

THE CROWS

BOOK ONE



IN
DARKNESS
WE
Claim

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMALUNA

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EMMA LUNA

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BLURB

At Shadowmere University, power is everything—and weakness is fatal.

Lawson Radley is a Crow Pledge of the Obsidian Order, the secret society that rules the world from the shadows. He's ruthless, focused, and destined for greatness—until *she* unravels him.

Harper Westmore was supposed to marry his rival. She's remained pure and innocent to be the perfect Order Wife. But when her family's fall from grace shatters her status, Lawson sees an opportunity—and he takes it.

She can be his. His Prize. His obsession.

If she agrees to submit.

If she offers herself willingly.

If she trusts the one man who could destroy her.

But love was never supposed to be part of the game. And the deeper they fall, the closer they come to losing everything.

AUTHOR NOTE

In *Darkness We Claim* is book one of the Crows trilogy, part of the Obsidian Order series—where secrets reign, power corrupts, and passion ruins. The trilogy follows one couple, so the first two books will end on cliffhangers, and you'll need to read them all in order to get to the HEA.

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AUTHOR NOTE



Welcome to Shadowmere University!

I am so excited to dive into this brand-new world with you, and introduce the unforgiving, high-stakes universe of the Obsidian Order—a secret society that rules from the shadows.

When Pledges enrol at Shadowmere, they are sorted into one of four powerful Houses: Crowhurst House (The Crows), Hawksmoor House (The Hawks), Eaglemont House (The Eagles), and Falconridge House (The Falcons). The Obsidian Order universe consists of four distinct trilogies—one for each House.

Each trilogy follows a third-year Pledge as he claims his Prize, and explores how they navigate their intense year of total submission.

Please note - the first two books in the trilogy will end on a cliffhanger. You will need to read all three books to reach each couple's guaranteed, hard-earned Happily Ever After.

Emma Luna is a British author, and the Obsidian Order Series is set in England. Therefore, UK English spelling, grammar, and phrases have been used. If you find any errors, please don't hesitate to email:

emmalunaauthor@gmail.com

If you want to be the first to receive up to date information and giveaways, you can join my mailing list here:

<https://www.emmalunaauthor.com>

I hope you enjoy this dark new world, and I would love to hear your thoughts as you read. Tag me on social media, share your favourite quotes, and tell me which House and character you're falling for. If you can also leave a review on Amazon, that would be so appreciated too.

Thank you so much for stepping into the darkness with me. Turn the page, take your oath, and enjoy Lawson and Harper's story!

Love, Em xx

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CONTENT WARNING

In *Darkness We Claim* is only intended for mature readers, and features scenes that may be triggering for some people. This list features the main triggers in the book, but is not exhaustive.

So, if you are worried the book may contain a trigger not listed, please reach out to me. I will respond quickly, and in the strictest of confidences, letting you know if your trigger features in the book or not. Please don't worry about getting in contact with me. Your mental health is important to me, and I don't ever want anyone to be triggered reading my books!

Please note - this list is not extensive, and **may contain spoilers**.

TRIGGERS INCLUDE:

- Violence
- Torture
- Murder
- Kidnapping
- Bullying
- Drugging
- Forced Tattoo
- Mentions of Sexual Assault/Abuse (Not by MMC)
- Skinning
- Knife Use/Play
- Rope Play
- BDSM Used As A Punishment

Primal Play
Breath Play - Hand Necklace
Somnophilia
Blood
Humiliation/Degradation

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PLAYLIST



Find the playlist here:

<https://bit.ly/Crows1-Playlist>

You Get Me So High - The Neighbourhood
Slow Hands - Niall Horan
This Is Me Trying - Taylor Swift
Bad At Love - Halsey
Forever After All - Luke Combs
Body Like A Back Road - Sam Hunt
Love Me Like You Do - Ellie Goulding
Of All These Yesterdays - Trivium
Iris - The Goo Goo Dolls
Ordinary - Alex Warren
Chokehold - Sleep Token
Numb - Linkin Park feat. Jay-Z
Hurricane - Luke Combs
The Monster - Eminem and Rihanna
Demons - Imagine Dragons
Centuries - Fall Out Boy
Fight Song - Rachel Platten
I Hate Love Songs - Kelsea Ballerini
The Only Exception - Paramore
Follow You Home - Nickelback
I Was Made For Lovin' You - YUNGBLUD
Bring Me To Life - Evanescence

Raw - Playful Devotion
I'm A Mess - Avril Lavigne feat. YUNGBLUD
I Fell In Love With The Devil - Avril Lavigne
Psycho, Baby - Shadow Beloved
All I Saw Was You - Johnny Huynh
Let The World Burn - Chris Grey

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DEDICATION

“Everything I have, I gift to you.”
“Everything you give, I claim as mine.”

Dear Reader,
Always remember, your love is a precious gift.
Only give it to someone who is worthy of claiming it.

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PROLOGUE

Lawson

FIRST YEAR AT SHADOWMERE UNIVERSITY

“Welcome to Shadowmere University.”
As the Chancellor of Shadowmere, Vernon Calderbank, continues on with his speech, I look around at the Grand Hall where the Sorting Ceremony is being held.

Located on the outskirts of the Shadowmere campus, the Black Chapel conceals the Grand Hall within its walls. Most of the students on campus see an old chapel that should probably have been knocked down years ago, and they avoid it, since it offers nothing exciting. In reality, the gothic building is home to the Obsidian Order.

Its vaulted ceilings, marble walls, carved obsidian pillars, and decorative stained glass windows show off the opulence associated with a secret society that rules from within the shadows.

Most people will have never even heard the name, or be aware that the Order is everywhere, even within the highest levels of our government—just the way the Order prefers it.

Four different coloured banners hang from the ceiling in the large, church-like room, each representing the Houses you can be sorted into—the Crows, the Hawks, the Falcons, and the Eagles. Each House favours a unique skill set, so the Obsidian Council will place you in the one they believe will bring out your true potential.

Chancellor Calderbank is standing at the far end of the Hall, on a wide black marble dais, bathed in a rainbow of colours from the stained-glass

window behind him. He's raised slightly above the crowd of people who are sitting before him in pews, soaking up every word that passes his lips.

He's cloaked in the full-length ceremonial black robes that all Order members wear on occasions like this, with the silver insignia of the Obsidian Order embroidered on the left side of his chest. Each member is wearing a decorative mask to hide their identity, with the colour signifying their hierarchy within the Order—silver being the most common.

The Hall is silent except for the shuffling feet of the men standing beside me, each with our heads bowed as a mark of respect. We're all first-years, standing in front of the dais, with the pews at our back, waiting to discover our House assignment.

Chancellor Calderbeck clears his throat before projecting loudly enough for all to hear. "You stand here on the threshold of greatness. Shadowmere University is not merely an institution; it is a crucible. It is where the exceptional are forged into the unbreakable—where the worthy are shaped into the powerful. And for a chosen few, it is the first step towards becoming a member of the Obsidian Order."

The silence is so thick, you could hear a pin drop. My breath hitches in my throat, a silent plea to the universe to hold still. The air feels heavy, charged with anticipation, and I daren't even exhale, fearing the softest puff of air will shatter the fragile perfection of the moment.

Even though my father told me what to expect from the Sorting Ceremony, nothing prepares you for the weight of expectation that appears on your shoulders the minute you're standing at the front of the Hall.

The Obsidian Order is an elite secret society that breeds the leaders of the future, though you may never know it as they rule from the shadows. Becoming a member is an honour that is earned, and only the strongest will survive their three years at Shadowmere.

I was raised knowing this was my future. My family has been part of the Obsidian Order for generations, and they drilled into me from a young age that I'm to follow in their footsteps—whether I want to or not.

Most of the men standing beside me come from Legacy families, invited to Pledge because our fathers once stood in the exact same place. But some have earned their invitation. It's rare, but if someone displays the traits needed to become an Order member, the Council can extend them an invite to Pledge. But their journey to prove themselves will be so much harder.

“For some, the three years you spend at Shadowmere will be the best of your life. If you pass all of your assignments, you will graduate and be inducted into the Order—guaranteeing you a lifetime of influence, wealth, and power beyond your wildest imagination. But the path will be fraught with danger and challenges, and only the strongest will survive. If you fail even one assignment, you will be forced to leave.”

Some of the guys next to me start to mumble to each other, no doubt wondering if they really mean it when they say we’ll be kicked out for just one failure. They don’t realise that is the best possible outcome.

When you graduate and become a full member, there’s no way out. If you fail an assignment, you die. Once you’re in the Obsidian Order, they have you in their grasp for life.

“In a moment, each of you will be assigned to a House. Your Head of House will be responsible for training you, issuing you with assignments, and assessing your competency. Everything will be a competition, and we will rank you to see which of you is elite enough to join us.

“The ultimate goal is for you to receive your House ring. It is a symbol for all to see, letting everyone know you are an Order Pledge. But remember, you will not receive your ring, or become an official Pledge, until you’ve completed your first assignment—which you’ll have two weeks to do.

“If you want to be worthy of the ring, you’ll have to bleed for it.” As the words hang heavily in the air, Chancellor Calderback shuffles over to the large throne-like chair at the back of the dais and takes a seat. Once his arse is firmly planted on the chair, I can finally breathe normally.

Before I can relax too much, Alexander Chance, Head of Crowhurst House, steps to the front of the dais, and I pull my shoulders back to stand taller. Every generation of my family has been assigned to Crowhurst House, and I’m fully expecting to become a Crow.

The iridescent purple banner hanging above Xander’s head looks almost regal, with a black crow sitting proudly in the centre, surrounded by gold peonies. He nods towards it as a show of respect before turning to address the group of young men standing at the front of the Hall, waiting patiently to find out their assigned Houses.

Xander is in his early thirties, and even amongst us Pledges, his name is legendary. He was once one of the most deadly Pledges, not only graduating as High Crow, he also had one of the highest kill rates of any

graduate. He rose through the Order ranks with force and determination, but rather than taking on a high-ranking role like everyone expected, he requested to be Head of the Crows, wanting to train the next generation.

There have always been whispers that something happened with his Prize, and it set him on a path of destruction, but whether that's just rumour, I don't know.

As he stares down each Pledge, it's easy to see why people think he's cold and calculating. His face is unreadable, all hard angles and tight lines. This just makes his dark, unruly hair seem out of place, as I'd expect it to be styled perfectly, like the rest of him.

When his cold blue eyes flick to me, I don't look away. Instead, I hold my head high and let him see he doesn't intimidate me. There's a flicker of something in his eyes, but it's gone before I can get a read on it. He takes a small step closer, and I pull in a quick breath, ignoring how my heart races with excitement.

Xander is only a couple of inches taller than me at six-foot-five, but with him standing on the dais, it gives him a height advantage that he's happily using over us Pledges. It's a pretty standard intimidation tactic, but it won't work on me.

When he finally looks away, I still don't allow myself to relax, as he clears his throat before addressing us. "I'm Xander Chance, Head of Crowhurst House, and to Pledge with the Crows is a great honour. We only take the clever, the cunning, the ones who see the entire board before any of the pieces are moved.

"A Crow must be intelligent enough to calculate, manipulative enough to control the game, and unpredictable enough to keep every rival guessing. Control is essential, as failure is not an option.

"*'In Darkness, We Control'*—this is the motto we live by, and we only accept Pledges who can take the shadows and own them. If I call your name, you will be given the chance to prove yourself. If you want to become a Crow, you will need to earn it."

As he says the motto I grew up memorising, there's a strange sense of pride that makes me puff out my chest. Although I looked into the other three Houses, there was no doubt in my mind that I'd be best placed in the Crows, and not just because it's my family's legacy. I am patient, cunning, and not afraid of playing the long game if it means getting what I want.

I don't know why I expected my name to be called first, but when it isn't, a strange sense of anxiety sets in, and I shuffle from one foot to the other. I have to force myself to hold still as the first guy steps forward to take an envelope from Xander.

He's handing out our assignments, as every Pledge is given something different. We have to complete it on our own, and once we've provided the proof they require, it'll cement our position within our House. We'll earn our first ranking, setting the foundation for the rest of our time at Shadowmere.

Xander calls the next name, "Bram DeWitt."

My best friend, with floppy brown hair, which seems to almost curl at the ends, practically bounces onto the stage. He's got a cocky grin on his face as he takes the envelope from Xander, before winking at him like he's got a death wish. The movement is more obvious because the silver piercing through his eyebrow glints in the candlelight.

When he turns back to face us, holding the envelope high in the air, it shows off the tattoos covering his entire arm. I've known Bram since we started high school together, and he's not just my friend; he's like a brother to me. He's the only person in this world that I trust, and he feels the same about me.

It's clear to everyone that Bram's a rebel, but despite his seemingly carefree attitude, he's more than earned his place here, and it's got nothing to do with his family name or Legacy status.

I'm pulled away from looking at the newest Crow when Xander calls, "Ryan Sheenan."

This guy is the total opposite of Bram, and he walks up to Xander like he's got a stick up his arse. Not a single strand of his dirty-blond hair is out of place, and he's wearing so much gel that it fucking shines. I can see the collar of his no-doubt perfectly pressed white shirt sticking out from underneath his Obsidian robes, and it doesn't take a genius to work out that this guy is from a Legacy family, too. But unlike me, he clearly embraces the stuck-up behaviour that I can't get far enough away from.

Two more names are called, and the certainty I had at the start of the ceremony has now dwindled, and fear is setting in. I've expected to be a Crow my whole life. Fuck knows what my father will say if I'm not.

The Council assesses all the potential Pledges and assigns them to the House they think suits them best, and it's normally something my father has

a say in. Unfortunately, his relationship to me prevented him from participating in this year's sorting—much to his annoyance.

As the last guy walks off the dais, a deafening silence fills the room as we all wait to see if Xander is going to announce another Pledge, or hand over to the Head of Hawksmoor House. He shuffles from one foot to the other, his cold eyes looking out over the crowd, before he once again projects his voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Our final Crow Pledge will be...Lawson Radley."

As soon as I hear my name, I breathe a sigh of relief. I hold my head high as I walk towards Xander, exuding the confidence I didn't quite feel a moment ago.

With each step I take, I'm moving one step closer to the future I've been working towards my whole life. It starts with my initiation into the Crows, where I'll graduate as High Crow. Then I'll become the youngest ever member of the Obsidian Council, cementing my position of power for the rest of my life.

It may seem like a big dream, but once I set my sights on something, I always get what I want, and this will be no exception.



CHAPTER ONE

Lawson

FIRST YEAR AT SHADOWMERE UNIVERSITY

As I slice the blade across my target's throat, his blood spurts over my black glove-covered hand, and I breathe a sigh of relief. While he gurgles and gasps his last breath, I look at the enormous clock on the wall, smiling when I see I still have just over an hour left. It will be cutting it fine to get back in time, but I have no doubt it's achievable.

Whilst this man isn't the first I've killed, he is my first assignment for the Obsidian Order, and once I submit the required evidence, I will have passed my initiation into the Crows. I was never worried about completing my task. It was easy enough to get into his house without detection and end his life.

I don't know who the man is, or why the Order has made him a target—what has he done that warrants ending his life? Honestly, I don't care enough to ask.

As his body slumps in the seat, all signs of life fading away, I question for a fraction of a second whether I should care. I just ended this man's life, yet I feel nothing. He could be someone's husband, father, son... But that's not my problem. He's just a job to me, and I know that makes me seem heartless, but if I allow my feelings to get involved, I'd never be able to do what's required of me.

This life is all I've ever known. The first thing my family taught me is that you must follow Order instructions without question. They give you a job; you complete it without hesitation. Because, at the end of the day, if

you fail the Order, it will be your name that's being handed to some poor Pledge, and your death will be their initiation.

It's kill or be killed, and I know which fucking side I'd prefer to be on.

Since I was never given the opportunity to choose what sort of life I'd want for myself, I decided early on that if I have to be part of the Obsidian Order, I wasn't going to be just any old replaceable soldier; I was going to rule.

I want to become the youngest ever member of the Obsidian Council—the group of men that run the Order—but that's not a simple task.

The Order nominates and elects Council members based on their performance, and their position within the society. That my father is a member means nothing; I will need to earn my place, just like he did. I'll have to do as I'm told, get my hands dirty, and prove I'm the best man for the job—and that starts now as a Crow Pledge.

Once I've downloaded the footage from the man's security system, and wiped it clean, I gather up anything I brought with me, and leave the way I came. I've left behind nothing that would incriminate me, but even if I had, his death will be investigated by Order members, and the case will be closed by this time tomorrow.

There are Obsidian Order members everywhere, including within law enforcement, and they will have been made aware that this is a sanctioned kill, so it won't be investigated properly. We may not know if the person standing next to us is a fellow Order member, but there will always be someone watching our back if needed.

I walk down the long drive, approaching my Honda Blackbird motorcycle parked at the roadside. After removing my baseball cap, I place it in my bag, which I secure onto my back, before throwing my leg over the sleek chrome body, settling into the seat that by now feels like an extension of me.

As soon as my helmet is secure, I turn the bike on, smiling as it rumbles to life beneath me. I take off in a flash, not even bothering to look at what speed I'm doing. The Blackbird is fast, which is part of the reason I bought it in the first place, so I'd be doing it a disservice if I didn't give it all the throttle I can.

I arrive back at Crowhurst House in next to no time, coasting my bike into the garage off to the side. I have to weave around several abandoned cars, as the annual Crow's Welcome Party is already in full swing.

To most of the students at Shadowmere University, the Crows, alongside the Eagles, the Hawks, and the Falcons, are nothing more than the English versions of a Frat House. And this is nothing more than a wild part our House throws every year, a way to show off the new Pledges.

Whilst they don't know about the Order, we make it clear to them that any House Pledge is untouchable. We reign as the Gods on campus, and we require respect at all times. Our popularity, and the elite reputation we've built over the years, is enough to create intrigue and fear.

As I stride into the large manor house that's home to all the Crows, I run my fingers through my dark, messy hair before sliding my baseball cap on backwards. The old wooden floorboards creak beneath my feet as I dodge the barely-dressed partygoers who seem to fill every available space.

The bass of the loud music vibrates through me with each step I take, but thankfully, it gets quieter as I approach my destination. The DJ will have set up outside, so the deeper into the house I get, the fainter the music is. Given how many people are in attendance, the extensive garden area that backs onto Shadowmere Woods is the best place to house a dancefloor big enough for everyone.

I push open the dining room door, unsurprised to find it is also full of people, though they are gathered for a different reason. As I expected, every Crow Pledge from this year, and a few from other years, are hovering around the ranking board on the wall.

The wooden plaque is one of three that take up most of the wall. It's titled *First Year Crow Pledges*—whilst the other two are for the second and final year Pledges—and has rows of slats with some gold plaques already in place.

This is how the Order keeps track of us, how it ranks us. Every Pledge who passes initiation will have their name on this board, and whether you're at the top or the bottom depends on how well you completed your assignment.

Every job we do is graded, and we are continuously being assessed. Being at the very top means you're the High Crow, which, of course, is where everyone wants to be. If you hold that spot at the end of your third year, it pretty much guarantees you your chosen position when you join the Order after graduation.

If your name isn't on the board at all, you have failed your assignment, and you'll never be a Crow. This is the only time you'll be able to fail and

leave without issue. Once your name is on the board, the only way it comes off is if you die.

I look over at the enormous clock on the wall; the ticking of each second seems to ring loud as we all watch the deadline quickly approach. We had two weeks to complete our assignment to be inducted into the Crows, and the deadline ends in exactly four minutes.

Fuck, I wasn't kidding when I said I was cutting it fine! Still, four minutes is more than enough time to get a drink, I think to myself as I make my way over to the cooler sitting on the extended dining room table.

I pull out a bottle of beer, pop the lid, and lean against the opposite wall as I take a sip of the annoyingly lukewarm drink.

More people filter into the room, eager to see what the results will be when the deadline hits. Most don't even notice I'm there, and I can hear them muttering that the famous Radley heir hasn't made the cut, as my name isn't on the board. I keep my thoughts to myself as I continue sipping my drink.

The door swings open again, and I can't help the scowl that spreads across my face when Ryan fucking Sheehan strides into the room. His dirty-blond hair, as always, is perfectly styled, and he looks exactly like the stuck-up rich kid he is. He wears cream trousers that are expertly pressed, and his light-blue polo shirt probably cost more than most people earn in a month.

Without even glancing around, he walks straight over to the rankings, and with a big grin on his face, he quickly points out that his name is in the top spot. I clutch my drink so tightly I'm worried the glass might shatter, and I have to remind myself that this is all part of my plan. I'm playing the long game, and the look on his face will be worth it in the end. This smug expression is only temporary.

"Harper! Harper, get in here," Ryan yells towards the door, loud enough to pierce my eardrums and make me want to stab him even more.

I've only known him for two weeks, and my sheer fucking hatred for him grows every time he even breathes near me—he's just that bloody annoying.

The door swings open, and for just a fraction of a second, my body tenses. The beer bottle stops only a centimetre from my lips, and without meaning to, everything just seems to move in slow motion the moment my eyes land on her.

I've never seen the girl before, but as she makes her way over to Ryan, it's clear she's the Harper he was calling for. She's possibly the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and that's not a compliment I hand out lightly.

She's at least a foot shorter than me, making her about five-foot-two, and the flowery summer dress she's wearing seems to cling to her gorgeous curves—which she has in all the right places.

As she strides into the room, her long, strawberry-blonde curls flow behind her, trailing all the way down her back. Although her milky skin is pale, even from here I can see the splattering of freckles that glitter her nose and cheeks.

Her plump pink lips are turned up into a smile, and anger ripples through my veins like lava that Ryan is the recipient. But when she does a quick glance around the room, and her gaze lands on me, I freeze, as does my heartbeat and my breathing.

Her piercing blue eyes meet mine, and at first, I think she's just going to continue scanning the room, barely giving me a look, but she doesn't. Her gaze locks with mine, and it feels like everything around us melts away until we're the only two people left.

Blush spreads over her cheeks, as if she's embarrassed to be caught staring at me, but she doesn't look away. After what feels like ages, she gives me the sweetest little shy smile before turning her attention back to Ryan, shattering the weird bubble that seemed to have formed around us.

I have to shake myself off, wondering what the hell just happened. I'm not a fucking monk. I've seen pretty girls before, but I've never responded to one like that. Fuck, even when I was a teenager, who'd just discovered the joys of getting his dick wet, and every girl with a pair of tits was hot, I never felt like that.

As Ryan possessively throws his arm over Harper's shoulders, it does nothing to quell my rage. I decide I only feel this way because of how much I hate Ryan—that douchebag doesn't deserve a girl as gorgeous as Harper, and the way he behaves around her only confirms it.

Watching them for a couple of minutes is long enough to know she's too fucking good for him. He wears her on his arm like a bloody trophy, and despite him being the one to call her in here, he's not even spoken to her yet. He's talking to everyone else in the room, and she's just standing by his side, looking like an accessory.

Her gaze keeps flicking to the floor as she bites on her pretty, plump lower lip, as if she's trying to stop herself from speaking. My hands ball into fists as I watch the beautiful girl fade into the background as though she isn't even here.

I choose to remain in the shadows, watching and waiting until it's the right time to make myself known, whereas Harper is being purposefully pushed off to the side. I might not know anything about her, but I'm fucking certain a girl like Harper should never be hidden away.

As I shuffle from one foot to the other, trying to dispel the nervous energy that's making me want to stab someone, I must move just enough to draw attention my way, as Ryan's gaze lands on me. His eyes widen and almost sparkle as a giant shit-eating grin spreads across his face.

"Well, well, if it isn't the famous Lawson Radley. Did you really come all the way here, just so that we could watch your arse get kicked out?" Ryan gloats, taking a step towards me, pulling Harper with him.

I keep my face neutral, making sure he can see I'm not affected by his words. Instead of replying to him, I take a lazy swig of my drink, loving the way his smile drops into a frown at my disinterest.

Ryan turns slightly and points at the board. "Can you see the name on the top spot? Ryan Sheehan—me. I'm High Crow after our initiation. Where is your name? I thought you said that with your Legacy and skills, there would be no competition...you'd easily be taking the top spot. But I don't see your name anywhere."

The urge to argue with him grows, but patience is a skill that any good Crow has, and I'm waiting for my moment. I don't have to wait long as the clock strikes the hour and the door to the dining room slams open again. Xander Chance, Head of Crowhurst House, strides in, aiming straight for the ranking board.

As the crowd gathers around him, I stay where I am, lazily leaning against the wall. I can see everything from here, including the gorgeous girl who keeps sneaking glances at me out of the corner of her eye when she thinks Ryan isn't looking.

Her arse is fucking perfect, I think to myself, before Xander interrupts my thoughts.

"Crows, time is up. The initiation period has ended. If your name isn't on the board, you have not made the cut. You have thirty minutes to get your shit out of this house and off university grounds. If I see your face

again after the thirty minutes are up, I will kill you,” Xander announces loudly, his tone turning deadly at the end.

Ryan turns to stare at me, an evil smirk on his face as he wiggles his eyebrows almost comically. But before he can say anything, Xander continues.

“Though I have a last-minute adjustment that needs to be made.”

Starting with the name at the bottom of the ranking, Xander slides it out and moves it to the empty slot below. He then repeats that with all the names on the list, until he gets to Ryan’s at the very top. As he slides Ryan’s name out of the top spot, moving it to the row below, Ryan’s face twists with anger.

“What the fuck?!” he snaps, but Xander ignores him.

He pulls a new plaque out of his pocket and slides it into the space at the top, and as soon as everyone reads the name that’s written in gold, all eyes turn to me.

Lawson Radley—my name now sits in the High Crow Pledge position, and if I have my way, that’s exactly where it will stay for the next three years.

As Ryan glares at me, anger twisting his pretty boy features, I can’t contain my smug, cocky grin. I hold up the pointer finger on my right hand, letting him see the Crow ring that now proudly sits there, glistening under the lights. His gaze flickers between the plaque and my ring, before turning his attention to Xander.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? You can’t fucking do that. The deadline has passed,” he snaps.

Xander takes a threatening step towards Ryan, who has the good sense to move back, as Xander’s deadly gaze makes it clear he won’t be spoken to in that way by a Pledge.

“As Head of Crowhurst House, I can do whatever the fuck I want, and you’ll do well to remember your place, Mr Sheehan, or I can take the time to remind you, if you’d like?

“As it is, Mr Radley submitted his evidence to me half an hour ago, which was within the deadline, albeit a little last minute.

“His performance was graded the same way everyone else’s was, and I can assure you, he earned his place at the top. If that bothers you, I suggest you work harder in the future, but my decision is final, and you won’t ever question it again. Do I make myself clear?”

The tone Xander uses makes it incredibly clear there's no room for arguments, and the temperature seems to drop from the icy glare he's giving Ryan.

"Yes, sir," Ryan mutters through gritted teeth, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment.

Xander doesn't even acknowledge his response; he simply turns on his heel and strides out the door, not sparing any of us a second glance. He's not here to be our friend. He's here to push us to be the best Crows we can be, and there won't be any paternal-style bonding involved.

As the door slams closed behind him, that seems to pull Ryan from the submissive silence he slipped into, and his face twists with anger once more as he turns his attention back to me.

"How the fuck did you do that? You weren't even on the board half an hour ago. How the hell did you beat me?" he snarls, taking a menacing step towards me, dragging Harper along with him.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide with fear, and I want to reassure her I'm not a danger to her, but that would mean showing weakness in front of Ryan, which I can't afford right now. Not when my plan is playing out beautifully.

I purposefully avoid looking at her as I take another sip of my beer, pushing off from the wall I'm leaning against. I take a couple of slow steps until I stop right in front of them, the cocky smirk still on my face.

"I can't help it if I'm better than you. I did what any good Crow should have done...I watched, and I waited," I explain, shrugging my shoulders dismissively.

As Ryan balls his hands into fists, his stance getting progressively more threatening, out of the corner of my eye, I catch my best friend coming to stand beside me.

I'm not at all surprised to find Bram by my side when there's the potential for shit to hit the fan. If there's a fight going down, Bram will be the first to throw himself into it. He's just that type of friend.

I turn to give him a small smile, and a slight head nod is all that's needed between us to confirm we have each other's backs—just like we always have. Ryan's gaze flicks between the two of us, and he has the good sense to back up, clearly not wanting to take us both on.

"Stop talking in fucking riddles. I bet your dad got you the fucking top spot," Ryan spits venomously.

Those were the magic words that he needed to say to spark the fire simmering beneath the surface. I take a menacing step forward, letting him see my rage as I snarl at him.

“My father has nothing to do with this. I earned the fucking top spot. I watched every single one of you complete your kills. I listened to each of you brag about how you undertook your assignments, and the feedback Xander gave you.

“You all gave me more than enough information, so when the time came for me to complete my task, I knew exactly what Xander was looking for. I watched and I waited, and you handed me everything I needed to beat your arse. So you have nobody to blame but your fucking self.”

Everyone in the room falls silent at my words, no doubt berating themselves for handing me my success. It’s only because everyone else is silent that I’m able to hear the quiet word that slips from Harper’s mouth.

“Clever.”

My gaze flicks over to her, and for just a second, she looks almost proud of my plan. Then she realises she spoke the word aloud, and she slams her lips shut as her beautiful blue eyes grow almost comically wide, before she drops her gaze to the floor. I can’t help but smile as her cheeks flush bright-red, emphasising her freckles even more.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Radley. I’m going to fucking destroy you,” Ryan snaps.

Before I can respond, Harper reaches up and places a hand on Ryan’s chest, looking up at him with her lips in a tight line. “Calm down, Ry. This is only your first task, and second place is still great. You have more than enough time to get first.”

Ryan glares at her as he slaps her hand off his chest, before removing his arm from around her shoulders. “Don’t ever tell me what to do. Just shut the fuck up, this doesn’t concern you.”

If I wanted to kill him before, it’s nothing compared to how I feel now. Seeing him treat Harper that way, like she’s nothing, has venom dripping through my veins like acid, sizzling all my nerve endings.

I ball my hands into fists as I pull in a sharp breath, trying to get control of my rage, so I don’t act on instinct. I want nothing more than to pull out my knife and slice off the hand that dared to slap her, but I can’t attack a fellow Crow without just cause.

Besides, Harper shouldn't mean anything to me—she *doesn't* mean anything, and I have to make that clear to anyone who might think differently.

It takes every ounce of willpower to keep my expression neutral, and to ignore the hurt on Harper's face. I want to defend her, but that goes against the image I've built. People think I don't care about anyone, and if I jump to her defence, that will be ruined.

Besides, I'm not exactly sure why the hell I want to protect or defend her. So I draw on the persona I've spent the last two weeks perfecting, and keep the cocky smirk in place as I address Harper for the first time.

"That top spot will always be mine, sweetheart. But if you want to know what it's like to be with the best, I'd be willing to show you."

I deliberately make myself sound sleazy as I throw a wink at her, and it has the desired effect, as she wrinkles her nose at me in disgust.

"I'm Betrothed to Ryan. Why would I throw away my entire future just to become another forgettable notch on your no doubt already crowded bedpost?" Harper replies, cocking her hip with as much sass as can be heard in her voice.

I can't help but smile as my heart pounds in my chest at the way she challenges me, while my stomach sinks on learning she's Betrothed to that fucking bellend.

I shouldn't reply, but I can't help myself. I lean in closer until my breath flutters across her cheeks, and I love the way her breath hitches at my proximity.

My voice is low and husky as I say, "I have a feeling one night with you would be anything but forgettable."

She lets out the smallest gasp, making my cock twitch, and Ryan pushes me backwards, whilst he pulls Harper behind him, shielding her with his body.

"Stay the fuck away from my girlfriend," he shouts.

Harper peeks her head around Ryan's back, her pretty blue eyes wide and curious. Her breaths are coming out in small pants, as if she's as affected by our closeness as I am. That, combined with how much it's winding up Ryan, is enough to spur me on.

"I will...for now," I say, before flicking my gaze over to meet hers once more. Only when her eyes are locked with mine do I continue. "But one day, she'll beg me the way I want her to."

Ryan rushes at me, but Bram is there to pull him back, to stop him from doing something he will regret. As Ryan moves, Harper is exposed once more. Instead of cowering under my comments, she meets my gaze without fear as she scoffs loudly.

“I’d have to desperately crave you if I were ever going to beg, and given how much you disgust me, that will never happen.”

My cock twitches once more, and I can’t help but grin at her. “We’ll see, sweetheart. I’m happy to wait for you.”

As I turn to walk away, I throw a wink at her over my shoulder, trying to ignore the way my heart is racing in a way it never has before. I’ve never responded to a girl the way I do to her, and I’m starting to worry she might be a very dangerous bump in my plans.

Despite being concerned that this beautiful girl might be my undoing, I can’t help but think this is going to be the start of a great three years at Shadowmere University.

CHAPTER TWO

Harper



END OF FIRST YEAR AT SHADOWMERE UNIVERSITY

As soon as I've finished reading the text from Wren, informing me she's sick, I let out a loud groan as I slide my books into my bag before exiting the classroom. I should feel sorry for my best friend, but we both know her sickness is self-inflicted due to the large quantities of alcohol she consumed last night.

Besides, I'm too busy feeling pathetic to worry about Wren. I'm twenty-years old, but I need either my best friend or my boyfriend to walk me across campus to my next class. I mean, it's not like I specifically asked them to walk with me; it's just something they started doing after the Crow's Welcome Party.

It's been nine months since then, and life has not gotten easier for me. Not only do the campus bitches, Tillie Langston and Sienna Ball, go out of their way to make my life hell, but so does Lawson Radley.

I don't really know how it happened, as I'm well-liked by most people at Shadowmere University. My father is a high-ranking Obsidian Order member, and that brings a certain level of respect from any students who are aware of the Order.

For the students on campus who don't know about the Order, they simply see me as a nice, friendly person, and I've had no issues with them in class. Besides, everyone on campus knows Ryan, and our relationship status grants me the same respect they show him.

The only exception being the mean girls and Lawson. Obviously, I know what I did to annoy Lawson, standing up to him the night of the Welcome Party, but I have no idea why Tillie and Sienna dislike me.

Both come from Order families, with Tillie's ranked much higher than Sienna's, yet that doesn't create any loyalty between us. In fact, they seem to think it's more of a competition.

Wren is sure they're jealous that I'm Betrothed to Ryan, as he's an incredibly sought-after Crow Pledge, given that his parents are filthy rich and have a high social standing. When combined with my family name, our Betrothal makes us a formidable couple—not that I think like that.

I don't go around boasting about my family's wealth or status. In fact, if I had a choice, I'd love to swap lives with Wren and see what it's like to live a normal life. She hadn't even heard of the Obsidian Order before meeting me, and I can't even imagine a world where the Order isn't the centre of everything you do.

I've been raised my whole life knowing I'd marry an Obsidian Order member, but to do that, I had rules to follow. My father has been training me to be an Obsidian Wife for as long as I can remember, and I don't think there was ever a time that I dreamt of a different life. This is just how it's always been, no questions asked.

Given that Tillie, and maybe Sienna too, were raised in the same way, you'd think that would give us some sort of bond, but the opposite happened, and now they purposely make my life hell. And if it's not them, it's Lawson.

I pull in a deep breath as I remind myself I only have to get across the courtyard and I'll be at my next lesson. Yes, it will be full of people, but they might not be there. Maybe I can use the people as a distraction, keep my head down and slip into the crowd unnoticed.

Come on, Harper. You can do this, I tell myself, though I'm not entirely sure I feel as confident as my brain suggests.

After pulling my bag over my shoulder, I take another deep breath to steel my nerves before putting one foot in front of the other, keeping my head down. If I keep my eyes on the ground, they might not see me.

I count each step, moving with as much speed as I can without drawing unnecessary attention to myself. I hope that by looking down and not attracting attention, no one will speak to me, because I cannot afford any delays.

I've made this journey so many times before that my heart races when I see the shadow of the building ahead of me, letting me know I've almost reached my destination. Just a few more steps, and I will arrive without incident.

I should have known even thinking that would be enough to tempt fate, because sure enough, I've barely finished the thought when the obnoxiously loud clicking of high heels reverberates through me as the sound gets closer. Just as a pair of designer pink heels appears in my line of sight, a shoulder knocks into me hard enough to throw me off balance, and I fall to the ground with a yelp.

I crash down hard enough to send a cascade of pain over my arse and up my back as I land on the concrete courtyard. My bag slips from my shoulder, and as it hits the ground with a thud, the contents spill out around me.

A pair of black shiny heels joins the pink ones, consuming my vision, as the weight of the stares from everyone in the courtyard presses down on me. Where before it was a rush of movement and conversation, the noise has now dulled, and everyone has either stopped or are moving slower as they watch this scenario unfold.

"Well, well...if it isn't goody-two-shoes Harper. What are you doing down there? I thought good girls like you didn't get on your knees," Tillie taunts, pressing the tip of her pink shoe against my fingers.

I bite my lip to hold back a squeal as I pull my hand from beneath her shoe, steeling my nerves enough to look up at the two girls who seem to get off on making my life miserable.

Tillie is the shorter of the two, and has a sleek black bob that stops just above her shoulders. The pink mini-skirt and vest top match her shoes, and I don't need to see the labels to know they're designer, as that's all she wears.

Her makeup is heavier than is necessary for a Wednesday morning, particularly since we're on our way to class—or should be. The glitter in her eyeshadow makes her brown eyes glisten, and the bright-red colour on her lips only emphasises the filler that makes them much bigger than they need to be.

Sienna looks equally as fake and perfectly put together, with her bleached-blond hair straightened to the point it sits unmoving down her back. Her pale-green eyes are almost difficult to see, given how much

eyeliner and mascara she has on, and though her lipstick is more of a pale pink, the lip filler that matches Tillie's still stands out.

Both girls look like they're dressed for a night out instead of a mid-week class, but that's what gets them the attention they crave, and why people have stopped to see what they're going to do to me this time.

"I just want to go to class," I tell them, trying to project even the smallest amount of confidence.

"Aww, did you hear that? The little princess wants to go to class. What's the point? When you marry Ryan, you won't need an education to spread your legs and push out his heir," Sienna spits, glaring at me with such hatred that I just can't understand.

I don't bother arguing with her, as she's right. When I marry Ryan, I won't be able to have a job, or even a hobby. My role will consist of pleasing my husband in any way he desires, before giving birth to as many heirs as he needs me to have.

Knowing that's going to be my future, but also theirs, makes it less of a criticism than they imagine. "Won't that be expected of you too...if you ever find a husband?"

Well, I probably shouldn't have poked the mean girls by pointing out that they aren't Betrothed, but I couldn't help myself.

Tillie reaches down and grabs hold of my strawberry-blonde curls, pulling hard enough for my scalp to sting as she yanks my head back until I have no choice but to meet her fierce gaze. She looks furious, and I regret opening my big mouth.

"Who the fuck do you think you are, bitch? I am a Langford, one of the richest families on campus. I haven't selected my husband yet because I don't want to. Daddy wants to take his time finding me the perfect match. Not that it's any of your fucking business," she snarls.

Sienna takes a step closer, popping her hip as she scowls at me. "For your information, I already have a man; we're just waiting for the right time to make it public."

Both girls toss their hair in an impressively synchronised move, as they look down their noses at me. "Okay," I say through gritted teeth, not wanting to make this situation worse. It's news to me that Sienna is dating someone, but I don't care enough to follow her life. "Can I just get up and go to class, please?"

Tillie lets out an evil chuckle that sounds suspiciously like a snort. “You’ll have to beg better than that if you want to be a good whore for Ryan.”

I roll my eyes as I let out a huff. “I have no intention of being Ryan’s whore. Since I am to be his wife, I won’t need to beg.”

“You’ll need to beg him to touch you, as I’m sure his dick doesn’t even twitch looking at you,” Sienna snarls.

I can’t deny their words don’t cut deep. Of course, I’m worried that Ryan doesn’t find me attractive, that I’m too plain and boring to turn him on. But I don’t have a lot of choice in the matter. I was raised to be this way, and I never got a say in it.

When Ryan became my Betrothed, he knew I had to remain a virgin until we’re married. He also knew all the rules imposed on me by my father, including how I had to dress and behave. He knew exactly what he was getting into when he signed the marriage contract, but that doesn’t mean I’m not worried that his eye might stray elsewhere.

I don’t even have the words to form a response, so I just sit there waiting for whatever the girls plan to do next, hoping I can find a way out of this before things get any worse. I feel a shadow descend over me, and for just a fraction of a second, I hope it’s someone coming to my aid, but as soon as my skin tingles, I lose the last bit of optimism I was clinging to.

I don’t even need to look up to know that the person standing over me is Lawson Radley. My skin prickles every time he’s near, and though I choose not to read too much into why my body responds to him being close, I’m certain this isn’t the reprieve I’m hoping for—far from it.

“What’s going on here?” he asks, sounding almost bored.

“We’re just showing this trashy whore where her true place is... kneeling at the feet of people who are better than her,” Tillie announces proudly.

I can’t help the scoff that slips free, and it’s quickly replaced by a yelp when Tillie once again grabs a fistful of my hair and drags my head back until I’m forced to look at him. Lawson wears a bored expression, but there’s a flash of something I can’t quite identify in his dark silver gaze, and he continues to stare at me as the tension between us grows.

“You are not better than me,” I tell Tillie once I manage to drag my gaze away from him long enough to look at her.

Before I have the chance to brace myself, Sienna's perfectly manicured hand makes contact with my cheek, and the sound of the slap reverberates around the courtyard, followed by oohs and ahhs from the spectators.

My cheek stings, and I'm sure it's turning an awful shade of red, but I don't give her the satisfaction of lifting my palm to soothe the pain. I simply keep my gaze on them, biting my lip hard enough to stop any tears that are threatening to fall.

I'm frozen as Sienna pulls her hand back to hit me again, and I close my eyes as I brace for the impact...but it never comes. My eyes fly open to find Lawson grabbing Sienna's arm, glaring at her as his grip becomes tight enough to pull a yelp from Sienna's lips.

"In terms of ranking, she is better than you, so never hit her again," Lawson tells Sienna, dropping her wrist just as quickly.

As he crosses his arms in front of his chest, I can't help but stare at the way his biceps bulge beneath his T-shirt, as it pulls tight over his perfectly defined abs. He's so hot, and I'm kinda glad he's such a terrible person, as he'd be pretty unstoppable if he was a nice guy and gorgeous.

Lawson takes a step closer to me, that cocky smirk of his growing as he catches me ogling him for just a bit too long. "I have to admit, you look good on your knees."

He doesn't even try to hide the innuendo, and I can't help but roll my eyes at his very obvious comment. "I'm sitting on the floor; it's hardly the same," I scoff, waving him away as I reach over to gather the things that have fallen from my bag.

Tillie places her pink heel over my notebook, stopping me in my tracks, and I'm forced to stare at my tormentors once more, wondering what on Earth they get out of this. They've already humiliated me in front of everyone watching; what more do they want?

"You look like you're at the perfect height for what I'm thinking about." Lawson nods towards his crotch, just in case there was any confusion as to what he was talking about—there wasn't!

Tillie reaches over and places her ridiculously long pink nails on Lawson's arm, and he freezes beneath her touch. "Lawson, you can do so much better than this piece of trash." She deliberately makes her voice sound sickly sweet, and it's like nails on a chalkboard.

Lawson shudders, but not from her offer, more out of repulsion. He grabs hold of her hand and pushes her away so forcefully that Tillie

wobbles on her high heels, and Sienna has to reach out to help stabilise her.

“I can have whoever I want.” Although Lawson speaks to Tillie, he fixes his gaze on me, and my heart races when I hear the challenge he aims my way.

I shake my head at him, trying to ignore the way my stomach flips at how he looks at me. “Not everyone,” I point out.

“No, you’re far too sweet to want a bad boy like me, right?” He doesn’t even try to hide the sarcasm in his voice, but I hold my head high as I try to keep my voice from cracking.

“That’s right. I’m Betrothed, which means I’m off-limits.”

Lawson doesn’t respond, but that cocky smirk of his turns wicked, and a shiver runs down my spine. I’m on edge, knowing he’s about to do something, but despite it seeming like everything is happening in slow motion, I’m unable to stop it.

Lawson turns to his best friend, Bram, who I didn’t even realise was standing with him until just now. As he looks to him, out of the corner of my eye, I see Ryan leaning against the wall behind them, watching everything with keen interest. I can tell by his relaxed posture that he’s been there a while, but he’s made no effort to intervene on my behalf.

I’m so busy getting angry over Ryan that I miss what Lawson is doing, but I’m brought back to the moment when something cold hits my head. I let out a yelp as a cold, sticky liquid coats my hair before dripping down my body until I’m completely covered.

I glance up to see Lawson holding a large Sprite bottle over my head, shaking it to make sure every drop lands on me. He then hands the bottle back to his friend with thanks.

Bram shakes his head at Lawson, though he gives him a smile that only confuses me more. “I mean, it’s slightly better than pissing on her. Are you going to pull on her pigtails now, or shall we go?”

Lawson ignores Bram, waving him off as if he didn’t say a word, before turning to scowl at me. “You said you were sweet,” he jokes. “But I prefer my girls dirty...well, now you’re both. Why don’t I show you how much fun you can have being dirty?”

He then has the audacity to wink at me, which only makes the anger sizzling beneath my skin blaze to life. I scowl at him as I push myself off the ground, swiping my dripping wet hair off my face.

“How many times do I have to tell you, I will never want you! You disgust me. Even if you were the last man on Earth, I’d rather die a virgin than let you touch me,” I growl, stepping closer to him, though I doubt it’s as threatening as I’d hoped for.

Lawson lets out a low, maniacal laugh, his silver eyes sparkling as though he likes it when I argue with him. He closes the gap between us, and I freeze when he lifts his hand towards my face. He gently places a strand of soaked hair behind my ear before leaning in.

I hate how a shiver ripples down my spine when he whispers for only me to hear. “I would bet good money on that not being true. I think you secretly want me.”

He takes a step back as my stomach flutters in a way I pointedly have to ignore, since I refuse to admit he might be right. I definitely don’t want him...but there’s something about him that I’m drawn to. No matter how much of an asshole he is, or how awful he is to me, I can’t deny that my body reacts whenever he’s near.

Since I can’t let him know that, I hold my head high and try to make sure he can’t see any of the ways my body reacts to him. “I don’t want you. I will never want you.” Projecting my voice loud enough for everyone to hear, I make my stance very clear, whilst hoping my hormones and body get the message too.

Lawson shakes his head as his wicked smile grows, and it’s clear he isn’t buying a single word. “Keep saying it until you believe it, sweetheart. We both know I always get what I want. One day, very soon, you’ll beg me to show you how much fun you can have being dirty.”

Before I can say a word, Lawson turns on his heel and strides away, as if he didn’t just dump a drink on my head and mess with my emotions. Thankfully, Tillie and Sienna shuffle off behind him, calling his name as they follow like the sheep they are.

Bram smiles as he steps closer to me. I hold my breath as he leans in, his lips hovering beside my ear as he whispers, “Keep putting up a fight, Red. I’m enjoying watching you mess with his head.” He then gives me a cheeky little wink as he turns and walks after his friend, leaving my head spinning.

I glance over to where Ryan was leaning against the wall, only to find it unoccupied. I look around the courtyard, which has emptied quickly as

everyone who was watching just a moment ago has now rushed to their next class.

I spot Ryan's signature gelled dirty-blond hair in the distance beside Sienna and Tillie, and my heart sinks knowing the man I'm supposed to marry just stood by and watched this happen, and didn't even stick around to check on me afterwards.

Though our marriage contract wasn't born from love, I had hoped Ryan would care for me enough to back me and stand up for me in moments like these. I'm more than a little deflated that he didn't.

But as I collect my wet supplies, which somehow didn't manage to avoid the splatter of the drink, and shove them into my soggy bag, what annoys me more is that my thoughts aren't filled with anger over Ryan. In fact, he barely registers at all. Instead, all I can think about is Lawson, and the way my traitorous body responds to him.

This isn't even the worst thing he's done to me this year. On a sliding scale, it's barely a five, and yet, I still can't bring myself to hate him as much as I say I do. There's something about him that calls to a side of me I've kept locked away for a very long time, the part of me that will never see the light of day.

When he talks about me being on my knees, doing dirty things to him, that's the side of me he calls to. The one who cannot think like that, who contradicts the perfect Order Wife I'm destined to become.

So, I push my thoughts about Lawson deep inside, storing them away alongside the girl who will never get to know what freedom tastes like. As I remind myself that I hate Lawson, I keep repeating that I *will* be happy with the life I create with Ryan. I won't think about all the things I'm missing out on, as that won't do me any good at all. Hating Lawson is easy; wanting him to fulfil his promise and free me is what's dangerous.



CHAPTER THREE

Lawson

START OF SECOND YEAR AT SHADOWMERE UNIVERSITY

The rough burlap scrapes against my skin as the bag is yanked from my throbbing head. My eyes sting, trying to adjust to the dim, dusty light filtering through the grimy air. As I try to take in my surroundings, the world swims into a hazy focus, a disorienting blur of muted colours.

As I push to make sense of what's happening to me, a dull ache pulses behind my eyes, with each beat echoing the thrumming in my ears. The air hangs heavy and stale, carrying the faint scent of damp earth and something metallic, while my limbs feel like lead, heavy and unresponsive.

I remember going to bed in Crowhurst House, and then waking with a start to find a sea of Obsidian Order silver masks staring down at me. I can only assume they drugged me and brought me here.

I should have been expecting something like this, having just returned to Shadowmere University to start my second year. Even though we're given assignments to prove ourselves throughout the year, there's always a big task at the start of each new year. It's usually when our numbers drop most significantly.

I've handled every challenge thrown my way with ease; not only earning my High Crow status, but holding on to it for the last year. None of my fellow Crows have even come close to stealing my rank, and they never will. I will pass any challenge thrown my way with flying colours.

A shuffling noise on the other side of the room captures my attention, but the man is standing in front of me by the time my body has followed orders enough to lift my head.

Fuck, everything feels heavy and sluggish, and my reaction times are severely delayed.

A loud noise echoes around the room, and it takes a good couple of seconds for my body to catch up, as my brain registers that the man in front of me just slapped my cheek. The sting heats my face moments later, almost as if it's on a delayed timer.

I look up at the man who slapped me, focusing on the design of the silver mask with gold rims covering his face. It's one I've seen many times before, but I have to dig around in my brain for the name that's just on the tip of my tongue.

"Are you with us?" the deep, stern voice asks.

Xander! Head of Crowhurst House. I'd recognise the voice and mask anywhere, even if it took me longer than I'd like.

I give him a slow nod, which does nothing to help the throbbing in my head, but the increased pain clears my thoughts just enough for me to take stock of my situation.

My knees are screaming at me, and I look down to see I'm kneeling on a concrete floor; the pain suggests I've been in this position for a while. The bindings tying my hands behind my back grate against my wrists, making a strange crackling sound when I try to move them. They must have used zip-ties to secure them in place, and they're pulled tight enough to prevent any movement at all.

The room itself seems quite large, but it's difficult to make out the outer walls as they're doused in shadows. The harsh spotlights overhead blaze with an unnatural, almost searing intensity, bleaching the middle of the room white. It's almost impossible to discern anything beyond the looming figure silhouetted against the glare.

My brain feels sluggish, as if it's operating on a noticeable five-second delay, each new event a struggle to process. My body, I'm sure, lags even further behind, like a thick fog is clinging to my limbs. It doesn't take a genius to work out that the lingering effects of whatever they gave me are still very much present.

"Lawson, are you ready to receive your second-year assignment?" Xander asks, crouching down so he can make eye contact with me through

his ornate silver and gold mask.

“I am.” I try to say the words loud and with confidence, but my voice is shaky from the drugs, and they come out sounding almost wobbly.

Xander reaches up and removes his mask, keeping his stern glare on me, and my eyes flicker all around. I’m struggling to focus on him, but he moves close enough that all I can see is his face, so I have no choice but to concentrate on him.

My eyes lock on his lips as they begin to move, and I fight the fog in my brain to listen to every word he says, knowing they’re important. “We injected you with Midazolam to slow down your reflexes, leaving you in a haze. To prove yourself as a Crow, we need to be sure you’re able to complete your assignments, no matter the challenges or roadblocks in your way.

“You will have three hours to complete the task, and the drug will slowly wear off during that time. Search this room, find the instructions, and then complete the assignment within the allotted time.

“As always, failure is not an option, and you know what happens to Pledges who don’t complete their tasks. But you should also remember that the whole challenge is being watched and assessed. Your performance will earn you a grade that will affect your Crow ranking. Do you understand?”

His lips stop moving, but the words are still slowly filtering through my brain as I try to register the important instructions. It’s like wading through treacle, and my head throbs loudly from the pressure, but I sure as fuck will not let this beat me.

“I understand.” I’m not entirely sure I do, but I don’t let Xander know that.

With a sharp nod of his head, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a flip knife. He extends the blade as he stretches to stand in front of me, before walking out of sight. The sound of plastic being cut hits me before my hands tingle, indicating their freedom. Though it takes a few seconds to convince my arms to move where I want them.

Fuck, when he first said three hours, I thought that was plenty of time, but now I’m not so sure. It might take me an hour to get up off my knees.

Luckily, as if hearing my thoughts, Xander reaches down and hooks his arms under my shoulders to pull me to my feet, keeping his grip firm as I sway where I stand. When he’s sure I’m not going to fall, he lets go of me, taking a step back.

“Your time starts now, Lawson. Good luck.” Xander gives me a slight nod before turning on his heel and striding out of the room, leaving the door open as he goes.

I blink several times as I try to push through the fog and remember what my instructions were. I eventually recall him saying the task instructions are somewhere in this room; I just have to find them.

As I take my first step, my whole body feels as if it doesn’t really belong to me. In my head, I’ve taken several steps, but in reality, I’m still on the first, my legs trembling under the weight of the drug, making me feel so fucking heavy.

I focus on each step until I make it to the side wall, having decided the best way to check the room is to do it methodically, following the outer edges first, before making my way into the middle. Even though my brain is hazy, I’m able to think a bit more clearly with each second that passes, despite it still being a lot of hard work.

I reach the cold stone wall, and use my hand to trace along it as I take tentative steps, trying to look around as much as I can to find my assignment. I try to think outside the box to work out where they might have put it, but it would be difficult on a good day, so it’s nearly impossible with the fucking drugs in my system.

I don’t know how long it takes, but by the time I make it to the third wall, something near the bottom catches my eye. One brick has an obvious crack through it, and one side seems to protrude more than the other.

I crouch down as best I can, slamming my hand on the ground and the other on the wall in a desperate attempt to stabilise myself when I start to wobble. Once I’m sure I’m not going to topple over, I reach for the piece of protruding brick.

It comes out easily, and I let out a triumphant laugh when I see the piece of paper stuffed into the gap behind it. I pull it out and straighten it as I stand back up, leaning my shoulder against the wall to counteract the way the room spins around me from my sudden movement.

I have to blink several times and squint to read the fancy cursive writing, doing it slowly so I’m able to fully take in the task instructions.

*Pledge,
Somewhere in this warehouse is a guilty man.*

*He holds the key to your freedom.
You must deliver his punishment within the timeframe
and escape, or your failure will be the death of you.
Be warned: not all are guilty,
and choosing an innocent man will seal your fate.*

My head swims as I struggle to pick apart the instructions. Through the haze, I think I've figured out that there will be several men imprisoned here, but only one is guilty. Finding him is the key to my freedom, and passing this assignment, but I have no idea how I'll tell the difference between an innocent man and a guilty one.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I move towards the door Xander exited through earlier. I walk as fast as I can, since I'm not entirely sure how much of my three-hour timeframe I've already wasted.

As soon as I step into the corridor, I breathe a sigh of relief that the lighting is fucking normal. It's not so bright that it's burning my eyes, or dark enough that I can't see a fucking thing. Sadly, that relief quickly fades when I see rows of doors on either side that look like cells.

Each door is metal, with a small hole around head height that's large enough for you to see through. You can lift the flap hanging underneath to cover the window. At around waist-height, there is what can only be described as a large letter box, which opens just enough for things—presumably food—to be passed through.

I make my way over to the first cell door and look through the small gap, seeing a man standing on the other side of the small box room, glaring at me. He's wearing grey sweatpants and a jumper, with scruffy white trainers. His hair is greasy, and his unkempt beard is long and patchy, suggesting he may have been here for a while.

There's nothing visible that suggests whether he's innocent or guilty, so I do the obvious thing and ask him. "Why are you here? What crime have you committed?"

He shakes his head slowly, fear sparkling in his eyes as his hands tremble. "I'm not allowed to answer questions. All I can say is: the guilty man holds the key to your freedom."

His words almost perfectly match my instructions, and I'm embarrassed that my foggy brain took so long to make the obvious connection—I need to find a physical key.

Searching each of the cells is a little quicker now I know I'm looking for a man who is in possession of a key, though my movements are still more sluggish than I'd like, and I hate not knowing how much time I've already wasted.

I'm not sure how many cells I've looked in, or how much time has passed, but with each check that's unsuccessful, I become more pissed off. My nerve endings are prickling, as if they're coming back to life after being in a stupidly deep sleep, and my pulse is pounding loud enough to match the throbbing in my head.

Thankfully, the adrenaline coursing through me is helping to push the drugs from my system, and as my limbs become less heavy, I can move quicker. Though it still feels like there's a few seconds lag between my brain and my body, which is why I take longer than I would like to realise this cell is different.

The man inside the small room dresses like all the others in a grey jumper and sweatpants, yet the large key hanging on a chain around his neck makes him noticeably different.

He looks to be in his late forties, with grey strands poking through his short brown hair. There's a small amount of stubble, but nowhere near as much as the other prisoners here, suggesting he's not been here as long. While the other men were thin and gaunt-looking, this man still has a bit of a beer belly, so he obviously hasn't starved recently.

As his gaze locks with mine, the last of the colour drains from his pale face, and his eyes widen with fear. Although he balls his hands into fists and plants his legs firmly in a fighting stance, his whole body trembles. He looks terrified, and even without seeing the key, I'm sure I've got my man.

"You're guilty." I phrase it as a statement, not a question, and when he hangs his head in shame, I have my answer. "Give me the key."

His eyes flick up to meet mine, and I see a spark of life as he quickly shakes his head. "No, I can't. If I still have possession of the key when your time is up, I will have earned my freedom."

I let out a harsh laugh as I glare at the idiot in front of me. "Is that what they told you? They're lying. No matter what it is you're guilty of, the Obsidian Order doesn't just let people go. Even if I fail—which I won't—

they will just send someone else, and they'll keep sending people until you're dead."

Deep down in his soul, he knows what I'm saying is true, but when faced with his own mortality, he's planted firmly in denial. He is quick to tell me I'm wrong, but I don't have time to argue with him. I need to finish this task before I end up a victim of my own theory.

I reach for the door handle, letting out a laugh when I find it unlocked. I was expecting to have to solve a bloody riddle just to get into his cell, and almost didn't bother simply trying the door, but I'm glad I did.

The man takes a hesitant step back, trying to get away from me when I enter his cell, but it's a tiny room, and he has nowhere to go. I keep advancing toward him, but his back is already against the wall behind him, caging him in and giving him no way to escape.

Just as I am thinking this is too easy, he reaches into his sweatpants pocket and pulls out a flip knife, flicking it open and holding it out in front of himself in a clear warning.

I should have bloody known they'd give him a weapon, while I'm drugged and moving at the speed of a fucking snail.

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During previous fights, my quick reaction times and my ability to assess my opponent easily have always given me the upper hand. However, thanks to the drugs coursing through my system, I no longer have those advantages, so I'm going to have to wing it.

I take a threatening step toward the man, letting him know the knife doesn't scare me, though that's not entirely true. If I hadn't been drugged, I wouldn't think twice about getting the knife off him and ending his life with it, but it will not be that easy this time.

As predicted, the man freaks out when I get too close, and he lunges for me, his blade stretched out in front of him. My head is screaming at me to move out of the way, but the fucking haze means I take longer than I'd like,

and I feel the sting of his knife when it slices through my arm as he stumbles past me.

I hiss loudly as blood trickles from the wound, pain registering a few seconds later, but I don't have time to even think because he's turning, getting ready to lunge at me again. He doesn't have any proper fighting skills or training from what I can tell, but with my reaction times, he doesn't need them.

I'm able to slide out of the way at the last second, letting out a relieved sigh when he doesn't make contact again, though this is short-lived when he punches me in the head from behind with his free hand. I spin to face him, anger coursing through my veins as I glare at my opponent, who looks almost surprised by what he just did.

"Motherfucker," I growl.

He takes a frightened step back, before seeming to gather more courage and running at me again with his knife. This time the blade grazes my ribs, and I curse myself for leaving my side open to attack. I had lifted my arm to return the favour, punching him in the face at the same time his knife sliced through my skin.

As pain ripples through me, I experience a moment of clarity, as the adrenaline pushes past the effects of the drugs. My head is clear enough to form a plan, as I realise I'm never going to win if I fight the way I always do. I don't have the reaction times to beat him, but I'm still the best fucking Crow Pledge for a reason.

I study the man in front of me, and that's when it hits me: I can preempt his actions. Rather than reacting to what he does, I can monitor his movements and predict what he's going to do next. He's not a fighter, so he doesn't have a set strategy, making this a little harder, but not impossible.

He's moving quickly, not stopping to think about what he's going to do next, and that's working to his advantage as I'm slower than him, but now I can outsmart him, as long as my head remains clear.

Even though it hurts like a bitch, I press my finger against the cut on my ribs, hissing when the pain shoots through me. A sick smile spreads across my face when a rush of adrenaline helps keep my thoughts clear.

As the man charges at me, instead of trying to get out of his way, I raise my hands to fight him. His blade slices one of my palms, but my other hand lands a firm punch to his nose. The sickening sound of bones crunching echoes around us as blood gushes over his face.

He screams loudly, lifting his free hand to his nose to stem the bleeding, whilst keeping his knife outstretched in warning. But the pain and bleeding have him distracted, and I reach for the knife in an attempt to disarm him.

Unfortunately, he catches sight of me at the last minute, and uses my slow speed against me. Instead of dropping his hand, so I'm not able to grab the weapon, he lunges forward, stabbing it into my shoulder, before ripping it out just as quickly.

A scream leaves my lips as pain shoots through my arm, causing my fingers to tingle as blood oozes down my arm and chest. When I try to move my arm, the pain worsens, and I have no choice but to hold it by my side, taking it completely out of use.

Even with only one hand, I'm better than most guys, and the throbbing pain in my arm is providing me with a clear enough head to read his movements. When he lunges at me again, I let him hit me in the face as I swoop my hand underneath his outstretched arm and grab the knife.

As soon as I have hold of the handle, it doesn't take much to tug it out of his grasp, and I watch the fear seep into his wide eyes as he takes a step back from me, holding his hands out in surrender.

I don't hesitate, since I don't know how much time I have left on the clock. With one swift movement, I slice the blade over his throat, slitting his flesh open enough for blood to pour from the wound.

He makes panicked gurgling noises as he tries to breathe, his hand flying to his neck to stem the bleeding, but we both know it's too late. As he sways from one foot to the other, I quickly reach out and grab the key that's hanging around his neck, holding it tight as he drops to the floor.

I watch as he takes his last gargled breath; the light leaving his eyes, though they remain open as death takes him. I step over the body as though it's nothing but an inconvenience, though it's not the drugs that are dulling my emotions. This is my job, and despite not knowing his crime, if the Obsidian Order wants him dead, I have to make that happen.

Once I'm sure he's dead, I turn on my heel and stagger out of the room; the pain ricocheting through my body no longer working in my favour. When combined with the drugs, I'm feeling exhausted, and I send out a silent hope that there's not another challenge behind whatever door this key opens.

Once I'm back in the corridor, I keep going in the opposite direction to where I first woke up, only this time, I ignore the cell doors on either side. I

move as quickly as I can, turning corners until I see a different style of door up ahead. It's a plain metal door, not like the cells I've been passing.

I stop in front of it, breathing a sigh of relief when I see the lock fits the size key I have clasped in my bloody hand. Now I just need to hope it fits.

It takes several attempts just to get the key in the lock, given my shaky hands, the pain running through my body, and my heavy limbs. My heart is racing with anticipation of what might be on the other side, and when the lock clicks open, I push my body into high-alert before turning the handle.

As the door swings open, I keep my feet planted shoulder-width apart, my good hand lifted slightly in a fighting stance, as I prepare to face whatever is on the other side. I tuck my injured arm into my side, holding it firm as I try to ignore how much it fucking hurts.

My whole body sags, and I let out an audible sigh when I see Xander standing in the room, his face exposed as he holds his mask in his hand. There are around ten Obsidian Order members standing behind him with their masks in place, and I can tell by the gold colour and ornate markings that every one of them are Obsidian Council members.

The person at the very end catches my attention, as I'd know my father's mask anywhere. Of course, he'd want to be here to watch my challenge, no doubt critiquing me harsher than anyone else.

Xander's powerful voice pulls my attention to him. "Congratulations, Lawson. Not only did you pass your assignment, but you broke the Crows' record for the fastest completion in just one hour and forty-three minutes. I have to confess, I'm a little jealous, given I'm the one who set the record you broke, when I did it in one hour and forty-six minutes."

The numbers echo around my brain, which is throbbing more now than before, as I struggle to make sense of what he's saying. I would have guessed I took well over two hours searching that fucking room, let alone how long it took me to find the guilty guy before fighting him.

"I really did it that quickly? It felt like fucking forever," I grumble.

"That would be the drugs," my father unhelpfully states with a chuckle.

Xander takes a step towards me, handing me a towel to press onto my shoulder, and I let out a string of expletives as I hold it against the throbbing wound. "I'll take you to see the doctor, then you can return to Crowhurst House. As always, don't mention your assignment to anyone, as some Pledges have yet to complete theirs. I will update the board at the Welcome Party."

At the mention of the annual party the Crows hold to celebrate the start of term, which takes place in just two days, my memories go back to a year ago when I earned my spot as High Crow.

I think about the gorgeous girl with the strawberry-blonde curls who has become the bane of my existence, invading my thoughts even when I don't want her to—like now.

In fact, she's all I can think about, even when the doctor sticks me with needles and stitches my wounds closed. Each thought only makes me angrier, as I don't know how to deal with my feelings.

She's off-limits—something she enjoys telling me at every opportunity—and I hate that I can't have something I want. Call me a spoiled rich kid, but it's true.

I only want her because I can't have her, and because that shit-stain Ryan has her...at least, I think that's why.

As I enter Crowhurst House, despite the drugs having worn off, I'm still in a bit of a daze. Exhaustion from the task has my limbs growing heavy, and the painkillers the doctor gave me are making me a tad woozy. My whole body is screaming that it needs sleep, but I head straight for the kitchen, needing some water first.

It's almost three in the morning, and the house is cast in darkness. The ground floor seems completely empty, which isn't unusual for this time of night.

My eyes are heavy, and I'm moving on autopilot as I enter the kitchen. It's only when I hear a loud gasp that the daze clears and I'm suddenly on high alert again.

The beautiful woman who haunts my dreams is standing in front of me, her bright blue eyes wide as her mouth drops open. The colour drains from her already pale complexion as she looks me over, from top to bottom. I can imagine I'm a sight to behold with my sweatpants covered in blood and dirt, and my T-shirt ripped and bloody. Not to mention my bandaged shoulder.

While she's staring at me, I take advantage of her frozen state to drink her in. She's wearing a flowery dress that stops just above her knees, and black ballet flats that do nothing to show off her legs the way heels would. The dress hugs her perfect figure, but doesn't emphasise her curves the way it should.

A girl like Harper should look fucking gorgeous in everything she wears, but she insists on choosing dresses that make her seem sweet and innocent, instead of the queen she is.

Before I even realise what's happening, she strides towards me like we're more than the enemies we're supposed to be. She places her hand on my cheek and swipes her thumb under my nose, showing me the fresh blood she wipes away.

I blink down at her, struggling to understand why the girl whose life I've made miserable for the last year is tending to my nosebleed. I'm frozen in place as she reaches up with her other hand, having grabbed a tea-towel from the counter, and presses it against my nose.

I don't feel even a hint of the pain I expect when she pushes against my cartilage, as all I can feel is her soft hand against my cheek, and despite everything in me screaming not to, I lean into her touch, like it's the most natural thing to do.

"What happened to you, Lawson?" Her eyes are filling with tears as she takes in my ragged appearance, and once again I wonder why Harper is getting upset over me.

I shrug my shoulders, implying it's not a big deal, but let out a loud hiss when the stab wound on my shoulder screams at me. Harper lets go of my cheek and takes a step back, afraid she's hurt me, but I stop her. I grab hold of her hand and place it back on my cheek, as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

"It was just an assignment."

"You're hurt," she states, as I focus on the way she's swiping her thumb over my cheek, letting the soothing motion ease my pain.

"I've had worse," I tell her, which makes her brow furrow before anger flickers across her beautiful face.

"You shouldn't have to go through this." She lets out a frustrated sigh, since we both know this is nothing compared to what I'm signing up for as a lifetime Order member.

"It'll get easier when I've proven myself."

She shakes her head rapidly, a tear slipping free as a scowl slips across her lips. "You've already proven yourself. You're the High Crow, and have been for a year. Nobody has even come close to taking that from you. You shouldn't have to do more."

I can't hold back the cocky grin that erupts at the thought of her fighting for me, and that she's recognised my achievements. But in true Lawson fashion, I ruin it by opening my big mouth. "Don't let your boyfriend hear you say that."

At the mention of her arse-wipe boyfriend, her eyes widen frantically and she takes a staggered step back, her hand dropping from my face as if I burnt her. She looks around the room, making sure nobody saw our strange little interaction.

"I better go. Will you be okay?" She's already walking towards the door, even though she seems hesitant.

I want nothing more than to call her back, to return to the weird alternate universe we slipped into for a few moments, where we get to be more than the enemies we are here. But that's not real life.

I give her a curt nod, choosing not to be an arsehole since she was kind to me, though that won't be the case when I next see her. There's something about Harper that messes with my emotions, and even though I try to hate her, I can't seem to make myself truly feel it. So I'll have to settle for making her hate me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Harper



END OF SECOND YEAR AT SHADOWMERE UNIVERSITY

They say when you're on top of the world, there's nowhere to go but down, and boy, did I fall fast. I hit rock bottom in a way I never saw coming, and of course he was there to watch me crash and burn.

Since our first public outing together at The Crow's Annual Welcome Party, at the start of our first year, people have viewed Ryan and me as a power couple on Shadowmere's campus. This isn't a label I wanted or asked for, but it was always going to happen, given who we are.

Our arranged marriage will combine two great families into one unstoppable force. But despite our marriage being arranged by our parents when we were fifteen-years-old, we didn't get together until the summer before we started at Shadowmere.

I wanted to concentrate on finishing high school, and I imagine Ryan wanted to sleep around a little before being tied to me—a luxury women are not afforded.

Although I'd say I'm happy in my relationship with Ryan, I can't deny feeling like there's something missing. We've been together for almost two years, and I don't think I'm in love with him—despite having to say it to him all the time, as it's what he wants to hear. I don't get butterflies whenever he's near me, or crave hearing from him when we're apart.

I think our lack of a sex life may contribute to the problem, but that's not exactly something I can change. The Obsidian Order has very strict rules, and if I want to be an Order Wife, I have to be a virgin on my wedding day. So the most we've done is a little kissing, and some over-the-bra boob fondling, which was honestly a bit underwhelming.

I haven't even touched myself to see if I'm capable of experiencing pleasure, because I'm so scared of getting carried away and breaking my hymen. I've read about it happening, and I can't throw my future away for something as trivial as that.

Ryan continues to ask me to use my mouth on him, and I know there's no reason I shouldn't, but I still find myself saying no every time. If I'm being honest, I keep refusing because of the unfairness of it. He refuses to go down on me, saying it breaks the rules, yet he wants me to do it to him.

I get the rules are different for men and women in the Order; we will always be second-class citizens, but that doesn't mean I can't claw back a little fairness whenever I can.

Don't get me wrong, I'd like to have sex with Ryan... It's just not this all-consuming idea that I thought it would be. With some of my friends, sex is literally all they think or talk about, and I thought that was how I'd feel. But I don't.

Ryan doesn't get me hot and flustered. Sadly, that role is reserved for someone else entirely, someone it definitely shouldn't be—Lawson Radley.

As I walk across the Shadowmere courtyard, trying to distract myself from the anxiety of walking alone, he's the one I'm thinking about, even when I know I shouldn't be. I've just finished my first class of the day, and have plenty of other things to occupy my mind, but he's who my subconscious brings up first.

Since the first night I met him at the Crow's Welcome Party, he's been a constant presence in my life, despite him rarely ever speaking to me. His steel-grey eyes heat my body from the inside out whenever he's near.

The most confusing part is that I find myself torn between wishing he'd leave me alone and wanting so much more from him. Yet, when he interacts with me, it's either with a scathing remark—making it clear how much he despises me—or he offers to take my virginity. He usually says it to wind Ryan up, letting me know he's a much better option, and my traitorous body can't help wondering if he's right.

Why does he look at me like I'm his greatest obsession? Like he can't get enough of me, despite clearly hating me.

My thoughts are regularly pulled back to that strange moment we shared together at the start of the year, in the kitchen of Crowhurst House. It's been on repeat in my mind for the last few months, making me question my sanity.

A CROWD HAS GATHERED IN THE LIVING ROOM AT CROWHURST HOUSE, AND whispers circle me from my seat on the sofa in the middle of the room. Everyone is talking about the latest initiation that the second years are currently undertaking, both excitement and fear thrumming all around us.

Some of the Pledges that have already completed the assignment are sitting silently, their blank faces giving nothing away, but their eyes tell a story of just how hard this task is. Not a single one of them has come away unscathed, and even those that ranked highly have cuts and bruises that speak to the violence of the challenge they have undertaken.

Ryan has yet to face the assignment, so I have no idea what it is, and I'm not sure I want to know either. Some of the tasks he undertakes turn my stomach, and ignorance really is bliss, particularly when the risk of injury is so high.

Yet it's not Ryan that I'm worried about. As soon as Bram mentions that Lawson is missing, no doubt having gone to complete his task, nausea ripples through me as my heart starts to race. Acid claws at my throat, and I have to focus on my breathing to get it under control.

I try to zone out what the people around me are saying, since they never expect me to be part of the conversations anyway, but I keep picking up on snippets of information that strike fear through me. Danger. Drugs. Fighting. Weapons... They're all speculation, since the Pledges who have completed the task are still silent, but it's enough to freeze my veins with fear.

I don't even know why I'm worried about him, but as the hours drag on, my inexplicable concern only increases. In the early hours of the morning, as the people in the living room scatter, heading to their rooms for the night, I'm faced with a conundrum. I never spend the night with Ryan, as I don't trust him not to want more from me, but I can't bring myself to leave until I know Lawson's safe.

When Ryan stands to head up to bed, I give him a chaste kiss goodbye, telling him I will see him tomorrow, but instead of leaving, I sneak into the

kitchen to wait. My heart is pounding loudly in my ears, and for the millionth time, I ask myself what the hell I'm doing. Why am I hiding in the dark kitchen, waiting around to find out whether a guy I hate is okay or not? Except, I'm not sure I really do hate him.

It feels like forever that I sit here, lost in my thoughts in the darkness, when the distant click of the door opening allows a stream of light to burst into the room. Heavy footsteps echo around me as a large figure follows the beam, and I'm just about able to make him out.

My feet are moving before I'm able to stop them, though I don't think he can hear me as he doesn't look my way. Not until I let out a gasp when I'm close enough to see the state he's in, the shadows no longer hiding how awful he truly looks.

His sweatpants and jumper are ripped, and covered in grime and blood, and one of his shoulders is heavily wrapped in a bandage. He's got a few steri-strips over a large cut on his forehead, and there are other cuts that are not deep enough to require closing.

Parts of his face are already starting to turn purple and swell in some places, and specks of dried blood cover his unusually pale skin. There's a cut on his bottom lip that's oozing slightly, as well as his nose.

As soon as he hears the sharp exhale of my breath, his eyes flick to where I'm standing before him, and he doesn't even hide the way he drinks me in. I'm shocked when, for the first time, his silver eyes aren't blank masks. Instead, there's a flicker of pain, exhaustion, confusion, and something that can only be lust as he takes me in.

He's quick to shut down his emotions, as always, but like a moth to a flame, I'm drawn to him, and before I know it, my hand is resting on his cheek. My palm tingles against his bruised flesh, and although I know I need to be gentle with him, I can't help pressing a little more when he leans into my touch.

When a trickle of crimson blood leaks from his nose, I use my thumb to wipe it away, hating seeing all the injuries marring his handsome face. I don't know what possesses me to touch him like he might mean something to me, but when he doesn't stop me, I allow myself a moment to pretend. To forget about reality and just live in this strange moment we're sharing.

"What happened to you, Lawson?" My words sound as fragile as the surreal moment we're having, which I desperately don't want to end.

He dismisses his injuries like they're nothing, as if I can't see the fresh blood leaking from his wounds, or the large bandage covering his shoulder. Then he winces in pain, and I rush to step back, worried I've hurt him in some way, as I quickly make sure none of his visible injuries appear any worse.

When his hand wraps around my wrist, for the briefest second, I hold my breath, waiting and expecting the worst. What I don't anticipate is for Lawson to place my palm back on his cheek, pulling me closer as though I never moved away. He presses his hand over mine, leaning into my touch in a way that takes my breath away, and I bask in the warmth from his body being so close to mine.

For a moment, it's like all the air is sucked from the room, and my eyes are locked with his molten silver gaze. He's looking at me like he really sees me for the first time, and it's not just my hand that tingles. Butterflies erupt in my stomach, and my core heats as I pull my lower lip between my teeth when thoughts of kissing him flash through my brain.

I'm startled by the thoughts, and only when Lawson speaks am I brought back to the moment. "It was just an assignment."

He says it so casually, and the sheer lack of self-preservation and resignation he has sends a ripple of anger through my veins. I'm so mad that the Order puts him through so much just to prove himself, when he's already done so much. He doesn't need to prove himself to anyone.

I didn't realise I'd spoken the words aloud until Lawson's cocky grin lights up his face, his cheek dimpling beneath my palm, setting my pulse racing even more. "Don't let your boyfriend hear you say that."

It's like an ice-cold bucket of water is dumped over my head, snapping me back to reality as he reminds me of how wrong this is. Just the mention of Ryan is enough to make me drop my hand and take a rushed step back, as I frantically look around the room, hoping nobody else witnessed whatever this was.

I shouldn't be alone with Lawson, let alone touching him the way I was. My father would kill me. Ryan could argue to end the marriage contact, if he thought I was being unfaithful to him. It's bad enough that Lawson is all I think about, but I can at least hide that. If anyone found out about this, the so-called perfect future that has been planned for me could be over.

"I better go." Despite it being the last thing I want to do, I need to get some space between me and Lawson, to clear my head before I do

something really stupid. Still, I can't help asking him, "Will you be okay?"

I expect cold, cruel Lawson to return, to push me away before I have the chance to run myself, and so I'm even more surprised when he allows me to see the pain in his eyes, and something very similar to longing. I'm sure it's exactly the same as what he can see reflected in mine, as it physically hurts me to walk away from him.

He gives me a brief nod, and even though I want to linger, to draw out this strange moment between us, I know I can't. I'm not even sure what this was. I'm not stupid...I'm very aware that I find Lawson attractive, but I didn't think there was anything more to it than that. Just naughty thoughts when I knew I shouldn't have them. I was certain that's how he felt about me too, but this has me questioning everything, even though I know I can't.

As I walk away, he gives me the sweetest smile, and my heart aches, because a part of me knows I'll never see this version of Lawson again. And we both know that's for the best. I can never be with Lawson, and wanting him the way I do is dangerous.

JUST WHEN I'M ABOUT TO BERATE MYSELF, BECAUSE I CAN'T STOP THINKING about him, there's a scuffle on the other side of the courtyard that pulls my attention back to the moment. Only when I look over at the noise do I realise that practically everyone is staring at me.

I freeze for a moment before dragging my hand down the fabric of my dress, making sure it's not tucked in where it shouldn't be. But it doesn't seem like anything is out of place, which only makes my anxiety peak as my heart races.

Locating the source of the scuffle in the courtyard, I find my worst nightmare, Tillie and her friend Sienna, standing there. It seems like Sienna is trying to hold Tillie back, but as soon as our gazes meet, Tillie's face twists with anger and she storms towards me, her ridiculously high heels clacking on the concrete floor.

It's the last day of term! Can't I have one final day with no drama?

I'm literally glued to the spot as the woman who has bullied me relentlessly for the last two years storms towards me, looking more furious with every step.

Before my brain can even process the sudden stillness, my cheek explodes with a searing, hot pain. The sharp crack of her hand echoes in the

silence, and I stumble back as the raw, stinging sensation makes my eyes water.

Tillie doesn't stop there. Her perfectly manicured nails, a vibrant coral, snag in my long strawberry-blonde hair. I feel a sharp, agonising tug, as if my scalp is being ripped from my head, and then a sickening thud as I'm thrown to the hard, cold ground.

I land with a bang, and the harsh texture of the concrete shreds at my exposed legs, as the hem of my dress rides up—or maybe it rips completely; I don't know. My head is spinning, and I can't think clearly as everything happening so fast overwhelms me.

Thankfully, my brain is working just enough to recognise the vulnerable position I'm in on the floor, and I quickly pull my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them as Tillie towers over me, protecting myself as much as possible, just in case she continues attacking me.

My ears are ringing from the blow to my head, and tears stream down my face as I try to understand what is happening right now. Tillie has always been a bitch, but she's never done anything more than call me names or try to humiliate me in some way. She's never attacked me.

"You fucking bitch. I'm going to kill you." Although Tillie has been screeching and shouting since she first attacked me, this is the only thing she's said that I've been able to understand, and now I'm even more terrified.

I'm surrounded by people, and I quickly glance around to see if anyone is going to step in to help, despite already knowing the answer. If they were going to save me, they would have done so already.

My heart breaks when my gaze lands on Ryan standing beside Sienna, looking down at me with a vacant expression, like he doesn't even know me. As my eyes lock with his, I silently plead with him to help me, but when he simply looks away, my stomach drops.

Tillie is in the middle of another rant, which I don't hear over my world collapsing around me, when she kicks me in the side with her stupidly pointy heel. I cry out as pain radiates through my ribs, and more tears stream down my face.

Just as I'm about to beg her to stop, she's pushed away from me and a shadow bathes me in darkness as a large figure looms over me, blocking me from view. I look up and see Lawson standing over me, protecting me, and now I'm more confused than ever.

“What the fuck, Lawson? Why are you defending this bitch?” Tillie screams at him, and Lawson simply shrugs his shoulders, looking uninterested in the whole situation.

“I’m not. Your loud screeching was giving me a headache, so I’m simply trying to protect my eardrums,” he replies.

Tillie huffs. “I’m giving that traitor what she deserves.”

Despite being on the ground in a ball, I manage to find my voice. “I-I’m not a traitor. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Tillie leans around Lawson’s large, muscular body to get a good look at me, her pretty face contorted with rage. “Just because you didn’t know what your father was doing, doesn’t make you innocent. Now, he’s in jail, you’ve lost everything, and as far as I’m concerned, it couldn’t have happened to a nicer person.”

Her words ring loudly in my ears, and although I can hear what she’s saying, it makes little sense to me. I shake my head rapidly as my tears fall quicker, and I struggle to catch my breath as I sit up. “No. No, you’ve got it all wrong. I saw my dad this morning. He’s not in jail—he would never do anything to end up in there.”

I look over at Ryan, pleading with him once more to confirm what I’m saying. He saw my dad when he picked me up for school this morning, so he can tell them that this is all a misunderstanding.

As he shuffles from one foot to the other, looking uncomfortable, the last thread of hope in me snaps, and I know he’s not going to help me. “It’s true. They arrested him an hour ago. He’s been stealing money from some very important people, and if he talks, like they think he will, prison is his best-case scenario.”

The coldness in Ryan’s voice seeps into my veins, chilling me to the bone as my heart shatters. I can’t even bear to look at Ryan anymore, knowing he believes these lies, so I let my gaze flick over to Lawson, who is still standing over me, protecting me, even though he claims not to be.

When Lawson’s usually blank face shifts into one that can only be described as pity, I know what Ryan is saying is true—my dad is in jail, and I need to help him.

I no longer care about the position I find myself in, or the people around me. All I can think about is getting to my dad and making sure he’s okay. I know in my soul that he’s innocent of the crimes they’re accusing him of. I don’t even need to hear him say it.

