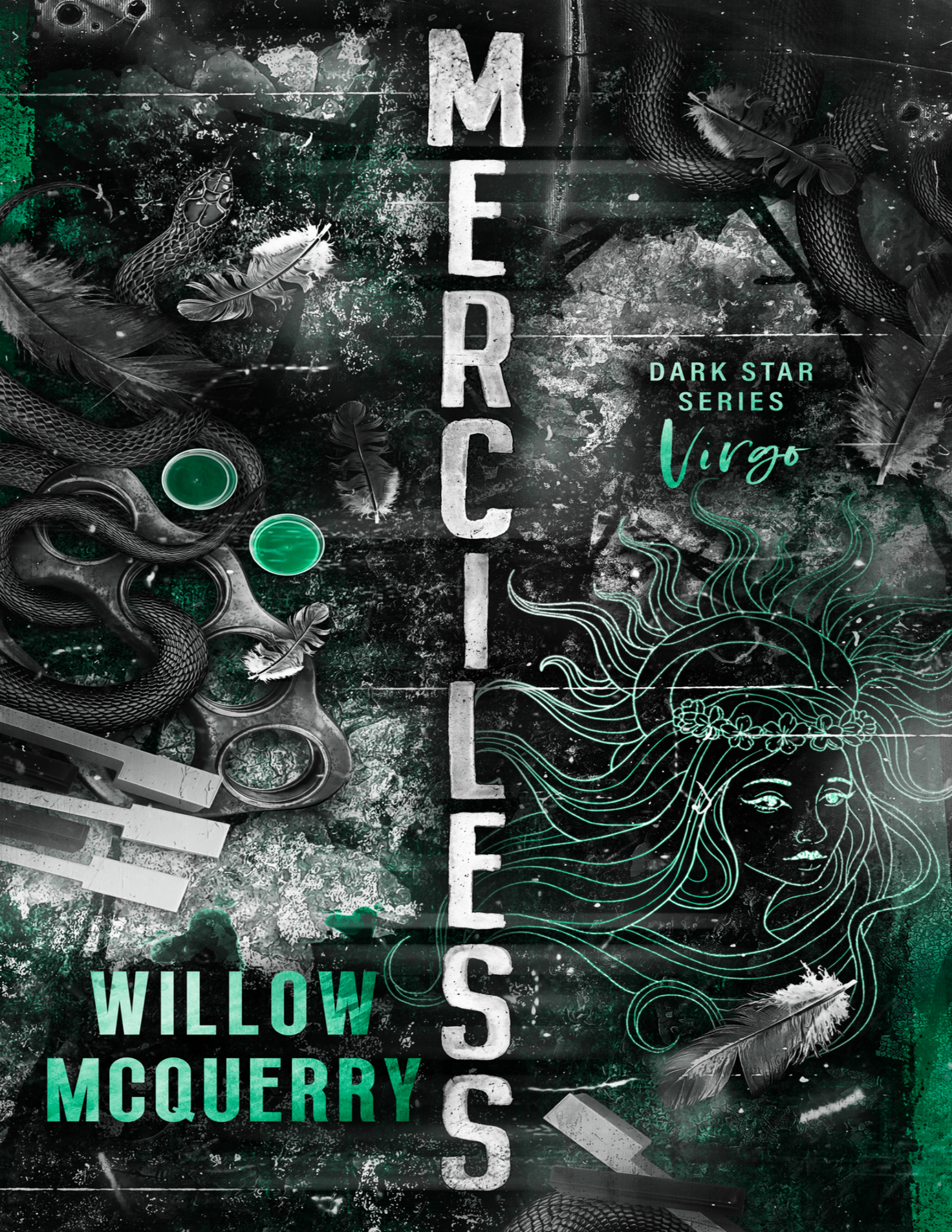

MERCILESS
DARK STAR SERIES
Virgo
WILLOW MCQUERRY

MERCILESS: VIRGO

A DARK WHY CHOOSE BULLY ROMANCE

DARK STAR SHARED SERIES

WILLOW MCQUERRY

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MERCILESS: VIRGO

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This is a **forbidden dark romance**. Please keep out of reach of children. They don't need to know you read some messed-up shit about stepsiblings fucking. Seriously, they don't need to know.

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BLURB

“I’M NOT A MONSTER, BUT I’LL BE ONE FOR HER.”

Asher and Elijah Astar—the Merciless Twins of Astar Elite College.

I’m the social pariah—the freak that no one talks to or hangs out with. The others learned their lesson and never speak to me because terrible things will happen to them.

The Merciless Twins made it clear that I’m off-limits.

They’ve made it their mission to make me suffer, but I didn’t know it was them until it was too late.

Nothing is too low for them. Not even taking a bet to sleep with me.

They love playing cruel games that mess with not only my head, but also my heart.

I thought I knew misery, but falling in love with my stepbrothers opened a new world of pain.

And they won’t stop until I’m crushed beneath their shoes.

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Dedicated to all the addicting manhwa on WEBTOON. They have nothing to do with this book, other than holding my sanity together while writing it.



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PLAYLIST

“Look Don’t Touch” by Odetari, cade clair
“I’m a Sucker for a Liar in a Red Dress” by Adam Jensen
“Hell Won’t Take Me” by NEFFEX
“Pinky Promise” by NEFFEX, Neoni
“Jump” by Silent Child, PatrickReza
“People Are Strange” by izzy reign
“Genius” by LSD, Sia, Diplo, Brian Fallon
“ENEMY” by Broken Flow
“Dark” by WesGhost
“Maneater” by Nelly Furtado
“Step Back!” By 1nonly, SXMPRA
“Okay” by Chase Atlantic
“bad decisions” by Bad Omens
“COFFIN” by PLVTINUM
“LET THE WORLD BURN” by Chris Grey
“fuK u lol” by CORPSE
“Obsessed” by Jutes
“Super Villain” by Stilleto, Silent Child, Kendyle Paige
“Monster” by Willecho
“Bitter Sweet Symphony” by The Verve
“Super Psycho Love” by Simon Curtis
“Doubt” by Twenty One Pilots
“Polarize” by Twenty One Pilots

“Monster” by Lady Gaga
“You’ve Created a Monster” by Bohnes
“Freak” by UNDREAM, Silent Child, Hannabelle
“Love is Madness” by Thirty Seconds To Mars, Halsey
“Vipers” by Dylan Fraser
“POKERFACE!” By CLXUDA

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before reading *Merciless* you need to know that this book is *fucked up*. It's dark, it's gritty, and what the guys do to Eden may make you uncomfortable. Please keep in mind that this is a dark *bully* romance, and they are merciless toward her.

