. “Come in.”

The door swings open and Arlo steps inside. I see the appeal, not that he’s my type, but I can see what they like about him. He avoids eye contact as he moves further into my office.

“I’m glad you’re back,” I say, and he looks up at me, nervously picking at the hem of his shirt.

“Thanks,” he says and looks around my office.

“They are not here today. I told them you didn’t come in, but you know I can’t keep them away forever.”

He looks over at me, wide-eyed. “What do you mean, keep them away forever?”

I sigh for what feels like the umpteenth time this morning. “I asked them to give you space and time to process this on your own. If it were up to Zee, he would have been on your doorstep that first night, forcing you to hear him out. And Aspen sits in the game room holding the headset in her hands. It’s actually a little pathetic if you ask me.”

“They wanted to contact me?”

“Kidnap you would be more accurate. Please sit.”

He flops casually into the chair opposite my desk, and I clench my jaw. What is it with these people Zee gets attached to and their lack of respect? No one else would dare come to my office dressed the way he is and just slouch like that.

“I want to apologize for the part I played in all of this. I let it go on for far too long. I baby Zee sometimes—his happiness makes me feel like I’m

actually happy. Since Aspen came into our lives, we have both been happier, and I let my guard down.”

“Why didn’t you touch me . . . when the masks were on?”

Maybe I should give the kid some credit—he has some balls on him. “You’re not my type. But don’t take offense, few are. I don’t have time for any more distractions either, and those two create enough chaos for me.”

“I miss them,” Arlo murmurs, “but I’m still so angry. It confuses me.”

“Maybe you need to hear them out. At the very least, it could give you some closure. Their intention was never to hurt or deceive you, even if it ended up that way. Just know that the first time was before they really knew you, the second was because they did, and the third was so they could touch you one last time in case this happened.”

He nods and gets up from his chair. “Thank you. I didn’t think you gave me this job because of me.”

“If I’m being frank, at first I didn’t. And before you get the wrong idea, it was because your resume is a mess. It wasn’t until I looked into you, I saw your name was in our system, and when I actually looked, I was impressed. Your resume didn’t stand out among the hundreds and hundreds of applicants, but your work speaks for itself. You are a valuable part of the team.”

“Thank you. That means a lot coming from you.”

I nod, and he walks toward the door.

“Hey, Arlo.” He turns back as he places his hand on the doorknob. “I want you to know they are worth it, both of them. They might be a lot, and they will both probably screw up so many times. They are both so impulsive—Aspen with the crazy shit that comes out of her mouth, and Zee with his flirty nature. But they are worth it.”

He walks out after that, and I don’t bother telling Zee or Aspen that he is here. I’m hoping he goes to them on his own.

It was a long day and I’m grateful when I finally walk into the house. It’s quiet and I wonder if they are still in bed. I should have checked, but I am trying to give them some space. If I have learned anything from this, it’s that they need to do this on their own. This is one problem I can’t fix for

them or make go away, though seeing them sad makes me want to, but I have interfered enough.

I hear faint laughter, and I follow the sound until I get to the game room. As I open the door, Zeland turns his head and smiles, then he pushes up from the beanbag and meets me at the door.

“What’s going on here?”

“He is playing with her. He won’t speak, but they are playing together. This means something, doesn’t it?”

I shrug. “Don’t read too much into it—maybe the guy misses his friend. They played together every single day. Aspen told us he shared a lot with her.”

“What should we do?”

I grab his arm and pull him from the room. “We shouldn’t do anything. Give him time to come to you. And let them have this moment.”

Zeland grabs my head and his mouth crashes against mine like he’s starving for me, like I’m the only thing he wants to taste.

I have missed this, missed him. The scrape of his stubble is rough against my skin, sharp enough to burn, yet soft enough to make me need more. It drags along the edges of my lips and the tip of my nose as he deepens the kiss, his hands fisting in the back of my shirt, pulling me in like he can’t get close enough. I moan into his mouth. The kiss is messy, desperate, and hot.

“I love you so fucking much,” he whispers against my lips.

Aspen might have gotten me to open up about my feelings, but I haven’t said it since. “I love you too.”

He wastes no time ripping my shirt from my slacks and tearing it open, the buttons scattering everywhere. His mouth is back on mine a second later—damn, I missed his taste. I kiss him back harder, my hands sliding beneath his T-shirt, my palms flat against his back as I shove the fabric up, desperately needing to feel his skin. He breaks the kiss only long enough to pull it over his head, and then we’re stumbling down the hallway toward my bedroom, mouths clashing and breaths heavy.

Halfway there, he pushes me back against the wall, biting at my lower lip, and I growl, grabbing his hips and dragging him forward. Every step is a tug . . . a kiss . . . the pulling off of more clothes. By the time we hit my doorframe, we’re both undressed and completely lost in each other. His hands are in my hair, mine are roaming everywhere. Neither of us kick the

door closed as we step inside—we stopped doing that when Aspen joined our relationship.

I know the exact moment when this stopped being a situationship of convenience and moved to a relationship; it was the second I admitted how I felt. Even if I still don't fully believe in love and fairy-tale endings, I know if Zeland walked away tomorrow, my entire world would crumble.

Zeland pulls back from my lips and pushes against my chest. As I fall back onto my bed, he straddles my waist, pressing kisses to my jaw.

“Fuck, you're so hot,” he whispers as he kisses lower down my neck, sucking on my skin.

Normally I wouldn't let him mark me, but with how desperate we are for each other, I let him suck and nip his way down my body, enjoying how he makes me feel.

“Will you let me fuck you?” he asks.