I quickly rush to my feet, despite my shaky legs, but as soon as I'm upright, Tillie charges at me, pushing me over once more. I cry out as my flesh scrapes against the rough concrete again, and I'm not surprised to see drops of blood oozing from my knees.

"You better get used to the view from down there, as that's where you belong now, bitch. You're a nobody. You have no money, no power, and none of the status that comes with your family name. You're an outcast with no future and no prospects. You have nothing," Tillie screams, her high-pitched screeching turning into an almost maniacal laugh at the end.

"Ryan?" I plead with him, hating how desperate I sound, but I don't have another choice. These hypocrites aren't even giving me a chance to speak, let alone clear my father's name.

Ryan winces as he drops his gaze, unable to meet my eyes, and that's when Sienna steps closer to him. She links her arm through his, and glares down at me with a bitter expression on her face. "Oh, honey, Ryan isn't going to help you. Now that your marriage contract is over, he has no reason to be with you. Not when he can get his dick sucked by someone else."

My mouth falls open in shock, as I look between Ryan and Sienna, not missing what she's hinting at. Despite there being so much I want to say to that, all that comes out is, "The contract isn't—"

Before I can even finish the sentence, Ryan cuts me off. "My father confirmed that the contract is void. You can't pay the dowry, and your name would only bring shame to our family. You have nothing to bring to the marriage anymore. I'm sorry, Harper, but it's over."

My heart doesn't break the way I expect it to. In fact, after everything that's happened in the last few minutes, this insignificant blip barely even registers, which I think says a lot about my feelings for Ryan. But I try to claw back as much of my self-respect as I can in this horrific moment.

I heave myself back to my feet, and the sharp sting of my protesting knees becomes a deafening throb as I force myself to stand tall. Lawson shuffles himself so he's standing between me and the crowd, but he somehow manages to make it look like he's not actually helping me, appearing somewhat disinterested still.

"This is all a big mistake," I tell everyone. "My dad will be released soon, and you'll all see that this was just a massive misunderstanding." I try

to make sure my words don't sound shaky, so they have no choice but to believe me.

Hell, I'm trying to convince myself too.

Tillie rushes forward once more and manages to slap me again before Lawson pushes her backwards. Luckily, he intercepts before she can get a proper hit in, so it barely grazes my cheek.

"It's not a mistake. Your father is a thief who stole from a lot of important people, my father included, and now he's paying the price...and so are you," she yells.

As Tillie tries to kick me again, Lawson blocks her and fully steps in front of me. He reaches behind with his arm and tucks me against him, making sure his body is covering mine. The hard muscles of his back press against my front as he pulls me closer, and my breath stutters from the proximity.

"Enough!" he snaps at Tillie. "You've made your point."

"She doesn't deserve your protection, Lawson," Tillie replies, fluttering her eyelashes at him, as if that might get him on her side.

I'm grateful nobody can see me rolling my eyes at her pathetic behaviour.

"I'm not protecting her. I'm merely saying you've made your point. The whole university now knows, so you have nothing more to gain here," Lawson explains, sounding almost bored again.

My head spins more than when Tillie slapped me, because despite his words, Lawson is very much protecting me, so I don't know why he's denying it. I also don't understand why he's helping me.

Since that night at the start of the year, he's been nothing but hurtful or rude to me, making me question whether our moment actually happened. He's never shown me even an ounce of kindness, but that's exactly what this is, and it confuses me all over again.

Tillie stomps her foot as she flicks her hair dramatically. "Fine. But I will not stop making this bitch's life hell. She can hide away for the summer, but once we're back next year, her arse is mine."

Lawson shakes his head, and I'd bet good money, if I could see his face, that he also just rolled his eyes at Tillie being dramatic. "That's fine; nobody is stopping you. Now, fuck off."

Tillie turns and storms away with a huff, her clicking heels fading with each step she takes. Sienna runs to keep up with her, pulling Ryan along

with her.

Before I can stop myself, a sob escapes my lips, “Ryan?”

I fix my gaze on the man who I thought I would spend the rest of my life with. I might not be hopelessly in love with him, but I’d pictured every part of the future we were going to have together. Our wedding, our children...everything.

Ryan meets my gaze for just a fraction of a second before he turns his back on me. My stomach drops when he laces his fingers with Sienna’s and walks away from me, from us, from our future.

Another sob escapes me as my legs give way, and I crash to the floor as the weight of everything that just happened threatens to drown me. I’m not just crying for Ryan or my future, but for my dad and the uncertainty of it all.

Lawson clears his throat as he steps closer to me, and when I look up at him, he’s holding his hand out to help me up. I hesitate at first, my gaze flicking between his hand and his face.

Over the past two years, with the exception of that night, Lawson has had nothing even remotely nice to say to me. He either speaks cruelly or makes repulsive propositions. Nothing that would ever be considered nice, kind, or helpful, which makes me question his current motives.

Then I remember I’m not in a position to turn down any kind of help, and he did protect me, even though he denies it. Without giving it any more thought, I reach out and take his hand, allowing him to pull me to my feet.

I pointedly ignore the way my hand tingles from his touch, or how my heart beats faster—and don’t get me started on the butterflies.

“Why are you helping me? You’re never nice to me.” The words slip out before I can stop them. I should be thanking him, but I have to know.

His lips tip into a smile, but it’s more dangerous than kind. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m not helping you. I’m just a possessive arsehole, and I want to be the only one who makes you cry.”

He reaches over and uses his thumb to wipe away the tears from my cheek, and my breath stutters at the softness of his touch. My head is spinning with confusion. “What?” I splutter, unable to form any other words.

Lawson lets out a harsh laugh as he steps towards me. His body is so close to mine, the heat he’s emanating warms me in ways I never expected.

He grabs hold of a strand of my strawberry-blonde hair and tucks it behind my ear, his fingertips leaving a trail of fire against my skin wherever he touches. He leans in until his lips are beside my ear, his breath fluttering over my cheek, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I suggest you spend the summer developing a thick skin, sweetheart. Life is about to get really fucking tough for you, and only the strongest will survive. It’s no fun for me unless you put up a fight.”

I know he’s referring to all the times in the past when I’ve shot him down. All the times I’ve told him to go away when he’s made an inappropriate comment, or I’ve dismissed him when he said something rude about me.

My lack of a foul mouth has been a source of his amusement for a while, and he claims to be eagerly awaiting a time when my words turn dirty. But my upbringing as a good, polite Order girl definitely discourages the use of profanities.

I lift my chin defiantly. “I will always fight.” Hating the way my voice shakes slightly when I say it, I now know exactly what he means. If people are going to believe me, I have to make sure there’s no doubt in my tone.

Lawson gives me a smile—a genuine smile that almost makes him seem younger—as he reaches out to grab my hip. His body slams against mine, a firm, unyielding wall that steals the air from my lungs in a sharp gasp. The rough texture of his shirt grates against my skin, as the heat radiating from him leaves me tingling.

He reaches out with his other hand and runs the pad of his thumb over my lip, ignoring the way I wince when he reaches the cut in the corner. When he pulls his thumb back, there’s a small drop of my blood there from my split lip, and my eyes grow wide when he slips his thumb into his mouth.

He licks my blood from his thumb, keeping eye contact with me the whole time, and all I can do is stand there while my heart gallops away.

This time, when he leans in close to my ear, my whole body tingles from his proximity, and I hold my breath in anticipation. His tone is deep and raspy, making him sound sexier than ever before.

“I want you to fight, but the outcome will always be the same. I made you a promise when we first met, and I still stand by it. You will end up on your knees for me, begging me to show you pleasure that no one else is

capable of giving you. I'll bend you and break you, until you're my perfect whore. And the best part is...you'll fucking love it."

Before I can even think about responding, he presses a soft kiss to my cheek that literally makes my knees weak. The brush of his impossibly soft lips against my skin sends a bolt of electricity down my spine, stealing my breath in a desperate gasp. Yet, as quickly as the sensation blooms, he is gone, leaving behind a faint, lingering warmth.

As Lawson turns and walks away, leaving my head spinning, he lets out a soft chuckle. A couple of steps in, he looks over his shoulder, his smug features once again contorted into his characteristic cocky expression.

"See you next year, sweetheart." Then he actually winks at me before turning back around and walking away.

As the world burns down around me, the only thing I see is Lawson walking through the ashes, somehow making sure I escape without being burnt.



CHAPTER FIVE

Lawson

START OF THIRD YEAR AT SHADOWMERE UNIVERSITY

It's been fifty-nine days since I was last on Shadowmere Campus, and the summer holiday seems to have dragged longer than ever before. It's the only time of the year when it's mandatory for students to leave campus, so they can prepare for the new students arriving in September.

I never cared about going back home before, but after what happened with Harper on the last day of term, she's occupied my thoughts more than ever—and that's saying something.

Since the first time I laid eyes on her at the Crow's Welcome Party, she's become my worst nightmare, because I don't understand why I'm so obsessed with her. I literally need to know where she is at all times, what she's doing, and when I don't know, I have to find her.

When she was Betrothed to that arsehole, Ryan, it only made me hate her more. Not only was she taking up too much space in my brain, threatening to derail me from my tasks, she thought he was a good fucking choice for a husband.

Not that any of us really gets a choice in who we marry. That's just a burden of being an Obsidian Order heir—we marry who we're told, no questions asked. Even so, surely her family could have found her a better match than Ryan the Cockwomble.

Though now they're no longer together, since he quite publicly called off their marriage contract, that's not something I have to think about. I can't even bear to consider the possibility she might have met someone new over the summer.

Her public fall from grace affected me more than I expected. She looked so small and fragile as everyone turned against her. It triggered a desperate need to protect her from the harsh reality that comes with being part of the Order—though it's something I never saw coming.

I've never felt the need to protect anyone before, and given I've spent the better part of two years making Harper's life miserable, she was the last person I expected to feel protective over. But I hate how easily her status has been stripped from her.

Her fall from grace happened at the worst possible time for me, as everyone left campus the day after. And everyone knows there's no better time to play with your prey than when they're at their most vulnerable.

Now, she's had eight weeks to get used to her new situation, to build up the thick skin I stupidly suggested, so I have no idea what to expect when I see her again.

Luckily, being away from campus doesn't mean I get to leave my Crow responsibilities behind. The Order still sent me assignments, and I was incredibly grateful for this, as it prevented me from hunting down and following a certain strawberry-blonde.

Gathering up incriminating evidence on a local MP, which the Order will then use to blackmail him when the time is right, took up a lot of my time, but not enough to stop my mind from wandering to thoughts of her.

The obsessive, protective, possessive thoughts have consumed me, even when I'm home and she's nowhere near. I've had to throw myself into anything and everything that will distract me from her.

I hate that I was looking for her the moment I stepped foot back on campus. A Pledge's final year is supposed to be his best yet. By this point, only the strongest have survived the gruelling process to remain a Crow, and we're rewarded for our efforts with a gift—the Prize we've all been waiting for since passing our initiation.

As I'm the High Crow Pledge—still—I have more benefits than most, including being allocated the best room in Crowhurst House. Not to mention, I get first choice when it comes to selecting my Prize, a reward a lot of my fellow Pledges covet.

Though, while I should be high on life, celebrating my achievements, I'm looking for her instead. But after being back on campus for a week, searching everywhere I usually see her, there's still no sign, and I'm starting to worry.

She had better not have dropped out!

The heavy bang of the door echoes as I slam it shut, the worn wood vibrating under my palm. My backpack, heavy with textbooks, crashes onto the floor with a dull thud as I try to push that awful thought from my mind.

Striding across the room to the silver fridge in the corner, I pull it open, the familiar hum reverberates as the chilly air hits my face. I grab a cold bottle of beer, the lid creating a sharp crack as it opens, and take a long, bitter gulp.

"Isn't it a bit early to be drinking?" Bram asks from where he's lounging on my black leather couch.

I roll my eyes at him. "Why are you in my room? Better yet, how did you get into my room?" The lock is an electronic fingerprint sensor, and it's programmed to only open for me.

Bram simply shrugs his shoulders. "I hacked it and added my fingerprint...in case of emergencies."

I should have fucking guessed. Although Bram is ranked fourth in our year, he could challenge me for the top spot if he actually tried. He's a Crow because it's his father's legacy—which he hates—not because he actually wants to be here. Though that doesn't mean he hasn't earned his spot.

Still, he sticks around for the chaos and the freedom he's given as a Crow. He enjoys being able to do whatever he wants without consequences, and though everyone thinks he's following in his father's footsteps, he actually makes a point of undermining him any chance he gets.

"You're the last person I'd call in an emergency," I tell him as I flop down onto the opposite end of the sofa.

Bram lets out a chuckle as he picks up his own beer that is over half empty. "I'm the only person you'd call, you unsociable bastard."

He's not wrong, though I won't tell him that. Bram has been my best friend since meeting on our first day at high school, and he's the only person I even remotely trust, which is why I asked him to help me locate Harper.

"Did you find anything?" Despite my best efforts to sound bored and casual, I catch the way his eyes gleam with amusement. He's lucky I don't

launch the bottle of beer at his head.

“She’s still enrolled here, but she’s not attended any classes since term started. A lot has happened with her father—rumours suggest he’s trying to save himself by naming Order members, but his actions have only put a bigger target on his back. I should point out that I haven’t been able to confirm the rumours yet, but the fact he’s still alive speaks volumes.

“I was able to confirm that she lost her family home, but I don’t know where she’s been staying for the last eight weeks. I’m looking into it, but her social media has all vanished, and I’ve not managed to track her using any of my usual means.”

“Fuck!” Bram’s not exactly a hacker, but he’s good at locating people, so the fact he can’t find her means she doesn’t want to be found—and that’s concerning.

Bram narrows his emerald eyes at me, his eyebrow piercing glistening as he assesses me in a way that makes me uncomfortable.

“Remind me again why we’re looking for her? I thought you hated her,” he inquires, and despite his feigned indifference, a distinct note of intrigue colours his tone.

“I do,” I snap, not bothering to elaborate further.

With a shit-eating grin, he says, “You have a funny way of showing it.”

I tighten my hold on the bottle, the weight of my anger pressing down as I remind myself not to throw it.

“I just want a front seat for her downfall, that’s all.”

He lets out a chuckle as he fucking winks at me. “Sure you do.”

A groan escapes my lips as I feel his gaze on me, a constant, scrutinising assessment of my actions. Bram might look like a bad boy who doesn’t give a shit about anything, but he sees more than people think. He likes when he’s underestimated, as it gives him the upper-hand.

Before I can come up with a witty, sarcastic response, there’s a loud banging on the door. “Party starts in thirty minutes,” some overly enthusiastic first-year Pledge shouts from the other side, which only makes me groan louder.

“Do I have to go?” I hate that I sound like a petulant teenager, but I’m really not in the mood for the Crow’s Annual Welcome Party. It will be loud, crowded, and too many fucking people will try to talk to me.

“Yes, and I think you should get laid. You’re normally a miserable fucker, but you’ve been even worse since your dry spell began.”

I take a deep breath before swallowing the last of my beer, and without thinking, I throw the empty bottle at his head. The fucker is expecting it and somehow catches it with ease.

“Fucker. That should have hit you.”

He tips his head back on a laugh, his dark curls flopping as he puts the empty bottle on the coffee table beside his own. “You need to be more careful. I can’t risk getting this pretty face smashed up.”

I roll my eyes at him. “You get into a fight nearly every week,” I point out.

He waves his hand dismissively. “But when I fight, we don’t use fucking glass. Besides, you know we have to go to the party. As the Senior High Crow, it’s your job to welcome the new Pledges, show them who they should aspire to be like.”

We both let out a sarcastic snort at that. I’m nobody’s fucking role model, and Xander is an idiot if he thinks I’d be good at giving the newbies a morale boost. Besides, I’m not interested in showing off my title. They can see my name on the top spot—where it’s sat since our own Welcome Party two years ago—and that speaks for itself. I don’t need to big myself up.

“But seriously, you should consider getting laid,” Bram adds once more.

Closing my eyes, the darkness behind my lids swirls gray as a dull throb pulses behind my eyes, and I try to shake it away. “I’m not in a dry spell,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Your dick disagrees. It’s been too fucking long.”

“How the fuck would you know?” I snap back, opening my eyes just so I can glare at my friend.

“I know you. You’ve not been near a girl for far too fucking long.”

He’s not wrong, but I’m annoyed that my far too observant friend knows this.

“It’s fucking irrelevant. We’ll get our Prize soon enough,” I reply, and his eyes light up.

“I can’t fucking wait. Now, get showered, get dressed, and meet me downstairs in an hour,” he says as he stands up, stretching his muscles like he’s been there for a while.

I don’t bother arguing, as he’ll never leave if I do. Besides, Xander made it clear he’d kick my arse if I didn’t make an appearance and at least play nice with the first years. And while he doesn’t particularly scare me, he

will punish me by pushing me to my limits during the next training session, and they're already hard enough without that fucker making them worse.

After I've showered, I pull on a pair of dark jeans, a tight black T-shirt, and my black Converse. After running my fingers through my damp hair, making it look even more unruly than usual, I put my baseball cap on backwards. I look the same as I did before my shower, just a little less crumpled—I don't see the point in making any extra fucking effort.

As soon as I make it to the bottom of the stairs, Bram is by my side, handing me a red plastic cup full of beer, and when Ryan's annoying voice floods from the next room, I couldn't be more fucking grateful. In fact, I'm sort of wishing he'd given me something stronger.

Bram pulls me over to the doorway of the room that Ryan's in, and it quickly becomes apparent that he's showing off for the first years—doing the job I'm supposed to do.

The blonde bimbo, named Sienna, hangs off his arm, her manicured claws digging into his flesh so deeply I'm surprised they haven't left a mark, but he doesn't seem to care. He's too busy performing for the first years to even know she's holding onto him.

"Being a member of the Obsidian Order is an honour and a privilege—one you'll have to earn—but being a Crow is something else. We're a brotherhood, and you'll have to prove you're worthy of standing by our side. You'll have to earn your ranking," Ryan boasts, deliberately leaving out what his ranking actually is.

Thankfully, my best friend is always willing to bring him down a peg or two. "And what actually is your ranking?" Bram asks loudly, smiling when all eyes in the room turn toward him, and Ryan's lips tip into a scowl.

"They can see the ranking board," Ryan responds through gritted teeth, which only makes Bram laugh.

"I'm just wondering if any part of this speech mentions how my boy, Lawson, here has been kicking your arse for the top spot since day one."

Now all eyes are on me, and I do my best to appear disinterested. Ryan lets out a very undignified sound that almost resembles a snort mixed with a growl. "We still have a whole fucking year to go. I was just telling these first-years that if you work hard and keep proving yourself, it will pay off. Your status or who your father is doesn't play a part in it. It's all about whose name is there on the final day."

I bite my lip at his thinly-veiled mention of my father, an obvious attempt to rile me that I make sure doesn't work, focusing on my position instead.

"That's true, but we both know my name isn't going anywhere," I drawl before taking a mouthful of my beer.

"We'll see about that," Ryan snaps, quickly turning his attention back to the audience. "As you can see, whilst the other Crows are your brothers, they will always be your competition. There will be times when you need to work together, but never forget they are also your rivals."

"How can you be brothers and rivals?" a first-year Pledge standing closest to Ryan asks.

"You'll find that there are some Crows you'll become closer to than others. They're the ones you'll see as your brothers, the ones you'll call when you need someone. But there will be other Crows that you'll never trust, as you'll always see them as not worthy of the ring they wear. That distinction is something you'll have to work out for yourself, and quickly, or you will put yourself in danger by trusting the wrong person," Ryan replies, his gaze narrowing on me when he mentions the ring I wear proudly.

Silence fills the room as all the first-year Pledges assess each other, trying to see who will become a friend or a foe. Sienna breaks the silence by clapping her hands together as she lets out a high-pitched squeal. "Let me grab you all some drinks, so you have something to toast with when they announce the final initiation ranking."

She presses a kiss to Ryan's cheek, leaving behind a bright-red lipstick mark that she quickly wipes away before she strides out of the room, swaying her hips in her ridiculously high heels. A lot of eyes in the room follow her arse as she leaves, since the short red dress she's wearing leaves nothing to the imagination.

The first-year Pledge who asked Ryan a question early steps closer to him and slaps him on his arm as he lets out a wolf whistle. "Bro, she's fucking gorgeous. You've got yourself a good one there. Is she going to be your Prize?"

Though I wasn't paying much attention before, that question piques my interest, and I lean closer to hear Ryan's response.

"No, I'm going to keep her as my girlfriend... I have another plan for who I want as my Prize."

“Who?” the kid asks.

“Harper Westmore.” His words slice into my very core, creating a visceral pain that makes my heart throb. The sound of her name uttered from his lips ignites a fire within me, and my whole body trembles with a furious rage.

Even with Harper’s new rock-bottom status, and lack of social standing, she would never be anyone’s Prize. She’s too fucking pure for that. Hell, she was keeping herself a virgin so she could be an Order Wife...there’s no way she’d choose to be a Prize.

“Isn’t she the bitch you were Betrothed to? Whose father betrayed the Order?”

Ryan nods. “That’s the one.”

“Why would you want a traitor’s daughter as your Prize?” another first-year asks.

Ryan shrugs, but there’s a glint in his eyes that suggests he’s planning something. “No better way to punish her than to make her my whore. Once she’s my Prize, she’ll have to obey me. So if I decide to let everyone in this room ride a train on her, she’ll do as she’s told with her legs open wide. The stuck-up bitch may even learn to love it.”

I’m not even aware that I’ve squashed the red plastic cup in my hand until I’m covered in beer. A hot, furious hum buzzes through my veins, making my skin prickle, and Bram’s sharp gaze feels like tiny needles as he assesses my barely-contained fury.

Before I can say anything, my mouthy best friend beats me to it. “I think you’re forgetting one very important fact, Sheehan...a Prize must gift herself willingly. What makes you think a girl like Harper would ever hand herself over to you?”

Ryan scowls at Bram, his hands tightening into fists as a slight flush spreads over his cheeks. Clearly, he doesn’t enjoy being embarrassed in front of his admirers.

“She’s desperate, and I’ll make her an offer she can’t refuse,” Ryan states confidently.

Bram lets out a maniacal laugh as he slowly, deliberately looks Ryan up and down. “Nobody is *that* desperate.”

Ryan takes an aggressive step towards Bram, who squares his shoulders, more than happy to fight. That’s when Ryan unclenches his fists and backs down—good fucking decision.

I wasn't kidding when I said Bram likes to fight. He's a bare-knuckle fighter, known for the illegal cage fights he regularly enters—and wins.

My best friend is crazy, and he's not afraid to fight dirty to win, which most people wouldn't guess from looking at him, as he's typically the voice of reason in a verbal debate. His unpredictability is why Ryan has backed down so quickly, and it's the most sensible thing he's ever done.

"Come the Gifting Ceremony, you'll see how desperate the bitch really is," Ryan states before he turns away and heads in the direction Sienna went.

Hearing him call Harper a bitch has anger flooding my veins like lava, heating me up and setting my nerves on edge. The thought of her being his Prize shouldn't bother me this much, but it does.

As I shoot daggers from my eyes into Ryan's retreating spine, Bram steps in front of me, a serious expression on his face. "I'm assuming you have a plan?" He sounds as hopeful as he looks.

I shake my head, ignoring the way his shoulders sag. "No, but I'm making one as we speak. I'm not letting him have Harper."

CHAPTER SIX

Harper



As I stand in front of the eerie gothic-style building at the front of the Shadowmere Campus, I have to take several deep breaths to steel my nerves.

While travelling up the long, winding drive, a prickle of anticipation ran down my spine. The rhythmic thud of my heart grew louder in my ears, each beat like a quickening drum, while a clammy heat built within my palms.

Returning to Shadowmere for my final year of university was the hardest decision I've ever made. I spent the summer hiding out at my best friend Wren's house, after the police seized my family home as part of their investigation into my dad and his company.

I knew dropping out would mean letting the haters win, and I can't give them anymore than they've already taken. But I feel like being at school is taking time away from the only thing I can think about right now—getting my dad out of prison.

I have no doubt he's innocent, but hearing him confirm it, when I first went to visit him in prison, lifted a weight off my shoulders that I hadn't even realised was there. I trust him implicitly, and he maintains he's being set up, so I'm going to prove it.

The only problem is...I have no idea how.

A call from Chancellor Calderbank made it very clear that if I missed any more classes, returning wouldn't be an option. So, late last night, Wren helped me move into my tiny dorm room on campus, ready for me to start classes Monday morning—only two weeks late.

Wren and I actually had to smuggle what little belongings I have into the dorm under the cover of darkness, as fear of running into Tillie or Sienna was enough to make me stalk through the shadows like a thief in the night.

I know I'm going to have to face them eventually, but if I can put that nightmare off for as long as possible, you bet I will.

I stride towards the administration building to let them know I'm back, and to get my timetable, clutching the letter confirming my accommodation and tuition have already been paid for. Luckily, Dad paid them before he was arrested; otherwise I wouldn't have anywhere else to live.

I still have my bills to pay, but I was able to grab some cash from Dad's safe before everything was seized. I'll have to budget heavily, but it will get me through the next few months. If he's not home by then, I'll probably have to look at getting a job, but that's a worry for another day.

I smooth down the soft yellow sundress I'm wearing as I step into the administration building. It feels strange to be back in a dress, as I've been living in jeans and hoodies recently, so nobody would recognise me, but I can't do that now.

For the last two years, I've been portraying the perfect image of a future Obsidian Order Wife, and despite no longer being Betrothed, I have to maintain that facade. I genuinely believe my father will be released soon, once he's proven innocent. When that happens, we will regain our power and status, and he'll expect me to fulfil the role he's been training me for my whole life.

I can't mess up the plan now, not when he needs me the most.

As I look down at the bright sundress and heels, I couldn't feel less like myself. I've never felt comfortable in soft dresses that emphasise my femininity, but I've never had the option to choose anything different.

Now I feel like a doll who is being dressed up, ready to be paraded in front of an audience, while I'm expected to play my part perfectly. No need to think for myself; I just need to do as I'm told.

The only problem is, now that my dad isn't around, and Ryan has abandoned me, I don't have anyone telling me what to do. I'm finally able to think for myself...and I bloody love it.

Once I've gathered my new timetable, I head to my first class of the day. Wren is by my side, her arm tucked in mine, as she chatters aimlessly

in a bid to distract me. It's not working, but I'm glad to have her with me, so I can draw strength from her.

Wren Williamson is the complete opposite of me. Where I'm shy and quiet, she's loud and in your face. She's not afraid of standing up for herself, and she loves the freedom that comes with being at university. She wears whatever she wants, goes to parties until the early hours of the morning, and drinks way too much.

What I love about Wren is that she is completely comfortable in her own skin. She has curves she's proud to show off. If someone doesn't like her, she doesn't care. She knows her worth, and she makes any man earn the pleasure of her company.

We gravitated toward each other on our induction day, the summer before starting at Shadowmere. It was one day for us to get used to the campus, meet fellow students, and generally get a taste for university life. She bounced over to me with a bright smile on her face, looped her arm through mine, and announced we would be friends. She's been by my side ever since.

I live vicariously through her sex life stories. Though, if I'm being honest, some things she tells me actually scare me. She's always trying new things, getting guys to push her boundaries, and the more she tells me, the more jealous I get.

I want to be free enough to explore my sexuality, to learn about my body the way she is, but I've always known that's not an option for me. The pretty doll has to be a virgin, or she's not worth as much.

We come to a stop in front of the building where my English Lit class is being held, and Wren pulls her arm free from mine before turning to face me. Placing her hands on my shoulders, she gives me a little shake.

"Be brave today. Remember what we talked about, and don't take any shit. Call me if you need me, okay?"

I nod and force a smile on my face, hoping it looks at least a little genuine. "I will. I'll be fine, don't worry about me."

"I'm your bestie; it's my job to worry about you," she says before placing a kiss on my cheek.

This time, the smile I give her is genuine. "Go to class. I'll see you tonight."

As she walks away, I draw in a ragged breath, wishing there was a way I could instantly thicken my skin, as I know I'm going to need it. I want to

pull my shoulders back and lift my head up high, ready to challenge anyone who even looks at me wrong, but I can't do that.

Perfect feminine Harper wasn't raised to be strong or argumentative. She's meek and submissive, so I reluctantly drop my gaze to the floor and attempt to make myself as invisible as I can.

Too bad it doesn't work! I only have one more corner before reaching my lecture theatre when someone bangs into my shoulder, knocking my bag to the floor. Despair fills me as my books and everything else in there tumbles out.

As I bend down to collect my things, I mutter an apology, despite it not being my fault. I reach for the book nearest to me first, but before I can grab it, a bright pink stiletto heel presses down on my hand.

I let out a yelp as I look up to see Tillie scowling down at me with Sienna by her side. I curse whatever deity is listening for my awful bad luck.

"Well, well, I thought there was a foul smell around here. Turns out it's just a homeless, skanky arse traitor," Tillie snarls, twisting her overly made-up face.

Ignoring the sharp jab of pain against my skin, I snatch my hand from beneath her unforgiving heel. A quick, furtive glance confirms their enraged faces, and with a silent resolve, I gather my things, determined to ignore them both.

"I thought you'd had the good sense to drop out when you didn't come back for the start of term. Seems you're just as stupid as you look," Sienna adds, flicking her bleach-blond hair over her shoulder.

Once all my things are in my bag, I stand back up, throwing it over my shoulder as I do. Both mean girls take a step closer, blocking me against the wall behind me. I let out a sigh, which sounds suspiciously like a groan. It's too early to be dealing with this nonsense.

"I need to get to class," I tell them through gritted teeth.

"Why are you here? There's no way you can afford it. I heard they seized all your family's money and took your house. You're a fucking nobody, and we definitely don't want you here," Tillie snaps, pushing me back against the wall.

An overwhelming urge to fight back ripples through me, heating my veins as I bite down on my lip to prevent myself from saying something I might regret.

“You should have fucking stayed away. We’re going to make your pathetic life hell,” Sienna adds, pushing my shoulder the same way Tillie just did—like a terrible copycat.

Before I can respond, I’m startled into silence when I see Ryan walking over to us. Although he’s not looking at me, I can’t help but hope he’s here to tell these bitches to leave me alone. We may not be together anymore, but I was his girlfriend for two years. He can’t have forgotten that already.

Ryan stops when he reaches Sienna’s side, and everything moves in slow motion, like something out of a horror movie, as Sienna turns and pulls him into a kiss. It’s overly affectionate for something so public, but it’s clearly Sienna’s way of marking her territory.

She might as well have pissed on him. But I don’t care; she can have him, as I sure don’t want him anymore—maybe I never really did.

As they continue sticking their tongues in each other’s mouths, Tillie pulls my attention back to her. “Oh, you didn’t know, did you? Ryan and Sienna are together now. He knew he could do so much better than a dirty little tramp like you.”

I bite my lip so hard I can taste copper as blood leaks into my mouth. I really want to say something, but I know it’ll only make things worse, so I stay quiet. Besides, my silence seems to wind Tillie up even more, as she actually stomps her foot when she doesn’t get a rise out of me.

Then her eyes widen, and the anger on her face is replaced by excitement mixed with a little craziness. “But don’t worry, I can help you appear a little less like a dirty tramp.”

Before I can work out what she means, she opens the bottle of water I didn’t even see her holding and pours it over my head. My strawberry-blond curls plaster against my scalp as the liquid drips down over my body, soaking me.

Ryan and Sienna part just long enough to turn and laugh at me, while Tillie takes her phone out of her bag and starts snapping pictures of me looking like a drowned rat. The soft fabric of my dress is clinging to my body, and the coldness of the water has my nipples poking through.

Don’t cry, Harper. They will never see you cry!

Despite the mental reminder, the tears form, and I have to fight to keep them at bay. Luckily, Tillie, Sienna, and Ryan appear to have had their fun—they have the pictures as a lasting reminder—and I breathe a sigh of relief when they turn and leave.

Just when I think the situation couldn't get any worse, I look up and see Lawson Radley leaning against the wall opposite, his piercing silver gaze taking in every inch of my soaked skin.

As I draw in a breath, I try to pull my shoulders back, but all that does is cause the soaked material of my dress to scratch against my peaked nipples. The dress covered me well enough, and came with its own built-in support, so I didn't need to worry about wearing a bra—until now.

I drop my gaze to the floor as I take a step towards the classroom, hoping I'm not already late after my nightmare of a morning so far. But I've barely made it two steps when Lawson pushes off from the wall opposite and starts stalking towards me.

If I keep moving forward, I'll knock into him. So I do the only thing I can think of when my heart is beating so loud I can hear it echoing in my ears...I retreat. Shockingly, in just a couple of steps, my back hits the wall behind me, yet Lawson keeps going until I'm caged in.

He's standing so close I have to look up to meet his gaze, only to find he's not looking at my eyes at all. He stares at my sundress clinging to my skin, lingering on my nipples poking through.

Now would be a great time for the ground to open up and swallow me whole, please.

My cheeks flood with embarrassment at him seeing me like this, until my eyes meet his once more, and all I can see reflected is fire. He's looking at me like he wants to devour me whole, and it makes my knees weak.

Lawson places his hand against the wall beside my head, blocking me in even further, and when I take a breath, all I can smell is him...and it's all kinds of intoxicating.

"Why didn't you stand up for yourself?" His voice is deep and gravelly, but there's a sternness to it that puts me on edge.

I shrug my shoulders. "There's no point. A proper lady knows how to remain quiet and not cause a scene." I'm just spitting out a pre-rehearsed line that I was taught growing up.

With his free hand, he hooks his finger under my chin and lifts my head until I meet his gaze. I shiver under the intensity and his touch. He's so close, his breath fans across my face.

"I'll admit, there's something incredibly sexy about seeing a woman submit, but it's even hotter when she puts up a fight."

The innuendo in his words sends butterflies through my stomach, and my core clenches in a very unfamiliar way. The corner of his lip tips up into his signature smirk, as if he can see the way my body is reacting to him.

He tilts his head toward my ear, moving so close his lips are almost touching my lobe. I ball my hands into fists to stop from reaching out, as the overwhelming urge to touch him grows.

“If you want to show you still have power and status, even without your family name, you’ll need to act like it. Tillie knows she’s powerful, which is why she acts like a bitch. If you learn to stand up for yourself, she’ll quickly realise that you haven’t fallen like she believes you have, and she’ll think twice about messing with you.”

I tilt my head to look at him once more, trying to see behind the mask of indifference he wears so well. “Why are you telling me this? Why are you helping me?”

He takes a small step back, and I’m very grateful as it allows me to clear my head just a little. With my senses not overwhelmed by all things Lawson, I can actually think straight.

“I have a very selfish reason. I want you to agree to be my Prize.” His casual words hang in the air, a stark contrast to the sudden cold that prickles my skin. I flinch, the sharp sound of my own gasp echoing in the sudden quiet.

I shake my head in confusion; stunned and a little intrigued by his suggestion.

Of course, I know what a Prize is, though many girls on campus probably don’t. If you’re a daughter, raised in an Obsidian family, you will be one of two things—a Wife or a Prize, but you can’t be both.

Coming from a high-ranking Obsidian family, there was never any doubt that I’d be an Order Wife, which is why I had to remain a virgin, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t learn all about the other option that wasn’t even presented to me.

Every third-year Pledge is gifted a Prize at the start of the school year, and that girl is theirs until they graduate. She must gift herself willingly, but once she does, she belongs to him—mind, body, and soul. He can do whatever he wants with her, and she has to obey.

That a guy like Lawson would want me as his Prize is frankly baffling, but it calls to a part of me I’ve kept hidden for a very long time. The part of

me that is secretly intrigued by the idea of being a Prize, and all that it entails.

Despite him calling to a dark, repressed part of my soul, there's only one answer I can give him. "I can't be your Prize. I still plan to be an Order Wife in the future; that hasn't changed. Besides, I'd never lower myself to be your whore."

As I say the final word, a shiver of excitement ripples through me, and I have to push the thoughts away, but I can tell Lawson saw. He laughs, his silver gaze sparkling with something that can only resemble a challenge, and it sets my nerves on edge.

He leans closer until his lips are right beside mine, and I have to hold my breath as I stay as still as possible. "I guess we'll have to see what happens, sweetheart. I think you'll find being my Prize—my whore—is the best future you can hope for."

Before I have the chance to respond, he takes a step back, spins around and walks away, as if he didn't just shake me to my very core. All I can think about, as he gets further away, is the way his eyes blazed when he called me his whore, and how much I liked the idea.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Harper



It's been two days since Lawson told me he wanted me to be his Prize, and I've barely been able to think about anything else. I don't know why, but there's a dark part of me that's intrigued by his offer and is genuinely considering it.

Lawson Radley is the highest-ranking Crow for a reason—he's deadly, ruthless, and cold, but I have always wondered if that's just a role he plays. That maybe nobody has ever seen the real Lawson, but that could just be wishful thinking. Maybe he's exactly as he appears.

The one thing I am thankful for is that I've not had any more run-ins similar to that first day. Don't get me wrong, I still get stared at constantly, and people throw hateful comments my way, or call me names, but it's not gotten physical again, which I'm grateful for. I'd have to take Lawson's suggestion into consideration if it had.

As soon as Wren found out what happened, she wanted to wage war on Tillie and Sienna, and I couldn't help but smile at the rage and hurt she felt on my behalf. I hate that she agrees with Lawson, and thinks I need to defend myself.

I didn't tell her about his suggestion at first...mostly because I didn't want her to try talking me into it. She's never been supportive of me remaining a virgin until marriage, but she doesn't come from our world. She only knows about the Obsidian Order through me.

When we met on our trial day, the summer before starting university, it was nice to meet someone who didn't belong in our world. She's from a working-class background, and her family worked their arses off to send her to Shadowmere.

Initially, she thought the four Houses were nothing more than pretentious frats, who ruled the school because of their wealth, status, and reputation. But as our friendship grew, and I learnt I could trust her more than anyone else in my life, I explained all about the Obsidian Order and the world I grew up in.

Generally, the Order's existence is kept secret, but Wren attending their parties with me would draw attention to her. Her lack of status means she'll never be an Order Wife, but it doesn't stop someone from wanting her as a Prize, and that's the loophole I used to enlighten my best friend on the life I grew up in.

While Wren supports me at Order events, she's also determined that I experience some of what life has to offer for a normal student. Which is how I find myself being dragged to the campus pub after a really long week.

The Blackbird Inn is a typical English pub with low lighting, mismatched fabric seats, and sticky wooden tables. Faint music filters into the room, but it's barely audible over the room full of people talking and laughing. No matter the day, this place always seems to be full of students taking advantage of the cheap drinks.

We slide into a booth in the corner, after grabbing a drink each, and settle into our usual easy conversation. Even though we see each other most days, we still find plenty to talk about, and just as I'm starting my second vodka and lemonade, I feel like my tongue might be loose enough to tell her what happened with Lawson.

Just as I'm trying to work out what to say, someone walks over to our booth, casting a shadow over us. I look up in time to see Ryan pulling up a stool and sitting at the head of the table.

"I'm sorry, are you fucking lost?" Wren asks, her nose wrinkling in disgust as she stares at Ryan. I don't think he even sees her, as he fixes his gaze on me.

"We need to talk," he tells me, completely ignoring Wren.

I shake my head as Wren says, "Fuck no. You need to leave."

Only then does he turn and glare at my best friend. "I need to talk to Harper...alone."

Wren throws her arms up in the air dramatically as she shakes her head rapidly. "I will repeat this one more time, since you've clearly developed a

listening issue since we last saw you... You need to fuck off and leave Harper alone. You made your position very fucking clear.”

Anger flashes in his eyes, and before he can yell at Wren, I cut him off. “She’s right. You had plenty of opportunities to talk to me before.”

When he turns his attention back to me, his face softens slightly, and I’m reminded of the boy who supposedly loved me for the last two years. “I know I’ve handled things badly, but this is important.”

Wren lets out a sarcastic snort. “Badly? That’s a fucking understatement.”

Ryan turns to argue with her, but I reach out and lay my hand over his, stopping him. “Why now? Why is it important?”

“Can we talk alone?” he repeats, motioning his head towards Wren, who continues to glare at him.

I remain silent, and she flicks her gaze back to me, her eyes growing wide when she realises I’m considering his request. I don’t think he has anything good to say, but Ryan has piqued my interest enough that I can’t walk away. I have to know what’s so important.

She shakes her head with a frown. “I’m not leaving you. I’ll sit here in silence and won’t interrupt, but I’m not leaving you with him.”

Ryan groans. “I’m not going to hurt her.”

“Too fucking late for that, dick,” Wren retaliates, and I have to hold up my hand to silence them both.

I fix my gaze on Wren, letting her know how serious I am as I say, “You can stay, but if you make even a sound, you’ll be gone. I appreciate you looking out for me, so if you can sit in silence, you can stay.”

“But—” Before Ryan can argue, I cut him off.

“I’m agreeing to hear you out, but that’s the only demand you get to make of me. Wren stays, and if you don’t agree to that, you can leave,” I tell him firmly, making it clear there’s no room for discussion.

“Fine,” Ryan mutters as Wren nods her head. She mimes zipping her lips shut, and I can’t help but chuckle. There’s no way my friend will be able to stay silent for the entire conversation, but I appreciate her trying.

“Okay, what is so important? What do you have to tell me?” I ask, hoping he can’t hear how interested I am.

“Look, I didn’t deal with what happened between us very well, but I want to try to make things right. Even though we can’t be together, it

doesn't change the fact that I loved you for the last two years. I care about you, and I want to help you out of the situation you're in."

I have to grit my teeth when he refers to our love in the past tense. It's been just over two months since we broke up, and he's already over me. Though I suspect he never really loved me at all, and I didn't love him either. But that's what hindsight gets you.

"How?" There were so many questions swirling around in my mind, but I settle for the easiest, keen for him to get to the point.

"I want you to be my Prize," he announces proudly.

It's like one of those comedy moments you see in films. Wren has just taken a mouthful of her Jack Daniel's and Coke, and as soon as Ryan says the word Prize, all the liquid spurts out of her mouth before she breaks down into a coughing fit.

I pause to make sure my friend is okay, sliding over my bottle of water, which she gratefully accepts. Her cheeks are bright red by the time her breathing returns to normal, and I can tell it's taking a lot of effort for her to remain silent right now.

"Why would I agree to be your Prize? You know I'm saving myself to become an Order Wife," I tell him, my brow wrinkling in confusion.

He lets out a short laugh as he shakes his head. "You really think anyone would want you as an Order Wife now? With your status and reputation? Even the lowest-ranking Order member wouldn't want someone with your baggage. Being my Prize is your best offer."

"Why is it? I may as well just stay as I am," I tell him.

"It's too dangerous. Your father pissed off a lot of people, and if the rumours are true, and he talks to the police about the Order, it will only put an even bigger target on your back. If you agree to be my Prize, I will have to protect you," Ryan explains, puffing his chest out as if he's actually doing me a favour.

"You may have to protect me, but you'll also have full control over me. I'll have to give myself to you, no questions asked. Isn't that right?" I narrow my gaze on him, wondering if he's going to lie to me.

"Yes, it's true that a Prize has to gift herself fully to the Pledge, but that's necessary for me to take care of you and keep you safe. I'd never take advantage of you," he responds, trying to make himself sound almost angelic.

Just as I'm rolling my eyes, Wren lets out a snort that she quickly tries to hide by covering her mouth with her hand. I turn to look at her, and I can't help but smile at her desperately trying to stay quiet.

When I turn back to Ryan, he's watching me closely, no doubt trying to work out what my response is going to be. "Honestly, there was a time when I would have believed you when you said you wouldn't take advantage of the situation, but that trust is long gone. I wouldn't feel any safer with you than I would with any other Order Pledge. So I'll take my chances on my own, thanks."

As soon as it registers that I'm rejecting him, his entire demeanour shifts. Gone is the innocent, caring guy who just wants to help me, and in his place is the ruthless man who doesn't like to lose.

His face contorts and a raw crimson flush creeps up his neck as fury ignites within him. His eyes, burning like embers, flash with brutal intensity.

"You don't know what you're turning down. You need someone to keep you safe, otherwise this year will be really dangerous for you," he threatens.

I shrug my shoulders as if I don't care. "That's fine. I'll take my chances."

"I'll make sure nobody hurts her," Wren says, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"You'll regret this," Ryan warns as he stands from his stool, looming over us.

"We will see," I respond with a shrug, his cheeks turning a deeper shade of red as he clenches his teeth, clearly unhappy that he's not getting his own way.

As Ryan walks away, I take a big gulp of my vodka before letting out a groan. "Why does everyone suddenly want me to be a Prize?" I mutter under my breath.

"What do you mean?" Wren asks, having picked up on my little slip of the tongue.

"Lawson Radley asked me to be his Prize a couple of days ago. I turned him down, before you ask, which is why I didn't bother telling you."

Her eyes widen almost comically large as she glowers at me. "Lawson asked you?"

I nod. "He worded it differently to Ryan, but the proposal was the same."

“What did he say?” she asks, as she leans forward, ready to soak up every drop of gossip like a sponge.

“He basically said he wanted me to be his whore, and that I’d quickly realise that being his Prize was the best future I could hope for.” I roll my eyes as I recall the cocky confidence he’d had when he spoke to me.

Wren lets out a chuckle. “Well, at least he was more honest with you than Ryan, the turd, was. Besides, Lawson is hot as hell, and I can only imagine he’d be a fucking God in bed.”

I shake my head in despair at my friend. “More like the devil.”

Her eyes light up as she nods rapidly. “Yes! He’d be a fucking devil in bed. Tell me you don’t want that.”

I don’t tell her that there’s a part of me that has more than considered his proposal. That I’ve imagined many scenarios involving Lawson and a bed, but that doesn’t mean I’ve changed my mind.

“It’s irrelevant. I still have to be an Order Wife, which means my virginity stays.”

Wren lets out a groan as she dramatically bangs her head on the back of the booth. “You have no idea what you’re missing out on.”

I don’t bother arguing with her, as it’s one argument I will never win. Besides, I agree with her—I am missing out on a lot, but it still changes nothing. I was raised to fulfil a particular role, and I have no alternative but to keep striving for that goal.

We make our way home, once we’ve finished our drinks, and I’d be lying if I said the proposals from both guys weren’t playing on my mind. *Why now?* I know the Gifting Ceremony is coming up, which is why they’re deciding who their Prize should be, but why do they both want it to be me?

As I climb into bed, I know there’s only one person I can talk to about this, and I just have to hope he’ll give me an honest answer. I just wish he wasn’t the last person I want to talk to about my sex life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Harper



I wake up the next morning, after a restless night's sleep, having spent most of the time tossing and turning, as I became overheated thanks to thoughts of Lawson bloody Radley. I don't know why the idea of being his Prize intrigues me so much, but it was all I dreamt about. So when my phone buzzing woke me up, I was more than a little relieved.

With a series of rapid blinks, I try to banish the lingering sleep, my fingers finding the cool surface of my phone on the nightstand. My vision has focused by the time I look at the screen, my heart freezing for a second when I recognise the number.

I instantly accept the call, keeping quiet as I wait for the automated message to start. *"This call is from a person currently in a prison in England. All calls are logged and recorded, and may be listened to by a member of prison staff. If you do not wish to accept this call, please hang up now."*

When I see that it's only quarter past seven on a Saturday morning, I pull in a ragged breath as my mind wanders. I usually know roughly when my dad will call, and this isn't it. The only time I received an unexpected call was from a prison staff member who informed me that my dad had been injured and hospitalised. So, naturally, I'm in worst-case scenario mode right now.

The agonising wait for the call to connect finally ends with a distinct clicking sound, then my father's voice, and a wave of relief washes over me. *"Hey, buttercup."*

"Dad, are you okay?" My voice shakes, giving away just how worried I am.

“Hey, don’t sound so sad. I thought you’d be glad to hear from your old man,” he replies, and I don’t miss the way he sidesteps my question.

“I’m always happy to hear from you, Dad. I just wasn’t expecting your call, and when I heard it was the prison calling, I started overthinking,” I admit, not able to hide anything from my dad.

A sigh escapes him, followed by the rustle of him moving about. *“I have a call scheduled with my lawyer, and since I was supposed to be talking to you tonight anyway, the guard let me call early. It means I get longer with you, and it’s more private.”*

“So there’s really nothing the matter? You’re not hurt or anything?” My questions rush out as quickly as they enter my brain.

“Really, everything is fine, buttercup. But enough about me, how are things with you?” he asks, and I’m once again aware that he’s rapidly changing the subject, which is a concern, but there’s not a lot I can do if he’s being evasive.

Just last night I was looking forward to talking to my dad later today, to discuss everything that has happened recently, but now he’s here, I’m not even sure where to start—which is probably why I just blurt everything out.

“Ryan asked me to be his Prize. He said it’s the only option, as I need someone to keep me safe. Obviously, I said no... I wouldn’t trust him to keep me safe, anyway. But...” I trail off, wondering how to tell him about Lawson.

“But what?” Dad prompts. *“Are you considering it?”*

Even though he can’t see, I shake my head and snuggle deeper into the pillows, my back settling against the headboard. “No, absolutely not.”

“So what aren’t you telling me?”

Pausing for a moment, he gives me the time to find my words. “A couple of days before Ryan asked me to be his Prize, Lawson Radley asked if I would be his.”

“Lawson Radley?” Dad repeats his name like a question, sounding as confused as I am.

He knows who Lawson is—every Obsidian Order member has heard of the Radley family, since Lawson’s father, George, is part of the Obsidian Council. They’re one of the highest-ranking families, making them like royalty in our world. So, of course, my dad has heard of him, but he doesn’t know them on a personal level.

"I didn't know you and Lawson were that close. Why would he ask you to be his Prize?" he enquires, his tone laced with suspicion.

"We're not close. He's always been Ryan's biggest rival, and they've never hidden how much they hate each other. Over the last two years, the only time Lawson has interacted with me is either to embarrass me or to proposition me away from Ryan. I think it has more to do with their rivalry than with me."

A soft hum escapes Dad before he goes silent, leaving only the tap-tap-tap of his finger on the phone. *"Did Ryan know Lawson asked you to be his Prize?"*

"No. Nobody knew. I kept it a secret, and I assume Lawson did too after I refused him."

He lets out a long sigh. *"If that's true, Ryan didn't ask you in retaliation for Lawson asking you. I suspect Lawson found out Ryan was going to ask you and beat him to it."*

"Why?" The word slips out before I can stop it, but this whole situation is confusing me.

"I don't know, but I hate to say that I agree with Ryan. You need someone to protect you."

With another shake of my head, I tighten my grip on the duvet, its familiar weight a comfort to me. *"I don't—"*

Before I can finish my sentence, Dad cuts me off. *"I know you're going to say you can look after yourself, and I don't doubt that, but there's a lot more going on here than you're aware of. Some very dangerous men are determined to see me fall, and they don't plan on stopping until I'm dead."*

"Luckily, I still have some friends in high places, and I have no intention of dying anytime soon. But once they realise their current plan isn't working, they will switch things up."

"You, buttercup, are the only person in this world that I care about, and that makes you my one weakness. When they don't get what they want from me, there's a very good chance they'll use you to get to me—and I can't allow that to happen."

"Because of the situation we're in, I can't marry you to an Order member, despite that being the best way to keep you safe. Nobody will marry you until I've cleared my name, and the same goes for someone dating or getting Betrothed to you. So, unfortunately, that doesn't leave us with many options."

My heart hammers against my ribs as I gasp for air, my thoughts a chaotic whirl as I try to keep up with him. The chilling death threats against him ring ominously in my ears, bringing with them the terrifying fear that I could be targeted too.

“What are you trying to say, Dad?” My voice cracks as tears fill my eyes, even though I’m fighting to keep them at bay.

“I’m saying, you need someone to help keep you safe. You’re right not to trust Ryan, after the way he treated you and then left...but Lawson... He has the power, the money, and the prestige to take care of you,” he explains, and my stomach drops.

“You think I should be his Prize?” I ask, exasperated.

He lets out a long groan, and it sounds like he’s hitting the phone. *“I don’t like the idea of you being anyone’s Prize, buttercup. You’re worth so much more than that, but I hate to say that Lawson may be the only person who can keep you safe.”*

“Being a Prize means giving up on the future you had planned for me. You know that, right?” I don’t know why I’m being so pissy with him, since it’s not exactly a future I was dead-set on, but I hate not having choices.

He lets out another long sigh, and guilt sits heavily in the pit of my stomach as I add to my dad’s stress levels. He’s going through so much as it is, and I’m only making it worse by being petulant.

“I know, Harper, and I’m so sorry. I hate that I’ve gotten us into this mess, and I don’t know how to get us out of it.” He sounds so broken and dejected, and my guilt worsens.

“It’s not your fault, Dad. We need to come up with a way of getting you out of there. I hate that I’m thinking about trivial things like boys when I should be focused on proving your innocence,” I tell him, frustration bleeding into every word.

“Maybe you can do both?” he replies, sounding brighter than he had just a second ago.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve always raised you to believe that women are second-class citizens when it comes to the Obsidian Order, but that’s not entirely true. That’s what the Order wants women to believe, to make themselves seem more powerful. The truth is, the right woman can wield a lot of power over a man, under the right circumstances.”

“Although my marriage to your mother was arranged, we truly fell in love, and I would have done anything for her. Under the Order’s rules, she was beneath me and had to submit to me, but she was the one with the actual power.

“She knew exactly what to say or do to get her way, and she could twist me around her finger when she wanted something, making me her very powerful weapon. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I shake my head, then remember he can’t see me. “Not really.”

He lets out a sigh. *“You have to submit to Lawson as his Prize, but once you learn all about him—what he loves, what he hates, what he craves—you’ll be able to twist him around your finger. You’ll be the one with the power. And you might be able to use Lawson and his connections to help me.”*

I have what TV would describe as one of those lightbulb moments, where I almost feel stupid for not having thought of it before. Not only is Lawson highly ranked within the Crows, his entire family is part of the Order. His father is on the Obsidian Council, and that means he has knowledge that other members don’t have access to.

All I have to do is manipulate Lawson into helping me—after I give him my body and my virginity.

Oh, that doesn’t sound simple at all.

“Honestly, I’m not really sure how I’m going to do it, but I’ll do whatever I can to get you out of there, and we can deal with the fallout when it happens.”

“Harper, as much as I want you to help me, you need to remember: the reason I’m telling you to be Lawson’s Prize is so that he can protect you. Anything he can do to help me is nothing more than an added bonus. Your safety is my priority. Do you understand?”

I let out a long sigh, and despite never normally doing it, I lie to my dad. “I understand. I won’t do anything that puts me at risk.”

He pauses, and I wonder if he can hear the lie. *“That’s all I ask, buttercup. Being a Prize isn’t easy, and I’m sorry you’re in this position.”*

Letting out a short laugh, I sound way more sarcastic than I intended. “Dad, it’s just sex, how hard can it be?”

Dad lets out a long groan before he huffs at me. *“Obsidian men aren’t like normal men, Harper. They’ve been raised to think they’re better than everyone else, that they can control whoever they choose. They rarely know*

how to love, and they certainly don't fall for their Prize. They see her as property, something to use and nothing more. Don't go into this thinking it will be easy, or that Lawson will care for you, because he won't."

Nausea ripples through my stomach as Dad's harsh words hit me hard, making me uneasy. He's not telling me anything I didn't already know about Obsidian men, but now I have a face and a name to go with the information. I'm picturing Lawson being the one using and abusing me for his own pleasure, and if I'm being honest, I don't know how to feel.

"I know, Dad. It will be nothing more than an arrangement—no feelings." I'm not sure if I'm saying the words for him or myself.

"Buttercup, I want you to promise me that when you tell him you'll be his Prize, you make it clear to him that me being in prison won't stop me from killing him if he hurts you. Okay?"

I can't help but laugh at his overprotective threat, even though I'm sure he's very serious.

"I'll tell him, Dad."

"You need to let him know about Ryan asking you too. Find out if he already knew, as that will go a long way in helping you understand his motives."

Even though I agree, I'm not sure I care what Lawson's motive for asking me to be his Prize is—it doesn't change anything. I might have to say yes, but that doesn't mean I'm going to give in to him easily.

Lawson has been telling me to stand up for myself, to not let people walk all over me, and I think there's no better time to start than with him. I'm sure he didn't mean for me to stand up to him, but I plan to. If he wants me as his Prize, I'm going to make him earn it.



CHAPTER NINE

Lawson

The last thing I want to do on a Saturday night is spend it surrounded by drunk arseholes in Vulture's Den—the nightclub on campus, run by a young Obsidian Order member called Rafe Kincaid, but we all call him Kincaid.

He's only a few years older than me, and he's been running Vulture's ever since he graduated. I don't know if there's any truth to them, but the rumours suggest he was one of the best Pledges the Order had ever seen, and they had no choice but to give him his choice of assignment after graduation, even though they were disappointed with what he chose.

Although I know Kincaid, and we've hung out a few times, our connection is mostly through Bram. So when Bram told me we were going to Kincaid's club tonight, I knew there was no point arguing—no matter how much I might have wanted to.

As I down my second shot of some horrible green liquid, grimacing at the sour taste that's burning my throat, I acknowledge that the only good thing about knowing the owner is that we get a private booth in the VIP section. It comes with its own server, so we don't have to queue at the bar for our drinks.

I chase the fucking repulsive liquid with a mouthful of beer, my nose scrunching up at the awful taste it's creating on my tongue. I turn to glare at Bram, who is actually licking the fucking empty shot glass.

"What the hell was that? It tasted fucking awful," I shout, trying to be heard over the loud, pounding bass that the DJ is pumping into the room.

Vulture's is jam-packed tonight, which is not surprising. While there's a pub on campus, and at least one dorm or Order House that will throw a

party each weekend, this is the only nightclub within the University grounds, so options are limited.

Nobody bothers leaving campus, since the nearest town with anything close to a nightclub would be well over an hour away, and even then, it wouldn't be anywhere near as good as Vulture's.

"It was a Squashed Frog. Admittedly, it's an acquired taste. The Slippery Nipple coming up is much better," Bram announces almost proudly, and I let out a long groan.

I didn't come out tonight intending to get pissed, but that was clearly on Bram's agenda. In fact, he was halfway there before we even stepped foot in Vulture's, as I'm pretty sure he started drinking back at the house.

"Remind me again why I agreed to come out tonight," I mumble, more to myself than anything.

"Because you couldn't turn down my sparkling personality," Bram replies with a wink, which only makes me roll my eyes at him. "Besides, you need to get laid."

I groan loudly before taking a bigger gulp of my beer. "Not this bullshit again."

He shuffles closer to me in the round booth and throws his arm over my shoulders, using his other hand to point towards the main section of the club. "Look around. This place is packed full of gorgeous girls, and I bet there's more than a few who would jump at the opportunity to fuck you."

He's not wrong. Before we made it to the VIP booth, at least three girls tried to hit on me, and there are several others looking this way now. It's not that I'm not interested; it's just that none of them grab my attention that much anymore.

It's a bit like going to an all you can eat buffet. The first time you go up and see all the food, you want a bit of everything. You want to sample whatever is on offer—and then some more. You eat until you're full to bursting.

And you might repeat that process the next few times you eat there, but after a while, all the food tastes the same. Nothing stands out or captures your attention the way it did that very first time.

Until finally, you reach the stage where nothing tastes good, so you don't bother with it. You're just waiting for them to bring out that new dish to capture your attention all over again.

You mean like a certain strawberry-blonde? I think to myself, before quickly pushing that thought away.

It's true Harper has managed to keep my attention for much longer than anyone else, but that doesn't mean I'm interested in her in that way.

Bram is staring at me, clearly waiting for me to get out of my head and answer him. With a huff, I say, "It won't be long until I'll have plenty of opportunities to get my dick wet, remember?"

Like a child on Christmas morning, his eyes sparkle with excitement. "The Gifting Ceremony. I can't fucking wait."

"Have you even picked a Prize yet?" Although Bram is more than happy to tell me about his conquests in great detail—usually too much detail—I've never once heard him mention who he plans to make his Prize.

His eyes darken and his smile falls as he shrugs his shoulders, trying to look as laid back as he usually appears, but I know my friend too well. I can see he's hiding something. "I haven't decided yet."

"Come on, there must be someone you have your eye on. Or are you worried the one you want won't agree to be your Prize?" I'm somewhat familiar with that scenario, given Harper's rejection has been playing on repeat in my head since it fucking happened.

Bram swallows the last of the whiskey that's in front of him, before flagging down our server and ordering far more alcohol than two people need. The air hangs thick and heavy as the palpable silence presses in. His steady and unyielding gaze meets mine, reminding him I'm a stubborn arsehole who plans to wait him out.

As soon as the server has dropped off our drinks, giving Bram a flirty wink and a giggle as she sashays away, he downs the awful cream-coloured shot without hesitation. Letting out a loud huff, he turns to face me. "I don't get to choose my Prize. My father informed me the other day that he has selected my Prize, and I have no choice but to accept her."

"Do you know who she is?"

His head snaps back, a sharp jolt sending waves of agony through him. The fire of anger ignites behind his eyes, a searing, visible heat.

He hates doing anything his father demands, and is usually more than happy to rebel, so I'm not sure why he's toeing the line now.

"No. He's not telling me on purpose. He thinks I'll manipulate her into refusing to be my Prize," he snaps.

"Which you would."

“I would. And I fucking hate that he knows that about me,” he growls, taking another long swig of whiskey.

“Why don’t you just refuse? It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve declined a request your father made.”

His eyes narrow into dark slits, as the emerald flecks within them seem to absorb all light. The ice in the tumbler clinks softly as his grip tightens, his knuckles turning a stark white against his tanned skin as his fingers clench around the smooth glass.

“He said that if I don’t take the Prize he chooses, then next year, he will put Lu forward as a Prize.”

Now the murderous expression on his face makes perfect sense. Lucky is his seventeen-year-old sister, and one of the few people on this planet that Bram would kill to protect. She’s starting Shadowmere University next year, and while it’s uncommon for a first-year to become a Prize, it’s not unheard of. Once a girl registers at Shadowmere, she can become a Prize.

For as long as I’ve known him, his main goal has been for Lu to live as normal a life as possible, away from the world we’re part of. He didn’t even want her to enrol at Shadowmere.

“I thought she wasn’t going to be part of the Order. She was going to go to university away from here,” I state, remembering the conversation we had not too long ago.

His face twists in disgust. “It would appear my father has rescinded his deal with me, and now that I’m a third-year Crow, he knows I have no way out. I thought he was planning on arranging her Betrothal, and if I’m being honest, that was the best-case scenario for me, because it gives me time to get her out of the contract. But if she agrees to be a Prize, I’ll have no way of stopping that, and I won’t be here to protect her either.”

Shit, now I know why he’s so angry.

“So you have to accept the Prize your father chose. I guess that’s no big deal. Once she’s yours, you can do whatever the hell you want with her. You can fuck her once and ignore her for the rest of the year.”

He fills his lungs with a deep, drawn-out breath, then lets it out. “I know that, but I’m worried this is just the start. If I give in to him now, what else is he going to ask of me in the future? No matter how hard I try, I’m always going to be under his fucking thumb.”

Now I can fucking relate to that.

Being raised in the shadow of a powerful man who gets everything he wants is something I'm more than familiar with. What's ironic is that a lot of junior Crows think being a Legacy member is an immense honour, that our name precedes us, but they don't know what it's like to live in another person's shadow. It's nearly impossible to become your own person—though me and Bram are still desperately trying.

Before I can reply, Bram's whole demeanour shifts, and a bright, mischievous smile lights up his face. I follow the direction of where he's staring, wondering what has captured his attention, and as soon as my eyes land on her, I let out a string of curse words.

Harper Westmore has just walked into Vulture's, looking like every man's fucking wet dream. She's wearing a short black dress that stops mid-thigh, showing off her long creamy legs, which look even longer thanks to the black stilettos.

The silky material seems to just flow down her body like a waterfall, clinging to every gorgeous curve just enough to show them off. The neckline swoops lower than I'm used to seeing on Harper, emphasising her ample cleavage—and I can't help but wonder how the hell she's been hiding them!

Her long strawberry-blonde hair hangs down her back in gentle curls, with a few pieces pulled back away from her face. She's wearing more makeup than she normally does, and the dark glitter around her eyes only makes her gorgeous blue shade pop. And don't even get me started on the bright red colour that's plumping up her lips incredibly seductively.

I don't recognise the version of Harper that's standing on the other side of the club. She's normally shy and reserved, and her appearance typically matches that part of her persona. Usually, she does everything she can to blend into the background, to go unnoticed, but that's not the case here.

In fact, there are far more eyes on her than I'm comfortable with, and the sudden urge to start gouging out eyeballs makes me squeeze my fists in fury.

I'm a mess of emotions, as both jealousy and rage ripple through my veins, heating me up and making me practically vibrate. I want to look away, but I can't.

Bram's loud laugh drags my gaze away from watching Harper make her way over to the bar, with her best friend Wren by her side. When I meet his amused expression, my eyes narrow, but he just continues to laugh.

“Tonight just got real interesting,” he chuckles.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I say through gritted teeth, regretting my response immediately. I should have kept my mouth shut, but now I’ve given him the opportunity to tell me his thoughts, and no good can come from that.

“You’ve had a face like a slapped arse since we walked in, and bored doesn’t even begin to cover your expression. Yet one look at Red over there and your eyes light up like fucking illuminations. You’re into her,” he states confidently, and I quickly shake my head.

“No, I’m fucking not. She turned me down when I asked her to be my Prize, remember?”

His smile grows as he nods rapidly. “I don’t have to remember because you never stop fucking talking about it. You’ve spent two years making this girl’s life hell, and now that you actually have a good reason for being a dick to her, you aren’t. If she’s half as confused as I am, it’s no wonder she’s avoiding you.”

I let out a huff, hating that he’s right. I don’t know how to explain it, as there’s no way I’m admitting that I’ve never hated her. So I settle for some version of the truth. “For the last two years, she’s been Betrothed to that wanker, Ryan. That’s the reason I’ve made her life hell, and now she’s rid of him, that excuse has gone. Besides, she’s being targeted simply because of who her father is, and we both know that’s not fair.”

His expression shifts for a second at the mention of his father before he nods in agreement. “She doesn’t deserve to be hassled just because he’s done something wrong. Besides, I know you only asked her to be your Prize to get back at Ryan, so he can’t have her.”

I mean, he’s not wrong. That was definitely part of the reason, but there were other thoughts occupying my mind at the time—and I’m definitely not going to vocalise those.

“Exactly. She’s just got free of him; the last thing she needs is to go backwards,” I add, before taking another sip of my drink.

It’s taking every bit of my energy not to turn my head and seek her out. I want to know where she is, what she’s doing, and who she’s talking to, but I can’t. That will give too much away under my friend’s watchful gaze.

But that thought goes out the window when the sound of a commotion at the entrance to the VIP section reaches us. The voices are loud enough to

capture our attention over the booming bass, and both me and Bram turn to look at what's causing the fuss.

My eyes widen as my gaze lands on Harper, who is standing behind an enraged-looking Wren. She's yelling at the large security guard, who is blocking their entry into the VIP area. He grabs her arm, and she slaps him away.

Harper is practically hiding behind her best friend, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment as more people turn to watch Wren argue with a man twice her size.

I didn't even hear Bram get up from our booth, as I'm so distracted by Harper, not until he's charging at the security guard. I mutter a string of curses as Bram drags the guy backwards, pulling him away from Wren. Without even a moment's hesitation, he slams his fist into the guard's face, and as blood gushes from his now broken nose, all hell breaks loose.

A couple of other guards jump in to help their colleague, and Harper tries to pull Wren back, but the crowd of people gathering behind them means they're pushed further into the commotion.

I don't normally get involved with Bram's fights, as they happen far too often, and he doesn't need my help, but this time, I stand with a groan and make my way over, much more casually than the frantic situation calls for.

As soon as I'm close enough, I pull the guards out of the way, so I can make my way into the middle of the scrimmage. My eyes catch a fist flying at my face; I narrowly avoid it and retaliate with a punch to his abdomen, winding him enough to knock him backwards.

As the next man rushes at me, I slam my fist into his nose, hearing a sickening crunch as blood spurts from what I'm absolutely certain is a fracture. He mumbles curse words as he spits blood, but all I can hear is Bram's maniacal laughter as he takes on three men at once.

I take a quick look around, assessing the scene I now find myself in the middle of, and without thinking, I pass Bram and head straight for Harper and Wren, who are both clinging to each other in terror as they try to avoid getting hit.

Once I'm close enough, I grab hold of Harper's arm, and her eyes widen in fear until she realises it's me. Wren smacks my arm as she shouts something I can't hear over all the noise, but when Harper leans in and whispers in her ear, she stops trying to hurt me.

“Follow me,” I shout, loud enough to be heard over the music and commotion.

I don’t let go of Harper’s arm, pulling her along behind me without giving her a choice. I cast a glance over my shoulder to see her dragging Wren along with us. Once we reach our booth, I push them both to sit down.

“Stay here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Without waiting for a reply, I run back to where Bram is still fighting with some of the security guards, whilst others remain on the ground. Just as I get closer to the fight, someone grabs hold of my arm, spinning me around to face them.

I quickly take up a protective stance, ready to strike if needed, but once my gaze lands on the scowling face of Rafe Kincaid, I back down immediately. He takes a menacing step forward, his lips twisting in anger as he glares at me. “Do you want to tell me why your friend is beating the shit out of my security guards?”

I shrug my shoulders, as I’m not exactly sure. “I’m sure he has his reasons.”

“Can you stop him before I have no choice but to throw him out and ban him?”

I let out a harsh laugh. “I’d love to see you try. You and I both know Bram does whatever the hell he wants.”

“Not in my club, he doesn’t. You’re lucky I like you both, otherwise I’d have you strung up in my basement already, reminding you why you don’t mess with me or my club,” Kincaid growls, and it’s easy to see why grown Order men are so terrified of this guy.

He may only be a couple of years older than me, but the harsh expression he wears constantly makes him appear older. There’s a coldness to his icy-blue eyes that chills you to the bone when he stares at you like this. But then the suit he always wears makes him appear the same as any other professional businessman.

Then again, normal businessmen don’t have a basement they use as a fucking torture chamber.

And since I don’t want to become acquainted with said torture chamber, I need to stop Bram before he injures all of Kincaid’s men. But as soon as I take a couple of steps towards the commotion, the security guard nearest to me sees me as a threat and charges at me.

Before his fist makes contact, a loud, high-pitched whistling cuts through all the chaos, and everyone freezes in place. We all turn to where the noise came from and see Kincaid with his fingers in his mouth, glaring at us all with a murderous expression.

“Enough!” he shouts, even though we’re all completely still.

I look over at Bram, who is no longer laughing like a crazy person, and is instead assessing Kincaid in a way that scares me just as much. I push through the frozen guards and grab his arm, ignoring the blood covering him—which appears to be from other people.

Bram has a minor cut above his eye, redness that I’m sure will escalate to bruising over one cheek, and his lip is cut enough to still be dripping blood. But other than that, he came out of the fight relatively unscathed, from what I can see.

“What the hell happened?” I hiss in his ear as I pull him away from security, heading back to our booth, where I left the girls.

We only make it a few steps before Kincaid cuts in front of us, halting our movement. “Yes, I’d very much like to hear what happened, too.” Although he sounds cold and distant, the threat in his tone is more than evident.

Bram, clearly not valuing his life at all tonight, glares at Kincaid. “Your fucking security staff put their hands on an innocent girl, and I sure as fuck wasn’t going to allow them to manhandle her.”

Kincaid’s eyes narrow as he assesses Bram, trying to work out if he’s telling the truth or not. “Which girl?”

Bram looks at me, and I incline my head towards the booth, where the girls are sitting, huddled together, looking absolutely fucking terrified. Kincaid spins on his heel and heads straight towards them, me and Bram running behind.

Kincaid ignores us as his gaze flicks between Wren and Harper, taking them both in. I want to throw myself in front of Harper, to stop Kincaid from being able to look at her, hating the way she seems to shrink under the weight of his stare.

“Tell me what happened. What did my men do?”

Harper remains silent, and I can’t help but notice she’s shivering—though it’s not clear if it’s from cold or fear. Either way, I want to wrap my arms around her and show her she has nothing to be afraid of.

Well, except me, I think to myself.

Wren clears her throat before holding her head high, trying to project an air of confidence that she clearly doesn't feel. "We were trying to get into the VIP section, as Harper wanted to talk to Lawson, but your security guards wouldn't let us in. They said our names weren't on the list, and that was final.

"I started shouting Lawson's name to get his attention, and your man didn't like that. He said I was causing a scene and that I needed to leave. When I said no, he grabbed hold of me and pushed me."

"Did he hurt you?" Bram asks through gritted teeth, his whole body practically vibrating with rage.

I watch him slowly drag his gaze over Wren's body, no doubt looking for any injuries in case she doesn't tell him the truth. She holds out her arms, twisting them slightly. "Nothing major. I'll probably just have some bruises in the morning from where he grabbed me."

"I'm going to kill him," Bram seethes, before turning his attention to Kincaid, who looks equally murderous.

"I'm sorry a member of my staff put their hands on you. I'll make sure they're punished, and that it never happens again," Kincaid states, ever the professional.

Harper leans forward, her words rushing out quicker than normal, no doubt thanks to the adrenaline coursing through her. "It was partly our fault. We were trying to get into the VIP section without permission, so we're sorry for that."

I glare at the beautiful strawberry-blonde, wondering why the hell she's sticking up for the man who laid his hands on her friend. She meets my gaze, but instead of shying away like she normally does, she lifts her head slightly in challenge.

"Thank you for saying that," Kincaid replies. "But that's still no excuse. He shouldn't have touched you the way he did. I'll review the security footage before I make my decision on what happens next."

"Are we in trouble?" Wren asks, her voice shaking.

Kincaid shakes his head slowly. "No, but I will ask you not to cause another commotion in my club."

Wren nods rapidly, a small smile on her face. "I promise, we won't." She pauses for a second, her gaze flicking to Bram before quickly landing back on Kincaid. "What about him?"

Bram's lips curl into a wide, cocky grin as he winks at Wren. "Aww, you worried about me, little fighter?"

Her eyes narrow as she glares at Bram, but it's impossible to miss the flush spreading across her cheeks. "Fuck no," she replies quickly, but I'd put money on that being a lie.

Kincaid lets out a brief chuckle, his eyes lighting up as he stares at Wren. For just a moment, I wonder whether I should be concerned that both Bram and Kincaid appear to be checking out Wren, but I quickly push those thoughts aside. I have enough shit to worry about.

"This is your one free pass, Bram. No more fighting in my club. Keep it for your sanctioned fights. Understood?"

Bram stares down Kincaid for a second before giving him a sharp nod. "Fine. But I'd like to view the security footage to see who hurt Wren."

I let out a low groan as I shake my head in despair. "Can't you just let Kincaid handle it?"

Bram glares at me. "Fuck, no."

Kincaid casually shrugs his shoulders, as if he doesn't care either way. "Fine by me."

"If you let him see the footage, you won't be able to stop him from handling it afterwards," I tell Kincaid, who gives me a look that very much says he doesn't give a shit.

"I'm sure we can come to an agreement together on how to handle it," Kincaid replies.

"Can I see the footage?" Wren asks, shocking us all.

"Why?" Harper blurts out, looking at her best friend like she's grown a second head.

Wren's cheeks are now bright red, but she shrugs like it's no big deal. "I missed a lot of what happened because I was trying not to get hurt. Call me nosy."

Both Bram and Kincaid laugh, before looking at each other in shock that they agreed on something. "I don't see a problem with you watching the footage," Kincaid tells her, and Wren's face lights up.

"Now?" she blurts out.

Kincaid holds out his hand to her, and Wren casts a glance between Bram and Kincaid, before sliding her palm into his and allowing herself to be pulled out of the booth.

"No time like the present," Kincaid says, as he helps her to her feet.

Wren takes a couple of excited steps before stopping and looking over her shoulder at Harper. She grimaces a little, like she just remembered her friend was still here. “Do you want to come, Harps, or will you be okay here?”

I don’t miss the way she not so subtly glances at me when she asks if she’ll be okay. Harper looks at me out of the corner of her eye, though she tries to make it seem like she’s not, and I can’t help but smile.

“I’ll be fine,” she tells her friend.

“I’ll be back soon, I promise,” Wren shouts over her shoulder as she skips off with Kincaid, Bram following closely behind.

Now that it’s just me and Harper, the silence between us is almost deafening. I slide into the booth next to her, since there’s no point remaining standing while I wait for them to come back.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask, breaking the oppressive silence.

Harper seems to think about it for a minute, like I asked her a complicated math question, before finally saying, “Yes, please. Can I get a vodka lemonade?”

I give her a nod as I lift my hand in the air, signalling to the server allocated to us, who comes over straight away. I give her our drinks order, but before she can walk away, Harper shouts, “Can you make mine a double, please?”

As the server leaves with a nod, I turn my gaze to Harper, but she just shrugs her shoulders.

“It’s been a long night,” she says, and I can’t help but agree with a smile.

“It fucking has.”

The server brings over our drinks fairly quickly, and Harper doesn’t hesitate to take a decent mouthful of the alcohol, swallowing it with a hiss as I do the same.

We sit there in relative silence, each of us taking sips of our drinks as we steal glances at one another, hoping that the other doesn’t notice. Like there’s any chance I wouldn’t notice her eyes on me. Her gaze seems to burn my skin, leaving a heated trail across my sensitive flesh wherever she looks.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but we’ve both almost finished our drinks when Harper lets out a long moan followed by a huff as she turns her body until she’s fully facing me. “Can we talk?”

In order to face me properly, she has to bend one leg and tuck it under her arse, which causes the hem of her dress to ride up higher on her thigh, showing off more of her creamy flesh. Then, as she leans closer to me, so I can hear her properly, that movement pushes her tits forward, emphasising her cleavage even more.

My dick throbs painfully in my jeans, getting harder by the second, and it takes all of my willpower to keep my eyes on her face, rather than on her fucking amazing curves.

“What about?” I ask through gritted teeth.

She draws in a ragged breath as she shuffles around, before finally pulling her shoulders back and holding her head high, making herself appear confident. “I’d like to discuss the offer you made for me to be your Prize.”

“The offer you turned down, sweetheart,” I point out.

She glares at me, no doubt having realised I’m not going to make this easy for her. Though I am finding it hard to hide how intrigued I am by her bringing this up again. Let alone the flicker of hope I’m trying to ignore.

“Well, I might have reconsidered,” she states, and that flicker suddenly grows into a burning ember.

“What does that mean?”

She lets out a huff as she rolls her eyes at me, and my palm twitches with the need to punish her every time she does it. “It means, I will be your Prize, but I have conditions.”

I narrow my gaze at the beautiful girl, wondering where this confidence has come from. “What conditions?”

“I know who your father is. Your family name is legendary within the Order, and you have connections that most members couldn’t even dream of. I need you to use them to help me.”

I can’t keep the confused expression off my face. “I don’t understand.”

Everyone knows my father is a member of the Obsidian Council, and he doesn’t exactly hide how well-connected he is. In fact, it’s part of the power he wields over people, but I’ve been very careful not to use my family name at all over the last couple of years.

Every assignment I’ve passed since joining the Crows has been through my own merit. I’ve never once used my family’s connections, or wielded the Radley name as a weapon, so I’m not sure why she thinks that’s something I’d be willing to do.

“My father is innocent, and I need you to help me prove it,” she rushes out.

My mouth falls open in shock, as that was probably the last thing I expected her to say. I haven’t been following her father’s case, but from what I’ve heard, there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind that he’s guilty. It’s actually more confusing why the Order hasn’t taken him out yet.

Just as I’m about to argue with her, a small voice in the back of my mind tells me not to. She’s offering to be my Prize, which is exactly what I want.

Yes, I’ll have to make it seem like I’m helping to clear her father’s name, but when it becomes obvious that he’s guilty, and the Order ends him, she will have already been gifted to me, and there’s no turning back from that. This is the perfect agreement—I really don’t have to do much, and I still get everything I want.

But I have to make sure she knows what she’s getting into by agreeing to be my Prize. Shuffling closer to her, I fight to hold back my smirk when her breathing speeds up from my proximity.

Once my lips are beside her ear, I rest my hand on her opposite cheek, smoothing her hair away from her eyes as I whisper, “Are you sure you want this, sweetheart? If you gift yourself to me, I won’t go easy on you. I’ll use you, dominate you, before ruining you for all other men that come after me. Are you prepared for that?”

I’m close enough to hear her breath catch in her throat as she lets out the tiniest whimper, which seems to have a direct line straight to my throbbing cock. Harper shuffles slightly, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s rubbing her thighs together to alleviate some of the ache she’s feeling between her legs.

“I will do whatever it takes to clear my dad’s name,” she replies, her voice low and breathy.

I pull back just enough to make eye contact with her, smiling when she doesn’t shy away from the intensity of my gaze. “I hope he’s worth it, sweetheart, because I’m going to fucking own you. I want to bring every dirty fantasy you’ve only dared to dream about to life. I’m going to learn to play your body like it’s an instrument that only I can master. I’ll make you my whore, and you’ll love it so much, you’ll beg for more.”

I watch as her cheeks flush, but I’m not sure if she’s embarrassed or turned on. Given the rapid rise and fall of her chest, and the ragged breaths

she desperately pulls in, I'd say she's just as turned on as I am.

With her firm gaze locked with mine, she finds a confidence that I really wasn't expecting. "I know I'll have no choice but to do exactly what you say, and I'm sure there'll be some stuff that I'll even enjoy. But I can promise you now, I'll never be your whore, and I'll never beg you for anything."

I can't help but laugh at her fierce tone, and the way she's trying to cut me down with her deadly gaze. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see, sweetheart."

She glares at me, her nose wrinkling at my use of the nickname she pretends she hates. "So, we have a deal? I'll be your Prize, and you'll help me clear my dad's name?"

The side of my lip lifts into my signature cocky smirk, and I try to ignore how much my heart is racing as excitement builds within me. I never in a million years expected to have Harper Westmore as my Prize, but now it's happening, I plan to grab it with both hands and never let go.

"Are you sure you want to make a deal with the devil, sweetheart? There's no going back once you do," I tell her, even though I have no intention of letting her back out now. I just want her to be very sure that she knows exactly what she's agreeing to.

"There's nobody in this world that I care about more than my dad, and if that means doing a deal with the devil, then so be it. All I can hope is that the flames of hell don't burn me beyond recognition when it's all said and done."



CHAPTER TEN

Lawson

Obsidian Order members get everything they want in life, even if they have to take it by force. As a Legacy Pledge, this is something my father taught me from an early age. Nothing is out of reach for a Radley.

So when I met Harper two years ago, and found out she was off-limits to me, it was a completely new feeling, not being able to get what I want. But the most disturbing thing is that I didn't know why I wanted her so much.

Bram has been hinting that the only reason I've been obsessing over her is because she's off-limits. That age-old saying that you want what you can't have. And maybe he's right. Maybe if I fuck her once, she'll be out of my system and I can move on. But I'm not so sure. I think my obsession with her will only grow once I finally have her—and that's fucking terrifying.

So, I've been playing the long game, hoping one day to make her mine in whatever way I can, and in just a few hours, everyone will know who Harper Westmore belongs to.

It's the day of the Gifting Ceremony, and she's finally going to be mine. Not only will she have to announce that she's mine to all the Obsidian Order Pledges, from all four Houses, there will be senior Order members there too.

But it's more than just saying the words; she'll have to demonstrate her willingness to obey me. She'll have to prove to everyone that she means every word of the vows she will have to take. That she is freely giving

every part of herself to me, for me to do with as I please, until we both graduate.

We've discussed this demonstration at great length over the last couple of days, as we've ironed out the details of our arrangement. I've promised to help her look into her father's arrest, but I was very careful with my wording not to agree to more than that. I can hardly get him released if he's actually guilty, and right now, the evidence is damning, and I'm a little surprised he's still alive.

Besides, after Harper has given herself to me, there's no going back. She can't change her mind just because she thinks I'm not fulfilling my part of the bargain, so I'm just doing enough to get her to the damn ceremony.

Some Pledges fuck their Prize as a way of showing their willingness to obey, while others simply force the Prize to follow their instructions in front of the audience. It's my choice how I demonstrate Harper's loyalty, and I wasn't entirely sure how far she'd be willing to go to prove herself. Naturally, she surprised me by saying she'd do whatever was needed.

There's no way I'm fucking her for the first time in front of a room full of horny men—I'm far too fucking possessive for that. I want to be the only one who watches her bleed all over my cock as she whimpers my name.