Please read the content warnings below before going any further. Your mental health matters.

Graphic: mental health (schizoaffective disorder, depression, self-harm); bullying; name calling; animal death (not done by the MMC); incestuous relationship between side characters; violent fights; use of brass knuckles; knocked-out teeth

Relationship: non-con; dub-con; non-con oral; non-con tit fucking; carved into with a blade; relationship starts out as a bet; bullying; slut shaming; breeding; forced pregnancy; DP; DVP; mentions of waking up to receiving head; sneaky twin switch; half-awake sex; non-con while she's asleep; stalking; harassing through text messages; blackmail; taboo relationship with twin stepbrothers

If you're still here and nodding to the list, then keep reading, pookie. Enjoy the wild ride.

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PATIENCE IS BITTER, BUT ITS FRUIT IS SWEET.

— ARISTOTLE

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CHAPTER 1
EDEN

THE CROW'S scream splits through the courtyard. The crowd pauses for a moment, then moves on like nothing ever happened. Black feathers float around my head before they dance onto the manicured grass of Astar Elite University.

I crouch beside the dead bird and reach for the poor thing, hesitating at the last second before touching its gossamer wing. I stare at its bent neck, hating the uncanny angle and how its beady eye glares at me, as if it were my fault it succumbed to this misfortune.

Finding a dead crow is an omen of change. It symbolizes death, then rebirth. The latter being overlooked by most people. I don't fear death because I know something good will come out of it.

Or finding a dead crow could mean that Derrick Thomas is an evil bastard who enjoys killing animals for his friends' entertainment.

Tears fill my eyes as I glare at the nearby ball.

People go on like Derrick didn't just kill a bird. It's nothing more than shit beneath their pristine shoes.

I glare at them, hating their rich-snob mentality. Nothing matters to them unless they get something out of it.

Derrick's cackles fill the courtyard, and his friends join in. Katie's high-pitched laughter peels louder than theirs, grating on my already frayed nerves. The stupid bitch would do anything for the guys' attention, which includes fake-laughing. All except for her cousin Derrick.

I gather the dead crow in my palms and bring it closer to my chest. Stroking my thumb over its cold feathers, I glare at the assholes. They stand off to the side, watching me with shared expressions of amusement and disgust. They cover their mouths, thinking it's enough to disguise their chuckles. Katie is the only one openly laughing. She glances at the group every few seconds, checking to be certain they're still joining her.

Derrick's gaze meets mine. His grin stretches wider and hooks in the corner to form a malicious smile that's meant to unsettle me. I've always found blond men attractive, but ever since meeting this asshole, my preferences have drastically changed.

My frown deepens. The jerk is betting on me looking away from him first, and I refuse to give him that.

His smile fades, and he scowls at me when I don't give him what he wants.

Movement beside him rips my attention to the person shifting and refusing to spare a glance my way. His expression is blank—nothing new there. He'd rather watch paint dry than look at me.

Elijah Astar—my stepbrother, the playboy of Astar Elite University. If rumors are to be believed, his long, dexterous fingers are good at more than painting perfect pieces of artwork. The rumors don't make me hesitant to be around him. It's his nickname, right along with his brother.

The Merciless Twins.

Elijah is the cruelest of the two. He's the devil disguised as an angel, and for that, I avoid him at all costs. Even when we were kids and I saw the monster beneath the mask he wore, I stayed out of his path. He was the first twin I met when my mother married his father. The look of pure disgust he gave me matches the one he gives whenever he spares me a glance, which isn't often.

Asher is a little better than his identical twin. He's the quieter of the two and keeps to himself. But that doesn't negate the fact that he's just as merciless and terrible as his brother. I've seen him whisper things to Elijah, inciting the maliciousness in him toward others.

The Merciless Twins have made a reputation for themselves at Astar Elite. Don't ever cross them and don't ever let them set their sights on you.

Elijah slips his hand into his uniform pocket, his bored gaze on Derrick. Strands of his jet-black hair dance in the light breeze. His expression

doesn’t change, but I’ve been around him enough to spot his disgust for me through his body language.

Tense shoulders.

A slight curl to his lip.

His eyebrows pinch together, as if I reek of shit and he can smell me from where he stands.

“Awww,” Katie’s mocking whine echoes across the courtyard. “Is the freak going to cry?”

The guys snicker at Katie’s comment. Except for Elijah, but he never shows emotion.

Derrick steps forward and gestures toward me. “Kick the ball over here.”

I grit my teeth and straighten to my full height with the crow clutched to my heart.

Katie wrinkles her nose and folds her arms across her chest. “You don’t want it back. What if it has bird guts on it?”

I glance at the soccer ball, considering if I should stomp on it until it deflates. They can’t kill any more animals with a flat ball.

“Nothing a little water can’t clean off, but I need it back for practice.” Derrick takes another step toward me and points at the ball. “Hey, freak! I know you can hear me.”

My grip tightens on the dead bird, and I inch backward, moving closer to the ball. Tension coils in my stomach. My fingers itch to touch the blade tucked in my skirt pocket. I keep it on me for protection against assholes like them, but I’ve never used it because I always chicken out.

Katie puts more weight on one leg, jutting out her hip. Her smirk matches Derrick’s before she pouts her bottom lip in mock sympathy, fists her hand under her eye, and sniffles. “Whomp, whomp. Go cry about it somewhere else, and take that disgusting thing with you.”

I don’t know what compels me to look at Elijah. It’s not like he’ll save me from his friends’ insults. Or from Katie whenever she finds me alone later in the day.