Most of the time, I am the one who tops him. I'm not a huge fan of bottoming, but in times like this—when I'm so turned on—I let him take what he needs. My nod makes him smile against my abs and he reaches over to the bedside table and pulls out the bottle of lube, squirting some onto his fingers. He leans down and licks my cock as his fingers find my ass. Slowly he pushes inside me and I moan—*fuck* that feels good. My lack of bottoming has less to do with not liking it and more to do with giving up control. It's not something I have ever trusted anyone with, but right now, I trust him with my whole damn heart.

His fingers slide in and out of me, torturously slow.

“Fuck me already,” I growl, and he laughs as he pulls his fingers out.

“Needy much?” He smirks as he pulls my legs up and pushes them against my chest. He positions himself, pushing his cock against me, the burn welcome.

Zeland thrusts inside me, his tense abs making my mouth water, and every time his hips move, pleasure makes my cock leak precum. He likes to mess with me—in this position, I can't stroke myself as he fucks me, and he knows it.

His blue eyes stare down at me, consuming me, and once their intensity used to scare me with how much love and adoration they held. In this moment, he's not fucking me; this is the first time we're making love, and he knows it. He moves onto his knees and pulls my legs down, bracing a hand beside my head, then he leans in and his breath brushes over my lips. I

can't look away. Those eyes have me pinned more than his weight ever could, and I feel the way he takes his time. This isn't just about lust, but about claiming every part of me—parts I swore no one could reach.

When his lips capture mine, his movements get slower. If this is how love feels, maybe it's not so bad. The world is left at the door and it's only us.

“Oh fuck!” I grit out when I come, the stickiness captured between our bodies as he continues fucking me through my orgasm and into his own.

When he's done, he pulls out and falls down beside me, and I pull him into my arms. The only thing that could make this moment better walks into the room with a smile on her face. She doesn't say anything, just walks into my en suite and comes back out wearing one of my shirts, which keep disappearing, but I know it's her stealing them. She climbs onto the bed and hands Zeland a warm washcloth, then slips in behind me and wraps her arm around my stomach.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my skin.

“For what?” I ask.

“You know what, and thank you.”

She means for talking to Arlo and making them give him space. I will always look out for them and have their best interests at heart, no matter what that looks like. Even if I have to be the bad guy or make them see sense. Aspen is the first one to tell me that my love language is taking care of people, and maybe she is right because there isn't anything I wouldn't do to take care of them.



Chapter Twenty-Four

Aspen

Nerves have never hit me as hard as they did this morning. When Ridge asked us to give Arlo space, I wanted to say fuck it and storm over to his house, demanding that he listen to me. I know I'm a little confrontational, but I hate leaving things in limbo. I need to sort the issue out straight away, regardless of the result. But this time I decide to trust Ridge. He said if we give Arlo time, we would get our chance to explain. That he deserves space to process his loss, because it is how he is feeling, and he is entitled to those emotions.

For the last few nights, Arlo has logged on and we have played together. It's in a group of people, and he doesn't talk to me, but he has my back when those pesky prepubescent dudebros decide to gang up on me. It's been excruciatingly hard to not beg for his forgiveness, but Ridge assures me it was a good first step.

Ridge spoke with Arlo about me coming back to work and he agreed—that's why I'm nervous.

I threw up four times before I left the house this morning. Zeland wants me to wait, but it doesn't matter what day I do this, the result will be the same. When I freak out or my anxiety rears its ugly head, I vomit. It's why I have a stash of vomit bags handy.

Ridge, Zeland, and I walk into the building together. Ridge stops in front of me and takes my face in his hands. “You’ve got this, just be yourself.”

He presses his lips to mine in front of everyone in the foyer, and I gasp. He never does PDA in front of his employees. Thankfully, I brushed my teeth and used half a bottle of mouthwash before we left, or this kiss would be super awkward.

Zeland wraps his arms around both of us.

“Okay,” Ridge says with a chuckle. “I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. I will see you both for lunch in my office.” He winks and straightens his tie as he walks off.

“Damn, he has a nice ass,” I whisper, and Zeland takes my hand.

“That he does. Now let me take you up to your floor. I promise I won’t say anything to Arlo—he can come to me when he is ready. I’m just happy he’s back.”

We get into the elevator and once we reach the eighth floor, my nerves ramp up to a million. Zeland squeezes my clammy hand as the doors open and steps out with me—then we both freeze. Arlo is standing at the front desk talking to Theo, and both men look our way.

“That is my cue to leave,” Zee blurts. “Have an amazing day. You know where to find me if you need me.”

I nod as he pulls me into his body and wraps his arms around me. The comfort that radiates through me calms my nerves. When he lets me go and steps back into the elevator, he’s looking over my head. He winks as the doors slide closed.

I take a deep breath and turn to face Arlo.

“Morning,” I quip as I rush past them to the double doors, scanning my access card, then quickly scurrying through and down the hall to our office. It smells like him, and I can’t believe how much I have missed the smell of sweet oranges and spice until now. I know liking three men is not normal, but I do, and I had it all until I screwed up. But at the very least, I need my friend back.

When Arlo walks into the room, the tension is thick—I can feel it radiating from him.

“Hi, Aspen,” he says.

“I missed you,” I whisper, not wanting to scare him.

“I know, Ridge told me, but I’m so upset with you.”

In a rush of steps, I close the distance between us, all my logic about not wanting to scare him falling away. “Yell at me, tell me how pissed off you are, anything but silence. I know how badly I fucked up. If I could go back—”

“You would want to take us back?!”