But I'm aware that leaves us in a bit of a predicament, one my father is not making any easier. He called me into his office yesterday to discuss the ceremony, and I'm so fucking pissed about it, I can't get it out of my head.

"COME IN," MY FATHER'S BOOMING VOICE SHOUTS THROUGH THE DOOR before I've even finished knocking.

Pulling in a deep breath, trying to steel my nerves, I walk into my father's study and find him sitting behind his large mahogany desk. His eyes, so like my own, latch onto me, observing as I stride confidently over to the chairs in front of him. I sit without waiting for an invitation, and it amuses me that his nose wrinkles in disgust at my lack of manners.

"Lawson, glad you could come to see me." George Radley doesn't bother with pleasantries, even with his own son, choosing to get straight to business instead, which is fine by me.

He makes it sound as if I could refuse his invitation, when we both know I couldn't. He sends word that he wants to see me, and I drop everything to do as I'm told.

“What do you want?” I ask sternly, not caring that my tone only seems to wind him up more.

“It’s the Gifting Ceremony tomorrow, and you’ve yet to tell me who you have chosen. I thought I’d have heard from you by now. I gave you a long list of girls to choose from.”

I wince as I remember the fucking list. I also remember setting it on fire not long after he gave it to me, since I had no intention of choosing any of the women he selected. Before there was even the slightest possibility of Harper choosing me, I still didn’t plan on letting my father have any say over who I fuck for a year.

“I didn’t choose anyone on your list, so I didn’t think you’d want to know,” I tell him casually with a shrug of my shoulders.

His cheeks begin to turn red as he balls his hands into fists, his forehead wrinkling as anger overtakes him. “What do you mean you didn’t choose from the list? They are the only women I will approve of,” he says through gritted teeth, fixing me with a hard glare that I’m sure he’s hoping will scare me—it doesn’t.

“All the women on your list were either ugly, fucking annoying, or just plain dull. If I’m going to be stuck with the Prize for the entire year, it has to be someone I won’t want to murder after one week,” I tell him.

“I don’t give a shit what you want, Lawson. It’s your duty to forge connections that benefit our family. I, personally, think Lena is your best choice,” he states harshly, his nostrils flaring as I wave my hand dismissively.

“I’m very aware of my responsibilities, Father. I’m sure you’re already plotting my future Betrothal to some vapid, shallow bitch who will enhance our family name—and wealth. But agreeing to let you choose who I marry is as far as I’m willing to go. You don’t get any say in who I fuck.”

Holding his gaze, I make it clear I won’t budge on this. I don’t even bother commenting on him choosing Lena, the daughter of one of his business partners. I’ve never met the girl, and have no idea what she looks like, so she was never even a consideration.

“Who have you chosen, Lawson?” I can hear the irritation in his tone, and it takes all of my effort not to grin. There’s nothing I love more than winding my father up.

I pull my shoulders back and keep my gaze locked with his as I confidently and proudly say, “Harper Westmore.”

The fury now blazing in his dark eyes is a scorching inferno compared to his previous anger. A thunderous crack echoes around us as he slams his fist onto the desk, the polished wood groaning under the impact. A visible tremor passes through his body, deepening the furrow in his brow like a storm cloud gathering.

“Over my fucking dead body. Bob Westmore’s daughter? The fucking traitor?”

His voice becomes more high-pitched with each word that comes out of his mouth, but I keep my expression relaxed as I shrug my shoulders at him.

“That’s the one.” I sound much more amused than I was going for, but I can’t help it.

The prominent, pulsing vein on his temple makes me curious whether continuously provoking him could lead to it bursting and him bleeding to death. One can only hope!

“No! Absolutely not, Lawson. You need to find someone else.”

I roll my eyes at his dramatics. “It’s too late. The Ceremony is tomorrow, and I’ve already submitted her name to Xander. He approved.”

Every Pledge has to submit the name of their Prize to their Head of House. It’s then their job to make sure that the Prize is gifting herself willingly, and that he approves of the match. It’s very rare for a Head of House to reject a proposal, but it has been known to happen under extreme circumstances.

“I knew this was something the Obsidian Council should have had a say in,” my father mutters, and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing.

As a member of the Obsidian Council, my father has been campaigning for the last two years for the Council to become involved in the Prize selection. It’s always been the job of the Head of House, and the Council have always felt they have enough work to do without taking on more.

But my father is a controlling bastard, and he’s seen this day coming since I started at Shadowmere. His control over me has been slipping, which is why he’s been trying to get the Council involved. He doesn’t give a shit about the other Pledges; it’s all about getting me to toe the line, which I’m refusing to do in this instance.

“It’s done, Father. She’s agreed, and Xander has signed off on it.” In other words, nothing you do can change this.

He pauses, and the sudden, profound silence hangs heavily between us. I can practically see the cogs turning in his mind. He absentmindedly strokes the stubble on his chin as his gaze becomes almost vacant.

More time passes in silence than I'm comfortable with, but I know not to interrupt whatever he's thinking about, and I breathe a sigh of relief when he lets out a loud huff. His gaze meets mine once more, and his usual cold, calculating expression is back.

"I don't care what you have to do, but you will make this right. You will go to Xander and tell him you've changed your mind. Do whatever you have to do to get him to accept a new Prize. I will be in the audience tomorrow night, and I expect to see you do our family name proud," he states, puffing his chest out with an overwhelming sense of importance.

I don't bother arguing with him, as he won't back down—but neither will I. My mind races with possibilities as I depart his office. I have no intention of choosing another Prize, whether my father likes it or not. So, tomorrow night, I am going to have to show the Obsidian Order, and my father, that I've made the right decision by selecting Harper as my Prize...I just don't know how I'm going to do that yet.

I'm well aware there will be repercussions for going against my father, and that's something future me will have to deal with. I just hope Harper is worth all the trouble.

ARRIVING AT THE BLACK CHAPEL, I CONTINUE TO REVIEW THE PLAN IN MY head, trusting it's thorough enough for things to proceed without a hitch. Thankfully, Harper has agreed to do whatever is needed to show she's all in, but I'm not sure if she'll regret that when the time comes.

I can't stop tapping my foot as I glance at my watch for what feels like the hundredth time since arriving not even five minutes ago. Call it a nervous tic, but I'm anxiously waiting for Harper to arrive.

I offered to pick her up and drive her here, but she declined, saying she wanted to get ready on her own. I picked out the outfit I expect her to wear, so I'm hoping she's wearing it.

Who am I kidding? At this point, I'm still just hoping she fucking shows up.

Just when I think I couldn't get any more on edge, a sleek canary-yellow Jaguar pulls into the parking lot, and a smug-looking Ryan climbs out, with Sienna on his arm. She has on a long, red velvet dress, and her

bleach-blond hair is in a big bun on top of her head. She's applied much more makeup than usual, and her red lips are nearly brighter than her dress.

I knew it would be too much to ask for Ryan to just keep walking into the Grand Hall, and I curse under my breath when he stops in front of me. He makes a show of looking around, noting that there's nobody else out here, and his smug grin grows larger.

"Don't tell me you've been stood up, Lawson? Did your Prize change her mind? I thought it was suspicious that you never told anyone who you chose." He doesn't even try to hide the gloating in his voice.

"She'll be here," I tell him, keeping my voice neutral, almost disinterested.

"Maybe she's ugly," Sienna says in her fucking annoying girly voice.

I glare at her, causing her to take a step behind Ryan, which puts a bit of a smile on my face. Then Ryan opens his mouth again, washing it away in an instant. "It will not look good for someone of your status to not have a Prize."

There's no denying he's gloating, and it only makes me want to punch him in the face even more.

"He has a Prize." The quiet, almost timid-sounding voice seems to appear out of nowhere, but the recognition is loud enough to cut through my nerves.

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Harper steps out of the shadows into the moonlight, and it makes me wonder how long she's been standing out of sight. But all thoughts quickly vanished when I actually see her.

The short, silky white dress she's wearing seems to glisten under the moonlight, rippling over her delicious curves in the most perfect way. The softness of the fabric complements her; the white making her appear even more innocent.

The dress stops just above her knees, not showing off too much of those creamy thighs that I can't wait to part later when it's just the two of us. But I made sure that the neckline on the dress drops low enough to show off her impressive cleavage.

I can tell she followed my instructions and didn't wear a bra, as her peaked nipples press against the soft white fabric that's almost see-through. I allowed her to wear a white lace thong, as I'll enjoy ripping that off her later.

Harper has paired the dress with some white lace ballet flats, which only emphasises the aesthetic. Most of the Prizes will be in hooker heels, and I wanted Harper to stand out from the crowd—like she always does.

Her long strawberry-blonde hair has been styled into perfect curls that fall loosely down her back, flowing behind her in an almost angelic way. And I have the sudden urge to run my fingers through them to see if they're as soft as they seem.

Fucking hell, get a grip!

Harper catches me staring, and her pretty pink lips lift into a small smile as redness flushes her cheeks, emphasising the splattering of freckles over her nose. She's only got a bit of black liner under her eyes, and mascara to make her lashes longer, which both make her bright-blue eyes pop.

It's almost like we're in a bubble, just the two of us, as I take in how fucking gorgeous she looks. I love the way she shuffles around, her eyes downcast, as if she's not used to anyone looking at her the way I am.

When she finally looks at me, her gaze lingers on the raw intensity burning within me, a silent testament to the desire I make no effort to conceal.

Unfortunately, our bubble is popped by Ryan's obnoxious voice. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he snaps at Harper, as his gaze rakes over her body in a way that sets my nerves on edge.

I reach out and take Harper's hand, and as I pull her to my side, she lets out a little yelp of surprise. Ryan turns to look at me as my cocky grin grows. "Isn't it obvious? Harper is my Prize."

Fuck, I couldn't have sounded any more smug if I tried, but also a little proud. I have no doubt that out of all the Prizes in that room, mine is the most beautiful.

"No, she fucking isn't," Ryan growls, taking what I'm sure he thinks is a threatening step forward.

Just as I'm about to argue with him, Harper lifts her head high and replies to Ryan with much more confidence than I thought she was capable of. "Yes, I am. He asked, and I agreed."

Ryan pauses for a long moment, clearly contemplating what to say to Harper's no-nonsense explanation. When he finally speaks, there's a vulnerability to his voice that he doesn't even try to hide. "Why him? I asked too."

Harper looks up at me, a sweet smile on her face, before turning back to Ryan. "Because I want to. I want Lawson."

Fuck, those words go straight to my dick, making me twitch against my tight boxers.

Ryan looks lost for words, and also a little confused. Sienna, on the other hand, is absolutely furious. "Come on, Ryan. We need to go in before the ceremony starts."

She practically pulls him into the Grand Hall, but all the while, he keeps casting backward glances at the girl he tossed away like she was nothing. Now she's with me, and I don't plan on getting rid of her anytime soon.

"Well, that felt good," she chuckles, smiling at me as she slides her arm through mine. "Shall we?"

Her nod towards the door sends a jolt of adrenaline through me with the eager expectation of what's to come. As we walk, I make sure Harper is truly prepared for the spectacle she's about to endure.

"Do you remember everything I told you about the ceremony? No matter what you see or hear, you remain silent and still. Some Order Pledges may do things to their Prize that you don't agree with; they may punish them in brutal ways to show their obedience. But no matter what happens, you are to sit and watch—nothing more."

Her eyes widen and the soft smile she was wearing a moment before falls from her face. She pulls her lower lip between her teeth, worry getting the better of her.

"Will it be bad?" she asks, her voice so small and timid.

I shrug my shoulders. "I don't know for sure, but I've seen some pretty bad things over the past couple of years. Obsidian Order members will do whatever they can to prove they're in charge, that they're the ones with the power, and sometimes that means using brutal methods that not everybody has as a kink."

She opens and closes her mouth a couple of times, as if she's trying to find the words, but can't. I take pity on her and continue.

"When it's our turn, and we're called onto the stage, we are there to put on a show. Everybody in that room has to believe that you are truly submitting to me in every way a person can. If you show even the slightest hesitation, it makes me look weak—and I won't fucking allow that."

She swallows hard, her throat bobbing, before pulling in a shaky, gasping breath. "I won't make you look weak," she tells me, and this time, there's no hint of uncertainty in her voice.

As we reach the doors into the Grand Hall, I take a deep breath before pulling them open. The room is packed full of Pledges from all four Houses, as well as other Obsidian Order members who have come along to watch. Everyone is in their robes and masks, except the third-year Pledges and their Prizes.

Harper tightens her hold on my arm, but keeps her gaze on the floor as she walks beside me. We stride down the aisle, with rows of chairs on either side, and I keep my voice low so only she can hear as I continue my explanation.

"The lower-ranking Pledges will go first, leaving the top three Pledges of each House until the end. There will be a lot of waiting around, but there's nothing I can do about that."

She looks like she's about to say something, but before she can, I quickly grab hold of her shoulders and spin her around until she's facing away from me. I pull her arms behind her back as I take some zip-ties from my pocket. She gasps loudly as I slide them onto her wrists, securing her hands together behind her.

I lean forward until my lips are beside her ear, my breath fluttering against her curls as I pull the ties tighter. "You're mine now, sweetheart, and I want everyone to see that you'll do whatever I tell you to."

With her hands tightly secured behind her back, I walk us to the very top of the aisle, where there's a gap on the front row just for us. I help her into the seat next to me, as I take the one on the aisle, loving the way she shuffles as she struggles to get comfortable with her arms tightly bound the way they are.

I lean closer to her again, keeping my voice a whisper, still just for her. "You better get used to being tied up, as you'll be spending a lot of time strapped to my bed."

My cock twitches as her mouth falls open and her breathing speeds up, the rise and fall of her chest only emphasising her great tits.

As the ceremony gets underway, Harper watches closely as some of the lower-ranking Pledges bring forward their Prizes. As I expected, they're completely unimaginative in the way they show their control, with nearly all of them choosing to fuck the girls on the raised dais.

After over an hour of watching girls get fucked, it starts to affect Harper. A flush creeps up her neck, deepening the rosy hue on her cheeks, and her bright-blue eyes, now clouded with desire, grow darker. Her chest rises and falls in little gasps as she shuffles around, obviously trying to rub her thighs together to ease some of the ache I'm sure she's feeling.

As I lean in, the faint scent of her perfume tickles my nose. My hand, warm and firm, settles on her thigh, and a delicate gasp escapes her lips, which brings a smile to my face. "Are you getting turned on, sweetheart?"

She turns to face me, her eyes wide as she shakes her head, but her body is betraying her. "N-no, I'm..." she trails off, not sure how to finish the lie.

I let out a little chuckle, which only makes her glare at me. My fingers sink into the soft flesh on her thigh, startling her as I grip it tight.

"Don't lie to me, sweetheart. I bet if I were to slide my hand under your dress, and feel that little bit of lace you've got on, it would betray just how soaking wet your little pussy really is. Wouldn't it?" My voice is deeper and raspier than I expected, betraying just how turned on I am, too.

She slowly shakes her head again, but doesn't speak this time. I slide my hand a little higher, keeping my eyes locked on hers so she doesn't look away.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, Harper. I want you to be a needy little slut. I want your pussy to be dripping wet at all times, so you'll always be ready for whatever I have to give you. It's okay to be turned on, because I plan to keep your cunt soaked at all times.

"And when your tight pussy can't take any more, I will use your mouth and your arse too. Every hole will belong to me, and you'll give them to me willingly.

"I want you to be a dirty little slut, just for me. I want you to beg me, plead with me, until I give you everything you didn't know you wanted. You're going to learn to scream my name like I'm the only God you pray to, begging me for more."

By the time I'm done talking, she's practically gasping for air, and my cock is throbbing painfully in my trousers. I want nothing more than to free myself and sink into Harper's tight hole, but that's not part of the plan. I need to keep hold of my control, just for a little longer.

Although there's no denying how turned on she is, my feisty girl still argues with me. "I told you before, and I'll say it again...I won't ever beg you."

I let out a laugh as I squeeze her thigh, not caring that people turn to look at us. I lean in close enough that my lips are almost touching the corner of hers. It wouldn't take much for one of us to turn just a little, to steal our first kiss, but neither of us does—and if I have my way, we never will. No kissing is a rule I'm not willing to bend on.

Instead, I move closer to her ear, loving the way she trembles from my proximity, like there's a shiver rippling down her spine. "Oh, you'll beg me, sweetheart, and you'll fucking love it. You'll love being my slut so much, I'll ruin you for all other men."

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harper



By the time Lawson pulls me onto the raised platform, standing in front of a sea of Pledges and masked Order members, I'm a panting, horny mess. Watching the various ways the Pledges used the gifted women before me was both a massive turn-on and extremely terrifying.

Lawson made it clear to me that whatever he does to me will be humiliating, but that I'm to obey without hesitation. Failure to do so may result in me being removed as his Prize, and that can't happen.

Obsidian Order members have power and status that others can only dream of, and they're very secretive. If you want information on an Order member, only another higher-ranking member can get it.

Lawson is a Legacy Pledge, and once he's passed all the tests that the Crows throw at him, he'll inherit his father's high status, as well as being the High Crow—should he keep that spot right until the very end. Which means he will have the reach I need to clear my dad's name, and that's worth anything I'm going to endure whilst on this damn platform, with the sea of eyes staring back at me.

I'm just grateful Lawson agreed that I wouldn't have to lose my virginity in front of an audience. Don't get me wrong, I didn't exactly dream of love, hearts, and flowers for my first time. I've always known I would have to give my virginity to the most suitable business match, but that doesn't mean I'm happy for it to be a communal affair.

And if I'm being totally honest, there's a tiny part of me that's pleased I no longer have to remain pure, to become the perfect Order Wife. Once that high expectation is off the table, I'm just the same as any other girl my age, and that opens me up to a lot more possibilities.

I've spent the last two years listening to all the rumours about Lawson—and to say that the women on campus see him as a sex god would be an understatement—but who knows if they are true or not. I've never seen Lawson with any girl for longer than a night.

Lawson is giving me the chance to explore my wildest fantasies, things I've only ever dared to dream about, but have never said aloud. What would have been the point, since I was supposed to stay a virgin?

I grew up believing my fantasies were dirty and wrong, and yet now, Lawson plans to bring every one of them to life, and then some...and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

Lawson tugs on my restrained wrists, and the harshness of the zip-ties rubbing against my sore skin is enough of a distraction to pull me out of my thoughts. Lawson is standing right behind me, so close I can feel the warmth from his body through the thin layer of my dress.

My heart races as my body heats under the weight of all the people staring at me, and I can feel my cheeks flushing. I try to calm my breathing, reminding myself that I'm safe with him, but I know that's not true.

Lawson may have made me promises, but he's also spent the last two years humiliating me in the worst ways every chance he got, so I'm not sure if I should trust him—though it's not like I actually have a choice.

Lawson keeps hold of my wrists in one hand, while placing his other on my hip, pulling me back until I'm plastered against his hard body. He doesn't say anything, but I can feel the slow inhale and exhale of his chest, and I use that movement to centre myself, slowing down my breathing to match his.

The Head of House for the Crows steps up to the altar one last time, having done this with each of the other Crow Pledges that came before us. He's wearing his Obsidian Order robe and silver mask outlined with gold, but everyone knows it's Xander.

"Lawson Radley, Pledge for Crowhurst House, welcome to your Gifting Ceremony," Xander says loudly, projecting his voice so that everyone in the large hall can hear him.

A loud round of applause echoes around the room, and I'm a little shocked that everyone is still as animated, given this process has been going on for at least a couple of hours now.

"Lawson, who has agreed to gift herself to you?"

“Harper Westmore has gifted herself to me,” Lawson states proudly, and I wince at the different reactions from people in the room. Some hiss, others gasp, and whispers break out amongst the spectators, as they no doubt question why someone with Lawson’s standing would choose me.

“And do you accept her as your Prize?”

There’s a long pause where the silence in the room is almost stifling, yet Lawson’s heart rate doesn’t falter at all. It just continues beating to the same rhythm against my back, like this pressure doesn’t affect him at all.

“I do.”

I breathe a sigh of relief as soon as the words leave his lips, but then Xander turns his attention to me.

“Harper Westmore, now is the time for you to gift yourself to Lawson. Be warned: if you do this, you are binding yourself to him until he graduates. You will belong to him—mind, body, and soul—and there will be no way out, even if you want to.”

There’s a seriousness in Xander’s voice that I definitely didn’t hear when he was doing this with the other girls. It’s almost like he’s warning me to walk away now while I can—if only he knew I don’t have that luxury.

Lawson’s grip on my hip tightens to the point it’s almost bruising, and his breath flutters against my ear, making me tremble. “Remember the vows, sweetheart. Say them loud and proud, so they will never doubt you.” His voice is barely above a whisper, so only I can hear it, but it gives me the confidence I need to stand tall and project my voice the way he told me to.

“Everything I have, I gift to you.”

“Everything you give, I claim as mine,” Lawson adds.

“I bind myself to you in every way,” I state, my voice shaking slightly from the intensity of the words.

“Today, I make you mine.”

As soon as the words have left Lawson’s lips, it’s like my whole body reacts to the knowledge that I’m now his. The small hairs on my arms stand on end as a shiver ripples down my spine, my heart thumping so loud I can hear it buzzing in my ears.

Xander takes a step closer to us, before turning to address the room full of people watching our every move. “Before I can declare you as bonded, the Prize must show her unwavering loyalty to her Pledge.”

Before he’s even finished speaking, Lawson grabs a handful of my hair, and I let out a yelp as it tugs on my scalp. Once his grip is firm, he pushes

downwards, making it very clear what he expects of me.

“On your knees,” he commands, his voice firm and gravelly.

Without hesitating, I sink to my knees, lowering my gaze so I’m staring at the floor, but Lawson quickly rectifies that by pulling on my hair until I’m facing the crowd once more.

“Don’t lower your eyes unless I tell you to. I want you to look at the room full of people who are here to watch your downfall.” There’s a cruelty to his voice that I wasn’t expecting, and it sets my nerves on edge even more.

I should have insisted he tell me what he has planned for this, as the anticipation may give me a heart attack.

Lawson then projects his voice, addressing the people in the room instead of me. “I’m sure most of you are wondering why someone with my name and status would accept Harper Westmore as a Prize. We’re all very aware that her father is a traitor, and that she’s no longer worth anything in our world.”

His words cut me like a knife, but I keep my head held high, not wanting them to see how much he’s hurting me. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop the tears from welling up, and only when I taste copper am I sure they won’t spill over.

None of these arseholes will ever see me cry!

Not even aware of the pain he’s putting me through, Lawson continues with his speech. “Harper has spent her whole life believing she’s going to be the perfect Order Wife. She’s remained a virgin for that very reason. But today, I’m going to prove to her that she will never be good enough for that. No respectable Obsidian Order member would ever want her as a wife, which leaves her with only one option—to become a whore.”

The room erupts into cheers as grown men whoop and holler like they’re at a sports game and their favourite team has just taken the lead. When in reality, they’re cheering at my downfall, as it suddenly hits me that I’ve made a massive mistake by trusting Lawson.

Lawson tugs on my hair once more, pulling back until I have no choice but to look up at him. He’s staring down at me, a blank face with no expression or emotions visible, and the coldness freezes my veins.

“I want you to tell everyone in this room who you are now.”

He fixes me with his harsh glare; those gorgeous silver eyes of his now empty and cold. I let him see the anger coursing through me as I sneer at

him, before turning to face the audience again.

Taking a ragged breath to steady myself, I try to push down the waves of disgust, hoping the words that emerge are what he wants to hear. “I’m Lawson’s Prize—his whore. I’m no longer fit to be anyone’s wife. Being a whore is all I’m good for, and I can’t thank Lawson enough for agreeing to own me.”

The words taste like ash on my tongue, and I have to close my eyes when the audience laughs, taunting me, throwing my own words back at me.

I’ve never felt so low, and the urge to punch Lawson and make a run for it grows with every passing second. But I know I can’t. I’m too far in now; I can’t ever get free.

“I am going to enjoy claiming you as my whore, and I want everyone to know who you belong to.”

As soon as the last word leaves his lips, he pulls me to my feet before dragging me over to the table behind us. I’ve just watched countless women get used on or over this table, and my stomach drops as he pushes me towards it.

“Lie down on your back.”

Knowing I can’t even hesitate, I do as I’m told. It’s hard to shuffle into position with my arms tied behind my back, and it’s sure as hell not comfortable, but I do my best.

Once I’m where he wants me, Lawson leans over the table, close enough for only me to hear. “Remember the rules, sweetheart. Don’t resist, or we’re both fucked.”

I offer him a tiny nod, a flicker of my chin that’s barely perceptible in the dim light, as my heart hammers a frantic rhythm against my ribs. Each breath tears from my lungs in ragged gasps, leaving my head swimming in a disorientating haze.

I close my eyes and focus on taking in deep breaths, before letting them out slowly. I try to block out everything around me, but the fact that the room has gone quiet in anticipation of what Lawson is going to do to me does nothing except worsen my anxiety.

After what feels like a few minutes, footsteps approach the table again, and I open my eyes to make sure it’s Lawson. He’s got something with him, but I daren’t move my head enough to see what it is.

When his hand rests on my bare leg, a shiver runs down my spine, and I become still. For just a moment, I wonder if he's going to break the promise he made to me and take my virginity in front of all these people.

"Breathe," he whispers, for only me to hear, before sliding his hand up my thigh.

He doesn't stop until he's pushed my dress up to my waist, exposing the white lace thong he told me to wear underneath. His silver eyes seem to darken as he takes in the fabric that's barely covering me.

I wonder if he can see how turned-on the rest of the Gifting Ceremony made me. Even though that's gone now, thanks to the fear and the nerves, I'm sure there'll be some reminder that I was dripping wet not too long ago.

As he cups me over the lace fabric, I let out a soft whimper at the feel of someone touching where no one else ever has. I'm sure I hear a low groan coming from Lawson, but he's quick to cover it.

Without thinking, I lift my hips, rocking into his touch as I desperately seek more from him. But Lawson doesn't move his hand, or give me more of what I'm looking for. Instead, he lowers the elastic at the top of the thong just a bit, exposing the bare flesh on the top of my mound.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment, and I close my eyes to block out the room full of people who now know I have a bare pussy. It was another of Lawson's demands, though I didn't have the confidence to tell him I was already bare before he told me I had to be.

A shiver goes through me as he softly brushes his fingers over my exposed skin, despite him not getting close to touching where I crave him most.

When he does it again, there's a wetness to his touch, like he's rubbing some sort of liquid into my skin. My instinct is to sit up and try to look, or to ask Lawson what he's doing, but neither of those things are allowed, so I just clench my teeth together as my imagination runs wild.

After a couple of minutes, the skin he's been rubbing feels a little tingly, and Lawson shuffles closer as he clears his throat. With his loud, confident voice, he addresses the room once more.

"As you've seen throughout this ceremony, there are many ways for a Prize to prove her loyalty to her Pledge. I could easily fuck her in front of you right now, so you can all see her give her precious virginity to me, but what does that really show? That she's willing to open her legs for me? I

want more than that. I want her to hand over every piece of herself until she's ruined for all other men."

With each sentence, my nerves prickles and my anxiety spikes. I thought Lawson wanted to humiliate me in front of all these people, no doubt as a punishment for who my dad is, but this feels like something more. He's talking about me like I'm an object he's going to own, that he can do what he wants with until he's had enough and discards me. The problem is, I think that's exactly what I've volunteered for.

"Harper," he snaps, getting my attention. When I open my eyes, I find him staring at me, that haunting blank expression still on his face. "Are you happy for me to mark you and ruin you for all other men?"

My heart pounds a frantic rhythm against my ribs, as a whirlwind of a million unanswered questions and thoughts spin wildly in my mind. *What does he mean by marking me? How will he ruin me for other men? Does he intend to ruin me permanently?*

These thoughts are rushing through so fast, but I know I can't vocalise any of them. I've already been silent for too long...I need to answer now.

"Everything I have, I gift to you." I repeat the vow I made not too long ago, hoping that will be enough.

The wide smile on Lawson's face tells me it's exactly what he wanted to hear. He then picks up a strange black object that looks a little like a large pen, but it's connected to a wire. When Lawson turns it on, it buzzes loudly.

"Today, to show that you completely belong to me, I'm going to tattoo my name onto your pussy. That way, every man that follows me will know who you belonged to first."

My eyes grow wide as realisation hits—he's holding a tattoo gun. He's going to mark my skin permanently, and it's something I'll never be able to get rid of. My heart is pounding so hard it feels like it might burst out of my chest, which is also flying up and down much quicker than it should be as I struggle to control my breathing.

I want to scream for him to stop, to tell him I don't want to be marked for the rest of my life. I agreed to be his Prize until we graduate, which is less than a year away. What he's talking about will last forever.

There's a scuffle in the audience, and a loud, booming voice stops Lawson before he can start the tattoo. When I hear Ryan, I breathe a sigh of relief, as he's bought me a few minutes to collect myself.

“What the fuck, Lawson? She’s only going to be your Prize until you graduate, then you’ll go off and marry someone else. You can’t leave her with a fucking mark that will be with her for the rest of her life. No guy is going to fucking want her if she’s got your name on her cunt,” Ryan snaps, vocalising the very thoughts I’m trying to ignore.

Lawson shrugs his shoulders, his expression not faltering in the slightest. “I couldn’t give a shit what the men in her future think. They will know the truth—her cunt belonged to me first. Harper doesn’t have to go through with this. She can walk away right now. I’m not forcing her into anything.”

His sharp and unwavering gaze prickles my skin as the last words leave his lips. The low rumble of his voice resonates in the quiet air, as a sudden certainty washes over me—he’s telling the truth.

Even though it would negatively affect his reputation, he’s willing to let me leave if I choose. But if I stay, this is just the beginning of what he will do to me and my body. If I allow this, I have to be all in.

I don’t realise I’m biting my lower lip until I taste copper, the sting not even hurting me with everything else going on. Lawson’s beautiful eyes seem to soften as he stares at me, silently asking me if I’m all in or not.

I pull in a shuddering breath, hoping that will be enough to keep my voice from cracking as I speak loud enough for everyone to hear. “I’m not walking away. Today, you claim me as yours.”

It’s a variation on his vow, and the smile that spreads across his lips is the most genuine I’ve ever seen, setting butterflies off in my stomach. *Of all the things to find romantic, my messed-up butterflies choose this.*

“You’re going to regret this, Harper,” Ryan shouts.

Before either Lawson or I can respond, Xander cuts in. “Sit the fuck down, Sheenan. You have your Prize, now shut the fuck up so Lawson can claim his. I’d very much like to get out of here sometime this year.”

There’s a sarcastic edge to Xander’s tone that makes me smile, and I wish I could see the look on Ryan’s face right now, as I’m absolutely certain he’s pouting. He hates not getting his own way. I’m also sure Sienna is sitting beside him with a face like thunder, annoyed that he’s making a scene over me.

I was surprised Sienna had agreed to be Ryan’s Prize, especially as she calls herself his girlfriend. Then again, since they’re already having sex, she

can't exactly become his Betrothed, so their options are limited. I'm almost certain she would have hated the idea of someone else becoming his Prize.

While it's common for Pledges to have a girlfriend and a Prize, or even be Betrothed and have a Prize, it takes a certain type of woman to be okay with it. Those who are engaged under a marriage contract are less bothered, mostly because they probably don't care all that much about the person they're being forced to marry.

However, the Pledge probably chose his girlfriend, and it's likely she'd view him being with a Prize as cheating. So, I'm not surprised Sienna offered to be both his girlfriend and his Prize. Though I would have expected her to hold out for a Betrothal once Ryan ended things with me.

Lawson's warm fingers brush across the tingling skin on my bare mound once more, catching me off-guard enough that I let out a gasp. With his voice low, so only I can hear, he asks, "Are you ready for this, sweetheart?"

I give him a small nod. "Yes."

A familiar smirk plays on his lips, while his dark gaze deepens with an unreadable emotion. "Then make sure you keep still. I don't want you to move and ruin my masterpiece."

Oh, I hadn't even thought about staying still. Or that the tattoo might actually hurt. How am I supposed to stay frozen if it hurts?

I tense all of my muscles whilst silently hoping Lawson has nice handwriting, so it doesn't look a complete mess. The buzzing of the tattoo machine starts up again, as does the tittering of the audience, and Lawson gets into position.

He lowers himself until his head is much closer to my body than it should be, which only causes me to tense more. Where before he had an almost blank, bored expression, his brow is now furrowed, as though he's deep in concentration.

When the needle pierces my skin for the first time, I'm shocked by how little it actually hurts. It feels like someone is scraping their nails over my flesh, but it's not an uncomfortable or painful experience.

I'm mentally tracking how Lawson moves the needle, picturing the permanent tattoo being etched onto my skin. It feels like more than just his name, which is all he said it would be, but I can't exactly ask him.

You're stuck with it either way, I tell myself.

A sigh of relief escapes me when the gun's buzzing ceases. Not because of pain, but because my role in the ceremony has ended. Then Lawson catches me unaware as he lowers his head closer to my core, and as he looks up at me through hooded lashes, my gaze locks with his.

A shadow falls over his darkened gaze as he purses his lips, blowing on my newly tattooed sensitive skin. A gentle gasp escapes me as the air hits, my body quivering from the pleasurable sensation. It's like his breath soothes the soreness, and I bite my bottom lip as he does it again. It shouldn't feel as good as it does, but I know I'm getting wet just from his closeness.

He reaches for something beside him, and I gasp when he places something sticky onto my skin. As he gently presses down the edges, I realise he's placed a plaster over the tattoo.

When he pulls back and stands up straight, the softness I saw on his face not two seconds ago is gone; the cold, blank mask is back. He reaches over and pulls down my skirt, covering my exposed legs.

Once I'm no longer exposed, he slides his hands up my thighs, underneath the fabric; the featherlight touch of his fingers leaves goosebumps all over my skin. When he reaches my lace thong, he hooks his fingers into each side. I hold my breath as I wait to see what he's going to do next.

Is he going to pull them up over the tattoo? Is he going to pull them down? Why would he pull them down if my part in the ceremony is over?

I've barely finished the thoughts in my head when Lawson yanks at the fabric, ripping the thong to pieces. I let out a yelp as the cotton digs into my skin before tearing apart. He then pulls the tattered material out from underneath my dress and slides it into his pocket, but not before showing the audience, who cheer at his brutality.

Grabbing hold of my hips, Lawson then lifts me from the table, keeping a firm hold on me until I find my feet. He ensures my dress is pulled down, so no part of me is exposed to the room full of people still staring at us both.

With my back to the room, I look up at Lawson, nerves setting in at the way he's staring down at me with an unreadable expression on his face. He places his hands on my shoulders, but his movements seem almost hesitant, as if he's not sure what to do.

As he stares at me, I can almost see his brain ticking away, like he's warring with himself over something, but I'm not sure what could cause him this level of confusion. He then shakes his head ever so slightly, before pulling in a sharp breath as he looks over my head at the room full of people.

"Now that I've branded my whore, it's time to see what she's capable of," he announces, his voice loud but devoid of any emotion.

My stomach flips at the harshness of his tone, and I barely have a chance for my nerves to set in before he's pushing down on my shoulders, forcing me to my knees.

When Lawson looks down at me, there's none of the softness I saw before, only the cold, emotionless guy that's spent the last two years driving me crazy. He's looking at me like I'm nothing, and I've never felt worse about myself.

"Open your mouth, whore. Show everyone what you can do," he snaps, as he pulls down the zipper on his trousers.

My heart hammers against my ribs like a trapped bird, a frantic drumbeat in the silence. Thoughts collide in my head, a chaotic whirlwind of images and sounds, as the reality of the situation settles heavily in my gut. Lawson is about to pull his dick out, and he expects me to suck it in front of all these people.

I'm hit by a wave of betrayal, as Lawson told me he wouldn't make me do anything sexual. Yet here he is, pulling down his trousers so he can use me as a whore in front of a jeering crowd.

My cheeks flush as he pulls his shaft free from the confines of his boxers, giving me my first ever look at a real penis. But I barely have a chance to acknowledge how big it is before Lawson grabs hold of my hair and drags my face into his crotch.

"Open. It won't suck itself," he snaps, rubbing the large purple head against my closed lips.

A shiver of nerves and excitement ripples over me, before fear quickly sets in. I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do, and I can't even grab hold of it to get it into position, given my arms remain tied behind my back.

Lawson is sneering at me, the way he used to do in the hallways between classes, before he'd make some sexual innuendo that would annoy both me and Ryan. I guess now he's having the last laugh, as I'm on my

knees for him the way I promised him I never would be—and I have an audience to witness my humiliation.

His grip on my hair tightens, and the glare he gives me makes it clear I can't disobey him any longer. The Obsidian Order is watching, and I have a role to play.

As soon as I open my mouth wide enough, Lawson doesn't hesitate; he slides the head inside. I try to wrap my lips around him, but he quickly pulls back out before dragging the length of his shaft over my tongue. He's moving so quickly, I barely register how almost silky he feels, and I can't even taste him.

Lawson slides his length against my tongue a few times, using his grip on my hair to control my movements. All I have to do is keep my mouth open as he uses me, moving me whichever way he wants.

After a couple of thrusts, he pushes deeper into my throat, hitting my gag reflex. I manage to get control of it, so I don't vomit, but I can't stop myself from coughing and spluttering when he pulls back out.

Lawson barely gives me time to recover before sliding back in again, and this time when he hits the back of my throat, he stays there for a few seconds, cutting off my air. My eyes grow wide as my lungs burn, and I try to pull back, but his grip holds me in place.

Black spots appear at the edges of my vision, and tears fill my eyes as panic overwhelms me. Just when I think I might pass out, Lawson pulls out with a groan.

I gasp for air, my lungs burning as I desperately pant, pulling in as much as I can, but that just makes me cough and splutter as tears stream down my face.

My jaw aches from being spread wide, and the back of my throat is sore, but none of that matters to Lawson as he slides his length back in again. I try to shake my head, to tell him I can't handle anymore, but he doesn't listen.

The head hits the back of my throat again, and I try to swallow around him, to see if that helps, and I'm shocked when Lawson lets out a deep groan as he rocks his hips into me. I look up through my tear-filled eyes to see him staring down at me, his lips open slightly from the pleasure I'm giving him without even trying.

Even though I feel so dirty and used, as I glance up at him, knowing I'm the one who put that look of sheer bliss and pleasure on his face, a flicker of

pride ignites within me. Using me gives him pleasure, and knowing that is a bit of a turn-on.

When Lawson pulls out again, I desperately pull in more air, and he takes hold of his dick at the base, holding it straight out in front of me. I'm mesmerised as he strokes along the length, letting out a soft moan as he twists his palm over the tip.

His movements speed up, and I can't look away; every stroke is almost hypnotising as he pushes himself closer to the edge. His lips part slightly as he lets out the softest moan, his gaze locked with mine as I flick between looking at him stroking himself and the way he's staring at me.

"Keep your eyes on me and your lips open. I'm going to paint your pretty face with my cum," he tells me, and even though his words scare me a little, I do as I'm told.

I open my mouth and stick my tongue out—like I've been told girls do—then I keep my eyes locked on him. He lets out a deep groan, and I look down just in time to see ropes of cum shoot from him.

The first bit lands on the tip of my tongue, and Lawson keeps stroking as more follows. It lands on my cheek, my lips, and my chin, but I keep my mouth open until I'm sure he's finished.

Lawson lets out a soft moan as his body sags, his orgasm finally subsiding. I'm still kneeling before him, my face covered with his cum as he stares down at me, an unreadable expression on his face.

He drops his hand from my hair, and I let out a gentle sigh now that the stinging from my scalp is gone. He then tenderly runs his thumb over my lower lip, scooping up the cum that hit me there. As he presses his thumb into my mouth, I don't need him to say anything to know what he wants me to do.

I close my mouth around his thumb and suck, swiping my tongue over the tip, gathering up all the cum as I swallow down what was already in my mouth. It's quite a strong salty taste, but it's nowhere near as bad as I was expecting.

Lawson's eyes seem to be alight with fire as he watches me suck his cum from his thumb, his dick twitching in response, coming to life again much quicker than I expected. Lawson feels it and quickly tucks his length back into his trousers, pulling up the zipper once it's secure.

As he pulls his thumb out of my mouth, he slides it over the cum that's sitting on my cheek, but instead of gathering it up, like I expected him to,

he smears it into my skin.

He leans down until his lips are beside mine, and for just a moment, I wonder if he's going to kiss me. And that starts a war within me over whether I want him to.

He's just spent the last few minutes using me, humiliating me, making me feel like a whore, and yet my body still reacts to him in the most betraying way. I'm wet, and my core is clenching with a desperate need I'm not used to feeling. And the war with my own body just makes me hate him even more.

With his lips beside mine, he whispers so only I can hear him. "I want you to wear my cum until I tell you otherwise."

Before I can say anything, he reaches down and grabs hold of me underneath my arms, dragging me upward until I find my footing. My legs are a little shaky from kneeling on the hard floor, and I'm not able to use my arms to stabilise myself, but Lawson keeps hold of me until he's sure I'm not going to fall.

He then roughly spins me around until I'm facing the room, pulling my back against his front. He wraps his arm around my waist as he projects his voice loudly one last time. "Members of the Obsidian Order, may I present to you my Prize, Harper Westmore."

The crowd cheers, just as they did with every other Prize presented to them. I try not to look at them, but it's impossible to miss the way Ryan is glaring at me. He appears almost murderous, but I'm not sure if it's directed at me or Lawson.

Sienna is beside him, shooting daggers at me as her gaze flicks between her boyfriend and me. Her face twists with anger and annoyance, and her hatred for me is clear to see, yet she cannot understand that I want nothing to do with Ryan. I belong to Lawson now, and even if I didn't, Ryan hurt me enough that I'd never want to see him again.

As if to remind me that I belong to him, Lawson rocks against me, making sure I can feel how hard he is. A sharp breath slips from my lips as he presses his length against me, creating a need in me that I've never experienced before.

Lawson leans down until his lips are beside my ear, his breath tickling my cheek as he whispers, "You did good, sweetheart, but this is just the beginning. Now that you're mine, I'm going to take you home and claim you in every way I can. I'm going to fill all your holes with my cum, until

you say my name like you worship me. I'm going to make you my whore, and you'll love it so much, you will beg me for more."

Bloody hell! I want to argue with him, to tell him I'll never beg him, the way I always have before, but I can feel my body betraying me. My nerves are prickling with the desperate need to feel his touch on my skin. My core aches, craving every wicked promise he makes. And I'm dripping wet, more than ready for him to make good on his promises.

But there's another side of me that's absolutely furious with him for the way he just used me and humiliated me. I knew he'd push me to show my loyalty to him, but I didn't know he'd make me feel so cheap and dirty.

The biggest problem is that I didn't hate that feeling as much as I should. I want to be mad at him, to scream at him for making me feel that way, but I can't. I'm so confused by it all.

For as long as I can remember, I've pushed down all of my dark and dirty fantasies, keeping them hidden away, but now I don't have to hide. Lawson wants to pull them from the shadows, to bring my body to life in ways I've only ever dreamed of, and I think I'm going to let him. After all, it's not like I have a choice.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Lawson

I don't know how Harper manages to walk out of the hall on her shaky legs, but I have a feeling my arm around her tiny, trembling body is the only thing keeping her upright. As soon as we're outside, in the cool night air, she collapses to the floor.

Sobs wrack her body as the adrenaline from the evening seeps out of her, and all the confusing emotions I just put her through hit her at once. I hadn't planned on fucking her throat, but when we stood on the stage, after I tattooed my name onto her skin, it was impossible to miss the look on my father's face—he'd taken his mask off specifically to make sure I could see. He expected more, and I can't let him down.

I never wanted to go that far with Harper in front of a room full of horny men. I don't want anyone to see her that way other than me, but I needed to do something, and that was the least invasive thing I could think of.

My eyes never left hers throughout; the way her cheeks flushed as she warred with herself over whether she actually liked the way I spoke to her or not. She let out little gasps, her chest rising and falling faster as she got more turned on.

She wanted to hate me calling her a whore, but we both know she didn't. I just have to teach her that it's okay to follow her desires, her fantasies, as long as it's with me.

I scoop Harper into my arms, her small body now nestled against my chest, and a sense of calm washes over me as she presses her face into my shirt, her arms still bound behind her back.

When we get to my car, I settle her into the passenger seat. She doesn't ask me to untie her wrists—not that I would—but I secure her seatbelt before sliding into the driver's side. I didn't bring my bike, as I knew I'd be taking her home with me, and I didn't think she'd be in any state to ride on my baby.

As I drive to Crowhurst House, her sobs slowly subside, and she settles into the seat, her knees pulled up to her chest as if she's trying to comfort herself. Every so often, she'll shuffle her arms, no doubt trying to alleviate the soreness in her shoulders and wrists, which are red and sore from the harsh zip-ties binding her. They aren't my usual choice of restraint, but it's tradition during the ceremony.

She'll learn what type of restraints I like soon enough, I think, before chastising myself for thinking that while she's crying on the seat beside me.

Luckily, Crowhurst House is empty, since most people are still at the Ceremony. Being High Crow Pledge gives me more freedom than the others, so nobody will question me leaving early.

I carry Harper through the house, relieved when she lets me pick her up after I've parked the car. As she's stopped crying, I was worried she wouldn't let me touch her, but she doesn't put up a fight.

Shifting her weight onto one arm, I reach out and use my thumb to open the door to my room before closing it behind us once we're inside. I carry her straight into my ensuite, sitting her on the counter next to the sink.

She's still not said a word to me, but I'm more than a little relieved that her sobs have died down. I reach into my back pocket and pull out my flip knife, hating the way she gasps and moves away from me when she catches sight of the blade.

I grab the front of her dress, and she freezes when I move the knife closer to her. She's barely breathing, afraid her chest moving will put her closer to the sharp metal.

As I shuffle my body closer, I knock her legs apart, spreading them wide enough to accommodate me standing between them. Her wide eyes are watching my every move, and she lets out a small gasp when I slide the blade under the hem of her dress.

Using my other hand, I pull the dress taut as I move the knife up to the neckline of her dress. I then use the blade to slice through the fabric, pulling at the damaged material until it falls apart, exposing her silky pale skin. It's

difficult to do with her hands still tied behind her back, but it's not my first time.

Her arms being pulled backwards pushes her chest out, and her tits pop free, since she followed my instructions and didn't wear a bra. I take a moment to appreciate how fucking good they look; the nipples peaked and ready for my attention.

After a few more cuts in just the right place, I pull all the tattered material off her body, throw it onto the floor and take a small step back, so I can admire her naked beauty.

With her legs spread to accommodate me, a thrilling heat ignites deep within me at the sight of my name tarnishing her perfect skin, sparking a possessive joy I've never felt before. It's still visible beneath the clear plaster I applied at the ceremony, since I couldn't bear to cover it so soon after etching it into her skin.

Following my line of sight, Harper looks down, her gaze fixed on the tattoo I gave her not too long ago. It's my name in cursive, along with a small, intricate rose.

She's still for a moment, barely breathing as she just stares at her pubic bone, her face devoid of any emotion, other than looking completely drained. A few seconds later, as if a switch were flicked, she snaps out of her trance, and her face contorts with rage.

She lifts her head, her hard stare aimed right at me as her lips twist into a scowl. "Why the hell did you tattoo me? You put your bloody name on me."

She's seething, but despite how angry she is, she still doesn't deviate from her Order Wife training, and no real curse words leave her lips, which only makes me want to push her more, to see her break.

I hate to admit that seeing her so worked up is a massive turn-on. But I don't want her to know that, so I shrug my shoulders, trying to seem uninterested as I tell her, "Now everyone knows you belong to me."

Her cheeks flush red, but this time I'm almost certain it's because of her anger. Her nose wrinkles as her gaze turns murderous. "But it's only for this year, Lawson. I'm only yours for our final year, then you'll go off and marry some perfect Obsidian Wife, while I'll be stuck with your name on me forever."

I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face at the thought that she's stuck with this piece of me forever. But as much as I enjoy seeing her

fiery side, I need to remind her of the rules around here.

I reach up and grab hold of her neck, ignoring the cute little yelp she lets out when I tighten my hold. “It doesn’t work like that, sweetheart. Now you’re mine, and you don’t get to leave until I say so. You belong to me. Besides, I’m going to ruin you for all other men, so having my name branded onto your skin is the least of your worries. When I’m through with you, I’m going to be inked onto your soul.”

Her eyes grow wide, her mouth opening and closing as she doesn’t know what to say. The urge to argue is evident on her face, yet a lifetime of being taught to be submissive and to refrain from speaking out holds her back.

Harper lowers her gaze from mine, letting out a huff as she deflates. But I like seeing her fire, so I move my hand around her throat a little higher, forcing her to arch her neck until she makes eye contact with me once again.

“Say whatever you were going to say, Harper. You never have to censor yourself with me.”

She lets out a harsh laugh as she rolls her eyes. “Rubbish. You want me meek and submissive. You don’t want a girl who argues with you, who challenges you.”

I lean in closer, letting her see the challenge in my eyes. “You’re very wrong, sweetheart. It’s always so much more fun to break someone who fights back. So give me all you’ve got.”

She looks at me like I’m crazy, and that only makes me happier. There’s something about this girl that brings the real me out, like I don’t have to hide either, and that’s a little scary.

“So you’ll untie me?” she asks, tilting her head backwards as much as she can with my hand wrapped around her neck.

I pause for a second, contemplating where I want this to go next, a smirk lifting my lips when an idea hits me. “I’ll untie you if you answer one question honestly. No lies. Deal?”

She nods without hesitation.

I pause for dramatic effect, making it seem like I’m considering which question to choose, when I already know. “Did anything that happened at the Gifting Ceremony turn you on?”

She shuffles uncomfortably, trying to close her thighs, but it’s impossible with me standing in the way. I can feel her heart fluttering

beneath my palm on her neck, and I already know the answer, but I want to hear her say it, to make sure she won't lie to me. After a couple of seconds, she slowly nods.

"Which parts?" I ask, my voice deep and gravelly.

"That's two questions, and you haven't untied me," she retorts smartly, and I squeeze my hand around her throat, pulling a gasp from her lips.

"Answer me." The tone of my voice leaves no room for argument.

She drops her gaze from mine, and when she finally speaks, it's so quiet I can barely hear her. "I liked things I shouldn't have."

Shame paints her cheeks a deep red, and a spark of fascination ignites within me as the colour blooms across her neck and chest. I even remove my hand so I can watch the blush creep over her freckled skin.

Fulfilling my end of the bargain, I reach behind her back and slice the zip-ties with my knife. I pull her arms to the front as she lets out a relieved sigh, before gently massaging her wrists and hands, making sure the blood flow returns to normal.

"Why shouldn't you?"

She keeps her gaze locked on the floor, and I want to force her to look at me, but this is clearly a topic she finds embarrassing, so I let her hide in favour of her telling me the truth. But this will be the last time she hides her eyes from me.

"I was raised to be an Obsidian Wife. The only purpose of sex is to give my Obsidian Husband pleasure and produce an heir. My enjoyment is irrelevant," she whispers, reciting the words as if she's said them a million times before.

A burning fury ignites within me, and I want to fucking kill her father for making her believe that bullshit. I mean, she's not completely wrong, as that's what a lot of Obsidian members believe, but not all of us.

I clear my throat, hoping she won't be able to hear any of my emotions when I speak. "That might be the way some Order members do things, but not me. I don't do romance, hearts, or flowers, and I can't guarantee everything will be about pleasure, but I can fucking promise you'll love every second.

"No matter how much I humiliate or degrade you, no matter if I give you more pain than pleasure—you'll love it. You will beg me for it, just like my perfect little whore."

Harper shuffles on the counter, struggling to find her words, so I take advantage of her silence. I slowly slide my hands up her thighs, lightly dragging my nails over her sensitive skin, before reaching her exposed pussy. She watches every movement I make, and as I slide my finger over to her slit, she bites down on her lower lip.

I slowly and deliberately swipe my finger through her slit before lifting my glistening finger until it's right in front of her.

"You like the idea of being my whore, sweetheart?"

She nods slowly, dropping her gaze to the floor once again in embarrassment, but this time I don't let her hide from me. I hook my finger underneath her chin and lift until she meets my heated stare.

"All the time you were with that asshole, Ryan, were you secretly wishing someone would treat you like the dirty little slut you are?" I ask, my voice deep and husky as I struggle to keep control of my desire.

She nods again, and I quickly grab hold of her throat, squeezing just enough to pull a startled yelp from her before restricting her air. She looks up at me with wide, confused eyes.

"Use your words, sweetheart," I tell her as I release her neck.

I slowly trail my fingers down her body, lightly circling her nipples as she breathlessly says, "Yes."

As I glide my fingers over her lower abdomen, avoiding the freshly tattooed skin on her mound, Harper holds her breath, watching me as I press my thumb against her clit. She lets out the softest moan, and my dick twitches with excitement.

"I know you're still a virgin, but what other experiences have you had?"

I leave my thumb pressing gently on her sensitive bud, making sure not to rub too much in case it distracts her from answering my questions.

"N-none," she stutters, pulling that damn lip between her teeth in a fucking maddeningly distracting way. I can't hide the shock on my face as my eyes grow wide. "Today was my first time even seeing a-a c...cock, let alone sucking one."

Fuck! I wish I had known that before.

The edges of my vision blurs and darkens as bitter envy, sharp and twisting, coils in my gut in an unexpected way. "I hate that other men got to see that. From now on, only I get to see you like that."

Harper's lips lift into the cutest fucking smile as she stares at me like I just said something she never expected. "Thank you."

My brow furrows as I ask, “Why are you thanking me?”

“I know a lot of Pledges like to share their Prizes. It’s something that’s been worrying me a little, as I’m not sure I’d want to be passed around—not that I get a choice. I’m just glad you said you don’t want to share me.”

I circle my thumb around her clit, dragging a soft whimper from her as I lean in close enough that my breath fans her face. “You are mine. I don’t share.”

I’m aware I sound like a caveman as I stake my claim, but I want her to know where I stand from the beginning. When she nods in agreement and smiles at me, a strange, fluttering sensation takes hold in my stomach, confusing the hell out of me.

Pushing the strange sensations away, I get us back to the conversation we have slightly digressed from. “What about when you’re alone? How do you make yourself come?”

She drops her gaze again, and I remove my thumb from her clit until she looks up at me, her cheeks flushed once more. “I never have.”

“What?” I sound completely flabbergasted, but I can’t quite believe what I’m hearing.

Her voice is soft, almost timid as she says, “I was always worried I’d want more and would get carried away. I couldn’t risk not being a virgin on my wedding day.”

I lean in close once more, my lips right beside her ear as I press my thumb against her clit again, making her gasp. “You were worried that you’d fuck your fingers so hard it’d make you bleed?”

She nods, but as she sees my eyes narrow, she quickly adds, “Yes.”

I let out a shuddering breath. “I love that I’m the only person to have ever touched you here. Let’s see how tight you are.”

I slide a finger through her slit as she holds her breath, either out of nerves or excitement, I’m not sure. Once it’s covered in her juices, I slowly and gently press into her wet pussy, making both of us groan.

She moves her shoulders as if she’s trying to reach out with her hands, but then doesn’t, clearly not sure if she can touch me now her arms are free. Her hips rock forward as she opens her legs wider to accommodate me.

Her sweet cunt is gripping my finger so tight, I can barely press in and out, and all I can think is how fucking good my cock would feel with her wrapped tightly around it.

Her breathy moans and little gasps whenever my finger hits her deep are like music to my ears, and once I've stretched her a little, I waste no time adding another.

"Good girl," I tell her as she takes my second finger, letting out a little whimper.

As soon as the words leave my lips, her cunt flutters around my fingers, and I'm sure she gets even wetter. *So my girl has a praise kink*, I think to myself, smiling at the knowledge.

"You're so fucking tight, Harper. Can you feel me stretching you, getting you ready for me?" My voice is deep and gravelly, showing just how affected I am by this gorgeous girl.

"Oh, shit." The word falls from her lips like a sinful prayer as she drops her head back, closing her eyes. I have to fight to hold back my smirk at her using a curse word, albeit a mild one.

I speed up, thrusting my fingers into her as I press on her clit with my thumb, loving the way she rocks her hips as best she can, taking everything I'm giving her.

"You are taking my fingers so well, sweetheart. You cunt feels so fucking good."

She opens her eyes, and they grow wide and hooded, darkening as I curl my fingers inside her, hitting the spot I've been searching for.

"Oh, God. P-Please," Harper whimpers, rocking against my hand.

I lean over and capture her earlobe between my teeth, nibbling just enough to make her gasp, before releasing it to whisper into her ear, making sure not to slow my thrusts. "If you want to call out anyone's name, sweetheart, it better be mine."

"Lawson." A shit-eating grin breaks out on my face when she says my name like a prayer. "I'm... I'm... Oh, shit... Lawson."

Her movements become as frantic as her attempts to find the words, her brain clearly scrambled from all the overwhelming sensations I'm forcing on her body right now. But despite the way her cunt flutters around me, I can tell she's not letting go enough to finish, which is fine—I can spend all night dragging it out of her.

"Please don't stop," she begs.

As much as I fucking hate doing it, I ignore her words and pull my fingers from her pussy. Harper lets out a frustrated groan as she glares at me, pulling in some much needed air.

“Why did you...” She sounds both angry and confused, flush spreading across her cheeks as she drops her gaze.

She doesn’t know how much I want to devour her, or that I have a plan I need to stick to, so she sees this as a rejection. I reach over and hook my finger under her chin, forcing her to meet my gaze.

“I have so much I want to do to you, but we have time. It won’t be long until I make you come. Every orgasm you have belongs to me. You will need to ask me to come, and you won’t be allowed to unless you have my permission. Do you understand?”

Despite looking a little shocked by my words, like the good girl she is, Harper nods, still trying to catch her breath. “Will it...when you?” she mutters, her words coming out fractured.

I hazard a guess as to what she’s asking. “Do you mean, will it hurt when I fuck you?”

She nods. “Yes.”

I move my hand to her cheek, my heart stuttering when she leans into my touch, as if she’s seeking comfort from me. I swipe my thumb over her freckles, in an uncharacteristically soft gesture, which we both know won’t last.

“I’ll do you this one favour, sweetheart. For your first time, I’ll go easy on you. It will still hurt, but I’ll make sure it’s good for you. I’ll be gentle until you like it.”

Her brow furrows as she narrows her eyes at me. “Why would you do that?” She looks suspicious, and she has every reason to be. I’m not known for being kind or gentle, and my reputation for fucking women and leaving them is well-earned.

But with Harper, it’s different. I have all year to do whatever I want with her, to use her in whatever twisted way my brain can think of. The least I can do is make her first time good.

My smirk turns wicked as I stare at Harper, giving her the answer I’m sure she doesn’t want to hear. “There will be times when I’m claiming you, when I’m punishing you, and it will hurt. There will be times when you will wish you had never agreed to be my Prize. During those times, I want you to remember that I’m capable of giving you everything you need, even if you don’t know what that is.”

Her nose wrinkles, and she looks even more confused than before. “But not romance,” she adds, pointing out the one thing we both know I’m not

capable of giving her.

I shake my head, ignoring the flash of sadness in her beautiful blue eyes. “Women think they want hearts and flowers, Disney-style romance, but that’s child’s play. That’s a fantasy that the prince, the good guy, is the one you should be with. In reality, it’s the villain that will own you, crave you, obsess over you to the point of madness. Surely having that is better than romance.”

I don’t give her a chance to respond to that. I pick her up off the counter and keep a hold on her hips until she finds her footing. She looks up at me with her big, beautiful blue eyes, and I once again have to ignore the strange fluttering in my chest.

“Get freshened up. Do whatever you need to do, then come to bed. I’m done waiting. I’m claiming all of you—now.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harper



I'm ashamed to admit that I hide out in the bathroom for far longer than I should. But to give Lawson his due, he doesn't rush me like I expect him to. Instead, he waits in the bedroom while I pace around the ensuite, wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do to prepare myself for losing my virginity.

I know I'm overthinking things, and it's only making everything worse, but I don't know how to stop. After discussing things with Wren yesterday, I'm already waxed everywhere, so I'm not sure what else to do.

I consider getting in the shower, but then my hair will be wet, and I'm not sure there's any point when we'll need one afterward. I decide on brushing my teeth and touching up my makeup, and I'm grateful once again that Wren reminded me to drop a bag off with Lawson before the Gifting Ceremony.

He's already taken the time to put all my toiletries and makeup on the cabinet beside the sink, so I quickly follow my usual routine, though I don't bother with much makeup. I wore some for the Ceremony, but after Lawson used my face, he completely ruined it, and I don't fancy doing that again.

Still, I settle for a bit of dark eyeliner and mascara to make my eyes pop, and red on my lips. It's a tad darker, more sultry than I usually wear, but fits the occasion, so I run with it.

After taking some deep breaths to calm my racing heart—then giving it up as a bad job when it only gets faster—I grab hold of the door handle, finally ready to join Lawson.

I'm still completely naked, which makes me want to cover myself with my hands as I walk into the bedroom, but there's not much point as he's

going to see it all anyway—and more. So, instead, I pull my shoulders back and hold my head high, trying to project much more confidence than I really feel.

I walk into the bedroom to see Lawson already sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard. He's removed his shirt, leaving him in just his trousers, and he's flicking through something on his phone, so he doesn't even notice me entering the room.

I do a quick scan, not even a little shocked to see Lawson's bedroom is so much bigger than my dorm. He's got a seating area with a black leather sofa and matching comfy arm chair when you first enter the room, aimed at a very large TV.

To the left side is a mini kitchen, though it barely looks used, aside from a couple of glasses drying beside the sink. There are two bar stools next to the counter, which he probably uses as a table.

There are two doors off to the side next to the ensuite; one is the main entrance, so the other is most likely a walk-in wardrobe. His large king-sized bed takes up most of the far side of the room, black silk sheets beneath him, with two bedside tables on either side.

The decor is exactly what I expected; plain walls, dark wood, and black and grey furnishings. What I wasn't expecting is how neat everything is, with barely anything out of place. It hardly looks like the room of a twenty-one-year-old guy at university.

I barely spend more than a minute looking at the room, as my gaze is pulled back to Lawson. I take a moment to stare at him, getting my first glimpse of his naked flesh, and I hate to admit that he's not bad to look at. In fact, he's so bloody gorgeous, it should be illegal.

He's tall and lean, but the hard lines of his body suggest he works out regularly. His chest is bare, but there's a small trail of dark hair between the well-defined V that arches across his hips, just below his perfect six-pack.

My gaze catches on a couple of tattoos; one across his right pec that travels up his shoulder and around his bicep, while the other is over his left ribs. I can't make out much of the design from across the room, but they seem very well done.

He's holding his phone in one hand, and every so often, almost like it's an unconscious movement, he lifts his other to run his fingers through his jet-black hair. It's just long enough that the ends are starting to curl a little,

and after he's combed his fingers through, it has the perfect messy bedhead look only Lawson could pull off.

I'm shocked by how much I want to run my fingers through it, to see if it's as soft and silky as it looks.

As I soak in every detail of him, the sight of his relaxed expression strikes me. The subtle shift in his features, the easy curve of his lips, the way his shoulders have dropped—it all paints a picture of peace that I've never seen before.

Whenever I see him around campus, he's always projecting that cold, hard image of someone who doesn't give a crap about anyone or anything, yet he's nothing like that right now. It makes me wonder which version is the real Lawson.

His sudden, sharp cough jolts me out of my thoughts, and I look up to see his mouth curved into a cocky grin. "Are you going to stand there checking me out all night, or do I have to come and get you?"

Caught in the act of ogling him, an undeniable flush of red spreads across my face. There's no point denying it, as he caught me red-handed, so I opt for sarcasm instead.

"Please... You know you're good-looking. You probably have enough people telling you."

He places his phone on the bedside cabinet and swings his legs around until he's sitting on the edge of the bed, not once taking his eyes off me. He crooks his finger, motioning for me to walk towards him, which I do.

"I don't care what other people think. But I might be interested in knowing what you think." His voice is deep and husky, and it sends shivers down my spine.

I stop about an arm's length away from him, my nerves suddenly getting to me the closer I am to him. Lawson doesn't seem to care as he reaches out and grabs my hips, pulling me until I'm standing between his legs.

"Tell me, sweetheart, do you like what you see?" He lifts his gaze to meet mine, his sharp, piercing eyes intensely studying me as he awaits my response.

I don't need to look at him to reply. "Yes."

A genuine smile replaces his cocky smirk, and it makes him seem younger. He trails his fingers over my hips, up my sides, over my ribcage, before trailing them down my stomach. His touch is featherlight, and the

slight drag of his nails over my sensitive flesh makes me shudder as my core tightens.

“You’re just as gorgeous as I imagined you’d be.”

At his words, my eyes widen in shock, and my voice cracks with insecurity as I ask, “You imagined what I’d be like?”

He lets out a short, sharp laugh as he slowly shakes his head. “I have been imagining this day since the first time I laid eyes on you.”

My brow furrows in confusion. “But you hate me. You’ve been making my life hell for years.”

He nods, a knowing glint in his eyes, and his lips curve into a smug smile. “I can still hate you and want to fuck you.”

My stomach flips, but not in a good way. The way he was looking at me before had me believing maybe he didn’t really hate me the way I thought he did, so to hear him say the words hurts more than I’m expecting.

I can’t believe I’m going to lose my virginity to someone who hates me. I mean, I’ve always known it wouldn’t be to someone I love, but I was still hoping he’d at least like me a little.

I have to bite the inside of my cheek so the pain fights against the tears beginning to well up. Lawson must be able to see them, as his eyes narrow on me, his penetrating gaze making me feel more exposed than I’d like.

I hate feeling vulnerable, so I try to hide it from him. “Well, get on and do it then,” I snap, hoping the challenge in my tone is enough to stop him looking too closely.

My mind doesn’t even register his intent before his hands are on my hips, and he lifts me, flinging me onto the bed beside him. I let out a startled yelp as my back hits the mattress, and Lawson leans over me, a hand on either side of my head, caging me in.

“Be careful what you wish for, sweetheart. I promised to go easy on you for your first time, but if you want me to really fuck you, I’ll happily break my promise,” he tells me, his smirk growing as he throws back his own challenge.

I let out a huff as I push at his chest, but he’s all muscle, and I can’t move him even a little. “I never had you down as someone who breaks their promises.”

“That’s because you don’t know me,” he retorts.

Even though he’s right, I don’t know him; I have a feeling he’s lying right now. I think he’s the sort of guy that promises mean a lot to—or at

least that's what I'm hoping.

"You don't know me either," I snap.

Lawson lets out a short, humourless laugh. "I know a lot more than you think."

It almost feels like there's something he's not saying, that he's deliberately leaving out, but I don't get the feeling he's lying. Lawson is a Crow for a reason, and they're well-known for watching, waiting, assessing their prey, so I totally believe Lawson knows more about me than I'm aware of. I suspect he knows more about everyone, after watching from the shadows.

As he leans in, a soft sigh escapes me when he gently presses his lips against the sensitive skin of my neck. The frantic thrumming of my heart echoes in my ears, a rapid drumbeat against my ribs that's so strong I imagine he must be able to feel the frantic rhythm against his own skin.

His touch is so soft, it can barely be called a kiss, as he trails his lips over my neck, my collarbone, down towards my breasts.

"I know that you've never had anyone touch your nipples, but despite that, you know they're sensitive." His breath flutters over my peaked nipple, and the feel of his warm air touching my cold nub makes me shudder.

"How did you—"

I'm cut off from finishing my sentence when he flicks his tongue over my nipple, making me gasp as I arch my back, chasing more of that feeling. His cocky smirk grows wider as his tongue circles my peaked bud, heating my core with each lick.

He pulls back just enough to look up at me with those enchanting eyes. "Your nipples get hard whenever it's cold, and if something or someone accidentally brushes past them, your mouth opens slightly and your body tenses. You fight the reaction."

Before I can say anything in return—not that I'd know what to say, as he's right—he wraps his lips around my breast and pulls my nipple into his mouth, sucking and nibbling on it as I whimper beneath him.

Holy shit, that feels so good. It's like my nipples have a direct line to my core, and I can feel myself growing wetter.

Lawson pulls free from my nipple, making sure to graze his teeth over it as he backs away, and before I've had the chance to catch my breath, he

does the same to the other side. I arch my back, pressing my breasts into his face as he nips and sucks in the most maddening way.

With one hand fisted in the sheets, I lift the other to Lawson's head, sliding my fingers through his silky dark hair before grabbing a handful. As he bites on my nipple, I pull on his hair, making him hiss around my sensitive bud.

As he withdraws, the glint of steel-grey in his eyes deepens, turning shadowed and heavy-lidded, as a raw hunger sparks within them. A tremor runs through me, and a frantic fluttering, like trapped wings, erupts in my stomach. He's looking at me like he wants to devour me, and I want to let him.

"Normally, I'd tie you down so you can't touch me, but I'll make an exception just this once," he tells me, his voice thick with emotion.

I slide my hand from his hair and move it to cup his cheek, rubbing my thumb over the rough stubble covering his face. "I don't think I'd like not being able to touch you."

There's a flash of something unrecognisable in his eyes, but I'm not sure what it is. "You'll get the chance to touch me when I tell you to. I like to be in charge, sweetheart. What I say goes, do you understand?"

I nod, as his tone leaves no room for argument. Besides, I don't think I want to challenge him. There's a part of me that really likes the idea of handing over all control to him, of letting him take what he wants from me. It's one of my dark, intriguing fantasies—not that I tell Lawson that.

SLAP!

I'm pulled from my thoughts by a stinging sensation rippling over the flesh of my right arse-cheek, as the sound of skin-on-skin fills the air. Lawson has rolled me to the side just enough to spank my arse, hard enough to leave a slight pink handprint.

"Use your words, Harper," he states in his firm, authoritative tone.

"Yes, I understand," I say through gritted teeth, before letting out a soft sigh as he gently rubs his hand over my stinging flesh.

"If you disobey me, I will punish you. I promised to go easy on you for your first time, but I may as well start teaching you the rules now, as you'll need to remember them."

"P-punished?" I mutter, my eyes wide and panicked.

He nods, and as he speaks, his fingers continue their lazy perusal of my body, his touch setting me on fire. "Each punishment will look different.

They won't necessarily be about pain. It's more about teaching you a lesson, making sure you remember everything I've taught you."

"So if I follow your rules, you won't punish me?" I ask, rocking my pelvis against his touch as he drags his nails over my hips and down my thighs.

His eyes sparkle as his smirk grows. "That's right. If you're a good girl, you'll be rewarded."

My body shudders when he says *good girl*, just as he slides a finger through my slit, pulling a soft moan from me. He smiles at my reaction.

"I think you have a praise kink, sweetheart," he tells me as he presses his finger against my clit, making me yelp.

"A what?"

I'm so distracted by the way he's sliding his fingers through my slit, lightly pressing on my clit just enough to be maddening, that I'm barely following what he's saying. I'm unable to concentrate, given the way he's lighting up my body in a way I've never experienced before.

"A praise kink. You like it when someone tells you that you've done something well," he explains, pressing down on my clit as I rock against his hand.

I don't say anything, but I suspect he's right. A burning need to please him rushes through my veins, and I've never experienced anything like it before. I want him to enjoy this as much as I do, but given my lack of experience, I have no idea what to do.

"I can't wait to discover what other kinks you have." As soon as the words leave his lips, he presses his finger into my soaked pussy, and we both moan together.

He slides it in slowly, pressing until his entire finger is deep inside me, before he pulls back. It's not long until he adds a second finger, and this time there's a stinging sensation from the way he's stretching me.

His movements are almost agonisingly slow, but I'm grateful for him taking the time as the stinging wears off quickly, leaving behind a stretching sensation that almost feels good. I soon find myself swaying against his rough palm, the friction sending a shiver up my spine as I urge him to continue.

Lawson has that gorgeous, cocky smile on his face as he speeds up his movements, pressing in deep enough to make me gasp as he uses his thumb to circle my clit.

My body feels as though it's on fire, in the best possible way, and when he presses his lips against the pulse point in my throat and sucks, my head spins with overwhelming sensations. My core is tightening and heating from his fingers stretching me, and my nerve endings are prickling like there's an electric current running through me, forcing my heart to beat ridiculously fast.

"More." The word slips from my lips without me even thinking it, and I'm not even sure what I'm asking for, but it sounds like a breathless plea.

"Do you like me stretching out your tight little pussy?" he asks, his voice deep and husky.

I nod, before quickly adding, "Yes. It feels so good."

That's a bloody understatement. Now the sting has gone, there's still an almost full, stretching sensation, but it's more pleasurable than painful.

"You're so fucking wet for me, Harper."

I shiver at the way he says my name, along with the dirty edge to his tone that I could listen to all night. "Is that good?" I ask, unable to keep the embarrassment from heating my cheeks as I voice something I've been worried about.

Lawson leans back slightly, keeping his gaze locked on me as he continues to slide his fingers in deep. Once he's sure I'm not going to look away, he pulls his fingers from inside me, and I can't stop the frustrated groan from slipping out as his cocky smirk grows.

He moves his hand up towards his face, and stops when it's between us both, showing that his fingers are glistening with my juices. I have no idea if it's normal or not, and I want to look away in embarrassment, but the heat burning in his eyes has me captivated.

Lawson slowly brings his fingers to his lips, and my eyes grow wide as he slides them into his mouth. I watch with rapt attention as he drags his tongue along the length of his digits, devouring every drop.

He lets out the softest groan, and my core tightens with an almost desperate need to hear him make that noise again. His steel-grey eyes are dark with lust as he stares at me like he's a starved man, and I'm his favourite meal.

"It's a fucking great thing, sweetheart. Knowing I'm the one to make that tight little cunt so wet has me hard as a fucking rock. And you have no idea how fucking sweet you taste. Now that I've had a sample, I'm going to feast on you every chance I get."

A shiver ripples down my spine at his words, and I can't help but look down at the tent in his trousers, where his rock-hard length is pressing against my thigh, trying to break free from its constraints.

Lawson sees me staring and reaches over to grab my hand. He has to pry my fingers from the tight grip I have on the duvet, but once he has them free, he pulls my hand over and rests it on top of his length.

"Feel how fucking hard you make me," he tells me, as he uses his hand on top of mine to direct me.

He wraps my hand around his length, encouraging me to squeeze just enough that he lets out a low groan as he rocks against my palm. I keep my hand in place as I look up at him, hoping he's going to continue giving me instructions.

"D-do I... Should I..." I flick my gaze down to his length and back, hoping the movement will make clear what I'm struggling to put into words.

His brow furrows, like he's struggling to understand my clearly very vague code. "Use your words," he repeats.

I pull in a deep breath and try to push away the nerves just enough to get my sentence out. "Should I take off your trousers?"

His smile grows, making him look almost predatory as he moves my hand beneath his, showing me how to stroke along the length of his cock, which I can feel getting bigger under my touch.

"You can do whatever you want to me, sweetheart."

Well, that's both a massive turn-on and utterly terrifying. I mean, I know what I want him to do to me, but what I'm supposed to do to him is something else entirely.

I drop my gaze, unable to meet his eyes as I allow myself to be vulnerable with him again. "What if I do something wrong?"

He hooks his finger under my chin and tilts my head back until I'm forced to look at him, and the way he's staring at me has my breath hitching. "You can't do anything wrong. Just do what feels good for you, and I'll guide you with what I like."

There's a softness to his voice, and the way he's looking at me makes me shiver, and I wonder, not for the first time, whether the Lawson the world sees is the real guy, or if he puts on an act to play the role that's expected of him. I'm very aware that could be my wishful thinking.

"I want to see you," I tell him.

He pulls back just enough that he's able to shuffle around until he's slid his trousers and boxers down, before kicking them the rest of the way until they fall to the floor beside the bed. When he turns back to me, in all his naked glory, I'm completely lost for words. I can't help but stare at his hard length as it rests against his lower abdomen.

It's so big, there's no way it will fit!

It looks almost velvety soft, except for the deep vein running along the underside of the shaft. Then you get to the tip and it almost looks angry, with its deep purple colour, and the pre-cum gathered on the head.

Just as I'm thinking that I kinda want to touch it, Lawson reaches over and grabs my hand again, guiding me the way he was before until my palm is wrapped around his soft skin.

When I tighten my grip, Lawson lets out a deep moan, and I quickly pull back, thinking I must have done something wrong, but he drags my hand back into position. "Keep doing that," he tells me, as he uses his hand to show me how to move mine along his length.

It doesn't take long for me to get the hang of it as I slide my hand from base to tip, sweeping my thumb over the pre-cum beaded on the head to help slicken up his length as I repeat the process. I keep my grip firm, and though I start slow, a little unsure of myself, I quickly fall into a rhythm.

I watch the way Lawson's chest rises and falls quicker, the little gasps he makes as he tries to pull in air, and the way his body tenses as I slide my thumb over his sensitive tip. I love the way he rocks his hips into my hand, forcing me to speed up and give him what he wants.

Lawson's cheeks are flushed, his mouth falls open just slightly as his eyes seem to glaze over with lust, and I can't help but feel pride that I'm able to give a man like Lawson pleasure.

All the time I'm stroking his length, Lawson presses kisses over my body, trailing his fingers over my skin. Each time he cups my mound, or glides over my upper thighs, I hold my breath and try not to get distracted from my task, while silently begging him to touch me where I need him most.

His teasing is maddening, so when he finally slides his fingers back into my pussy, a cry of pleasure rips from me, and I gasp as he stretches me while sinking them in deep.

My grip on his dick tightens, and a low groan rumbles from his chest, the sound vibrating through my bones. As his fingers curl deep within me, a

sharp, electric jolt shoots through me, and for a dizzying moment, a kaleidoscope of bright stars explodes behind my closed eyelids.

“Oh, shit,” I mutter, my hand frozen around his length as I struggle to think about anything except the way his fingers are making me feel.

“Come on, sweetheart, you can do better than that. Let me hear a proper curse word,” he chuckles, not missing a beat as he pushes me to let go.

Lawson continues thrusting his fingers in and out, speeding up each time, my muscles coiling tight as the pleasure within me builds, setting my nerve endings on fire. Then he does it again, curling his fingers in just the right spot, and I cry out his name as I rock against him.

“I love hearing you scream my name,” he whispers against my ear, and for just a second, I’m shocked to find him so close. My eyes had been tightly closed as I got lost in the sensations, and I hadn’t realised he’d leaned in until I heard his voice vibrating against my cheek.

As I stare at his heated expression, it’s like the fog in my brain clears and I remember I’m still holding his dick in my hand. I had been so lost in the overwhelming sensations his fingers were creating, I’d stopped moving my hand, just holding him as if I couldn’t do anything else.

As quickly as that thought occurs to me, I lose it again when Lawson’s fingers distract me once more. It feels like my body is a live-wire that’s coiling tight, and it won’t be long before it ignites and explodes. The overwhelming sensations are all over my body, so much so I can barely pinpoint what is causing the pleasure.

It could be Lawson’s fingers inside me, his lips against my skin, the way his tongue heats my flesh, or his other hand trailing over my already frazzled nerve endings. It’s so much all at once, and my head is spinning.

“I-I don’t... Oh, shit... So good. I-I don’t know... I feel...” I can’t even form proper sentences, just breathy rambles that are cut off by my own moans and whimpers.

“I can feel your hot little cunt getting tighter, sweetheart. You’re gripping my fingers so fucking tight. Are you going to come for me?” he asks as he bites down on my neck before sucking on the spot to help ease some of the sting.

Am I about to come? I have no bloody idea. My body definitely feels like it’s building up to something, but I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.

“I don’t know,” I mutter, a loud moan ripping from my throat as Lawson uses his thumb to circle my clit.

His smile grows wider as he drags his gaze over the length of my body, as he touches me like he's worshipping me. "Oh, you're definitely going to come, Harper. Remember the feeling, as this is the only time I'm going to let you come without my permission."

My head is swimming as I try to make sense of what he's saying, but it's quickly forgotten when he curls his fingers again, making me see stars as I cry out.

I had no idea I was capable of making some of the noises Lawson seems to be able to pull from me, but I'm long past the point of being embarrassed. The pleasure he's giving me makes everything else disappear, and all I want to do is chase the high that's building within me.

I don't even know when I let go of Lawson's dick, but my hands are fisting the duvet beneath me, holding on tight as I lose myself to the overwhelming sensations.

It's not long before my whole body tenses, and I hold my breath as my heartbeat echoes in my ears. My nerve endings prickle with electricity as everything within me coils tight. Then, as Lawson swipes his thumb over my clit one more time, I'm pushed over the edge.

A cry rips from my throat and my whole body trembles as the force of my very first orgasm rushes through me. My pussy clamps down on Lawson's fingers, holding him in place, as he continues to draw lazy circles around my clit with his thumb. This prolongs my orgasm, causing tingles to spread across my skin.

When it finally dies down, I'm frantically gasping for air, my body feeling boneless as I sag into the comfortable mattress beneath me. As Lawson pulls his fingers out, I let out a hiss as my stretched pussy stings a little.

He leans in closer, so close I hold my breath when I think he might actually kiss me, but at the last second, he turns and presses a kiss to my cheek. "That was so fucking hot."

I let out a nervous chuckle, suddenly feeling very exposed under the weight of his stare. "It felt good."

He shakes his head as his eyes narrow on me. "Good? Good? That was better than fucking good. Your pussy was drenched, and you screamed my name like I'm the God you worship. That was way better than fucking good, sweetheart," he snaps, exasperated.

I bite my lower lip as I try not to smile. “Okay, it was a little better than good.”

He lets out a growl as he rolls on top of me, spreading my legs wide so he can rest between them. I gasp as I feel his hard cock sliding against my slick folds, while Lawson presses a hand onto the bed on either side of my head, caging me in.

“I’m going to fuck you until you see stars, and you can’t even remember what good means. I’m going to ruin you,” he says, as he traces his finger around the see-through plaster that’s covering the tattoo of his name. The one branding me as his for the rest of my life.

Even though I know there’s a ticking clock hanging over my time with Lawson, and we’re only in this until graduation, my biggest fear is that he really will ruin me for all other men. I think there’s a high possibility that no man will ever live up to Lawson Radley, and that scares the shit out of me since we have no future together.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lawson

I hate to admit that I almost blew my load without even being touched as I watched Harper fall apart on my fingers. It was one of the sexiest things I've ever seen, and something I intend on repeating over and over again.

When Harper made her vow, giving everything to me, it awakened the possessive, obsessive side of me that needs to claim her as mine in every way possible—and that starts right now by taking her virginity.

As I slide the head of my cock through her soaked folds, she holds her breath, her eyes widening as fear and anticipation overtake her. Knowing I'm the only person to have seen her like this makes my dick twitch in anticipation, and I have to mentally remind myself to slow down.

"Remember to breathe, sweetheart," I tell her as I press a kiss to her neck, before working my way down until I pull her peaked nipple into my mouth.

Harper lets out a soft moan as she arches her back, pressing her tit into my face as she moves one of her hands to my back, her nails scraping over my flesh as I nibble on her sensitive nipple.

She pulls in a ragged breath and watches as I reach between us and fist the base of my cock, using the control I've regained to slide the tip over her swollen clit.

As I move my shaft lower, lining the tip up with her tight hole, Harper shakes her head rapidly. "You're...you're not wearing a..." she trails off as she waves her hand, motioning toward my cock.

"What?" I ask, struggling to piece together what she's saying.

"A condom," she mutters, her voice barely above a whisper.

I let out a harsh laugh as I fix her with a hard stare. “Not a fucking chance,” I tell her as I wrap a hand around her throat, feeling the galloping of her heart beneath my fingers. “I want to feel your cunt wrapped around my bare cock. I want to watch as your blood coats my shaft. And I want you to feel it as I fill you with my cum.”

She tries to shake her head again, but my hold on her throat inhibits her. I’m not restricting her air, just holding her in place, so I can watch the way her eyes widen and blaze at my words. They may scare her, but I can see how turned-on she is.

“I’m not on any birth control,” she says, as if it matters.

I slide my thumb over her pulse point, loving the feel of her heart racing beneath her silky skin, as I lazily drag my dick through her slick folds once more. “I’ll make sure you get the morning-after pill tomorrow, and then we can sort out a more permanent option.”

She pauses for a second, contemplating my suggestion, but she clearly hasn’t realised it’s not optional. This is what’s going to happen, and she has no say in it. I’m going to fuck her bare, fill her with my cum, and she’s going to thank me for it afterwards.

“Okay.” She sounds almost defeated, but I don’t really care. We both knew we’d be doing things my way, and only my way.

“Good girl.”

She bites her lip in an attempt to hide the way she smiles at my praise, but I see it. I shuffle between her legs, spreading them as wide as I can, making it clear I’m not waiting anymore.