He stands at the back of the group, hands in his pockets, not caring about what’s happening. He turns his gaze and locks onto me. Curiosity replaces his usual contempt, darkening his eyes by a shade.

My fingers twitch, the burning ache of reaching for my blade intensifying. Elijah tilts his head as he peers past Derrick’s turned back. The

air knocks loose from my chest as the corner of his lip hooks in a subtle smirk. Then he breaks the spell by being the first to look away, all traces of amusement gone as though they'd never been there to begin with.

"Don't play dumb, freak." Derrick stomps toward me, each long stride eating up the space between us.

I raise my chin and march through the crowd, putting distance between me and the assholes. Laughter and taunts nip at my heels, their cruel words fading until I can't make them out anymore.

"The freak shouldn't take the bird with her."

"Yeah, what does she plan on doing with it?"

"She'll probably violate the corpse."

I round the corner and get out of sight. The back of my head tingles from the weight of dark, merciless eyes.

It's expected from a Virgo man. Judging is what he's best at, right along with his twin brother.

Keeping my head held high, I stride past my peers with a destination in mind. Several people double-take when they notice the dead crow cradled against my chest. Some curl their lips with a roll of their eyes before moving on.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. My heart skips a beat, then flutters like a hummingbird's wings.

I know who messaged me without even looking.

The unknown number that's been harassing me for over a year.

I look at every person I walk past, wondering if they're my secret tormentor. It's an unknown number and impossible to know who's been sending me threats, but I search for any signs of the nameless person's identity. Just one more problem I'm forced to deal with.

Welcome to my hell.

But as I glance at each face, the most I get is complete disgust as I cart around a dead bird.

I don't know why they act surprised every time they see me with an unliving thing. It's nothing unusual for the dubbed freak of this elite college to carry around a dead animal.

I'm already running late for class, but I don't care. I make a beeline for the aviary tucked on the south side of campus.

The bell above the door chimes, alerting Rome to my arrival. He lifts his head, his friendly steel-grey eyes landing on me. A smile brightens his

face before his attention drops to the dead crow in my hands.

"Another one?" He pushes back his chair and stands with a soft sigh.

"A soccer ball this time." I stop at the desk and hold the crow out to him like I'm offering a sacrifice and hoping it will bring the creature back to life.

Rome makes a sound at the back of his throat and gently shakes his head. A lock of platinum hair falls over one eye.

He's drop-dead gorgeous, but despite that acknowledgment, I don't see myself doing anything with him or *being* with him. Yeah, I sometimes get flustered around him, but that's just nerves.

Besides, if word got out that I showed interest in him, that'd be the end of his career. He'd likely disappear from the face of the planet, then return with cuts and bruises, thanks to that unknown number. That's what happened to everyone else who got too close to me.

Rome leans over the desk for a better look at the bird before easing it out of my hands. He strokes his thumb over its stiff wings, each caress more loving than the last.

I can't look away from his face as he pets the dead bird.

It's strange to see a man show a softer side for an animal. Every time I come in, I search for clues that it's all an act. That he's playing with me and will show his true self. But it never comes. He's always gentle. Sympathy shines in his kind eyes. He even baby-talks the dead birds.

Rome lifts his head, catching me staring at him like a creep. I snap my gaze to the side and step backward toward the exit.

"Thanks again," I mumble, and spin on my heel.

"Don't be a stranger." His deep voice follows me, a smile hidden in it.

The door slams shut behind me, and I rush to class.

Shane's goofy laughter floats over the loud music in the arcade, along with the different machine sounds from the games.

"Quit cheating." I yank the steering wheel to the right.

"I'm not cheating. You're just a rookie at this one."

"Am not."

"Are you sure about that?"

Lights and whistles blare from the game. The word WINNER flashes above Shane's player name on the screen.

I sigh and drop my hands from the steering wheel. Shane twists his body to look at me, his signature goofy grin in place.

"You can't beat me at these types of games," he says with a chuckle.

I turn to him, blank-faced. "I know you cheated, but I just can't prove it."

"Someone's in a mood today." He snickers with a shake of his head and stands from the plastic seat. "Besides, you were giving it too much gas to drift the corner. You've got to slow down and go with the turn."

"Derrick and his friends killed another bird today. So yeah, you could say I'm in a mood." I follow him.

Shane stops and turns to me, his light-blond eyebrows slashed together. "They've killed other birds?"

"Yes, I've told you that."

"You told me you found dead birds and took them to the aviary to be laid to rest. You left out what happened or *who* killed them." He blows out a frustrated breath and pushes his naturally red hair from his forehead. "Fucking Derrick and his bullshit."

I nod. I'm tired of Derrick being cruel to animals. If he wants to make me suffer, do it another way. Don't bring animals into it. That's one step away from being a serial killer, in my opinion.

Tension bleeds from Shane's shoulders, and he flashes a mischievous smile. "Did you see your man at the building today?"

A blush crawls up my neck, and I duck past him.

"You did." Shane's laughter follows me. "Why don't you ask him on a date?"

"I don't date."

"Why?"

"Because men are fickle." I stop at the claw game and fish for tokens in my skirt pocket.

"Some men can be fickle. Not all of us are, though. I think you should give it a shot." Shane slips a token into the machine.

"I'm not going on any dates with anyone whatsoever because men are ass-butts." I grab the knob and move the claw over the purple-and-black stuffed bat I've had my eye on for the past week.

He gives me an amused look. “You realize that you’re talking to a man, right?”

“Yeah, but you’re the only man who’s never treated me like I’m shit on the bottom of your shoe. So I made an exception for you.”

He lets out a low laugh. “Gee, thanks. I’m glad I made the cut.”

I turn my focus to the claw as it descends on the bat plushie. Holding my breath, I wait for the device to grab it. It misses by a centimeter, closes around nothing, then rises and moves to the side, where it opens to drop the non-existent prize.

“Damn,” Shane sighs. He turns to me. “I’ll give it a go if you want.”

I scowl. “No. I want to win it on my own.”

“You really don’t like men, do you?”

“I don’t like people.” I glance at him. “But I especially don’t like men.”

“But you have a crush on that aviary guy.”