I reach up and cup his jaw. “God no, at least not the first time, but I would have told you the truth after that. I’m so, so, so sorry I lied to you and betrayed your trust. Everything just snowballed so fast. You were a different person online, and when you started working here, I wanted to be close to you. Then with the mask stuff . . . I wanted you to be free, to do things you never thought you could. I just didn’t mean to fall for you in the process.”

“It hurt so bad. I finally had all the things I wanted in life. I trusted you,” he says, his voice low and tight, as if he is trying not to cry. It breaks my heart that I made him feel like this. “As a gamer. As a friend. As a coworker. And then as something more. Something I can’t even put into words because the second I name it, it feels too real, too much.”

My lips part, ready to assure him he can still have those things with me, but he shakes his head, dislodging my hand and halting my reply.

“I fell for you without even realizing it. First through the headset, when you’d tease me during raids and call me out when I didn’t have your back. Then again, when we worked side by side, and I kept wondering why you felt so damn familiar.” He laughs bitterly. “And then the masked version of you . . . fuck, Aspen. I let that version of you touch me in ways no one ever has. You took almost every first I had without even giving me your name.”

A tear slides down my cheek, and he reaches out to wipe it away.

His own cheeks are flushed with emotion, and his eyes . . . fuck, those eyes won’t stop flicking to mine like he’s scared I’ll look away.

“I didn’t mean for any of it to happen,” I whisper, but he cuts me off gently.

“No, let me just . . . say this.”

I nod and gently bring my hands back up to cup either side of his jaw, and he exhales shakily.

“Zeland messed me up,” he admits, and his voice cracks just enough to slice me open. “I didn’t expect to like him the way I did. It was the small things at first—his smile, the way he was always at the coffee shop every day, how he’d find a way to touch my elbow or wink at me. I kept telling

myself not to read into it, that maybe I was projecting because of how confused I already felt about you. I couldn't just push myself on you, Aspen. You're my coworker."

His eyes search mine, desperate and raw. "But then I was falling for you all. I held back, though. For you. Because I didn't want to disrespect what you had with him, or disrespect you because I had mixed feelings about the people chasing me, even though I didn't know who they were."

My heart stutters painfully in my chest.

"And then to find out it was you both behind the masks . . . it didn't just hurt, Aspen. It broke something in me. Both of you knew who I was. You saw me falling, and you let me. You let me give myself to people who were already inside my world, already close to me. It was like being gutted from the inside out."

I can barely breathe through the ache exploding in my chest. "Arlo . . ."

His voice softens, but the pain in it doesn't wane. "I just wish someone had told me before I gave so much of myself away. Because I didn't know how much of me was tied to you. To both of you."

I lean in and gently rest my forehead against his. "You still have all of you," I whisper. "And we're the ones bleeding now. We never stopped wanting you—we just didn't know how deep we were in until we were drowning."

His breaths are uneven, his face held between my hands harrowed, like he might shatter if I let him go. His words echo through me, raw but honest, and something cracks open in my chest. I don't know how to fix the hurt I caused, but I want to try. These emotions are new, and the pain of hurting someone is exactly what I was trying to avoid feeling.

My thumbs brush along the curve of his cheekbones and I tilt his face down just enough for our eyes to meet.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

His eyes flick to my mouth, then back to my eyes, and that's all it takes.

I lean in, giving him a second to pull away, but he doesn't. He leans down to meet me, and when our lips finally connect, it's not rushed. I kiss him slowly, every apology whispered on my tongue and captured by his. I can feel him holding back, afraid to hand over anything to me—and I can't blame him. But if he gives me this chance, I will prove he can trust me.

I kiss him deeper, and when his hands find my waist and he relaxes, I realize this isn't just a kiss, this is him saying he might just be willing to

forgive me.

I pull back first, and he takes a step back. “Do you think you could ever forgive me? Let me show you how sorry I am. I promise I will make it up to you. No more lies, no more secrets. I will be an open book.”

“What do you even like about me, when you have Ridge and Zeland?”

His insecurities are eating at him. “I like you because you are sexy in a nerdy way, you are smart, funny, and you show your emotions on your face so openly. I love how you love your mom, and how close you are to her. You don’t shy away from that or telling people she is your best friend. I love how you think of other people before yourself, but I also hate it as well, because you are worth putting first. I know I’m not easy to be around—I’m chaotic, and I do things before I think them through. Worse, I’m scared to put my heart in other people’s hands. I’m afraid people will leave me like my mom did and not look back. I know I deserved for you to walk away. It broke me, but it also made me realize just how important you are in my life. I need you, Arlo. In any way you will have me. If that means just being your coworker, I get it. Or if you just want to be friends. But please don’t walk out of my life for good.”

“I forgive you, Aspen. Hearing your voice was enough to know I would forgive you. But if you hurt me again, I don’t know if I can come back from that.”

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I pull his body tightly into mine. “I missed your smell. If it wasn’t weird, I would climb inside your shirt and smell you all day.”

I lift his shirt and place my cheek against his heart. The steady beat grounds me more than I expected. When he laughs, it rumbles through his chest, and I close my eyes to savor it for a few seconds. I feel the smile stretch across my face; I have found my safe space, and you would have to pry it from my cold, dead hands before I let him go again.



Chapter Twenty-Five

Zeland

Personal boundaries are not something I realize I bulldoze through until I'm already on the other side. Yet with Arlo, I know I have to take things slow and go at his pace. After Aspen told me he was willing to give her a chance, I decided I'd start my own attempts at reconciling. I wait at the coffee shop, two coffees in hand. The door chimes and I look up to see Arlo walk in. He doesn't notice me at first, but I see the smile on his face.