As I slowly press the tip against her entrance, Harper reaches up and places her hand on my stomach, as if she’s trying to hold me back. “Are you sure it won’t...hurt?”

Her voice is barely above a whisper, and her wide, beautiful blue eyes make her seem so vulnerable. I’m not used to caring about the person I’m fucking. Usually, as long as they have an orgasm before me, I don’t give a shit about anything else. Sure, I want to make sure it’s good for them, but that’s it. Hell, under most circumstances, I don’t even know their fucking name. So this is all new to me.

Removing my hand from her throat, I gently run my fingers over her forehead, sweeping a strand of hair off her face before tucking it behind her ear, then cupping her cheek with my palm. “It probably will hurt, but only for a bit.”

I can't lie to her, and I can't make her pain go away. But I sure as fuck am not going to tell her that I don't want to make it go away. I want to watch as I steal the last of her innocence, knowing I'm the one who will turn her pain into pleasure.

She looks like she's about to say something more, but I can't wait any longer. I press the tip of my cock against her entrance, groaning when her tight walls envelope me as I slowly push into her. I've barely gotten the head in and she tenses around me, holding her breath.

"Relax, Harper. It will hurt way less if you do," I tell her, and she nods in response as she pulls in a ragged breath.

I press in more, biting the inside of my cheek to try to prevent myself from coming too soon. Her walls clamp so tightly around me that I can barely push inside her, and every bit I slide in chokes more of my cock.

I want to just slam in until I'm balls deep—ripping off the plaster, as some would call it—but I promised Harper I'd be gentle, and a Crow always sticks to their word. Well, I do.

When it's clear she's not relaxing like I've told her to, making it nearly impossible for me to get any further in, I reach between our bodies until I find her clit. I gently slide my thumb over her sensitive nub before rubbing slow circles around it until Harper lets out a soft moan.

Her body sags the way I knew it would, and she arches into my touch, allowing a little more of my cock to slide inside. She lets out soft whimpers as I continue stroking her clit, and once she's relaxed enough, I press in harder this time.

I'm going slow enough to feel the moment my dick meets the resistance of her hymen, and I know there's no easy way for me to do this. As I press down hard on her clit, making her moan, I slam the rest of my cock into her pussy, tearing her hymen as I sink all the way in.

Harper's soft moan turns into a cry of pain, and her whole body tenses up as she stares at me with wide eyes that are filled with tears. I keep my dick buried deep in her pussy, not moving at all as I allow her the time she needs to adjust to the feel of me stretching her wide.

"Shush, it's okay, sweetheart. It will feel better in a minute," I tell her as I press a soft kiss against her cheek, making sure to keep circling her clit as the perfect distraction.

"It stings, and I feel so full. It's like you're tearing me in half," she whimpers, tears rolling down her cheeks.

I reach up and wipe them away, pressing kisses along her cheek where they were, loving the salty taste on my tongue. *This will not be the last time I make her cry.*

I press down harder on her clit as I pull her nipple into my mouth, hoping they'll both help to distract her. As I move to the other nipple, nibbling and grazing it with my teeth, she gently begins to rock her hips, testing the waters to see what it will feel like if I move.

I can't fucking wait; her tight cunt is choking the life out of my cock, and if I don't move soon, I'm going to come just from this.

"Is it feeling better?" I ask, praying to anyone who will fucking listen that she says yes.

"It's still stretching me really badly, but I don't think it's hurting as much," she whispers, her pelvis moving rhythmically against mine, as I softly wipe away the remaining tears.

I can't keep the arrogant smirk off my face as I say, "I have a big cock, that's why you feel like I'm ripping you open."

She lets out a soft laugh as she rolls her watery eyes at me, my heart racing in a way I never expected at the sound. I push that thought away as soon as Harper says, "I think you can try moving a little."

With a nod, I pull back slowly, watching as each inch appears from deep inside her. I almost come right there when I see blood smeared over my cock—proof that I took the innocence she was saving for another man.

I stop when only the tip remains inside, watching the rise and fall of Harper's chest as she reacts to my touch. This time when I push back in, I don't go slow. I don't slam in hard and deep like I desperately want to, but I'm certainly not soft or gentle as I push into her waiting pussy, feeling her hot, wet walls wrap around me as I sink into her.

We both let out desperate moans as we lose ourselves to the pleasure, and this time, I only stop for a moment, giving Harper just enough time to feel me deep inside before I pull back again.

"How does it feel?" I ask as I continue pushing into her, getting faster and deeper with each thrust.

"Sore, but good," she replies, her voice breathy and desperate as it quickly trails off into a groan of pleasure when I hit the spot deep inside that makes her eyes roll.

"I'm going to fuck you faster and harder now." I don't wait for her to respond before speeding up, moving both hands to her hips so I can control

our movements.

She's past the point where she needs me to play with her clit as a distraction. Her pussy is getting hotter and wetter with each thrust, and despite the pain she's no doubt still feeling, she's rocking her pelvis to meet each of my thrusts.

"F-fuck! Oh, shit...so good. I can't... It feels..." I can't help but smirk as she lets out her first real curse word in between her whimpers and cries of pleasure. I'm not even sure she knows she's done it, but I heard it loud and clear. It's so sexy watching her fall apart, letting go of the expectations and constraints placed on her in the past.

"Your pussy is so fucking tight, Harper. You're wearing my cock like a glove." I groan, the sound of our skin slapping together filling the room along with our moans of pleasure.

"So deep. It's too much," she mutters as her walls tighten around me.

"You'll take all of me and you'll fucking love it," I tell her, thrusting hard and deep enough to make her yelp, emphasising my point. "Won't you?"

For a moment she doesn't reply, lost in the sensations as I continue pounding into her with a ruthless speed, until she finally manages to say, "Yes, Law."

"Good girl," I say, just before I sink my teeth into her neck, licking and sucking until I'm sure I'm leaving a mark behind.

Her yelp turns into a long, guttural moan as she rocks against me, matching each of my thrusts, and it's not long before my balls are tingling, letting me know I won't be able to last much longer.

Removing one hand from her hip, I slide it between us once again, roughly swiping my thumb over her clit. I don't take it slow, or go gently. I need her to fall apart before I lose it.

"Come on, sweetheart. Be a good girl and come on my cock," I tell her as I snap my hips, hitting her sweet spot deep inside as I roughly flick over her clit.

Her eyes roll into the back of her head as her whimpers turn to loud moans of pleasure, before she begins to say my name like a religious chant. "Lawson...oh, fuck. Please... Lawson... I don't... I need... Law."

My name sounds almost ethereal coming from her lips when she's seconds away from falling over the cliff, and it's the best fucking sound in the world. My name will never sound better than when it's being said like

this. And don't even get me started on the shortened version I'd kill anyone else for using.

"That's it, beautiful. Come for me. Come all over my dick like the good little slut you are."

Her eyes narrow on me for just a second when I call her my slut, but it's quickly replaced by her lust as her orgasm hits. Her body becomes tense, and her pussy clamps down so tight on my cock that I'm unable to move, as she lets out a loud groan.

As her orgasm ripples through her, she trembles against me, letting out soft whimpers in between pulling in desperate gasps of air and crying out my name. I keep my grip tight as I hold her through her release, gently stroking my thumb over her clit to help drag her pleasure out for as long as possible.

As her body jerks, her pussy walls contract around my cock, and even though I try to fight against it, to make it last a little longer, the sensation of her tight cunt milking my dick tips me over the edge. I let out a deep roar as my orgasm hits, and I spill ropes of cum deep inside her.

We both stay as we are, waiting for the last of our orgasms to subside, and once they have, we both collapse. Harper goes limp beneath me as she pulls in ragged breaths, her body seeming almost boneless once again as a serene expression settles on her face.

I collapse on top of her at first, before quickly rolling to the side so I don't squash her with my body weight. As I roll, my dick slips out, and Harper lets out a hiss as I try not to moan at the loss of her warmth.

We both look down at the same time, and I don't even try to hold back my smirk when I see her blood coating my cock, as my cum drips from her pussy. When I'm sure she's watching, I reach down and gather up some of the cum that's leaked out onto my finger, before I gently push it back inside her cunt.

"I like seeing you full of my cum," I tell her as she just stares at me with those wide, beautiful blue eyes.

"I bled on you," she whispers, nodding to where her blood has stained my shaft.

I let her see the possessiveness in my gaze as I smile at her. "I wear it with pride. It's proof I'm the guy who stole your innocence."

She narrows her eyes at me, her lips tilting into a frown. "You didn't steal it; I gave it to you."

I let out a harsh laugh. “Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart. We both know, if you had another choice, you would still be a virgin right now.”

She lets out an annoyed huff, but doesn’t argue back. There’s no point; she knows I’m right. She didn’t want to have sex with me—not that I care. This is just the beginning.

“Let’s get cleaned up. You can soak your pussy for a bit, so it hurts a little less, but then you’re all mine. This is only the beginning. I went easy on you for your first time, but now that’s out of the way, I’m going to show you what it’s really like to be my Prize.

“I’m going to turn you into a desperate whore who won’t be able to stop begging for more. You’ll crave my fingers, my tongue, my cock—all of me. I’ll turn you into my perfect little slut, and you’ll love every second of it.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lawson

I should have known after my first taste of Harper that it'd never be enough. Once she'd bled all over my dick, giving me the one thing she'd held onto all this time, I claimed her in every way I could.

After her first time, she is sore, and a tad swollen, making her even more sensitive, but that isn't enough to stop me. The minute she walks out of the bathroom, I push her chest against my bedroom wall and slide my cock into her waiting cunt, bottoming out in one rough, brutal thrust.

I use one hand to hold her arms behind her back, while the other wraps around her creamy throat, making it clear I control the very air she needs to survive.

After filling her with my cum again, I give her a short amount of time to get some sleep, as it has been a long day for us both. I tell myself I can wait until morning, that I need to sleep too, but as Harper curls up into a ball on the far edge of my bed, presenting her arse to me, I lose all of those thoughts in an instant.

I don't care that she is still asleep, or that she is no doubt incredibly sore by now...I just want to claim what is mine in every way.

I wrap my body around Harper's, as though I'm trying to spoon her, and she melts into my touch whilst remaining asleep. For just a second, I actually quite enjoy pulling warmth from her as she shuffles around in her sleep, nestling against me even more.

Her arse brushing against my hard length reminds me I'm not here to cuddle. I need to claim what's mine all over again, so I don't even hesitate as I push my cock into her waiting hole.

She isn't as wet as before, but it's enough to suggest she's probably having a very good dream. I expect her to wake up as soon as I'm balls deep inside her, but she doesn't. She lets out a soft murmur as she rocks against me, but her eyes remain closed, still very much asleep.

I give myself a moment to get used to how fucking tight she still feels, her walls clamping around my dick like a vice. After a few deep breaths, I'm ready to move. I wrap one arm around her chest, grabbing hold of her tit as I use my other hand to spread her arse-cheeks apart. I want to watch my cock sinking into her heated flesh.

I pull back until just the tip remains inside, and maintain an agonisingly slow pace as I press in until she's taken all of me. Harper lets out a soft moan, followed by a gentle whimper, but she doesn't wake up; her low snores continue as before.

The feel of her gripping my length is too much, and my thrusts get faster each time. As soon as I hit that spot deep inside, Harper's eyes spring open as she lets out a loud moan, chased by a cry of pleasure as I rub her nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

"Lawson...what? Oh, shit..." Her words trail off as she pushes her arse back against me, meeting each of my thrusts, forcing me to slam into her even harder.

I lean in close until my breath fans over her cheek, and after pressing a soft kiss to her neck, I whisper into her ear. "Do you enjoy waking up with your pussy full of my cock? Do you think I could have made you come in your sleep? You felt like you were getting pretty fucking close, sweetheart."

I feel a shiver ripple through her body as she continues rocking against me, her mouth falling open as she closes her eyes, losing herself to the overwhelming sensations. Her pussy is so wet, but I can feel her walls tightening, like she might be close to exploding all over me.

"Oh, Law... I'm gonna... P-please... I need to..." Her eyes fly open as I pinch her nipple, cutting off her mumbled sentences as she yelps.

"Tell me what you need, sweetheart. Good little whores use their words, remember?" I tell her, before pressing my lips against the pulse point on her neck, loving the feel of her racing heart pounding away beneath me.

I keep up my relentless pace as Harper glares at me, still not happy about me calling her my whore. But that's exactly what she is, and it's not the bad thing she seems to think it is. She doesn't realise that there's a level

of power that comes with embracing her sexuality, and when she truly learns to wield it over me, I'm in for a world of trouble.

I move my hand off her tit and wrap it around her neck, forcing her to tilt her head back until she's looking up at me, watching as I continue to thrust into her relentlessly. As her moans and whimpers become more desperate, my movements turn uncoordinated as a shiver runs up my spine, letting me know I'm close too.

Her eyes roll again as she cries my name, her pussy fluttering around me as she edges closer to her orgasm. I'm not sure if her silence is because she's lost in the moment, or because she's rebelling. Either way, I need to teach her a lesson.

I quickly pull my cock from her dripping cunt, biting my lip to hold back the groan of frustration that tries to rip from me, matching the high-pitched one Harper lets out. She turns to glare at me, her eyes narrowed in frustration.

Before she has the chance to say anything, I slap my hand hard against her arse, and she cries out in pain as a pink hand-shaped mark appears on her creamy flesh. She opens her mouth, but I silence her by spanking her once more.

Harper stares at me with a mixture of confusion and anger, tears filling her beautiful blue eyes as she tries to shuffle away from me, but my arm around her waist holds her in place as I spank her twice more in the same place. I watch in fascination as her pale skin reddens with my handprint.

"What... Why are..." She struggles to find the right words between her whimpers, and I spank her once more.

"Do you remember the rules, Harper?" I ask, keeping my tone firm.

Her brow furrows, as if she's thinking back, trying to remember them, until she finally shakes her head. "No, I don't."

"Surely you remember what I said only a few minutes ago," I say, before gently massaging my palm over her no-doubt stinging flesh.

Harper lets out a shuddered breath that turns into a whispered whimper as she leans into my touch, feeling the soothing effect my palm is having on her heated skin.

"You called me a whore," she replies, not even bothering to hide the distaste in her voice.

I shake my head, but I'm not able to keep the smirk off my face as I correct her. "Actually, I said that good whores use their words. Not only are

you supposed to tell me what you need, you have to ask for permission to come.”

Her eyes, wide saucers reflecting the dim light, dart back and forth as her head whips from side to side. “But we...we had sex several times tonight, and you didn’t once make me ask for permission.”

She’s right. I was so lost in the feel of her, I forgot my own rules, but now that I’m not thinking with my dick, it’s time to start training her—and this is rule number one.

“Well, now we’re going to play by my rules,” I tell her.

She wrinkles her nose at me, her cheeks flushing. “How am I supposed to play by the rules if I don’t know them? You bloody hit me,” she spits.

I spin Harper over onto her back before rolling on top of her, using my body to cage her in without pressing my weight onto her. I shuffle and spread her legs wide enough for me to settle between them.

With one hand on her hip, I move the other to her throat once more, only this time I press down enough to restrict her air, as well as limiting the blood supply rushing to her head. Her eyes widen as she starts to thrash beneath me, trying to throw me off her as panic sets in.

I keep my hold on her for just a few seconds more, before releasing my grip enough that she’s able to pull in some much-needed air. I’m sure her head is spinning, but I keep my soft hold on her throat, making sure she doesn’t look away.

“I didn’t hit you. I spanked you as a punishment—and a mild one at that. Don’t even bother denying that your pussy isn’t still dripping wet. I saw the way you reacted...you like a little pain with your pleasure. Just what I love in a whore.”

With a fresh surge of fury, her eyes narrow, and with her teeth tightly clenched, she spits, “I’m not a whore.”

I let out a short, sharp laugh. “Yes, you are, sweetheart. You gifted yourself to me, remember? That makes you my whore, and I plan to train you to be the best fucking slut I’ve ever had.”

The anger drains from her eyes, leaving behind a blank, unseeing gaze. When she speaks, there’s no emotion or fire that I heard just a moment ago. “So, that’s all I’ll ever be...a whore.”

It’s a question, but she phrases it like a statement, and the hollowness in her voice makes my stomach sink, though I’m not entirely sure why.

“Is that a bad thing?” I ask.

Harper tilts her head as though she's thinking over her answer, before letting out a long sigh. "I guess that's all I have now." She sounds resigned, almost lost, and I fucking hate it.

Taking my hand from her throat, I move it until I'm cupping her cheek, before running my thumb under her eye to catch the lone tear that has slipped free. She doesn't lean into my touch the way I've come to expect in the short time she's been here, and I hate how much I miss it.

"Look, I think you have a warped view of what it means to be my whore. It doesn't mean I'm going to share you with other people. It doesn't mean you can fuck any other guy you please. All it means is that you've embraced your sexuality. You listen to your body, to what it craves, and you take what you need."

Harper opens her mouth, as if she wants to respond, but I press my thumb to her lips, silencing her so I can continue.

"If you have a sexual fantasy you want to explore, then we will. If you have something you've heard other girls talk about that you want to try, then we fucking will. That's true for me too, as long as we agree."

"Yes, as my Prize, I'm going to push your limits sometimes, but I won't ever take things too far. You can have a safeword, and if you ever feel like you have to use it, we'll stop instantly. Until then, I will push you to explore yourself, because I believe you've been caged inside the previous version of yourself for far too long."

"You deserve to experience everything, to know genuine pleasure, but also to see how much power you can wield just by embracing how fucking sexy you really are."

She sticks her tongue out to lick my thumb, as if to emphasise my point, and my dick throbs once more. I have to focus my thoughts to finish my point, before I'm lost to her.

"The men in your past have held you back from exploring this version of yourself, and I sure as fuck will not do that. I want to watch you explore, to find out what you like, what your body craves. I want to see the moment you realise how fucking gorgeous you really are, and how unstoppable that makes you if you truly know how to use it."

"So, no, being a whore is not a bad thing. In fact, being my slut is going to be so fucking good for you, your head will be spinning constantly, and you'll be so wet all the time that you'll run out of fucking panties. How does that sound?"

I watch with a cocky smile on my face as her cheeks flush bright red, her mouth opening and closing as she struggles to find the right words. But when I feel her leaning into my palm on her cheek, I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I think I’d like to find myself, like you said. I’ve always felt like I’m missing out on so much. It’s just, whenever anyone calls a woman a whore or a slut, it’s always a negative term, and I thought that’s what you meant,” she explains, before pulling her bottom lip between her teeth and nibbling on it nervously.

I move my fingers down and pull it free before sliding my thumb over her soft, plump lower lip. When she sticks her tongue out to lick the tip, my cock twitches, reminding me just how close to orgasm I was only a few minutes ago.

“It’s definitely not a negative term for me. It’s just more proof that you belong to me and nobody else. I want to be the only person who makes you feel like you can let loose and embrace your inhibitions. I want to be the one who forces curse words to slip from your filthy mouth.”

Harper’s eyes flicker to my lips, and for just a moment, I think she’s going to lean forward and kiss me, so I pull back, rocking my hips until my hard length is sliding against her slick folds once more. She seems confused, but it’s quickly replaced by lust when the tip of my dick presses against her sensitive clit, pulling a moan from her lips.

“Are you ready to be my good little slut and come for me?” I ask as I line my head up with her hole.

This time, she doesn’t hesitate. She fixes her gaze on mine as she says, “Yes, please. Just for you.”

Fuck, I almost come right there. Instead, I lose the last shred of self-control I was grasping onto as I push into Harper in one brutal thrust, not stopping until I’m buried deep inside her. We both moan together, our breaths mingling from how close we are to each other, and I have to press a kiss to her neck to avoid her lips.

I don’t hold back at all, and Harper takes each hard, deep thrust I give her, rocking her hips to meet mine, pushing me even deeper. And it’s not long until we’re both close to the edge once more, my movements becoming frantic and uncoordinated as I desperately try to get her there before me.

Reaching between our bodies, I cup her mound before sliding my finger over her clit, rubbing it just enough to make her lose her mind. Her

whimpers and moans make my cock throb, and I will myself to hold on just a little longer.

“Fuck, Lawson... Please, please...can I...come?”

My balls tingle and my cock grows impossibly harder while I get as deep as I can, making her eyes roll as she claws at my back. Hearing her angelic, sweet voice cursing and begging me is too much, and I can't hold back any longer.

“Come, sweetheart. I want to feel you come all over my dick,” I tell her.

As soon as the words have left my lips, I press down on her clit, and she lets out a scream of pleasure that twists into her repeating my name over and over as the orgasm rips through her body. Her tight cunt clamps down on my cock, and I couldn't hold back even if I wanted to.

I blow my load deep inside her spasming pussy, loving the feel of her milking me as she chants my name, her body trembling with the force of her desire.

We just hold each other as tremors ripple through us, the power of our orgasms leaving us both boneless when we finally collapse, gasping for air. Harper winces when my cock slips out, and I roll onto my back, pulling her with me so I can wrap my arms around her still. She rests her head on my chest as if it's the most natural thing in the world, her eyes fluttering with exhaustion as she relaxes into my hold.

We stay like that for a while, and when Harper tries to pull away from me, I hold her tighter, not ready for this to be over yet. I'm not a hugger, but the feeling of her in my arms, taking warmth from her gorgeous naked body, is one I'm not ready to let go of just yet.

“I'm sore, and I need to clean up,” she tells me.

I reach between her legs and feel where my cum has leaked out onto her thighs, and my obsessive need to see her full of my cum overtakes me as I once again press it back into her pussy. She hisses, no doubt from how sore she is, but I ignore her.

“I like knowing you're so full of my cum that it's dripping from your tight cunt,” I say.

Harper lets out a low groan, but I'm not sure if it's from frustration or because she's turned on. “I'm so sore. I need to rest a bit.”

My smile turns into an almost manic smirk as she narrows her eyes on me in confusion. “That's fine, sweetheart. You have two other holes I can make good use of.”

She pushes against my chest, trying to move away from me, but my hold on her is too tight. She shakes her head rapidly, glaring at me. "You aren't going anywhere near my arse," she says through gritted teeth, which only makes me laugh.

"Oh, sweetheart. Haven't you realised by now that I always get what I want, and you belong to me. In fact, not too long ago, you promised that everything you have belongs to me...and that includes your tight arse," I tell her, squeezing her arse-cheek for emphasis.

"No, it'll hurt too much. Can't you just use my mouth?" she asks, not even trying to hide the plea in her voice.

"I will use your mouth, but I want your arse, too. I promise to go slow, to make sure you're ready for my cock. The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

She's silent for a moment, mulling over what I just said, before she lets out a soft sigh. "I can tell there's no point in arguing."

I let out a chuckle as I pull her closer. "You're learning. Now, get some sleep. I'm nowhere near done with you yet."



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lawson

When Harper emerges from the bathroom, her curvy hips swaying and her long strawberry-blond hair flowing over her naked chest, my interest in my phone disappears as she captures my attention. I've lost count of how many ways I've fucked her over the last few days, but just one glance at her naked body and my cock springs to life like I've been celibate for months.

After getting Harper the morning after pill, the Order doc talked to her about the best long-term options, and thankfully, the implant she opted for was effective immediately. Whilst I want to fuck her bare, a baby is most definitely not an option—my father would have an aneurysm—but when she stands before me, naked and beautifully tempting, all rational thoughts go out the window.

She stops in the middle of the room, her gaze fixed on me as she pops her hip, placing her hand on it for effect. I have to bite my lip to hold back my smirk when I see the red marks around her wrists from where I've tied her up several times over the last few days, and the bite marks littered over her creamy soft skin.

"I want to go to class," she states confidently, holding her head high.

I wave her off with my hand. "You don't need to. I'll make sure the teachers are aware you're my Prize, and they'll pass you without you ever attending a lesson."

Her mouth gapes open, a silent gasp escaping, as her eyes, wide for a fleeting second, quickly narrow to sharp slits. The air crackles with her irritation as she takes a deliberate step towards me, her voice tight as she

says, "I don't want that. I want to earn any qualifications I get. Besides, I can't stay locked in this room for the rest of the year."

I quickly stand from the bed, sliding my phone into the pocket of my grey sweatpants, before slowly walking towards Harper. She stands her ground, keeping her head held high as I stalk towards her, but it's clear by the way her breath hitches that she's nervous, wondering what I'm about to do.

Although she tries to look brave, she's still just prey trapped in the path of a hunter.

I don't stop until I'm right in front of her, and she has to tip her head back to meet my gaze, thanks to our almost one-foot height difference. With me looming over her naked body, it only makes her appear more petite and fragile.

"I thought you'd learnt the rules by now, sweetheart. If I say we're staying in this room until we graduate, that's what we're doing," I tell her.

She looks like she's about to argue, but before she gets herself into trouble, my phone pings. Removing it from my pocket, I curse when I see who the text is from.

After I've finished reading the message, I let out a long sigh as I place the phone back into my pocket, suddenly feeling incredibly twitchy and anxious. To distract myself, I wrap my hand around the back of Harper's neck, before grabbing hold of her hair, and tilting her head back to meet my gaze once more.

"Luck appears to be on your side, sweetheart. I have to go to a meeting with my father, so you can go to class," I say, before leaning down and pressing a kiss to her neck, loving the feel of her fluttering pulse beneath my lips.

When Harper replies, the confidence she mustered before is long gone, and her voice trembles as she stutters over her words. "Th-thank you. B-But...I-I don't... I don't have any clothes."

I let go of her hair and take a step back, trying to cast my mind back to a few nights ago to remember what I did with her dress. Once I'm no longer in close proximity to her, Harper pulls in a ragged breath, and once again tries to steel her nerves to seem less affected by me.

"You cut the dress off me as soon as we got back from the ceremony. I've been naked ever since," she tells me, pointing to the scraps of white fabric on the floor in the far corner of the room.

My smile grows as memories of that moment flash in my mind, reminding me of the terror in her eyes as I slid my blade against her delicate flesh. "I remember. Don't worry, I'll find you something."

I head straight for my walk-in closet, and once I'm inside, I look around to see what would work best. Then I spot the black hoodie I was wearing the other day, thrown over the back of the chair, and I quickly grab it, offering it to Harper.

She reaches out and accepts the hoodie, her brows pulling together as she looks at it in confusion. "Is this it? Surely you have something else for me to wear with it?"

My fingers brush against her arm as I snatch the soft, worn hoodie from her grasp. With my other hand, I grip her hip and pull her close. She lets out a startled yelp as I slide the hoodie over her head. As she guides her arms into the waiting sleeves, she takes a deep breath against the fabric, obviously inhaling my scent.

The fabric falls over her perfect body, and I straighten it before taking a small step back, admiring all of her. My cock twitches in approval at the way she looks, like she's drowning in my top. It's far too big on her, the bottom reaching well below her mid-thigh, almost the same length as the dress she wore.

Seeing her in my clothes does something to me that I've never experienced before, and I can't get over how fucking sexy she looks, despite the large hoodie hiding all of her curves. But I know they're there, hidden beneath something that smells entirely of me.

"It's the same length as your dress. In fact, you're probably more covered up," I tell her, whilst mentally working out if I can fuck her once more without being late to meet my father. I already know the answer is no, but she's so tempting.

She places her hand on her hip, cocking it once more as she says, "Lawson, I can't go out like this. I'm not wearing any underwear."

With a menacing step, I bend down until my lips are close enough to whisper in her ear. "If you'd rather, I can leave you tied up here in nothing but a ball-gag."

She pulls back, the scent of her perfume momentarily filling the air as she stares at me. Her pupils dilate in a silent gasp when she realises how serious I am.

Before I agreed she could go to class, I considered whether I should tie her to my bed and leave her here, naked and waiting for me to return. Now I'm reconsidering it, and it sounds like a fucking great idea.

Harper lets out a huff as she scowls at me. "Fine, I can go like this."

"Good girl," I tell her before pressing my lips to her cheek. "Wait here while I get ready."

She takes a seat on the bed, and I quickly rush around, getting ready to leave. Luckily, I had a shower earlier, so I just need to freshen up and get dressed. As I pull on my dark jeans, black T-shirt, and grey hoodie, I can feel Harper's eyes tracking my every move.

I keep my eyes fixed ahead, so she won't feel awkward about being caught checking me out. I want her to be attracted to me, to crave my touch, and I sure as shit won't let her feel ashamed of it.

I stop in front of the mirror and run my fingers through my hair in a failed attempt to tame it. It looks like I've spent the weekend getting fucked, and refuses to be straightened, so I quickly pull on a baseball cap backwards, hoping that will flatten it down enough to be presentable by the time I get to my father's.

Once I'm ready, I hold out my hand to Harper, and as she slides her fingers into mine, I have to hide the shock I feel when it's almost like my palm is tingling from being in contact with hers. I wonder if she feels it too, as she sucks in a soft gasp, but quickly covers it with a cough.

I try not to think about it too much as I lead Harper through Crowhurst House, heading straight for the front door. As it's Monday morning, the house is much busier than normal, with everyone getting ready to head to class. Or some making the walk of shame, having spent the weekend at the house following the Gifting Ceremony celebrations.

I can feel everyone's eyes on us, and I pull Harper closer, wanting to shield her from their lecherous gazes. If anyone lingers for even a second too long, I might pull the blade from my back pocket and stab someone in the eye.

Fuck, when did I become this overprotective? Then again, she's mine, and I don't like to share.

Harper doesn't just allow me to pull her closer; she actually nestles against my side, as if she's using me as a shield, and I almost puff my chest out with pride that she trusts me enough to take care of her.

As we walk through the large entrance hall, the front door within our sights, we're frozen in our tracks by a loud, high-pitched voice that can be heard over all the others.

"Well, look what we have here. It's a dirty whore, looking thoroughly fucked and used," Tillie squeals as she rushes over to stand in front of us, her ridiculously high heels making an awful clicking noise on the hardwood floors.

Harper freezes beside me, her body tensing as Sienna rushes to stand by Tillie's side, dragging that skid-stain Ryan behind her. Sienna glares at Harper, wrinkling her nose in disgust as she spits, "Aww, looks like you've finally learnt your true place. Now you'll never be an Order Wife."

Sliding my hand around Harper's back, I rest it against her hip as I pull her closer to my side, hoping to give her some of my strength, as she's practically vibrating with rage.

"Didn't you become Ryan's Prize?" I point out to Sienna, gently reminding her of her place too.

Sienna's gaze shifts towards me, her eyes narrowing into a glare. "Yes," she says through gritted teeth.

"Doesn't that make you nothing more than his whore then?"

Sienna's face turns purple as she scowls at me, her hands balling into fists as she no doubt thinks of something vaguely unintelligent in response. But before she has the chance to speak, I hear the voice of my best friend, Bram, as he walks over to stand on Harper's other side.

"From what I've heard, you've been a whore for a few years now. Then again, your family would never be considered for a marriage contract, would they? To say it would be scraping the bottom of the barrel would be a fucking understatement," Bram drawls lazily, his eyes glistening with mischief as he taunts Sienna.

The people who have gathered to watch our exchange giggle under their breath, which only makes Sienna madder, her cheeks turning an unhealthy purple colour. She actually stamps her foot as she turns to glare at Ryan. "Are you going to let them talk to me like that?"

The wanker just rolls his eyes as he waves her off, which only seems to infuriate her more. She turns to glare at Harper, who presses herself against my side even more, and I decide to stop this before it goes any further.

I fix Ryan with a hard glare as I say, "You better put a muzzle on your bitch before someone has to put her down."

Okay, so I'll admit, I probably didn't say the right thing if my intention was to calm the situation down, but seeing the look on Sienna's face was more than worth it. Until she charges toward me with her ridiculously long fake pink nails held out like claws, squawking in outrage.

Ryan reaches out and grabs hold of her bleach-blonde hair, pulling her back before she's able to make contact with me. What I didn't expect was for Harper to rush forward, pushing me back until she's standing in front of me. With her head held high, my quiet, shy girl uses her body to shield me from the crazy bitch who is charging at me.

Tillie, Sienna, and Ryan all look shocked, but their expressions have nothing on mine, as I wonder why the hell Harper would throw herself between me and danger.

As Harper holds her head high, straightening her spine to make it clear she's not afraid, her voice comes out more confident than I've ever heard before. "I'd rather be Lawson's whore than Ryan's wife."

Fuck, my cock will never go down after hearing those words on her lips. It's the sexiest thing I've ever heard, and I'm at a total loss as to where this gorgeous, feisty woman came from.

I'm in so much of a daze that when Harper takes hold of my hand, she practically has to pull me from the room, making it clear she's not waiting for a response from them.

I can't resist looking over my shoulder, and it's more than worth it when I see the furious glare on Ryan's face as he watches Harper stride from the room like she owns the place. Bram's cheers follow us as we head straight for the door, and he waits behind, no doubt to soak up the carnage we leave in our wake.

When we reach my car, her confidence crumbles, and she trips over her own feet. I catch her and spin her around until her back's against my car, and she lets out a gasp as I press my body against hers, letting her feel how hard I am for her right now.

"You have no idea how bloody sexy that was. I think it might be one of the hottest things I've ever seen," I say, my voice deep and raspy.

She tilts her head to the side, as if she's confused, but she doesn't say anything, so I elaborate for her.

"You wanted to protect me in there?"

She nods. "Yes."

"You stood up for me."

“You would have done the same for me,” she says, shrugging her shoulders as if it’s no big deal.

“I would. I will always protect you,” I tell her, hoping she can hear the sincerity in my voice.

With a small smile on her face, Harper reaches up and presses her palm against my cheek as she says, “I will always protect you, too.”

Bloody hell, my heart is beating so intensely, it’s a miracle it hasn’t burst free from my chest. With the exception of maybe Bram, nobody has ever stood up for me the way Harper just did. After everything I’ve done to her, the way I’ve treated her and used her, there’s no reason for her to want to protect me. But there’s a small part of me that’s really fucking happy she does.

Without even thinking about it, I drop to my knees in front of her and slide my hands up her creamy thighs. Her eyes grow wide as I push my hoodie upwards, revealing her bare pussy to me. With the plaster now gone, I delight in the sight of my name tattooed there before I press a kiss to the tender skin.

“What are you doing?” she whispers, her eyes darting around the car park to make sure nobody can see, but I don’t give a shit.

“I’m going to eat your pussy until you scream my name,” I tell her as I lift her leg and hook it over my shoulder, looking up at her through hooded lashes.

“What if someone sees?” She sounds panicked, looking everywhere except where I want her to.

“I don’t give a shit. Now, be a good girl and keep your eyes on me. I want to watch you come on my lips.”

Before she even has a chance to respond, I dive into her sweet cunt like a starving man being offered his first meal. I lick and suck at a furious pace, loving the taste of her on my tongue.

Harper quickly loses herself to the overwhelming pleasure I’m giving her, and with her gaze fixed on me, she knocks my baseball cap off and grabs hold of my hair, rocking against my face as she takes what she needs from me. Her soft moans echo around the car park for all to hear, but neither of us care if people can see, we’re both too lost in the moment.

When I feel her getting closer to her release, I suck hard on her clit as I push two fingers into her wet pussy, dragging a strangled cry from her lips as she begs for more.

“Lawson... Please, I’m so close... Please.”

I look up at her from on my knees as I quickly thrust my fingers in and out, curling them at just the right time when I’m deep inside, until Harper is gasping for air.

“Are you going to come for me, sweetheart? Are you going to come all over my tongue?”

She nods her head as she rocks against my face, her grip on my hair tightening to the point it’s almost painful, but I allow her to pull me closer so I can keep tasting her.

“Yes. Oh, Law... Please, can I come?” she begs, her leg trembling as she puts more of her weight on my shoulder so I can keep her upright.

“Come for me,” I tell her, wrapping my mouth around her clit, sucking and nibbling on it as I continue to fuck her cunt with my fingers.

Harper lets out a loud cry that quickly turns into a guttural moan as her orgasm rips through her body, making her violently tremble, and I have to hold her tightly so she doesn’t fall over.

Her pussy grips my fingers to the point I can’t even move them, and I softly lick her clit through her release, dragging it out for as long as I can. When she finally stops shaking, I ease my fingers from her dripping cunt, and keep my gaze fixed on hers as she watches me lick them clean.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly as she tries to catch her breath, but her eyes blaze with fire as she watches me on my knees, cleaning her juices off my fingers. When I’m satisfied that I’ve gotten every drop, I lift her leg off my shoulder and place it on the ground. I keep my grip on her hips firm until I’m sure she’s not going to fall.

When her breathing returns to normal, and her legs are no longer wobbling like jelly, I stand back up, grabbing my baseball cap as I do. I secure it on backwards before pulling the hoodie down to cover Harper’s beautiful curves. She stares at me with a small smile on her face, suddenly looking very fucking shy, like she wasn’t just riding my face and screaming my name.

I lean in close, my eyes drawn to her lips, and Harper freezes, her big, beautiful blue eyes watching me as I slowly edge closer. Her pink, plump lips are calling to me, and I’m so unbelievably tempted by them, but at the last second, I turn my head and place a kiss just beside the corner of her mouth.

Harper lets out a soft sigh that almost sounds like a groan, but she doesn't say anything, and so I quickly change the subject, not wanting to draw attention to the fact I can't kiss her.

I run my finger over my own lips before pulling it into my mouth. "This is my new favourite taste. This might even be my new breakfast," I tell her, loving the way her eyes grow wide before she quickly turns shy again.

There's a sexually adventurous girl buried deep inside Harper, I'm sure of it. She's just been repressed by years of 'training' to become what the Order expects of her. The Order no longer has any expectations of her, freeing her to explore the side of herself she's had to ignore for so long.

I am incredibly bloody excited that I get to be the one to help her find that side of herself, to help her live out all of her dirtiest fantasies. I have a few of my own I plan on experiencing with Harper. But I have a sneaking suspicion that she's more of a turn-on than any fucking fantasy ever could be, and that's what makes her so dangerous.

I almost broke one of my rules just now by kissing her, and I can't risk that. I have rules in place for a reason, and no matter how fucking tempting Harper is, I can't risk breaking them for her.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lawson

After taking Harper back to her dorm room, I made the far-too-short journey to my parents' house. Shadowmere campus is large, set in the middle of nowhere, and it's a decent drive just to get to the nearest town, which just so happens to be where I grew up.

As my father is a member of the Obsidian Council, with strong ties to the university, we've lived nearby my whole life, so he could be close to campus if needed. Growing up, it was never a problem, but now that I'm living on campus, my family aren't as far away as I'd like them to be—the hour journey is over far too quickly.

We live on the outskirts of town, in a large house that most would probably describe as a mansion. The two-story building is all white concrete, with ivy and other greenery climbing up the sides, giving it a more homey feel. Sadly, the two large white pillars on either side of the door give away just how pompous my family really is.

Our estate covers many acres, with grass and trees as far as the eye can see, making us miles away from our nearest neighbour. It's so large, it takes me almost five minutes to get from the main entrance gate to the front door; the winding gravel driveway seems to go on forever.

I park my car in its usual spot and take a moment to pull on the mask of indifference I need to wear around my father. Unexpected meetings like this one never go well for me, and if I'm right about why he's called me here, I won't like any part of this discussion. So it's imperative I keep my emotions under control. That way, he can't ever use them against me—and I'm certain he fucking would.

I've barely reached the top step when the large wooden door creaks open to reveal my mother standing there, waiting for me. I'm startled for a moment, as it's usually a member of staff that greets me at the door. In fact, I can't remember the last time Mother answered the door, and that in itself has me worried.

As always, Christine Radley looks perfectly put together, not a single hair out of place. Her platinum-blonde hair is pulled back into a fancy bun at the back of her head, and her makeup perfectly emphasises her features, though she's probably wearing more than a woman her age should.

At forty-eight years old, Mother looks good for her age, but she's had a lot of help. Botox has smoothed out the fine-lines on her face, and filler has plumped up her lips larger than they should be. The boob job she had several years ago has left them much larger than is natural, but at least she doesn't have to worry about them sagging.

Everything about her is fake, except for the stupidly expensive designer dress she's wearing. Even the smile she's giving me doesn't quite reach her eyes, and so I don't bother returning the gesture.

She takes a step towards me, giving me a tight smile as she reaches up and rests her icy hand on my cheek. "It's been far too long, Lawson."

I narrow my eyes on her, trying to work out what she's doing. She rarely shows me any kind of affection. I was here a couple of weeks ago for a meeting with Father, but she never bothered coming to see me. "Hardly, I visit plenty," I say through gritted teeth, leaning away from her touch.

She takes the hint and drops her hand with a sigh. "You only seem to come whenever you have to see your father. It's never a social visit, or to spend time with me," she replies, sounding almost whiny.

"You've never asked to see me," I remind her. It's not like I come home voluntarily. Each time it's because Father has summoned me here.

"I know you're off enjoying your life at Shadowmere, but you will graduate soon, and the Order will assign you your role... I worry that after that, I won't ever see you." Her face twists into a frown, although it's hard to be sure since her forehead barely moves.

With any fucking luck, I think, reminding myself that in the none-too-distant future, I'll have my own life, and I won't have to answer to Father.

"I'll make sure to come and see you more," I lie, knowing I have no intention of doing any such thing.

Mother gives me a small, tight smile that suggests she knows I'm lying to her, but she doesn't call me out on it. Instead, she lets out a long sigh. "That's all I can ask. Anyway, you better not keep your father waiting; he's not been in a great mood lately."

Ha, when is he ever in a good mood?

When Mother takes a step back, there's a sadness in her eyes that I'm not used to seeing, and I'm not entirely sure why she feels that way, but I don't have time to find out. Instead, I say my goodbyes, turn and walk away, heading toward my father's office.

As soon as I reach the door, I knock twice and pause, waiting for his booming voice to tell me I can go in. With his permission, I push open the door and find my father sitting behind his large mahogany desk, his fingers tapping on the top as if he's been waiting impatiently for my arrival.

I quickly slide into one of the seats on the opposite side of his desk, lounging in a way that makes him glare at me. He loves to lecture me on the importance of making an impression, and me sitting like I've got a stick up my arse apparently gives off a good image, while relaxing into the chair does not.

His eyes narrow on me, and it's very fucking clear this meeting is not going to be a good one. Anger and annoyance are practically dripping off him, permeating the air around us to the point it's stifling.

"You asked to see me, Father?" I decide to start the conversation, since I have no intention of just sitting here while he scowls at me, trying to intimidate me.

"I want to talk to you about the Gifting Ceremony. I'm very disappointed in you, Lawson. What the hell were you thinking making that Westmore girl your Prize?" he spits, glaring at me with pure venom in his eyes.

I shrug my shoulders. "I think she makes a great Prize."

His eyes blaze with anger as he balls his hands into fists on the desk, looking more irritated with me. "We had a plan. You were supposed to convince Xander to let you select a different Prize. Lena was expecting you to choose her. She's the daughter of one of my business partners, and would have been a perfectly good choice for a Prize. Instead, you've let down a very powerful family, and put our working relationship in jeopardy."

I roll my eyes at my father's dramatics. We both know Lena's father will not cut ties with us, given we're one of the most powerful families in

the Order. If they're offering their daughter as a Prize, they're mid-level at best. It wouldn't be in their best interests to piss us off, so I know this is coming from my father, not the family I supposedly let down.

"I don't care. I follow every command that is given to me by the Order, without hesitation or question, but choosing who I want as my Prize is the one thing I get to decide for myself, and I don't regret it," I tell him, hoping he can hear just how fucking serious I am.

He continues to glare daggers at me as he says, "Did you even bother thinking about how being attached to the Westmore name is bad for our reputation?"

I don't think my father wants to hear the honest answer—that I don't give a shit about how my connection to Harper might affect our family name. But he's not wrong; some people may look at the connection and read into it incorrectly.

"I think our name is strong enough to withstand rumours and gossip," I tell him.

He lets out a huff as he bangs his hand on the desk. "That is irrelevant. You need to turn this shitshow into something that benefits us."

I roll my eyes at his dramatics. "And how do you suggest I do that?"

"You need to make it clear to people that you chose Harper as a punishment. Her father betrayed the Obsidian Order, and since he's yet to face justice, you are giving his daughter the punishment their family deserves. It's clear the girl is Bob's weakness, and you need to show people you plan to take advantage of that."

Every part of that sentence feels wrong to me, but the sheer determination in Father's eyes suggests he's not going to let this go. "What exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying, you need to punish your Prize publicly. Make it clear that this family is not weak, and that we put the needs of the Order before our own. You need to clarify that you gave up the Prize you really wanted to get justice for the Order members wronged by the Westmore family."

I shake my head at his ability to spout such bullshit in the name of making this family look better. But I use this as an opening to ask a question that's been on my mind since I first spoke to Harper about her dad, since I promised to help look into his arrest.

"Why hasn't Bob Westmore faced justice yet? Normally, traitors are killed straight away, long before they even have a chance to be arrested.

Bob Westmore is not only alive, he's in a position to talk in prison. Something doesn't add up."

It's impossible to miss the exact moment my father's walls come up, and all emotion bleeds from his face, leaving behind a cold, empty expression. His voice is monotone, lacking any kind of fire that he had just a moment before. "I have no idea how Bob Westmore is still alive. It's something the Obsidian Council is looking into."

His response seems almost practiced, as if he's reading from a pre-prepared prompt sheet, and it's very clear they're not my father's own words. He's relaying whatever the Council has told him to say on the subject, and no matter how much I prod him for more, this is the most I'll get from him.

But that doesn't stop me from having one last dig. "So, because the Council is incompetent and can't do their job and kill Bob, I now have to punish his daughter for something she didn't do. Is that what you're saying?"

He slams his fist down on the desk again, his voice booming while his face turns a dangerous shade of purple. "Never call the Council incompetent again, or you'll find yourself on the receiving end of one of our punishments. As a Pledge, you should show nothing but respect for the elders you hope to answer to after graduation. But if you don't think you're capable of showing the Obsidian Council the respect it deserves, we can always kick you out of the Crows."

His threat is like a stab to the gut, and his sadistic smile suggests he knows exactly the impact it's had on me. I've spent my whole life working towards becoming the youngest ever Obsidian Council member, so for him to imply I don't respect the institution is a devastating blow, and I have to set it right immediately.

"I'm sorry, Father. I spoke out of turn without thinking. Of course, I have the highest level of respect for the Obsidian Council, and hope to one day be a member. I will do whatever it takes to get there," I tell him, meaning every word.

His sadistic smile grows, and I can't help but think I just walked straight into the trap he set for me. "Good. Then you'll have no problem making an example of the Westmore whore."

I let out a sigh before saying through gritted teeth, "No problem at all."

“Good. Now, you had better go as your Head of House is waiting for you back at Crowhurst House. He has a new assignment for you,” he tells me, which quickly snaps me out of the darkness I could feel descending over me at the thought of what I have to put Harper through.

“I didn’t get a message,” I tell him as I pull my phone out of my pocket to check.

My father waves me off. “I told him I’d send you straight over after I finished speaking to you. I didn’t want you to be given the assignment until after we’d had this discussion.”

My father’s manipulative nature is once again made clear to me. Everything has to be on his timeline, to his specifications. I fucking hate that he’s interfering with my role as a Crow, despite not even being on campus. Stupidly, I hoped that moving to Shadowmere would get me away from him. I should have known I was wrong, that I’ll never be free from his shadow.

“I better get going then,” I tell him as I get up.

He doesn’t bother to stand, since he’s not going to see me out, or show me any kind of affection. Instead, he waves his hand at me, dismissing me, before picking up some papers from his desk. He doesn’t offer me a goodbye, and I don’t bother waiting for one, as it’ll never come.

I turn on my heel and quickly make my way out of the office, heading straight for the front door. I don’t even bother looking for my mother to say goodbye, as I’m not in the mood for her dramatics either. This meeting went as fucking badly as I expected it to, and now I need to work out what the hell I’m going to do about Harper.

My desire to have her as my own has got me into a massive fucking mess. My father expects me to punish her in front of the Crows, making it clear I’m taking justice into my own hands. While Harper expects me to help her clear her father’s name, since she’s still absolutely fucking certain he’s innocent. And all I want is to be able to fuck Harper any time I want, however I want, until she’s as desperate for me as I am for her.

I rush back to Crowhurst House, knowing I desperately need this new assignment to distract me from the fucking mess I’ve gotten myself into.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lawson

As soon as I step foot into Crowhurst House, Xander is standing in the entrance hall, waiting for me. Each impatient tap of his foot makes it clear he's bored and irritated, no doubt from having to wait for me.

"My office, now," he snaps, before turning on his heel and marching towards his office, not even bothering to check that I'm following behind him.

He doesn't bother taking a seat behind his desk, and chooses instead to lean against the front of it, facing the chair he motions for me to sit in. I do as I'm told, not wanting to agitate him any more than he already is.

"I have a new assignment for you, if you're not too busy reporting to Daddy," he spits, glaring at me with disgust.

"I had no idea you wanted to see me until after my meeting with my father. Had I known, you would have been my first stop, not him."

I mean every word. My loyalty is to the Crows before anyone else. The only time a meeting with my father would take precedence is if he was addressing me as a member of the Obsidian Council, rather than as family.

Despite Xander's continued glare, a subtle shift in his stance signals that he believes me. A huff escapes him, and a wave of relief washes over me, glad he won't be inflicting some tedious fucking punishment.

"This is a top-secret assignment, one I hate having to assign to anyone," he tells me, looking sombre, which only piques my interest further.

"I won't tell anyone about it." This isn't something I need to say aloud, as I've more than proved my loyalty over the past two years, but I put it out there all the same.

“I have reason to believe one of our first-year Pledges has been bragging about his induction, and spilling Obsidian Order secrets whenever he’s at Vulture’s Den.”

Xander’s face contorts, a crimson flush creeping up his neck with each biting word. His eyes, dark pools of fury, glint dangerously with the threat I feel radiating from him.

“That’s fucking unacceptable,” I growl, the words a low rumble in my chest. A fiery surge courses through my veins, hot and intense like molten lava, as the thought of a Crow disrespecting this incredible, hard-won opportunity flashes in my mind.

Xander nods in agreement. “I need you to get proof that this is definitely happening, and when you have it, you’ll present it to the Council for us to take care of the rat for good. We informed him of the rules before inducting him into the Crows, so his punishment should not come as a great surprise.”

I mean, I don’t think he’s going to like the idea of me torturing him before brutally killing him, but Xander is correct in saying he should see it coming. We all know the rules, and the consequences we face if we break them.

“Do we know if it’s anyone in particular he’s spilling our secrets to?” I ask, my brain ticking away as I formulate a plan.

“Women... It’s always fucking women. I’m under the impression he’s bragging to get between their legs,” he snarls, looking disgusted once again.

I let out a humourless laugh. “Dickhead. A true Crow could get between a woman’s legs easily without having to brag.”

“Exactly,” Xander agrees. “He deserves his punishment for that alone.”

“I have an idea for a plan, but I’d like your permission to divulge my assignment to another Crow, if possible,” I tell him, crossing my fingers as he stares at me, assessing me.

“I’m assuming you mean Bram?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I want to use my Prize and her best friend as bait. They’re both good-looking girls, and if I put them in the Pledge’s way, I’m almost certain he’ll make a move on them. Bram can monitor the girls to make sure they’re safe at all times, and I can focus on getting the evidence before taking care of the Pledge.”

Xander is silent for a moment, most likely mulling my plan over in his head, before he slowly nods. “I think that would work. The only complication would be if he recognises your Prize. No decent Pledge would dare make a move on another Pledge’s Prize, let alone the High Crow.”

“I think he’s more than proved he’s not a decent Pledge. Besides, that’s why I plan to take Wren with us. She’s not a Prize, so he’d have no reason not to make a move on her,” I say, ignoring the way my chest tightens at the thought of some asshole hitting on Harper.

I think this plan will be the perfect opportunity for me to push Harper out of her comfort zone. I want to teach her to be more confident, whilst also testing her loyalty to me at the same time. But whenever I think of another man hitting on her, it drives me fucking insane, and I’m quickly regretting my idea.

Unfortunately, Xander gives it the stamp of approval, and there’s no going back once an assignment has been handed out.

Once Xander dismisses me, I rush straight to Bram’s room, not even bothering to knock before I throw his door open and stride in. He’s lying on the bed, reading a book, and I’m too wound up to even make a sarcastic comment about how much of a geek he is.

Bram places the book on his bedside table and swings his legs off the bed, sitting up on the edge. “It’s a good job I’m not in here fucking Lianne,” he says, referencing the Prize he reluctantly accepted to please his father.

He may not have selected her, but she’s not bad looking, and Bram has no problems fucking her in a way that makes his feelings about the situation well known.

I wave him away, ignoring his comment as I launch into the story of my morning from hell. When I’ve finally got everything out, including the meeting with my father, I flop down into the comfy armchair in the middle of the room with a loud sigh.

Bram is glaring at me, shaking his head in frustration. “Why the hell did you say we’d use Wren? She’s not part of our world, and it should stay that way.”

I choose not to explore why my friend is so furious, as I don’t have time for any more drama, and focus on pointing out the obvious. “If Harper plans on keeping Wren in her life, then she’s part of this world whether she likes it or not. Besides, Wren gives Harper confidence, and that’s exactly what she needs if she’s going to survive being my Prize.”

Bram looks like he wants to argue, but he knows I'm right, which is why he lets out an annoyed huff as he falls backward onto the bed, running his fingers through his curls in frustration. "I don't like this. So much could go wrong. Can't we just torture the guy into confessing?" he asks, sounding hopeful and bloodthirsty in one sentence.

"No, this is the plan. It's the only way to secure the proof we need. Then you can go all bloodthirsty on him," I tell him, which makes Bram smile.

"Oh, I'll definitely enjoy it. The thought of a fellow Crow betraying us makes me fucking murderous."

I nod in agreement. We're supposed to be brothers, united under a shared cause as we all fight to become members of the Obsidian Order. We believe in the Crows, and the Order, and it boils my blood that someone doesn't take this role seriously, and that they have no problem betraying us for a bit of pussy.

"Me, too. But we'll make things right," I say confidently, knowing the rat won't be around much longer.

Bram lets out a little laugh as he replies, "Yeah, but first you have to tell Harper that you're using her as bait. Good luck with that."

His laughter only coaxes a heavy groan from my throat at the mere thought. I quickly pull my phone from my pocket, opening the app that feels like it's been burning a hole in my pocket all day.

The screen glows faintly as I swipe across the smooth glass, searching each page. A sense of relief washes over me like a cool wave against my skin as my eyes land on Harper, covered by a soft mound of blankets on her plush dorm chair, her faint snores filling the otherwise quiet room.

She has no idea I installed multiple secret cameras in her dorm room, as well as in other buildings she visits often. I want to be able to see how she's doing at any time when we're apart.

As I was installing them, I told myself I was doing it as a way of protecting what's mine, but now I'm not so sure. She's only been apart from me for half a day, and I'm getting withdrawal symptoms. Harper Westmore is my drug, and being able to watch her on the secret cameras gives me access to her whenever I need it.

I'm very aware that makes me sound like an obsessive, possessive asshole, but I really don't fucking care. Since I can't keep her with me at all times, this is the next best thing.

I quickly scroll through my contacts, dialling her number when I reach her name, before flicking back to the camera app when it rings. I watch as the phone ringing wakes her up, and try not to read into the small smile that spreads across her face when she sees it's me calling.

"Hello," she mutters, sounding shy and sleepy.

"Harper, I have an assignment that I need your help with."

The cameras capture as she sits upright in the chair, giving me her full attention. As I explain the plan, an array of emotions flicker across her face, while she remains silent, listening to everything I have to say. It's clear she's worried, and not at all happy when I mention involving Wren.

But a part of her finds the assignment more than a little intriguing, and I can tell her interest is piqued, even though she tries to hide it in her voice.

"Is there any way we can do it without Wren?" she asks.

I shake my head, even though she can't see me. "No. I won't let you do it alone, and I trust Wren to look out for you. Besides, Bram will be watching you at all times, too. Nothing bad will happen to either of you."

She's silent for a moment, and I watch her shuffle nervously on camera, looking very unsure of herself. When she finally speaks, it's barely above a whisper, and I have to strain to hear her. *"What if I'm not able to seduce him, to get the information we need?"*

I let out a harsh laugh, which startles her. "Sweetheart, you have no idea how fucking gorgeous you really are, do you? You won't even need to try, and I'm certain the asshole will still head straight for you. But if it makes you feel any better, I'll give you some tips."

The notion of her trying to seduce someone other than myself makes my hands ball into fists, but I sure as fuck am going to seize any opportunity to turn this situation to my advantage.

"You really think I'm gorgeous?" she mutters, shifting uncomfortably on the chair.

"Yes, Harper, I think you're gorgeous. I wouldn't have made you my whore if I didn't."

Her face twists into a scowl as she glares at the phone, clearly not happy with my response. I hate that I have to remind her of her place with me, but after the meeting with my father, I need to be very careful around her. I can't have Harper thinking she means more to me than just another hole to fuck and use whenever I want. Even if that very thought makes me sick to my stomach.

I have no idea how I feel about Harper, but I know what's expected of me, and right now, that has to take priority. Not only do I need her help with this assignment, but to make my father happy, I have to punish her—and make her believe that I *want* to punish her.

To pull that off, I have to keep Harper at arm's length, making it clear she'll never be anything more than a Prize to me.

"I'll come to your dorm and get you soon, when I've finished what I'm doing. Make sure Wren is free on Friday, as that's when we're going ahead with the plan."

I don't even wait for her to respond before hanging up, watching on the screen as she throws her phone across the room in frustration, before getting up and pacing around her dorm. My chest tightens at the anger she holds for me, but I quickly push it away, since there's nothing I can do about it now.

Bram's laughter pulls my attention from the app, and I look up to see him shaking his head at me. "You're such an asshole. Pulling on her pigtales in the school playground didn't work when we were kids, and it sure as shit won't work now. If you want Harper to like you, maybe try being nice to her."

I wave him away, my face a mask of calm as I inwardly grapple with my confusion. "I don't want her to like me, so I don't need to be nice to her. I just need her to take my dick when I give it to her. Nothing more."

Bram's sadistic smile widens as he continues shaking his head at me. "Keep telling yourself that, dickhead."

I don't bother saying anything more, as it's an argument I really don't want to get into with my best friend. Instead, we fall into a comfortable silence as I continue watching Harper on the secret camera app, unable to look away from what is quickly becoming my obsession.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Harper



“**N**o, no, no. I can’t go out like this, Wren,” I snap, my voice tight with nerves. I smooth my hand over the cool, soft fabric of the short black dress, the silky material gliding over my skin with each worried movement, willing it to magically lengthen.

Don’t get me wrong, it’s a beautiful dress, just not the sort of thing I’d ever wear. The silky fabric makes the black almost shimmer, like a waterfall cascading down over my body, showing off every curve I didn’t know I had. The shape of my small waist, rounded hips, and arse is more visible than normal.

The narrow spaghetti straps holding the dress up are barely visible, exposing the pale curve of my collarbones and neck. Not to mention the deep V-shaped dip in the front that highlights my boobs—and the fact I can’t wear a bra, thanks to the low back.

The hem of the dress stops mid-thigh, and even though it puts far more on display than I’d like, there’s a traitorous part of me that wonders if Lawson will like what he sees. I don’t know why the hell I care about his opinion, but I do.

I have a strong feeling he’ll notice my bare legs; the killer heels Wren has forced me to wear add inches, elongating and giving them shape.

Wren walks up behind me, and I track her movements in the mirror as she reaches over and starts carefully arranging my long hair. It took her ages to meticulously curl every piece, and now she’s ensuring they fall in the correct way, pulling a few strands back so they’re off my face before securing them with a sparkly clip.

She's also done my makeup, and it's definitely not the style I would usually go for. I normally go for a "no-makeup" look, using subtle, natural shades to enhance my features without looking overly made up.

But not tonight, as Wren has gone for what she calls "Full Party Glam". That involves dark, glittery eyes, circled by thick black liner to make them pop, pink blush to brighten my cheeks, as well as contour and concealer to shape my face more than I ever thought makeup could.

Then she adds a bright-red lipstick that appears to shimmer, making my lips appear plump and almost wet. It certainly stands out, without looking like I've gone down the route of lip fillers. Despite being the opposite of 'me', it certainly draws attention, and I can't stop staring at my lips in the mirror.

"You look fucking amazing, Harps. I can't wait to see the look on Lawson's face when he sees you like that," she laughs with a knowing smile.

I roll my eyes, and a flush crawls up my neck, warming my cheeks with an embarrassing heat. "It's not like that with him. I don't care if he likes how I look or not." I don't know if I'm trying to convince myself or Wren.

She shakes her head at me; her smile never wavering. "Of course, you don't. I mean, he's only one of the hottest guys on campus, who you have tied yourself to for a year. Why the hell would you want him to find you attractive?"

I dismiss her sarcasm with a wave of my hand, not trusting myself to reply with words. The truth is...I want him to like me, to be attracted to me. I'll never be anything more than just his Prize, and I'm fine with that—at least, I think I am—but that doesn't mean I can't hope for something... more. It would be amazing if he didn't hate me, and was maybe just a little attracted to me.

Thankfully, my phone distracts us both from the conversation, and I reach over to the bedside table to grab it. Seeing Lawson's name appear on the caller ID sends a jolt through me, my pulse quickening as I hit the answer button. "Hello."

"I'll be there in five minutes. Take a deep breath, and don't change a fucking thing. You look amazing," he says before hanging up.

My brow furrows in confusion, and I question how the hell he knows I'm freaking out, or that I'm considering changing to put on something more 'me'.

“What did he say?” Wren asks.

“He’ll be here in five minutes. He also told me not to change.”

She lets out a short laugh as she pushes in front of me to get closer to the mirror, applying her deep purple lipstick. “He definitely knows you well already.”

“I don’t know... It sounded like more than that,” I try to explain, but I barely know what I’m saying, so there’s no way Wren will understand.

She turns around to face me, twisting from side to side with a bright smile on her face as her skirt flows out around her. “What do you think? How do I look? Do I look like I go undercover all the time?”

As she reminds me of the reason we’re doing all of this in the first place, I let out a long groan. I have no idea what going undercover entails, but I’m certain I will not enjoy it. I’ve been a nervous wreck since Lawson told me about the plan, convinced I’m going to mess up and ruin things for him. He’s earned his title of High Crow, and I’d hate to be the reason he loses his perfect standing.

I push those thoughts from my mind, otherwise I’ll spiral, and focus instead on Wren. She looks as beautiful as she always does, and for a fraction of a second, I’m jealous of how easily it comes to her.

She knows exactly what to wear to emphasise all the best parts of her body, and hide the areas she’s not keen on. And her talent with makeup is second to none, with her ability to adapt it to every situation, whilst still maintaining her flair.

She’s wearing a black skater-style short skirt that flares out when she twirls, along with fishnet stockings that are held up by a garter, which is just visible beneath the hem. Her clunky black wedge boots give her the extra height she needs, while still adding to her edgy look.

Her short, white crop-top stretches tightly over her large breasts, making it very obvious she’s not wearing a bra, and it puts her impressive natural cleavage on display, thanks to the low-scooping neckline. Its shortness exposes most of her stomach, revealing her pierced belly button and her curves.

Wren reaches over and grabs a large, baggy plaid shirt, which she pulls on over the top like a jacket, covering up most of the skin that was on display, whilst adding to her grungy vibes. Her dark, almost vamp-like makeup only adds to her style, completing her look.

Her short jet-black hair is straight and sleek, curled under slightly at the ends to make her bob-cut appear more subtle. Under certain lights, the black colour shines almost purple, complementing her tanned skin.

“You look amazing,” I tell her, hoping she can hear the sincerity in my voice. Though it’s not like she needs to hear a compliment from me, she’s not at all insecure about her looks.

Before she can utter a word, the solid wood of my bedroom door slams open with a bang, making us both jump. My heart leaps into my throat, a jolt of surprise running through me, as I could have sworn I locked it. Lawson’s imposing figure fills the doorway, before he strides in with an arrogant confidence that seems to suck the oxygen from the room, leaving me breathless.

He keeps his eyes on me while talking to Wren. “Go down to the car, Wren. Bram is waiting there. We’ll be down in a second.”

She hesitates, her gaze flicking between Lawson and me, clearly unsure whether she should follow his order. She doesn’t like being told what to do, which is why she’s glaring at Lawson like she’s considering stabbing him in the eye.

I give her a reassuring smile—at least, I hope that’s how it looks—as I tell her, “It’s fine. Go to the car; I’ll meet you there shortly.”

She gives me a small nod, before turning her fiery glare on Lawson. I’m actually a little impressed that he doesn’t cower under the weight of her stare. In fact, his expression doesn’t alter at all, and his gaze never wavers from me.

Wren turns on her heels, and with a loud, exaggerated huff, she grabs her bag and storms out of the door, muttering about how Lawson is paying for all of her drinks tonight, whether he likes it or not. I can’t help but laugh at my feisty friend.

Wren didn’t grow up knowing about the Obsidian Order, and as she’s never really experienced any of their members, she hasn’t developed the healthy fear that women raised around Order members have. I, personally, hope she always remains ignorant of the power they wield, as I don’t want my friend to change, and being exposed to the Order changes everyone, whether they want it to or not.

As soon as the door slams shut behind Wren, Lawson stalks over to me, only stopping when he’s so close I can feel his breath fluttering over me. He then takes a small step back, and very slowly drags his gaze down the

length of my body, leaving a trail of heat across my skin where his eyes have been.

I use the time to do a little ogling of my own, taking in the too-hot-for-his-own-good man who is standing in front of me. He's wearing dark jeans that cling to his thighs in the most delicious way, and he's paired them with biker boots that make him look every bit as dangerous as he is.

For the first time, he's not wearing his usual tight T-shirt, and has opted for a black button-down shirt instead. The way the material stretches over his muscles leaves nothing to the imagination, showing off how ripped he is in all the right places. And I hate to admit it, but the way he's rolled the sleeves up, showing off the veins in his sculpted arms...it does something to me that I never expected.

"Like what you see, sweetheart?" he asks, with a cocky edge to his voice, as if he wasn't checking me out just as much.

Still, I can't help the flush that spreads to my cheeks over being caught. "You were looking at me too," I mutter, almost childishly.

He lets out a short laugh, and my stomach flutters when his lips tilt into a genuine smile that makes him appear younger and more carefree than normal. His face becomes almost boyish, and even more handsome.

Quick as a flash, he grabs hold of my hips and twists me around, pulling my back flush against his chest. He crushes my body against his, making sure we're both positioned in front of the full-length mirror I was using not too long ago.

There's heat in his beautiful steel-grey gaze as we stare at each other in the mirror. I can feel the sharp points of his ribs, the hard lines of his abs, and the rough texture of his skin pressing into me, causing goosebumps to erupt over my flesh. His erection, a hard, undeniable presence, is growing warm and insistent against my thigh, its heat radiating through our clothes.

He leans down and presses several short, sweet kisses along my shoulder and up my neck, stopping just as he reaches my ear. "Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you look right now?"

The deep, raspy rumble of his voice sends a wave of heat through me, coiling low in my stomach. A shaky breath escapes my lips as I shake my head, the movement feeling heavy under the weight of his stare. The air seems thick, charged, and I'm struck by the silence, the right words seeming just out of reach.

“I’m so fucking torn right now,” he tells me, and my brow furrows in confusion. “I need to complete this assignment, and I know you’re my best chance at doing that, but the thought of anyone else seeing you like this makes me murderous. It’s going to take all of my effort tonight not to stab someone in the eye.”

A silent chuckle escapes me at his ridiculous words, but a sharp, icy glare reflected in the mirror halts me mid-breath. “You’re not kidding, are you? Why does it matter if people look at me?”

His steel-grey eyes deepen to an almost black abyss, reflecting the intensity of the moment. The rough fabric of his shirt scrapes against my skin as his strong hands grip my hips. The pressure is intense, a tangible heat radiating through my clothes, and I can already feel the phantom sting of a bruise forming beneath his touch.

“Because you’re mine,” he growls possessively.

“I’m so confused,” I mutter, my brain working hard to understand the complexity that is Lawson Radley. “You told me to dress sexy, so it’d be easier to draw the attention of the Pledge, but now you’re saying you don’t want anyone to look at me. You hate me, but you don’t want others to look at me. And they say women are confusing,” I huff, shaking my head in despair.

Lawson lets go of my right hip and wraps his hand around my neck, spreading his fingers out just enough to force me to tilt my head back, whilst still being able to meet his gaze in the mirror. His touch feels coarse against my skin, a firm pressure that doesn’t steal my breath, but makes it clear he’s in control.

“None of that matters. Since I can’t tell everyone in the room tonight that you belong to me, I’ll have to settle for knowing that you know you’re mine.” His voice is a deep rumble that vibrates against my back.

The air around me hums with an unseen energy, and every nerve ending tingles with the sheer proximity of him. He ignites my body, a cascade of electric sparks dancing beneath my skin, the sensation both dazzling and new.

“I have your name tattooed on me. I don’t think I’ll ever forget,” I snap, needing to rebel against the way he’s making me feel.

I’m supposed to be holding onto the knowledge that he hates me, that he’s only doing this as a punishment for my dad, despite his promises to

help me. Him playing my body like a bloody fiddle cannot make me forget that.

His cocky smile widens as he looks down to the bottom of my dress, the hand on my left hip trailing lower across my thigh. He grabs hold of the hem and lifts it up, bunching it into his fist until he's exposed my black lace thong underneath.

His dark eyes appear almost hungry as he takes in the scrap of material that's barely covering me. Lawson then lets go of my neck, and slowly trails his fingers down the length of my body, stopping when he reaches the elastic of the thong. He gently slips it down a little, only stopping once the tattoo of his name is visible on my bare mound.

There's a little redness around the cursive writing and small rose, as the tattoo is still healing, making it quite sensitive. Usually, I cover it with a large plaster, to stop the elastic on my underwear from rubbing against it. But tonight, it's almost as if I knew he wouldn't want me to have it covered, even though he never said anything.

Lawson trails his fingers over the writing, his touch featherlight, so it creates more of a tingle than a sting. I'm actually a little impressed by how beautiful the writing is, given Lawson is the one who did it—since he's hardly a professional tattooist—and we weren't exactly in a tattoo studio with all the best equipment. Still, you wouldn't know any of that just by looking at it.

"I like seeing my name on your skin. Maybe I'll find some other ways to mark you," he muses, before asking, "Have you ever considered getting tattoos?"

I shake my head, not even needing time to think about the answer. "It was never an option for me. The perfect Order Wife is expected to have unblemished skin. A tattoo would be seen as common. Even though I secretly thought I might quite like one, I never would have gotten your name if I had been given a choice."

That bloody smug smile of his grows as his touch sweeps lower, and he slides his finger through my slit. The only thing separating us is the thin lace material. He can feel how wet I am, and I can't help but moan quietly as his finger strokes my clit.

"What tattoo would you have got?" he asks, as he slowly circles around my sensitive bud, making my head swim.

“I don’t know. I never gave it any thought, since it was a waste of time. Why did you choose the tattoos you have?” I ask, trying to concentrate on our conversation and not the way his finger is sliding through my fabric-covered pussy, while his hard cock rubs against my back.

“They all have meaning, but I had to get them in places that aren’t visible, as my father would never approve,” he tells me, and I’m stunned that he so willingly gave me a little piece of himself, but that’s quickly pushed aside when he moves my thong so he can press his fingers into my wet hole.

I let out a shuddered breath that quickly turns into a moan as I rock my hips to meet his fingers, pushing them in deeper. I throw my head back and rest it against his shoulder, closing my eyes as I lose myself to him and his fingers.

“You’re so fucking wet, sweetheart,” he growls against my ear, sucking on my neck as soon as he’s finished speaking.

All the sensations I’m experiencing at once overwhelm my body, and my core is tightening as heat floods my veins, making every nerve ending feel like it’s on fire.

The rhythmic grinding of my hips against his palm, as I desperately chase the simmering heat that’s blooming within me, is abruptly shattered. A harsh groan escapes my lips, a sharp exhale of frustration, as Lawson pulls out his fingers, leaving a hollow emptiness where warmth and fullness had just been.

“What the hell?” I groan, my eyelids snapping open to fix a burning glare on his reflection in the glass.

His pupils are blown wide, making his eyes appear black with a silver ring around them, and I’m captivated by how stunning his hungry gaze is. He’s panting just as badly as I am, which only confuses me more.

“We don’t have time. We need to get to the club,” he explains, and I let out a frustrated huff.

“Then why the f—hell did you start something you can’t finish?” I snap.

Lawson lets out a chuckle as he grinds his hard length against my arse. “Careful, sweetheart, you almost swore then. And I stopped because I never intended to let you finish; I just wanted to get you wet enough.”

I glare at him as I ask, “Wet enough for what?”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a light-pink object shaped like an egg, with a piece of string hanging from one end. I eye it curiously

as Lawson holds it in front of me.

“What is it?” I ask, though, given the material it’s made of, I’m sure I can guess. I’m actually a little embarrassed I have to ask, but that’s one of the joys of being sexually repressed, I guess.

“This is a love egg,” he says, though that doesn’t offer much of an explanation.

“I think I can guess where it goes,” I mutter, which only makes Lawson smirk more.

“You’re going to wear this all night,” he tells me, my eyes stretching in disbelief.

“I-I can’t... How the hell am I...going to be able...to walk?” I stutter, struggling to find the correct words.

“You’ll be able to walk; you’ll just feel a little...full.” I stare at him, and despite not knowing Lawson well, I have a sneaking suspicion he’s not telling me everything.

“What are you leaving out?” I ask, my gaze fixed on him, searching his face for any hint of dishonesty.

Instead, he lowers my thong as he nudges my feet wider apart. “Bend over and place your hands on either side of the mirror.” His tone is firm and leaves no room for argument.

Once I’m in position, with my arse elevated, the cool air caresses my exposed pussy. Lawson’s fingernails trail down my arse-cheeks, a shiver of anticipation coursing through me as goosebumps prickle across my skin.

As he slides a finger through my slit, he keeps his eyes locked on mine in the mirror. My heart races when he places the pink egg against his lips, and I don’t even blink as he drags his tongue over the soft toy before sucking it into his mouth.

Fuck, if that’s not one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen. I thank God I don’t have to talk right now, as the curse word would have easily slipped from my lips, rather than just in my head.

He coats the egg in a glistening sheen of saliva, the wetness clinging to it as he withdraws it from his mouth. My breath catches, a sharp, sudden hitch in my chest, at the sight of his swollen, slick lips. Realisation hits me—not for the first time—that we still haven’t kissed, and watching him now only creates a fierce, undeniable urge.

I’m distracted from those thoughts when Lawson drops the hand holding the egg between my legs, using his other to spread me open. He

then gently presses the silicone toy against my entrance, taking his time as he guides it in.

Although we've had a lot of sex since he took my virginity, I'm still incredibly sensitive, and he has to take his time to stretch me open enough to take all of the egg.

When the widest part of the egg slips in, stretching me fully, I let out a deep moan as the whole thing slides in. Lawson then slowly presses his fingers inside along with it, pushing the egg in deeper, leaving me overwhelmingly full.

When he pulls his fingers out, I don't get the usual empty feeling that accompanies the loss of his touch. I still feel just as full, the egg remaining in place.

Lawson helps me to straighten out, keeping his hands on me until he's sure my shaky legs are going to hold me upright, before pulling my thong back into place. As he ensures it's positioned just right, his fingers softly brush over my clit, making me whimper as the egg shifts inside me, bringing unexpected pleasure.

I rock my hips to meet his touch, but he quickly removes his hand, pulling down my dress as I let out a frustrated groan. As we both look in the mirror, except for my flushed cheeks and his swollen lips, nothing about us is out of place. You'd never know he had me bent over with his fingers in my pussy just seconds before.

My hips sway, a silent invitation to his touch, but he quickly pulls his warm hand away. A frustrated groan escapes me as he tugs my dress down further, our reflections staring back at me in the mirror. My cheeks bloom with a flush, and his lips are slightly swollen, but otherwise, we appear perfectly composed. He smooths my dress, erasing any evidence of the intimate moment we just shared.

"How does it feel?" he asks.

I pause, a faint warmth spreading through me as I shift my hips and clench my pussy walls. My muscles tighten, and a strange, yet not entirely unwelcome, feeling washes over me.

"I don't really know. Full, stretched open, and maybe a little...I don't know...hot?" It comes out as more of a question than an answer, which only makes Lawson chuckle.

"Try walking," he suggests, taking a step away from me so I have room to move.

I do as he advises, and I'm only a couple of steps in when the egg hits me in places I wasn't expecting, sending ripples of desire shooting through my core, and I have to bite my lip to hold back a moan.

Lawson, who is watching my every move, sees the exact moment the egg hits the perfect spot, and that cocky, knowing smirk of his returns. I want to slap him, but it's taking all of my energy to focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

I try to push the desire away, concentrating solely on my steps, and when I look over at Lawson again, he's messing about on his phone. I'm about to ask him if we should go, when his gaze meets mine, and for just a fraction of a second, an almost mischievous expression crosses his face, and it doesn't take me long to work out why.

The bloody egg starts to vibrate, and my knees almost give way. I stumble in my too-high heels, and if it wasn't for Lawson catching me, I'd be a collapsed mess on the floor right now.

"What did you do?" I snap, my breath hitching with a sharp, involuntary gasp as the buzzing from the egg deep inside my body intensifies, sending tremors through me. My eyes grow wide with a desperate focus, as I rock my hips back and forth, each movement a plea for the vibration to find that elusive, aching spot.

"Did I forget to mention that the egg vibrates?" He tries to play dumb, but it doesn't suit him.

I hit him on his arm, glaring at him, but it hardly has the desired effect when a moan of pleasure slips from my lips. "Turn the vibration off. I can't walk like this," I tell him, though my body betrays my words as I twirl my hips while Lawson holds me upright, seeking more of the pleasure the egg brings.

Lawson lifts his phone, and with just a few touches of the screen, the vibration turns off. I let out a sigh of relief, that sounds suspiciously like a frustrated groan, as I try to straighten out and find my footing once more.

My legs are a little shaky, my pussy still tingling from the ghost of the vibration as my heart thumps loudly, but with Lawson's help, I'm able to stand straight again. Still, he doesn't remove his hand from where it's wrapped around my waist, and I allow some of my weight to rest against his side.

"What are you going to use that for?" I ask, my eyes narrowed on him, as I think I already know the answer.

Sure enough, his mischievous grin tells me everything I need to know. “I will use it to make sure you know who you belong to tonight.”

I roll my eyes at the possessive edge to his voice. “Like I could ever forget,” I snap sarcastically, which only makes him laugh.

“Oh, sweetheart, you have no fucking idea. I will not stop until the entire world knows you’re mine. But more importantly, I plan on making sure you never forget that every part of you, every piece you willingly gifted to me, will always belong to me. Now, let’s get this assignment done, so I can bring you home and fuck you.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Harper



Lawson walks us out of the dorms together, not stopping until we reach a bright-red car I don't recognise. Wren is in the front passenger seat, with Bram in the driver's seat. Once we're close enough, Bram sticks his head out of the open window.

"Didn't think you guys were coming. Wren wanted to send in a search and rescue team," he shouts, and my best friend can be heard grumbling from inside the car, but I can't make out what she's saying.

Lawson doesn't bother replying, he just holds the car door open for me, gesturing for me to climb in. It's not as easy as it usually would be to get in and scoot across to the opposite side, with my dress and the egg acting as a hindrance.

I have to bite my lip to hold back a moan when I shuffle into position and the egg moves along with me, hitting spots deep inside that makes me see stars. I have an awful feeling the black lace thong is going to do a terrible job of containing how wet I am tonight.

As Lawson takes a seat beside me, he has a knowing look in his eyes, along with that bloody smirk that infuriates me. "Comfy?" he asks as he reaches over and pulls my seatbelt into position, securing it for me.

"I could have done that," I grumble, but he completely ignores me, sliding into the middle seat, so there's no gap between us.

He rests his hand on my thigh, and I try my hardest to ignore the way my skin tingles beneath his touch. It's worrying how easily I respond to him after such a short amount of time.

"Shall we go over the plan?" Bram asks, his gaze fixed on the road in front of him.

I turn to Lawson, my eyes wide with panic, as I quietly whisper so only he can hear. “There’s a plan?” He hasn’t told me any sort of plan, only that I’m supposed to attract the attention of a new Pledge, and hope he spills his secrets to me.

Before Lawson can reply, Bram continues, “I don’t think you will be in any danger tonight, but it’s always best to go over the plan, so we’re all on the same page.”

“Danger?” Wren squeaks, glaring at Bram before turning her attention to me. “I didn’t sign up for anything dangerous.”

“It’s a good thing I just said it wouldn’t be dangerous,” Bram replies sarcastically, which only makes Wren glare harder.

Lawson cuts in before they can argue anymore. “Look, we’ve done our research, and from what we can tell, the Pledge, Nigel, he has a type,” he says, before turning to look at me. “And you are it.”

“What?”

“He likes pretty girls who dress in a way that shows off all their curves. While he prefers them a little on the shy side, he also wants them to be confident enough to be open to a one-night stand if he asks them. He doesn’t want to work too hard to get laid. He wants a girl who acts shy, but is really body confident, at ease with her sexuality, and not afraid to go home with a total stranger.”

Wren lets out a loud, harsh laugh, as she turns to look over her shoulder at Lawson. “I hate to break it to you, dude, but that most definitely does not describe Harper. She’s got the shy part down, but that’s about it.”

I nod my head in agreement. “She’s right.”

Lawson’s knuckles whiten as his grip on my thigh tightens, a silent, firm protest against my friend’s words. The air hums with tension, as he keeps his magnetic gaze fixed on me. “I disagree. I’ve seen you grow in confidence over the last few days. You’re learning to let go of the restrictions that have been placed on you in the past, and have been embracing doing the things you want, the things that make you happy, rather than following the expectations of others.

“I know you can do this. I want you to walk into that club, believing you’re one of the most beautiful girls in the entire room, and that confidence alone will draw his attention. You’re going to pull on the girl you would have been if the Order had not influenced your entire life.”

As I process his words, I can't deny there's a certain appeal to what he's saying. I've never really felt like *me*...more that I'm playing the role of the character I'm supposed to be. I've become so used to being that stranger, I'm not entirely sure who the real me is anymore.

"I'm not sure I know how to do that," I admit to Lawson, keeping my voice low so that Bram and Wren don't hear. I don't want them to think I can't do the assignment, even though I'm starting to worry I won't be able to.

Lawson reaches up with his free hand and places it against my cheek, turning me until I'm facing him. He lightly brushes his thumb under my eye in an action so sweet it steals my breath away. His voice is low enough that only I can hear, and the deepness of it has my heart racing.

"I've watched you over the last few days, and you've slowly been escaping the confines that previously imprisoned you. You've been questioning how you should dress, how much makeup you should wear, and even whether you should keep your mouth closed when you really want to argue back.

"Hell, you've even sworn a few times. I know deep inside there's a girl who wants to scream and shout, and swear whenever she wants. You want to live the life you choose, not what someone else chooses for you."

His words capture every part of me, because I know he's right. I want more, I've just never had the opportunity before. As he softly tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his wicked smile returns.

"And don't even get me started on the sex. You're finally admitting you have fantasies, and that it's perfectly fucking normal to want to explore them. Having a healthy sex life isn't a bad thing, and neither is being my little whore.

"I want you to pull on all of that when you walk into that club. I want everyone in there to look at you and want you—even though it will make me fucking murderous. But as long as you remember that nobody touches you except me, I'll keep my knife in my pocket. Can you do that?"

Even though I've processed everything he just said, and I'm struggling to hold back the feelings Lawson brings to the forefront just by believing in me, I can't stop the random words from blurting out. "You have a knife?"

He chuckles as he grins at me. "Sweetheart, I always have a weapon on me. Never forget, I'm the most dangerous person in any room."

He's not bloody kidding, but I mean it for a completely different reason. For me in particular, he's dangerous because he calls to a side of me that my father buried a long time ago. He wants me to break free from my gilded cage, but more than that, he makes me want to be *me*, and that's really risky.

"I can do this," I tell him, leaning into his touch as he continues to stroke my face.

My eyes, as if they have a mind of their own, are drawn to the curve of his lips. The tip of his tongue slips out to slide along his lower lip, dampening it as he magnetically draws me in. The quiet hum of my own pulse thumps in my ears as we close the distance, and the urge to feel his lips against mine is overwhelming.

He's definitely looking at my lips too, and my heart is thumping with such speed that I'm surprised he can't hear the frantic rhythm. His breath flutters against my cheek as he moves closer just the smallest amount, and I hold my breath in anticipation.