I dart past Shane. “I think he’s good-looking, but that doesn’t mean I want to be with him or anyone else. The thought of a relationship makes my skin crawl.”

“We shall see if that’s the case. Who knows, maybe this guy likes you too.”

I roll my eyes. Yeah, I don’t see that ever happening.

Shane and I met here a few months ago and have kept our friendship within the arcade so that nothing happens to him. Because of that, he doesn’t understand how I’m the target at my school. He doesn’t know that people there would rather eat nails than ever look at me like a potential girlfriend.

And I’m okay with that. I prefer what I’m doing over putting up with a man playing pretend with me while entertaining some other woman. I’m fine with being single and happy with my pet snake, Lavender, and concentrating on my studies.

If I ever date anyone, it’s a sure sign that I’ve lost my mind and need help.

Shane and I play for another hour. The entire time, the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand. I feel the weight of someone staring at me, and no matter how many times I check my surroundings, I don’t see anyone.

I call it a night after a while. I don’t want Shane to be dragged into something, even if it’s all in my imagination. The person who’s responsible

for hurting my past friends is likely watching. I can only hope they thought Shane was a stranger playing a game with me one time.

But as I walk back to campus, the feeling only intensifies. I scan the area, but like in the arcade, I don't spot anyone. It's the same intensity as all the other times I've felt watched. My head is calm, but my heart hammers against my chest in the echo of panic I once felt.

A thought floats to the front of my mind, starting soft and barely believable. But the more I linger on it, the more freaked out I get.

Maybe seeing the dead crow earlier today wasn't an omen of change. Maybe it was a warning of what's coming.

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CHAPTER 2
ASHER

ROLLING the blue-raspberry sucker in my mouth, I grin as Eden's door slams shut. Not once did she look to see *who* was watching her. I'm always right behind her, in plain sight, and she never looks.

My smile fades, and I scowl.

She never fucking looks. Eden is the only person I want to be noticed by.

She's wiggled herself beneath my skin when nothing ever bothers me.

The evening all those years ago when she snooped on me while I played the piano was enough to light a fire inside me to return the favor. Ever since, I've been watching. Learning. Needing more from her.

Over the years, I've discovered surface-level things about her. The useless information I gather provides enough for Elijah to use against her. And yet, everything about her has intrigued me. I've kept some of her secrets to myself, such as her sounding like a whore that time I used my tongue and fingers to make her come.

I suck the candy into my mouth and walk past her dorm to the exit. The door slams shut behind me, and I breathe in the fresh garden air fragranced with the light flowery smell from the plants.

Eden is a mystery that I want to take apart and study. I want to understand why she is the way she is.

Why doesn't she fight back when my brother sends people after her?

Why is she attending this school when she's clearly miserable?

Why did she snoop on me when I played the piano?

Why the hell is she eye-fucking Rome Graves? And why does it fill me with seething jealousy? I saw red and pictured myself strangling the motherfucker until he took his last breath. Same goes for the redheaded shit at the arcade she was sneaking around with.

I'm not a monster, but I'll be one for her.

Her mother married my father for money, but it doesn't give me a good enough reason to punish her. I find her more fascinating than irritating. Elijah, on the other hand, can't stand her and wants her to suffer. Part of it has to do with the inheritance our father holds above our heads.

What hides in the dark always comes to light. She's done a great job of hiding the skeletons from me, but not anymore. As soon as she gives me something with enough meat on the bone, I'll finally hate her as much as Elijah does.

I roll the sucker in my mouth and peek through the window in the door to see if Eden has left her room yet. She works at the bar today, which means she'll need to take a shower before getting ready for work.

Women crowd the hall, coming and going from their rooms. A door near Eden's dorm opens enough for me to see inside. One of Elijah's friends is balls deep in a woman on her elbows and knees in the middle of the bed. Her roommate doesn't give a single fuck about privacy, and the door closes behind her as she enters the room.

I knew I wouldn't be the only man in this part of the wing. Every time I come over here, I'm suddenly the most popular person in the vicinity, and it's not because of my status or last name.

No, no, no.

It's because they see my twin, since he's made a reputation by sleeping with anyone who'll open their legs for him.

They're all the same, pretending to be sweet and innocent, but behind closed doors, they're just like the woman behind that closed door. They want to be used. Degraded. And they want to be treated like a slut. My brother delivers that fantasy on a silver fucking platter.

Unfortunately for me, they can't tell the difference between us. The thought of having to fuck a woman who will undoubtedly think I'm my brother feels like broken glass ripping open my tattooed skin. Half of them here have already slept with Elijah.

Eden's door opens, and she shuffles across the hallway to the community bathroom that no one else uses. A towel hangs over her arm,

and a black bathrobe hugs her curvy body.

I wait for the bathroom door to shut before I count in my head and join her.

Hot steam fills the room and mists the mirrors above the sinks lining one wall. I keep my footsteps light as I inch toward the shower stall where Eden stands under the spray.

She didn't bother closing the curtain. Why should she? It's not like anyone comes in here.

Once again, she doesn't notice me right behind her. So close that I could touch her. She stands under the spray, her back facing me. The water runs down her shoulders and back, leaving behind a trail of bubbles. I tilt my head as I take in every curve, dimple, and freckle on her skin.

It's been so long since I've been well-acquainted with her body. Time couldn't dull the memory, but fuck me, it's addictive to see her fully nude.

My fingers clench into fists by my sides.

I don't get it. Why am I so drawn to her? Why do I want to know more about her? She's nothing to me. She's been a pain in my ass and a mission my brother sent me out on.

I'm right here, where I can touch her, yet she's not turning around to yell at me to leave.

Rage boils my blood.

I raise my hand and brush my knuckles against the overheated skin over her waist. My gaze flips to the back of her head, waiting for the moment she spins around and slaps me for encroaching on her privacy.

Eden washes her hair, head bent backward and eyes shut. She hums a tune I don't recognize, not that it fucking matters.

My fingers curl into themselves, and I draw away from her.

I take one step back, then another.

Red bleeds into my vision until it's all I can see. I spin on my heel, storm to the door, and leave the bathroom. I don't give a single shit when the door slams shut behind me.