"Hi, sweetheart," I say, and he glances over at me.

I expect him to turn and walk away but he doesn't. Instead, he walks over and I hand him Aspen's coffee choice for this week. It's what we did—every week when she changed her order, we did as well. Some of her choices are shit, but this week it's not actually so bad. I don't mind the taste of nuts in my coffee or my mouth, whichever works for me.

"I was wondering how long it would take for you to come and see me," he says as we walk out of the shop together.

"I have wanted to since the day you ran away, but my voice of reason told me I should let you process how massively I fucked up first. Also, I wanted to make sure you fixed things with Aspen. If she's happy, I'm happy."

He smiles at the mention of her name, and as he dips his head, the mass of curls falls in front of his face. We stop walking, and I reach over and tuck

some behind his ear, making him blush.

“Red still looks good on you.” I put the palm of my hand against his cheek, and he leans into it.

“You make me drunk on your words every time you talk. I needed space to process everything that is, well, *you*. To work out how this all works and how I fit in. You already have Ridge and Aspen, and she already has you both, and the same with Ridge. Where does that leave me?”

“In an Aspen and Zeland sandwich . . . and I can confirm being the meat is really fun.”

Arlo playfully slaps at my chest, and I catch his wrist with a grin. Then I hold it gently, like he’s something fragile, because he is and I’m the idiot who broke him.

“Okay, okay, I deserved that,” I say, still laughing, even though there’s a tight ache in my chest. “But in my defense . . . No, actually, I have no defense. I was a cocky bastard with a brilliant plan but a terrible execution.”

He rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t pull away.

That’s something, and it’s more than I could ask for if I’m being honest with myself. “I’m sorry, Arlo. For all of it. For the masks, for the lies, for not seeing how much it would hurt you. If I could go back, I’d do it differently. Since I can’t, I am here begging you for a second chance to prove how much you mean to me.”

“Then show me.”

There is only one way I know how, so I grab his free hand in mine, pulling him down the street, and he rushes to keep up. When we get to Ridgeland, people turn and watch me drag him through the foyer and into my personal elevator. The doors slide shut behind us, and the second they do, I’m on him.

I slam Arlo’s back into the mirrored wall, and his breath hitches just before I catch his mouth with mine. It’s not gentle. It’s days and days of frustration and guilt all crashing into him at once. His hands clutch at my shirt, fingers curling into the material like he needs me as badly as I need him.

I bite at his bottom lip and swallow the soft gasp he gives me in return.

“Zeland,” he breathes, but I’m not done. Not even fucking close.

I spin him, pressing him face-first to the mirror. His cheek touches the glass, his reflection staring back at me, blushing and wide-eyed. My chest is

flush to his back, one hand gripping his waist, while my other one rises slowly to slap the red stop button.

The elevator jerks to a halt.

I lean in, my lips brushing his ear as I growl, "I'll show you just how much you mean to me."

He doesn't fight me when I undo his pants, or when I slide my hand beneath his boxers and touch the silky skin of his hard cock.

"This is going to be hard and fast, and you will walk into work knowing exactly how I feel. You will smile as you remember this while you sit in your office. Do you have any objections to having my cum in your ass all day?"

"Oh god, please claim me already," he whines.

I let go of his cock and remove mine from my dress pants, spitting on my hand and using it as lube, as it's the best we can do right now. I'm gentle as I pull him back, run the tip of my cock along his ass, and push into him. He moans as I inch my way in.

"Look how well you take me," I growl, fisting his hair, forcing him to look up and see how good he looks in the mirror. "I'm going to fuck you, and when we get to my office, Aspen will be there waiting. Won't she, Ridge?"

Arlo gasps. "Ridge is watching us?"

I laugh. "He's always watching what is his. Just because he doesn't want to fuck you, sweetheart, doesn't mean you're not his too."

"Fuck," he whimpers as I thrust into him, forcing him to keep his head tilted up the entire time. His panting breaths fog the mirror, and his fingers splay against the glass like he needs something to hold on to. I run my free hand slowly down his back, making him shiver. God, he feels so good—so mine.

I press closer, my hips pumping harder with each breath. Every sound he makes goes straight to my head and I can't stop touching him.

I slide a hand beneath his shirt, dragging my fingers along the soft skin of his stomach. He arches into my touch, and I can feel the tension in his muscles.

"I've thought about this . . . about you. Every damn night. Do you know what it did to me? Wanting you, and not being able to have you?"

He gasps as my hands roam lower. The way he melts against me, the way his body trusts me even when his mind might not.

It undoes me.

I explode in his ass, making him mine. I want every inch of him to know he matters.

Carefully, I pull out, and he whimpers as I tuck his cock back in his pants before I do the same to mine.

“You don’t get to come just yet, sweetheart.”

I hit the button, and the elevator comes back to life and opens on my floor.

Aspen stands there in her birthday suit, and Arlo’s eyes go wide before he frantically glances around. But there is no way Ridge would let her stand there naked if the floor wasn’t empty.

Arlo rushes out of the elevator and pulls his shirt off and Aspen laughs. “It’s okay! Ridge sent everyone home for a paid day off. He threatened anyone who refused to leave within five minutes with instant dismissal.”

I laugh—of course he did.

“So, how many of these surfaces are you going to fuck me on? The boss’s desk would be a good place to start,” Aspen teases.

“This boss approves. I’m just going to shower quickly, and I will be back. Feel free to start without me, but just know his ass is filled with my cum and it’s to stay where it is.”