The tension and silence in the car is so thick, it's almost suffocating, and all I can think about is kissing him. His gentle touch against my cheek is like a spark, igniting a shiver that traces its way down my spine as I close the distance between us, my breath catching in my throat.

Should I be the one to make the first move?

Then, out of nowhere, Lawson lets out a shuddered breath, drops his hand from my cheek and backs away from me, blinking rapidly like he's coming out of the same trance I was in. He's breathing a little heavier, and I'm sure my chest is rising and falling just as rapidly, but now I have a sinking feeling in my stomach from the rejection.

He's had sex with me in every way imaginable, so why won't he kiss me?

I've never had the guts to ask him about it, as I don't want to seem needy and desperate. Besides, I'm pretty sure he sees kissing as too intimate. After all, it's not like he has feelings for me. I'm just his Prize—his to use for anything sex-related over the next year, but that doesn't include hearts, flowers, or kisses.

Maybe it's a good thing he won't kiss me, as I can already feel myself getting in deeper than I should. This is the last boundary we shouldn't cross, so I can keep some of my dignity for when this is all over and he moves onto the Order Wife I'm sure his family is eyeing up for him as we speak.

Why does it hurt so much to think of Lawson marrying someone else? Even if we break all the rules and catch feelings—which I need to make

sure doesn't happen—it sure as shit doesn't change the fact I can never be an Order Wife. I'm tainted now, and my lack of purity means that's not in my future, and I hadn't realised how much that bothered me until just now.

I push those quite frankly strange and confusing thoughts out of my mind, knowing I need to concentrate on the job I'm about to do. I can't have Lawson messing with my head if I'm going to succeed at this.

"You can do this," Lawson says, repeating what I just told him before everything got a little more confusing. We both choose to ignore the way his voice trembles slightly, as if he's as thrown off-kilter by all of this as I am.

I draw in a ragged breath in an attempt to steel my nerves, projecting my voice louder this time so both Bram and Wren can hear. "So, you're hoping I will draw his attention, then what?"

Bram looks at me through the rearview mirror, a cheeky smile on his face. "Then both of you are going to flirt with him until he tells you what we want to hear."

Lawson quickly adds, "But we don't want you to lead the conversation. As far as he knows, you two know nothing at all about the Obsidian Order, or what a Crow Pledge is. We need him to brag to you willingly, so he can't argue that you led him on or trapped him."

Wren clears her throat. "Won't he know Harper is your Prize? I mean, from what I've heard, you're a pretty important member of the Crows, so I find it hard to believe he won't know who she is. Also, weren't all the Pledges at the Gifting Ceremony?"

Bram lets out a soft laugh as he shoots Wren a quick look before turning back to concentrate on the road. "This isn't going to make any of the Crows sound good, but it's the truth. At the Gifting Ceremony, there were so many Prizes, it would be almost impossible to remember which girl belonged to which Crow, let alone remember their faces. And although Lawson is popular, he hasn't exactly been parading Harper around like a trophy.

"I'd be more concerned if Nigel had been here last year, as he would definitely have known Harper was with Ryan—you didn't exactly hide your Betrothal to that turd—and your downfall was very public. But since he's a new-recruit, and Harper hasn't been around Crowhurst House all that much, except in Lawson's bedroom, I think we should be okay," he explains.

Wren nods along with his explanation, as if it makes perfect sense to her, before she asks, "So if Harper is the bait to draw him in, what's my

job? Why am I here?"

Lawson answers her. "Your job is to make sure nothing happens to Harper. We can't be anywhere near her. If he sees either me or Bram, there's no way he'll tell her anything. I need someone to stick close to her, to make sure nothing happens to her."

"I can do that," she states firmly, pulling her chest back as a fierce expression crosses her face, and I don't doubt a word my friend says.

When she's in this kind of mood, nobody should dare mess with her, and once again, a pang of jealousy hits me that I don't have the conviction Wren has. I want people to fear me the way they do her when she looks like this.

"We're here," Bram announces, as he pulls into a parking space at the back of the club. We're not using the public car park, since the guys know the owner. Also, we can't exactly walk in together.

Lawson opens the door and holds out his hand for me, and I gladly take it as he helps me out. I let go to straighten out my dress, pulling on it a little as nerves start to kick in. Lawson reaches out and grabs both hands, stilling my movements, and I look up to find him staring at me with heat in his sparkling silver eyes.

"Don't ever doubt how fucking gorgeous you look tonight. It's like my own special brand of torture to see you in this dress and not be able to touch you," he tells me, his voice deep and husky, and it sends shockwaves straight to my core.

"You can touch me when this is over," I say, trying to pull on some of the confidence I'm going to need tonight.

Lawson lets out a harsh laugh, his expression almost predatory as he drags his gaze over the length of my body, lazily taking all of me in. "I fucking plan on it, so let's get this over with. Are you ready for the rules?"

"Rules?" I repeat, confused.

He shakes his head at me. "There's no way I'm sending you into a club full of drunk, horny guys, dressed the way you are, without setting some fucking ground rules."

I roll my eyes, waving him on. "Okay, what are they?" There's no point in arguing. Lawson is far too possessive and controlling; it's an argument I'd never win, and he'd only punish me for challenging him.

"First, only one alcoholic drink. Second, always stay where either I, or Bram, can see you. We'll keep out of sight so Nigel doesn't see us, but I

need to be sure you know where at least one of us is at all times.

“Finally, do not let another man touch you. Not even a brush of his hand against your arm. Any touch is off-limits. Do I make myself clear?”

He fixes his gaze on mine, waiting for me to answer. There’s so much I want to push back on, but I know there’s not much point. Though there’s one thing I can’t help but query. “Why only one drink? If you want me to be confident enough to flirt with this guy, I’m going to need more than one.”

His gaze turns stern as his expression hardens, coldness practically radiating off him. “You don’t need to be drunk to do this. I need you to have a clear head, and if you have any more than one drink, that won’t be the case. Even just a little tipsy, you could say something that not only jeopardises the mission, but more importantly, your safety. The alcohol is non-negotiable, and I’m sure Bram will have given Wren the same rule.”

I let out a sharp laugh at the thought of anyone telling my friend what to do. “Good luck with that. She doesn’t follow orders well.”

“That’s Bram’s problem. All I care about is that you’re safe, and if her actions put you at risk, I will pull her out faster than you can blink. I may need to complete this assignment to keep my ranking within the Crows, but I won’t compromise your safety to do it.”

Lawson seems almost confused by the words leaving his lips, and it’s strange that I can hear how much he means them, but that doesn’t mean he’s happy about it. Having been raised to always put the Order first, I imagine it’s a new sensation to value someone over the assignment, despite his apparent surprise.

“I won’t put myself in danger, and I’ll do everything I can to make sure you pass this assignment.” I’m very clear about not making him any promises regarding the alcohol, as it’s a rule I fully intend on breaking. If he wants me to succeed at this assignment, he’s going to have to let me do it my way.

Besides, once we’re inside the club, neither Bram nor Lawson will be able to approach us, or they risk blowing our cover, so he can’t stop me from having an extra drink or two. I just hope he doesn’t punish me for it too much once it’s all over.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

Harper



I enter the club with Wren by my side, trying my hardest not to seek out Lawson, who went inside several minutes before us. Bram will come in shortly after us, as he stayed behind to make sure we got inside without any issues.

It doesn't take us long to identify our target—Nigel the Pledge is sitting by the bar, and luckily for us, he's alone. We deliberately ignore him as we push our way through the crowd, aiming for the space beside him. As we take our seats on the two barstools, Wren holds her hand up to flag down the bartender.

From across the thumping, strobe-lit expanse of the club, Lawson's gaze is a palpable heat, prickling my skin like a thousand tiny flames. The bass vibrates through the floor and into my chest, but it does nothing to detract from the phantom burn of his stare.

I try to tell myself he's watching me so closely to protect me, for my safety, but I know that's just my brain trying to bullshit me from getting too involved. Before we parted ways, he was looking at me like he wanted to devour me whole, and I've never felt so sexy.

Then there's the damn egg stretching me, making me feel full, whilst gently hitting the right spot when I lean a certain way, or just when I'm walking. How I'm capable of putting one foot in front of another is a miracle, because my legs are like jelly with anticipation of what the egg can do—and knowing I'm at Lawson's mercy if he decides to turn it on.

Once Wren has flagged down the bartender, he rushes over to take our order as soon as he's free. "What can I get you both?"

Wren looks over at me with her eyebrow raised, no doubt having heard all about the rules from Bram. “Can I get a double vodka and lemonade, and one of your house special shots, please?”

“Tonight’s special shot is a Traffic Light. It’s a mix of melon, strawberry, and mango liqueur,” he explains, pointing to the other end of the bar where a group of rowdy guys are throwing them back.

I nod quickly, though my stomach is already flipping at the flavour combination. “Great. I’ll take that.”

Wren quickly adds, “I’ll take two of the awful-sounding shots, along with a martini, if you don’t mind.”

“Coming right up,” the bartender says with a smile as he rushes away to prepare our drinks.

Wren leans over to whisper in my ear, so that only I can hear. “You are asking for trouble.”

I lean back to meet her gaze, and she’s wagging her eyebrows at me, but she looks more excited than concerned for my well-being. I roll my eyes at her before leaning in close so I can whisper my response.

“What’s he going to do? It’s not like he can march over here and put a stop to it. Besides, it’s only an extra shot. I can handle it.”

I know I’m breaking his rules, but I really want this assignment to go well for him, and this is the only way I know how to do this. I need something to help me loosen up a little, but I’ll make sure not to have too many, so I keep a clear head. He can’t lose his spot as Head Crow because of me.

Before she can respond, the bartender hands over our main drinks, before lining up three empty shot glasses in front of us. He then mixes up the shots while we’re watching, both of us drawn to the flair he uses. Then, once they’re done, he slides them over to us, and Wren hands over a black credit card I’ve not seen before.

Wren slides a Traffic Light shot over to me as she picks up her own. “Cheers.” She holds out her glass toward mine as she adds, “Lawson gave me his credit card, so I’m going to enjoy this.”

Wren was very insistent before we left the dorms that she would be allowed to pay for the drinks tonight—though I hadn’t realised she intended on making Lawson pay—and despite my pride being hurt, I couldn’t say no even if I wanted to. I barely have enough extra cash to feed myself each week, so a night out drinking is a novelty I cannot afford.

I clink our glasses together, shouting, “Cheers,” before bringing the rim of the glass to my lips as I tip my head back, swallowing it all.

Bloody hell! The liquor is strong, and it burns my throat as it slides down; the different liqueurs give it a thicker texture than a normal shot. As the three different flavours hit my tongue at once, they create an explosion of flavours, but I’m not entirely sure they work well together. They’re all such big flavours, they almost overwhelm each other.

Despite it not being the most pleasant taste, Wren grabs the second shot glass and repeats the process again. I follow my first shot with a mouthful of my vodka and lemonade, but even that makes my face screw up given how strong it is. The rush of alcohol is already making my head spin a little, as my stomach rolls in disgust.

“Well, they were...”

I pause, trying to find the word, but Wren cuts in to finish for me. “Fucking disgusting?”

I bark out a laugh as I nod in agreement. “They really were.”

I take another small sip of my vodka, hoping it will quickly replace the swirl of confusing flavours sitting on my tongue.

“I’m picking the next round of shots,” Wren says, as she holds out her hand to the bartender, flagging down a woman this time.

“What are you having?” she asks as she clears away the empty shot glasses in front of us.

“Can we get three Slippery Nipples?” my friend replies, and I almost spit out the vodka I had just taken a sip of.

With a nod, the bartender pulls out the shot glasses and sets about mixing our drinks. First, she pours in some sambuca, and then she adds Bailey’s Irish Cream on top, before passing them over to us.

Just as Wren is about to pass over Lawson’s card again, a hand rests on top of hers, stopping her. As we both turn to look, we’re pleased to see the hand belongs to Nigel. We feign confusion as we glance at him, while he simply smiles at us.

“Could I do the honour of buying you both these drinks?” he asks, trying to sound incredibly smooth.

Wren looks at me, excitement clear in her eyes, but when she turns back to face Nigel, her usual distrustful expression is in place. “I suppose that would be okay,” she says, before turning her attention to the bartender. She’s looking at us, waiting to see if we’re happy for this stranger to buy

our drinks, and after a nod from Wren, she takes Nigel's card as payment before rushing off to serve the ever-growing queue.

"Now I wish I'd gotten a shot to do with you," he says, twisting his lips into the most ridiculous pout.

I lean towards him, fluttering my eyelashes at him as I reply, "I'm sure a big, strong guy like you could down the rest of his beer in the time we take to do our shots."

While I'm aiming for flattering, I make sure he hears the competitive edge in my voice. I've been around Crows, and Order Pledges in general, long enough to know none of them ever turn down a competition.

"I definitely can," he replies confidently, raising his almost-full pint glass towards us in challenge.

"Cheers," we all say, clinking our glasses before we throw back our drinks.

Wren downs both her shots as I do mine, and as she slams her last glass down on the counter, Nigel follows mere seconds later. My face twists into a sour expression as the thickness of the Bailey's sits heavily in my stomach, while the alcohol leaves a burning sensation down my throat.

As the alcoholic drinks slosh and swirl within me, their effects surge through my veins, spreading warmth from my gut outward. My head spins, making the room tilt precariously, and I grip the smooth wood of the bar, using it as an anchor against the unsettling feeling.

The drinks must have been stronger than I was expecting, and given I've never been much of a drinker, my body just isn't used to throwing them back the way I just did. I'm suddenly very grateful I'm already sitting on a bar stool, otherwise I'd likely be swaying where I stood.

I don't know how Wren is able to cope with drinking double what I've had.

The one good thing that comes from the alcohol is my good friend, Liquid Courage, and my confidence is growing with each inhibition I lose.

I lean closer to Nigel, giving him my sweetest smile as I lay my hand on his bicep, squeezing it just enough for him to know it was intentional. Not that he's got anything to write home about when compared with Lawson, but then again, Lawson's muscles look like they've been carved by the Devil himself.

"Thank you for the drinks. That was so incredibly kind of you. I'm Lola, and this is Jenny," I tell him, using the fake names Bram gave us after

he created a whole backstory for us both.

He grabs my hand from his bicep and pulls it up to his lips before pressing a kiss onto the back of it. "I'm Nigel; it's great to meet you."

I can practically feel Wren rolling her eyes from beside me because he's completely ignoring her, but he's playing straight into our plan. Unfortunately, his slimy behaviour combined with the alcohol I just rapidly consumed is adding to my nausea, and I quickly pull my hand from his, giving him a sweet smile so he doesn't take it as a rejection.

He shuffles his barstool closer until his body is almost touching mine, and I'm overwhelmed by the cologne he's wearing; it only gets stronger the nearer he is.

As Nigel's rough palm presses against my bare thigh, a wave of nauseating disgust washes over me, making my stomach churn. The small talk is almost mind-numbing, and completely predictable, with him turning every answer into an innuendo, or a way to flirt with me.

With each random question he asks me, I reel off the fabricated answers Bram drilled into me, while Wren chimes in whenever my fuzzy brain lets me down, filling in the gaps with ease.

With each question, his hand drifts higher on my leg, sending a hot, acidic tide surging up my throat. At the same time, I can feel the weight of Lawson's gaze on me, watching my every move, judging me for letting Nigel touch me this way. But I don't know how to stop him without blowing the whole assignment.

"Are you here by yourself?" I ask. "I'm surprised a good-looking guy like you isn't surrounded by people."

His eyes light up at my compliment, his smile growing wider. He then drops his gaze to stare at my chest, something he's been doing regularly since we started talking. It would appear Nigel is a boob man, and he struggles to look at anything else.

"My friends are around here somewhere, but between you and me, I'm here alone for a reason." He drops his voice slightly, trying to add an air of mystery to it that might win over a less intelligent woman, but not me.

"Oh, now you have me intrigued." I lean forward, playing into his story.

"Can you keep a secret?"

I nod as I flutter my lashes at him, trying to appear sweet and innocent. "Of course; I won't tell a soul."

Not that I need to. Wren is standing beside him with her phone out, recording everything, but he's so caught up in me and my boobs, he barely even notices she's still standing there.

He puffs up his chest, trying to look confident as he says, "I'm actually here on assignment. Have you heard of Crowhurst House?"

I nod, keeping my gaze fixed on him, as if he's telling me the most interesting story. "You mean the male-only elite dorm? Where the most popular guys on campus live?"

He nods slowly as he adds, "It's so much more than just a dorm. We're all Pledges, training to be part of a secret society, where only the most powerful men get inducted. I just so happen to be the highest-ranking Pledge by a long way."

Oh, I can just imagine what shade of purple Lawson's face will be right about now. He's worked hard for that top spot, so for Nigel to imply it belongs to him, without earning it... I'm certain Lawson will make him pay for that statement alone.

Still, I flutter my eyelashes like a bimbo, flicking my hair as I pretend to be impressed by him. "Oh wow, I had no idea anything like that even existed here at Shadowmere."

More people fill the room, and as they try to get to the bar we're sitting next to, the space between us diminishes, pushing Nigel closer and jostling Wren a little further away from me.

I can still see her, and I'm not worried about the recording, since she just got everything we need, but I'll continue with the plan to see what more he divulges, hoping Wren is still close enough to pick it up.

As a couple of people knock into us, I stumble off the barstool. Nigel reaches out to grab hold of my hip, making sure I don't fall, and I stabilise myself by placing my hand on his chest. We're much closer now than I'm comfortable with, but there's literally nowhere to go, thanks to the people crowding around us trying to get to the bar.

Nigel leans in so his lips are beside my ear, and I have to bite my lip to hold back the ripple of repulsion I get from his proximity. "There are actually four Houses training Pledges, but the Crows are the best, so you don't need to worry about the others. I'm responsible for helping keep this university safe, as well as the country in general."

Wow, this guy really has a heightened sense of grandeur, and it takes all of my effort not to roll my eyes at his posturing.

Instead, I swallow the last of my drink, groaning when I realise it's empty. Without me even asking him to, Nigel reaches over and grabs the attention of the female bartender from earlier, pulling her away from another customer to serve us. I ask for just a lemonade this time, knowing I shouldn't have any more booze.

As she's making our drinks, he turns his attention back to me. "She always drops what she's doing to serve me. The guy who runs this place used to be a Pledge, so they all know how important I am, and they don't like to keep me waiting," he brags, and I can just imagine the looks on Bram and Lawson's faces if they were here listening to his bullshit.

When he moves to grab our drinks, I take the opportunity to turn and find Wren, leaning towards her when I see she's pushed her way through the people to stand beside me again.

"Did you get it all?" I ask, motioning my head to where she's discreetly holding the phone in her hand.

She nods, a bright smile on her face. "I got everything. I'm going to go let Bram know, so he can tell us what to do next."

I'm sure Bram probably told us what the plan was for when we'd gathered all the evidence we needed, but either we didn't listen closely enough, or the alcohol rushing through our veins has conveniently helped us to forget. Either way, we don't know what to do next, so Wren going and asking him seems like the best option.

I turn back to face Nigel, pulling the fake expression that I've been wearing with him all night back into place, pretending like nothing has changed. I gratefully take the drink he offers me, taking a couple of big gulps of the lemonade, hoping it will dilute some of the alcohol rushing through my veins, reducing that buzzed feeling I'm regretting already.

"Tell me more about this secret society," I say as I lean in closer to him, keeping my voice down so nobody else can hear.

"Well, I can't tell you much, given the secret part, but we're the most powerful group in the world. We run the world from the shadows. The men you see in the spotlight are the figureheads we've placed there, but really, they're just puppets and we're controlling their strings. We're the ones ruling without anyone knowing."

It's not a completely inaccurate description of the Obsidian Order, but it's also not something he should brag about. I'm just the daughter of an

Order member, with no genuine power or position, and even I know that's not something to be divulged to a complete stranger.

"Oh, wow. I had no idea anything like that even existed. I'm guessing you being the top Pledge is a great honour. It must make you incredibly good at your job." I make sure my voice is sickly sweet as I'm overly flirty, and the resulting twist in my stomach catches me off-guard.

Nausea hits me like a brick, and the room spins as black spots flicker in my vision. It quickly occurs to me that I need to go to the bathroom, as there's a good chance I'm about to vomit.

"Sorry, will you excuse me for a minute while I go to the bathroom?" I don't wait for his reply, heading straight for the women's room.

The club is overly full of people now, and given how unsteady I am on my feet, it feels like I stumble into every person I pass. I mutter apologies, but I'm not even sure actual words come out. The nausea and dizziness is so overwhelming, I feel the egg stimulating me as I walk.

The loud pounding of the bass music isn't doing anything to help. Combined with the headache that's beating away inside my skull, it makes me even more dizzy. Sweat drops are beading on my forehead and upper lip as heat flashes through my veins, and feel like I'm burning.

Acid burns my throat, and I try to concentrate on breathing, thinking that's the only way to stop myself from emptying my stomach contents before I get to the bathroom. But with each deep breath I take, my vision gets hazier, until I'm not even sure I'm going in the right direction.

I'm burning up so much it feels like I've got ants burrowing away under my skin, and my brain is struggling to concentrate on anything except the sensations that seem to overwhelm me.

It's not until an arm wraps around my waist that I realise I've been standing still, unable to make my jelly-like legs move forward anymore. Even though my vision is fuzzy, and the room is spinning, I'm aware enough to hear the alarm bells ringing in my head.

I have enough of my faculties left to know that how I'm feeling isn't normal, and it sure as shit isn't caused by me having a couple of extra drinks. I also know that the arm wrapped around me isn't the one I want. It doesn't warm me or make me tingle the way it should. Instead, it repulses me, and if I had the energy, I'd push it off, but I can barely move any of my limbs, as they're feeling way too heavy.

The dizziness and drowsiness mix together, and my eyelids keep fluttering closed of their own accord. No matter how many times I force them to open, trying as hard as I can to remain alert, the heaviness settling over my whole body is fast becoming all-consuming.

Nigel's breath flutters against my cheek, making my stomach twist in revulsion as he gets close enough to whisper in my ear. "Don't worry, the drug will take full effect soon, and you won't be able to fight it. But there's nothing for you to be afraid of; this is just a safety procedure. I can't have you knowing all of my secrets, or those of the Crows. This way, we both get to have a fun, sexy night, but you won't remember anything you shouldn't, which means my role won't be in jeopardy."

His words barely make sense to me, and I have to repeat them in my head several times until my brain catches up enough for them to register. I shake my head, regretting it instantly when the room spins even more. "No, I don't want to."

That's as much as I can get out, and I'm not entirely sure the words made sense aloud the way they did in my head. The smile on Nigel's face turns wicked, almost evil, as he says, "Of course, you want it. Every girl in this room would kill for a night with me. You're lucky I chose you. I promise to make it good for you, so you'll feel me tomorrow, even if you don't remember."

Nausea rips through me as my heart races, panic fully setting in when he tries to drag me towards an exit I don't recognise. My legs are so heavy, I can barely move them, and I couldn't be more grateful as it means I'm not going anywhere like this.

Nigel lets out a huff before turning and picking me up, cradling me to his chest in a princess-style hold, as my head lolls backward from the abrupt movement.

As he lifts me, the egg I'd almost forgotten about hits a sensitive spot, and I can't hold back the moan that slips free. Nigel grins at me, thinking I'm moaning for him, which makes me even more disgusted with myself as I focus on anything except the egg shifting deep inside me.

The room spins around me, dizziness overwhelming me as I struggle to keep my eyes open, knowing the sensation will lessen if I close them. But there's something that makes me keep them open...

I look around frantically, though for a few seconds, my brain struggles to remember what exactly it is I'm looking for. Then it hits me—Lawson.

Where is he? Why isn't he stepping in to save me?

As Nigel carries me out of the club into the chilly night air, the power of the drug overwhelms me, and I can't keep my eyes open any longer. I'm seconds from dropping into unconsciousness, and then there will be no turning back. I won't be able to stop this monster from doing whatever he wants to me.

With the last moments of my sanity, all I can think about is Lawson. I beg and plead inside my head for him to come to me, to rescue me from this horrible situation.

I pull in a ragged breath, and with every last ounce of energy I have, I draw on it all as I open my mouth wide and scream Lawson's name as loud as I can. The noise reverberates through my skull, making my head spin more, but I hope to God it was worth it and that he heard me.

I pull a picture of Lawson's beautiful face into my mind, focusing on his molten silver gaze as he stares at me like I'm the most beautiful woman in the room. I keep going over every detail of him I can remember, making sure he's the last thing I see as the darkness takes me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

Lawson

By the time Harper finishes her third drink, the raw fury coursing through me feels almost uncontainable. I want nothing more than to storm over there, drag her out of here, and spank her so fucking hard for breaking the rules I set for her.

I know I wanted her to grow in confidence, and to find the version of Harper that's been hidden away her whole life, but now is definitely not the time for this shit.

Each time that shit-stain, Nigel, leans in closer to her, or brushes his arm against hers, I want to slam his face into the bar, before peeling the skin off his bones, so he can't ever touch her again.

I keep trying to remind myself that this was my plan...that I asked Harper to flirt with him to get the information we need, but that doesn't mean I have to like it now it's playing out in front of me.

Every so often, Bram catches my eye from where he's standing on the opposite side of the room, and his gleeful, mischievous expression does absolutely nothing to ease the anxiety running through me. For some reason, he enjoys seeing me uncomfortable.

I'm so caught up watching Harper, I don't even notice someone sitting down beside me; not until they nudge my arm with a glass. I look up to find none other than Rafe Kincaid, owner of Vulture's Den, handing me a glass of whiskey.

"What brings you to my club, Lawson?" he asks, his piercing icy-blue eyes assessing me closely.

I accept the glass he offers me, swirling it around a little before taking a big gulp. The amber liquid burns in the best way as it slides down my

throat, heating me as it goes. There's a sweetness to it that suggests he's given me the good stuff.

"I'm here for a drink," I tell him, holding up the glass to emphasise my point.

Kincaid shakes his head, but I can see the amusement in his gaze. "So that's not Bram standing by the edge of the dance floor, turning down every girl who approaches him—which is really fucking unusual. And over by the bar, that's not your Prize and her friend talking to a first-year Crow Pledge?"

"One might think you're in the middle of an assignment. But that can't be right...there's no way you're stupid enough to undertake an assignment in my club without me knowing."

The temperature in the room seems to drop rapidly as Kincaid's cold, icy-blue eyes bore into mine, the tone of his voice taking on a dangerous edge. It's suddenly very easy to see why there are so many rumours floating around about him, and how he became the owner of Vulture's Den, despite being one of the best-ranked Pledges ever.

My lips part and close, a silent struggle as words elude me. I don't want to piss him off, but that doesn't mean I can divulge Order secrets. "You know how assignments work. Silence is mandatory."

Kincaid shakes his head again, but the hard edge to his jaw seems to ease just slightly, and I breathe a sigh of relief that he no longer looks like he's about to gut me. "I don't need to know the details, Law, but I expect to be informed if my club is being used for an assignment."

I let out a huff, knowing he's not going to drop this. "The Pledge my Prize is currently talking to is under suspicion. We're gathering evidence."

His brow furrows as he leans closer. "Under suspicion of what? I've seen him here before. In fact, he's here a lot."

"We have reason to believe he's divulging Order secrets to get women into bed. He finds them here, wins them over with lies and bragging statements that relate to the Obsidian Order, and his position as a Crow Pledge. Once we have proof that this is what he's doing, we can respond," I explain, trying to keep my voice steady despite how angry I am that a fucking Pledge would risk the security of our Order, just because he has no other way of getting laid.

Kincaid looks even angrier than he did before, his hands curling into fists as he glares across the room at Nigel. "He's been using my club to pick up women by disclosing our secrets?" he clarifies through gritted teeth.

I give him a small nod. “We’re almost certain. Harper and her friend, Wren, are with him now, seeing if he talks to them. We just need confirmation.”

As the words leave my lips, my eyes dart over to Harper, who is standing alone with Nigel. A jolt of adrenaline shoots through me, my heart thudding against my ribs. I scan the packed club, the air thick with a haze of smoke, searching for Wren, all whilst trying not to let my anxiety get the better of me.

I spot the feisty girl heading towards Bram, and a wave of relief washes over me as I locate her. Though I’m still pissed she left Harper by herself with Nigel.

Just as I’m turning to look for Harper again, all hell breaks loose around me. The group of guys standing next to my table start pushing and shoving at each other, and in the blink of an eye, an all-out brawl erupts. Several of the drunken men topple onto my table, sending everything flying as they throw punches at each other.

Both me and Kincaid spring to our feet, pushing away from the table just as it tips over under the weight of the brawling men. Kincaid is absolutely furious as he reaches into the swarm of men and begins lifting them off each other one at a time, as if they weigh nothing.

The first one he grabs turns to swing at him, but he quickly regrets it when Kincaid knocks him out with one swift punch to the face. He tosses his limp body to the side as he pulls out his phone and starts barking orders into it.

Within seconds, security guards are on top of us, pulling the men apart as they try to regain control of the situation. I’m covered in fucking booze, and my hands are twitching with the urge to hit at least one of these arseholes, but I know better than to get involved while Kincaid is standing right beside me.

I can just about make out his loud, booming voice over the pounding music as he yells instructions at his security staff. “Get these fuckers out of here, and take their pictures. Make it clear they’re banned for a month. In fact, I’m banning the wanker on the floor who swung at me for life. Understood?”

His security staff just nod as they work on getting the suddenly very apologetic men out of the club. Some are trying to stay behind, arguing that they weren’t really involved, that they were just caught up in the chaos. But

Kincaid isn't having any of it, and he dismisses them with a mere wave of his hand.

His stern expression is enough that nobody challenges him further, and even I take a small step back when his eyes blaze as he takes in the surrounding carnage. He steps over to me, putting me even more on edge, but I hold firm, not letting my body give away any of what I'm feeling.

"I'm sorry you were caught up in that. I'll get everything cleaned up, and you can grab another drink—on the house, of course," he adds, and I thank him with a smile.

As he continues bossing around his staff as they try to get everything put right, I glance back over to the bar, my gaze seeking Harper. When I don't find her where I expect her to be, my stomach sinks and panic sets in.

My eyes dart across the room, catching sight of Wren and Bram hurrying toward me, their faces etched with matching worry. The thumping bass of the dance music fades as my own heartbeat pounds loudly in my ears. A cold dread washes over me, like a prickling sensation on my skin, as the sickening certainty that something is terribly wrong dawns on me.

Both Harper and Nigel are missing. She would never leave with him, and she sure as shit wouldn't go anywhere without telling me. Which means he's done something to her, and that thought freezes my veins to ice.

Bram and Wren reach me a second later, and even though I'm certain they don't know the answer, I ask anyway. "Where's Harper?"

Wren's eyes are full of fear as she slowly shakes her head. "I don't know. We were hoping you'd know. She's not at the bar anymore."

Kincaid, who had been standing off to the side, barking orders at his team, must be able to tell something is wrong, as he walks over to us, assessing us with his piercing gaze. "What's going on?"

Bram replies, "Harper is gone. She was with a Pledge at the bar. Wren came over to show me the evidence they collected, and when we looked over at Harper, getting ready to pull her out, she was gone. We looked all around the bar, but found nothing, so we came to get Lawson, hoping he had seen her."

I shake my head, unable to find the words. Wren's voice shakes as she says, "She wouldn't have just left with him. She has to be here somewhere."

The panic in her tone matches how I feel, but I do my best to keep all the emotions off my face, knowing I need to approach this the way I would any other task. Unfortunately, the emotions I try to keep out of my voice are

running rampant in my head, making it hard for me to formulate any kind of plan.

Luckily, Kincaid is an emotionless asshole, and his brain is working fully, so he quickly pulls out his phone once more, pressing the touchscreen before lifting it to his ear. Just a second later, the call connects, and we hear him talking to his security team, asking them to review the cameras in the club.

After giving them a description of Harper, there's a brief pause, and I can only assume the person on the other end of the line is doing their job, scouring the footage for my girl.

It's not long before Kincaid hangs up the phone, an angry scowl on his face that a lesser man would be terrified of. "My team has watched the footage. Apparently, your Pledge spiked her drink. He was seen carrying her out of the staff-only back exit around seven minutes ago. It appears he used the fight as a distraction."

Kincaid has barely finished speaking when I take off in a run, heading straight for the door where Harper was last seen. The sound of Bram, Kincaid, and Wren chasing after me is a distant echo, but I don't pay them any attention, not even when they call out to me.

All I can think about is getting to Harper. Once I know she's safe, I will cut both his arms off and beat him with them. *How fucking dare he take what belongs to me?*

As soon as the cool air hits me, I pause, taking a second to look around the car park. It's big, and I don't want to set off running in the wrong direction, as that will only waste time.

Just as the others catch up to me, I spot Nigel in the far corner of the car park, to the right of where I'm standing now. He's trying to push Harper into a black car, but her limp body is hard to manoeuvre, giving me the time I need.

Without thinking, I take off running in his direction, knowing if I don't get to him in time... Fuck, I don't even want to think about what he might do if he gets Harper into the car and takes off. It's not an outcome I can even consider, and I push myself harder until my lungs and thighs are burning from the speed and force of my exertion.

A sickening fear builds in me as Nigel roughly shoves Harper into the backseat, the slamming of the door echoing in the sudden quiet. As he takes a step back, straightening out his shirt, he casts furtive glances around. The

harsh lights over the carpark glint off his eyes, betraying his unease, as he no doubt makes sure no one saw him abducting the terrified girl now trapped in his car.

A glint of surprise, then raw fear, flashes in his eyes as he sees me. His smug smirk crumbles, replaced by frozen dread as I thunder towards him, the sound of my feet breaking his sudden silence.

The metallic tang of exertion fills my nostrils as I bolt towards the car, a blur of motion. My feet, clumsy from the speed, send a spray of fine gravel skittering behind me. I slam into the Pledge's side, the impact vibrating through my limbs as we tumble onto the rough, gritty ground. His startled grunt rips through the air, only to be drowned out by a sharp, pained squeal as my fist connects with his face, a dull thud echoing the blow.

A shooting pain slices through my knuckles from the force of the punch, but it does nothing except spur me on as I hit him over and over again, my fist landing on any exposed area.

His cries of pain as he begs me to stop barely register over the adrenaline pounding in my ears. The rough gravel beneath us scrapes at our skin as he squirms, trying desperately to get away from me, but I have him pinned down. There's no escaping my fury.

My punch to his nose causes a sickening crack, and blood spurts onto us both, adding to the splatter that already covers us. My knuckles are stained red, and I'm not entirely sure it's all his.

I'm so lost to the rage that when Bram wraps his arms around my shoulders, using all of his body weight to pull me off the sobbing Pledge, who is now curled into a ball beneath me, I turn to hit him. I try to push him away from me, as I don't want anything to stop me from killing the arsehole on the ground.

Unfortunately, Bram is a fucking underground fighter, with much more skill and strength than me, and I'm barely able to move him—though I get a couple of good hits in to let him know I'm not happy.

Eventually, he drags me away from Nigel's battered and bruised body, but he keeps his arms wrapped around me as I desperately gasp for air, my heart pounding from the fury burning through me.

"Calm down, Lawson. Take some deep breaths and get your shit together," Bram tells me, keeping his hold tight so I can feel his measured breathing.

Nigel's sobs grow louder as he tries to roll into a sitting position, but Wren stops him with a kick to his stomach. "You sick fuck. What the hell is your problem? Do you get off on abusing women?"

Bram keeps one arm around me and uses the other to gently push Wren away from the sack of shit on the ground. She looks at Bram with a fierce glare, letting him know she doesn't appreciate being held back, and I know the fucking feeling.

Bram lets out a huff as he says, "Look, this giant turd will answer for his crimes—all of them—but there are rules that need to be followed. Put your emotions to the side and see this as an assignment. We will have our revenge, but until then, we have to follow the rules."

I sag in his hold as his words echo around my head, and I can hardly believe I almost forgot this is an assignment. I was so lost in my anger over him taking Harper, and all I could think about was hurting him for touching what's mine. That I almost blew the assignment shocks me, as I never let emotions get the better of me.

"Fuck that. He doesn't deserve to walk away from this," Wren spits, as she balls her hands into fists while practically bouncing with pent-up aggression.

Having felt all the anger seep out of my body, Bram lets me go and walks over to Wren. He takes her fists and pries her fingers open, smoothing out her palms until she's a little more relaxed.

He then places one hand on her cheek, soothing his thumb over it as he says, "I promise, little fighter, he will pay for what he's done. This will seem like a walk in the park, but we have to do it officially. If not, Lawson could get into a lot of trouble, and that's the last thing we want. Harper will get justice."

Wren still looks furious as she turns her attention to Kincaid, who has been standing back with a murderous expression on his face. "Why the fuck did none of your security stop this asshole from carrying an unconscious girl out of your bloody club?"

Kincaid actually winces at the death glare Wren shoots his way as he shrugs. "Do you know how many Pledges carry drugged up girls out of our club? It's almost an everyday occurrence, but it's almost never non-consensual."

"That's not fucking good enough. He took Harper," she yells, taking an angry step towards him before Bram grabs her again.

Their argument is enough to pull me out of my own head, and now that the fog has cleared, the very mention of Harper's name makes my stomach sink, and I rush over to the car. I was so caught up in making Nigel pay that I completely forgot to check on Harper.

I throw open the back driver's side door, and I let out a low, threatening growl at the way she's lying across the backseat on her stomach, her body limp. Her arm is dangling off the seat, and her gorgeous strawberry-blonde hair is hanging there too, covering most of her face.

The hem of her dress has ridden up from how he threw her into the car, exposing the backs of her thighs and the round globes of her arse. I reach in and gently roll her onto her back, keeping my eyes fixed on her chest, making sure she's still breathing.

I let out a sigh of relief when her chest lifts ever so slightly, but when several seconds pass before it does it again, panic sets in. I reach in and gently place my hand on her cheek, my thumb hovering over her mouth so I can feel her breath touching my skin, reminding me she's still here.

She's as white as a sheet, and her whole body is completely limp. So much so, she can't even hold her own head up. I gently rub my fist against her sternum, hoping it will be enough to stimulate her into waking up, but when she doesn't react, nausea ripples through me.

What the hell did he give her?

"Harper," I say firmly, before getting louder and more insistent. "Harper! Sweetheart, open your eyes for me."

Her eyelids flutter for a second, but my relief at her opening them quickly vanishes when her eyes roll into the back of her head before closing again. This time, as I call her name louder, I shake her more vigorously.

She lets out a barely audible whimper, but other than the odd flutter of her lashes, there's no evidence she's trying to wake up, and fear really sets in, flooding through my veins like ice.

I pull back out of the car and set my murderous gaze on Nigel, who is now sitting on the ground with his hands zip-tied in front of him, blood dripping from his face. "What the fuck did you give her?"

His eyes widen like saucers in fear, but no sound escapes his lips. I take a menacing step closer, a cruel delight coursing through me at the sound of his pathetic whimper, a small, broken sound. The air crackles with tension, then Bram's solid form looms before me, blocking my path.

With his hand holding me at bay, he turns to face Nigel. “You better tell him, or I will let him torture the information out of you.”

He shakes his head, blood and snot flying everywhere, as he stutters, “N-no, p-please... I d-don’t... P-please...”

“What the fuck did you give her?” I scream, pushing against Bram’s hold on me.

“R-Rohypnol,” he cries, dropping his head as sobs wrack his battered and bruised body.

I pull on Bram’s arm, getting him to turn and face me as I frantically ask, “How do we get that out of her system? Do we need to get her to the doc?”

Although my friend tries to hide it, there’s panic in his eyes as he says the words I don’t want to hear. “I don’t think there is a way to get it out of her system. I can call the doc, if you want to get her checked out, but I think we need to get her home.”

I give him a slow nod as I consider all the very poor options. “Okay, you call him and see what he says while I get her into your car.”

Bram gives me a forced smile in agreement, before inclining his head towards the still sobbing Pledge. “What should we do with him?”

Nigel looks up at us then, his whole body trembling from fear as blood covers him. “Stick to the plan. You take him until it’s time.”

Bram nods, but this time there’s nothing forced about his smile. It’s more of a maniacal grin that tells me Nigel will not enjoy his time with Bram, and that makes me very fucking happy.

I drown out Nigel’s crying and whimpering as I focus my attention back on Harper. Reaching into the car, I lift her into my arms, cradling her against my body as best I can. She’s so limp, it’s hard to hold her, but there’s no way I’d ever let her fall.

I carry her over to Bram’s car, thanking Wren as she opens the backseat for me. I climb in with Harper still in my arms, settling her on my knee as I use my shoulder to support her head. Once she’s settled, almost like you would cradle a baby, while making sure their head doesn’t roll back, I use my free hand to rub against her sternum again. I press hard as I repeat her name, begging her to open her eyes.

Wren slides into the front passenger seat, her piercing gaze still on us, but I don’t pay her any attention, focusing all my energy on Harper. She seems to be drifting in and out, though her eyes remain closed, but her

breathing remains steady, which soothes me just a little. I place my hand on her cheek, stroking it with my thumb as I hold her close, letting her know she's safe with me.

I'm distantly aware of the boot opening and closing before Bram climbs into the driver's seat. "I drugged him and threw him in the boot. Give him a taste of his own medicine," he chuckles.

"What did the doc say?"

Bram lets out a sigh as he starts the engine. "He's going to meet us at your place, but he says there's not a lot he can do. It's important to try to keep her awake, and when she's lucid enough, give her plenty of fluids."

"Should we try to make her vomit?" Wren asks, unable to keep the fear out of her unsteady voice.

Bram shakes his head as he quickly says, "No. That's the worst thing you could do. It's already in her system, so it's too late for her to throw it back up. And if she is sick when she's not fully conscious, she could choke."

"Fuck," I snap, not liking our options at all.

Still, I turn my attention back to Harper, doing everything I can to get her to wake up. After a few minutes, her lashes flutter again, and my chest aches when she finally opens her pretty blue eyes and they stay that way.

"Hey, sweetheart. Keep your eyes open for me, Harper. Let me see those beautiful eyes of yours," I tell her as I gently stroke her cheek with my thumb.

Her lips lift into a small smile as she begins to speak, her voice barely above a whisper, "You think I'm beautiful?"

I let out a short laugh as I gently swipe a strand of hair out of her eyes, tucking it behind her ear. "You have no idea."

Although her eyes remain hazy, making her seem almost drunk, she's a little more coherent as she swallows anxiously. "I'm sorry."

Tears fill her eyes, and when the first ones fall, I softly wipe them away. "It's okay. Don't think about it now, just focus on staying awake."

She gives me a brief nod, her lip quivering as she asks, "Did you...get him?"

Anger thrums through me at the fear that's written on her face, my nerve endings prickling with electricity as I struggle to push down my raging emotions. I'm fucking furious that the asshole Pledge dared to

touch what's mine, but Harper broke my rules, and as a result, she put herself in danger—and that's not something I'm going to forget.

I'm going to take her back to the cottage I keep hidden away just off-campus, where she can have the space she needs to heal and recover, away from prying eyes. But once she's well, I will hand out a punishment so severe she will never consider breaking one of my rules ever again.

Bram pulls into the driveway at the back of the cottage, after putting in the security code to get him onto the property. He's the only other person who knows this place exists. Even my family doesn't know I own it. They think I blew the money on random shit, when really I was saving to buy a place of my own, somewhere to act as a haven when I need it most.

I don't come here often, but when I need to decompress, or have time away from Crowhurst House, this is where I come. Although Bram knows about it, this is the first time he's ever been here, as he knows how much I value my privacy when I'm here.

When he parks the car, he doesn't even attempt to get out; he just turns to look at me over his shoulder. "Are you okay getting her inside? Doc should be here to check on her soon. I'll take Wren home and then sort out the shithead in the boot."

Before I can respond, Wren cuts in with a high-pitched, frantic-sounding voice. "What? I'm not leaving Harper. Where the hell even are we? I'm not going anywhere without her."

Bram reaches over and places a hand on her thigh, silencing her. "This is Lawson's house. Nobody knows about it, so it's the ideal place for Harper to chill out and recover. She's just going to be sleeping it off, but when she's well enough, she will call you."

"I'm not leaving her," she states, jutting out her chin defiantly.

"You don't have a fucking choice," I snap, not even flinching when she turns her fierce glare on me. "She's my Prize. Which means she's mine to take care of. I promise, she'll be safe here, but the fewer people who know about it, the better."

"Don't argue, little fighter. Red will be safe here," Bram says before she can challenge me.

She lets out a loud huff, not at all happy, but as she crosses her arms like a petulant teenager whilst staying quiet, I know we've won this round. Though I have a feeling, this is one battle she will not let me forget.

“Can you give the doc the code so he can let himself in? I’m going to get her settled in the bedroom,” I tell Bram, who nods in reply.

I lift Harper into my arms once more and carry her into my cottage. It’s not big or fancy, but there’s something distinctly homely that I think Harper might quite like. I’ll be sure to give her the tour once she’s recovered.

As I carry her to my bedroom, watching her lashes flutter as she tries and fails to take in the environment around her, I’m filled with a maelstrom of emotions.

Part of me is so unbelievably relieved that she’s safe, that I got to her before he could hurt her. Then there’s a murderous part of me that is consumed by my need to get revenge on the asshole for daring to touch what’s mine.

There’s also a fleeting part of me that wonders if Harper would like it here, or if she’d want to change anything to make it feel more like home to her.

I push those thoughts away and focus on the part of me that should be much more prominent than it currently is. Nevermind thinking about how she feels, or if she’s safe...I need to concentrate on how I’m going to punish her so that nothing like this ever happens again.

I might be feeling all kinds of weird things that I can’t name or explain, but none of that changes the fact she’s my Prize...she’s mine to control as I see fit. And I demand her obedience...which she fucking clearly didn’t give me.

So now, I need to teach her a lesson she’ll never forget. I just have to wait for the drugs to leave her system, and the doc to give her the all-clear, then she’s all mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Harper



My eyes flutter open and closed a few times, and I almost breathe a sigh of relief that they don't feel as heavy as the last few times I woke up. I can barely remember anything about those times, except that I quickly let sleep take me again soon after opening them.

This time, the heaviness from before is almost completely gone, and it's not a mammoth task to keep my eyes open. Though I'm grateful for the dimmed light in the room, as I think anything brighter would most likely hurt.

There's an intense throbbing in my head, and though it's more painful than I would like, there's no brain fog like before that prevents me from piecing together where I am, but there are other worrying memory blanks.

I remember everything that happened with Lawson in my room, when he placed the love egg inside me—*bloody hell, I hope that's not still inside me. How long can you keep a love egg in before it causes damage?* That sounds like a question for Google, rather than my pounding head.

Since I can't feel the sex toy, I'm hoping Lawson had the good sense to remove it. Particularly since I have no idea how long I've been drifting in and out of consciousness. But I have to admit, I'm a little let down that I never got to explore its potential.

I push that thought away and try to focus my frazzled brain enough to do an inventory of my body. The gaps in my memory are scaring me, and I'm worried the scenarios my overactive imagination is creating are so much worse than reality.

As I take stock of my body, panic sets in. When I try to move my arms and legs, I realise I can't. There's something cold and heavy wrapped

around my wrists and ankles, tying me to the soft, comfortable bed beneath me.

My arms are stretched above my head, almost as if they're attached to each side of the headboard. While my legs are being pulled wide apart, connected to the bottom edges of the bed. It's like I'm in a starfish position, and whatever is binding me is so unforgiving that I can't move, not even an inch.

As I try to lift my head to get a better look at my situation, a sharp pressure applies to my neck, cutting off my air supply and restricting my movements. I quickly drop my head back down, pulling in some much-needed air as my heart races, my nerves prickling with anxiety.

Since I can't move my hands, I have to get creative to try to work out what the hell is going on with me. So, this time, when I lift my head up, I do it incredibly slowly, stopping when I feel something touching my neck. It's cold and hard, almost like metal, and it's similar to whatever is tying down my limbs.

I can't see enough to work it out completely, but from what I can feel, I can hazard a guess what it is. I'm wearing some kind of collar, and the more I move, the more it restricts my movements and breathing.

Since I'm not able to move enough to see, I have to focus on all of my other senses, but the throbbing in my head and the buzzing of anxiety make it incredibly difficult.

While I can feel the warm, comfy, silky fabric of a duvet covering me, I'm almost certain I'm naked beneath. When I try to move, the softness of the material glides over my exposed nipples, creating a tingling sensation that is more than pleasurable.

As I try wiggling my hips, just to see what else I can feel, a rough burn-like sensation spreads over my lower abdomen and the area just below my breasts. Rope secures me to the bed in two places, making it well and truly impossible for me to move.

Despite only having fractured memories, when I first woke up, I was one hundred percent certain that I was with Lawson. I remember him finding me after Nigel kidnapped me, and he pulled me out of the car and into his arms. He held me as we drove home. He then carried me into his bedroom, laying me down to sleep in his arms.

From the brief parts of the room that I can see, I'm almost certain this isn't Lawson's room in Crowhurst House, and it's not my dorm either. If I

am with him, we'd have to be at one of those locations, and this room doesn't seem familiar, which only makes my breathing pick up.

Are all the memories I have of Lawson looking after me each time I woke up in a daze nothing more than my brain playing tricks on me? Was Nigel really able to kidnap me?

I remember very little from the times I woke up before, but I'm sure Lawson was here each and every time, stroking my hair, kissing my cheeks, whispering reassuring words that soothed the balm of my soul.

I can't possibly have made him up to help me get through whatever situation I'm in, but it's looking like a possibility. And if Lawson didn't find me, that means Nigel kidnapped me.

Tears well up in my eyes as fear gets the better of me, and despite it doing nothing but make the situation worse, I thrash against my bindings, trying my best to get free, even though I know it's hopeless.

I scream through my sobs, my voice hoarse from the collar choking me as I push against it, but the crippling fear prevents me from thinking logically.

Within seconds, soft hands are pressing me into the bed, stopping me from pulling against my bindings, allowing me to breathe, even if each inhale is jagged and sharp against my burning lungs. It's not until Lawson's head appears, hovering over me, that I finally breathe easy once more.

The bed dips beside me as he takes a seat on it, sitting right beside me as he reaches over and wipes away my tears with his thumb. His movements are soft and gentle, a complete contradiction to the man I'm struggling to even begin to understand.

After holding a bottle of water to my lips, giving me a few much-needed sips, he lets out a long sigh as he finally breaks the silence. "Welcome back, sweetheart," he tells me, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead.

I try to form words, but have to push hard against my sore, hoarse throat. "Lawson, where... What...?"

He presses his finger to my lips, shaking his head as his sparkling silver gaze locks with mine. Although there's a softness to his face, with his small smile, there's fierceness in his eyes that seems to contradict everything else I'm seeing.

"You're safe," he tells me, and I breathe a sigh of relief, feeling the tension flooding from my sore muscles as I sink into the comfortable

mattress beneath me. “But now you’re being punished.”

My eyes spring open as I try to process what he’s saying. “I’m...what? Punished? Why?”

He leans down until his lips are right beside mine, and I’m suddenly grateful for the collar tying me down, as the urge to claim his mouth with mine becomes more overwhelming each day. I’m consumed by thoughts of why he doesn’t want to kiss me.

Instead of kissing me, at the last minute, he turns just slightly and presses his lips against my pulse point, just below my ear. A shiver ripples along the length of my body as his breath flutters against my ear, lighting me up in the most delicious way.

“Not only did you break the rules I set for you, but you also put your life in danger. I’m so mad at you for that, and I’m going to make sure you value your own safety from now on, as well as following every single one of my instructions without fail,” he tells me, his voice deep and husky.

I want to argue, but before I can, Lawson takes a shuddered breath as his gaze rakes over my body. I can’t read the emotions on his face, but he almost seems uncertain.

“I don’t know how much you remember, but after I found you in Nigel’s car, I brought you here and had a doctor look at you. Although you have a couple of minor cuts and bruises, you are otherwise well. We can talk more after your punishment, but for now, I need to remind you why it’s important to follow my rules.”

Lawson reaches up and places his thumbs against my lips, stroking them over my slightly cracked flesh, careful around the cuts he was just telling me about. I want to breathe a little easier knowing Nigel can’t harm me, but my thoughts obsess over what Lawson is about to do.

With one thumb on the top lip and one on the bottom, his swipes become more forceful as he coaxes my mouth open.

“Keep your mouth open wide,” he instructs, moving his thumbs away as he stands up.

The ghost of his thumbs still haunts my lips, and it’s almost like I can still feel him touching me. I run my tongue over the surface, and my stomach sinks when I can’t taste anything but copper, probably from where Nigel cut my lip during my brief time with him.

I keep my mouth open wide, even as the dampness threatens to spill from the corners of my lips, but I daren’t go against Lawson, not with the

sharp, biting edge of his tone.

His face appears in my vision once more, and all I can do is watch as he brings something toward my mouth. It's a round metal ring with black leather straps on either side, which connect them together.

"Open as wide as you can," Lawson tells me, as he gently slides the cool metal ring into my mouth, resting it behind my teeth.

The ring forces my mouth to open wider than I expect, and I can already feel a twinge in my jaw as I use my tongue to feel along the metal. Although I can still breathe easily and move my tongue, the ring restricts everything else. If I were to hazard a guess, I'm sure I'd struggle to talk too, but I think that's probably the point.

Lawson smooths the straps over each cheek, reaching around to the back of my head to fasten them together, pulling them tight as he does. The motion of moving my head forward forces me to press against the collar around my neck, limiting my breathing temporarily, but it's not like I could say anything if I wanted to.

Once the cool ring gag is pressed firmly against my lips, securing it in place, a metallic tang hits my tongue. Lawson lowers my head back onto the cool silk of the pillowcase before softly gliding his thumb across the side of my mouth, wiping away the warm trail of saliva that has escaped.

"You look so pretty all tied up for me like this. This is a punishment, so I will push your limits, but I won't ever give you more than I know you can handle. However, if you think this needs to stop, you can click your fingers or shake your head three times.

"As my Prize, you shouldn't even be allowed a safeword or gesture, so think long and hard before you use it. I promised you could have one, but using it will change things between us. Everything will stop. We won't be able to go back. You'll have to try to trust that I know your body well enough to be sure of exactly what you want and need."

A tremor ripples down my spine, but not simply from apprehension or fear; there's also a thrilling element to all of this, something new I've never experienced before. So far, everything he's done to me and my body has been pleasurable, and I feel he's earned that trust—for now.

"Okay," I mumble through the gag, spit slipping off my tongue as I try not to choke on it.

Lawson pulls the covers off me, exposing my naked body to the cool air, as he hovers over me from beside the bed, taking in every inch of my

exposed flesh. My nipples harden as the colder air hits them, contrasting against the soft fabric they've been rubbing against, making them sensitive already.

Lawson reaches towards my neck and begins adjusting the metal collar, and I pull in a ragged breath when I feel it loosen ever so slightly. As Lawson slides his hand to the nape of my neck, he grabs hold of my hair there and slowly lifts my head.

I wait for the crushing pain of the collar to cut off my breathing, but it doesn't come straight away as I'm expecting. In fact, I'm able to almost get my head upright before it begins to dig in, and that's when Lawson lets go of my hair to adjust the collar once more.

"I've loosened it a little, so you can lift your head up to here. I want you to watch what I do to your fucking gorgeous body," Lawson tells me, my heart racing with anticipation.

He trails his fingernails over my skin, starting at my neck before dropping over my collarbones, down my sides, and over my hips. His touch is featherlight, but the sharpness of his nails makes my skin prickle, leaving a trail of heat and goosebumps in its wake.

I feel him trace his fingertip over the cursive lettering on my mound, taking his time as he follows the lines of his own name, and there's no denying the possessive edge in his gaze as he studies the ink.

Once he's finished, he moves to the foot of the bed, where manacles attach my ankles to the corners of the bedframe. Lawson adjusts the ankle cuffs one at a time, giving me slightly more leeway on them both, meaning I can move my legs a bit—though I daren't move under his watchful glare.

As he sits on the bottom of the bed, his molten silver gaze fixed on mine, he grabs hold of my knees and forces me to bend them before spreading my legs further apart. The slack he gave on the ankle restraints was just enough to allow me to bend my knees and spread myself wide enough to expose my bare pussy to him.

The cool air once again hits my heated pussy, sending a shiver through me as my skin tingles with anticipation...and more than a little fear—this is a punishment after all.

Lawson turns his back to me as he walks over to the door opposite, which I think leads into the ensuite, since the door into the bedroom is via the wall to the left. So it could either be a bathroom or a walk-in wardrobe,

but I have a vague memory of running water coming from the other side of the door, so I make an educated guess.

When he returns, there's something in his hand, but as he sits on the bottom of the bed, I can't see what it is. He shuffles closer, once again trailing his fingernails up my legs and over my thighs, making them tremble as his touch gets closer to my core.

"I'm so mad that I had to take the love egg out before we got a chance to play with it, Harper," he says, his eyes narrowed as his fingers continue exploring. "But that just means I'll have to use it another time, when you really don't want me to."

His eyes sparkle with the wicked threat, and my heart races so fast I'm surprised he can't see it beating out of my ribcage. He can obviously see the rapid rise and fall of my chest as I draw in shallow breaths, drool leaking from the sides of my gag as I struggle to remain in control.

"Do you like being tied up and exposed to me?"

Despite it being a question, he doesn't wait for me to answer...which is good, as I'm not sure I can. Instead, he seeks the answer for himself by sliding his finger through my slit, feeling how wet I am for him.

If he'd done it ten minutes ago, he would have found nothing, but after the lazy perusal of his fingers over my body, his lips hovering so close to mine, and his general proximity, I'm once again lost to him, my pussy getting wetter with each dirty word he mutters.

As if to prove the point, he lifts his finger close to my face, letting me see it glistening with my own juices. He then keeps his gaze fixed on mine as he brings it to his mouth, slipping the digit fully inside as he cleans every drop of my taste from his skin.

When he lets out a soft moan, muffled slightly by his finger, my flesh tingles and my core tightens until a soft whimper of my own slips past the gag.

"You taste so fucking sweet. If this wasn't a punishment, I'd feast on your delicious cunt for hours, but I think you'd enjoy that far too much," he says, his lips glistening invitingly.

"Please," I mutter into the gag, not entirely sure if what Lawson hears is the same word I say, but I rock my hips as best I can with the rope tying me down, hoping he understands what I'm asking for.

My body craves his touch, and I silently beg him to give me what I need, even though he probably won't, since this is still a punishment. His

smile turns wicked as he leans closer, and that's when I see what he has in his hand.

"This is a magic wand. Have you ever seen one before, or heard of it?" He doesn't bother asking if I've used one, already knowing the answer.

I shake my head from side to side as best I can, answering no the only way I can.

He presses a button on the side of it, and the bulbous head begins to vibrate, shifting so quickly I can barely see it moving, though the noise leaves nothing to the imagination.

Obviously, I've heard of sex toys before, but I've never seen any in person—other than the egg. Wren talks about her Battery Operated Boyfriend occasionally, saying she could swear off men as long as she has batteries to hand, but that's the most experience I have with them.

Hell, I've not even watched porn, seeing it as a slippery slope into a world where I would struggle to keep my virginity intact, which was essential if I was to become an Order Wife. Why torture myself by getting turned on when I daren't risk pleasuring myself, in case I got too involved and ended up breaking my hymen?

It was a lesson that was repeatedly drilled into me by the women my dad paid to help raise me, guiding me in 'women's things' that he didn't want to touch with a ten-foot pole. Though I have no doubt that my father set the rules they imposed as a way of keeping me pure and meek. Something I'm starting to resent now that I'm able to explore my sexuality with Lawson.

"I'm going to place it on your clit. I'll start on a low level and build up," he explains, before spitting into his hand and then rubbing the saliva against my pussy, making sure I'm wet enough for the toy.

He uses his fingers to gently part my labia, before pressing the cool, almost velvety, round head against my clit, and when the vibrations rip through my sensitive nub, I can't help but yelp.

It's a unique feeling, and at first, I'm not sure if I like it, as the vibrations are almost bordering on sharp against my tender flesh, but that quickly changes when Lawson alters the position, moving the head through my slit a few times to get the wand wet.

When he finally begins rubbing the head over my clit, it's almost delicate to begin with, and the vibrations are soft, creating a very pleasant tingle that seems to heat me up slowly. It doesn't take long for me to want

more, and I try to tilt my hips, chasing the pleasure that's brewing within me.

Unfortunately, the rope around my lower body prevents me from moving much, but Lawson responds to my silent request, rubbing the head of the wand over me faster as he turns up the intensity.

I let out a soft moan followed by a whimper as bliss ripples through my body, making all of my nerves feel as though they're electric. Drool runs from the side of my mouth as my head swims from the overwhelming sensations.

I've never been in a position where all of my control is gone. I'm completely at Lawson's mercy, and there's nothing I can do to change that. And while it's incredibly scary to hand over that level of trust to someone, there's also an element of freedom that's quite enjoyable.

When Lawson turns up the intensity again, all thoughts shatter, and my body reacts almost violently. My core tightens and my skin tingles with anticipation as every part of me seems to burn with the power of my impending orgasm.

The smooth, silicone of the wand vibrates against my throbbing clit, each rapid, insistent stroke sending a shiver through me. The air feels thick and charged, a tangible hum of anticipation building with every touch. I'm teetering on the brink of pure bliss, my body yearning for that final, explosive release.

My heart is pounding and my breaths are coming in short, shallow pants as the ache in my jaw worsens with the desperate need to speak, to tell Lawson what I need.

"Are you going to come, sweetheart?" he asks, his voice deep and seductive.

I nod as best I can, whilst trying to say yes, but thanks to the gag, what comes out is incoherent.

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As all my muscles tense in anticipation, the ache within them is so much worse than normal, and I can only think it's because of how they're already restrained. Although Lawson has tied me up before today, I've never been this restricted, and I think not being able to move is making that throbbing tension worse.

I try to beg through the gag, knowing I'm supposed to ask for his permission to come, but it's pretty much impossible. What comes out is a garbled moan that quickly becomes a breathy whimper as I try desperately to lift my pussy, even just a little, to chase the high that's building.

Lawson fixes his molten silver gaze on mine, watching me intently as I lose myself to the sensations he's giving me. I silently beg him with my eyes, letting him know that I'm about to tumble over the edge, and as a wicked smile appears on his face, I'm certain he understands.

Suddenly, he pulls the wand away from my aching clit, leaving me feeling bereft as there's nothing to get me to the finish line that I could almost touch just a second ago. A low growl of frustration rips through the gag, along with my desperate gasps for air, as saliva drips down over my chin.

Every nerve ending in my body is tingling, but in the most frustrating way. I was so close to my orgasm, and now the embers that were burning hot are cooling once again, leaving me with a strange, empty feeling.

I stare at Lawson—well, glare would be more accurate—as I try to communicate using only my eyes. I'm asking him why the hell he pulled away when I was so close.

His wicked smile widens, and in that moment, I'm absolutely certain he understands me. His face hovers close to mine; the feel of his breath fluttering over my face makes my heart stutter as he says, "You haven't forgotten this is a punishment, have you?"

My stomach sinks, as I had very much forgotten. I was so lost in the pleasure he was giving me, all other thoughts had slipped my mind, but I won't let that happen again. Or, at least, that's my plan, until he presses the vibrating wand against my clit once more and I lose all good sense yet again.

This time, the ache in my clit grows quickly, picking up from where we left off moments ago, and my body soon seeks the release it was previously denied. My muscles coil as my nerve endings prickle with electricity, heating me up as my pussy walls flutter with excitement.

There's no slow build this time. My body rushes towards the impending orgasm with great speed, and I fight against my bindings to help get me there. The rope around my stomach burns as I rock my hips, not caring about the pain as I chase the desire that keeps growing in intensity.

My breaths are coming out in short, shallow pants, making my head spin, while the ache in my jaw worsens as I fight against the metal ring, desperate to use my mouth. I want to tell Lawson how much I need to come. I want to let out the moans and groans of bliss and frustration that are swirling around inside me, with no way out. But more than anything, I want to feel my lips against his.

Those thoughts are soon gone as the overwhelming sensations of the orgasm that's about to overtake me push my body to the edge. The rope burn on my stomach is bordering on painful as I lift my hips again, desperate for more.

Just as I'm about to come, Lawson pulls the wand away again—*motherfucker!* If I could scream the word aloud, I would, but the jumbled mix of words, saliva, and groaning makes it inaudible.

Tears fill my eyes as the empty sensation hits me again, like ice water being doused over my burning body, putting out the fire whilst leaving me cold and lost.

Before I've even had a chance to catch my breath, he presses the wand against my clit again, startling me as jolts of electricity shoot through my pussy, almost painfully.

Within seconds, I've reached the same peak again, only for him to pull away once more, leaving me a gasping, sobbing mess. Tears and saliva cover my face, and my jaw hurts from all the tension as I've ridden through every emotion possible, all whilst being unable to vocalise how I'm feeling.

My body swapping from hot to cold, on edge to empty, pleasure to pain, becomes too much, and everything I feel moulds into one. I lose track of how many times Lawson pushes me to the edge, only to pull away and leave me feeling so fucking lost and empty.

I've never felt so many emotions, swinging from one end of the scale to the other, in such a short space of time, and it's mentally draining. My body is overstimulated; my head, however, pounds from the overwhelmingly confusing situation.

But no matter how much I try to block everything out, Lawson continues to force it on me. He wants me to feel the pleasure, followed by

the pain that comes when he takes it away. I think he might like me being at his mercy.

When he pulls the wand away again, I struggle to catch my breath, and black spots fill my vision as the room around me spins. Tears fill my eyes, making everything seem blurry anyway, but the lack of oxygen only worsens the situation.

I try to pull in some much-needed air, but my lungs burn with each inhale as sobs continue to wrack my body. Lawson reaches over and wipes the tears from my cheeks, but it's a pointless effort, as they're quickly replaced by more falling.

"Shush. Take some big, deep breaths for me, Harper," Lawson says, his soft, melodic voice confusing me further.

He slides some strands of hair off my forehead, where they're plastered thanks to the sheen of sweat coating my body, and he lightly tucks them behind my ear. It's not a straightforward task because of the gag.

He gently runs his hands over my body while his gaze is fixed on mine, yet my overloaded senses mute all sensations. Even when he flicks his fingers over my peaked nipples, I'm torn between pleasure and pain, unsure how it should feel.

"You've been such a good girl so far, but I don't think you've learnt your lesson quite yet." As soon as the words leave his lips, sobs wrack my body, and my eyes widen with panic. *This isn't over yet.*

I watch as Lawson walks to the foot of the bed and unfastens the manacles around my ankles. My feet and legs tingle now they're no longer being pulled apart, my muscles relaxing even though I don't move from the position I'm in.

I freeze when Lawson pulls out a knife, holding my breath when he kneels next to the bed. I only breathe a sigh of relief when he slices the ropes tying me down, though I'm still cautious that he might use the blade on me, so despite my new freedom, I keep perfectly still.

Only when he puts the knife away do I breathe easily again. *Well, as easily as I can with this fucking ring in my mouth,* I think to myself. My anger over the situation seems to have allowed curse words to break free, and given Lawson keeps telling me he wants to see that side of me, I have no intention of hiding them again now.

Lawson then moves onto the collar around my neck, and after he removes the cold, harsh metal, I roll my head, hoping to ease some of the

tension and pain that keeping me in that position for so long caused. I groan as my neck twinges, protesting at being frozen and held stiff for that length of time.

When Lawson moves to unfasten the straps at the back of my head, freeing me from the ring gag in my mouth, I send out a silent prayer that I never see it again—I bloody hate the gag.

He gently removes it from behind my teeth, and I whimper when I have to stretch my mouth wider to free it.

My jaw doesn't just ache now, it's bordering on painful. My mouth is dry, as all my saliva has drained out, covering my neck and breasts, making me feel dirty. I try to move my jaw around, slowly opening and closing my mouth to try to ease the tightness, but my joints scream at me as tears stream down my face.

Lawson places a hand on either cheek, and gently uses his thumbs to massage into my jawbone, helping to ease some of the tension. I don't know how he knows what to do, but it doesn't take long for the pain to ease into a dull ache, which combined with the rest of the sensations overloading my body is nothing.

When he moves his hands away, giving me a small smile that I can't return, he lifts the gag again, and my heart stops when I think he's going to put it back on. I clamp my mouth shut, knowing for sure that I'll fight him if he tries.

Lawson shakes his head as he throws the gag onto the bedside table. "I'm not going to put it on again, but you will learn to enjoy it. It's one of my favourite gags, as I can still get my cock in your mouth when it's in place."

My eyes grow wide, and I'm sure he can see my fear in them as he lets out a dark chuckle. If I thought the gag was bad this time, I can only imagine how much worse it would be with him sliding his dick through it.

Lawson stands again, and I wait for him to loosen the manacles around my wrists, as they're still tied up, but when he moves to the foot of the bed, I realise that's not going to happen. The cold, harsh metal is digging into my wrists from where I've been pulling against the unforgiving restraints, and I'd be surprised if I don't have marks.

Before I can question what he's going to do, Lawson grabs hold of my hips and flips me over so I'm lying on my stomach. The restraints only just

allow for my arms to cross over above my head, the manacles biting into my wrists even more, and I cry out in a mixture of shock and pain.

Lawson then manipulates my body, moving me around until he gets me into the position he wants me in. When I'm kneeling on the bed, my chest pressing into the mattress with my head turned to the side so I can still breathe, he pulls my legs open as wide as they will go.

Lawson pushes his hand against my lower back, forcing me to arch my spine in just the right way, lifting my arse into the air. The cool air hits my swollen, sensitive pussy, and I let out a whimper as my muscles scream from the sudden movements.

SLAP!

I let out a yelp as Lawson spanks my arse-cheek hard, before quickly doing the same again on the other cheek. My arse burns from the force of his strike, but then he softly glides his hand over the area, soothing my tingling flesh as my head swims in confusion.

He spanks me again and again, moving from one cheek to the other, covering every part of my arse and upper thighs, not sticking to just one section. My sobs fill the room, and they're only made worse when his fingers lightly brush against my sensitive clit.

After a while, I begin to feel something other than pain, as the tingling becomes almost pleasurable. Don't get me wrong, it's still bloody painful, but my pussy is getting wetter for a reason, and my flesh tingles with excitement.

When his fingers glide over my clit again, I let out a pleasure-filled gasp, feeling more excitement than pain now. As Lawson continues to massage my no doubt red, tender arse, my breath catches in my throat when I feel his breath against my cheek, his face filling my vision with how close he is.

"You like a bit of pain with your pleasure, don't you, dirty girl?"

I bite my lip to stop myself from responding. I want to deny it, but we both know the answer is plain to see, and Lawson's cocky smirk only confirms it.

He takes a step back, and all I can do is watch as he removes all of his clothes, standing before me looking like a fucking god. He takes hold of his hard cock and begins stroking along the length, letting out a deep groan as his thumb slides over the tip.

I bite my lip harder, my pussy throbbing with a desperate need for him to fill me. I'm still overstimulated from before, and the sight of his hard length is making me desperate, as all good sense flies out of the window.

The words leave my lips before I can stop them. "Please, Lawson. Please, will you fuck me?"

He lets out a dark chuckle as he steps closer, his silver eyes almost black with how dilated they are, suggesting he's as desperate for this as I am. "Look at my dirty girl begging and swearing. I thought you were supposed to be a good girl."

There's a teasing edge to his voice, and we both know he's been trying to turn me into his dirty girl since the moment we met—and now he has. I hate that I'm caving after I told him he'd never see me beg, but I'm so desperate for release, I'll do or say anything he wants, and he knows it.

Lawson walks around to the bottom of the bed, and I lose sight of him given my position, but when I feel the bed dip between my legs, I hold my breath in anticipation. As he slides the head of his cock through my aching, wet slit, I let out a desperate mewl as I push against him.

He grabs hold of my hips, gripping so tight that it will no doubt leave bruises, but given what he's just put my body through, that's the least of my problems. I then feel his fingers sliding through my slit too, only this time, instead of pressing against my pussy, he circles them around my puckered asshole.

I hold my breath, my muscles tensing as I keep completely still while he gently presses his fingers against my forbidden hole, but I try to shake my head. "No. Not there," I tell him, my voice barely above a whisper.

I know I probably don't have a say in what Lawson does, and when I gave myself to him as his Prize, I gave him every part of me—all three holes—but I guess a small part of me hoped I'd be able to keep that one thing intact.

I hear the crack of skin on skin at the same time I feel the pain of him slapping my arse once more, his hard spank adding to the already sore flesh as I cry out in pain.

Lawson leans over my body until his lips are right beside mine. "I won't fuck your arse tonight, but only because this is a punishment, and when I finally claim your arse, I want you to fucking love it."

I breathe a sigh of relief, and decide to ignore the way my pussy flutters at his dirty promise. If he's going to fuck me there, I want to enjoy it, no

matter how wrong it seems.

I've barely processed Lawson's words when he slams the full length of his hard dick into my dripping pussy, forcing me into the mattress as I cry out from the sudden intrusion. But he doesn't give me any time to adjust before he's thrusting into me hard and fast.

He slides all the way back until just the tip remains, before slamming in until he's balls deep, hitting that sweet spot that makes me see stars. I yelp from the force of the thrusts, but my noises quickly turn to moans and whimpers as I once again lose my body to the pleasure only Lawson can give me.

My head is spinning from the overwhelming sensations, and my body doesn't know if it's experiencing pleasure or pain. All I can do is lie there and let Lawson use my body in any way he sees fit, lost to the feelings I have no control over.

His hold on my hips is brutal, as are his sharp thrusts, and my arse stings from where he's slamming against my tender flesh. Lawson's deep grunts and moans are like music to my ears, telling me he's enjoying this too...that my body is giving him pleasure.

It doesn't take long before my muscles tense as my core heats, edging towards the orgasm Lawson has continuously denied me. I try not to focus on it, so he won't break me as much when he doesn't give it to me again. Though when Lawson reaches between our bodies and presses his finger against my sensitive clit, that thought is long gone.

I cry out as I rock my arse back against him, meeting each of his thrusts as my muscles coil tightly. Now I no longer have the gag in my mouth, I can tell Lawson exactly what I need.

"Oh, fuck. Please... Please, Law. I-I'm... I'm going... Can I... Law, can I come?" I yell as I slam back against him, his fingers strumming over my clit in an absolutely maddening way that makes my head spin.

"Fuck. Come for me," Lawson grunts as he slams into me hard and deep, holding me there as my orgasm hits.

I scream loudly as I finally get to experience the orgasm that's been building repeatedly for the last...God knows how long. My body trembles and shakes as lava rushes through my veins, setting my body on fire in the best way.

As my pussy clamps down around Lawson's cock, that's all he needs to push him over the edge too, and he lets out a deep roar as he spills his load

deep inside me. His grip on me remains tight, and he holds me as we both allow our orgasms to overtake us, riding the waves of pleasure.

My head spins and black spots fill my vision as my orgasm fades, and I pull in some much-needed deep breaths. Every nerve ending feels as if it's alive, crackling just beneath the surface, goosebumps erupting over my flesh as my orgasm trails off.

Lawson collapses on top of me with a grunt, before quickly pushing off so as not to crush me under his weight. As he moves, his now soft dick slides out of my aching pussy, and I whimper from the loss of him filling me. Despite all of my muscles screaming at me, I don't move from the position I'm in, waiting for Lawson to give me instructions.

My eyes flutter closed, only opening again when I feel him removing the manacles from around my wrists. He gently rubs the sore area circling them, and I let out a hiss at how much that stings, even though the warmth from his touch helps a little.

I must have closed my eyes again, as I'm startled when Lawson grabs hold of me and flips me over onto my back once more. He moves us both up the bed, and I ignore the feeling of his cum leaking out of my sore pussy, or the way my muscles scream at me from the movement.

He then pulls me against his side, wrapping his arm around me as I lay my head on his chest, allowing his warmth to seep into me. I'm utterly exhausted, and I don't think there's a single part of me that doesn't hurt, but as Lawson draws me closer to him, wrapping us both in the duvet, I'm filled with a sense of peace I never expected to feel.

"I'm sorry," I say as tears trail down my face, the emotions of everything that has happened hitting me. I endangered myself with Nigel, and Lawson's rules could have prevented that if I had only listened.

Lawson presses a soft kiss to my forehead as he reaches over and wipes away my tears. It's in these moments, when he's being sweet and gentle like this, that I'm most confused. I could almost allow myself to believe that this thing between us is more than it actually is.

When he's caring for me, and being tender with me, it's almost as though he likes me, and that thought hurts me more than any punishment ever could. I can't allow myself to develop feelings for him; there's no happy ending in the cards for us. I need to close off my heart now, or I risk it breaking into a million pieces that I'll never be able to put back together.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

Lawson

My eyes flutter open as the sound of a deep moan fills the air around me, waking me from a very good dream. One that involved me using a very naked Harper in any way I wanted.

I'm startled awake by a groan that vibrates through the air, only to discover the sound came from me. My whole body is burning with desire as a warm, wet sensation envelops my hard length.

I lift my head just enough to see Harper's strawberry-blond curls covering my body as she unashamedly bobs up and down on my cock, swallowing me down more each time.

I let out a strangled cry as the tip hits the back of her throat and she swallows, creating the most perfect suction. I fist the sheets beside me to stop myself from reaching out and grabbing her.

She must see my movement, as next time she pulls back until just the tip is resting against her lips, she lifts her head and looks up at me through hooded lashes. Even though her blushing cheeks suggest she's embarrassed for acting without permission, the mischievous glint in her eyes says she has no regrets.

As her pretty blue eyes sparkle while they remain fixed on me, she seductively sticks out her tongue, making sure I'm watching as she curls it around the tip, licking across my sensitive slit.

I let out a low groan, and she chuckles against my hard shaft, the vibrations only adding to the overwhelming amount of pleasure she's giving me with her dirty mouth.

She then opens wide and sucks me down into her throat once more, bobbing up and down as she takes more of me with each attempt. When she

finally has all of my length in her throat, her nose touching my manscaped area, she looks up at me once more as she swallows around my hard dick, driving me to buck my hips against her.

It takes every bit of effort I can muster not to blow my load right then and there. Her throat creating a vacuum around my shaft, as her tongue slides over my sensitive head, is all too much, but then, having my shy, gorgeous girl look at me in such a sensual way makes me almost lose control.

“Fuck, Harper. You are getting so fucking good at this. Do you like having my cock deep in your throat?” A low groan rumbles in my chest as her tight, moist mouth begins to slide off my length. The relentless pressure is exquisite, a slow, deliberate torture that makes every nerve ending sing.

When she gave me her first blow job, after the one in the Black Chapel, she was so timid and shy, unsure of every move she made. I had to guide her, to show her how I like it, but fuck did my girl take instructions well, and now she’s a pro.

She lifts off my cock, her lips looking plump and shiny from the abuse they’ve taken. There’s spit trailing down her chin onto her bare chest, making her look like my perfect whore. She gives me that wicked smile once more as she nods, before quickly taking me back into her mouth.

My eyes flutter closed, lost in the intense sensations, as her tiny, warm hand grips the base of my shaft, while her wet mouth and tongue glide over my length.

When she speeds up, bobbing up and down on my cock as she twists her wrist around the base, dragging moans from my throat that I can’t hold back, even if I want to, I lose the last of my control. I fist my hand in her hair, pulling the red curly strands into my palm, so none of it is blocking my incredibly sexy view.

As I tighten my hold on her hair, Harper lets out a soft whimper with my dick still in her mouth, which seems to vibrate against my shaft, causing my balls to tingle with excitement. I then use my hold on her head to control her movement, giving me the illusion that I’m in control, when we both know her and her fucking mouth have all the power.

Once she pulls all the way back, her lips wrapped around the tip as she once again swirls her tongue around my slit, I press down on her head, making it clear I want her to swallow me again. When she thinks she’s

reached her limit, I apply pressure to the back of her head with my fist, forcing her down just a bit more.

When my gorgeous girl has all of me in her throat, I keep the pressure on the back of her head, holding her in position, even though she tries to push against me. With my cock filling her throat, restricting her breathing, she quickly starts to panic, her wide eyes staring up at me as she hits my thigh with her hand.

As her eyes fill with tears, her cheeks becoming even redder, I pull back on her hair, lifting her off my cock. Harper drags in several frantic gasps of air, as a few stray tears trail down her cheeks, alongside the saliva that's dripping over her chin.

Harper glares at me, but says nothing. I drag her back towards my dick, and this time she seems almost hesitant. I place my free hand on her cheek and swipe away the rogue tears that have fallen.

"I know you think you couldn't breathe, but I promise, you could. You couldn't breathe through your mouth, but nothing was obstructing your nose. You could have pulled in all the air you needed by breathing through your nose, but you got lost in your own head, and panic set in."

She pauses for a moment, her expression softening as she tilts her head to the side, no doubt going over what just happened to see if what I'm saying is true. When she lets out a soft huff, followed by a sigh, I can't help but smirk now that she knows I'm not lying.

"I did panic," she admits through gritted teeth.

"Well, now you can try again, but this time, breathe through your nose."

As the words leave my lips, I pull her back down onto my dick, and Harper sticks her tongue out, guiding me deeper into the velvet heat of her throat. Once I'm buried as deep as I can go, she grabs hold of my thighs, her tear-filled eyes staring up at me.

I watch in amazement as the delicate pulse of her throat moves with each swallow, a maddening suction coiling around my shaft. Her eyes, once wide with panic, now glint with a fierce light as her nostrils flare, drawing in the air she needs with a sharp, audible gasp.

When I pull back on her hair, she slides all the way off my cock, leaving a string of saliva between her lips and the tip, which she quickly swipes away with her tongue. She gasps for air, her lungs no doubt burning, but I don't give her any more than a couple of seconds before I push her back down again.

I only manage to repeat this a couple more times before a tingling sensation spreads through my balls, and I realise I can't hold back my release any longer. So, I focus on thrusting into her mouth, feeling her hand twisting around the base as I edge closer to my release.

She looks up at me through hooded eyes when I pull back on her hair, making sure she keeps my cock in her mouth as I tell her, "I'm going to come, and you're going to swallow every last drop."

Harper gives me a small nod before continuing to work my dick, pushing me closer and closer to my release. It doesn't take long, and when it hits me, I'm not able to hold back. A guttural grunt escapes me as my fingers dig into her hair, a sharp sting no doubt blooming against her scalp as I secure her in place.

Spurts of cum fill her throat, and I pull back just enough for some to land on her tongue instead, ensuring she tastes all of me. Like the fucking good girl she is, Harper swallows everything I give her, licking and sucking her way through my orgasm, pulling out every drop.

My body shudders as the last of my release hits, and I let out a groan when it finally subsides, every part of me sagging into the bed. I can't help but smile when Harper pulls off my spent cock, a coy smile on her face as she shyly lifts her fingers to her lips to wipe away the drops of my cum that are seeping out of the sides.

She takes me by surprise when she places the fingers in her mouth, devouring every taste of me she can get, and despite just having the most earth-shattering release, my dick twitches at the sight. I can't help but chuckle at this girl's ability to surprise me, and I reach over and pull her into my arms, placing a kiss against her forehead.

Harper settles into position next to me, her body moulded against mine as she wraps her arm over my body, her cheek on my chest. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her in even closer, and we both let out a contented sigh, as if we've been doing this forever.

Even though my eyes feel heavy, I don't allow sleep to pull me under, as I don't have time for that. A quick glance at the clock on the wall in front of me confirms we're already running late, but I wasn't going to stop Harper's blowjob for anything.

When I feel her relax against me, like she's about to fall asleep, I jolt her a little to keep her awake. "Sorry, sweetheart, but we don't have time to sleep. We need to get dressed; we're already running late."

“Where are we going?” she asks, her words cutting off at the end with a yawn.

“We need to see Bram. But first, we need to shower.”

She nods against my chest, yawning again. I don’t blame her. I’ve more than pushed her limits over the last few days. I gave her a couple of days to recover at the cottage after her punishment, but then we had to come back to reality.

I enjoyed having her in my space, watching her find comfort in my place of safety, far more than I should. It scared me how easily she fit into my life, how we seemed to orbit around each other, like we never knew a life before this.

Since arriving back at Crowhurst House the evening before last, I’ve not stopped claiming her. I woke her up several times overnight, so she’s probably had less than four hours sleep. Honestly, I’ve been using sex to distract her at night when she wakes from a nightmare. I know I’m going to have to find a better way to help her, but this is what I have right now.

We will have to talk about what happened with Nigel eventually, as she’s definitely feeling more than she’s letting on, but I’m hoping what I have planned will give her the closure she needs.