I hope she hears it. I hope it startles her and she wonders who was in the bathroom with her. Maybe then she'll pay attention and see that I'm always there. Always watching.

The few women in the hallway turn their heads at the loud sound. Their surprise melts into lust because they think I'm Elijah.

I stalk down the hallway and ignore them as they call me by my brother's name. Each time I hear it, my mood sours until my knuckles turn white from clenching my fists.

Elijah is expecting me. I wasted too much time on our stepsister. He was right to hate her as much as he does. Perhaps the sneaky things he does are for the best.

Maybe instead of being the ghost of Astar Elite College, I should be the monster Eden *fucking* Astar deserves.

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CHAPTER 3
ELIJAH

DERRICK AWKWARDLY SLINGS his arm around my shoulder as we walk toward the entrance to the local pub. I stand a foot taller than the annoying asshole, and he has to push up on his toes to pull me into him. The height difference never stops him from doing this.

His laughter grates on my last nerve. Moments like these remind me why my twin hates people. I don't blame him. I'm right there with him, barely putting up with other people's bullshit.

I cast a glare at Derrick from the corner of my eye, then shrug him off me. He rights himself without missing a beat, unbothered and still just as fucking annoying.

"Did you see how she looked when she picked up the crow?" he says between laughs. "She was seconds away from crying."

Katie and the others join in with Derrick. They break down my stepsister's reactions as if they're discussing a film. They get a fucking hard-on from Eden's negative reactions, and it's been their thing for years. They remind me of energy-sucking vampires who need to feed on others' misery. Sometimes even my own.

During my friends' breakdown of Eden's reactions, they miss one little detail—an interesting look that strangely made my dick twitch. A spark of violence flashed in her eyes and turned the melancholy into venomous disdain. She reached for an item in her pocket, and I want to know what it was.

The boring attempts to get a rise out of her would be made so much better if she developed enough gall to reach for a weapon. But that's just wishful thinking. I enjoy breaking women's spirits and watching their inner fire extinguish. I'd be a hypocrite if I said I didn't get high from seeing the tears in Eden's eyes and how her chin wobbles when I do a particularly cruel thing.

My lips twitch at the thought of a broken Eden, and I fight back my smile.

Katie steps ahead of the group and turns to walk backward.

"I don't know what the freak does with all the dead birds," she says to Derrick. "Do you think she uses them as sacrifices for her spells?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if she does." Derrick snorts.

One of the lackeys snickers. "Watch out, the freak may put a curse on us. Especially you, Derrick. Did you see how she looked at you?"

"Maybe we should leave her a warning not to try anything." Katie's gaze flicks toward me, and her smile tightens before she turns to open the bar's door.

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes at her.

It's been five months, and she's still cumbersome. I may have embarrassed her in front of the school by turning down her advances, but that's long past us now.

I walk inside the bar behind her, my friends following me. Aged wood, booze, and cigarette smoke fill the place. I part from the group and head toward the back corner, where I can sit and face the door.

"Where are you going, bro?" Derrick calls.

"You're too slow," I say, not bothering to raise my voice.

"Aw. Don't tell me you're upset about us giving your sister a hard time." Derrick's shoes thump against the ground, each one bringing him closer. His arm hooks around my shoulder, and he jerks me into him.

Turning my head toward him, I glare, hoping he gets the message.

Derrick ignores my warning and flexes the muscles in his arm. "Get the stick out of your ass, man. Chill. You wanted us to do the dirty—"

He yells as I grab his wrist. I duck beneath his outstretched arm to position myself behind him, and then I ratchet his wrist in a lock to control where and how he moves.

"I don't give a shit what you do with her." I raise his arm and grin at his garbled yell. "What I have a problem with is you touching me. Next time, I

will take a body part for keepsakes. Maybe then you'll understand keeping your hands to yourself."

"Jesus Christ, man! Let go!" Derrick twists his body and stops when he realizes that the more he moves, the worse the pain gets.

Releasing his wrist, I step back to put space between us before taking a seat at the table.

The others take their seats as well, spreading out.

Derrick breaks the tense silence and pats the sleeves of his uniform jacket, then smooths the flyaway strands of blond hair. "Anyway, is anyone else jonesing for some pretzels and cheese after the bullshit that happened this morning?"

I raise an eyebrow. "What happened this morning?"

Heads turn toward me, and they all share the same confused look.

"I was busy." By being balls deep in some pussy, but that's none of their business.

Derrick clears his throat. "This might be an off-the-wall question here. You don't think your brother would side with the Walker brothers, do you?"

"You think my brother is a rat?"

"I think nothing of that sort." He shrugs. "But Asher never speaks, and he gives off the vibe that he would rather be anywhere else but with us. I mean, shit, he's not with us right now. For all we—"

"My brother isn't a rat," I say. "What happened this morning?"

"They left a message. It's been the talk on campus." He pins me with a somber expression. "They etched something into Grayson's car. It said *rich boys don't belong*."

My back straightens. "And you think it's the Walkers?"

"Come on, man. It can't be anyone else, given that they'll be at the competition tonight."

The act screams Walker brothers, that much I know for sure. They've had a stick up their ass ever since my group joined street racing with the occasional drifting. Then everything went to shit when I won a race fair and square. They accused me of cheating. Over the time that we've been racing, the Walker brothers sent messages in the most dramatic ways. Each one escalated from the last, becoming more brutal. They don't think we belong because of our money and their belief that I cheated. They're spoiled rich boys as well, but their pride won't let them accept money from their daddy. They would rather "work hard for the money they get."

“We’ll send a message back to them tonight,” I say.

My gaze drifts from my friends to the busy bar, where a crowd gathers to get their booze and food.

Eden works behind the counter, pushing sodas to waiting customers. The bartender huffs when Eden doesn’t move fast enough. She points to my table, most likely telling her to get our order.

The corner of my lip twitches.

Eden glances our way, her gaze sweeping over the backs of my friends’ heads before landing on me. Her eyes narrow, and she whips around, shaking her head at the bartender.