Aspen reaches around Arlo’s back and runs her hand down the mismatched tattoos lining his skin, dipping beneath his pants as Arlo groans, his knees wobbling. “So he does. I might have to cover his face with mine. See you soon,” she says, winking at me as the elevator doors slide closed.

Pressing the button for the penthouse, I scan my card and wait to ascend. I don’t expect Ridge to be up here, but he is sitting on the couch with his laptop open, watching Arlo and Aspen kissing, taking their time with each other.

“I didn’t expect you to come up here,” he says, not taking his eyes off the screen as he sips his whiskey.

“Well, I need to wash my cock. One wrong move and Aspen would be out of action, and with three cocks, we need all the holes we can get. Are you coming downstairs?”

“I think I will let you three make up. Watching is enough.”

Leaving him to watch, I shower, making sure my dick is squeaky clean before I towel off and slip on a pair of sweats, then head back to the living

room. I place a kiss on Ridge's cheek with a smile; I don't know when we got so touchy feely, but I love it.

"Have fun and don't push them too far."

"Me?" I gasp. "Never."

He laughs under his breath and goes back to watching the screen. I can see why he likes it; Arlo lies on my desk and Aspen grinds against his face.

That's my sign to leave, though, and I take the elevator back down to my floor. As I head into my office, I see Arlo now has Aspen pinned against the floor-to-ceiling windows. He is completely naked and his body is a work of art—literally—with his patchwork of tattoos. I see a new one on his shoulder and grin. I move closer to them, and Aspen cries out his name as she orgasms, then I step up behind him and kiss the mask tattoo.

"When did you get this?" I ask.

"Yesterday."

He steps back as Aspen moves, needing to see what we are talking about. Instead of walking around, she jumps into his arms, and he holds her up so she can peek over his shoulder.

"Holy shit! When you're ready, I plan to chase you again, and this time you will know it's me calling out your name as I search for you."

"Yes, please," he says as Aspen lines up his cock and sinks back down onto it.

"I wonder if our girl is ready for a cock in her ass?" My grin looks nearly feral in the window's reflection.

Ridge and I have been stretching her out, using our fingers, but right now I need to be inside her as well.

"I was born ready—fuck, that sounded wrong. Fuck my ass, Zeland."

Arlo laughs as he holds her up, and she grinds against him. "Go sit on the sofa, sideways."

I knew there was a good use for that thing, though it seemed pointless when the designer insisted it "fit the space." Rushing over to my desk, I find the lube I keep here in case Ridge ever visits my office.

When I turn back around, Arlo is staring at me like he wants to say something. "What's wrong?" I ask, and his face goes red. "Sweetheart, you know what you going that color does to me. If you want to say something, say it. Never be afraid to voice what you want."

"Can . . . can I fuck her ass?" He wants one of her firsts.

"You want to take her ass virginity?"

He nods, and I lift Aspen off his lap. Arlo's cock glistens with her juices and I want to drop to my knees and lick him clean, but Aspen latches onto me like a spider monkey, sliding down my sweats and sinking onto me in one swift move.

A needy sound breaks from my throat, and I take Arlo's place on the couch. He looks down at us and I motion for him to come closer.

"Let me taste her," I murmur, as her hips rotating over my cock have my eyes rolling in my head. I love how she takes what she wants.

Arlo nervously comes to stand closer, and I wrap my hand around his cock. "Bend your knees, sweetheart."

He does what I ask and his tip presses against my lips.

I lick him, tasting them both. Sucking his length down my throat, I swirl my tongue, and he draws in a ragged breath as his knees buckle.

Popping off his cock, I grab his ass and squeeze. "Now be gentle with our girl."

He nods and I release him, then he kneels behind her. He takes the lube, squeezing a generous amount on his cock and fists himself. After spreading it everywhere, he uses his hand to swipe the leftover lube on her ass. "If this hurts, please tell me to stop."

His hands shake as he holds his dick and moves it into position, half leaning over her.

"Oh fuck," she grits out, a slight pain in her voice. "Keep going—it feels so good even though it hurts."

Reaching beneath her, I rest my fingers on her clit and as Arlo pushes into her, she grinds down on my hand.

"It's so tight," Arlo whispers.

"I feel so full. Please start moving—both of you. I need you to move."

"Zeland, you thrust up while Arlo holds still."

All three of us turn our heads and see a shirtless Ridge standing in the doorway, his glass of whiskey in his hand.

"That's it," he softens when we comply. "Now, Arlo, you need to fall into rhythm with him. Start slow, good boy," he says, walking closer.

Aspen holds an arm out for him, and as he steps up to her, she rubs her hand over the bulge in his pants. I knew he couldn't stay away. She rips at his sweats, and hell has officially frozen over because Ridge Ellington is in the office in sweats, day drinking.

"Put your cock in my mouth. Oh fuck, please, Ridge. I need you all."

He bends down and sets the glass on the carpet before reaching beneath his waistband and pulling out his cock. As he steps forward, Aspen opens her mouth, but then he moves back. “Don’t open those pretty lips until I tell you.”

She pouts her lips as he steps closer to her and rubs the head of his cock over them, spreading his precum on her face.

“I’m going to fuck your face, stray. I really hope you can breathe through your nose.”

She smirks at him and opens her mouth, but he doesn’t give her a chance to gloat before he wraps his fist full of her hair and pushes his cock down her throat.

“Now we fuck her hard and fast until she is nothing but a mess of tears and drool.”

My thrusts get faster, as do Ridge’s, and Arlo keeps up.