I lift her into my arms as I climb out of the bed, loving how small she feels against my muscular frame, and carry her into the bathroom. I sit her on the counter next to the sink as I reach into the shower cubicle, turning the knobs until I get the water to the perfect temperature.

I place both hands on Harper’s cheeks, lifting her head until her sleepy gaze meets mine. “I’m going to take a quick shower first. If we get in the shower together, it will make us even later.”

Her lips tilt into that sheepish smile that makes my cock twitch as she says, “Maybe that wouldn’t be too bad.”

I shake my head as I let out a low laugh. “Your pussy could probably do with the rest, but don’t worry, I’ll make up for it later,” I tell her, my voice deep and full of promise.

I climb into the shower, washing as quickly as I can, whilst trying to ignore the very naked girl who is watching my every move from the other side of the glass door. She’s biting her lower lip, while pressing her thighs together in a way that suggests she’s trying to alleviate some of the aching between her legs.

I keep telling myself that I don't have time to fuck her right now, no matter how much I really fucking want to. Besides, after the way I roughly fucked her last night, I'm surprised her cunt isn't sore and swollen beyond use.

As soon as I'm finished, I climb out of the shower and wrap a towel around my body. Harper looks at me like I'm the most delicious piece of chocolate cake she's ever seen, and she can't wait to devour me.

Her eyes track a water droplet that runs down my chest, over my abs, before disappearing into the V that is hidden beneath the towel. Her cheeks flush when she sees me watching her openly ogle me, but she doesn't look away like I expect. Instead, her eyes darken as she meets my gaze, making it clear she's not ashamed of being caught.

I shake my head to clear all the dirty thoughts that are filling my mind, whilst trying to stop my dick from hardening any further. "You need to shower on your own. When you're finished, go straight to Bram's room. I'll let him know you're coming, and he'll leave the door open for you. I need to stop by and see Xander first, so I'll meet you there."

I fail to mention that I'm sending her there for more than one reason, hoping to expose her to a whole new world of desire.

She nods, her teeth still gnawing on her bottom lip, before she slowly spreads her legs, keeping her gaze locked on mine. "Are you sure you don't want to help me in the shower?" she asks, trying to sound sweet and innocent, while flashing her bare pussy at me.

I take a purposeful step back, even though every part of me wants to move closer to her. "You're going to be the fucking death of me," I growl as I turn around, rushing to the bathroom door. Her laughter tinkles behind me as I stomp out of the room, cursing myself for creating such a fucking gorgeous sex monster.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

Harper



Walking through Crowhurst House on my own is incredibly strange, but luckily, Bram's room isn't too far away from Lawson's, and there's not many people around. The few I pass do nothing more than give me a polite head nod, whilst making sure not to stare for too long. It's almost like they're afraid...which knowing Lawson, they probably are.

I can't help but wish we were back at Lawson's quaint little cottage in the woods. It wasn't at all what I expected when he told me he owned it, as it was more rustic and homey than grand and opulent. It felt more like home than any place I'd ever been before, and the sense of safety it—and Lawson—offered me, after what happened, was exactly what I needed.

Back to reality, I think to myself as I reluctantly keep walking, wondering when Lawson will take me back to the cottage.

As I make my way down the long corridor toward Bram's room, which is at the very end, I spot that the door is not fully closed. Lawson said Bram would leave it open for me, since he knew I was coming.

Still, I'm not just going to walk in. But before I can knock, strange noises coming from inside stop me in my tracks.

It's very clearly a woman moaning, the sound of sex unmistakable, and I freeze, unsure what to do next. *Why the hell would Bram leave the door open when he's obviously...in the middle of something?*

I don't know what possesses me, but I edge closer to the gap, opening it slightly to give me a better view into the room. The angle of the bed means I have a very clear view of Bram and a girl I recognise but don't know. I'm sure I've seen her somewhere before, but I know nothing about her, or even her name.

The blonde girl is lying on the bed, completely tied up and at Bram's mercy. Using rope, he bent her knees so he could bind her calves to her thighs, and he secured her ankles to the corners of the bed, spreading her legs wide apart.

Her arms seem to be secured behind her back, and the same rope is being used to bind her breasts, pushing them together and upwards in a way that almost looks painful. Then again, she also has what can only be described as silver clamps on each of her nipples, with a chain connecting them.

Although the blonde is moaning in pleasure, she's unable to make any other noises due to the red ball gag in her mouth. My jaw aches at the reminder of what it's like to wear a gag, and I can't help but wonder if the ball would be better than the ring. It looks more comfortable.

Although she has tears streaming down her cheeks, mixing with the drool spilling from the gag, her eyes seem almost hazy, as if she's so lost in the desire she can't focus on anything else.

The sheen of sweat plasters her blonde hair to her skin wherever it touches, while the rest fans out around her over the bed. It looks like Bram had hold of her hair at some point, which is why it's all over the place.

Bram lets out a deep grunt, and the noise is enough to snap me out of the trance I'm in, reminding me I shouldn't be watching what is clearly a very private moment. Yet, I can't look away.

Bram is standing between the girl's legs, not wearing any clothes either. His smooth skin has tattoos all over it, and the variety of designs makes it difficult to tell if there's any connection between them or if they are totally random.

The tattoos only add to his whole bad-boy look, along with the muscles that seem to be everywhere. His hard biceps and broad chest fit with what Lawson told me about Bram being a fighter, and the veins running along his arms are their own kind of porn.

He's more lean than bulky, but it's still very clear he has muscles in all the right places, including the six-pack that drops into the perfectly sculpted V that shapes over his hips. And each time he thrusts his hips, his muscles ripple and tighten, making him look like a work of art.

I try not to look at where their bodies meet, but it's like when you're driving past a car crash...you know you shouldn't look, yet you can't seem

to stop. That's how I feel right now as my eyes drop to between the girl's wide-open legs.

My eyes widen in shock when Bram's cock fills her pussy, whilst his hand controls the large black dildo that's stretching her arse beyond what I assume would be comfortable. He seems to have found a rhythm between pushing into her pussy, then her arse, and I'm almost hypnotised as I watch the dildo and his cock work in tandem, drawing cries of pleasure from the blonde girl.

Bram's deep, husky voice startles me, but he's not talking to me. He's far too lost in the blonde girl he's buried balls deep inside. "That's it, dirty girl. Fuck, you're taking me so well. Do you enjoy having all your holes spread open, being used like a filthy fucking whore?"

The blonde whimpers louder through the gag, as if she wants to reply to him even though she can't. It looks like she's trying to rock her hips to meet his thrusts as best she can, but the way he's tied her up leaves her completely in his hands, and she just has to lie there and take whatever he gives her.

"Fuck, your sweet little cunt is so tight. But you were made for this. You were born to be nothing more than holes to be used, somewhere for men to sink their dicks into and fill with cum. That's why Daddy sold you, isn't it? I can feel how wet you are for me, dirty girl." Each of his words sound breathy as they're punctuated by him thrusting into her, but it's clear his dirty talk is having the desired effect on the blonde, as her cries of pleasure get more high-pitched and frantic.

I'm so lost in the moment, watching something I very much shouldn't be, that I let out a yelp when someone presses against my back. They quickly wrap a hand around my mouth to swallow the sound, and although that makes me panic more, it only takes me a fraction of a second to calm down when I recognise a very familiar scent—Lawson.

I turn my head to look over my shoulder, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment at being caught in such a predicament, but that quickly fades when I catch the fire in Lawson's silver gaze. His hand on my hip tightens as he pulls my back flush against his chest, his hard length straining through his jeans, pressing against my arse.

He removes his hand from my mouth, watching my throat as I gulp, before he wraps his fingers around the front of my neck, holding me in position.

“I-I... I’m sorry, I...” I try to stutter out an apology, but I can’t find the right words.

How the hell do I say I’m sorry for spying on his best friend while he’s fucking some girl? How do I explain that I should have walked away, but I didn’t, and I have no bloody idea why?

I don’t know what I was expecting Lawson to say, but I definitely didn’t think he’d remain silent, or that he’d turn my head away from him, guiding me back to watching the show in front of me.

A warm breath tickles my skin as his lips press kisses against my neck, stopping just below my ear, as the sensation sends a flutter of butterflies soaring through my stomach.

His voice is barely above a whisper as he says, “Do you like what you see, sweetheart?”

I open my mouth to respond, before quickly closing it again, unsure if this is a trick or not. *Does he want me to be honest? Or should I tell him what he probably wants to hear?*

Then I remember Lawson is big on me being honest, on using my words to express myself, and so despite it being very much out of my comfort zone, I pull in a ragged breath and answer honestly. “Yes. I didn’t think I would, but...”

I leave it hanging, knowing Lawson can fill in the blanks. But I should have known he wouldn’t leave it at that. His voice takes on a rough edge as he asks, “What do you like about it?”

My heart thrums a frantic rhythm against my ribs, and I fear he might feel the erratic fluttering through my skin, where his lips rest against the pulse point on my neck. My chest heaves in shallow, rapid gasps, the air catching in my throat. A dizzying sensation washes over me, but it’s an almost pleasant disorientation.

My core tightens with anticipation, and I’m sure my knickers are already ruined from how wet I am.

“She looks like she enjoys being at his mercy,” I whisper, my voice shaking with the admission.

His grip on my throat tightens as he asks, “Would you like to be at my mercy?”

Even though he’s holding my head back against his shoulder, I nod into his hand. “Yes.” The word sounds more like a breath, a wish, and it sits heavily between us.

I'm no longer denying that I want Lawson. He's awakened my body to the pleasure I didn't even know existed, but now that I do, I can't get enough. But it's not just the sex...it's him. There's something about Lawson. Even when he's being an overbearing asshole, I'm still drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

He promised to corrupt me, to ruin me for all other men, and that's already happened. When we have to walk away at the end of this year, I don't know if I'll ever be able to move on, to forget the way he makes me feel.

In just a few short weeks, he's made me feel more like myself than I ever have before, and I'm worried that without Lawson by my side, I'll go back to being invisible, bowing to everyone else's demands, while mine continue to go unmet.

Lawson's lips push those thoughts aside as he sucks on my neck, sending shivers down my spine as I arch into him, feeling his hard cock rubbing against me.

"I want to know all of your fantasies. All the sexual desires you've ignored, or pretended don't exist...I want them all. I want to be the person who brings those dreams to life."

Well, fuck, if my knickers weren't ruined before, they sure are now.

Lawson drags his hand from my neck, trailing his fingers over my collarbone before stopping on the neckline of the baggy T-shirt I'm wearing. He slides his hand beneath the fabric, letting out a low groan when he finds I'm not wearing a bra, his fingers going straight to my nipple.

"Tell me, sweetheart. I need to know." He rocks his dick against my arse to emphasise his point.

Even though my first instinct is to be embarrassed, to shut him down and tell him a proper Order Lady like me doesn't have such fantasies, we both know that's not true. Besides, part of me wants to trust him with this information, just to see what he does with it.

Though his touch on my nipples is sending my head spinning, not to mention the noises coming from inside Bram's room, I try to block it all out and focus on keeping my voice sounding confident.

"I like the idea of you taking what you want from me, whenever you want it, or when I least expect it. Almost like you have to force me," I admit, and Lawson's deep groan suggests he approves.

He scrapes his teeth over my neck as he twists my nipples, and I bite my lip to hold back the noises I don't want Bram to hear. "What if there are people around? Would you mind if they watch?"

I pause, trying to block out the sensation of his tongue on my nipple as I think over my answer. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I don't think I'd like people seeing me in such a vulnerable way, but I know what it's like to get lost in you, so I might not even care."

I can feel him smile against my neck at my confession, his cock growing even bigger as he rocks into me. "What about if you're asleep or unconscious? Can I fuck you even if you don't know about it, or until you wake up?"

"Why would I be unconscious?" I ask, though I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

He shrugs the shoulder my head is resting against as he casually says, "I might have drugged you."

I let out a short, humourless laugh, knowing he's not kidding. "I didn't like when...Nigel drugged me, but...I trust you not to do more than I'm comfortable with."

Lawson lets go of my nipple and grabs my chin, turning me until I'm looking up at him, my gaze fixed with his. "I would never drug you like he did. I'd give you just enough to make sure you'd wake up at just the right time. I'd want you to know what I'm doing to you, to feel the pleasure I'm giving you. What he did...I'd never do it like that."

My genuine smile shows him the sincerity of my words. "I know. That's why I trust you to do it."

If someone had said a few weeks ago that I'd trust Lawson Radley, not only with my body, but with my deepest secrets too, I'd have laughed until I fell over...yet, here we are. And I do trust him, more than I ever have any other person.

He beams back at me, but it quickly turns into that wicked smirk of his as he asks, "What if I chase you? You'd have to run from me, knowing that when I catch you, wherever that may be, you're mine in whatever way I want."

My breath hitches as my heart stutters, excitement racing through my body as my core heats to the point it's almost on fire. Nodding rapidly, I tell him, "I'd like that." I pause for a moment before adding, "I just don't think I'd like it if you had someone else fuck me, even if you were there. I mean,

I know as your Prize, you're allowed to share me with whoever you want, and I have to accept that. I'm just telling you, I don't think I'd like it."

He slips his hand down around my throat once more, his grip becoming bruisingly tight as his eyes flicker with fire, and Lawson suddenly looks more than furious. "You are mine. I do not share," he growls possessively, and his deep rumbling tone vibrates through my body.

The possessive, claiming edge to his voice makes my stomach flip, and once again, my eyes drop to his lips. I turn slightly in his hold, not taking my gaze off his mouth, and all I can think about is how much I desperately want to kiss him.

Lawson's gaze appears to be fixed on my lips too, and I wonder if he's feeling the same. Our mouths are barely an inch apart, and it wouldn't take much for one of us to lean in and close the gap. My heart races as I try to pluck up the courage to be the one to do it.

Just as we both lean in a fraction closer, our lips almost touching, a scream from inside the bedroom grabs our attention, shattering the bubble we find ourselves in. I turn toward the noise, seeing the blonde is in the middle of what can only be described as an earth-shattering orgasm, and it's not long until Bram is grunting out his own release.

I can't take my eyes off them both as they shudder through their orgasms, and Lawson tenses beside me. I look up at him, and the guy who was close to kissing me a moment ago is long gone. Lawson's face has twisted into a blank mask, almost as if he's indifferent to the situation, but his hard cock pressing into my arse, and the death grip he has on my hip, suggest otherwise.

Bram takes a step back from the blonde, pulling his softening cock from her red, sore pussy, and I can't look away as cum trickles out of her hole, over the dildo that's still spreading her arse wide open.

We're all startled when Lawson slams the bedroom door open loudly, striding into the room like he owns the place. He doesn't seem to care that Bram is standing there naked, his wet dick hanging out, while the blonde remains tied on the bed, cum seeping from her hole, the dildo still in place.

"Time to go," he snaps at Bram, who looks almost as stunned as I am at Lawson's actions.

Bram's gaze slides from his friend over to where I'm standing in the doorway, and a devilish smirk spreads across his face, as if he's made some sort of connection that the rest of us have missed.

“Harper, this is Lianne, my Prize,” he tells me, before turning his attention back to Lawson, who is glaring at his friend. “Let me just get her sorted, and then we can leave.”

Bram takes a step towards the bed when Lawson loudly clears his throat, drawing Bram’s attention back to him. Once Bram is looking at him, Lawson throws a pair of sweatpants at his friend, growling, “Put some damn clothes on.”

Both men look over at me, and I quickly glance down at the floor, feeling the weight of their gazes on me. Bram just chuckles as he pulls the sweats on, like he’s used to this sort of behaviour from Lawson, before moving over to the bed.

Despite knowing I should look elsewhere, my gaze keeps returning to the blonde on the bed. Bram begins by untying her arms, and I watch attentively as he massages them, no doubt trying to ease the soreness that will have built in her muscles from having them secured behind her back for who knows how long.

But instead of keeping her hands free, he pulls them towards the corners of the headboard, securing one wrist to each corner. Lianne whimpers into the gag when it’s clear he’s not letting her go, he’s just tying her in a new position.

Although he moves her body so she’s more central on the bed, he doesn’t free her legs. He keeps her knees bent; her calves secured to her thighs. Rope pulls her legs wide and connects her to all four corners of the bed like a starfish, but unlike how I was bound, there’s a bit of looseness to them. Though it’s not enough for her to really move, just enough to not be painful, I think.

Tears continue to stream down Lianne’s face, and she whimpers into the gag, but Bram doesn’t pay her any attention. Instead, he takes hold of the dildo in her arse, pressing it in just a little deeper, until Lianne cries out again.

“I’m going to leave this dildo in your arse, spreading you wide for me, and my cum is going to leak from your dirty cunt, covering it,” he tells Lianne, who shivers from his words.

Bram leans over her, gently tugging on the clamps that are still on Lianne’s nipples until she moans, before pressing a soft kiss to her sweaty forehead. He slowly removes each clip, making sure to sweep his fingers

over her peaked buds as she cries out, her back arched as much as she's able to.

Then he gives her a wicked grin as he says, "I'll be back later."

Her eyes widen with panic when she pulls on the ropes, but she's too well secured to move much, so she whimpers and pleads into the gag. Bram simply turns away from her, as if she's not even there, and moves over to the wardrobe near where I'm standing.

I know I shouldn't say anything, but the words are out before I can stop them. "Are you really going to leave her here like this?"

That fucking smirk of his that reminds me so much of Lawson spreads across his face as he walks over and picks his phone up off the bedside table. He presses a few buttons, and Lianne lets out a muffled scream. My eyes drift to the bed, where she's rocking her hips as much as she can, her hands tightly gripping the fabric of the sheets.

"The toy in her arse is a vibe. After a while, her orgasms will overwhelm her so much that she won't even know where she is. Besides, her daddy sold her to mine, insisting she'd be the perfect whore for me, so I'm merely testing if they were right," Bram tells me, a shiver of excitement rushing through me, even though my mouth falls open in shock. So many questions run through my head, about his dad and Lianne's.

Before I get a chance to respond, Lawson grabs hold of my arm, his face stern as he glares at his friend before pulling me from the room. He pushes me out of the door before turning to Bram, who has an almost maniacal smile on his face now. "Get dressed. We'll meet you at the car."

Lawson doesn't wait for a response; he storms off down the hall, pulling me along behind him in a daze. He doesn't stop until we reach Bram's car, when Lawson turns me around, slamming my back against it as he cages me in with his large, imposing body.

I open my mouth to snap at him, but I'm silenced when he slides his hand beneath the waistband of my black leggings, his fingers trailing through my drenched slit.

"Did you like what you just saw, sweetheart? Did it get you this wet?" he growls, his lips right beside mine.

I nod, whimpering as I rock against his fingers, my body tingling every time his tips brush against my aching clit. "Please," I beg, fluttering my lashes at him.

He rubs his fingers against my sensitive bud, ripping a cry of pleasure from my throat, before he quickly pulls his hand out of my leggings. He shakes his head at me as he sucks his fingers into his mouth, cleaning my juices from them.

“You’ll have to be patient, sweetheart. When I make you come, I want to know I’m the only person you’re thinking about. Can you be a good girl for me and wait?”

I want to scream at him and tell him he’s always the only person I think about, but instead, I nod. His answering smile makes my heart stutter, and I’m once again drawn to his bloody lips.

Why the fuck won’t he kiss me?

Lawson opens the car door, completely oblivious to my desperate thoughts, and as I slide into the car, I have to rub my thighs together to try to ease the growing ache that’s throbbing between my legs. But as Lawson gets settled into the backseat next to me, the glint in his eyes tells me he saw exactly what I was doing, that knowing smirk giving so much away.

Flush spreads across my cheeks, and he lets out a little chuckle, which makes me narrow my gaze at him. Before either of us can say anything, Bram throws open the driver’s side door and gets in behind the wheel. He looks at us both in the rearview mirror, that maniacal smile still on his face.

He slams the steering wheel a couple of times as he practically bounces in his seat in excitement. “This is going to be so much fun,” he laughs as he starts the car.

I look over at Lawson, who is wearing a wicked grin of his own, and it quickly occurs to me that I have no idea where we’re going. But given the crazed looks on both men’s faces, I’m worried this is more for them than me.

Lawson’s warm hand envelops mine, and as he intertwines our fingers, the gentle pressure sends a jolt through me. A silent battle rages as I try to suppress the grin threatening to break free, as a familiar flutter of butterflies erupt in my stomach, causing their usual delightful chaos. “Don’t worry, I promise you’ll enjoy this.”

Shit, why do I believe him?

I have no idea what these two crazy guys have planned, but I trust them both enough to be certain they wouldn’t take me anywhere I couldn’t handle. Besides, I’m quickly learning that life with Lawson is full of surprises; I’m just not sure they’re all good.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

Harper



We arrive at the Black Chapel, on the far edge of campus, and one glance at the old gothic building sends a shiver running down my spine as I remember the last time I was here for the Gifting Ceremony.

Once we've parked the car, a quick glance around confirms we're not the only ones here. In fact, the car park is just as full as it was the night of the Gifting. There are men all around us wearing their Obsidian robes and masks, making their way inside.

Bram turns to face us as he hands Lawson a bag from the front passenger seat, looking more serious than I've ever seen him, which sets my nerves on edge. Bram is usually a carefree, easy-going guy, which is why this stern, all-business expression is so jarring.

Bram gives me a tight smile as he says, "This is an important Order meeting. It's not just attended by Crows. All the other House Pledges will be present, alongside full Obsidian Order members and the Council, which is why our masks and robes are mandatory."

My gaze narrows on Bram as I wonder why he's telling me this, and I turn to Lawson, hoping he can unravel my confusion. Lawson is pulling on his deep black robe, looking just as serious as Bram.

When he sees me staring at him, Lawson lets out a small sigh. "Normally, these meetings are for members only, but I think this is one you need to see, and Bram agrees. So we're going to be sneaking you in."

My eyes stretch wide, comically so, as a rapid, jerky shake of my head sends a faint ringing through my ears and a fluttery, disbelieving sensation through my stomach. "No. I-I can't. If I'm caught—"

Lawson cuts me off before I can finish. “You won’t get caught. I’ll make sure of it, but you have to trust me.”

Even though my instincts scream that I don’t want to do this, the truth is, I trust Lawson, so if he thinks this is something I need to see, I have to believe it is.

I give him a small nod, though I instantly regret it when he pulls out a pair of metal handcuffs from inside the bag. My heart races as he holds them toward me.

“Hold out your hands,” he states calmly, not a hint of emotion in his words—he’s all business, and that has me even more anxious.

Still, I do as I’m told, holding my arms out after clasping my palms together, the same way he’s shown me in the past. I hold my breath as Lawson’s warm fingers glide over my hands, making sure they’re where he wants them.

When the cool metal wraps tightly around my wrists, I let out a sharp exhale before gently tugging on them, testing to see how tight he’s made them. There’s a bit of room, meaning I won’t lose feeling in my hands, but it’s not enough for me to move them significantly.

I look up at Lawson, only to find him holding a roll of duct tape, and my heart stutters as a moment of panic hits me. “What’s that for?” I ask, my voice shaking.

He reaches out with his free hand and presses his palm to my cheek. I hate the way I lean into his touch, desperate to feel his warmth. His thumb glides across my lips, a feather-light touch that sends a shiver through me, making me feel beautifully delicate.

“I need to make sure you don’t make a sound,” he explains, before dropping his hand from my face so he can pull off a strand of tape.

I gasp, a ragged, desperate sound, my chest heaving as I steal a few shallow breaths, knowing exactly what he’s about to do. Bram tells me to relax, but that’s easier said than done when Lawson is moving towards me with a strand of tape he’s about to place over my mouth.

I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to see him do it, as a tremor of dread runs through me. The thick, sticky material spreads across my lips, sealing them together.

The sound of the tape ripping again echoes around me, before he places another layer over my lips. He does this a couple more times, only stopping when I have five layers of tape covering my mouth.

He brushes his fingers over the tape before stroking his thumb over my cheek once more. With my eyes open, I concentrate on inhaling through my nose, determined not to succumb to panic.

I try wiggling my jaw, as well as pushing out my lips, testing the strength of the tape, but it's wasted energy, as the tape doesn't move. With a huff, I let it go, as the constant pulling against my skin causes it to sting.

Lawson then pulls a black robe that matches his from the bag and reaches over, making it clear he's going to help pull the robe over my head. I can't use my arms, so Lawson has to do most of the work, though I lift my arse off the seat so he's able to get it to fall to my feet, covering me completely.

The sleeves of the robe hang limply by my side, as I can't thread my arms through them given they're secured in front of me. I want to ask Lawson if people will notice, but I can't say a word...I just have to go with the flow.

Lawson then pulls a mask out of his bag, and it matches the design all of the Crow Pledges wear. He leans closer with it in his hand, and my heart pounds loudly in my chest, as a sudden claustrophobic feeling suffocates me.

With the tape already restricting my mouth, the added mask over my face intensifies my feeling of being trapped, making it difficult to breathe. My nostrils flare as I rapidly try to pull in air through my nose, but the speed at which I'm breathing means I'm not filling my lungs enough, causing my head to spin even more.

Lawson places his hand on my cheek once more, before pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. "Slow your breathing, sweetheart."

He pulls me forward and rests my head on his chest, holding it in place until I can both feel and hear the beating of his heart beneath my cheek. I follow the movement of his chest rising and falling with each breath he takes, focusing on that as I try to mirror his actions.

Eventually, my breathing slows down to match his, and once I'm pulling in enough oxygen, the black spots in my vision and the lightheadedness quickly fade.

"Good girl." His praise makes my stomach flutter, and he presses his palm against my other cheek, letting me draw strength from his touch. "I'm going to put the mask on now," he tells me, when he's sure I've calmed down enough.

I give him a firm nod, letting him know I'm ready, whilst keeping my breathing slow and steady as he slides the mask into position, covering all of my face.

"Can you see okay?" he asks once he's finished straightening it.

He's lined up the eyeholes perfectly, so I nod to tell him I can. He then reaches behind my head and pulls up the hood, making sure the robe hides all of my long, strawberry-blonde hair. I'm suddenly grateful I pulled it into a long French plait before leaving, since I didn't have time to deal with it after my shower.

He then pulls on his own robe, keeping the mask in his hand as he turns to me once more. "No matter what you see or hear, you must not do anything that will draw attention to yourself. Do you understand?"

I give him another nod, since I'm not able to answer any other way. He holds his mask up in front of me, before grabbing Bram's and holding them side-by-side, so I can see the subtle difference. All of the Pledge masks are bronze, but Lawson's has silver circles around the eyes, and a few other silver ornate markings alongside the black lines that are on Bram's.

"Look at the design on my mask. Memorise it. Bram's looks the same as all the other Crow Pledges, but he won't leave your side. If we do get separated, for whatever reason, do not approach anyone. Just concentrate on locating my mask. Is that clear?"

I give him another nod, fear sliding through my veins as I wonder what the hell I'm about to get myself into. I don't want to be separated from either of them.

"Should you disobey me, the consequences will be severe," he warns.

Bram reaches over and takes his mask back, before adding, "Also, if anyone finds out that we brought you here, our punishment will be brutal, and I'm really not in the mood to be tortured, so please don't let us down."

I quickly shake my head, hoping he can see how much I mean it when I say I won't put them in any danger. I wish I could say the words, so he'd know he can trust me, but his subtle smile suggests he already knows.

He then turns to Lawson, his gaze flicking between us as he asks, "Why is she handcuffed again?"

I turn to face Lawson, keen to hear his response, as I can understand the duct tape, but not why my arms are tied together. He simply shrugs his shoulders as he unapologetically replies, "Because I like having control over her like this. Besides, I can't risk anyone seeing her girly hands."

Bram lets out a chuckle as he rolls his eyes at Lawson, while I glare at him through the stupid eye holes on the mask. If he sees my anger, he doesn't respond.

"Let's get this show on the road," Bram says, suddenly sounding very excited as he slips his mask into position before climbing out of the car.

Lawson gets out too, before reaching over to help me, given I don't have the use of my hands. Once I've found my feet, and Lawson does one final check to make sure the robe and mask are in place, he pulls his own mask on and turns to face the imposing building.

Lawson places his hand on my back, using it to guide me forward, while Bram stays tight to my other side. The two of them caging me in as we walk towards the entrance.

My breath hitches and my heart speeds up when we get inside, the Grand Hall full of men in robes, probably just as many as the night of the Gifting Ceremony. And despite hoping we're going to sit at the back of the room, out of the way, I'm not at all surprised when the guys lead me straight to the front row.

Bram slides into the row first, taking the seat next to another Order member, while Lawson pushes me in next, before taking the aisle seat and caging me in.

I've barely had time to get my breathing under control when a loud bang startles me, and I glance up as Xander, the Head of Crowhurst House, strides through the door he just slammed open, his robes flowing behind him, his mask noticeably absent.

He doesn't stop until he's standing on the small stage-like platform at the front of the room, the stained glass window behind splashing him with an array of colours as the sun sets outside. He clears his throat so that when he speaks, he's able to project all the way to the back of the room.

"Thank you all for coming. As per Obsidian Order policy, our church is now in session. We will present the evidence, and then we will pass judgement."

As soon as he finishes speaking, the door he just entered through opens once more, and we all turn to watch as two men in robes drag into the room a bloody, beaten man, his feet trailing behind him. They pull him up onto the stage, his head hanging low as blood drips from his face.

The man is only wearing a pair of black boxers, showing that his exposed skin is littered with cuts, bruises, and open wounds. There's a

mixture of dry blood coating his flesh, and fresh blood oozing from him.

He doesn't put up a fight as the two men place him on a chair that a third man has brought onto the stage, his body resembling that of a rag doll as they roughly manipulate him into position, tying him down.

It's only when one man takes a fistful of his hair and drags his head back, so he can wrap a leather belt around his neck, do I recognise who it is, a small gasp leaving me when recognition hits.

Nigel—the Pledge from the bar that drugged me.

I tremble, the chilling memories of that night flashing through my head, as a cold dread washes over me again. Bram digs his nails into my thigh. It's a sharp, grounding pain that makes it clear I'm making more noise than I should be, as my ragged breaths and stifled whimpers betray the panic that has seized me.

I focus on inhaling, despite the burning in my lungs, desperate to stop my body from trembling. Though I have to work even harder when Lawson stands from his seat beside me and walks over to where Xander is calling him forward.

Lawson stands on the stage between Xander and Nigel, and I let out a small gasp when he pulls his mask off, letting everyone in the room see his cold, hard face. He doesn't need to clear his throat the way Xander did, as his voice is sharp and firm as he projects it over the entire room, confidence oozing from every pore.

I have to admit, it's a little sexy—not sure what that says about me.

"This is Nigel; he's a first-year Crow Pledge, and he's charged with treason."

There's an echo of gasps that seem to spread around the room, making it clear to me this isn't something the Order faces regularly. Then again, growing up with my father in the Order taught me enough that I could have guessed not many people choose to betray them, given that the punishment is your life.

Lawson then turns to Nigel, who looks like he's only able to face the crowd because the leather belt tying his head to the high-back chair is holding it up for him. I doubt he'd be able to hold his own head up, given the way his vacant eyes seem to flutter open and closed on their own.

"How do you plead?" Lawson asks, but Nigel remains silent, looking as if he's not even aware he's being spoken to.

The man in the silver mask standing beside him slaps his cheeks twice until the fog seems to clear from his gaze. I can tell he's back in the room because terror is written on his face.

Lawson repeats his question again, but this time, Nigel is quick to shout out his answer. "Not guilty. This is all a big misunderstanding."

Lawson's lips twist into a sadistic smile, as if he's pleased with Nigel's answer, even though he knows it's not the truth. He takes a step towards Nigel and punches him in the stomach. Nigel cries out as he gasps for air, wounded by the blow.

"I think you're lying," Lawson says casually, while Nigel shakes his head rapidly, blood droplets flying all around him.

"I-I'm not," Nigel whimpers, sounding decidedly less sure of himself.

Lawson pulls a knife out of his pocket, holding it up so the light from the stained-glass reflects against the shiny blade, as fear flashes on Nigel's face.

He's so well tied down, he's barely able to move at all, but as Lawson stalks towards him with the knife held out in front, Nigel does everything he can to get free, thrashing around desperately, despite being unable to move at all. His energy levels wane quickly, and as Lawson reaches him, Nigel sags in the chair, his body deflating like a balloon.

Lawson presses the blade into the top right of his chest, in line with his nipple, pushing slowly until a bead of blood peaks out around the knifepoint, as it slices through his skin like butter. He then drags the metal down over his skin in a diagonal motion, moving at an agonisingly slow pace, before stopping just above the waist of his boxers. Nigel's skin has been sliced open in a line across his body, blood oozing from the wound as he sobs loudly.

"I'll ask you again, how do you plead?" Lawson says, sounding even more bored, though the bloodlust in his eyes suggests he's enjoying this very much.

Nigel shakes his head, but doesn't say a word, choosing instead to keep sobbing loudly as blood, snot, and saliva cover his face. Lawson shakes his head dramatically, as if he disapproves of his lack of response, but his gaze flickers with excitement when he places the knife at the top of Nigel's chest, in the opposite corner to the mark he just made.

Lawson then proceeds to drag the blade over his skin, not stopping until a giant X sits across Nigel's body, blood oozing from the large wound as

Nigel trembles in the chair. Sobs wrack his body, but he lacks the energy for more, as he has clearly endured significant torture prior to this.

“Maybe we should talk about the other crime you committed then?” Lawson states loudly, and even though he’s addressing Nigel, he looks out over the crowd, who all cheer him on, baying for the Pledge’s blood.

“In addition to treason, a heinous charge on its own, you are also accused of drugging and kidnapping another Pledge’s Prize. And not just any Pledge, the High Crow—me.”

The crowd begin to boo and hiss as if this is a pantomime, and I freeze at the mention of what Nigel did to me, trying my best to keep the memories at bay. Nigel also freezes, looking shocked by that piece of information.

“What? I...she...what? I didn’t know,” he stutters, before trailing off into a loud wail, his body once again trembling with fear.

Lawson leans down so he’s at the same height as Nigel, letting him see the fury in his gaze. “Harper, the girl you drugged, after telling her Obsidian Order secrets, is my Prize. Not only were you stupid enough to spill secrets to someone who is part of the Order, you were a fucking idiot for daring to touch what is mine,” he growls, before slamming the blade into Nigel’s thigh.

Nigel screams loudly, thrashing as much as his binds will allow, before his noises turn to whimpers when Lawson pulls the blade from his flesh, the blood glistening under the stained-glass.

“I-I didn’t...know,” Nigel stutters, his voice barely above a whisper. I doubt any of the rows further back will be able to hear him at all, though that’s probably a good thing as his sobs are giving me a headache.

“So you admit you drugged and kidnapped my Prize?” Lawson asks, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Nigel shakes his head, his eyes widening when he realises the mistake he’s made. “No,” he whispers, dropping his head as much as the belt allows, casting his eyes away from Lawson’s penetrating gaze.

Lawson steps between Nigel’s legs and grabs hold of his greasy hair, pulling his head even further back, before addressing the silver-masked man standing behind Nigel. “Hold his head back and make sure he doesn’t move.”

The man steps forward and takes his own fistful of Nigel’s hair once Lawson lets go, and the stranger then places his other hand on Nigel’s chin,

gripping him in place.

It briefly registers that Lawson is giving instructions to a full Order member who is ranked higher than him, and he's listening to him without question, which shows just how powerful Lawson really is, but a pain-filled groan from Nigel quickly pushes that thought away.

The last bit of colour drains from Nigel's face when Lawson moves the knife to his forehead, and he blinks rapidly as he tries to speak, but the masked man slams his chin upwards, closing his mouth for him.

Nigel's sobs echo around the room as Lawson takes his time carving the word RAPIST into his forehead, blood dripping all over his face when Lawson takes a step back to admire his handiwork. With a nod from Lawson, the man releases Nigel, who sags in the seat as silent sobs overtake him.

But Lawson doesn't stop there. He takes his knife and peels the skin from Nigel's hands, making it clear this is his punishment for daring to touch me. And I have to hold back vomit when Lawson throws the flesh from Nigel's hands onto the floor beside him, leaving a mess of visible tendons and bone.

If I thought that was bad, it's got nothing on what he does next. Using the tip of his knife, Lawson slides it into Nigel's eye-socket, working slowly as he scoops the eyeball all the way out, before letting it drop onto the floor with a sickening thud. He reminds Nigel that this is the punishment for looking at me when he shouldn't have.

I'm almost a little relieved when he leaves Nigel's left eye intact, because he wants Nigel to watch as they pass judgement on him. Honestly, I don't think I could watch another eyeball rolling across the floor like a forgotten marble. I'd be sick onto the duct tape, that's for sure.

Almost as if he's remembered why he's here—not just to torture and maim the man before him—he turns to Nigel and asks, “One last chance... do you want to confess your crimes?”

Nigel shakes his head, not bothering to say a word as he snuffles, blood and snot flying everywhere, including from inside his empty eye-socket. Lawson slams his knife down into the other thigh, giving him a matching wound to the one he created earlier, as Nigel's weak screams bounce around the room.

All the blood and violence is making my stomach twist, nausea rippling through me as the food I ate earlier threatens to make a reappearance. I

concentrate on breathing through my nose, trying to drown out the sobs of the man who more than deserves everything he's getting.

Lawson rips the knife out of his thigh, wipes it clean on Nigel's boxers, before placing it back in the pocket of his robes. He then turns to address the room. "Obviously, this pathetic excuse for a Pledge isn't even man enough to own up to his crimes, but that doesn't matter, as I have more than enough evidence to prove he is guilty."

As soon as Lawson finishes speaking, my voice echoes around the room, coming from speakers that appear to be dotted all around. It's the recording Wren made that night, when Nigel first approached me.

I close my eyes, unable to stop the memories from hitting me once the audio plays, and the fear I felt when I realised Nigel had drugged me comes flooding back. Bile rises in my throat, and I once again feel Bram's hand on my thigh, only this time it's more of a comforting gesture than a warning.

I try to pull strength from his touch, the way I would do Lawson's, and though it doesn't work as well, I'm able to push my fear aside just enough to get myself under control. I keep reminding myself I'm safe, that Lawson won't let anything bad happen to me—*unless he's the one doing it*.

Once the recording ends, more than proving Nigel is guilty of all the charges he's facing, Lawson then turns to the far side of the room, to the left of where we're sitting. There's a raised platform that's cordoned off from the rest of the members, and the grandeur of the seats is enough to suggest the men residing there are not ordinary Obsidian members.

Their ornate gold masks make it clear the seats belong to the Obsidian Council, and that sets me further on edge. I'm glad I didn't see them before, as I'd have been even more worried about the risk Lawson and Bram have taken to bring me here. But I'm grateful they've done it.

Even though I'm not a fan of the violence and torture, seeing Nigel get the punishment he's owed repairs a part of me that still hasn't dealt with the trauma of that night. Knowing he's paying for what he did to me is like a balm to my soul, healing me in a way I never expected.

When Lawson told me I was not the first girl he'd drugged, and that he had raped other less fortunate women, I knew his punishment would never be adequate, but this comes close.

This time, when Lawson speaks, he addresses the Obsidian Council members directly. "Now that you've seen proof, I believe you have enough

evidence to find him guilty of all crimes. If you agree, I'd like your permission to carry out his sentence."

We all know what the sentence for treason is, and I imagine what Lawson has just put him through is punishment enough for the crimes he committed against me. Still, I wait with bated breath for the Council to pass judgement.

A man sitting in the middle of the front row stands and removes his mask, and I'm shocked to see it's someone I recognise. Reginald Gilson, Head of the Obsidian Order Council, who was also a friend of my dad's before everything went to shit.

Reginald is an older man, probably in his early sixties, though he still looks quite good for his age, despite the small dad belly he seems to have grown since I last saw him a couple of years ago. He stands in the middle of the room, exuding confidence as he draws all eyes to him, and it's clear why he's the one with the most power, it's been well-earned.

His voice is loud and booming, not a hint of uncertainty as he passes judgement for everyone to hear. "Pledge Nigel Higgsley, you have broken our most valued rule—the privacy that protects us. You broke the vow you made when you were initiated into Crowhurst House, letting down your fellow Crows in the process.

"You have put us all in danger by revealing our secrets, all because you wanted to brag your way between a whore's legs. You then proceeded to drug and rape multiple women, something a true Order member would never need to do.

"You are a disgrace to the Obsidian Order. I vow you will be stripped of your title, the Crow ring sliced from your finger, and you shall face your punishment as the nobody you were before you betrayed the greatest gift we bestowed upon you."

Reginald inclines his head towards Lawson, who stands beside Nigel once more. He unfastens the rope from around Nigel's right wrist and holds up what remains of the man's mangled hand.

After Lawson removed all the skin from his flesh, the silver-masked man with him must have put Nigel's Crow ring back on, as it's hanging loosely from what remains of his first finger, but wasn't there before. It's nothing more than bright pink flesh with hints of bone poking through, and my stomach rolls once more.

Lawson doesn't choose simply to remove the Crow ring, even though it's barely hanging on and could easily come off. Instead, he pulls his knife out once more and cuts off his whole finger. Nigel's screams slice through the air, and bile rises in my throat as Lawson discards the finger onto the floor, whilst keeping hold of the ring that is an exact replica of the one he wears on his own right pointer finger.

Nigel is begging and pleading in between sobs, but I can't make out what he's saying, too lost to the pain. Not that anyone would listen to him, even if he were making sense. He's made his bed, and now it's time to lie in it.

Lawson hands the ring to Xander, who looks absolutely furious, his knuckles turning white as he tightens his hold on it. Both Xander and Lawson turn to face Reginald once more, who gives them a sadistic smile in recognition.

"Traitor, the punishment for your crimes is death. Lawson, as he touched your Prize without permission, and you are the High Crow, as well as the person to unveil his betrayal, I grant you the honour of choosing how he dies," Reginald announces.

Lawson bows respectfully as Reginald takes his seat, before turning to face Nigel once more. He grabs hold of his greasy, blood-soaked hair again, dragging his head back until he's forced to look at him with his only remaining eye.

"I was going to take your remaining eye, but I want to watch as the last bit of life leaves you, and I want you to watch as you lose everything," Lawson spits, allowing a hint of emotion to bleed into his voice, before the mask slips back into place and he pulls out his knife again.

I lose track of how long Lawson tortures him, but by the end, a thousand tiny cuts cover every patch of Nigel's skin, and a pool of crimson gathers beneath his feet as he bleeds out.

All the colour has drained from Nigel's skin, and he's so exhausted he can't even cry anymore. The only thing keeping him upright is the bindings tying him to the chair, whilst Lawson jerking him regularly keeps him conscious.

I don't know how Lawson decides when Nigel has suffered enough, or maybe he's just done, but he moves to stand behind him, pulling his hair once more. I watch with sick fascination as Lawson slides the sharp blade

across his throat, the flesh parting to reveal a river of blood as his neck slices open.

Sure enough, we all witness the last bit of light leaving Nigel's remaining eye, as the blood flowing from the multiple wounds slows, with more of it on the floor than in his body. And despite it being fucking awful to witness, I breathe a sigh of relief knowing he'll never be a threat to me—or any other woman—again.

Lawson stands beside Nigel's body, covered in his blood, a cold, almost deadly expression on his face. I know I should be fucking terrified of the man standing before me, and the bloodlust he clearly enjoys, but that's not at all how I feel. Strangely, I'm grateful for him getting revenge on my behalf, like he was, in some weird way, trying to protect me.

I don't know if that's my mind going crazy after everything I just witnessed, but I can't deny how I feel. I push those thoughts aside when Lawson grabs hold of my arm, jerking me to my feet.

The room emptied while my mind wandered, leaving just me, Bram, and Lawson with Nigel's corpse. As Lawson roughly grabs me, I jerk away on instinct, fear flashing through me as I look into the eyes of the cold-blooded killer he so easily became.

Lawson drops my arm straight away, hurt flashing in his eyes as he takes a small step away from me, suddenly looking like my Lawson again...but it's too late. He saw how I reacted, and with the tape over my mouth, I'm not able to explain it was nothing more than a reaction.

Bram shuffles next to us, clearing his throat awkwardly as he says, "I'll take care of the body. You can take the car. I'll call some of the first-years to help, and we'll take him to the graveyard out back."

Lawson lets out a dark chuckle as he shakes his head. "It's really fucking handy having a graveyard behind the Black Chapel where we can bury new bodies on top of old ones."

If my mouth wasn't taped shut, it would definitely be wide open right now. Of course, the Obsidian Order has its own fucking graveyard, and the Pledges know how to dispose of bodies. I don't know why I'm even surprised.

Bram hands Lawson his keys and pulls out his phone to send a text, before moving towards the bloody mess that remains of Nigel. I look away, not wanting to see whatever he's going to do next.

Lawson takes hold of my arm once more, only his touch is much more gentle this time, and he leads me towards the door that Nigel was brought in through.

He guides me along a corridor, turning twice before we reach another door. This opens to the outside, and as I step out, I look around to get my bearings.

We're not in the car park, like I expected. Instead, we're at the edge of the woods that run around the outskirts of the Shadowmere Campus. The cool night air hits me; the darkness letting me know we had been in the building long enough for the sun to have set and night to descend.

The trees in the woods are dense, and the wind rustling the leaves makes it sound almost like they're howling, groaning amongst themselves. The cool air has made the leaves on the ground and the grass hard, so they crunch as we step on them.

Lawson walks me to the edge of the woods, before quickly spinning me around as he pushes my back against a large tree. He lowers the hood covering my head and pulls the mask off my face before ripping off the tape, making me yelp in surprise from the sting that ripples across my face.

Blood splatter covers his face, and the crimson liquid drenches his robe, though the dark fabric obscures it. He pulls off the blood-covered gloves he's wearing, before wrapping his long fingers around my neck, pushing against my throat until I gasp.

"Are you scared of me now, sweetheart?" he asks, tilting my chin so I'm forced to keep eye contact with him.

Even though I want to tell him I'm not, a different response slips out without me thinking about it. "How could you do that? Torture him, then kill him so easily?"

Lawson shrugs, the look of cool indifference remaining in place, but there's a flicker of something I can't identify in his silver eyes. "I would have done it simply because I was told to, but I did it easily because he touched you. He drugged you and kidnapped you. Fuck knows what he would have done to you if we hadn't found you in time. So, yes, I enjoyed torturing and killing him, teaching him a lesson he won't ever forget."

I'm frozen in place, not entirely sure what to say as I look into the eyes of a man who just tortured and killed for me. Lawson presses his hard body against mine, crushing my handcuffed wrists, as he lets me feel how much

he enjoyed what he just did. That alone should have me running a mile, but I'm not. As always, I'm trapped in his orbit.

Lawson rips my robe open and roughly slides my leggings and knickers down, before pressing his hand between my legs. He's rough as he slides his finger into my pussy, making me yelp before it turns into a long moan as he sinks deeper.

His lips are beside my ear, his tone sounding almost taunting as he says, "I don't think you're scared of me at all. In fact, I think you got turned-on watching me avenge you."

As if to prove his point, he pulls his fingers out, making sure the moonlight catches how they glisten with my juices when he holds them between us. His smile turns wicked as he pushes his fingers into my mouth, forcing me to lick them clean before pulling them out.

"Okay, sweetheart, here's what we're going to do. I'll untie you and give you a ten-second head start. If you don't want me to catch you, you'll have to hide or escape. But if you want me to make you come like never before, you'll be a good little slut and let me catch you," Lawson says, his voice deep and gravelly.

"So, if I escape, will you actually let me go? Like I won't have to be your Prize anymore?" Even as I voice the possibility aloud, I'm not sure how I feel about it.

Fuck, that's a lie. I don't want him to let me go. Lawson has a hell of a lot of red flags that should make me run a mile, but I find myself drawing closer to him instead. I'm worried I might be falling for him, red flags and all, but even that fear isn't enough for me to run away.

When Lawson nods his head, my stomach sinks, but it's quickly eased by his words. "I'm only saying yes because I know how this is going to go. You're mine. You're desperate for me to fuck you and make you come. So I have no doubt you'll let me catch you."

I keep my mouth closed as he unfastens my hands, making sure to massage the wrists once they're free in an oddly sweet gesture. Only when he finally takes a step back, letting me know he's ready for the game to begin, do I speak, hoping my words will unbalance him as much as he does me.

"I think you want to catch me and keep me because *you* can't let me go. You're supposed to hate me, to treat me as nothing more than a whore, but we both know you feel more for me than that.

“You’ve almost kissed me several times, and though I have no idea why you won’t, I can tell you’re close to breaking your rule because you like me, and that scares you. So run as fast as you can, because maybe when you catch me, I’ll give you all of me, my heart included. And maybe that’s exactly what you’ve always wanted.”

I don’t wait for him to respond; I quickly pull up my leggings, turn on my heels, and start running as fast as I can, but not before confusion flashes across his face. His silver eyes are shining bright, and I think I may have told him a truth he hasn’t been brave enough to face himself yet.

My heart pounds in my chest as I run as fast as my legs will carry me, the thrill of the chase rushing through me, and I hate to admit that I’m already enjoying it. Even though I feel like prey being chased by a predator, the excitement and anticipation is intoxicating.

Lawson was right; I crave his touch, and I’m desperate for him to catch me. I just hope I didn’t ruin the game by throwing our emotions into the mix. All I can do is cross my fingers that when he catches me, I won’t regret putting my heart on the line.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Lawson

As Harper runs off into the forest, I'm left standing with the weight of her words sitting heavily on my shoulders. *Am I in deeper than I ever intended to be? Has this shifted from her just being my Prize?*

As the thoughts roll around in my head, I can't help but wonder if she was ever just my Prize. I can't deny I've been obsessed with her since the first moment I saw her, and no matter how much I've tried to hate her—or get her to hate me—I've never truly felt it.

Then again, I'm not entirely sure I can label my feelings at all. It's not like I grew up surrounded by love and affection. I didn't have role models teaching me what it's like to care for another person, or how to let them love you.

All my father taught me is how to be cold and emotionless, and to follow instructions. I don't even know if he likes Mum, let alone loves her.

Obsidian Order members don't marry for love; everything is transactional. Who you tie yourself to for life has nothing to do with your feelings. It's what they can do for your name, your power, or your wealth. So it's hardly fucking surprising I'm caught off-guard by Harper throwing around words like feelings.

I have to admit, it's getting harder and harder to resist those fucking tempting lips of hers, but that's my last rule still standing strong, and if I allow that to topple, I really will have given her everything.

Bram thinks I'm a massive fucking pussy for having a no-kissing rule, but it just feels too intimate—or at least it has with every other girl I've been with.

In the past, I've never cared about the women I've fucked. Hell, I can't even remember some of their bloody names. I'm more than happy to fuck them until we've both got the release we need, but kissing isn't essential to achieve that goal. Kissing someone is intimate, and I don't want to open myself up in that way. I have never even been tempted before...until Harper.

She's never directly asked me about it, but she knows there's a line I don't want to cross, and so far, she's been respectful of that. It's clear she wants to, and her staring at my lips like she wants to devour them only makes me want her more.

Fuck, Harper really is messing with my head, and I need to remind us both that this is nothing more than sex. So I'm going to chase her down and teach her the lesson we both need.

After pulling in a shaky breath, I steel my nerves and take off running in the direction Harper went. I don't worry too much about finding her, as I'm confident she'll lead me straight to her. Though, like any good Crow, I move with grace, focusing my hearing on the subtle changes around me, so I can track my prey.

When I catch sight of Harper in the distance, her beautiful strawberry-blonde hair that's still in a plait flowing behind her as she jumps over a fallen branch, my heart races with anticipation, my skin itching to get close to her. I decide to curve around, so I can come out in front of her and catch her off-guard, and sure enough, she runs straight into my waiting arms.

With a yelp, I lift her into my arms and walk her backwards until she's pressed against a large tree, caged in by my body. She's breathing heavily, and I can't help but admire the way her tits move as she catches her breath.

The moonlight catches Harper's eyes, turning them a fierce bright blue, and I know, without a doubt, that the raw desire I feel is clearly visible in my own reflection. She pulls her lower lip between her teeth, fucking enticing me whilst also making herself seem sweet and innocent.

Her legs remain wrapped around my waist from when I picked her up, and I only have to rock my hips slightly for her to feel my hard length pressing against her sweet pussy, but it's nowhere near good enough with our clothes separating us.

"You caught me. What now?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper, full of anticipation.

“Now you’re mine,” I tell her with a growl, before pressing my lips to her throat, sucking and nibbling my way up her neck and along her jaw.

When I get too close to her sweet lips, I pull back, guiding her feet to the floor. Once she’s found her footing, I lift my gaze to meet hers, and suddenly she seems almost shy...and a little hurt. I can’t give her what she wants right now, but I can give her what she needs...and more.

After removing my own Obsidian robe, I take off hers and throw them both onto the ground. Her chest rises and falls as she tries to catch her breath, as wisps of hair that have fallen from her plait frame her beautiful face.

I pull the knife from my pocket, and Harper’s eyes grow wide as her body tenses, unable to tear her gaze from the blood-coated blade. I reach between us, keeping my movements slow so she can see exactly what I’m doing, as I don’t want to cut her by accident.

Once I have the knife in position, I slice through her T-shirt, then her leggings, before pulling the fabric away to reveal her creamy pale skin. She’s trembling, and I’m not sure if it’s from fear or anticipation.

Standing before me in just her black lace knickers, with curves in all the right places, she looks like a fucking wet dream, and my dick grows impossibly harder at the sight.

She looks to be holding her breath, waiting to see what I’m going to do next. Using the side of my blade, I drag it over her peaked nipples, and Harper lets out a gasp as they grow harder against the cool metal.

I waste no time taking one into my mouth, licking, sucking, and nibbling until Harper is whimpering beneath me, her arms wrapped around my shoulders as her fingers play with the hair at the nape of my neck.

I reach down with the hand not holding my knife and grab hold of the edge of her knickers. The movement forces the material to rub against her sensitive clit, making her moan loudly as she arches her back, pushing her nipple further into my mouth.

With as much force as I can, I rip the knickers from her body, and Harper yelps in surprise as the fabric chafes against her delicate skin before falling apart. Once I’ve disposed of it alongside the rest of her clothes, I slide my finger through her slit, moaning when I feel how wet and ready she is for me.

“So fucking wet, sweetheart,” I groan.

“All for you,” she murmurs, dropping her gaze from mine, as if she’s embarrassed.

I take the blade and place it underneath her chin, keeping the sharp edge away from her flesh as I tilt her head back, forcing her to look at me. She should never be ashamed to admit that I’m the only one who can turn her on. Fuck, that’s exactly what an obsessive, jealous asshole like me wants to hear.

“Don’t ever be embarrassed by that,” I tell her as I grab her hand and pull it over to rest against my erection that’s straining to be free from my jeans. “This is all for you, sweetheart.”

She gulps, the movement of her throat rippling against my knife, and then a small smile spreads across her face as she wraps her fingers around my hard length, grabbing as much as she can through the fabric.

“I think you’re wearing too many clothes,” she says, dropping her gaze to watch as her hand strokes over my jeans, rubbing me as she goes.

I shake my head, a wicked smirk on my face as I reach down and unfasten the button on my jeans before sliding the zipper down. Harper takes the hint and pushes my boxers down alongside my jeans, just enough for my dick to spring free.

Her small hand wraps around the base of my cock, and I have to bite my lip to stop a groan from breaking free. Her hands look so tiny and delicate next to my size, yet she’s wrapped her fingers around just tight enough to make my balls tingle, and when she strokes my length, I see fucking stars.

I keep my blade pressed against her throat, but Harper doesn’t seem to care as her gaze remains fixed on where her hand is working over my dick, beads of pre-cum pooling on the tip with each stroke.

When I softly press the knife into her throat, enough to cause pressure but not split the skin, she pauses, looking up at me with her wide, innocent eyes.

“On your knees,” I tell her, moving the knife so she can sink to the ground, not caring that she’s kneeling on leaves and branches, or that she’s in the mud.

I drop the knife just in time to slide my fingers into her hair, gathering it into my fist as she takes my dick in her mouth, and I keep hold as she sucks me off. Her warm, wet mouth sends a shiver down my spine, making my skin tingle as she pushes until most of my length is in her throat.

Her throat contracting around my cock makes my head spin, and she's able to take more of me each time she pulls back. Her mouth is so perfect, with the way her tongue sweeps along the underside of my shaft before she sucks me into her throat, making my knees go fucking weak.

As I get lost in the sensations, I take control and set the pace, fucking Harper's mouth like it was made to take all of me, my fist gripping her hair to keep her in position. Like the fucking perfect girl she is, she takes every inch I give her, loving it just as much as I do.

Tears stream down her face, alongside the black eyeliner she's wearing, staining her rosy cheeks as she chokes on my cock. Her pink lipstick is smeared over her face, and along the length of my cock. Despite her dishevelled appearance, and the spit running down her chin, she's never looked more fucking gorgeous to me.

Unable to control myself any longer, as she slides my cock out of her mouth, I reach down and grab under her arms, lifting her to her feet as she yelps in surprise. Before she's even found her footing, I spin her around and push her chest against the tree behind her.

Without giving either of us a moment to think, I arch her back and spread her arse-cheeks wide, before sinking my spit-covered cock into her dripping-wet pussy, not stopping until I'm all the way in. Her cry of surprise quickly turns into a guttural moan as I hit her deep inside, my hands roughly grabbing her hips to keep her in place.

"Oh, fuck." As the expletive falls from her lips, I can't help but chuckle, knowing I've corrupted her thoroughly now.

"Tut tut, Harper. That's hardly the language of a good little Order girl, is it?" I joke, as I fuck her slowly, making sure she can feel every inch of me as I pull out and push back in.

"Fuck. Order girls don't know what they're missing," she groans, pushing her arse back against me, trying to get me to move faster.

I slap her arse-cheek hard, loving the way she yelps before turning to glare at me, but she wisely keeps her mouth shut, not wanting to earn another punishment. Her sweet little arse is probably still a little sore from the last one.

"You like how much I've corrupted you?" I ask in between thrusts, getting faster with each one, as I gradually lose control to her tight walls.

She nods, biting her bottom lip once more in an attempt to hold back the sexy little mewl she lets out every time I hit that sweet spot deep inside her.

“I never knew it could feel this good.”

Fuck, if that doesn't make me want to puff my chest out like a fucking caveman, knowing I'm the only person who has ever made her feel pleasure like this.

“Only with me,” I grunt, pounding into her hard and fast now. “No one else will ever make you feel the way I do.”

The thought of anyone else touching Harper makes my blood boil, and I fuck her harder, hoping I can leave my mark on her in any way I can. If I have my way, she'll never so much as look at another man. I've already shown everyone what happens when they take what's mine, and Nigel won't be the last man who has his skin removed for touching what doesn't belong to him.

As my skin tingles, my balls throbbing painfully with my impending release, jolts of electricity shoot along my spine, letting me know I'm close. Harper's tight cunt is fluttering around my cock, but I want to make sure she gets there before me.

I reach around the front of her body, sliding my hand over her mound until I reach her slit. As soon as my fingers meet her clit, Harper lets out a loud moan, and it fucking echoes beautifully all around the forest.

She arches her back, rocking hard against me with each of my thrusts, forcing my cock deeper inside her tight cunt. She cries out as her eyes roll, her grip on the tree looking almost painful as she rises onto her tip-toes. The change in her position tilts her pelvis, and I'm able to sink in just that little bit deeper.

That's all it takes for us both to lose the last of our control, our orgasms hitting at the same time. I shoot my load deep inside her cunt, as her walls tighten around me, milking every drop as Harper shudders beneath me.

Her orgasm hits her hard, and she cries out loudly, her body trembling as her release crashes over her, and I tighten my grip on her hips to hold her through it.

Once the last wave has subsided, Harper's legs wobble, and her body sags as she drags in shaky breaths. I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her back against my chest, while my soft cock remains buried in her warm pussy.

I hold her there until her legs stop shaking and she's able to stand on her own, our breathing finally returning to normal. As I slowly pull out, Harper

hisses, and luckily, it's loud enough to drown out the soft groan I don't mean to let slip as my cock mourns the loss of her tight heat.

As Harper takes a step away from me, she reaches down between her legs, making a noise of disgust when she lifts her fingers to show she's scooped up some of my cum that's oozing down her thighs.

I take hold of her wrist and push it towards her mouth, setting my fierce gaze on her, so she knows not to question my silent instruction. Like the good little slut she's becoming, she licks and sucks every drop of my cum from her fingers.

As she's doing that, I reach down and scoop up some of my own, before pressing my fingers into her sore cunt, pushing my seed back inside her. She whimpers at my touch.

"I want your cunt to be full of my cum at all times," I tell her as I pull my fingers out of her pussy, before sliding them into her mouth alongside her own.

Once they're clean, and Harper's lips are glistening with a mixture of her juices and my cum, I pull our fingers out. Her plump lips have never looked so fucking tempting, and when Harper leans in, a hopeful gaze in her eyes, I almost fucking cave.

Reluctantly, I take a step back, and Harper lets out a frustrated growl. "Why the fuck won't you kiss me?" She actually stomps her foot like a child throwing a tantrum, and I can't help but smile at how fucking adorable she looks.

I shrug my shoulders as if it's no big deal. "It's too intimate."

Her eyes widen as she shakes her head, looking confused. "You just fed me your cum off your fingers, which were buried deep in my pussy...you don't get more bloody intimate than that."

I chuckle, struggling to find an argument for that. "Kissing is way more intense, more...real."

She narrows her gaze on me, her brow furrowing. "We're not in fucking *Pretty Woman*."

"No, but her reasons were valid," I reply, without thinking.

Harper's smile grows as wide as her eyes, which sparkle as if she's just unearthed a big secret. "You've seen *Pretty Woman*? Is that where this ridiculous idea came from?"

I try to keep my face as expressionless as I can, not knowing how to respond, and that only makes her laugh more.

“It fucking is, isn’t it? You saw it on *Pretty Woman* and applied it to you.”

I reach out and grab her throat, pressing her into the tree behind her once more as I tighten my hold, cutting off her laughter. “Whatever my reasons, they are valid. Kissing is intimate, and if I don’t care enough about the girl to learn her name, I’m sure as fuck not going to kiss her.”

Although her voice is strained, given the way I’m pressing on her throat, Harper is able to croak out, “But you know my name.”

There’s a vulnerability in her beautiful blue eyes that cracks the walls around my cold, black heart, and I release my grip on her neck, watching as she pulls in air whilst lifting her hand to rub over the areas where I pressed too hard.

I let out a long sigh as I pick up the Obsidian robe and hand it to Harper, since she’s completely naked, and I destroyed all of her clothes. She wraps it around her tiny body, curling her arms around herself as she looks down at the floor, refusing to meet my gaze.

Without saying a word, I pick up my knife and put it back into my jeans pocket, before pulling on my own robe. I then scoop Harper into my arms. She doesn’t even yelp with surprise when I lift her; she just wraps her arms around my neck and allows me to carry her out of the forest.

We find Bram’s car easily, and I place her in the passenger seat, putting her seatbelt on before sliding into the driver’s side. We drive home in silence, neither of us knowing how to break this awkwardness that seems to be hanging in the air between us.

Harper isn’t even looking at me; she keeps her eyes on the floor as her arms remain wrapped around her small body, and my stomach sinks. I don’t even know why I’m so determined to stick to a stupid fucking rule that I’m desperate to break for her.

After parking the car, I gently scoop her into my arms, the familiar weight settling against me as I carry her inside. As we step into Crowhurst House, the faint scent of old wood and stale beer tickles my nose. I steal a glance at Harper, her breathing is a soft, rhythmic sigh against the quiet hum of the old building. Even in sleep, a shadow seems to linger on her features, a quiet sadness etched there.

Once we reach my room, I softly place her on my bed. Her eyelids flutter open, and there’s a sliver of awareness, just enough for her fingers to brush against the Obsidian robe as she helps me slip it off. She remains

silent as her eyes, wide and unfocused, drift toward the shadows pooling in the corners of the room, anywhere except my face.

“Do you want a shower?” I asked, the words a soft rumble in the quiet.

She nods, a silent acknowledgment that does little to soothe the sharp, twisting ache in my gut, like a cold knife turning. My fingers close around her hand, and I pull her into the bathroom. The rush of water fills the air as I twist the knob, the showerhead hissing with a promise of the warmth to come.

As I peel off my sticky, blood-soaked clothes, the bathroom light glints off the mirror, revealing a gruesome sight. Dried blood cakes my skin, matting my hair. Harper’s gaze skims over me, unseeing, as she waits for my command.

Once the water temperature has reached perfection, I step into the shower, my hand finding hers as I pull her in. A soft, collective moan escapes us as the luxurious warmth cascades over our skin, fighting the lingering chill of our outdoor adventure.

I gently lather her skin, my touch deliberate and featherlight, tracing her perfect curves. Despite the undeniable thrum of desire and my throbbing cock, I hold back, focusing only on the soft sensation of her beneath my palms. And it only gets worse when she silently takes the soap and sponge from me, wordlessly scrubbing every inch of my skin.

Her touch is a slow, soft caress as she gently wipes off every speck of our enemies blood, the water turning a murky pink as it drains away beneath us.

Once the water flows clear, I begin to shampoo her hair, and the vanilla and strawberry scent that reminds me of Harper fills the room. I’m confident mimicking the precise, soothing motions I’ve watched her use on herself countless times, despite this being my first time washing anyone else’s hair.

I make sure to massage her scalp the way she likes, her soft sighs making my cock twitch with excitement, even as I remind myself this isn’t about sex. I’m not entirely sure what the hell this is, but the sad expression Harper was wearing has washed away alongside the blood, and that’s all I wanted.

I hate that I’m the person who made her sad, and I never want to see anything but happiness or pleasure on her beautiful face ever again.

As the last suds of conditioner rinse from Harper's hair, she pivots, her small frame melting against mine. Water droplets glisten on her skin, and through wet lashes she offers me a shy smile. Her eyes then drift downwards, locking onto my mouth, as she nervously drags her lower lip between her teeth.

I reach out and free it from between her teeth, stroking my thumb over her plump lips as they part for me slightly. I lean in closer, and Harper's breath hitches.

My lips hover just above hers, and her chest rises and falls, as her heart no doubt beats as rapidly as mine. My voice is deep and gravelly when I'm finally able to get the words out. "I've never wanted anyone the way I want you, Harper, and that fucking terrifies me. I'm frightened of wanting you this much, knowing I'll never be able to keep you."

She sucks in a sharp breath, her voice just as shaky as she says, "What if I want you to keep me? I'm yours, but are you mine?"

As soon as the words register in my head, my body moves on instinct alone, and I slam my lips against hers. I kiss her with as much passion as I can, desperate to show her just how much I am hers. She may have gifted herself to me, but somewhere along the way, she claimed all of me for herself too.

Harper is startled at first, clearly not expecting me to kiss her, but when it finally registers, she melts into the kiss, wrapping her arms around my neck to pull me closer, or maybe to stop me from pulling away—not that I fucking could.

The taste of her lips on my tongue is like a fucking drug, and I know I'll never get enough. I'll never be able to stop claiming her in every way I can.

Her tongue battles mine as she also tries to take as much as I'm willing to give, but she quickly learns she can have all of me, and we settle into a passionate kiss where we both devour each other.

When we finally part, the shower water starting to run cold, the smile on Harper's face is fucking blinding, and my heart skips a beat. My stomach flutters in the strangest way as she glances up at me with her bright-blue eyes, looking like I just gave her the fucking moon.

We don't say anything as we climb out of the shower, and I'm a little relieved about that. I was right in saying kissing is intimate, and it's made me feel things I've never experienced before. Quite frankly, I'm a little shaken, and I'm unsure what the hell I'm going to do now.

I think I've just handed Harper a piece of my heart, and without her in my life, I suspect I'll never be whole again. But the more I think about it, the more I realise I never want to live in a world that she's not a part of, and that's fucking scary, because the clock on our time together has already started counting down.

We are living on borrowed time, and soon, new obligations will force us in different directions. That's never bothered me before... I've always known I'll have an arranged marriage to someone I don't give a shit about, and I've never questioned my fate. But as I feel the ghost of Harper's lips against mine, I suddenly want to rebel against the only future I've ever known.

I don't want anyone else in my life, only her, but keeping her means breaking all the rules, and possibly losing everything I've spent my life working towards.

Fuck, I knew kissing her would be the death of me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

Lawson

As my eyes flutter open, my body feeling oddly relaxed, almost as if I'm acting on instinct alone, I reach out to grab hold of Harper, needing to pull her curvy body against mine. When the soft, plush weight of the duvet is the only thing I feel, a slow dawning spreads through my mind. The silence of the room, usually filled with her gentle breathing, is unnerving. And the strange absence of her familiar warmth pressed against me sends a prickle of unease through me.

Since the Gifting Ceremony, we've rarely been apart, and I've grown accustomed to the comforting warmth of her body pressed against mine as I sleep. Waking up to fucking mind-blowing morning sex is just a lucky bonus.

After I crossed the final line with her last night, kissing her for the first time, it's like the walls I erected around my stone-cold heart are crumbling, and she's worming her way inside, no matter how hard I try to push her back.

I roll over and catch sight of a piece of paper on her pillow, my eyes narrowing as I reach out and grab it.

Lawson,

*I didn't want to miss any more school, so I've gone to
class.*

Please, don't be mad. I'll see you this afternoon.

Harper xx

I screw up the piece of paper in my hand, letting out a groan as my dick twitches in commiseration, since I'm definitely not getting laid this morning.

I know I shouldn't be mad that she's going to class, or that she didn't wake me before she left, but that doesn't mean I'm not. I'm aware it's illogical, but Harper Westmore seems to bring out my crazy side, which is how I find myself standing outside her classroom door, getting ready to barge into her lesson.

While showering, dressing, and eating breakfast with Bram, I had ample opportunities to talk myself out of this. Hell, Bram put forward several very convincing arguments...yet here I am, having listened to none of them.

I've been watching her long enough to know her schedule by heart, and Business Studies is her least favourite class. She only signed up for it to keep her father happy—a theme I've noticed runs through most of Harper's life.

To steel my nerves, I pull in a sharp breath as I adjust my backwards baseball cap, making sure I'm projecting the air of confidence and arrogance I've spent many years perfecting. Wearing my usual dark jeans, biker boots, tight T-shirt, and leather jacket, I look just like any other university student, but the dangerous edge I exude reminds people to keep their distance—a reputation I've worked hard to maintain.

I push the classroom door open hard, not caring when it slams against the wall from the force, and all eyes turn to me as I stride in, my head held high. I scan the room, my gaze landing on the pretty girl with strawberry-blonde curls, who is gawking at me with her mouth open.

"What the... Who are you?" the old man standing at the front of the lecture theatre splutters, glaring at me as I pointedly ignore him.

I make my way down the stairs, heading straight for Harper. She's sitting about six rows from the back, but her chair is five from the aisle. There's a geeky-looking guy sitting in the aisle seat, and as soon as I stop beside him, towering over him, he looks up at me in fear.

"Move," I snap, glaring at him when he doesn't respond straight away.

"Who are you? I will call security!" the teacher shouts, but I ignore him as though he didn't say a word.

“Find a different seat,” I tell the thin guy with thick-rimmed glasses, who is staring at me with his mouth wide open.

He blinks a few times, almost as if he can’t quite believe what’s happening, and frustration bubbles within me as I battle with the urge to pick him up and move him myself.

“T-this i-is my s-seat,” he stutters in a high-pitched whisper, grabbing hold of the seat to emphasise his point.

I squat down so I’m level with him, making sure he can see the barely contained rage that’s simmering just beneath the surface. I nod my head towards Harper, who is staring wide-eyed, silently watching everything unfold.

“I don’t care that this is your seat. She is mine, and I want to sit with her. I also don’t want anyone near her,” I snap, as Harper lets out a frustrated groan.

“B-but...I-I’m not...next to her.” He points to the three seats that are separating them, like that’s enough for me to be satisfied—it’s fucking not!

I narrow my gaze on him as I curl my hands into fists, dropping my voice low and threatening, so only he can hear. “If you don’t move now, I’ll staple your eyelids closed so you can never look at her, or anyone else, ever again.”

The colour drains from his already pale face, and I barely have time to stand up again before he’s gathered all of his things and stumbled out of the seat. He rushes to a seat near the front, almost falling down the stairs with how quickly he moves.

I take his seat on the end of the aisle and turn my attention to the beautiful girl who is now glowering at me with fire in her eyes, looking furious. I tap the seat beside me, not bothering to use my words.

“What the fuck, Law?” she seethes, her jaw tense as she grinds her teeth.

I have to bite my lip to stop from smiling at her use of a shortened version of my name, kinda like a nickname. I wouldn’t allow anyone else to call me that, but with her...

Stop acting like a fucking teenage girl, I tell myself, schooling my face.

Before I can respond, her annoying-as-fuck teacher is charging up the stairs, his hands on his hips as he shouts at me. “You cannot just barge in here. Who the hell do you think you are? Get out now before I call security.”

He stops once he's beside my seat, his chest rising and falling rapidly as his face turns a concerning shade of purple. I'm not sure if it's from being mad, or if he's really so unfit that charging up the stairs has him out of breath.

Either way, I wait until he's close enough before I discreetly show him the ring I wear on my right pointer finger, the silver and black skull and crow glistening under the harsh classroom lights.

As soon as his gaze lands on my Obsidian Order ring, his face pales, and he takes a stumbling step back, his mouth opening and closing in panic as he struggles to know what to say.

Whilst the Order's presence on campus is a secret from the other students, who think we're nothing more than elite clubs who rule the university, the faculty are very aware of who we are. They might not know all the details, but they know enough to keep them in line.

Order Pledges never fail their classes, even if they don't sit any of the exams or submit any homework. They maintain a perfect attendance record, whether they've stepped foot in the classroom or not. And no one ever challenges them, no matter what chaos they're causing.

University staff know that Obsidian Order members and its Pledges are the highest-ranking people on campus, and staff must always show them respect, regardless of whether they deserve it.

Right now, if I wasn't an Order Pledge, he would have called security to kick me out, and I'd get in trouble with my teacher, since I should be in class too. But I'm not worried about any of that, which is why I'm a laid-back cocky bastard—the joys of being untouchable.

"I-I'm s-sorry," the teacher mutters as he takes another step back. "Are you joining the class or just observing?"

"Just observing, but Harper is mine, so I may drop in from time to time to make sure she's doing okay." Even though I don't say it explicitly, the threat is more than obvious. Now he knows she's mine, Harper will receive the same luxuries I do.

Though, given the way she's shooting daggers at me with her eyes, I don't think she appreciates the gift I just handed her. I keep my gaze locked on hers as I address her teacher once more. "You can continue with the lesson."

He nods so low it's almost a bow, before rushing back to the front of the lecture theatre, his legs moving so fast he almost falls again. Without so

much as another glance my way, he starts talking, pointing to the slideshow on the big screen behind him, and I'm grateful when the other students give him their attention once more, meaning they're no longer staring at me.

I turn my attention to the girl who is still glaring at me, looking absolutely furious. The corner of my lip tips up into a cocky smirk as I once again pat the seat beside me.

"Lawson," she growls, shaking her head at me.

I lean closer to her, dropping my voice low so she can hear the dangerous edge as I say, "If I have to ask you again, your punishment will be severe."

She rolls her eyes as she lets out a huff, but like the good girl she is, she gathers her things and moves to sit in the chair beside me, dropping her bag onto the floor with a thud.

"Why are you here?" she asks through gritted teeth.

I shrug my shoulders as I lounge back in the chair. "Because you are."

She shakes her head as she closes her eyes, using her fingers to massage her temples, her frustration more than apparent. "You can't interrupt my lessons."

My smirk grows as I tell her, "I can do whatever I want."

Harper lets out a groan as she lightly punches my arm in exasperation, which only makes me chuckle. "You're so annoying."

"And you are in trouble."

Her brow furrows as she asks, "Why?"

I reach across and grab her hand, pulling it over and resting it on my lap. Using my hand over hers, I guide her until her small fingers cup my hard cock through my jeans.

"That's why." I groan as she tightens her grip on my length, and I rock my hips, pushing against her.

Her eyes flick around the room, making sure nobody is watching as she tries to pull away, but I keep her grip firmly on me.

"We can't. Not here," she whispers, her gaze flitting frantically, even though nobody is paying us any attention. All eyes are on the screen as the teacher talks them through whatever video is playing.

"Don't move," I demand, fixing her with a look that makes it clear this isn't up for debate.

She gives me a tiny nod, her body sagging with acceptance, though her glare remains as her final act of rebellion—something I find incredibly

sexy.

Removing my hand from over hers, smirking when she doesn't even loosen her grip on my dick, I slide it over and rest it on her bare thigh. I silently throw a thank you to whatever higher being decided that Harper should wear one of her cute little dresses today. This would be so much harder if she were wearing trousers, but it wouldn't have deterred me. The dress just makes life much easier.

As I slide my hand under the hem of her baby-blue dress, trailing my fingernails over her creamy skin, Harper slaps her free hand over mine, stopping me in my tracks. She shakes her head with panicked eyes, her lips falling into a frown when she realises I'm not going to listen to her.

"There's people all around us," she hisses, peering around as if to prove her point.

"Then you better be quiet and not draw attention to us," I tell her, jerking her hand off mine so I can continue my lazy journey up her thigh.

She lets out a harsh laugh as she glares at me. "You drew everyone's attention to us when you stormed in here like a fucking possessive asshole."

I can't hold back my smile as I say, "You really have developed an awfully dirty mouth, Harper. What would your dad say?"

When her father's name is spoken, her entire body turns rigid, as if a bucket of icy water has just been dumped on her. The light drains from her eyes, replaced by a deep sadness, and regret hits me instantly.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

This might be the first time I've ever apologised to someone...and meant it, but I do. Not necessarily because I regret what I said, but I don't like seeing her upset.

Besides, her newfound sadness is hindering the plans I had when I walked in here, and now I'm going to have to work to get things back on track.

"It's okay. I just miss him. I don't know that he'd hate who I've become, but he wouldn't be happy about everything we've lost. It makes me sad to think of him alone in that prison, fighting for his life while mine just carries on. I have to get him out of there," she says, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

I squeeze her thigh reassuringly, not really knowing what else I can do. "We will do everything we can to help him, but right now, I don't want you

even thinking about your dad. Push him—and any other man, for that matter—out of your mind, and let me distract you.”

She rebounds quicker than I thought was possible, her misty eyes clearing as she goes back to glaring at me. Fuck, I can’t keep up with this woman and her all-over-the-place emotions.

“I should be concentrating on my class, not letting you distract me,” she replies, her voice lacking any real conviction, sounding instead like she secretly hopes I will keep her from her work.

The rough lace of her knickers snag on my fingertips as I trace their delicate edge. Her breath hitches, a tiny sound lost in the hum of the room, as she subtly shifts her weight against the plush fabric of the chair, parting her legs for me.

A deep rose flush creeps up her cheeks, emphasising her adorable freckles, and her eyes darken as her pupils bloom with the intensity of her lust. As my finger traces the slick line of her slit, a low, breathy sound escapes her lips.

She lets out a long exhale as her grip on my cock tightens, and it takes all of my willpower not to push against her tiny hand. I want to rock against her, but there’s no way I’m finishing in my boxers, and that’s the only outcome here, so I focus on Harper instead.

I dip my fingers beneath the soft fabric of her knickers, biting my lower lip as I feel how slick and warm she is for me. Harper shifts lower in her seat, the faint rustle of fabric accompanying her movement, tilting her pussy in just the right way. The subtle scent of her arousal fills the air as I slide my finger inside her.

Harper lets out a soft gasp, before quickly slapping her hand over her mouth, her gaze flicking around frantically to make sure nobody heard her, or is watching us. I don’t even care if they are, though a quick glance confirms nobody is looking our way. Her asshole teacher is deliberately making sure to look anywhere except at us.

As I add a second finger beside the first, Harper bites down on her lower lip, her flush blooming over her cheeks as her gaze fixes on mine. There’s a war going on inside her beautiful blue eyes, and it’s clear she’s torn between wanting the release I’m going to give her, and her fear of getting caught.

Giving in to her desire, Harper rocks her hips against my hand, altering the angle and allowing my fingers to slip deeper, confirming she’s made her

decision. I give her what her eyes are begging for, thrusting my fingers quicker and deeper, curling them just the way she loves.

It takes every bit of her control to not make any noise, and to not meet each of my thrusts. Thankfully, she's moved her hand off my cock and is now squeezing my thigh as tightly as she can, no doubt using it as a distraction to avoid making a sound.

Normally, I want my girl to scream the place down, to call my name until her throat is as raw as her cunt, but not in the middle of her crowded classroom. Nobody gets to see her fall apart except me.

As my thrusts speed up, becoming more uncoordinated, while my thumb rubs over her sensitive clit, her eyes burn into mine and her chest rises and falls rapidly as she tries desperately to hide her impending release.

"Please," she whispers, her eyes pleading with me as I press my thumb against her clit, pulling a soft whimper from her.

I lean close, feeling her breath against my cheek as I press soft kisses along her neck, stopping when I'm beside her ear. "Come for me, sweetheart. I want to watch you fall apart in the middle of your class."

I curl my fingers when they're deep inside, hitting that spot that drives her fucking wild, and her eyes roll, her grip on my thigh tightening to the point it's almost painful.

I continue dragging my fingers over her sweet spot, whilst brushing my thumb against her clit, and it doesn't take long for her orgasm to hit. When her body tenses, I nudge her hand away from her mouth and press my lips to hers, kissing her with everything I have.

Her orgasm hits and her body shudders with the intensity of her release, whilst I use my lips to swallow her moans and whimpers, making sure she's hidden from the room.

I continue kissing her long after her orgasm subsides, her body relaxing as the last shudder dissipates, leaving her boneless and satisfied. Still, she kisses me back, clinging to my lips like they're the best thing she's ever tasted, and I know the feeling, because I can't get enough of her.

When her pussy stops spasming around my fingers, I gently pull them out, Harper wincing as I do. They're dripping wet, and I reluctantly pull away from our kiss so I can taste her. I suck every drop of her juices from my fingers, Harper's eyes darkening as she watches me.

Her hand that was gripping my thigh slides back over to my throbbing cock, and as she wraps her fingers around my length, I almost blow my load

from that alone. I quickly remove my fingers from my mouth and take hold of her hand, pulling it off me.

Harper pouts as her brow furrows. “Why can’t I...” Her gaze drops to where my dick is straining to break free from my jeans, her slight head nod finishing her sentence without words.

I lean in closer, my voice barely above a whisper as I say, “Because I don’t want to walk around campus with cum in my boxers. And people would notice if I pushed you to your knees to swallow everything I give you. So I’ll take an IOU.”

She lets out a soft chuckle that does dangerous things to me, like making my stomach flutter in a way only a teenage girl’s should. “I guess it’s not very comfortable to walk around in wet, sticky boxers. Then again, I seem to always be in wet knickers since being with you.”

I can’t help but puff my chest out with pride on hearing that, my smirk growing wide as she rolls her eyes at me. “I enjoy knowing I make you wet. But if you’re complaining, you could always go without knickers.”

She shakes her head, her eyes scrutinising me with a gaze that feels both sharp and amused. I detect the faintest upturn at the corners of her lips, a smile she’s desperately trying to keep concealed. “Can I get back to class now?”

I lean over and steal another kiss, unable to help myself now I know how fucking good they feel. “You can, but I came here for a reason—”

“You didn’t just come to punish me?” she cuts in.

“No. I came to tell you we’re going to a Halloween party at the weekend, so you need to think of a costume to wear. Come up with some ideas, and we’ll go over them. If you don’t come up with something good, I’ll pick for you,” I tell her, letting her hear the hint of a threat in my tone.

She picks up on it straight away. “Why do I get the feeling I wouldn’t like whatever outfit you have in mind?”

My smirk grows as a hit of mischief glistens in my eyes. “Probably because you’ll moan that it’s too revealing, but I know I’d like it.”

She rolls her eyes at me again, and I consider punishing her for it, but she speaks before I can say anything. “Who’s throwing the Halloween party? I know there’s a few that happen around campus.”

My nose wrinkles with disgust as I respond, their name tasting like ash on my tongue. “The fucking Hawks.”

Harper's brow furrows as she asks, "The Hawks, as in one of the rival Obsidian Order Houses?"

"The very same."

"Why would you go to a party at your rival's house?" she asks, confused.

I let out a huff, having asked the same question myself over the years. "While we're here at Shadowmere, the Hawks, Falcons, and Eagles are our rivals, and we're competing against them to a certain extent, but when we graduate, we will all be brothers.