“What’s that look for?” Derrick’s question drags my attention to him when I’d rather watch my stepsister being scared to get our orders. Specifically, *my* order.

“What look?”

“Like you’re about to snap someone’s head off.”

I slowly blink and focus on relaxing my muscles. A figure approaches us. Leisurely, I turn to Eden, right as she stops beside the table, notepad and pen in hand.

“What do you want?” she says, her voice flat.

Well, this is going to be fun.

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CHAPTER 4
EDEN

"Oh, look," Derrick says. He rests his elbow on the back of his chair. "The freak is here. Are you stalking us now?"

"Maybe she wants something of yours for that curse I told you about," Katie says with a laugh.

I glare at her and bite my tongue. She seems to know a lot about curses for someone who wears a small cross around her neck. Or maybe she's scared that I really will put a curse on her and there's nothing she can do to stop it.

This isn't the first time someone accused me of being a witch—not that there's anything wrong with it. However, they need to get their facts right before pointing their fingers and accusing people of something.

Katie scrunches her nose at me like I stink. "Are you going to cry about it, loser?" She scoffs. "Do it somewhere else. I don't want your snot and tears anywhere near my food."

I step back and stuff the notepad and pen into my apron pocket. "I guess you want nothing, then. If that's the case, you can leave."

Derrick rolls his eyes with a guffaw. "And who made you the owner of this place? Even if we don't order anything, you can't kick us out."

"It's the rule for Patrick's Pub. Besides, isn't this place a little too low-class for the likes of you?"

He throws his head back in a fit of laughter. It booms over the buzz of conversation in the bar. Not surprising that an asshole like him would be the loudest in here. He's always starving for attention, the egotistical bastard.

“The freak has a sharp tongue,” he says between laughs. “But she’s stupid as fuck.”

I glare at him.

A tall, dark form moves into the corner of my vision. By the time I turn my head, Elijah towers over me, his hands in his pockets and a cruel smile lifting the corners of his lips.

I suck in a startled breath. He’s looking at me again, which is throwing me off.

“You must not know who owns this pub, birdie,” he says.

“Birdie?”

Elijah leans down until our faces are at the same level. “Stay on topic.”

“I don’t care who owns this—”

“You should,” he says with a smug smirk. “Patrick Thomas is the owner. You know, Derrick Thomas’s grandfather?”

Elijah’s lips peel back in a snarky smile. It’s the same smile these rich assholes use when looking down on people who are less fortunate. Every time I see it, I’m filled with disgust and irritation.

This time, seeing it from Elijah fills me with rage.

Everyone at the table snickers. I scowl at each of them, my cheeks heating.

How am I supposed to know Derrick’s grandfather? I’d rather crawl over broken glass than learn anything about that asshole.

Elijah’s smile sharpens, never once reaching his cold, merciless eyes. “A basket of pretzels with cheese, and a pitcher of the coldest beer you have, *birdie*.”

He straightens, hands still tucked in his pockets, and he takes a step back to put space between us. He acts like it’s torture for him to be in my personal bubble.

Everyone at the table smothers their laughter, but they do a poor job of it.

“Do you need to write it down, freak?” Katie rolls her eyes. “I don’t want you to get the order wrong.”

I grind my teeth until they feel like they’re about to shatter as I turn to leave. I make a beeline for the bar so I can put in their order. As much as I would love to change it to something ridiculous, I can’t risk my job for something petty. The money is more important than my feelings.

Once the order is in, I ignore their existence and focus on work and staying on Macie's good side; she's the bartender, and she's not my biggest fan. I assumed the bullying would stop at work, but my reputation followed me to Patrick's Pub. Now I understand why Macie and the others give me such a hard time. Derrick's influence followed me here because of his family ties to the owner of this pub.

"She's so disgusting." Katie's screechy voice climbs above the crowd. I know the bitch wants to get a rise out of me. I refuse to give her any sort of reaction.

The others at the table laugh, but when I peek at Elijah, he's blank-faced, and his gaze tracks my every move. The way he's looking at me, even while caught staring, reminds me of a predator. His dark eyes border on black, and they're cold, much like his heart.

Why now, of all times, is he openly staring at me?

And why did he speak to me?

Bullying someone is terrible, but if you're standing aside and watching it all happen, you're just as guilty as the bully. You fall into the same category as the rest of them. That's where Elijah falls into. After years of receiving the cold shoulder from him and his brother, I've grown used to it. I even liked it because I could pretend they didn't exist either.

When I walk too close to their table to drop off an order of drinks, Katie gives me the stink eye.

"I heard she gave the janitor a blowjob," she says with a tight smile. She looks around the table for a reaction.

I clench my jaw and duck my head as I storm across the room.

That's a bald-faced lie, and she fucking knows it too.

I run straight into a wall and grunt. Hands catch me by the waist and steady me on my feet before I fall on my ass. My head snaps up, and I look into a pair of kind, steel-grey eyes.

"Easy there," Rome says with a gentle smile.

"Thanks," I mumble, and step back.

Elijah's friends cackle like a bunch of hyenas, making me the butt of the joke.

Rome glances at the group before dropping his gaze to my flushed face. He leans down until his lips are beside my ear, and he caresses my arm in a barely there touch.

"They're wrong, you know," he murmurs. "About everything."

The heat in my cheeks burns for an entirely different reason.

He's kind for saying that, but I want nothing to do with him. Yeah, he's good to look at. Rome is a great flirt and believable at that. But I don't want him. I don't want *anyone*.

I shove past him and head outside for fresh air. I need to clear my head, and I can't do that when I'm surrounded by so many people. The weight of Elijah's stare during the whole interaction with Rome didn't help. Because he was watching, just like he had been since he ordered.

I push the door open, and it slams shut behind me as I step into the cool spring evening. The sun sits on the horizon. Dusky sunlight smears the heavens with shades of pink, purple, and baby blue. If my head wasn't such a mess, I would have taken pictures of the sky to add to the collage in my dorm.

If Macie catches me out here, she'll burst a blood vessel and report me to Patrick.

I roll my eyes and walk further into the back alley. Crates and a large dumpster cower nearby. It's weird knowing that Derrick's grandfather owns this bar. This place looks affordable for those who don't fall into the one percent like the rest of the rich bastards.