Tears leak from her eyes as she is fucked in a way only she likes. Aspen loves her body being used, but only by us. If anyone else tried this, Ridge would bury them. Not in the literal sense, but they would wish they were by the time he was done with them. Her pussy clamps hard around my cock.

“I’m going to come,” Arlo whispers.

Ridge fists his hair and forces him to look his way. “Claim her ass. Show her who owns her. We do, and after today, Arlo Kross, you belong to us too. If you need to date them, they can date the fuck out of you, but no more hiding. This is messy and complex, but it’s us.”

“Do you want that, sweetheart?” I ask him.

“Yes!” he gasps as his body twitches, and he goes still behind Aspen as his eyes roll almost all the way back in his head.

Watching them both come has my balls tightening, and I let go of my release with a roar of pleasure just as Aspen chokes, Ridge’s cum dripping from her mouth and even her nose. She pulls air into her lungs when Ridge steps back, and I grab her face and lick her clean.

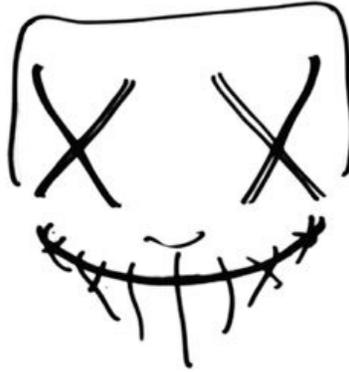
When I finish and sit up, with her still on my lap, Ridge has his arm around a very naked Arlo, who looks ready to piss himself.

“I . . . I never thought I would be naked in a room with the men I wanted to be one day. Shit, who am I kidding? I never thought I would have a naked girl near me either.”

We all laugh.

“Welcome to whatever the fuck this is, kid.”

I love how Ridge calls him “kid,” even though he is only six years younger than us. I see the look in Arlo’s eyes, and even though it’s not sexual between them, I can already tell Arlo needs Ridge in his life, just like Aspen and I do. He is the rock, the solid foundation we all need.



Epilogue

Ridge

3 months later

Aspen holds her vomit bag and has her head resting between her knees as Arlo rubs her back.

“Are you okay?” I look in the rearview mirror but can only partially see her because Zeland is pushed half through the gap between the front seats, his hand on her knee.

“Do I look okay?” she snaps. “What if she hates me?”

Arlo chuckles lightly. “My mom has never hated anyone in her life, and I don’t think she’ll start now.”

“She knows we broke your heart, and now we’re stealing you away.”

“I already told you, Rowena is the best,” Zee quips. “She did create Arlo after all.”

“I don’t know how to do moms. I never had one, remember?”

“Just breathe, I really don’t want to get the car detailed. Vomit smell lingers.”

She flips me off, and I laugh. I wasn’t keen on meeting Arlo’s mother either, but the little asshole demanded I come. Apparently, if I can watch him fuck, I have to meet his mother. Fair point, and I didn’t have an

argument against it. Besides, I got payback. He said it just before he was about to suck Zeland's cock and I had my fist in his hair. Arlo has a very nice gag reflex.

"Do you trust me?" Arlo asks Aspen, and she nods.

"Then just know if I'm happy, my mom is happy. And she already loves Ridge. Because of him she was able to give up her shitty job."

When I did a little more digging into Rowena, I found out she was working nights for the worst pay in the world. I offered her a management job at Game and Grind. We haven't officially met yet—I just gave the order and made it happen. Now she gets to work whatever hours she chooses, and the other staff can do the rest.

That's also when Aspen found out that The Syllabus was shut down. Her boss Barbie has reopened in a different location, but I like to make her life a little difficult from time to time—a building inspector here, a health inspector there—so she knows that if I took it away from her once, I can do it again.

"Okay," Aspen whispers. "But if she hates me and I throw up in her kitchen, that's on you."

"Good thing we're here then," Arlo says as I pull into his mother's driveway. Their house is cute, but a lot smaller than I imagined.

"Don't be a snob," Zeland whispers to me as Arlo helps Aspen from the car.

"I'm never a snob."

He scoffs. "I can see the look on your face. Not everyone was born into money and had everything they ever wanted. Rowena has worked hard for this house."

"Just get out of the car," I demand. "I am not a complete asshole, at least not all the time."

"Baby!" Arlo's mother cries out as she runs through the front door. I swear he saw her a week ago. I know he has been staying at our house a lot, but this seems a little excessive.

"Your face is talking," Aspen quips, and as I look at her, she laughs.

I lower my voice so only she can hear me. "He is almost twenty-four, and he just ran to hug his mother."

She elbows me in the side. "It's cute, and it's a wonderful trait for a man to have a good relationship with his mother."

Aspen has met my father because he likes to insert himself into my life, and he insisted last week that we meet his new wife—who isn't a child this time—and her son. They, surprisingly, seem decent enough. However, my mother, she's . . . well . . . a lot. She is of high society breeding, and though I know she loves me, she is the only person in the world who isn't a fan of Zeland. And if she can't accept him, then I still have no immediate need to see her.

Aspen twists her fingers with mine and pulls me toward where Arlo, his mom, and Zeland are standing.

"Mom, this is Aspen and Ridge."

"Oh my gosh, it's so nice to finally meet you. My baby boy has told me so much about you. I'm so happy that he is happy. Come in."