"So while they encourage a certain level of competition between us, they also push us together to prepare us for the future. When we're Order members, we can be paired with someone from another House, and we'd be expected to work with them as we would any other Crow.

"Each House hosts an annual event, and attendance is mandatory. We host the Welcome Party, while the Hawks do Halloween. The Falcons hold a charity auction for Valentine's Day, and the Eagles throw a fancy New Year's Eve Ball to show off how fucking pompous they are. You'll be attending them all."

A look of disbelief washes over Harper's face. "I had no idea. I just thought you were rivals who kept your distance, except for events where everyone is expected to attend at the Black Chapel."

"Honestly, it's a little confusing. They want each of the Houses to have a certain amount of rivalry towards the others, as that pushes us to be better, but they also want to promote unity for the Order as a whole, which is why we all come together in church.

"The annual events are a way for us to unite and get to know our rivals, but our Head of House makes it clear that we're representing the Crows whilst there, and we should always come away looking superior."

She shakes her head as she lets out a soft chuckle. "So it's all one big pissing contest."

"I guess, it is," I reply with a shrug of my shoulders.

"So, we pretend we like the other Houses, but really we want everyone to know we're better than them?"

My cocky smile grows as my competitive edge flares to life. "Too fucking right."

Although she projects an air of disbelief, the smile on her face tells me she gets it. "That's why the outfit is so important. You want to show the

Hawks that you have the best Prize?” She phrases it like a question.

I lean in close, my lips hovering beside her ear, loving the way she shivers from my proximity. “I don’t need a Halloween costume to show that, sweetheart. No matter what you’re wearing, you will be the most beautiful girl in the room, and everyone will be jealous knowing you belong to me.”

A flush spreads over her cheeks as she drops her gaze to the floor, too shy to meet my eyes after hearing the intensity in my words. But I don’t need her to believe me; I know it’s true. There’s not a single girl on this entire campus that holds a torch next to Harper.

“I’ll make sure the outfit is good anyway,” she mutters.

I reach over and tip her chin back, forcing her to make eye contact with me. “You’ll look fucking gorgeous in whatever you pick, but the sexier you are, the harder I’ll fuck you.”

Her eyes darken with lust, and before she can say anything, I capture her lips with mine, stealing another passionate kiss. When we pull back, both of us gasping for breath, my blue balls throbbing painfully in my much-too-tight jeans, I go to stand.

“Enjoy the rest of your lesson,” I tell her, before adding, “I’ll claim my IOU very soon.”

Her gaze drops to my straining bulge, which is at eye-level with her now that I’m standing up, and a mischievous smile tugs at her lips. “I look forward to it.”

I laugh as I stride out of the classroom, not caring that I’m disrupting the lesson yet again. All I can think about is claiming my IOU as soon as possible, or my balls might actually drop off.



CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

Lawson

I have one foot over the threshold of Crowhurst House when Xander's booming voice has me frozen. "Where the hell have you been, Radley?"

I wince, suddenly remembering that I should have been at my combat training session with Xander, instead of making Harper come in the middle of her lesson. *She's far too distracting for her own good.*

"Sorry, I had somewhere I needed to be," I tell him, remaining as vague as possible, since I'm almost certain he won't approve of the truth.

He advances towards me, a look of fury etched on his face as he glares at me. "So you didn't storm into your Prize's classroom and disrupt her lesson instead of attending your fucking combat training session with me?"

He doesn't even try to hide the sarcasm in his voice, and I mutter a curse under my breath. *Of course, he fucking knows where I've been. He doesn't miss a bloody thing.*

I shrug my shoulders, trying to appear casual. "She needed to be taught a lesson."

Xander shakes his head in despair, leaning in closer so only I can hear, since we've gathered a bit of an audience. "You were seen kissing her. Is that not against your rules?"

My brow furrows as I rack my brain, wondering when I told him about my no-kissing rule. "How do you know about that?"

"It's my job to know everything." He says it like it's common sense, and I guess that's the only way he can keep track of three-years' worth of Crow Pledges with superiority complexes and attitude problems.

"It's not what you think." I cringe at the answer that slips out, which is made worse when Xander rolls his eyes at me.

He lets out a harsh laugh as he says, "Whatever you say. I just don't want you to balls up your High Crow position because of some fucking pussy."

It takes every ounce of control I have not to unleash my barely restrained anger at him talking about Harper like that, but I keep my mask of indifference in place as best I can. "I have earned my position, and nothing will change that."

His eyes narrow on me, as if he doesn't quite believe me. "You need to remember, she is your Prize, nothing more. You have no future with her, and that will never change."

As if I need him pointing out the fucking obvious. The ticking clock hanging over our heads is louder than ever now that I've admitted I want Harper. I know our time is limited, and we have no future, but hearing it aloud makes it even more real.

"I'm well aware of what my future entails; my father has been drilling it into me since I was a child. It's not something I'm ever likely to forget," I say through gritted teeth.

Xander lets out a sigh as something that resembles pity flashes across his face. "Being a Legacy Order member can be tough, and I'm sure your father being on the Council is even harder, but it doesn't change what is expected of you. If anything, it raises the standards."

I'm completely over the conversation at this point, but Xander will only kick my arse more if I show him the disrespect that's threatening to slip out, so I remain quiet.

With a huff, he takes a step back, talking louder so the nosey bastards watching can hear him again. "Get your arse in the gym. After you've done a hundred laps, then we can begin our training session. Instead of the hour you should have done, you'll do two. You have five minutes to get your arse in the gym. For every minute you are late, I'll add an extra ten laps. You'll never miss training again."

He doesn't even wait for a response before he spins on his heel and stalks off towards the gym, and I let out a loud groan as the bastards watching laugh under their breaths. All it takes is a glare from me to silence them as I run to my room.

Xander's poorly veiled threat about my time with Harper running out repeats in my head, and I hate that he's yet another obstacle standing in our way. As if we don't have enough of those fuckers. Still, when I think back

to the way she came on my hand in the middle of her class, trying not to make a sound, it's really hard to have any kind of regret.

I always knew this thing with Harper would be dangerous, but now I'm wondering if I should risk everything just to keep her. That thought consumes me as I run the laps as Xander instructed, though the burn in my lungs is enough to quieten them for a bit.

Instead, as I do during every training session, I focus on why I'm here, working my arse off the way I am. I repeat all of the goals I have in life—graduate as High Crow, gain a high-ranking Order position, then become the youngest ever Obsidian Council member. Each pound of my foot propels me closer to those goals.

“Radley,” Xander shouts as I'm finishing my last lap, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Into the ring with DeWitt.”

He points to where Bram is standing in the middle of the training ring we use, bouncing from one foot to the other with a maniacal grin on his face. Two Pledges stand beside the ring, panting heavily whilst holding their middles, after he took them both on at once.

This is where Bram is in his element, having spent more time in fights than most of the Crow Pledges combined, which is why Xander has him train others—though he does watch on, shouting pointers and criticism.

It's not my first time sparring with my friend, and despite being exhausted from the laps I've just done, I know he won't go easy on me. Not that I'd expect him to.

“Don't worry, I won't mess up your pretty face. Don't want Harper coming after me,” he jokes as I climb into the ring and pull on the boxing gloves left in the corner.

“You won't get close enough,” I fire back, though we both know that's not true. I know my own strengths, but like any good Crow, not only am I aware of my weaknesses, I know everything about my opponent. He's a better fighter than me, so I'll have to find a tactical way to beat him, or at the very least, hold my own.

We touch gloves as Xander shouts for us to begin. I shift my weight, my back foot finding purchase on the dusty canvas, when suddenly, Bram's fist slams into my gut. The impact steals the air from my lungs in a ragged gasp, a sharp, burning sensation blooming in my core. I ignore it as best I can, hopping out of the way as I aim for his head in retaliation.

I see him anticipate it, his body coiling just in time. As I stumble, a jarring impact lands against my ribs, and a ragged grunt escapes my lips, the sound sharp and loud in the sudden stillness of the room.

“Come on, Lawson. You’re moving slow as fuck. Is all the sex getting to you, old man?” Bram taunts, as he lands another blow to my chin.

I stumble backwards, but recover quickly, propelled forward by his teasing tone and the urge to silence his cocky attitude. A sigh of relief escapes me as my fist connects with his ribs, the dull thud a small victory. I relish in his groan, but it’s abruptly cut short. A blinding flash of pain rips through me as his blow lands on my kidney, followed by a stinging impact against my opposite ribs.

Fuck, I’m going to be bruised tomorrow, I think to myself, as Bram gives me that psychotic grin that suggests he’s enjoying this way more than he should.

We spar for much longer than I would like before Xander calls time on our fight. He doesn’t give us any feedback, just throws a disappointed glare my way before stalking out of the training room as I try to catch my breath.

I climb out of the ring, my body screaming at me with every step I take. Bram, however, like the psycho he is, remains in place, shouting for someone else to take my place. The crowd that had gathered to watch us fall silent, as nobody wants to face him when he’s in this mood, but the junior Pledges in particular know that taking him on is a good way to prove themselves.

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As a nervous-looking first-year Pledge climbs into the ring, I grab my things and head back to my room. Each step makes my body feel heavier, and I want nothing more than to soak in the bath and rest my aching muscles.

I open my bedroom door and freeze, shocked to see Harper is sitting on my bed, wearing one of my T-shirts. Her school books are spread out

around her, and she looks deep in thought, her pen resting against her lips. She looks up when she hears me enter, a bright smile spreading across her face that quickly falls as she rushes off the bed and over to me.

I close the door as she reaches me, resting her hand on my sore cheek. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Her thumb, smooth and warm, glides across my lower lip, sending a surprising shiver rippling down my spine. The soft scrape of skin on skin is almost imperceptible. When she withdraws her hand, I see a tiny, glistening bead of blood bloom on her fingertip.

My shoulders protest with a sharp ache as I shrug, the muscles burning. I draw her thumb into my mouth, the coppery tang of my own blood filling my senses as I suck it from her skin before saying, “Just training. Bram didn’t go easy on me in the ring.”

Anger flashes across her face as she narrows her eyes on me. “I will have words with him tomorrow,” she states fiercely, looking cute as hell when she’s trying to be threatening.

“I look forward to seeing that,” I tell her, which makes her smile. “Until then, I need to soak in the bath.”

She grabs hold of my hand and pulls me towards my ensuite, and I’m once again grateful that as High Crow, I have the only room with a bath and a walk-in shower. “Come on, I’ll run it for you.”

“Only if you join me,” I tell her with a wink.

She rolls her eyes at me, but we both know she’s not going to turn me down. For once, I’m not even referring to sex. I’m so fucking tired, I don’t have the energy for anything more than just holding her and soaking in the tub.

Even the feel of her silky skin against mine in the water isn’t enough to push away the exhaustion that seems to have seeped into my bones, and my eyelids start to droop as I hold her close. Her rhythmically stroking my arms that are wrapped around her slender waist only makes it worse.

Harper helps me from the bathtub, and uses a fluffy towel to dry us both off. I don’t bother to protest, I’m literally that tired. I just let her dry me as if I’m not capable of doing it myself, before she guides me over to the bed.

After clearing all of her books away, she holds the duvet up so I can slide under it, and I pull her in beside me. She’s barely snuggled into my side before the world goes black, and I let sleep pull me under.



THE GUTTURAL SCREAM TEARS THROUGH THE QUIET NIGHT, JOLTING ME awake. My eyes snap open as chilling whimpers echo in the darkness. My heart hammers against my ribs, and I blink rapidly, trying to clear the haziness from my eyes enough for them to focus. A sliver of moonlight slices through a gap in the heavy curtain, and it's just enough to make out shape outlines.

Another shout startles me, and the bed beside me shakes as Harper begins thrashing around. She's rolled over to the far edge of the bed, so she's too far away to hit me, but I can still feel her violently trembling.

I sit up and lean over her, close enough to see that she's still asleep, and my heart breaks at the way her face is scrunched in pain. She's been getting nightmares regularly, but I had hoped that killing the bastard who dared to hurt her would give her some relief.

"No. No, please. Don't. I-I... No. Law, please," she whimpers, sounding so lost and helpless, even in her sleep.

I reach over and gently place one hand on her cheek, whilst using the other to rock her shoulder. "Harper, sweetheart, can you hear me? It's me, Lawson. You're dreaming, sweetheart. Wake up for me." I keep my voice soft and gentle, not wanting to startle her too much.

Her lashes flutter, but she doesn't wake up, and her sobs continue, so I shake her a little more forcefully. "Harper. Wake up."

She lets out a violent screech as I press against her shoulder, her eyelids flying open as she thrashes against me. Although her eyes are open, she still seems stuck in her nightmares, as she tries to push me off, not knowing it's me.

I try to soothe her, shushing her whilst I hold her down as gently as I can, so she doesn't hurt herself. I whisper reassuring words, letting her know where she is, and that she's safe. When my voice registers, the haze over her beautiful blue eyes clears, and she finally realises where she is.

"Lawson." Tears fill her eyes as she stares at me, her muscles still tense with fear she can't seem to shake.

I swipe my thumb over her cheekbone as she leans into my touch, tears rolling down her face as she stares at me. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

As soon as the words leave my lips, her face crumples and sobs wrack her small, fragile body. I waste no time pulling her over to me, and as I roll onto my back, she curls up against me. Her tears flood my chest as she clutches onto me for dear life, and I wrap my arms around her as tight as I can.

I hold her until the last of her tears have fallen, whispering reassuring words as I remind her she’s safe, that the monster is gone and can never hurt her again. When she finally has control over her breathing again, she looks up at me with red, swollen eyes, the beautiful blue colour still shining bright.

“Thank you.” Her words are barely above a whisper, and she gives me the briefest smile, but it’s enough to cleave open my chest.

“You don’t ever have to thank me for protecting you. I’ll always look after you.” I make sure she can hear the sincerity in my voice as I press a kiss to her forehead.

This time, the smile she gives me is dazzling, and I know I’m a fucking goner. I don’t just want to protect this girl, to keep her safe from harm, I want to give her everything. I will kill anyone who even dares to look at her wrong, just to know she never has another nightmare again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Harper



I'm not even going to pretend I didn't spend the rest of the week—since Lawson made me come in the middle of class—thinking about what the hell I'm going to dress up as for Halloween.

Don't get me wrong, I've been to Halloween parties before, so I've done the whole fancy dress thing several times, but the stakes seem higher now. Not only do I want to impress Lawson—his remark about fucking me harder, depending on my outfit, is on-repeat in my brain—but I also have to impress his rival Houses.

Naturally, Wren was my first point of call, but her suggestion was less than helpful. '*Something slutty*' didn't exactly narrow down my options, though it's presumably what Lawson expects of me.

In the end, when I became really desperate, I barged into Bram's bedroom and asked for his advice too. He gave me several suggestions that all fell within the realms of '*something slutty*', but none of them seemed to fit me, and I was beginning to go insane.

I even contemplated letting Lawson pick for me, but I had a feeling I'd regret that. Besides, if he chooses the outfit, the element of surprise is gone, and I need that if I'm going to show him how sexy I can be.

After a lot of consideration, I realised that was exactly where I was going wrong. I've spent my whole life trying to fade into the background, to look as conservative as possible, and now, trying to be overtly sexy is making me uncomfortable. I've made a lot of progress while I've been with Lawson, but not as much as I thought.

I need to find a happy medium between who I was and who I want to be when I'm with him...and that's how my idea began to take shape. Once I

had the plan and ran with it, I was more than happy.

Lawson, on the other hand, was not pleased when I told him I was getting ready at Wren's, and he could pick me up from there, or I could meet him at Crowhurst House. But I was adamant that I wanted it to be a surprise.

He tried to talk me into getting ready in my dorm, but I shot him down. Wren has all the makeup and hair accessories I need, and it doesn't make sense for her to drag them all to my place.

After taking much longer to get ready than I would like, I stand in front of the mirror, trying to take in the person reflecting back at me—she looks just like me, but not.

The soft, cool fabric of the short white dress hugs my skin, outlining every curve and showcasing my figure. The hem stops mid-thigh, revealing my smooth, creamy legs that appear even longer thanks to the sleek, towering white stilettos.

Thin straps swoop down into a dramatically low neckline, and the ample cleavage on display, sculpted by some discreetly applied tit-tape, is undeniable. The pull of the tape holding firm is a subtle reassurance, since there's no way I could wear a bra—or any underwear, for that matter.

The thin, silky material would show off every crease, so I go without, but that in itself has created more problems. The pale colour of the delicate fabric makes it nearly transparent, my peaked nipples boldly visible beneath. I'm hoping the sheer detail only adds to the costume.

Wren has woven my long, strawberry-blonde hair into a cascade of tight curls that brush against the expanse of my lower back. A few strands have been artfully pulled back, delicately sweeping away from my face, framing my features.

Clipped onto the top of my head, hovering above me, is a fluffy white halo, which glistens under the lights. As I slide the matching feathery wings onto my back, they complete the ethereal feel of my angel costume.

The last element of my look is my makeup, a point of contention with Wren since my arrival. I wanted to keep it simple, adding to the angelic aesthetic I've created, but Wren disagreed. She wanted me to go full glam, pushing me more into the fallen angel category.

In the end, of course, my pushy best friend won, and as I admire her art in the mirror, I hate to say; she was right. The velvety darkness of the smoky eyes, intensified by the thick, black eyeliner, creates a stark contrast

that makes my blue eyes pop, perfectly contrasting the all-white outfit. The bold bright-red gloss transforms my lips, making them appear plump and luscious; the final sultry touch needed to ignite the look.

Wren has managed to hide the black circles under my eyes, courtesy of my nightmares that have me waking up screaming. Although Nigel is gone, I still can't seem to stop what happened from creeping in during the dead of night.

What I never expected was the way Lawson would pull me into his arms, holding me close as I cry, while he promises I'm safe with him—which I already know. He's slain my monster and now he's helping to heal my heart too.

I push the negative thoughts away, and turn my attention back to my reflection. Although I'm more than pleased with how the outfit turned out, my nerves are on edge as I wonder what Lawson will think of it. Will my outfit turn him on as much as I hope?

"All done," Wren declares as she steps out of the bathroom, my eyes widening as I take in my hot-as-hell friend.

She decided to go as the Devil to my angel, and she sure as fuck met the brief, and then some. The vibrant, cherry-red leather mini-dress clings to her body like a second skin, accentuating every curve of her voluptuous figure.

The hem stops even higher than mine, and I worry that if she turns around I'll be able to see the round edges of her arse-cheeks, but the black fishnet tights she's paired it with should offer some coverage. Her black platform boots give her extra height and help her maintain Wren's signature edgy look.

The sweetheart neckline of the strapless dress reveals her impressive cleavage, as the padding she added into the dress boosts her breasts. She is wearing several necklaces that hang down in between, drawing even more attention to them.

Her straight black bob looks sleek and shiny, and she's added a headband that has light-up devil horns on top, making her stand out even more.

I expected her makeup to look similar to mine, but she has kept hers more natural, except for the bright-red lips that match her dress, and I have to admit, it works with her outfit.

There's going to be a lot of men struggling to take their eyes off my friend tonight, but when I tell her that, she just rolls her eyes at me, as if she can't see how fucking gorgeous she is.

"We're going to an Obsidian party, and although I've only known what that means for a short time, I've been around it long enough to know there's going to be a lot of scantily dressed, beautiful women at the party, most of whom are already someone's Prize," Wren says, flipping her hand at me like she doesn't care.

"I can assure you, no matter who is at the party, you will turn heads looking the way you do," I tell her, hoping my sincerity shines through.

She waves me away again as she paces around the room, picking up the things she needs and placing them in the small bag she has in her hand. "We both know I'm not going to pick up an Obsidian Pledge. I mean, they would probably fuck me for just one night, but that would be all. I'm nobody, remember."

I grab hold of my friend's shoulder as she passes, pulling her to a stop before turning her to face me. Even in my heels, she's still several inches taller, which doesn't help when I'm trying to get her to make eye contact.

With my free hand, I reach up and grab her chin, tilting it until she has no choice but to look at me. "You are not a nobody, Wren. Speaking as someone who grew up as part of the Order, I promise, it's a bloody good thing that you didn't. You can be yourself in a way that none of us can.

"Yes, being an Obsidian Order member comes with power and status, but I'd give that up for the freedom to do whatever I want, to love whoever I want...hell, to marry someone I actually love, rather than someone who has been chosen for me.

"While the Order may see you as a nobody, that's what gives you the freedom we all crave, so never think you are less than. I can assure you, there will be more than a few guys at the party with their eyes on you, no matter where you come from."

Wren wraps her arms around me and pulls me into a tight hug, crushing my face into her boobs. "Thank you. I just don't like having men that are off-limits," she jokes, and I take a step back, narrowing my eyes at her when I detect a little something in her tone.

"Are you talking about men in general, or someone specific?"

A slight flush spreads across her cheeks, and she drops her gaze, refusing to look at me, which speaks volumes. "Men in general," she

mutters.

I shake her shoulders, calling her out on her lie. "Bullshit. Who is he?"

She waves me off before turning her back on me, scurrying around once more to put things in her bag or make herself look busy. "Who is who? There's nobody in particular."

"Then why is your voice all high-pitched and nasal, like you're lying to me?"

She turns sharply, glaring at me. "My voice is neither high-pitched nor nasally," she spits, sounding even more like the things she's rebuking.

"You're a terrible liar," I tell her, which only makes her scowl at me even more.

"Says you. Why don't we talk about how you're definitely not falling for the guy you say you still hate?" she snaps, a proud glint in her eyes as she turns the tables on me.

A fiery blush spreads under my skin as my pulse hammers a frantic rhythm against my ribs. The mere thought of those feelings makes my stomach clench with a desperate need to push them away. "I do hate him."

Fuck, even I can hear the uncertainty in my voice.

Wren lets out a harsh, humourless laugh. "You don't hate him. What you feel for him is much closer to the L-word, and I get it...he brought you out of your shell and helped you find this new, feistier version of yourself, and I'm here for that. I just worry the deeper you get, the worse you'll be when he hurts you."

Her words cut deep, and even though she didn't mean to hurt me, she has. I may be pretending I'm not developing feelings for Lawson, but I'm not stupid. I feel my heart thumping when he looks at me, my stomach fluttering when he does sweet things.

My voice is barely above a whisper when I say, "He might not hurt me."

I'm not sure if I'm trying to make Wren believe it or myself. She obviously can hear the pain in my voice, as her rigid, on-the-defensive posture relaxes, and she looks at me with something far too like pity.

"He might not," she agrees as she takes hold of my hand, squeezing it almost condescendingly, which makes it clear she doesn't believe what she's saying.

I'm unable to stop the words from tumbling out, as my mouth moves quicker than my brain. "I don't know how to stop myself from liking him."

Wren squeezes my hand again, a sad smile on her face as she struggles to respond to my, quite frankly, embarrassing confession. “You have to see this the way he does—just sex.”

She says it like it’s the easiest thing in the world to do, and maybe for Lawson it is, but not for me. I don’t know how to separate things. When we have sex, and he brings out this new side of me, making me feel seen and beautiful in a way I never have before, it’s almost impossible not to develop feelings from that.

Now I know why he didn’t want to kiss me, why he sees it as too intimate. When we kissed, it was like the last hurdle shattered around us, giving him an all-access pass to my heart, and I just have to trust he won’t break it, even though I’m almost certain he won’t have a choice.

I nod at my friend and tell her what she wants to hear, even if I don’t believe a word. “I will do that. I’ll see it as just sex.”

Her gaze sharpens, her doubt palpable, but thankfully, a knock at the door cuts off her unspoken accusation. A wave of relief washes over me, knowing the difficult conversation is over, that I was spared the struggle of finding the perfect words.

Wren rushes over to answer the door, straightening out her dress as she goes, and I glimpse the slight flush covering her cheeks. She pulls the door open, and I rush into the bathroom, not quite ready for Lawson to see me yet. I need to gather myself after that shaky conversation.

I’m close enough to hear the conversation happening at the front door. “Well, if you’re the Devil that’s running Hell, I’d like to buy a one-way pass, little fighter,” Bram growls, and Wren giggles like a schoolgirl.

“You’re going to Hell either way,” Lawson adds in his usual blunt tone.

“I expect you both will be,” Wren replies.

Footsteps echo as the guys enter the room; the door closing behind them. “Where’s Harper?” Lawson asks.

There’s a pause, and I can only assume Wren is looking for me. “She was here a second ago. She must be in the bathroom.”

Footsteps start up again, before what sounds like a bit of a scuffle. “You can’t go in and pull her out of the bathroom. Give her a minute,” Bram snaps, no doubt pulling Lawson back from storming in here.

“She’s probably hiding,” Lawson tells him, surprising me with how well he knows me. Then he projects his voice loud enough for me to hear. “Harper, get out here.”

“Bossy arsehole,” Wren chunters as Bram laughs.

I take a deep breath, hoping it will settle my nerves, but after the fifth one, I’m no calmer. Knowing I can’t hide in here all night, I check my appearance one last time in the bathroom mirror, and once I’m certain everything looks how I wanted, I slowly open the door.

Lawson is waiting for me on the other side, so close to the door I can barely see the rest of the bedroom, but once my eyes meet his, it’s like everything falls away and we’re the only ones left standing. We’re trapped in our own bubble, just the two of us staring at each other, the tension between us getting thicker with every silent second that passes.

Lawson is dressed more casually than you’d expect for a Halloween party. He’s wearing his usual black jeans, biker boots, and a tight black T-shirt that shows off his muscles. The only hint of a costume at all is the fake blood dripping from the corner of his lips.

I’m a little sad to see he’s without his usual backwards baseball cap, which does stupid things to the butterflies in my stomach. But his dark, unruly hair, that is starting to curl more at the end from how long it’s gotten, gives him a sexy just-fucked look that makes me want to run my fingers through it even more.

“What are you supposed to be?” I ask, though I think I already know.

He pulls his hand out of his pocket and lifts it to his mouth, and when he drops it, he gives me a deadly-looking smile that shows off the fake fangs he just slipped over his teeth. “I’m a very dangerous vampire.”

I can’t help but smile, as the fake fangs make him sound like he has a lisp, and it’s incredibly endearing. It’s not the greatest costume, but it’s still more than I expected from him.

Lawson is quick to pull the fangs out, not once taking his eyes off me as he does. His gaze, hot as the sun, scorches my skin as it sweeps over me, cataloging every curve with an intense, unwavering focus.

Lawson steps closer, and I gasp, a helpless feeling washing over me, as if I’m prey caught by a predator with no escape. He licks his lower lip, and my eyes are drawn to the movement, my core heating as I remember the feel of his tongue on my body.

As he reaches out and grabs a stray curl hanging over my face, I hold my breath, the tension between us building as he gently tucks it behind my ear, taking another step closer as he does.

He's so close that the warmth radiating from his body is like a palpable heat brushing against my skin. The air is thick with Lawson's distinct, intoxicating scent, and the intensity of the moment makes my head swim.

"You are a fucking gorgeous angel," he whispers, stroking his finger along the fluffy edge of my halo. "I can't wait to corrupt you."

His smile twists into a wicked smirk, one that screams of a dirty promise, and I want to affect him as much as he does me. Knowing I'm playing with fire, I reach out and grab his hand, placing it on my thigh. I spread out his fingers, feeling the soft, silky material beneath his touch, before moving his hand underneath my dress.

I lean in close, whispering so only he can hear. "I think you've already corrupted me, since I'm not wearing any underwear."

He gasps as his grip on my hip tightens, and I smile when his eyes darken with lust, his fingers reaching to confirm that he can't feel the outline of my knickers. "I thought angels were supposed to be good," he says, his voice deep and gravelly with desire.

I stand on my tip-toes, reaching up until my lips are touching his ear, and goosebumps erupt over his flesh from my proximity. "Maybe I was an angel until I fell."

The words came out completely different than I intended. What was supposed to be a pun about fallen angels turning bad, suddenly sounded very much like me confessing my feelings for him. Saying that I fell—as in, I fell for him.

Fucking Wren and her words messing with my head.

Lawson's gaze is fixed on mine, and his blank, emotionless expression sets my nerves on edge, as I don't know how Lawson has interpreted what I just said.

I quickly try to correct myself. "I mean, I'm a fallen angel that was corrupted into falling from heaven."

I wince at the piss-poor attempt at covering up what I'm almost certain I meant to say. Because Wren has now forced me to acknowledge how I feel, and I can't deny that I like Lawson—a lot. I'm falling for him, despite knowing I shouldn't, but there's not a lot I can do about it.

I can't put any distance between us. Not when I gifted myself to him for the full year, and he makes me stay with him nearly every night. I can't close off my heart and simply enjoy the sex; it's just not who I am. So I'm

going to have to roll with it and deal with the inevitable fallout when it happens.

Though Lawson's expression remains blank and unreadable, the familiar glint of molten silver has returned to his eyes, sparking with a fierce intensity that makes me exhale a shaky breath of relief. "I'm going to enjoy seeing just how far you've fallen tonight. Come on, don't want to be late," he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me behind him.

My head is literally spinning as I try to process what he just said. Did he mean fallen in the same way I did, or is he making a fucking angel pun? I have no idea, but tonight isn't the night to have that conversation, if there ever will be a good time.

I'm not ready to lose Lawson, and I think that's exactly what will happen when he realises I'm in deeper than I should be. He doesn't care for me the way I do him, so he'll have no problems casting me aside and moving on to someone less clingy.

I only hope he leaves the broken pieces of my heart behind so I can attempt to glue them back together, but I suspect some parts will always belong to him, leaving me not quite whole.

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CHAPTER THIRTY- ONE *Lawson*

Seeing Harper in that pure white dress, looking like an innocent angel just waiting to be tarnished by me, is like the worst form of fucking torture. Going to a bloody Hawk Halloween party is the last thing I want to do when I could have Harper tied up, my cock buried deep in her tight cunt while she calls my name like I'm the God she worships.

But Xander made it clear our presence is mandatory, and we're not allowed to just stick our heads in and leave two minutes later—which I admit was my backup plan.

To say the other Houses are supposed to be our rivals, they make a fucking big deal about us spending time together. They hope that when the time comes, and we're brothers instead of enemies, we won't try to kill each other as often.

Personally, I believe Xander has a completely different motive for forcing these events on us. He's a competitive asshole, and there's no better way for him to show that he rules over the most powerful House than to have us boasting in front of the others.

I'm genuinely not interested in any of that political bullshit, not when my dick is throbbing with an insatiable need to have Harper. My ancestors will be rolling in their graves at the very thought, as nothing should be more important to me than becoming an Obsidian Council member, and until a few weeks ago, that absolutely was the case...then Harper gifted herself to me, and now she consumes my every thought.

"I've never been to Hawksmoor House," Harper tells me as we approach the large brown-stone mansion on the opposite side of campus to where we're based.

I furrow my brow at her revelation. “What? You’ve never been to their annual Halloween party before? Or any of the other events they throw?”

She shakes her head, biting her bright-red lip. “No. I was only ever allowed to attend Crow events.”

Despite knowing his name will taste like poison on my tongue, I have to ask her, and I can’t do it without bringing him up. “Didn’t Ryan, the douchebag, ever take you? These events are supposed to be a great excuse for people to show off either their Prize or their Betrothed.”

Even though most first and second-year Pledges have girlfriends, showing them off doesn’t add to your status. If you’re Betrothed, with a marriage contract in place for when you graduate, that’s something to fucking shout about, as it means your family is rich and powerful enough to have secured a match before you’ve even graduated. This means your Pledge ranking doesn’t even factor in.

Ryan is from a wealthy, powerful family, and he’s a high-ranking Pledge—despite living in my shadow—but having a marriage contract in place with someone like Harper, who was high-ranking before her father’s fall from grace, that would have cemented his superior status for all to see. So there must be a bloody good reason he wouldn’t want to show Harper off.

“Ryan said the parties were too wild for a girl like me,” she admits, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “He basically implied I was too vanilla to enjoy myself, and that I’d probably be bored.”

I let out a harsh laugh at Ryan’s fucking stupidity. “He must be fucking blind to not have seen the real you. I could see through your mask, and I barely knew you.”

“What do you mean?” She leans closer to me, her gaze locked on mine, as if the answer is important to her.

“Anyone who looked at you and truly saw the real you would have known you were playing a role. The good girl, the shy virgin, the meek little Order Wife...all were masks that forced you to hide the real Harper from the rest of the world.

“But every time you answered me back with your smart mouth, I saw the feisty girl hidden beneath all the expectations and rules. It hasn’t taken much for you to shed that old skin, to find the real you, and embrace the parts of yourself that you kept hidden for so long. If Ryan had actually looked, he would have seen what I see.”

Her breath hitches, her eyes darkening as a shy smile spreads across her face, before she leans over and captures my lips with hers, stealing a bruising kiss I'm more than happy to give.

When she pulls back, her smile is bright and my pulse races. "Thank you. I thought tying myself to you would be just another role I had to play, something new I had to pretend to be, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

"You have given me a freedom I never even dreamed of. You push me to be who I really am. You fight to see the side of me that everyone else said I had to keep hidden, and I'm so grateful for that."

I smile at the confidence in her voice...and the happiness I can hear without seeing the bright grin lighting up her face. I want to puff out my chest with pride that I've been able to do that for her.

"I'm proud of you for breaking down the walls you've hidden behind, but I can promise you, we still have a long way to go. We've barely scratched the surface of exploring your sexuality and your fantasies," I tell her, my voice deepening, a low rumble that echoes the molten promise coursing through my veins like lava, heating me from the inside out.

I love the way she shifts in the worn leather chair, the soft scrape of the material can be heard as she rubs her thighs together. Using the subtle friction of fabric against her skin to soothe the ache my words have ignited. It's a stark reminder of my own burning desire.

I ache to possess her, to lose myself in an explosive release until the world dissolves into a shower of blinding stars. And with that thought, a familiar frustration resurfaces like a sour taste in my mouth as I curse the fucking Hawks and their infuriating party.

"We're here," Bram announces as he turns off the engine, having parked off to the side of the house, next to the large courtyard. He climbs out and rushes around to the passenger side, opening the door for Wren, which confuses me, as my best friend is anything but a gentleman.

I climb out, holding my hand outstretched for Harper to take, and once she's out, I lace our fingers together. I want her by my side the whole time we're here, as I don't trust any of the other House Pledges and their grabby hands.

"Wow, this building is beautiful," Wren states, sounding almost awestruck as she tilts her head back, trying to take in as much of the vast mansion as she can.

Hawksmoor House has a very different feel to Crowhurst. They're both grand in their own way, but Hawksmoor seems bigger, as it's split into an East and West wing, with communal rooms in the middle.

While our House is old and gothic, Hawksmoor is more modern and spacious. It's nowhere near as rustic as Falconridge, or as pompous as Eaglemont, but it is extravagant in its own way.

Some people argue that the Houses reflect the personalities of the Pledges assigned to them, and, to some degree, that's true. Crowhurst House is dark and imposing, but there's something almost understated about it. You can't tell what you'll find inside by looking at the exterior.

Although it's mysterious and gothic, reflecting our ability to watch from the shadows while we assess the situation, there's a subtle quietness which matches the way we strike.

Hawksmoor House has a more modern, open-plan setting, which fits with the way the Hawks like to watch. They're observant and methodical, but have been known to strike in explosive violence, letting their emotions rule them in the end.

Falconridge House is the most rustic of them all, looking almost like an old-fashioned log cabin—just a much larger version. It's subtle and quiet, but modern fittings show how each new generation of Pledges has added to them. This reflects the Falcons' perfectionism and their ability to remain unimposing until it's too late.

Finally, there's Eaglemont House, which any Crow will refer to as a fucking eyesore. It's a large white marble mansion complete with columns at the entrance and gold accents throughout—very similar to my childhood home. The sleek modern finish makes it seem cold but rich, which sums up every asshole Eagle I've ever met. They all have massive egos and are ruled by their pride, and each kill is a show of their power.

I'm a little biased when I say Crowhurst House is the most beautiful, but Hawksmoor isn't as bad when compared with the others. Still, I don't trust any of the assholes inside, and I won't be letting Harper out of my sight.

Bram knocks on the door, but doesn't wait for someone to answer before letting himself in, guiding Wren beside him. A Hawk Pledge with short blond hair rushes over to the door, making it look like he's holding it open for us, when we're almost already inside.

“Welcome to Hawksmoor House. May your evening be filled with the darkest horrors,” he states blandly, like he’s repeated the same line a hundred times already. If it weren’t for the clown smile painted on his face, I’m sure he’d be frowning.

“I hate clowns,” Harper mutters from beside me as I pull her inside. She sidles up closer to me when her gaze flicks over the numerous clown decorations throughout the large entranceway.

The Hawks’ Halloween Party has earned its reputation for all the right reasons, and they throw out all the stops to decorate the place. If you picture the tackiest haunted house, then give the owner an unlimited budget, this is what you get. It may not be my thing, but I can appreciate the effort.

The Welcome Party we’re well-known for is nothing more than an excuse for people to get pissed and fuck, so they’ve definitely outdone us when it comes to effort. All we have to do is make sure there’s plenty of booze and condoms available.

The further into the house we get, the louder the music becomes, and the rooms seem to get smaller now they’re full of people. I follow Bram as he leads us into the dining room, which they’ve turned into a large bar.

“What do you want to drink?” I ask Harper.

She narrows her gaze at me, seeming almost suspicious. “Am I allowed to drink?”

My lips tip up into a smile. She’s learning my rules, and that makes me very happy. “As long as you stay with me and don’t get wasted, that’s fine.”

She gives me a small nod. “I’ll just take a glass of white wine, please.”

I pass her order on to the Hawk Pledge running the bar, keeping my eye on him as he pours the drink. I don’t trust anyone after what happened at Viper’s. Handing it straight to Harper once I receive it, I’m mesmerised by the way her throat bobs as she takes a mouthful, my cock throbbing at the sight.

Everything about this girl turns me on, and it scares me just how much I want her. When Wren has her drink, she takes hold of my girl’s hand, which I reluctantly had let go of to get our glasses, and pulls her towards the next room. “Come on, I want to dance.”

Harper laughs at her friend’s enthusiasm and allows herself to be pulled along. She looks over at me, tilting her head in the direction she’s being pulled, as if she’s silently telling me to come too. What she doesn’t realise

is that my feet are already moving; the invisible string tethering us together prevents me from being too far away from her.

I tell myself it's just for her protection, but the deepest part of my brain laughs at that pathetic excuse. In reality, I just can't bear to be apart from her for too long.

We step into a vast reception room, which has been stripped of its usual furniture. Gone are the comfortable sofas and plush armchairs, replaced by tall bar tables and a scattering of stools along the walls. A raised stage dominates the far end, with a DJ booth precisely in its center, bright lights glinting off the equipment. On either side stands polished metal poles, just waiting for someone to dance on them.

The room pulses with the harsh, erratic glare of the strobe lights, as the dim glow of the small lamps on the tall tables offers little additional brightness. The floor trembles with the deep thumping of the bass, a sound so powerful it seems to vibrate through my bones, yet there's an entrancing, almost mesmerising quality to the music as it washes over me.

Harper is standing beside me, taking in the mass of people who are on the dance floor, their bodies moving in time with the music, and when she sways her hips, I'm not entirely sure she's even aware she's doing it.

Wren turns to her with a big smile on her face and tugs on her hand once more, pulling her into the crowd. Before she allows herself to be pulled away, Harper reaches out with her free hand and squeezes mine, giving me her beautiful smile. It's not like she's asking for my permission, more that she doesn't want to part from me—or maybe that's my wishful thinking.

As Wren and Harper dance together, Bram sidles closer to me, that cocky smirk of his in place. "You're so fucking whipped," he laughs.

He's just trying to wind me up, so I roll my eyes at him, keeping my thoughts to myself. There's no point disagreeing with him; he'll have a rebuttal argument in place already, and it will be never-ending.

As the song changes to something almost sultry, a girl with long black hair climbs onto the stage, and stumbles over to the pole on the right side of the DJ. She's clearly had at least one too many to drink, but that doesn't stop her as she begins to spin around the pole in time with the music.

Harper and Wren catch sight of her and make their way closer to the stage, so Bram and I follow, making sure they stay out of trouble. The girl is attracting quite an audience, but she seems almost lost in her own world,

moving around the pole as if it's an extension of herself. She clearly knows how to dance, and it's not her first time on the pole.

A preppy-looking blond guy is standing beside the stage with a face like a slapped arse, glaring at her. "Maddie, get the fuck down, now!" he shouts, trying to be heard over the music that's even louder here as we're next to the speaker.

The girl doesn't even look his way; she continues dancing around the pole, contorting her body into impressive shapes that seem to get more difficult as the song progresses.

"She is so good," Harper shouts, though I'm not sure who she's talking to. "I wish I could do that."

I reach out and pull her back a step, pressing her spine against my chest as I wrap my arm around her waist to keep her close. I move my lips beside her ear, loving the way she shivers under my touch. "If you want to dance around a pole, I'm the only person who gets to watch."

She chuckles as she presses her arse into my hard cock, swaying her hips in a fucking maddening way. "Someone is overly possessive."

I bite her neck, just hard enough to leave a mark. "Too fucking right. I want everyone to know who you belong to."

Harper doesn't respond to that verbally, but she continues to rock her hips to the rhythm of the music, grinding against me as we watch the girl on the pole.

The blond guy is still shouting at her, but she's not even looking his way. When she does glance out into the crowd, pulling her out of the dance for just a few brief moments, her gaze seeks out the man who is leaning against the wall beside us.

His dark-brown hair, with tiny curls at the tips, is a tousled mess, as if he's been running his fingers through it frequently. He's a tall, lean figure, and his arms are a canvas of intricate tattoos that creep like dark ivy up his neck. The stark, all-black clothing adds to his brooding presence. Even without seeing the ring glinting on his finger, it's obvious he's a Hawk Pledge.

While I continue swaying to the music with Harper in my arms, I lean closer to Bram, making sure he can hear me over the noise. "Who is that?" I motion towards the guy with a nod of my head.

Bram looks over in that direction, seeing who I'm referring to. The whole time I've been looking at him, he hasn't once taken his eyes off the

girl on the stage, but his blank expression gives nothing away. Luckily, Bram is a massive gossip, so I'm sure he'll know.

"That's Eli Peterson; he's a second-year Hawk Pledge. If I remember correctly, he's ranked second, while the blond guy in front of the stage, Matty, is first," Bram explains, his animated voice making it seem more exciting than it is.

"What aren't you saying?"

He motions to the girl on the stage. "That's Maddie. She's Betrothed to Matty."

That shocks me, as she hasn't once acknowledged his presence, let alone him shouting at her. "She keeps looking at Eli," I point out, which has Bram bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement.

He nods quickly, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You saw that too? He can't take his eyes off her."

I shrug, unable to see why that's a problem—other than the Betrothal. "So?"

Bram leans in closer as he says, "Eli is her stepbrother."

Now that makes things more interesting. Harper, who I hadn't realised was even listening to the conversation, turns and says, "She's not looking at him like he's her brother."

As she says that, Maddie twirls around the pole, her heated gaze locked with Eli's, who hasn't taken his eyes off her, despite his expression seeming almost bored. Then again, any good Obsidian Pledge should be able to hide their emotions and intentions, and it's clear Eli is an expert—well, apart from the obsessive staring that's giving him away.

"Before tonight, I was under the impression they hated each other. Neither were happy when their parents got married, and they've been fighting ever since," Bram explains.

Harper chuckles as she looks over her shoulder at me. "There's a fine line between love and hate."

Her mention of the L-word is like a knife to my gut, and I freeze, no longer swaying along with the music. Harper's eyes widen when she realises what she's said. I mean, it's not like she's admitting how she feels, but it's pretty damn close.

We both know we can't fall in love, as we don't have a future together. Catching feelings is only going to hurt us both in the long run.

Harper opens and closes her mouth, as if she's trying to find something to say that will undo her previous sentence. "I just mean, hate isn't always what it seems."

I nod, my lips pressed into a tight line, and Harper lifts her glass, downing the rest of her wine in one gulp before putting it on the table beside me. "I'm going to get another drink," she says, but I keep my arm tightly around her waist.

"Bram will get it. You stay here where I can see you," I tell her, which earns me a scowl, but she doesn't argue.

I pass our drinks order to Bram, who grabs hold of Wren and drags her along with him. To change the subject, I lean in close to Harper's ear once more. "I bet you'd look sexy dancing like that."

Harper looks over her shoulder at me, suddenly shy. "I'm not sure I'd be very good at it."

I place the bottle of beer I have in one hand down on the table, before grabbing both of her hips, pulling her hard against me. Her hips are swaying in time to the music; I just help move them even more, making sure she can feel the way my dick throbs every time she grinds against me.

"I think you're pretty fucking great at it," I tell her as I pepper soft kisses across her neck.

She reaches back and wraps her arms around my neck, and the movement causes her to arch her back, pushing out her fucking gorgeous tits. I groan as she pulls on my hair, holding me close as she tries to mimic some moves Maddie is doing on the pole.

My cock throbs painfully against the confines of my jeans, and it's only made worse when I slide a hand lower, feeling the silky softness of her skin as I slip beneath the hem of her dress.

There are people all around us, caging us in, and a quick glance confirms nobody is paying us any attention. I see Bram over by the wall, having not made it to the bar. Wren's back is against it, and his hand is wrapped around her throat, but she doesn't seem to be pushing him away.

I have no idea what Bram is doing, but he's playing with fire and needs to stay away from Wren. I just hope Harper doesn't see them, as I'll never hear the end of it.

Luckily, she's far too distracted by the way I'm scraping my fingers along her sensitive flesh, edging closer to her core. I slowly make my way

to her slit, dipping the tip of my finger in just enough to feel how soaked she is.

“You’re already so fucking wet for me, dirty girl,” I growl against her cheek, a moan slipping past her lips when I reach her clit.

I move my fingers away quickly, leaving her pouting as she rocks her hips toward my hand, desperately seeking the contact I’m denying her. “Please,” she begs.

Giving in to her sweet plea, I slide my finger between her folds, trailing it through her slit before pressing against her clit, drawing a deep moan from her throat.

She presses her arse against my throbbing length, the friction sending a jolt through me. With a soft sigh, she begins to rock, her hips swaying rhythmically against my palm. As I glide my thumb over her sensitive peak, a tremor runs through her, a gasp escaping her lips.

Throwing her head back onto my shoulder, I tenderly kiss her cheek. As she moves her hips against my hand in time with the music, her mouth falls open, and I slide two fingers into her dripping cunt.

We’re both so lost in each other, it’s like we don’t even realise—or care—that we’re in the middle of the dance floor, surrounded by people in Halloween outfits. No one is paying us any attention, and if they were, they’d have to look closely to see we’re doing more than just dancing.

Harper turns her face and captures my lips with hers, stealing a bruising kiss as she tilts her pelvis, pushing my fingers deeper inside. I swallow her whimpers that only grow louder when I stroke my thumb over her clit harder, driving her closer to her release.

Her pussy walls tighten around me, her hips moving more frantically as she chases her release, my fingers curling in just the right way to help her see stars.

“Oh, fuck. Please, Law... Please, can I... Oh, shit, can I come?” she begs, pressing quick kisses against my lips in between each sweet plea.

I press my fingers in deeper, curling them as I swipe my thumb over her clit as quickly as I can, whilst trying to ignore the ache growing in my balls. I refuse to come in my trousers like a fucking teenager who’s never had sex.

“Come for me, sweetheart,” I tell her, capturing her lips straight after so I can swallow the cries of pleasure as her orgasm rips through her.

Harper trembles within my hold, her pussy fluttering around my fingers before gripping them tight, her whole body shuddering as her release floods

her system. I take all of her cries and whimpers, loving the way she screams my name before her eyes flutter under the weight of her desire.

When she finally comes down from the orgasm, her body sagging against mine, I gently pull my fingers from her dripping cunt, loving how she hisses from the loss. I push them into her mouth and she doesn't hesitate to lick them clean, grinding her arse against my hard length as she does.

"Come on, I'm not done with you yet," I tell her as I grab hold of her hand and pull her along behind me. She quickly straightens her dress and allows me to drag her to the closest door, which I know leads outside.

There are a lot of people gathered at the back of the house, enjoying the cool night air and the quieter atmosphere. Still, there are too many people for what I have planned, but I know where there will be fewer.

I turn the corner and keep going until we reach the large garage, following the path that leads to the entrance. Just before you enter the garage, there's an alley that leads to the front of the house, but only someone exiting the garage would use it.

There's a wrought-iron fence lining each side of the alley, sitting on top of a small brick wall no higher than my knees. I push Harper against the iron bars, stepping into her space to cage her in. I take hold of her hands and move them where I want them.

I wrap her hands around a bar on either side of her head, making sure she's holding onto each one tightly, her fluffy halo hovering between them. "Don't let go," I tell her, squeezing my hand around hers in emphasis, and when I release them, her fist remains tightly around the iron bars.

I push up her dress until it's bunched around her waist, exposing her to me. I give her a cocky smirk as I trace my finger over the inked letters on her mound, my dick twitching in a way that suggests I'll never get used to seeing my name on her body. "I enjoy seeing this instead of your knickers."

She rolls her eyes at me, but her pupils are wide with lust as she tries to hide how she glances down at my name. "I can't always go without underwear."

I grab hold of her hips, as if she never said a word, and lift her legs off the ground. She doesn't need me to tell her what to do; she wraps her legs around my waist on instinct.

Keeping one hand on her hip, I use the other to unfasten my jeans' button, before sliding the zipper down and finally freeing my aching length.

I let out a sigh of relief as I wrap my fist around the base of my cock, squeezing just enough to give me a little pain with my pleasure.

I slide the hand on her hip around to her arse, and lift her just enough to line up the tip of my dick with her dripping wet entrance. I sink straight into her, not stopping until she's taken all of my length.

We both moan loudly as my cock fills her wet cunt, her walls stretching to accommodate me. No matter how many times I fuck her, Harper's pussy still feels as tight as a glove wrapped around my dick, like she was made just for me.

I'm already so close to the edge, I can't hold back. I fuck into her with deep, fast thrusts, making her take all of my length, and all she can do is hold on. Her grip on the iron fence tightens until her knuckles turn white, and her legs wrapped around my waist grip me tight, making it clear she doesn't want me to stop—not that I fucking would.

"Fuck, Harper. Your cunt is so fucking tight, wrapped around my cock like a silky glove. You feel so good, sweetheart," I tell her as I press kisses across her lips, along the line of her jaw, and down her neck.

"So deep," she mutters, her eyes rolling as she tries to meet each of my thrusts with one of her own. "Please, Law."

"Tell me what you want, sweetheart."

"You, always," she cries, making my pulse race. "More."

Not wanting to let my girl down, I thrust into her more frantically, hitting that sweet spot deep inside that makes her cry out, begging for more. My balls are aching and throbbing, letting me know I'm edging closer to my release, but I sure as shit aren't getting there before she does.

I reach between her legs and find her sensitive clit, pressing my thumb against it as I sink my cock in deep, dragging a guttural moan from her throat. Harper's pleas become almost incoherent as she rocks her hips, trying to meet my thrusts, whilst digging her heels into my arse, holding me in position.

It only takes a few swipes of my thumb, and she's a goner. Her eyes roll as her moans become high-pitched, her breath leaving her in short, desperate pants.

"Please... Oh, shit... Please, Law. I-I'm... Oh, Lawson, can I... Can I come?" she moans, writhing against my hand.

I nibble along her neck before pressing my thumb hard against her clit as I growl, "Come for me, Harper."

Like the good girl she is, she comes on my command, her body shaking and trembling beneath my touch as her cunt grips my cock so hard I can't move.

The feel of her tight walls spasming around my length is all it takes to push me over the edge, and I groan loudly as I shoot my load deep inside her. Harper cries out my name as she takes everything I give her, milking every drop from my spent cock.

By the time we come down from the high of our release, we're both panting, our cheeks flushed and our lips swollen. She's wearing my teeth marks on her neck, as my cum floods her cunt, and I've never felt more like she's mine.

I kiss her passionately, feeling her wrap her legs around me tighter as she kisses me back with just as much force, like she can't get enough of me either. When we pull apart, I suddenly realise how exposed we are and that someone could discover us at any moment.

I pull out of her, and let her legs fall to the floor, though I keep my hands on her hips until I'm sure she's found her footing. Still, she doesn't let go of her hold on the bars, looking to me for permission.

"You can let go, sweetheart. You did so well," I tell her, loving the way her lips tip into the cutest smile at my praise.

She reaches down between her legs, glaring at me when she feels my cum sliding down her thighs. "I don't have any underwear to stop this from going everywhere," she complains, and it only makes me smirk harder.

"I like knowing my cum is dripping down your thighs. Nobody will ever doubt you're mine then," I tell her, pulling her to my side as I help to straighten her dress.

She rolls her eyes at me, but her smile is still there, and I wonder if she actually likes me being possessive over her. Even if she doesn't, she'll get used to it. She's mine, and I'm never giving her up, no matter how much I have to fight for her.

CHAPTER THIRTY- TWO

Harper



It's been almost six weeks since Halloween, and to say my feelings for Lawson have deepened would be a massive understatement. It's to be expected when I spend nearly every free minute with him.

We have explored things sexually that I didn't even dare to dream about, and he knows my body intimately, as if I were created just for him. He has touched and kissed every inch of my flesh, learning which parts are sensitive, while marking me along the way.

There's always at least one patch of skin that bears his mark, and not just the tattoo of his name that's now healed and looks like it has always been there.

Even though I know he enjoys making me submit to him, or exploring every sexual fantasy either of us has ever had, that's all I know. I have no idea how he actually feels. Given how often we fuck, he must like me a little. He's just not someone who wears his heart on his sleeve, or his emotions on his face, and that's left me guessing.

There are times when he lets his guard down around me, and those are the moments when I really fall for him, but they're also the most confusing. He shows me a side to himself that nobody else sees, but I'm not sure that means anything. Yet when he smiles, it's like he's smiling just for me, and my heart melts for him.

I'm not sure if I'm reading too much into it because I want Lawson to like me as much as I do him. He's always been honest that he doesn't do relationships, and that I'm just his Prize, but sometimes, I'm sure even he can tell we're so much more than that. Maybe he just doesn't want to see it.

After everything Lawson has done for me, the freedom he's given me, maybe I want to see something that just isn't there. Because Lawson has helped me find a version of myself that I didn't think could ever exist. He pushes me to not think about all the restrictions that were placed on me in the past, and to just be myself. It's a privilege I never expected, particularly not through tying myself to him.

I can finally think for myself. I can wear whatever I want, and say whatever I want, even if that means swearing or voicing my opinions. Lawson encourages me to use my voice, to ask for what I need, and that's something I never thought I'd have.

I thought that if I surrendered to Lawson, he would own and use me as he pleased, and I would lose the last bit of myself that I held onto after Dad's arrest, when we lost everything. But the opposite happened. In my submission to him, I found a life I didn't think was possible.

Don't get me wrong, I still give myself to him in any way he chooses, but the difference is...it's my choice. I chose Lawson. I choose to give him every part of me, so he can bend me to his will and ruin me in any way he wants—and I love every second.

But as my freedom has grown, my bitterness over the life I had before has continued to sprout its ugly head, and I'm starting to resent every time I see the number on my phone letting me know Dad is calling from prison.

I love my dad with everything I have; he's the only family I have left, but I also blame him for forcing me into a box that I don't belong in anymore. And each time we talk, I get the awful feeling that once they clear his name and release him; he expects me to go back into that box without question. Maybe that's why I haven't pushed Lawson to help me as much as I should have.

I'm standing in the middle of the university quad, staring at the number on my phone, trying to decide if I'm going to answer. I don't get to speak to him all that much, since he spends a lot of his time in solitary confinement, where nobody can try to kill him. But the last couple of times we've spoken has ended with us arguing, and I hate that more than hearing how much he's suffering in that hellhole.

A low hum of hurried footsteps echoes in the distance, a collective rush of students eager to escape the biting December cold that nips at their exposed skin as they hurry to class. Beneath their feet, a vibrant contrast of crimson and gold frozen leaves crunch softly on the grey concrete, adding a

splash of warmth to the otherwise stark landscape of weathered stone buildings.

I take a deep breath and push the thoughts of our arguments aside as I click answer, listening to the automated message that plays every time, asking if I'm willing to take a call from an inmate. Once I select yes, I wait for the clicking noise that indicates we've been connected.

"*Harper?*" My dad's voice echoes in my ear, and tears fill my eyes at the pain he's trying to hide from me.

"It's me, Dad. I'm here."

"*Oh, Harper. It's so good to hear your voice. How are you?*" I ignore the deep sadness that sounds almost like longing in his voice, as I try to stop my heart from breaking.

"I'm good. I have missed you, Dad." As soon as the words leave my lips, I know how much I mean them. These short phone calls will never be enough. I want to see him and have him hold me, but we both know that's not an option while he's in prison.

"*I miss you too, buttercup. I'm sorry for the way our call ended last time. It's so frustrating being stuck in here, not able to help you at all. How are things with you?*"

At the reminder of our previous argument, my nerves kick in, as I'm sure whatever I tell him will only lead us back to the same issue we have every time we talk. He might not be able to see the changes in me, but he can hear them, and he's not happy.

"Things are good. Classes are going well. We're just prepping for our end of term exams," I say, hoping to use schoolwork to distract him from conversations about my personal life.

Unfortunately, Dad seems to be a glutton for punishment, and he doesn't take the bait at all. "*That's good. I know you'll pass easily. How are things with Lawson? Is he keeping you safe?*"

I cringe, wondering what I can say to stop this conversation from going sideways like all the others have. "Yeah, everything is good. I haven't had any run-ins with danger, so I can't complain." I try to keep my tone jokey, but it doesn't work.

"*It sounds like you're spending a lot of time with him.*"

My brow furrows as I reminisce over what I just said, wondering how he made that connection. "I never said that."

Dad lets out a low groan that echoes through the phone. *"I've heard that you're spending a lot of time together. You were seen together at the Hawks' Halloween Party."*

My mouth drops open in shock. "Wow, so you're in solitary confinement, and still you're able to hear gossip about my life." I don't even try to hide my annoyance. *How is a man in solitary confinement capable of stalking me?*

"It's not gossip, buttercup. You're my daughter. Of course, I want to make sure you're okay," he explains, but it does nothing to soothe the fury flooding my veins.

"It doesn't sound like you're making sure I'm okay. It sounds more like you're keeping tabs on me and Lawson," I snap.

He lets out another frustrated groan that does nothing to quell the annoyance growing within me. *"Look, I know that being Lawson's Prize means you have to do things that, quite frankly, I don't even want to think about. But I need you to try to keep them behind closed doors. Do whatever you can to convince Lawson to keep things with you private."*

I shake my head in confusion. "Why does it matter?"

"Look, the Obsidian Council has massively let me down by failing to get me out of here and help me clear my name, so when I'm free, I plan to hold it against them. I will ensure they give you back the status you lost when you were forced to give up your virginity. But the more Pledges that see you with Lawson, the harder it will be for me to find you a decent Order Husband when this is all over."

The words seem to ring around my head on repeat as I stand there in silence, mulling over the plans my dad is making without even discussing them with me first.

My head throbs like a fierce drumbeat against my skull, as a hot, bitter tide of anger surges through my veins, a palpable heat that prickles my skin. As the pressure builds, and a tight knot forms in my chest, I can no longer contain the storm raging within.

"I don't want to be a fucking Order Wife," I shout, startling us both.

"Harper Westmore, watch your language," Dad snaps back, sounding baffled by my outburst.

"No, Dad, I will not watch my language, and I'm not going to tell Lawson that we need to keep things behind closed doors. Even if I told him that, he wouldn't listen, and honestly, I wouldn't want him to." The words

rush out of me, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, I don't censor them. I let my dad hear exactly what I'm thinking.

"*You like him.*" Although it's said as a statement, I don't miss the hope that he might be wrong.

"I do," I reply confidently, holding my head high even though he can't see me.

Dad lets out a long, frustrated groan, and I can imagine him running his fingers through his greying hair in frustration, the way I've seen him do so many times before.

"*Harper, you can't like him. I know you don't want to hear that, but it's true. You are Lawson's Prize, nothing more. And while I'll forever be grateful to him for keeping you safe while I can't, I don't appreciate the way you're changing for him. Your time with him will come to an end very soon, and you have to think about the future that comes after Lawson.*"

Each word is like a dagger to my heart, as he reminds me of all the things I'm choosing to ignore. I know my time with Lawson has been numbered since the start, that the sands of time are falling, pushing us further away from each other, but I've been holding out hope that something will come along to change that. My dad has voiced every fear I've kept hidden deep down, and the pain is unbearable.

"I'm not changing for him, I'm changing because of him," I say, my voice barely above a whisper as I try to explain the ways Lawson has made me better. "He's the only person who has ever taken the time to get to know the real me. He has never tried to change me, to make me into something I'm not. He pushes me to be the person I want to be.

"So, yes, our time together may be limited, but when it ends, I will never go back to the person I was before. Now that I've found myself, I won't ever let that go."

A dark, humourless laugh escapes my dad, its tone bordering on nasty. "*You sound like a lovesick teenager, Harper, living in a foolish dreamworld. That's not real life. In our world, you will be whoever your husband wants you to be. Fucking Lawson shouldn't be putting these foolish ideas in your head.*"

The anger bubbling under the surface bursts free, and I can't hold back. "This is nobody's fucking fault except yours. If you had never gotten arrested, my world would never have imploded, and I wouldn't have agreed to be Lawson's Prize. If it weren't for you fucking things up, I'd still be

with Ryan, pretending I was happy living a life in the shadows, looking sweet and pretty instead of having a voice of my own.

“You might not be happy with the way things have worked out—not the way I am—but you have nobody else to blame for this except yourself. You can want me to change all you like, but I will not go backwards.”

As soon as the last words leave my lips, I let out a relieved sigh, the heaviness on my shoulders easing now that I’ve gotten it off my chest. I hate that I yelled at my dad, and that I blamed him for getting arrested, but it was something that needed to be said.

Now that I’ve tasted freedom, there’s no going back for me. Even if Lawson isn’t part of my future—fuck, does that thought hurt—I still plan on being this version of myself.

“Harper—” I can hear the plea in his voice, so I cut him off before he gets the chance to say anything more.

“Look, Dad. I’ve done everything you’ve ever asked of me, and I’ve always tried to make you proud. And while I still want to do that, I will not sacrifice my own happiness or freedom to get it.”

Silence sits heavily between us, almost as if neither of us knows what to say to get past this. I don’t think it’s something we’re ever going to agree on.

That’s when the realisation hits that I want Dad to stay in prison for a little longer. Even though he hates it there, and his life is on the line every second of the day, the thought of him getting out scares me. While he’s inside, I can hold on to this life for just a little longer.

Fuck, how much of a terrible daughter am I that I hope my dad stays in a dangerous prison, even though I know he’s innocent, because I’m not ready to give up whatever this thing with Lawson is yet?

I’m certain Dad will do everything in his power to make me end things the moment he’s free, so he can align me with someone who will boost our name and status back to where it was, but I don’t want that. I don’t even think it’s something the Council can grant.

Dad’s holding out hope he can change their minds, but the Obsidian Order rules have been in place forever. When Lawson took my virginity, he stole any future I might have had as an Obsidian Order Wife, and while that doesn’t bother me, Dad won’t stop until he finds a loophole to get around the Council.

After what feels like forever, Dad breaks the silence, and my heart aches when I hear the pain laced in his voice. *“Are you still going to help get me out of here? Is Lawson going to keep his word, or do I need to find someone else?”*

Although his words cut, I know why he’s asking. It doesn’t exactly look like Lawson has done anything to fulfil his end of the bargain, but in all honesty, we’ve been so lost in each other, I haven’t asked him to help me.

“Of course, we’re still going to help you. I have no plans to go back to the shy nobody I was before, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still want to clear your name...and mine.”

He scoffs, *“You were never a nobody, buttercup.”*

I let out a sigh as my lips tip into a sad smile. “That’s how I felt.”

“But you don’t feel like that now?”

I shake my head, even though he can’t see me, my lips spreading into a grin when I picture Lawson. “No, I don’t feel like that anymore. I feel alive.”

My skin prickles the way it always does when he’s near, and a quick glance confirms Lawson is leaning against the building on the other side of the courtyard, his eyes fixed on me. I’m not sure how long he’s been there, but he’s too far away to have heard any of our conversation, so I’m not worried.

“I think I need to meet Lawson,” my dad announces, and I grimace at the thought.

It’s not the same as introducing my boyfriend to my dad...that would be much simpler. This is introducing Dad to the man who owns me, who took my virginity and tattooed his name on me, who has ruined me in every way possible. The man who I have feelings for, even though I shouldn’t.

“Okay, Dad. I’ll mention it to him, and we can talk about it next time. Stay safe,” I tell him, hoping he doesn’t notice my lack of commitment. Even if I say yes, I’d still need to get Lawson to agree, and I have no fucking clue what he’d say.

“Will do, buttercup. You stay safe, too. Will you come see me at Christmas?” he asks, and my heart sinks all over again.

Time has been flying by so quickly; I almost forgot we’re only a week away from Christmas. This will be the first one I’ve ever spent without my dad, and tears fill my eyes at the thought of being alone during a holiday I’ve always spent with family.

As the first tear falls down my cheek, I reach up to swipe it away as I bite the inside of my cheek to try to stop more from escaping. "I would love that, Dad."

I look up as Lawson strides towards me, his face that usual blank mask, but his silver eyes are blazing with anger. My pulse races with each step closer he gets, my breath catching in my throat from the intensity of his gaze.

"I'll talk to you soon, Dad. Love you."

"*Love you too, buttercup,*" he says, his voice thick with emotion, and when I hang up, I'm a mess with the maelstrom of feelings swirling inside me.

Lawson doesn't stop until he's standing right in front of me, so close I can feel the warmth from his body as his shadow swamps me. He reaches out and presses his palms against my cheeks, using his thumbs to softly wipe away the tears that are falling freely now.

"Who made you cry? I'll kill them." The sheer fucking power in his voice makes my heart skip a beat, and I genuinely believe he would kill for me if I asked him to.

I shake my head as much as I can with him holding my cheeks, forcing me to look at him. "Nobody. I was just talking to my dad."

"Did you argue again?" he asks.

I narrow my gaze at him, wondering how he knew we argued in the past, as I sure as hell never told him. "How do you know we argue?"

He shrugs his shoulders as if it's no big deal. "I know you. I can tell when you've spoken to him. He makes you feel a lot of conflicting emotions that you don't understand."

I let out a sharp laugh. "How the hell do you get all that from just looking at me?"

His lips lift into that cocky smirk of his, and I hate the way my stomach flips for him. "I'm the High Crow for a reason, sweetheart. I'm good at watching and reading people."

I roll my eyes at his blatant boasting. "You're so big-headed."

He chuckles as he lets go of my face and throws an arm over my shoulders, escorting me out of the courtyard that is thankfully empty, since most people are still in class. I'm glad there weren't any witnesses to my meltdown.

“I have a big head that you can take care of.” He motions towards his dick, making his innuendo more than clear.

I burst out laughing, which puts a genuine smile on Lawson’s face. Fuck, those damn butterflies are back. I hate how safe and happy I feel tucked into his side, and how much I need him.

Now that I know what it’s like to have Lawson Radley give me a genuine smile, nothing else will ever compare. With just one smile, he helped me forget all the bad things my dad mentioned, leaving me here with him, while everything else fades into the background, to be dealt with another time—or preferably, not at all.

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CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

Lawson

As I walk Harper back to Crowhurst House, it's clear she's not quite herself. She's quieter than normal, lost in her own head. It's the same way she always is after talking to her dad on the phone.

I know what it's like to have a wanker for a father, but Harper has never seen her dad that way. He's the only family she has left, and everything she's ever done has been to make him proud, or to follow his instructions.

But now she's with me, and has had a taste of what life can be like without those repressing feelings and restrictions, she doesn't want to go back to how things were—and I don't fucking blame her.

I've absolutely loved watching Harper come out of her shell. She's finding her voice, but more importantly, she's listening to the little voice inside herself that's been silenced for far too long. The voice tells her what she really wants in life, and now she can hear it; it seems to grow louder by the day.

I hate the way her father talks to her, but it's not like I can fucking tell her that...then she'll know I bugged her phone and have listened to all her conversations. I did it about a week before she became my Prize, because I wanted to make sure she would not back out, and ever since, it's been a great way to keep track of her.

She'd be bloody furious if she found out, so I've been careful not to let anything slip. Well, I almost fucked up a few minutes ago, but I covered myself just enough. Still, I can't stop thinking about what her father said, and Harper's tense silence suggests she can't either.

I've always known our time together is temporary, that there's a ticking clock hanging over us, waiting to pull us apart. I just hadn't thought about

what would happen when that time comes.

I'm sure my father has a plan in place for me, which will include marrying some stuck-up bitch, even if I can't stand her, and then we'll produce an heir to solidify our family name. It's a future I've always known about, but not given much thought to—until now.

Now that I have Harper, the thought of being with another woman makes my skin crawl and my dick shrivel. I don't exactly know when it happened, but she's literally the only girl I can see now.

Other women on campus still come up to me the way they always have, fluttering their eyelashes at me in the hope I'll fuck them, but since Harper, I barely register their presence, let alone get turned on by them.

It's like she has a connection with my dick, and it only gets hard for her—which is really bloody annoying.

I never really gave much thought to what would happen to Harper when we graduate. Without her virginity, her prospects within the Obsidian Order are slim. She could possibly marry an Order member's son who didn't Pledge, but that's about it.

Yet her father seems to think he can rewrite history, and have the Council change their mind regarding a rule they've had for as long as the Obsidian Order has been around. He thinks he can get them to agree to Harper being an Order Wife, even though she's no longer a virgin, which is pure insanity. They'll never go for it...*but what if they do?*

The thought of Harper being with anyone else sets my nerves on edge, and fury floods through my veins, making me want to kill anyone who even thinks about her in that way. She's mine, and I can't bear thinking about a day when she might not be anymore.

I'm not stupid; I know Harper has been developing feelings for me recently. She may not have said anything outright, but I've noticed the changes in her. The way she looks at me, smiles at me, curls up to me, like she trusts me to take care of her.

I've been trying to ignore every sign, every warning light that flashes bright, because if I acknowledge how she feels, then I'll have to look at myself, and I'm sure as fuck not ready to do that. I knew kissing her would open a massive can of fucking worms, and while I don't exactly regret it, it's not made life easier for either of us. In fact, it's gotten a lot harder.

So, I'm going to do what I do best...I'll push all the thoughts and worries to the back of my mind and ignore them until I absolutely have to

deal with them. I'm aware this is a childish approach, but it's all I have right now.

After the silence becomes unbearable, and the tension between us is almost suffocating, I break first and start a meaningless conversation, getting Harper to talk about her classes before the phone call with her dad. I breathe a sigh of relief when my plan works, and the sadness lifts enough for her to animatedly tell me about her day.

By the time we reach Crowhurst House, most of the awkwardness from her father's phone call seems to have dissipated, and we're chatting like we always do, telling each other about what we've been doing during the few hours we've been apart. Something mundane I never thought I'd enjoy, but I do.

I close the door behind us and pull her into the sitting room to the right of the entrance. I always check this room first because the Crow bulletin board is on the wall here, and it's the best way to keep up to date with any training dates or events.

I let out a low groan when I see the fancy fucking invitation stuck to the corkboard. Nobody has bothered to open the glossy envelope, as we already know what's inside.

"What is it?" Harper asks, catching the way I'm glaring at the lavish envelope with the pompous wax seal of an eagle in the middle.

"It's an invitation to the Eagles' Annual New Year's Eve Ball," I tell her with a groan.

Her gaze flicks between the unopened envelope and me, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Why is that a bad thing?"

"It's a lavish event that they throw every year, and a bit like the Hawks' Halloween Party, attendance is mandatory for all Pledges. But this is different to all the other events because the Eagles are fucking pretentious wankers, who use the party as an excuse to show off their wealth and status.

"It's a black-tie event, so not only will I be expected to wear a fucking tuxedo, you'll need a ballgown. And it will have to be a good one, as everyone present will be judged on what they're wearing, as well as the person they bring with them."

Harper's mouth falls open as her eyes narrow, a flush spreading across her cheeks, and I struggle to get a read on what's going through her head.

We were so lost in each other, focused solely on the bulletin board, that we didn't even think to check whether anyone else was in the room with us.

It wasn't necessary, as I planned to take Harper back to my room as soon as I'd checked the board.

Unfortunately, Sienna, Tillie, and Ryan are sitting on the leather sofa in the middle of the room, listening to every word we say, and like the complete bastards they are, they're incapable of minding their own fucking business.

Tillie stands from the sofa in a huff, her ridiculously pointy pink high heels clicking on the wooden floor as she stomps her foot like a child having a tantrum, drawing our attention to her.

"You can't seriously be thinking about taking this nobody to the Eagles' ball, can you? You literally just said people will be judged by who is on their arm," Tillie screeches, her pitch so high it's like someone is stabbing my bloody ears.

Sienna stands next, pulling Ryan along with her, even though he looks like it's the last thing he wants to do—fucking pussy. Sienna glares at Harper as she points at her. "She can't even afford a ballgown."

The way both girls are staring at Harper, like she's a piece of shit they've just found stuck to the bottom of their designer heels, has Harper shrinking beside me, shuffling closer to my side.

I make sure they both can see how furious I am, and can hear it in my voice. "Who I take is none of your fucking business. And I'm sure whatever she wears, she'll be the most beautiful woman in the room."

Harper gives me a small but genuine smile, and damn, does my stomach flip in the most ridiculous way. I'll never get used to her smiling at me like that.

The two bitches pull me out of my moment by snorting loudly, in a really undignified way. Tillie scowls as she says, "That's not likely. She will, however, be the biggest slut in the room. I'm sure the Eagles will let her in if she spreads her legs for them."

Hearing them call my girl a slut in the negative sense of the word sends a flood of fire through my veins, which is only made worse by the thought of her spreading her legs for anyone except me. I'm seconds away from exploding, but before I can say anything, Harper takes a small step away from me, pulling her shoulders back as she edges closer to Tillie and Sienna.

They're both wearing matching anxious expressions, their gazes flicking between me and Harper, and I don't blame them for being cautious.

Harper is holding her head high, her back straight, displaying more confidence than I've ever seen her have in front of the two girls who seem to love making her life hell.

"They'll be too busy trying to fill your baggy cunt to care about me, I'm sure," Harper replies, not even a hint of unease in her voice.

My dick fucking twitches to life as I watch my beautiful girl stand up for herself at last.

The looks on Sienna and Tillie's faces are priceless, and they're both too stunned to do anything at first. It's like their slow brains are taking their time to register exactly what Harper said, and you can see the moment the insult hits.

Sienna's face scrunches into an ugly scowl, and she lets out this fucking awful screech that I'm pretty sure only other dogs can hear, as she takes a threatening step towards Harper, her hand raised as she prepares to slap her.

Everything seems to move in slow motion once we all realise what Sienna is about to do. Harper hardens her face and turns slightly, bracing herself for the impact, while I try to move in front of her, hoping I can block the hit.

Luckily for Sienna, Ryan is the quickest to respond, and he grabs her wrist mid-motion, stopping her before she's able to make contact. Sienna turns to glare at Ryan, not even trying to hide the betrayal that's written across her face.

Before either of them can say anything, I make my feelings known, ensuring my voice has the dangerous edge people fear. "Be glad he stopped you. If you ever lay a hand on my Prize, I'll pull each finger off one by one."

All the colour drains from Sienna's face as she takes a step back behind Ryan, using part of his body as a shield between us, though that wouldn't be enough to stop me if I wanted to get to her.

Tillie's face wrinkles, as if she smells something nasty, her gaze flicking between me and Harper, before settling on me. "She must have a fucking magic pussy for you to lose your mind like this. You're the High Crow, for fuck's sake. Your father is a high-ranking Obsidian Council member. You are destined for greatness. She's nothing but a poor, has-been traitor. She's a worthless nobody."

Tillie shakes her head in disbelief as she glares at Harper, and I see the impact her words have on the girl beside me. They hurt her more than any

slap ever could, and she almost deflates beside me as the words burrow beneath her skin, taking up residence as she gives them power they don't deserve.

I wrap my arm around Harper, pulling her close, and it fucking kills me when she flinches at my touch. I turn my death glare on Tillie, and though I speak the words to her, I hope with everything I have that Harper truly hears them and believes them.

“Harper is more than just my Prize; she's mine. She is worth a million of you, and is most definitely not a nobody. She is who I chose, and I don't give a fuck what you say or think. Now, leave us the fuck alone.” I don't even wait for them to respond; I turn and exit the room, pulling Harper along beside me.

Just as we're exiting the sitting room, I hear Tillie's voice, low and threatening, “This isn't over.”

She's fucking right about that, but not in the way she thinks. The only reason I'm walking away now is because I need to do damage control with the broken girl beside me. I need Harper to forget about everything they just said, and get back the confidence she had when she stood up to them.

When the time is right, I plan on pulling both Sienna and Tillie down one peg at a time, until they're begging me to show them a mercy they neither deserve nor will get. Nobody messes with my girl and gets away with it.



CHAPTER THIRTY- FOUR *Lawson*

As soon as I pull Harper into my bedroom, slamming the door behind us, I spin her around to face me. My heart aches at the tears in her eyes. I push her back against the door, caging her in with my body as she drops her gaze to the floor, refusing to look at me.

I reach out and wrap my hand around her neck, spreading my fingers out and pushing up her chin until she has no choice but to meet my gaze. I hope she can see the fire shining in mine that matches my words.

“Forget about everything those jealous bitches just said. You are the most beautiful girl in any room, and they’re fucking bitter about that. I don’t care about anything they said, because it doesn’t change the fact you’re *mine*.”

A tear slips down her cheek, but it’s the lack of any genuine emotion in her expression that kills me. It’s like she’s trying to hide from me, and I never want that.

I press my lips to hers. It’s the briefest of kisses, but I want her to feel everything. So when I kiss her again, it’s a little harder and for a bit longer. Each kiss builds in intensity until Harper kisses me back. Her lips seeking mine every time I pull away.

Her pulse is racing beneath my fingers that are wrapped around her throat, my cock twitching as I steal her oxygen with both my kisses and my necklace that she wears so fucking well.

Her cheeks are a vibrant, flushed red, emphasising her adorable freckles, and her lips are lusciously plump—both visual effects of our heated exchange. The sight alone pushes me until I’m hard as steel. I press

my body flush against hers, feeling the warmth radiate between us, showing her the potent effect she has on me.

“You are mine,” I tell her again, my voice deep and gravelly, thick with emotion.

She kisses me once more, and it almost feels like she’s claiming me with her lips, but that’s nowhere near enough for me. I don’t think; I just let the words spill from my lips, from my soul.

“You are everything I could ever want, and nobody will ever compare to you. I can tell by the look in your eyes that you don’t believe me, but I will not stop until you do.”

“Lawson...” Her sad voice trails off, like she doesn’t know what to say, but that’s okay...I don’t need her to talk.

I let go of her throat and grab her hand, pulling her over to the bed. “Strip,” I snap as I drop her hand, moving over to the closet to grab what I need.

When I return, Harper is standing beside the bed, completely naked, and I have to bite my lip to hold back the groan threatening to break free as I take in every inch of her gorgeous curves. She’s fucking perfection, and my eyes are drawn to the tattoo on her mound, my name proudly marring her otherwise-perfect creamy skin.

As I slowly stalk towards her, prey caught in my trap, her gaze flicks down to the items I have in my hand, her eyes darkening with excitement as she takes them in.

I place the items I don’t need yet on the bed, keeping hold of the rope as Harper watches my every move. “Turn.” I motion with my hand at the same time.

She turns to face away from me, not even a hint of hesitation, and I smile at how perfect she is now that she’s trained just for me. I pull her arms behind her back, and Harper clasps her palms together, already knowing what I want before I ask.

I secure rope along the length of her forearms, making sure she’s tied from her wrists to her elbows, and that it’s tight enough to prevent movement, whilst not cutting off blood flow. I want it to be uncomfortable, but not painful—this is for pleasure rather than punishment, and it’s important she knows the difference.

Once I’m sure everything is secure, I grab hold of her shoulders and spin her around until she’s facing me again, before pushing her to her knees.

She sinks down in front of me, whilst still looking up at me through her long lashes, her beautiful blue eyes wide as she takes in every movement I make.

While she's kneeling at my feet, I lazily take off my baseball cap, hoodie, and T-shirt, then kick off my shoes so I can remove my jeans, leaving me standing before her in just my black boxers, which are tented thanks to the hard cock trying to break free.

I slide my hand into her hair, raking my fingers over her scalp as I collect her strawberry-blonde curls into my fist, gripping tight enough to make Harper hiss. With a solid grasp on her hair, I pull her head back until she's looking straight at me.

"Open." The word is barely out before Harper opens her mouth wide, sticking her tongue out like she's done so many times before. "Good girl."

Her cheeks flush from my praise, and I catch the way she tries to squeeze her thighs together, no doubt to ease her aching core. But I can't allow that, so I use my foot to motion for her to spread her legs wider apart, putting her sexy body on full display for me.

I drop my boxers and kick them to the side before fisting the base of my shaft, a groan breaking free as I tighten my hold around my aching dick. Harper watches with fire in her eyes as I lazily stroke my length, swiping over the pre-cum that's beaded on the tip, spreading it along my silky shaft.

I don't know if she's even aware that she's leaning forward, or that she's closed her mouth to bite at her lower lip, so engrossed in watching me stroke myself. It's only when I tut at her that she looks up at me again, confusion written on her face.

"If you can't keep your mouth open for me, I'll have to do it for you," I tell her, motioning towards the metal ring ballgag that's sitting on the edge of the bed.

Her brow furrows as she shakes her head. "I'm sorry. Please give me another chance, and I promise I won't let you down."

My smile rises at her eagerness to please me, and I'm secretly a little happy it's played out this way. As much as I like seeing her gagged, this time, it's much more important for me to hear her use her words.

"Okay, one more chance, sweetheart," I say, trying to make it sound like I'm disappointed in her.

"Thank you." She smiles up at me with that fucking cute as hell face, and I know I'm a goner. My cock throbs painfully when she does as she's

told and opens her mouth for me once more.

With my fist firmly around the base of my shaft, I guide the tip over her outstretched tongue, letting out a small moan at how warm and wet she is. I slowly press my length into her mouth, keeping the underside in contact with her tongue the whole time.

As I use her mouth for my pleasure, pushing in deep until I hit her throat, before taking my time to pull back out, her gaze remains fixed on me.

Her big, beautiful blue eyes silently plead with me, and I quickly give in. “Suck me, Harper. Be a good girl and show me how much you love swallowing my cock.”

Before I’ve even finished speaking, she wraps her plump lips around my dick and pulls me in, using her mouth and tongue to devour me. My head spins as I struggle to keep up with the overwhelming sensations that flood my body every time she pulls my cock into her throat.

I struggle to hold on to the last of my control, rocking my hips as I press my length into her throat, loving the way she chokes as she tries to take as much of me as she can.

Each time I hit the back of her throat, I push a little more, keeping it there as it cuts off her air. As she swallows around my length, the warm, wet friction of her throat spasming around me, a blinding white light explodes behind my eyes.

Harper uses her shoulder to nudge my thigh when I hold for a little too long, and I quickly pull back. She coughs and splutters as she tries to draw in some much-needed air, while a trail of saliva drips from her mouth to the tip of my cock, the rest trickling down her chin. Tears slide over her cheeks and join the rest of the mess, landing on her tits.

“So fucking beautiful,” I tell her, hoping she can hear the awe in my voice that I don’t even try to hide. This girl is fucking amazing, and I need her not only to know that, but to believe it.

Harper pulls in another deep breath and then slides my dick into her mouth again, letting me take over and fuck her throat until she’s gagging all over again. My balls tingle, signalling I can’t last much longer.

So I reach down and pick Harper up, throwing her onto the bed like she weighs nothing. I roll her onto her stomach and get her into position with her arse in the air, her legs spread wide to show off both of her holes.

With her arms tied behind her back, she's got no option but to rest her cheek and tits on the bed, using her chest to support her weight as she arches her back perfectly. Her peachy arse sways in front of me as Harper tries to get into position, and I quickly slap her arse-cheek, hard enough for her to yelp as the flesh turns pink.

She's spread out before me, looking like a fucking all you can eat buffet, and I dive in. Harper lets out a startled yelp that promptly turns into a deep moan when my tongue hits her pussy, licking and sucking her like I can't get enough.

I swipe my tongue from her clit all the way back to her arse, circling around her puckered hole, even as she tries to pull away from me. I slap her other arse-cheek and grab hold of her hips, my grasp tight enough to bruise as I keep her in position.