Katie's insults replay in my head.

"Stupid—" I choke on my words as a tall form moves in my periphery. I suck in a breath and turn to the person, my eyes widening.

Elijah's identical twin lounges against the brick building, a sucker rolling in his mouth and his cruel eyes watching me. The corner of his lip subtly curves into a hidden smirk at my surprise.

It's hard to tell them apart since they look so much alike, down to their tattoos and hairstyles. The only reason I know it's Asher is because Elijah is inside with his friends.

Asher rolls the sucker to one side of his mouth, his smirk widening into a grin.

Memories flash in my mind. Ones that involve his brother looking at me just like that, the same irritating but sexy grin, and how his brother's tongue did wicked things until I saw stars.

I shake away the memory and scowl at him.

He grins.

The back door creaks open, and Elijah steps out. "Are you joining us for the race?" He stops, his gaze swiveling to me, then to his brother. His

eyebrow rises. “Am I interrupting something?”

I don’t miss how he addresses Asher and not me. He’s back to ignoring my existence, and for whatever reason, that only irritates me more. Elijah can’t drop the act, then pick up where he left off.

Asher pushes away from the wall and moves closer to me. With each step, he sucks the air out of my lungs and raises the hair on the back of my neck.

Elijah’s focus slides to me and narrows. “Stay away from my brother, birdie, or there’ll be repercussions.”

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead, and I grab my chest. “He’s the one you should warn, not me.” I glare at Asher. “I want nothing to do with either of you.”

I shove past Elijah and head toward the back door. His humorless chuckle follows, sending a chill down my spine. He says something I don’t care to catch, and I won’t ask him to repeat himself.

I don’t care. I need away from those two men and their friends.

Elijah and Asher Astar can go straight to hell for all I care.

I can’t believe I let one of them touch me. It was a moment of weakness, and to be honest, I was lonely. I’m not that person anymore. The day I let either of them touch me again will be the day hell freezes over.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it. Only two people text me on a regular basis. One is Shane and the other is the unknown number, and I already know without looking who messaged me.

My day is already in the dump, and I don’t need it to become any worse because of the nameless person.

Once I’m back in my dorm, I’ll read it—because I always end up reading it. And I always end up feeling like shit and crying into my pillow.

Until then, I need to get through my shift without losing my mind from Elijah watching me and his friends making fun of me.

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CHAPTER 5

ELIJAH

ASHER'S SMIRK drops as soon as the door slams shut behind Eden. His cold gaze slides to me and narrows.

Now that's an interesting reaction.

"What were you two talking about?" I slip my hands into my pockets.

Asher casts a glare at me before he walks past me. I jerk my arm out and stop him from going any further.

I turn my head to look at him, to study his expression and find out why he's acting off. "What are you up to?"

I already know he won't tell me. Asher has always been secretive, preferring to keep to himself. However, in regard to our stepsister and the plan we've been playing out, it's only right that he tells me why he's making moves we never discussed.

Asher rolls his sucker to the other side of his mouth. One by one, he circles his fingers on my wrist while holding my stare. He shoves my hand from his arm, flashes a haughty smile that doesn't reach his eyes, then walks past me into the pub.

I take a deep breath through my nose to calm my temper.

He wouldn't do anything stupid. Nothing that would ruin our nearly decade-long plan.

I want Eden to suffer for what she's done.

Asher is on the same page—at least, he better fucking be.

Shoving my hand into my pocket, I walk back into the pub and join my friends and Asher at the table. My brother sits in the empty spot I saved for

him beside me. He glowers at the group, arms folded over his chest as he relaxes into his seat with his legs stretched out.

Sensing my approach, Derrick's blond head turns, and he grins at me. "Took you long enough."

"Sorry about that. There was a line to the restroom." I sit beside Asher and swipe invisible lint from my pressed long-sleeved shirt. I haven't changed out of my school clothes. It would have been wise to, since we're in the bar and Astar Elite students shouldn't be caught in a place like this. But with my name comes immunity.

"Jesus," Derrick says, bringing me to the conversation again. "It really is uncanny seeing the both of you together."

"Yeah, weird," Katie says. "Anyway, you know what else is uncanny?"

She peeks over her shoulder to look at Eden as she ducks beneath the bar to grab a drink. Katie's lips pull back in disgust, and she rolls her eyes as she turns forward, then flicks her hair.

"Everything about her is just *off*," she says. "I can't put my finger on what exactly it is, but—"

"It's because she's a witch," Derrick says with a chuckle. "I don't see how anyone could ever get with her. And you said she gave a blowjob to the janitor?"

He shakes his head and downs more of his beer like it's water. Not a smart move for our race or his reputation.

"I don't know how that guy could have gotten his dick hard looking at her." He wrinkles his nose in disgust.

Jasper guffaws. "You've clearly never had beer goggles before."

Derrick's expression twists into confusion. "What the fuck are beer goggles?"

Everyone at the table laughs except for Asher, Derrick, and me.

"No, I'm serious," Derrick growls. "What the fuck are beer goggles, asshole?"

Jasper laughs with a shake of his head. "Meaning you can get it up for anyone with a few drinks. Jesus, man. I thought you weren't this naïve."

Derrick's cheeks turn bright pink, and he grumbles, "Whatever," before downing the rest of his beer.

"There's no way anyone has done anything with her," Katie says. "If she spread her legs for them, she'd curse them or give them some kind of disease."

Asher scowls at Katie before turning his gaze to Eden. Much like I did earlier, he tracks her throughout the room, watching her and ignoring the conversation.

I watch him, too intrigued by his interest in her. Maybe he's searching for more to use against her, like what we had planned. But his earlier reaction still doesn't sit right with me.

"I'll degrade her while I fuck her," Derrick says.

Raising an eyebrow, I turn my head toward him. "You really think she'd sleep with you?"

"What do you mean?" Derrick scoffs. "That I'm not good-looking enough for your sister?"

"*Step*sister," I say, "and yeah, maybe that's what I'm saying."

Katie frowns at Derrick.