We follow her inside. The hallway is narrow, and I have to push Aspen in front of me so we fit. I look at the framed photographs that line the hall as we pass and smirk—Arlo was a cute baby. Aspen and I have spoken about how against children we are, me because I am not fond of children and Aspen because she doesn't want to be a mom. She laughed and said she would be okay with it if she was the dad. That started a conversation that is way too early to have in our relationship because Zeland started blending all our baby pictures with Aspen to see who would have the cutest children. Zeland's looked like something out of *The Hills Have Eyes*, and Arlo won by a landslide, all because of, in his words, "the gorgeous curls." I gave up, dragging Aspen to my bedroom and screwing her brains out while leaving poor Arlo to deal with Zeland. I did tell him just to put his cock in his mouth—it's how you shut him up.

"Ridge," Rowena says, catching my attention as I step into the dining room. She wraps her arms around me, and I freeze because it's not from one of the very few who can touch me, though they all happen to be in this room. "Thank you so much for giving me an opportunity to work in a good-paying job."

"You were more than qualified. And I like to know my customers are in good hands. Arlo speaks very highly of you."

She pulls back, and I exhale a sigh of relief. "Everyone sit. I've made lasagna, Arlo's favorite, and homemade garlic bread."

Arlo helps his mother serve the food and I watch as they bring out the plates. Aspen digs her nails into my leg, and I smile.

“This looks wonderful,” I say, even though it looks like a sloppy mess. I’m not sure if I have ever eaten lasagna that looked like this before.

Everyone digs in, and Rowena asks lots of questions—thankfully Zeland answers the questions about our business. By the time we have finished eating and dessert is pulled out, I’m stuffed. Dinner may have looked a certain way, but I think it was one of the best meals I have ever eaten.

“So, what are you kids up to tonight?” Rowena eventually asks.

“I have a surprise date, actually. Arlo and I planned it.”

Both Aspen and Zeland look at me with raised brows. I didn’t tell them before this because they would have nagged us endlessly until we told them what we were doing. Well, Arlo would have spilled the beans, because let’s face it, he is the weakest link out of the two of us.

“Oh, how fun!”

“It will be,” Arlo says.

We finish dessert, though I ate as slowly as I could to annoy Zeland, who finished in a few minutes. He hates waiting for surprises.

“We will have to have you over for dinner one night,” Zeland offers. “The meal won’t be as nice as this, but Ronny is an amazing cook.”

Once we say our goodbyes and are back in the car, Zeland puts his hand on my leg and inches it higher.

“Nice try. I’m not telling you where we are going. Arlo, can you get out the blindfolds?”

Arlo hands one to Zeland, and when I look back, he is helping Aspen into hers.

“I hate surprises,” he huffs as he pulls it over his head, and we all say that we know.

I drive in circles for a bit to put Zeland off, as he is great at knowing how far places are, and what turns we have to take. When I feel like he is completely lost, I pull up to the golf club. It cost me an exorbitantly large sum of money, and I had to cash in some favors, plus I had to call my father for help—which cost me lunch and a round of golf next month. But the entire place is shut down for the night, for a private party, though they don’t generally shut the entire building and grounds. We don’t need to go inside anyway. I hired a company to place some motion alarms along the perimeter, so I will be alerted if any prying eyes are trying to watch.

Arlo stands with Zeland and Aspen, helping them out of the car, and I grab the duffle bag with the masks. This time Arlo plans to do the chasing—he was the mastermind behind this date. He loved the idea of this location when I explained to him how Zeland mentioned it a while ago, so I made it happen. Today is three months since we all officially got together, after Arlo forgave us, and he wanted to do something special.

I will watch, to make sure no one gets to see what is mine naked. I don't like when people stare or touch them, including Arlo. He is a part of my life, and while I'll never say it out loud, I like having someone else levelheaded around. It evens out the chaos.

Arlo smiles as he slips a mask over his head, and I do the same.

"You can take the blindfolds off now," I say, Arlo by my side.

They both remove them and blink at us for a few seconds. Aspen's lashes flutter before her eyes lock on mine, and Zeland just grins like a lunatic.

"Run," I say.

"I can't wait until you're on your knees for me," Arlo adds, the voice modulator making him sound dark and dangerous.

They don't hesitate. Aspen bolts first, and Zeland is right behind her, one hand catching in hers, tugging her closer as they disappear into the rolling darkness of the golf course.

I don't move, not yet.

Arlo stands just ahead of me. He's never chased before, but tonight he gets the chance to hold the power. He watches them, shoulders rising with every breath, then he takes off after them.

Aspen glances over her shoulder and laughs as Zeland guides her across the fairway, keeping her close, never letting her hand go.

Arlo gains on them, nearly silent, moving with an intense speed—not that I'm surprised.

I run after them to keep watch. Arlo knows to steer them toward the tenth hole, but Zeland will run there anyway, I'm sure of it.

My feet hit the grass, and I see the flash of Aspen's blonde hair in the moonlight just beyond the ninth hole. She turns, her smile and eyes wide. Zeland's hand wraps around her wrist, tugging her forward. They're staying together.

"Run faster, sweetheart," Zeland calls over his shoulder, teasing Arlo.

I grin under the mask. *“I’m going to watch Arlo fuck you both by the tenth hole,”* I promise, loud enough for it to carry.

Aspen laughs, stumbling a little as Zeland encourages her to run at a faster pace. They vanish behind the hedge lining the path to the fountain.

I cut across the green, catching a shortcut I knew they wouldn’t take. The sight of the water fountain glinting ahead confirms I’ve made the right call.

I hear them coming, Aspen’s laughter echoing around me.

Arlo comes from the side and Aspen shrieks as he grabs her around the waist, pulling her back against his front.

Zeland lunges in to help her, but he trips and they tumble to the ground, tangled together, all three of them laughing.