Her pussy is dripping, and I press my tongue in as deep as I can to devour every drop that I can reach, before circling around her clit and then her arse, driving her crazy.

Harper's moans soon turn to whimpers, and she pushes her arse back, smothering me as she begs for more. But I'm not ready to stop feasting on her sweet juices just yet.

As I give her arse more attention, knowing she'll need it for what I have planned, I take one hand off her hip and rub my fingers over her clit, forcing Harper to arch her back further as she cries out against the bed, whilst rocking into me.

Once her arsehole is wet, I move my fingers there, and Harper freezes beneath me when she feels me pressing against her puckered hole.

"Lawson, I—"

I slap her arse again, cutting her off before she can protest any further. "I'm taking your arse tonight, Harper. It's the last piece of you I don't own, and after I've taken it, you will completely belong to me."

Although her eyes are wide with fear, there's a hint of excitement there too, and my dick throbs in anticipation of how fucking tight she's going to be, and how much I'm going to enjoy claiming the last piece of her.

"Will you...will you make sure it doesn't hurt?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I lean over and kiss her lips, before peppering kisses along the curve of her spine, as I tell her, "I can't promise it will be completely pain-free, but by the end, it will be more pleasure than pain."

She takes in my words for a second, as I continue kissing my way down her spine, then over the globes of her arse, before nibbling along her thighs.

She lets out a soft sigh as she nods once. "Okay, I want to try."

I can't stop the smile from spreading across my face, one that she happily returns, and I waste no time pressing the tip of my finger against her saliva-covered hole. As the tip slips past her tight ring, we both let out matching groans, and I can't get over how tightly she's gripping my finger.

I pull the tip back out and reach for the bottle of lube I threw on the bed. "Eventually, you'll be able to take me with just spit, but as it's your first time, this will make it easier," I explain as I drip the lube down her arse-crack, and Harper shivers from the cold liquid touching her heated skin.

This time when I press my finger against her hole, it slides in much easier, and I don't stop until it's all the way in. Harper tries to pull away at first, but I drop the lube and grab hold of her hip, stopping her with my bruising grip.

I pull my finger back before pushing in deep once more, keeping up the rhythm as I get faster with each thrust. It doesn't take long for Harper to relax beneath my touch, and she's soon rocking back to meet my thrusts, bliss written on her face.

When I add a second finger, she cries out as her arse stretches to accommodate it. As I sink both digits in deep, she whimpers, but still rocks her hips to meet my movements.

Since she's no longer trying to run away, I let go of her hip and move my hand beneath her, seeking her sensitive clit. As I stretch out my fingers while they're deep inside her arse, I rub against her clit, using her pleasure as a distraction.

Harper whimpers and moans as she continues to grind against my hands, her eyes dark with lust as she begs me. "Please, Law... More, please."

"Do you want my cock in your arse, sweetheart?" I push a third finger into her arse as I ask, stretching her until she screams, as I rub on her clit to provide the perfect distraction.

It's clear her head is spinning, and she's lost between the pleasure and pain, unsure of what it is she actually wants. "Yes, please," she mutters, her eyes fluttering closed as she loses herself to the overwhelming sensations.

I pull my fingers from her arse, making her hiss, before I slap her arse-cheek, dragging a yelp from her lips. Her eyes fly open and she glares at

me, silently asking why I stopped and why I spanked her.

“Eyes on me, sweetheart. I want you to watch as I claim every piece of you,” I tell her, my voice thick with emotion as I press the tip of my cock against her hole.

She missed me spreading lube over my length, but she’s so tight, I’m not sure I’d get all the way in without it. My dick isn’t exactly small, and she was gripping my fingers tight. Even with three stretching her open, it’s only a fraction compared to my cock.

Her eyes grow wide with fear when she feels me pressing into her, the ring of muscle protesting against me. I gently stroke her clit, as I use my other hand to caress the pink handprint I left on her arse-cheek, keeping my movements slow and soft to help Harper relax.

“Take a deep breath, sweetheart, and when you feel me pressing against you, I want you to push too,” I tell her.

Her bright eyes seem to get impossibly wider as she shakes her head. “What do you mean push?”

“Like you’re going to the bathroom. It will help you relax,” I explain, but she just scowls at me.

“I can assure you, it won’t help me fucking relax. I’ll be worried about...embarrassing myself,” she snaps, sounding more sure than the blush on her cheeks suggests.

“Harper, just do as you’re told and make life easier. Trust me.”

Although she looks like she definitely doesn’t trust me, she relaxes beneath my touch, and her chest rises and falls as she pulls in several slow, deep breaths. This time when I press against her hole, I feel her pushing too, and it doesn’t take much for the head to slip inside.

Both of us let out matching groans, and my grip on her hip tightens as her arse strangles my cock to the point it’s almost painful. I keep drawing circles around her clit to help her stay relaxed, as I slowly push my length further inside.

I want more than anything to push all the way in and have done with it, but she’s so fucking tight, I couldn’t go any quicker if I wanted to. But fuck, when my full length finally slides in, a rush of warmth floods me, a deep, satisfying pressure that’s utterly amazing.

Seeing her stretched open wide, taking all of me while she stares back at me with a look of bliss on her face, is a mental picture I’ll keep forever, bringing it out whenever I’m alone with only my hand.

“Fuck, Harper. You have no idea how fucking beautiful you are, stretched wide open, taking all of me like the good little slut you are,” I groan, pulling back until just the head remains in her arse.

“Fuck, I feel so full,” she tells me, her voice husky and thick with lust.

I drizzle some more lube on my length before I push back in, and I sigh as I slip in easier this time, not stopping until I’m in deep. Harper lets out a moan, her pussy dripping down over her clit as she grows wetter with each thrust.

Her soft whimpers now ripple with pleasure, a stark contrast to her earlier pained cries. Her rhythmic sway mirrors my thrusts, as her body arches to meet each plunge. Her initial resistance melts away, making it easier to fill her arse, yet she remains incredibly tight, her heat like a velvet vise. The sensation of her clenching around my length sends electric shivers down my spine, and a deep tingling in my balls.

My release edges closer, but I’m not quite ready, so I do everything I can to hold it off. Instead, I focus on getting Harper to the finish line, as well as achieving the goal I set before I started.

“How does it feel, Harper? Tell me how it feels to have a cock in your arse.”

She lets out a soft moan, fixing her gaze on mine as she says, “It feels so good. You’re stretching me so much, and I feel so fucking full, but...it’s so good.”

I rub my fingers against her clit, forcing her to cry out as I slam my dick hard into her arse, stealing her breath once again. “I can feel you tightening around me, sweetheart. Are you going to come? Are you going to be a good little whore and come with a cock in your arse?”

Her eyes roll into the back of her head as I slam into her hard and fast. My grip on her hip will no doubt leave bruises, but I don’t care. I’m claiming her in every way I can.

“Yes! Fuck, yes. Please, Law, please, can I come?”

“Tell me you’re mine. Tell me every bit of you belongs to me, and it always will. Tell me I’ve ruined you for everyone else, that you’ll never want anyone else the way you want me. Tell me who you belong to, Harper,” I growl, slamming into her hard with each demand, emphasising how fucking serious I am.

“Fuck...I’m yours, Lawson. I belong to you. Please...” Sincerity is shining in her eyes, as well as the vulnerability she’s letting me see with her

confession.

“You are all fucking mine,” I grind out, my cock aching with the desperate need to find release, so I rapidly rub my fingers over her clit until she’s crying out.

“Lawson...fuck...are you...are you mine?” she whispers, her voice barely audible above the noise of our skin slapping together, but the vulnerability in her eyes makes it seem like she shouted the words.

My heart races and my mind whirls as the seriousness of her question steals the air from my lungs. This has always been about me owning Harper. About me claiming every part of her, so nobody else can. I never stopped to think about whether that makes me hers in return.

As confusing as the thoughts and feelings are, the answer rolls off my tongue with ease, and once the words are out there, I breathe a sigh of relief. “I’ve always been yours.”

Harper’s smile turns into a grin bright enough to light up the fucking room, and although the words could be our ruin, I’d say them a million times over just to see how happy they make her.

“Thank you,” she mutters, but it quickly turns into a guttural moan as her pleasure takes over, her pussy dripping with the desperate need for release. “Please, Law, can I come?”

I give her a nod as I slam in deep, my movements becoming frantic as I struggle to remain in control. “Come for me, sweetheart.”

The words have barely left my lips when I feel her arse tightening around my cock, gripping me so tight it tips me over the edge, and my orgasm hits too. As her walls flutter around my length, I shoot my load deep inside her arse, and she milks every drop from me.

Her body trembles beneath me, and I slow my ministrations on her clit, not wanting her to get oversensitive, as this is just the beginning. I have all night to play with every inch of the body I’ve claimed as mine.

When our orgasms have subsided, and we’re both trying to catch our breath, I slowly pull my dick from her arse, watching in awe as it continues to gape just enough for my cum to leak out lazily. It trails from her arse, down over her pussy, and I bite back a groan at seeing her swollen cunt covered in my white sticky cum.

Once I’ve caught my breath, I untie Harper’s arms, massaging them once they’re free, to help get the blood flowing again. While they’re a little

sore from the rope burn, it doesn't look too painful, and Harper doesn't complain.

I turn her over and pull her up against my chest, wrapping my arms around her as I hold her close. We're both silent as we focus on our breathing, just enjoying the time with each other as we bask in the bliss together.

After a few minutes, I feel Harper pulling in a deep breath, her body becoming tense, as if she's worried about something, so I wait for her to find the words. When she speaks, she's so quiet, I can barely hear her. "Did you mean what you said, or was it just the sex talking?"

I pause, wondering which bit specifically she's referring to, as we said quite a lot. "Which part?" I ask, though the answer will be the same no matter what she says.

"Did you mean it when you said you're mine? Or were you just saying it because I said I belonged to you?" She looks up at me, her big beautiful eyes so full of hope that it makes my heart ache.

"I meant it. I've always belonged to you, even when you didn't know it. But...I'm not sure that will be enough," I tell her, hating the way her brow furrows.

"What do you mean?"

I let out a sigh, cursing myself for ruining the moment before it's even really fucking started, but Harper deserves the truth, no matter how ugly it is.

"How we feel doesn't change things. You are my Prize, and when we graduate, our time together will end. It's always been that way. No amount of feelings will change that."

I brace myself, waiting for her to get upset, but she just smiles at me as if she didn't hear what I said, and now it's my turn to look confused.

"Graduation is half a year away. A lot can happen in that time. I'm not saying we won't end the way you say, but I'm not going to spend the next few months worrying about it. I'm yours and you're mine, and that's what I'm going to hold on to," she says, sounding so fucking sure of herself that I almost buy into it. I want to believe in it so badly, but I'm worried that burying our heads in the sand will only hurt us more in the long run.

But that's a worry for Future Lawson to deal with, because tonight, I'm going to enjoy taking everything my girl is willing to give me.

Just as I'm about to capture her lips in a silent promise of more, my phone alerts. I mutter a curse as I reach over and grab it, instantly wishing I hadn't. My father is summoning me to meet him tomorrow morning, and his tone—even through a text—leaves no room for argument. So I reply, telling him I'll be there, then I put my phone on silent and throw it onto the floor, out of the way.

I don't want any more distractions. I just want a night of exploring every inch of the body I now know will always belong to me. I'm going to come up with as many ways of marking her as mine as I can. And as Harper sucks against my pulse point, I realise she's doing the same, claiming me as hers for all to see.

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CHAPTER THIRTY- FIVE

Lawson

I've never enjoyed sharing my space with someone. Call me a spoiled, entitled rich kid, but it's the truth. I've never even brought a girl back to my room at Crowhurst House, let alone had someone stay over. And I sure as shit haven't stayed the night with any of the girls I've fucked over the years, preferring to leave as soon as possible afterwards.

Yet all that changed with Harper. At first, I told myself I wanted her here for easy access, nothing more. It was convenient having her in my bed, so I could fuck her any time I wanted. But as much as I try to tell myself otherwise, that stopped being true a while ago.

I quickly learnt that I sleep better with her by my side than I have in years. No matter where we start at the beginning of the night, by the time I wake up, we're a mess of limbs, connected in nearly every way. My large body curled around her slight frame, holding her close, as if even in sleep I'm afraid to let her go.

There's something so warm and comforting about having her petite, soft body against mine, and I never saw it coming. I'm not a cuddler, and have always preferred my own space, yet with Harper, it's like I can't hold her close enough.

I'm very aware, after the conversation we recently had, that my thoughts are extremely dangerous. But I'm starting to resent the idea that we have no future together, and I can't help wondering if I can change that. It's a fucking dangerous thought to have, and it hinges on far more hope than I'd care to admit, but I can't stop myself.

This whole thing is unfamiliar to me, and it's bloody terrifying. My parents are the textbook definition of a loveless marriage, and neither of

them has ever shown me anything that could be labelled as parental love. I've always known I exist simply to carry on the Radley family name, and that they had me out of duty, not some great urge to be parents.

So I don't exactly know what love is, or what it means to have someone love me. Until I met Bram, I didn't even know what it was like to give a shit about someone other than myself. My parents being the horrible arseholes they are, meant it was easy not to give a shit about them, since that's how they felt about me.

With Bram, he latched onto me, and no matter how much I tried to push him away, he held on tighter. There's something so easily likeable about him, it almost came naturally. I quickly realised I enjoyed spending time with him, and whenever he came home with cuts and bruises from one of his underground fights, I felt rage on his behalf.

He was the first person to burrow under the walls I constructed around my cold, black heart, and I truly care about him. He showed me what it's like to trust another person, to put your life in their hands, and he's the only person I genuinely know would have my back, no matter the situation.

Harper tunnelled her way in just as easily, but in a very different way to Bram. With her, I have an overwhelming urge to protect her, to keep her safe from anyone who even thinks about threatening her, but it's more than that too. The possessiveness I have for her borders on obsessive, and the need to claim her in every way only seems to grow each day.

It's not enough for her to say she's mine, or for me to know she is. I want the entire world to know. I want to make sure that anyone who even casts a glance her way will know she belongs to me. No arsehole will even consider hitting on her, or they risk my wrath.

But the problem with feeling that way is...it's temporary. I can't stop time, and as much as I may want to change our future, it won't be easy. It would mean risking everything I've spent my life working towards, and it might leave me with nothing.

Since I'm not sure I'm willing to risk losing everything over a long shot, I keep pushing the thoughts to the back of my mind, telling myself it's a worry for another day. Right now, I can just enjoy the time I have with Harper, and ignore the large ticking clock hanging over our heads.

The alert on my watch has me groaning, as I remember the summons I received last night from my father. I set the alarm on my watch so I wouldn't wake up Harper. I know myself well enough to be certain that if

she wakes up, batting those sleepy, gorgeous eyes at me, I won't be able to tear myself away, and there's nothing my father hates more than tardiness.

I move slowly and quietly, trying my hardest not to disturb her as I climb out of bed, making sure she remains wrapped up in the covers once I'm out. She looks so fucking peaceful when she's asleep, her long, curly hair seeming almost wild when it's fanned out over the pillow and down her back. Her plump lips form a little O as soft snores escape.

Another fucking watch reminder has me stomping quietly into the bathroom, picking up some clothes on my way. Once I'm done, dressed in my usual jeans, T-shirt, and hoodie, I head back out into the bedroom. I pick up my phone and keys, throw on the baseball cap I know will piss my father off, before leaving a note for Harper, explaining where I'm going. I emphasise that I expect her to be here when I return.

What I don't say is that I'll be monitoring her using the secret cameras she still doesn't know about. And since I'm absolutely certain she wouldn't approve of them, I don't see any need to inform her.

As I place the note on her bedside table, I can't resist leaning down and placing a soft kiss on her lips. I pull away much quicker than I'd like after hearing her soft moan, but I freeze as she shuffles around in her sleep.

Once I'm completely certain she's not waking up, I turn and head for the door. I send Bram a quick message, letting him know where I'm going and that Harper is in my room in Crowhurst House. Without spelling it out for him, he knows I'm asking him to watch over her.

Although the majority of Crow Pledges have respect for the hierarchy—which I'm at the top of—there are some, namely Ryan and those bitches, Tillie and Sienna, that I don't fucking trust. The last thing I want is for something to happen to Harper while I'm not here to help.

Though last night made it clear, my girl is more than capable of standing up for herself now, even if she still lets their words get to her far too much when they're not around. But I'm proud of how much her confidence has grown since she's been with me. She's no longer the timid girl who follows orders and doesn't dare think for herself.

Don't get me wrong, she still follows orders and submits beautifully, but she knows her own mind now, and isn't afraid to tell me what she desires and needs. It's hot as fuck watching her experiment, and my cock is still aching from the memories of taking her arse for the first time last night.

I spend the whole fucking car journey trying not to think about all the things I did to Harper last night, while they continue to flash in my head, making me want to turn the car around. But I can't go into a meeting with my father with a massive hard-on, so I try to think about anything except Harper—which is much more difficult than I'd like to admit, since she's quickly become my entire world.

When I finally reach the stupidly long driveway leading up to the house I grew up in, my stomach swirls with a sickening, impending feeling of doom that seems to flood through my veins like ice. I never enjoy being called here by my father, but something about this sets my nerves on edge, and I'm not looking forward to finding out what he wants.

My anxiety is amplified even further when I turn off the engine and climb out of the car, only to find my mother, Christine, waiting for me in the open doorway. She rarely greets me at the door when I visit. I usually have to hunt her down in whatever room she's in with her wine, and let her know I'm here.

I push all my worries to the back of my mind and plaster on the perfect mask of indifference, making sure they can't see anything I'm thinking or feeling, just like they taught me.

"Lawson, my boy, so lovely to see you," Mother croons as she pulls me in for a stiff hug, and I'm so shocked by it, I freeze, unable to return the gesture.

I'm not sure when she last hugged me, but it was long enough ago that I can barely remember it, and there's nothing about the interaction that feels natural. I breathe a sigh of relief when she takes a step back, looking up at me with glassy eyes that are either from tears or too much alcohol.

Given that I can smell the booze permeating from her pores, I'm leaning closer to alcohol being to blame, even though it's not even ten in the morning yet.

"I'm here to see Father," I tell her, though I'm sure she already knows that.

Her face falls as her lips tip into a frown, making her appear almost sad that I'm not here to see her. But it's not like she invited me, or has ever expressed any interest in me coming to visit her, so I don't know what's triggered this reaction right now.

She reaches up and lays an icy hand on my cheek, her lips pressed into a tight smile. "I hate all the pressure and sense of duty that falls on your

shoulders as our only child.”

Her words make my heart race as the sickening feeling from earlier worsens. My mother may appear disinterested in life, but she knows everything. It’s one of the great things about being almost invisible in your own home; she’s privy to conversations that are deemed private, since they don’t even realise she’s nearby enough to listen.

She’s never once mentioned hating the pressure I’m under as a Crow Pledge, or the expectations that have been thrust on me since the moment I was born the only Radley heir. Which makes me think she knows far more about why Father has called me here, and that worries me.

Before I can ask her to elaborate, my father’s booming voice echoes from down the corridor, freezing us both. “I was expecting you in my office, Lawson.”

I stiffen at the glare he throws my way, before turning to give him the attention he commands, keeping my voice and expression impassive. “I was just greeting Mother,” I tell him.

Unfortunately, all this does is draw his attention to my mother, who is making herself as small as possible at my side. The look of sheer hatred he throws her way makes my skin crawl, and I’m once again reminded that Obsidian Order members don’t marry for love, and they sure as fuck don’t get divorced, no matter how much they hate each other.

If it had been allowed, my parents would have split years ago. Instead, they live separate lives in the same house, pretending the other doesn’t exist until they’re forced to put on the act of being a happy couple for the sake of others.

What a fucking awful existence, I think to myself, nausea overtaking me as I try not to think about how this could be a glimpse at my future.

Mother cowers under the weight of his glare. “I’m sure she has a drink to get back to,” he replies sarcastically, as he drags his eyes up and down her body, like she’s nothing more than shit on the bottom of his shoe.

Mother gives me a sad smile and lingers for just a moment longer, making it seem like she wants to say something to me, but my father’s presence is enough to silence her. With a sigh, she turns on her heel and leaves, but not before I catch sight of a tear streaking down her face.

I don’t know what to make of it. Normally, Mother either ignores me, or she plasters on what we both know is an act and pretends everything is fine. Our interactions are usually superficial, so she can say she’s done the

motherly thing of checking on her son, like I'm nothing more than a box to tick.

But this time feels different. It's as if I was getting a glimpse of the real Christine, and I got the impression that whatever she wanted to say to me would be the first genuine conversation we've had in as long as I can remember. That in itself is more than enough to have me intrigued, and I wonder whether it's worth finding Mother when our meeting is over, to see what she has to say.

Father clears his throat loudly, his patience with me wearing thin, and he turns sharply, stomping back to his office while I'm expected to follow.

Every part of me wants to rebel, to stand my ground, but that will just delay the inevitable and piss him off, which really isn't worth it. I remind myself about the beautiful girl waiting for me in my bed, and that's enough to encourage me to get this over and fucking done with as quickly as possible.

We make it into his office and I close the door behind me, but before I can even take a seat opposite where he's sitting on the other side of his large mahogany desk, he gets straight to the point. "What the hell is going on with you and Harper Westmore?" he snaps.

I keep my expression blank as I take a seat, and he tenses when I don't immediately reply to his question. I've known this conversation was coming for a while, and I'm actually quite surprised he's not called me here sooner.

"She's just my Prize," I tell him, keeping my tone neutral, almost disinterested.

Father scoffs loudly, rolling his eyes at me as he balls his hands into fists where they rest on top of his desk. "I have received word that it seems like whatever is going on between the two of you is more than just her being your Prize."

I tense, hoping my father has missed my reaction as I try to keep my voice neutral. "Since when do you listen to gossip, Father?"

"So she's nothing more?" he presses, his eyes boring into me, searching for the truth.

I shrug my shoulders. "She's mine, that is all," I reply, keeping it vague.

His gaze narrows, as if he's not buying my answer, and a chill ripples down my spine as I wonder where the fuck this is going. "You were

supposed to be using her, breaking her, and humiliating her as a punishment for her father.”

“That is exactly what I have done. Everyone knows she’s my whore, who does as she’s told.”

He shakes his head as his lips tip into a sneer. “And yet I’ve heard no stories of her being passed around, of her being humiliated in public. In fact, what I’ve heard is quite the opposite. You have been standing up for the dirty little tramp.”

Hearing him call Harper names has fury burning through my veins, and it takes every ounce of my self-control not to snap at him, or reach over and slam his head into the desk for insulting my girl.

Instead, I take a deep breath before saying, “Wow, you really have been gossiping like a little old woman, haven’t you, Father?”

“Don’t take that tone with me, boy,” he snaps, but I wave him off.

“While it may look like I’m defending my Prize, in reality, I am asserting my authority. If people think they can mistreat what is mine, that is a direct reflection on me. They are only allowed to do the things they’ve gained my permission for beforehand, showing me the respect I deserve by asking me. If I let them get away with not doing that, it makes me look weak. It has nothing to do with Harper, and everything to do with me making sure my name, status, and position are respected at all times.”

I have no idea where that little speech came from, but it stuns my father into silence, and I let out a brief sigh of relief, though I don’t relax too soon, knowing this is far from over.

He leans over the desk, his piercing gaze fixed on me. “Be that as it may, having our family name linked to that traitor is not a good look. Now is the time to strengthen our position, ready for when you graduate as High Crow.”

For the first time since entering the stifling office, I let my lips turn up into a smirk as I remind my father of who I am. “I will graduate as High Crow, and the Obsidian Order will induct me at the highest level a Pledge has ever been granted. I will then become the youngest ever Obsidian Council member. My plans have not changed, Father, as you well know.”

My father does nothing but scowl at me, as if he doesn’t actually believe I can achieve the goals I’ve been working towards my whole life. Or maybe he’s just jealous, as it will show I’m more powerful than him.

“In order for you to succeed at your goals, your future needs to be secured through a powerful match,” he tells me, a cold dread washing over me.

Anger and nausea rise within me when I realise why I’m here, now he’s finally getting to the point. I’ve been expecting this conversation for a while, but once Harper came into my life, I started dreading it.

“I know this, Father. I’ve agreed to enter whatever marriage contract you choose...after I graduate. Not before,” I say through gritted teeth.

The thought of marrying someone makes me feel physically sick, but it’s the realisation that I’m getting closer to having to give up Harper that really fractures my chest, making my heart bleed out where I sit.

It’s not until this very moment, when faced with the possibility of marrying some random woman, that I realise just how much I like Harper. She’s the only girl I can see walking down the aisle to meet me in a white dress.

Fuck, I knew I was obsessed with her, that I wanted to own her, but I hadn’t realised how far I’d fallen until just now. The idea of marrying her doesn’t scare me the way it should; it actually feels more right than anything else ever has, and that kills me.

My heart cracks further as I acknowledge that this is the worst fucking thing that could ever happen to me. I was never supposed to fall for Harper, because we can never have a future together.

When I took her virginity, I ruined any future we might have had, long before I even realised I wanted one with her. Hindsight is a bitch, and now all I can do is lose myself in the grief, knowing I fucked everything up for us by wanting her when I shouldn’t have.

My father is oblivious to the crisis that is currently crushing me, and continues talking, each new word slicing into me until I bleed out where I sit. “I know we agreed to wait until after graduation, but things have changed. Your...thing...with the traitor is tainting your reputation, and we need to repair it before it’s too late. Luckily, I’ve had a very lucrative offer, one we’d be crazy to turn down.”

That catches my attention, drawing my thoughts away from Harper. “What are you talking about?”

He rolls his eyes at me, annoyed that I’m making him explain himself, when I should just accept whatever he says, no questions asked. “Whilst you don’t have to get married until after you graduate, we will sign the

contract now, and you'll use the next few months, between now and graduation, to get to know your Betrothed. You'll show off your engagement, and use her to help fix your failing image."

I push to my feet, unable to stay sitting any longer as my nerves prickles beneath my skin, making me antsy. Although I try to keep my emotions in check, my words come out much harsher than I intend, as I struggle to keep hold of myself. "I'm not signing a fucking marriage contract."

My father's face turns an unhealthy shade of purple as he rushes to his feet and storms around his desk, heading straight for me. I stand my ground, letting him see I won't cower to him, no matter how much he threatens me.

He grabs hold of my throat and slams my back against the wall behind me, a snarl ripping from him as he pulls a knife from his pocket with his other hand, lifting it until it's resting against my neck. I freeze, holding my breath as I try to remain calm, biding my time until I show him I'm long past letting him push me around.

"You are my only heir, and you will do as you are told. You can keep your whore in private, but in public, you will promote this new union. You will use her family name to strengthen your position, do I make myself clear?" he snarls, his wide eyes fixed on me as he waits for a response.

Rage slides through my veins like poison, and my palms twitch with a desperate urge to reach for my own blade concealed in my pocket, but I keep my anger hidden, refusing to let him see the effect he's having on me.

Every nerve ending is screaming at me to fight back, to show him I'm no longer an impressionable kid that can be intimidated through threats and violence, but I know it's the wrong move. Fighting back will only show him how I feel, and I can't have that.

I give him a forced nod, not bothering to use words to acknowledge him. Thankfully, it's enough for my father, and he puts the blade away as he lets go of my neck, taking a step back like he didn't just threaten his only child with a knife.

The urge to grab him by the throat and let him know exactly how I feel grows, but then I remember how dangerous my father is, and I think of Harper. If he realises how much she means to me, it will do nothing except put an even larger target on her back, and I can't have that.

I straighten my hoodie and my baseball cap as my father takes a seat behind his desk once more, looking completely unruffled as he continues glaring at me. "I will get the contract to you for you to look it over."

A sinking feeling sits heavy in my stomach when I realise there's one important question I've not asked, and I'm almost afraid to say the words out loud, but I have to know. "Who the hell am I supposed to be marrying?"

He only says two words, but they echo around my head on repeat like a sick joke. "Tillie Langston."

I shake my head rapidly, not able to control my emotions. "Fuck, no. It can't be her. Why her?"

Father takes the blade out of his pocket once more and lays it on the desk, looking at me threateningly. "This isn't up for debate, boy. It doesn't matter why, you will accept it, no matter what. I'm finalising the terms with her father this weekend, then it will be official. We will announce that Tillie is your Betrothed, and everyone will forget about your connection to that filthy, traitorous whore. But if you refuse, I can always dispose of her myself, removing any distractions that might be preventing you from agreeing to this very lucrative deal."

Hearing him threaten my girl only makes me struggle to keep a hold on the anger that's very close to bursting out of me in a fit of rage, and I have to dig my nails into my palms to act as a painful distraction while I try to keep my cool.

"This weekend?" I snap. "Why so soon?"

My father shrugs his shoulders as if he doesn't care. "Tillie came to me with an offer, as you caught her eye, and I saw an opportunity which I'm more than happy to exploit. Her father is a very rich man, and she's his only daughter. He adores her and will do anything to make her happy, even if that means handing over much more cash than he'd like to, and a stake in his lucrative businesses."

"I thought he was a business rival of yours," I point out, my brain ticking over as I try to think of any excuse to get out of this.

A wicked grin spreads over Father's face as he says, "Haven't you heard the saying about keeping your enemies close, boy? Tillie seems to have very loose lips, so you might learn things that will benefit us in more ways than one."

I'm suddenly regretting all the opportunities I had to kill Tillie that I never took. "I don't want to marry Tillie," I say, even though it won't make a difference.

My father laughs, just as I knew he would. "Do you think I wanted to marry that bitch you call a mother? Fuck no, but I did my duty to the

family, the same way you will. I don't give a shit about your feelings, or what you want. You will do as you're told.

"You will marry Tillie and make her happy. If you insist on keeping her, you will keep your whore hidden away until graduation, and then you'll get rid of her for good. Your duty is to this family, and you will do what is expected of you, or so help me, I will fucking make you."

I pull my baseball cap off and run my fingers through my hair in desperation, a million thoughts rushing through my head. I know what I need to do, but the thought makes me want to rip my fucking heart out. "Give me this weekend, so I can sort everything out with Harper, and after that, I'll do whatever you want."

My father glares at me, looking very much like he doesn't want to negotiate with me at all, let alone concede this tiny thing. But he eventually relents, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Fine, I'll allow you one more weekend with your whore, but on one condition... After this weekend, you will never be seen with her again. I don't care if you fuck her in private, as long as the world thinks Tillie is the only girl for you. And you must get rid of her completely after graduation."

My heart is racing so fast, it's a fucking miracle we both can't hear it. Bile rises in my throat, and I'm worried I might be about to empty my stomach contents onto my father's office floor. I take some small breaths as I try to regain control of myself, all whilst hoping my father is oblivious to my meltdown.

I know what I have to say and do, but just the thought is tearing me apart. I'd rather peel my skin off than hurt Harper, but I don't have a choice.

"Fine, I'll agree to that." The words taste like ash on my tongue, and I don't even wait for him to dismiss me. I storm out of the office, needing to get as far away from this fucking hellhole as I can.

My ears are ringing as fury rushes through my veins with each stride I take through the halls I grew up in, even though they hold no sentimental value for me.

My mother is waiting by the door, her eyes red from where she's been crying, a wineglass in her hand. She reaches out for me when I get close, like she wants to comfort me, but I step around her as if she's not even there. Her sob echoes around the room, but it's not enough to slow me down.

She knew what this fucking meeting was about, but she did nothing to warn me or to help me. A proper mother would only want what's best for her child, to see them happy, and despite her knowing this would destroy me, she did nothing to stop it.

I know I'm being harsh thinking that, as she has absolutely no say in our family business, and I would never expect her to stand up to my father, as that would be a death sentence for her, but it still hurts. Not only am I going to be engaged to a woman I can't fucking stand, I have to push away the girl I'm falling for.

How the hell am I going to tell Harper that I'm engaged to the bitch who has made her life miserable? She's never going to forgive me, and I don't fucking blame her.

Marrying Tillie is bad enough, but that fucking ever-present ticking clock just got a lot louder, and by the time it stops, I will have to cut all ties with Harper for good.

Despite not wanting to acknowledge what I'm thinking, I keep coming back to the same thought. Whatever I do is going to destroy us both, but I need to try to limit how much I hurt Harper emotionally, and there's only one way to do that...

I have to cut ties with Harper now. Keeping her as my dirty little secret will cause her pain, and I'm certain if we continue in private, our feelings for each other will only grow. We'll fall in love, despite having no future, because we won't be able to stop what has already started.

She will have to watch as I parade Tillie around in public, telling everyone how in love with her I am, while my heart beats only for Harper. I'll be forced to watch her wither away on the sidelines, while we both cling to our time in private, despite it damaging us.

It fucking kills me to even think it, but I have to do right by Harper, even if that means hurting her. *If I push her away now before we fall deeper, surely it will hurt less than if we wait?*

I have to think of a way to push Harper away so she never looks back. There's no other way this will work unless I go all in and make her hate me.

Now I just need to work out how I'm going to destroy the only girl I've ever cared about, whilst hoping she takes care of the pieces of my heart that will always belong with her.

CHAPTER THIRTY- SIX

Harper



A soft moan escapes my lips before I've even opened my eyes, my whole body alight with that familiar feeling of ecstasy. My brain is foggy from sleep, still half in the dream I was enjoying just a few moments ago, and I struggle to decide whether the feel of Lawson worshipping me is real or not.

My eyes shoot open when he sinks deep inside me, and I blink rapidly to push away the hazy sleepiness. Him waking me up in such a way overwhelms me, and I quickly try to assess the situation before I'm lost to him completely.

My wrists are bound to the unyielding wooden bedposts, the rough fibres of the rope biting into my skin, creating a burning friction each time I move. The sharp sting around my lips confirms they've been sealed shut with duct tape, the tacky barrier preventing my desperate urge to cry out.

My knees are bent so far they press into my chest, as the roughness of the ropes rubs against my skin where they bind my calves tightly to my thighs. His large, warm hands grip my legs, pushing them outwards, spreading them wide enough to make room for himself.

How the fuck was he able to tie me up like this without me waking up? I bet he drugged me, like he's been hinting at.

The room is bathed in darkness, thanks to the closed curtains and the late hour, and the light shining through the partly open bathroom door is the only thing that allows me to see Lawson. Faint light surrounds his large silhouette, making him appear almost angelic, which is laughable because we all know he's a demon in disguise. But he's my demon.

As he sinks into me faster with each thrust, I moan against the tape sealing my lips. There's just enough light to see the harsh lines of his face and the furrow in his brow, making him seem almost angry, and his bruising grip on my thigh and hip only add to this.

A niggling worry sets my nerves on edge, only emphasising the anxiety that started several hours ago when Lawson didn't come home. He left me in his bed this morning with a note saying he would be back later, that he was visiting his father. Their relationship is strained, so he never stays for too long.

As the hours of the day ticked away, I became more concerned by his absence, and it was only made worse when he never returned any of my text messages. When it got to late evening, I went to Bram, worried something might have happened to Lawson.

Bram seemed to take pleasure in the fact I was worried about his friend, taking a moment to gloat as he pointed out my obvious feelings for Lawson. I waved him away, not willing to talk about it with anyone except Lawson.

He reassured me that Lawson was fine, that he just needed some time to himself, and that he'd be back later tonight. Even though it was meant to reassure me, it didn't. I understand Lawson needing time for himself, but he's constantly in contact with me, so his silence only strengthened that impending feeling of doom that kept nudging its way into my thoughts.

A quick look at the clock behind Lawson confirms it's almost three in the morning, but before I can properly take that in, Lawson's cock hits that spot deep inside me that causes fireworks to erupt along the edges of my vision, and all logical thoughts fade away. I'm consumed by the feel of him taking me, owning me, destroying me in the best possible way.

I lift my head just a little, and it's enough to see Lawson's piercing silver eyes as he stares at me. But instead of the fire I usually see when he wakes me up in this way, his gaze is cold and hard, and he's looking at me like I'm just another hole he can sink into and forget about.

I try to speak, an ominous chill rushing over me as fear niggles away beneath the surface when I look at a man I've not seen before. Even during our first time, when there were no feelings involved, just promises and a duty to the Gifting Ceremony, he never looked at me with such emptiness.

I shake my head three times, which is our sign that I want to slow things down or take a short break, but Lawson is looking at me without really

seeing me, so he doesn't notice my signal. That in itself should scare the shit out of me, but I remind myself that I trust Lawson implicitly.

Despite the panic prickling beneath the surface, I try to push all the negative thoughts from my mind and focus on the overwhelming pleasure he's giving my body, the way he always does. The feel of his cock hitting me deep rips a moan from my throat, but it's dampened by the tape.

It's such an overwhelming mismatch of feelings as my body chases the pleasure he's giving me, while my mind screams that something is wrong. I try to quiet the noise in my head by rocking my hips to meet each of his thrusts, chasing the release that's building.

But no matter how much I throw myself into the desire, my overactive mind prevents me from reaching that peak, and I shake my head three times again, hoping Lawson sees me this time.

I breathe a sigh of relief when his movements stop, and he freezes with his cock buried deep inside me. I keep my eyes on him as he blinks a few times, his expression softening with each movement. It's like the transition is happening in slow motion right in front of me, as a myriad of emotions cross his face.

He starts cold, then confused, before he sinks into anger and then despair, until he finally settles on something that looks almost like pain, even though that makes no sense. My brow furrows as I try to make sense of what I'm seeing before me.

For as long as I've known Lawson, one of his greatest talents has always been his ability to hide his true feelings, to pull on an unreadable mask so that nobody knows what he's thinking or feelings. It's one thing I've enjoyed most about our time together: watching him shed the mask and show me the real Lawson beneath.

Now, all of his emotions are laid bare for me, and they break my heart in a way I never expected. His pain is my pain, and I want nothing more than to ease the furrow from his brow and take away his frown, but it's clear he's trying to pull away from me, and that fucking hurts.

I want him to take the tape off so I can ask him what's going on, but I already know he won't answer me. The look he's giving me makes that more than clear, so when he reaches over and removes the tape from my lips, I keep quiet—even though it kills me.

He leans in closer, not saying a word either, and the chemistry between us seems to crackle as I feel his hard length pulsing deep inside me, still not

moving at all. As much as I want to rock my hips, to force him to move, I'm transfixed, caught in this stifling bubble with him as we both just stare at each other, waiting for who knows what.

His face is moving closer at the most annoyingly slow speed, but the nearer he gets, the more his features soften. It's almost like he's studying every little piece of my face, memorising it as though he'll forget it if he doesn't.

Lawson stops just centimetres from me, his breath fanning over my face, giving me the chance to breathe him in. I wait, but he doesn't move any further; he just continues staring at me without so much as a blink.

Unable to stop myself, I lift my head and close the minute distance between us, pressing my lips to his. It's the briefest kiss, as I don't want to push him too far when there's clearly something going on with him, but the feel of him filling me, pushing me so close to the edge without giving me that release, only makes me crave him.

At first, he's frozen, his lips not moving at all as his eyes remain open and fixed on me, but when I start to pull away, that's when his gaze flickers to life. He kisses me hard, claiming me in a bruising kiss that is both tender and full of raw passion.

My head swims from the intensity of him claiming my lips, his tongue seeking access that I willingly give. His cock twitches, but he still doesn't move his hips, keeping himself buried inside as my pussy aches for more.

When he pulls away from the kiss, I let out a soft groan, not ready for there to be any distance between us. Not when his silver eyes are finally warm, and he's looking at me like he might actually see me.

Suddenly, Lawson reaches over to the bedside table, his dick moving ever so slightly, pulling a moan from my lips as he grabs the knife he keeps there. My heart races, but more out of excitement than fear, as I trust he'd never hurt me. Though I doubt that for a moment when I remember he's not acting like himself right now.

As Lawson leans over and slices the ropes tying my arms to either side of the bed, I give him a small smile in thanks, as he knows how much I enjoy touching him when he's fucking me. I waste no time wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him in for another kiss that I feel down to the tips of my toes.

He then pulls back completely so he can slice the ropes binding my legs. After he's thrown the rope and his knife onto the floor, he tenderly

massages my legs as he stretches them out, encouraging the blood to flow freely now I can move them again.

But the feel of his fingers digging into my tense muscles has my head spinning, and I can't take him being so far away from me any longer. I reach down and pull him back up my body, spreading my legs so he can slot between them once more, as I lift my head to capture his lips.

He kisses me with so much passion, as his hands explore every inch of my body. I keep mine wrapped around his neck, with my legs locked around his waist, my way of holding him close so he can't move away. As his fingers caress and pull on my nipples, he swallows my whimpers as he continues owning every part of me.

The closeness and intimacy makes my heart thud in my chest. It's like someone has released a shitload of butterflies in my stomach, and each flutter sets my nerve endings on fire.

We both pull back from the kiss, drawing in some much-needed air, as we continue gazing into each other's eyes, like we're seeing the other clearly for the first time. His silver gaze is warm yet piercing, and I've never seen so much emotion staring back at me. It's so at odds with his blank mask from just a few minutes earlier.

This is the exact moment it hits me that I don't need to hear the words from Lawson; I can see them reflected in his gaze. I know with absolute certainty that he feels the same way I do, and that the emotion is reflected in my eyes too. I might not have the courage to say it aloud, but with each beat of my heart, I'm more certain that I love this man. He's captured my heart and soul, and I couldn't change it if I wanted to.

I push away all the negative thoughts that remind me of why this is a bad idea, that no matter how we feel, we have no future together. All of those things, whilst true, don't change what is between us. We're free-falling together, whether we say the words to each other or not, and there's no stopping it now.

I know this is going to end in heartbreak eventually; we both do, but as he ravages my skin with his lips and touch, I can't bring myself to care. I'll deal with the aftermath when it comes—and it will come—but right now, I want to bathe in the feelings I'm too frightened to admit to him.

I rock my hips, and Lawson groans with his mouth around my nipple, taking my not-so-subtle hint. He releases my nipple from between his teeth,

his gaze still locked on mine as he slowly pulls his cock out, not stopping until only the tip remains inside.

His hands are gripping my hips so tightly they're sure to leave bruises, but I don't care. I love wearing his marks, and he loves seeing them on me. He holds his position for what seems like an eternity, and though there's so much emotion shining in his eyes, his expression remains worryingly blank, and I don't know what to say or do about that.

I open my mouth, though I'm not entirely sure what is about to come out, but Lawson silences me by thrusting his dick in deep, my back arching as I take all of him. My nerves prickle as he does the same again, pulling out slowly before pushing in hard, hitting the sweet spot that makes my eyes roll.

He places his arm beside my head before leaning over me, his body flush against mine, stealing every bit of my personal space. His breath fans over my face and his eyes bore into mine, stealing my breath away as he continues his slow, torturous strokes with his cock, my pussy fluttering with desire as I ache for more.

I rake my nails down his back, loving the way he shivers beneath my touch, his skin bursting out in goosebumps as my fingers trail over his flesh. He presses soft kisses against my cheek, along my jaw, and down my neck, and I shudder at the tenderness of each touch.

The slow intensity makes me feel like he's trying to devour every part of me, taking his time as he claims each piece, one at a time. And the pleasure builds just as slowly as his ministrations, starting out as a mere ember before burning bright like a flame.

"More, please," I whisper, worried my words might break the intense bubble we find ourselves in.

For the first time since I woke up, Lawson's lips tilt into the smallest of smiles, but it's gone just as quickly, making me question whether it was real. But he gives in to my demand, thrusting in just that little bit quicker. It's nowhere near his usual brutal, claiming pace, but it destroys me even more.

This must be what making love feels like, I think to myself, not daring to voice that thought aloud, as it really would burst our bubble. But there's no denying that's exactly what this is.

Lawson's slow, deliberate strokes send a shiver down my spine, drawing out every drop of pleasure. The sensations are so intense, it makes

my head spin. My core clenches, a tight knot of anticipation, as every muscle in my body tenses, and with each sensual push and pull, I'm propelled closer to my release.

It's so different from anything I've experienced in the past. Normally, it's like I'm barrelling towards my release at the rate of a racecar, but this is more of a slow trek, with each step getting more intense. It's the slowest of slow burns, but as I near the peak, I'm certain it has the power to set the entire world alight.

I claw at Lawson's back as I give myself over to the overwhelming sensations, my gaze locked on his as he stares back. His eyes are blazing bright, and his expression has softened as his own pleasure washes over him, relaxing him at the same time.

The only noise in the room is the slow thrusts of skin slapping together, our breaths intermingling, and the soft moans that echo as we hold on to each other like the world is trying to pull us apart and we won't let it. My grip on his back tightens to the point I'm surprised I've not drawn blood, but Lawson doesn't seem to mind, as he holds me just as tight.

I whimper as my pussy walls flutter around his cock, getting wetter with each lazy stroke. My mouth falls open in a gasp when my orgasm takes over, and Lawson captures my lips to steal my moans as my body tenses.

Shudders ripple down my spine as fire races through my veins, burning me from the inside as I cry out with my release. My pussy clamps down on Lawson's cock, holding him deep inside as I tremble beneath his hard, firm body.

My eyes flutter closed as I lose myself to the moment, all of my nerve endings prickling like live-wires as bliss takes over every part of me.

Lawson's low, deep voice is barely above a whisper, but since it's the first time he's spoken tonight, it seems so much louder. "Eyes on me, sweetheart. I need to see you."

There's a burning intensity in his voice that sounds almost desperate, and when I open my eyes, that's exactly what I see reflected in his silver gaze—pure desperation, as if looking into my eyes is everything he needs to breathe, to survive.

My heart stutters under the weight of his gaze, suddenly feeling more naked than I ever have before. It's like he's trying to see into my soul, and we both know what he'll find there—him. This dark, dangerous man has imprinted himself on me in every way he can, even down to the very core

of my soul, and I have no doubt that if he looks deep enough, that's exactly what he'll find.

I catch the exact moment when he loses himself to his own pleasure, and a deep groan escapes his lips as he shudders against me. His dick pulses inside me, filling me up as he holds me tight through his orgasm.

Lawson slams his lips against mine, and I kiss him back with as much force as I can, both of us trembling as we cling to each other in a desperate need to be as close as we can. I savour everything Lawson gives me, devouring as much of him as I can, whilst he does the same.

I thought I'd given every bit of myself to him during the Gifting Ceremony, when I said the words aloud, but as they echo around my head at this moment, I know I never truly meant them until now.

Everything I have, I gift to you—it's like I'm hearing the words for the first time, as they take on a whole new meaning. Before I gave him my body, but now he owns every part of me: mind, body, and soul. Each beat of my heart is only for him.

As our bodies relax, the last of our orgasms leaving us almost boneless, we sag into each other. Lawson slips from me, and a soft hiss escapes my lips as I'm left feeling empty from the loss of him filling me.

Lawson silently rolls onto his back, pulling me over as he goes. He doesn't stop until I'm plastered along his side, my leg hooked over his and my arm curled around his waist. I rest my head on his chest, listening to the pounding of his heart, and I wonder if it beats for me the way mine does for him.

Lawson wraps his arms around me tightly, almost as if he's afraid of letting go, and he lets out a soft sigh when I nuzzle closer to him. He presses a tender kiss to the top of my head, and I can't hold back a smile at how gentle and sensitive he can be sometimes.

I look up and find his eyes closed, though his brow is furrowed as if he's deep in thought, and I want to smooth out the lines marring his pretty face. I like it when he looks relaxed and at peace, rather than as if he has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"You okay?" I ask, not wanting to say more in case it ruins our moment.

"Yes. Get some sleep," he tells me, pressing another kiss to my forehead.

He sounds almost defeated, and I try to ignore the sinking feeling that's seeping into my bones. I've seen a lot of versions of Lawson recently, but

this is the only one that's ever scared me, because I have no idea what he's thinking or feeling, yet I'm certain it's nothing good.

I push the negative thoughts from my mind as best I can, soaking up the feel of his warm, protective hold as he grips me tight against him. He's giving us the chance to hold on to this moment for a little longer, and that's not something I plan on turning down.

As my eyes flutter closed, I try to memorise everything about this night that has made me feel so fucking good. The realisation that I'm in love with this man, and that there's a chance he might feel the same way. I focus on the way my body moulds perfectly against his, the way he holds me like he never wants to be apart from me.

Sleep begins to take me whilst I count the beats of his heart, as it echoes mine. I wonder if he knows that a piece of my heart now belongs to him, and no matter what happens between us, it always will. I just hope he takes care of it the way I plan to take care of the piece of his that I've claimed for myself.

CHAPTER THIRTY- SEVEN

Harper



I wake up once more to the feeling of Lawson filling me, his cock hitting me deep as he thrusts into me, pulling me from sleep. I blink away the haziness as a moan falls from my lips, my whole body tingling from where his hands have been.

His thrusts are hard and fast, almost brutal, not at all like earlier, but as my body hums in response, I can't even focus enough to compare. It feels like he's everywhere, all at the same time. His lips on my neck, one hand on my hip as the other plays with my nipple, while he sinks his dick into me, his body covering mine.

I wrap my legs around his arse, pulling him even closer. Both my hands are tightly fisting the sheets beneath me, but I remove one so I can drag my fingers through his hair, tugging on the strands until he groans in response.

I lift my head towards his, making it clear I want to feel his lips on mine, but Lawson flicks his gaze away from me as turns his head at the last second, my lips hitting his cheek instead. My brow furrows in confusion, but before I can say anything, he pulls out of me so quickly that a sharp whimper escapes me. He then grabs my hips and flips me over onto my stomach.

I'm dizzy from the abrupt movements, but Lawson works quickly, getting me into the position he wants. With my chest and cheek pressed against the bedsheet, he uses his grip on my hips to lift my arse into the air, curving my spine in the perfect way to present my pussy to him.

He nudges my legs apart with his own, making room for himself before sinking into me from behind, as my guttural moan echoes around the room.

He fucks me with fierce thrusts, his grip on me tighter than ever before, as he keeps up his punishing rhythm.

The way he hits me so deep each time has my head spinning, and my overly-sensitive nipples rubbing against the sheets beneath only adds to the overwhelming pleasure. All of my nerve endings are on fire, crackling fiercely as his touch pushes me closer to my release.

My cries and whimpers let him know I'm getting closer, but before I can tell him myself, he pulls out of my aching pussy, and I cry out from the loss of him. I open my mouth to speak, but he slaps my arse hard, silencing me.

I turn to glare at him over my shoulder, my eyes growing wide when he presses the head of his cock against my arse. He leans closer, allowing a trail of saliva to run from his mouth down over my arse, before he uses his dick to smear it against my entrance.

As he pushes against me, the stinging sensation only worsens as he stretches me open, using only his spit and my juices on his shaft as lubricant. With each inch that makes it past the rim, the burning worsens, and I whimper from the pain.

"Law... I don't... I can't..." My mind is still frazzled from being woken up and pushed to the edge of an orgasm so quickly, only for it to be denied, so I struggle to form coherent sentences.

"You can take me, sweetheart. Be a good girl for me," he groans, and I recognise the wet sensation of warm saliva hitting my skin once again as he continues his advance.

I try to relax for him as much as I can, pushing against him the way he's always taught me to, and as the head pops in, we both let out groans of satisfaction. The rest of him slides in much easier, stretching and filling me to the point of pain, until his fingers rub against my aching clit, providing the perfect distraction.

"Such a good girl. I knew you could take me," he mutters, pressing soft kisses along the length of my spine until I've taken every inch of his big dick.

I shudder at the way his fingers caress my clit, as his length twitches deep inside, letting me know how desperate he is to move, but he gives me the time I need to adjust to him.

When he feels me relaxing, Lawson finally moves, starting off slow as he pulls almost all the way out before sinking back in again. With each

thrust, he gets faster, hitting me deeper and harder as he steals the breath from my lungs, his fingers continuing their frantic assault on my clit.

My head spins as I'm completely lost to him. All I can manage are cries and whimpers of pleasure, as my heart hammers a frantic rhythm against my ribs. Every nerve ending sparks and crackles under his touch, with the feeling of him everywhere.

Compared to the slow sensuality of last night, this is frantic, powerful, and brutal, as Lawson takes what he needs from me, whilst pulling every bit of pleasure from my body that he can. There's no intimacy, no eye contact, just raw passion as he claims every part of me in the most carnal way.

I can't even move to meet his thrusts as his hold on me keeps me in position, his hand on my lower back pushing me into the bed whenever I try to look over my shoulder at him.

Normally, he loves making eye contact when he's fucking me, but today, he doesn't even try.

The thought is out of my head as quickly as it enters, my body burning bright as I rush toward the orgasm Lawson denied me earlier. My muscles tense as my core overheats, my pussy dripping as it pleads for attention.

"Please, Lawson," I beg.

"Do you want to come, sweetheart?" He sounds almost emotionless as he continues furiously pounding into my arse, moans spilling from my lips each time he hits me deep.

"Yes...please."

He slaps my arse-cheek hard, and I yelp. When he presses a kiss at the base of my spine, the unexpected gentleness of it sends a visible shiver down my body, the stark contrast to his other rougher movements only confusing me more.

"Come, now," he snaps, as he sinks two fingers into my pussy, while his thumb brutally flicks over my clit.

A thousand stars explode behind my eyes as a desperate gasp claws its way up my throat. The overwhelming sensation of being utterly full and stretched open pushes me over the edge, as a final guttural cry is ripped from me at his command. It's like he's trained my body to respond to him, and the moment the words leave his lips, I do as I'm told.

My body goes as rigid as a coiled spring for a few heartbeats, before a wave of pure, hot pleasure washes over me, making me tremble from the force of my climax. Lawson doesn't falter; his powerful thrusts continue,

rhythmically pounding against my flesh. I gasp as my head reels, lost to his exhilarating, brutal pace.

My climax drags on forever, and I'm still quivering when he lets out a roar with his release. With his cock buried in my arse, his length twitches as he shoots his load deep inside. He pulls his fingers from my pulsating pussy, but continues lazily stroking my clit as he rocks his hips, making sure to leave every last drop inside me.

When we've both come down from our orgasms, he pulls out of me, and I let out a hiss. The stinging seems to worsen when his cum begins to seep out. He turns onto his back, shuffling to the far edge of the bed, leaving me on my knees, panting as his release drips down my leg.

I look over at Lawson, only to find him staring at his phone, not paying me any attention the way he usually does after sex. I roll over and shuffle to his side, but when he glances up at me, his stony expression halts me before I get too close. My stomach sinks as an uneasy feeling settles deep in my bones.

Lawson hasn't looked at me like this for a long time, and I'm suddenly thrown back into memories of the way he treated me for the two years when I was with Ryan. He was cold, heartless, and cruel, but I thought we were long past that now.

He turns his attention back to his phone, though it's clear he's talking to me. "You should get dressed and go back to your dorm." His tone is blank and emotionless, and my heart races as coldness seeps into my veins.

"What?"

I don't know what else to say. He's been insisting on me sleeping in his room almost every night since I became his Prize, so why is he suddenly demanding I leave?

Lawson lets out a frustrated huff, almost as if I'm annoying him, before turning his hard glare on me. His silver eyes, like chips of ice, hold no warmth, no flicker of feeling. They pierce me, and a cold dread slithers down my spine as a sickening certainty that something terrible is about to happen settles in my gut.

"There's a party at Crowhurst House tonight; I expect you to be here by eight. I have a lot of shit to do today, including a training session with Xander. Go to your dorm, and when you come back tonight, make sure you're dressed like a whore," he says flatly, before quickly turning his attention back to his phone.

I give him a small nod, even though he can't see it. My lips press into a tight line as I struggle to stop the tirade of questions running through my head from being said aloud.

The urge to defy him grows, as I consider refusing his demand that I dress like a whore. Normally, I wouldn't have a problem with it, but given the way he's treating me, it's the last thing I want to do, let alone attend a party. But that urge to please him rears its ugly head, quelling the rebellious thoughts.

"Okay, I'll see you tonight," I say, as I shuffle to the side of the bed before getting up.

As I head toward the bathroom, grabbing my clothes on the way, his hard voice stops me in my tracks. "Just get dressed and get out. I have things to do."

I turn to stare at him, wondering why the hell he's acting like this, but he's purposefully avoiding me. I let out a sigh as I quickly pull on my leggings and T-shirt, ignoring the sticky mess between my legs.

Once I'm dressed and have picked up my bag, I make my way to the door, throwing a quick glance his way as I silently plead with him to change his mind. I hate leaving like this, but I know I can't stay while he's in this mood.

When my fingers are on the door handle, he clears his throat to capture my attention, and hope floods through me, only to be dashed by his vicious tone. "Make your outfit properly slutty, just like you."

My heart stutters as tears fill my eyes, and I deliberately don't turn around as I don't want him to see them fall. It hurts me more than I care to admit when he doesn't stop me from leaving.

As I close the door behind me, a sob catches in my throat, and for the first time since becoming Lawson's Prize, I actually feel dirty.

With each step that takes me further from Lawson, the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach worsens. *How can I go from being sure I'm falling in love with him, to feeling dirty and used in just a few hours?*

I push the thoughts aside, hoping that when I come to the party tonight, he'll be back to the Lawson I love. But what if that's not the case? What if this is the real Lawson? Either way, I'm not sure my heart can recover from this.



CHAPTER THIRTY- EIGHT

Lawson

As I sink the needle into Harper's neck, watching her eyes grow wide with panic, before settling into something that can only be described as betrayal as they flutter closed, a strange sense of finality washes over me. That, and repulsion.

I have been going back and forth all day wondering how I'm going to do this, and every plan I made devolved quickly before I realised I was self-sabotaging because I don't want them to work. This is the last fucking thing I want to do, but I have no choice.

I intended to let Harper come to the party and go from there, but as soon as I saw her getting ready on her bedroom cameras, I knew I'd get distracted by how fucking phenomenal she looks. My dick wouldn't be able to resist her...let alone the rest of me.

I decided to treat this like any other Crow assignment. Meaning I have to go all in; switch off my emotions, follow the plan to the letter, and think about nothing except completing the task.

As Harper collapses into my arms, I try not to think of her as *my* Harper...she's just another victim.

Closing off my emotions is harder than I thought. With other assignments, I haven't even had to think about it consciously; it just happens. I have a job to do, and the people involved are simply a roadblock to me completing that task.

But this isn't just any hurdle; she's the girl who knocked down the walls around my cold, black heart, showing me I am capable of caring for another person. Now, I have to erect those walls again, making sure she's firmly on the other side once more.

The silky red dress she's wearing more accurately resembles lingerie, and it's testing every bit of my willpower. The smooth fabric falls over her body like a second skin, clinging to her curves in the most delicious way.

With her in my arms, the hem rises enough to confirm she's not wearing anything underneath, but I suspected as much, given her lack of panty-lines and the way her nipples peak through the thin fabric.

She's barely wearing any makeup, just some dark liner and mascara to make her blue eyes shine, and a bright-red lipstick that matches her dress, making me think of what her lips would look like wrapped around my cock.

Harper is a fucking wet dream come to life—my wet dream—and it's about to turn into my worst nightmare. I can't even be mad at her because I told her to dress like this...like a whore. I wanted her to wear something that would show her off. It's part of the plan, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

I'm not going to like anything about tonight, I think to myself as I carry Harper to my car, focusing only on the plan instead of the gorgeous girl in my arms.

All I can think is that we haven't had enough time together. Even when we knew we had a year, it didn't feel like long enough, so having our time cut further is nothing short of brutal. I just have to keep reminding myself I'm doing this for Harper.

I'm almost in a daze as I carry Harper into Crowhurst House, all eyes on me and the unconscious girl in my arms. She won't be out for long; I only gave her a tiny dose, but hopefully the effects will linger once she's woken up, taking the edge off things for her.

I considered giving her something to make her feel spaced out, so she'd be here physically, but not mentally. It was very bloody appealing, but I need to make this believable, and having her off her face would be pretty noticeable.

Bram is standing beside the barely used dining-room door, a scowl on his face that I'm quick to ignore. He has been making sure none of the drunk partygoers use the room, as I have it all set up.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Bram asks for about the millionth time as he opens the door for me, following us inside before pulling it closed.

"I have no choice." It's the same answer I've given him every other time, but the way he shakes his head signals his disapproval.

“There’s no going back from this,” he rather unhelpfully points out as I lay Harper on the large dining room table. Thankfully, this room practically never gets used, and even when it does, it’s more of a study area than where people actually eat. We have the main dining room for that.

“That’s sort of the point,” I snap back, not in the mood to rehash this same argument. “I need Harper to hate me.”

He lets out a harsh, humourless laugh as I gather the rope I had set aside earlier. “Oh, she’ll definitely hate you after this. You don’t have to worry about that.”

My stomach sinks and bile rises in my throat as his words hit me like a punch to the gut. I need Harper to hate me, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be happy about it. The thought makes me sick to my stomach, and I’m glad I didn’t eat anything this evening, or it might make a reappearance about now.

Although this room doesn’t have a specific purpose, the beam running along the ceiling made it the perfect choice for my plan, as I want to use it as a suspension system.

With Bram’s help, since he’s much more into BDSM than I am, we attach a spreader bar to a hook that’s suspended from the beam, making sure it’s capable of taking Harper’s weight. Once it’s set up, we lower it down and get a chair in position beneath it.

Once I have everything ready, I move Harper onto the chair, supporting her head when it flops forward. Although it makes the green-eyed monster in me flare to life at the thought of Bram getting close to Harper’s naked body, I push that aside as I tug the red dress over her head and throw it behind me. I need his help with this, or I risk seriously hurting her.

Luckily for Bram, he moves methodically and professionally, not even looking at my girl as he helps me wrap the rope around her perfect body. We secure it through her armpits and around her chest, pushing her perfect tits out as we pull it tight.

Once the top is secure, we move onto the rope around her hips. Before he gets the chance, I snatch the rope from his hands with a growl and start lacing it around her thighs, making sure it’s not too close to her pretty pussy.

Bram just chuckles at my possessiveness before moving to check the tension on all the ropes now that they’re secure. Once I’ve finished with her

hips and thighs, he checks them too, ignoring the glare I give him when his fingers edge closer to her cunt than I'd like.

"Okay, I can get two fingers underneath the rope, so there's enough tension to support her weight without it being too painful or cutting off her circulation. Once we suspend her, the ropes around her chest and hips will take most of her weight, while the spreader bar will help distribute it," he tells me, tugging on the ropes one last time to emphasise his point.

Before I can say anything, Harper rolls her head, letting out a soft groan. Her eyes are still closed, but it won't be long until she wakes up. I need her to be fully awake for this, so I reach over and grab the bottle of water that I left on the side earlier.

"Hey, Harper. Open your eyes and take a sip of this," I tell her as I move the bottle to her lips.

Her eyes flutter open, though they still appear heavy, and she has to blink several times to fight against the bright lights in the room. When I place the rim against her lips, she tilts her head back just enough for me to let the water trickle in, as she tries moving her hands.

"Don't try to move, just drink," I say, keeping my voice as impassive as I can. I don't want to scare her too soon.

When I'm satisfied she's had enough to clear her dry mouth, I move the bottle away, and Harper continues to blink rapidly, life coming back to her bright-blue eyes with each one. It takes a few minutes for the haze of the drug to clear enough for her to fully take in her situation, but when she does, her gaze narrows on me.

"What's going on? Why can't I move?" The words rush out as she looks around, taking in the ropes binding her naked body and the spreader bar hanging above her head, holding her arms upright.

When she catches sight of Bram leaning against the wall opposite, her gaze quickly flicks between her naked body and me, before going back to him.

"No more questions," I snap. "I don't want to use the ball gag, but if you speak once more, I will. Do you understand?"

Although her eyes narrow on me in a glare, she nods her head, not uttering a word, and I have to fight to hold back a smirk at how fucking well-trained she is now.

"I'm going to suspend you from the ceiling, but it won't be too painful as the rope around your body will take most of the strain. As with

everything we do, I expect you to follow my instructions, no questions asked. Do you understand?"

Her body is clearly tense, and her eyes are closely assessing me, no doubt trying to work out why I sound so cold and indifferent. But like the good girl she is, she nods for me.

I turn to Bram, motioning for him to begin, and he walks over to the pulley system, deliberately avoiding Harper's gaze as she follows every step he takes. Her eyes grow wide with panic when her body begins to rise off the chair, her arms pulling taut as she's lifted into the air by the ropes.

We leave it so she can only just keep the balls of her feet on the floor, so it can take some of her weight, but not much. Once Bram has secured the pulley in place, he once again checks the ropes on Harper's body, making sure they will not injure her.

As he runs his fingers over her skin, a blush spreads across her cheeks, but her gaze remains fixed on mine, showing me she's really confused by my friend's involvement.

"We're all good," he announces as he takes a step back, running his gaze over her as pride blooms over his features.

"You know what to do next," I tell him, which earns me a scowl, but I'm fucking grateful when he turns his back on me and leaves the room, not bothering to argue this time.

Harper seems to breathe a sigh of relief when it's just the two of us, a small smile on her face as she gently pulls on her wrists and twists her body, testing the ropes to see if they have much give—they don't, and she quickly discovers that.

"Please, may I ask a question?" she mutters.

I give her a curt nod as I move behind her, gathering the last things I'm going to need. "Sure."

"What's going on? I can hear the party on the other side of the door," she replies, nodding her head towards where the dull thud of the music being played at the party is coming from.

"As my Prize, I expect you to do as you're told at all times. If I give you an instruction, you will complete it without any questions or complaints. No matter how much things change between us, that role will stay the same, and it's important for you to remember that." It's a bullshit answer, but I need her to be the perfect Prize while I'm doing this. If she challenges me, it will only make things worse.

“I get that,” she responds, though the uncertainty in her voice suggests otherwise. “I just wish I knew what you were going to do.”

“I’m doing what needs to be done,” I say firmly from beside her, and when she turns to look at me, her gaze lands on the array of items I have prepared.

Panic forces her eyes to widen as the colour drains from her already pale cheeks, making her cute-as-hell freckles stand out even more. Her bright-red lipstick is the only colour that remains, and I want nothing more than to see that smeared on my cock, but that’s not part of the plan.

Before she can say anything, the door to the room flings open, and as the noise from the party floods in, so do several Crow Pledges. They’re all rowdy, with a beer in their hands, and they rush into the room in a sea of noise.

My stomach sinks when I see Ryan, Tillie, and Sienna stride into the room, taking a seat right in front of us. Both girls look the most smug I’ve ever seen them, while Ryan seems almost angry, but I push them all from my mind as I turn my attention back to Harper.

Her beautiful blue eyes are filling with tears as her gaze flicks from the people in the room to her naked body, which is very much on display for all to see. Embarrassment floods her cheeks, and given the way she twists her body and pulls on her wrists, it’s clear she wishes she could use anything to cover herself up.

When her eyes finally lock with mine, the stark betrayal glinting within them feels like a cold blade piercing my chest, a fragile ache blossoming in my heart. I don’t let her see any of that, keeping my mask of indifference in place as I turn away from her, addressing the people in the room.

“Silence.” I don’t say the word any louder than I would normally speak, but the room falls quiet in an instant, showing the power I have over them, and the respect the other Pledges have for me and my position.

I stride over to the table beside Harper, keeping my head held high as I hide all of my pain and anxiety over what I’m about to do.

I grasp the worn leather belt that I retrieved from my closet earlier, its familiar coolness seeping into my palms. As I fold it in half, the sharp slap of the material echoes through the silent room, bouncing off the bare walls.

As I stand beside Harper, although I’m speaking directly to her, I look out at the room, projecting my voice for them all to hear. “Tell everyone who you are. Your full name and your role.”

Harper drops her gaze to the floor, but when she speaks, it's loud and clear, showing more confidence than I'm sure she's feeling right now. "My name is Harper Westmore, and I'm Lawson Radley's Prize."

There's a mixture of boos and cheers from the people in the room, which only makes Harper's cheeks turn an even deeper shade of red. I move behind her, but she can't see with her gaze fixed on the ground in front of her.

I take a deep breath to steel my nerves before slapping the belt against her arse hard enough to leave a welt. Her scream echoes around the room, and she lifts her head enough to glare at me, but I make a point of ignoring her.

"Keep your eyes forward. I want you to look at the people in the room when you speak to them."

She doesn't acknowledge I've spoken, since I didn't ask her a question directly, but I punish her for her silence anyway with another strike to her arse, hitting the opposite cheek this time.

While I would normally use my palm to soothe the sting beneath the red welts, I have to clamp my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching out for her. As glistening tears well in her eyes, and she looks at me with an expression of profound betrayal, my heart fractures so severely I doubt its shattered pieces will ever mend.

"Tell the people in the room who your father is."

Her gaze narrows on me, only this time, she looks furious. She lifts her head and stares out at the crowd as she proudly says, "Bob Westmore is my father."

I have to bite my lip to stop the smile that's threatening to break free from seeing how much strength my girl has. She genuinely believes her father is innocent, and she'll take on anyone who says otherwise. I had counted on that when I cooked up this plan.

While she says his name with pride, the room erupts into loud boos and curses, calling him out for the traitor they believe him to be.

"He's in prison currently, a traitor to the Obsidian Order. Is that correct?"

As soon as the word no leaves her lips, I slap the belt against her arse two more times, once on each cheek, pulling a scream from deep in her throat. The tears she was trying to hold back are now flowing freely down her face as she pointlessly pulls against the spreader bar.

“He’s innocent,” she manages to say through the sobs.

“Bullshit. He’s a fucking traitor, and you are for standing by him,” Tillie yells, looking murderous as she moves to stand up, but I hit her with a hard glare that makes it clear she isn’t to interfere in this. She sits back down with a huff, as others in the room agree with her.

“Everyone seems to think he’s guilty and is evading punishment, which isn’t the way the Order works. I think you should pay for his crimes,” I tell her, trying my best to make it seem like I’m looking at her without actually doing so. I don’t think my heart can take seeing the sheer betrayal and pain in her eyes.

“Make her fucking pay,” Sienna shouts, as others in the room echo the same sentiment.

After steeling my nerves, I glance at Harper, only to find her holding her head high still, and despite the tears coating her cheeks, she meets my gaze with a defiant challenge. My heart races and my cock twitches—I’m so fucking proud of my girl for showing strength when she doesn’t truly feel it.

Fuck, if that doesn’t just make me hate myself even more.

I close my thoughts off as I lash her arse several more times, only stopping when her curvy backside and the top of her thighs are covered in red welts, as Harper sobs loudly, begging me to stop.

She lets out a shuddered breath when I finally lay the belt down, and I block out the jeers from the crowd. If she thought that was hard, this will break her in ways she never expected.

I lift the wand vibrator, making sure she can see what I have in my hand, but she’s so mentally and physically drained from the belt, she barely registers it. I stop in front of her, so close her breath is fanning over my face, and although her eyes are on me, it’s like she’s looking straight through me.

I nudge her legs wider apart, which is difficult since she’s already on the balls of her feet, but once they’re in position, I lean in close enough to whisper in her ear. “Did you enjoy being punished, sw—Harper?”

I can’t bring myself to use her nickname, not with what I have planned. There’s a flicker of recognition when she hears me switch to her name, but it’s gone just as quickly as she shuts me out, retreating into her own head.

She doesn’t bother to answer me, and so I turn slightly to face our audience, raising my voice so they can hear this time. “I was just asking

Harper if she enjoyed her punishment. She's being a naughty girl and refuses to answer me, but I think I can find out for myself."

The Pledges cheer loudly when I reach down between her legs, roughly sliding my finger through her slit, finding her wetter than I expected. I lift my soaked finger for all to see, before turning to Harper. "Looks like you really enjoyed it, slut," I taunt.

She moves her head closer to mine, my breath catching at her unexpected move as her lips stop just beside my ear. Her voice is barely above a whisper, and because of the way my body blocks hers, nobody in the room can see she's talking to me, let alone hear her. "Why are you doing this?"

I have to ignore the sheer fucking plea in her voice, giving her an icy stare in return. "It was brought to my attention that since your father isn't being punished, it should fall to his next of kin, which is you."

"You don't have to listen to them," she replies, but we both know that's bullshit.

"I know, but I want to." I make sure to sound like as much of an asshole as I can, and the way her nose wrinkles in disgust confirms I've achieved that goal.

"You promised you'd never let anyone see me like this."

I shake my head, ignoring the tiny slices to my heart with each awful thing I say to her. "Actually, I promised to never share you. Either way, I've changed my mind. Call me a liar, I don't care."

Before she can argue back, I slam two fingers into her pussy, dragging a yelp from her lips that quickly turns into a moan as I stretch her out. I keep my rough thrusts quick and deep, filling her as much as possible as the heel of my hand hits her clit.

As she lets out a reluctant moan, I turn to face the crowd, making sure to position my body in front of hers as much as I can. To everyone looking on, they will just think I'm in the best position for what I'm doing, when in reality, I'm trying to make sure these fucking assholes see as little of my girl as possible.

I need to do this, but it doesn't mean I'm going to make it easy on them. I've already made a mental note of everyone here who is ogling my girl, and I will make them pay whenever I get the chance. Every Crow Pledge got an invitation to witness Harper's punishment, but these are the only fuckers sick enough to attend.

“Look at this little slut. She’s so fucking wet, moaning for me even after I tanned her arse,” I gloat, not slowing my brutal thrusts.

Harper’s cunt walls flutter around my fingers, and as they tighten, Harper lets out a whimper that tells me she’s nearing an orgasm, no matter how much she tries to avoid it. She fixes her gaze on me, silently pleading with me, but it’s not clear whether she wants me to stop or to let her come. Either way, what she wants doesn’t matter.

I rip my fingers from her eager cunt, her groan filling the room as she sags against the ropes holding her upright. “Did you want to come, slut?”

She doesn’t respond, just continues to look at the floor as she pulls in gasps of air, her body trembling all over. I slap the palm of my hand over her tit, before doing the same on the other side, making sure to flick my finger against her nipple as I make contact.

She yelps loudly before lifting her head to glare at me. “Use your words, whore.”

She scowls at me, venom bleeding from her eyes. “Yes, I wanted to come,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Good little sluts know how to beg, so why didn’t you?”

I move the wand that’s still in my hand between her legs, turning on the vibrations once I have it in place over her clit. I press down hard when she doesn’t answer, a guttural groan ripping from her throat as she rocks her hips against the wand. Well, as much as she can, given the ropes tying her in place.

“Does that feel good, slut?” I ask, making sure she knows I’m not using the word slut the way I normally do when we play. The edge to my tone makes it obvious I’m using it negatively, even though it fucking kills me.

My dick isn’t even twitching in appreciation of this gorgeous girl moaning for me, because it’s all fucking tainted by the people watching, and what has to happen next.

“Yes,” she grinds out.

“I want you to tell everyone how you feel, and describe exactly what I’m doing to you. Show them what a dirty little whore you are.”

Tears stream down my face as she lets out a shuddering sigh, her body seeming to deflate as she loses the last bit of defiance that was holding her head high. Her expression turns blank as she rocks her hips against my hand, the last of her spirit breaking.

I didn't realise how much it would fucking hurt to break her like this, but my heart fractures into a million pieces as her tiny voice projects to the vile people watching. "It feels so good against my clit. I-I...I'm so close... because I'm...I'm a dirty whore."

I close my eyes so I don't have to look at the pain written on her face. It's so much worse than the physical punishment I inflicted, and my stomach sinks as revulsion slivers through my veins, corroding every bit of light she gave me, leaving me in darkness.

"Tell them how wet you are," I say, my voice just as empty as I feel.

"I'm dripping onto the wand, so wet...because I'm a nasty slut."

Fuck, Harper sounds just as robotic as me; like the most badly acted porn film. Yet the arseholes in the crowd are cheering and shouting derogatory comments like they can't even tell.

Each time someone calls her a vile name, it chips away at Harper, and a bit more light leaves her eyes, until she's left with nothing but a vacant stare. Her normally bright blue eyes look dull and lifeless as she tells me she wants to come, while the tears streaming down her cheeks very much suggest otherwise.

Feeling nothing but utter repulsion for myself, I move forward with the final part of my plan. I know Harper's body better than she knows her own, and when I see she's nearing her release, I press the two dripping wet fingers, that had recently been in her cunt, into her tight arse.

She screams as I shove them in hard, using only her juices as lube, which isn't anywhere near enough. It's rough and painful, but I rub the wand against her clit in the hope it will act as a distraction.

I don't stop until I have both fingers buried deep in her arse, and once I do, I immediately slide them in and out, slamming into her hard without giving her time to adjust. She cries and whimpers, as moans of pleasure slip through in between.

"Tell them," I snarl into her ear, widening my fingers in her arse to make her feel everything.

"Fuck," she yelps, her eyes locking on mine once more to plead with me, but when I turn away from her, she lets out a harrowing sob. "His fingers are in my arse."

She sounds so fucking defeated; my stomach rolls as acid slides up my throat, and I have to focus on my breathing to keep the nausea under control.

Her cries of pleasure become almost frantic, and I know she's about to come, even though she desperately doesn't want to. Her gaze flickers around the room at all the people watching, embarrassment flooding her cheeks when it hits her that these people are seeing her at her most vulnerable, and all I can do is humiliate her further.

"Come on, whore. Tell everyone how much you fucking love it."

A sob catches in her throat as her voice breaks. "Fuck, please...please, can I come? I-I...Your fingers in my arse and the wand...it's too much. I need...I need to come like a filthy slut."

I've heard her beg me many times before, and it's nothing like this. Her words are filled with disgust, and while coming is the last thing she wants, her body is betraying her in the worst way.

"Come like the dirty whore you are, and make sure everyone hears you," I tell her, thrusting my fingers into her arse as I turn the wand onto the highest vibration setting.

She screams as her release hits her hard, her body trembling as her arse clamps down on my fingers. Sobs wrack her body, and she has to fight to get her words out around them. "Coming...like a...filthy...whore. Fuck...fingers in my arse...love it. Coming hard. Slut."

Her words are incoherent, but we can all hear enough to get the idea; Harper's sobs and whimpers cutting her off. As her orgasm subsides, I turn off the vibe and pull my fingers from her arse, concerned when she doesn't even react to the sting she must have felt.

"As you can see, my Prize is a dirty whore, who has been punished for the sins of her father. You have all seen that she is now tainted. She'll never be an Obsidian Order Wife, and no self-respecting Order member will ever want her now." Each word tastes like acid on my tongue, and it's only made worse by the cries Harper lets out on hearing my words.

With a slight nod of my head to Bram, he quickly ushers everyone out of the room, not letting any of them linger. Tillie and Sienna both throw insults at Harper as they leave, while Ryan stays suspiciously quiet, his expression difficult to interpret, but if I'm being honest, I'm not really trying.

Once Bram closes the door behind Ryan, who is the last to leave, Bram works on getting Harper down. I keep out of the way, even though every fibre of my being is screaming at me to go to her, to give her the comfort I know she needs right now, but I can't... I'm still not finished.

Once she's down, sitting on the chair from before, Bram hands her a black silk robe, which she wraps tightly around her delicate body, followed by a bottle of water. She accepts it without a word, swallowing down big gulps before handing it back to him.

He takes it from her and places it on the table, his gaze flicking between the two of us. He looks concerned, but he doesn't say a word, simply hanging his head as he moves to the door. With one last disappointed glance, he leaves the room, giving me the privacy I don't deserve.

Harper is still sobbing silently, but now she knows we're alone, she lifts her gaze to meet mine, staring at me as she searches for answers I can't give.

"Look, I don't want to drag this out, so I'm just going to be blunt. This thing between us is over. I'm releasing you from all duties as my Prize," I say, my tone remaining cold and distant.

Harper freezes, her sobs stopping mid-hiccup as the light leaves her eyes, and my heart fractures inside my chest all over again.

Despite all the pain and suffering I've caused her, she shakes her head. "No, Lawson. I want to be your Prize."

Fuck, I never expected her to still want me after this.

I keep my face cold and emotionless as my lips twist into a cruel snarl. "I don't give a shit what you want. I have gotten everything I want from you. I've taken your virginity, destroyed all of your holes, branded you with my name, and now I'm done."

I wave my hand in a sharp, dismissive gesture, the air becoming frigid as I push her away. With each fallen tear, another shard of my heart breaks free, its cold, jagged edge tearing into me with a splintering pain.

"You don't mean that." Her voice is barely above a whisper, and I'm not even sure she believes what she's saying, or if she's just hoping there's some good left in me.

I scowl, pulling out the last thing I hoped I never had to use as I push her away one final time. "Look, this has been nothing more than a challenge for me. I wanted to see if I could break the traitor's daughter, as a punishment for you both, and unfortunately, you made it incredibly fucking easy. I've just shown all the Crows that I can turn you into a filthy whore, ruining you for men in the future, and now I have no need for you."

I let out a harsh laugh, making sure my face is as ugly as the words I'm using on her. She lifts her hand as if she's about to reach for me, but I pull

away, knowing her touch might be enough to fracture the last of my resolve, and I can't have that.

She looks up at me, and the pain in her fucking gorgeous blue eyes almost ruins me, so I quickly wrap my hand around her throat, squeezing enough for her to take it as the threat it's supposed to be. I cut off her air as I press hard enough to leave bruises, watching in disgust as genuine fear invades her eyes.

"We've had our fun, and now it's over. You are no one, and you'll always be a fucking no one. I don't ever want to see or hear from you again. Do I make myself clear?"

I squeeze a little tighter around her throat, to hammer home my point, before easing up just enough that she's able to nod in acknowledgment. Tears stream down her cheeks onto my palm, and when I pull my hand away, pain slices through me as I look at them in disgust.

I never wanted to be the reason for her tears.

Harper gasps for air in between sobs, her eyes flicking between me and the floor as she wraps her arms around herself. Just yesterday she was looking at me with so much love, and now it's all gone. There's only darkness in her beautiful blue eyes, and I'm the reason for that.

Bile rises in my throat, and I struggle to keep control as repulsion slivers through my veins like poison, destroying the last pieces of good that came from having Harper in my life.

As a loud sob catches in her throat, I know I can't watch this anymore. I have to get out of here. Keeping up the facade, I roll my eyes at Harper like she's being dramatic before pulling her to her feet. She stumbles slightly, but manages to remain standing.

"Stop crying and get the fuck out, now. Or I'll throw you out as you are," I snarl.

She looks down at the thin robe covering her otherwise naked body and lets out a small sigh as she stumbles towards the door. I'm sure Bram is waiting on the other side with clothes and shoes, but I pretend I don't know that.

With her fingers on the door handle, she turns to look at me over her shoulder, catching me unaware, and for a fraction of a second, I'm sure she can see the pain burning in my silver gaze, but I cover it as quickly as I can, hoping she missed it. With my cold, emotionless glare in place, she looks

away from me, not able to stomach seeing me staring at her in that way, and I don't fucking blame her.

As she leaves, the pain in her eyes is there for all to see, alongside all the unanswered questions. How were we talking about our feelings yesterday, and today, I'm kicking her out like I hate her? I'm sure she's confused, but it's for the best.

With each step she takes away from me, I take in every inch of the gorgeous body that I've had the pleasure of being able to worship over the last couple of months. I lock the images safe in my memories, knowing I'm going to need them, as this is the last time I'll ever see her again.

My life is about to change for the worst, and all I'm left with are the memories of a time when I was genuinely happy. For the first time in as long as I can remember, tears fill my eyes, and they quickly fall as I mourn the loss of the only person who has ever really loved me.

Pain unlike anything I've ever felt before rips through my body, and it genuinely feels like my heart is being fractured into thousands of tiny pieces, with no hope of ever being made whole again.

I allow myself a moment to fall apart, to grieve the loss of something I didn't even know I wanted, yet now feels so fucking deep. I'll give myself a short time to wallow, and then I need to find a way to gather up the pieces of my broken heart and move on with my life, even if it seems impossible right now.

Besides, I don't deserve to feel even an ounce of happiness after what I just did to the only girl I've ever cared about. I deserve to rot in a loveless marriage, hating everything about my life, which is ironic, as that's exactly the future that's been planned for me.

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ABOUT EMMA LUNA

Emma Luna is a USA Today Bestselling dark romance author from the United Kingdom. A former midwife who traded delivering babies for wrangling the darker voices in her head, she now spends her days crafting romance stories that are dark, dirty, and dangerously addictive. Expect unapologetically dark plots, strong, feisty heroines and their obsessive, possessive love interests, all fighting for their happily ever afters.

When she isn't writing, Emma can usually be found napping, losing herself in a good book, or hoarding novelty notebooks she definitely doesn't need. She loves drinking coffee and gossiping with her mum, cuddling her gorgeous nephew, and curling up on the sofa to watch a film with Mr. Luna.

Thank you for taking a chance on a delightfully unhinged Brit and the dark worlds inside her head. Feel free to reach out to Emma on social media, she loves talking to her readers!

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