Aspen twists to face me, her unspoken words making me want to join them. *“Happy anniversary,”* Arlo says.

“It’s not over yet,” I murmur, stalking toward them. *“Now I get to claim what’s mine. All of you, on your knees.”*

All three of them quickly move to their knees, and Arlo’s mask is now off.

I pull out my phone and at the press of a button the fairy lights behind the fountain come to life. They can’t see, as it’s behind them, but I have set up a makeshift bed, because tonight Zeland’s wish comes true: we all fuck together on the tenth hole.

“Turn around and see your gift.”

They obey eagerly. Aspen gasps, Zeland whoops, and Arlo stares at me and mouths thank you.

Fuck, the kid is adorable. I never thought I would feel anything for him, but here I am, feeling all warm and fucking fuzzy on the inside because he is happy. Aspen ruined me. She broke through my reinforced-steel exterior and released years of pent-up emotions. Lucky she is adorable.

“Who wants to watch their boyfriend suck my cock?”

Aspen’s hand flies up into the air. Zeland looks at me and smirks, raising his hand. Oh, he wants to play this game. Lucky for him, this is something Arlo and I spoke about a few days ago.

Arlo walks into my office, wearing his black jeans and stupid Rick and Morty shirt. I swear he has it in his office and switches shirts every time he has to come up to see me. He has no real reason to be here, but I sent for him anyway.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Ellington?”

I love the way my name sounds on his lips. “If you say my name like that, I might get the wrong idea.”

His face goes bright red. “Sorry Mr. Ellington, I will do better next time.”

I stand from my chair, and stalk toward him. Zeland is right—he looks fucking hot when his face flushes red beneath his thick, black-rimmed glasses and his mop of curls.

“You’re in my head, Arlo. And I hate that I don’t want you out.”

His face tilts up to mine, his body language hard to read. Is he scared of me, turned on, or just really nervous?

“I . . . uh, wow. Okay. That’s— I mean, I’m in your head? Like rent free, or . . .? No, wait, that’s not what I meant. I just, uh, cool. Coolcoolcool. Totally normal. Yep. Just, uh . . . you too. Kinda. A lot. Actually, a lot, a lot. Shit, you’re making me nervous. I thought you didn’t like me.”

He looks down as he talks, and I hate that; I tilt his chin back up. “That’s because I didn’t know you.”

“Oh—I need to talk to Aspen and Zeland first.”

“I respect that, and I have a plan.”

I love that I make him nervous.

“It looks like they want to see it,” I say with a wink, and I motion for him to move forward. He crawls toward me and looks up at me with his big brown puppy-dog eyes, those red cheeks, and an eagerness I love. Arlo is submissive, and I knew him chasing them would end with me in charge. He still needs to learn to be more aggressive in the bedroom, but he is getting there. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

He reaches up with shaky hands and takes my cock out of my pants, something I have thought about for days. His innocence turns me on.

He nervously wraps his hand around my length. I love how he paints his nails—so masculine, yet not.

“Wrap those lips around me and show them what they are missing. They don’t get to move until my cum is sliding down your throat.”

He hums against me as his mouth closes around my head, and fuck that feels good. He goes slow, sucking and licking, teasing me and making me want more.

“Fuck, you’re doing such a good job,” I praise. Arlo loves to be praised and walked through what he is doing. “If you suck a little harder, I will

come. Do you want to taste me?"

He nods, and I move my fingers through his hair as he sucks me deep and hard. His head bobs, and he gets no warning before I give him what he wants. He barely has a chance to take a breath, then Zeland is on his feet and moving, his mouth attacking Arlo's face.

Aspen walks over to me and wraps her arms around my waist. "So, that's new."

"Are you okay with it?"

She smiles up at me. "Of course I am. This might seem weird to others, but it works for us. If you're all happy, I'm happy, but I think we are complete now. I don't think I could handle any more dicks."

"I agree. Now go join them." I gesture to where Zeland and Arlo have moved over to the other side of the fountain, and Zeland is chasing Arlo. *"I'll join you in a minute."*

She walks over to them and helps Arlo gang up on Zeland.

If you told me a year ago that I would believe in love, I would have laughed in your face. If you told me I would let three people into my heart, I probably would have made your life a living hell. Yet I stand here on the tenth hole, watching the man I love chase the ones I'm falling for, and I know love doesn't always fit in the neat little boxes people try to force it into. It's messy, chaotic, and sometimes it wears a mask until you're brave enough to look beneath it. But this? This works for us.

The timber of Arlo's laughs as he runs, the fire in Aspen's eyes as she looks back over her shoulder, and the way Zeland reaches for her hand so they don't lose each other in the dark—it all fits. Not perfectly, but it's real. It's how our love looks.

And I'm not letting it go, even if it scares the shit out of me.

Want to read a Bonus Scene and see what Ridge was thinking the first time Aspen and Zeland were together?

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JAYE'S ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jaye is an Australian author based in Queensland. Her passion for reading blossomed later in life after her sister convinced her to read the *Twilight* saga, sparking a lifelong love of books. For Jaye, reading is an escape from reality—a moment of relaxation and reprieve from life's demands.

Now a full-time writer, Jaye channels her creativity into crafting stories that captivate and inspire. Balancing her dedication to writing with the hustle and bustle of family life, she finds joy in bringing her ideas to life and sharing them with readers worldwide.

A proud mother of six and grandmother of two, Jaye cherishes the joys of having a large family. When she's not immersed in writing, she can be found refereeing lively family antics or playing the role of "mum taxi," driving her children to work and sporting events.

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