A muscle in Derrick's jaw flutters. "You think you're better looking?"

"No. I know I am."

He bares his teeth. "Then how about you sleep with her since you're better looking? Go ahead, fuck your sister and make an embarrassment out of her."

I raise an eyebrow. "Is that a dare?"

"Yeah, it is. If you can get her to sleep with you in seven days, I'll give you whatever you want." He laughs and leans back in his seat with his arms folded across his chest. "So how about it, hm? Since you're better looking."

"You really want to make a bet with me?" I relax in my seat and glance at Asher white-knuckling the table.

"The real question is if you want to make the bet with me, Astar," Derrick says. "You'll end up losing. I may not know the girl well, but I can bet that she wouldn't sleep with you."

"What will I get when I win?"

"Bragging rights for ruining your sister's reputation."

I shake my head. "Not good enough. You said I can get whatever I want."

Derrick purses his lips, thinking over what he'll give me, but I already know what I want.

"Your Mazda." I lean forward to rest my forearms on the table.

Derrick's eyes widen, and he shakes his head. "I'm not giving her up for anything."

I smirk and raise an eyebrow. “I thought you were sure I’d lose this dare.”

“You’re right.” He shrugs to appear nonchalant, but he’s not fooling me. He’s coiled like he’s ready to snap. “You won’t win this, so why the hell not? I’ll give you the Mazda, but you’ll have to prove that you slept with her. You have seven days, starting tomorrow.”

I shrug, leaning back in my seat. “Then it’s a deal.”

“You’re going to lose, asshole. And you’ll eat your fucking words.”

Asher leaps from his seat, the chair knocking backward in his rush. The table goes quiet, and we watch as Asher storms away.

“What the fuck is his problem?” Derrick’s features twist.

“I’m not sure,” I say. “But I’ll find out.”

“So what happened before I came out?” I say.

Asher spares an annoyed glance my way before looking out the passenger window. I let out a soft laugh, but there’s nothing humorous about this.

My custom GT-R’s engine fills the silence as I drive to the race start.

Asher plays with the stick from his sucker, rolling the candy back and forth in his mouth. It’s something he does when he’s upset. It clacks against the backs of his teeth, each sound striking a nerve.

I side-eye him and shift my focus to the road as I drive.

“Did she say anything to you?” I ask.

Silence meets my question.

If the little bitch upset my brother, I’ll make sure she pays for it. If she thinks her life is terrible right now, she’ll wish she’d never been born when I’m through with her.

I clench my jaw and tap the screen on the console to play music. I can’t stand the silence, and if he wants to keep to himself, then I’ll respect it. For now. Eventually, I’ll find out what he’s hiding from me.

For the rest of the ride, I don’t say anything to Asher. Once we get to the meetup, I line up with the others to start the race.

Engines and over-inflated egos run hot. I spot the familiar yellow Mustang and find the Walker brothers staring at me. I smirk and turn

forward right as Katie walks in front of us, a white shirt in her hand.

"Do you think I'll win the bet?" I say, wanting to test Asher's reaction.

He slowly turns his head, anger brimming in his cold eyes.

I've never seen him react like this.

Maybe he's worried about my reputation; fucking Eden could come back to bite me if things go south. I don't foresee it happening, though. But I don't think it's that. It has something to do with Eden.

Maybe having him watch her wasn't a good idea. Perhaps I should tell him to back off. Now that I have a bet to win, it wouldn't be a bad idea to take over.

"Don't worry," I say. "I know what I'm getting into, and I'll make her pay for what she and her whore mother have done."

Katie smirks at Derrick in his Mazda, holds up three fingers, and counts down. Tires screech before the shirt hits the ground, and I'm pushed into the seat as I stomp on the gas.

The Walker brothers' Mustang catches up to my side and veers closer to push me off the road. I cast a bored look at them and shift gears to gain speed. The others trail behind us, unable to keep up. Even Derrick's Mazda can't come close to our custom GT-R.

I turn a corner onto a different street and watch as the Walker brothers follow. My lips curve into a smile as their car shakes before the front tire pops off. They shouldn't have left their racer unattended at the local burger-and-shake shack.

Sparks and smoke flare up as the Mustang screeches to a stop. Austin whips the steering wheel to the side to get out of the way of the other cars racing closer.

I focus on the road ahead as I break away from the rest of the group. Unlike the Walker brothers, the others don't drive dirty by pretending to swerve into me.

I release the gas and drift into a tight corner on a different road. Smoke billows around the car, blocking my view of the path ahead. After a moment, the smoke clears, and I break onto another street, racing toward the designated finish line.

The others have no chance of catching up. I grin and look at my brother for his reaction, expecting anything but the frown he's sporting. He holds the handle above the door, eyes straight forward and sucker rolling in his mouth.

I speed through the night and check the rearview mirror every few seconds. Nobody has caught up, which means I won the race.

I chuckle and stomp on the gas. Hopefully, the Walker brothers get it into their fucking heads that we're not to be messed with.

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CHAPTER 6

EDEN

DAY 1 OF THE BET

"They're wrong, you know." Rome's words have replayed in my head since last evening. Even while I was supposed to pay attention in class, I couldn't stop thinking about how they struck a nerve.

I know I'm not what everyone says, but hearing someone say it out loud pins the truth to my core.

I'm not a slut or a whore. I'm not a freak. And I'm not disgusting. I'm not whatever anyone says that's negative.

My shoes slap against the pristine floor as I rush toward my next class. One that I'm very much late to, thanks to Lavender, my albino hognose snake. She hid in her enclosure, and I ended up spending my lunch break looking for a non-missing snake.

It's been a rough twenty-four hours.

While Rome's reassurance swirls in my mind, it's not enough to shake away the text message from the unknown number. They sent me two last night, each one worse than the last.

Not surprising. They always send multiple texts in a day, letting me know how terrible I am.

I must be a masochist, because I pull my phone from my skirt and read the messages from the unknown number.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Is this you? 😂

attached image

The picture is of me bent over to pick up a dead bird. I don't know when it was taken because I'm always rescuing the corpses. But it's not the bird they're focused on. The angle of the image zooms in on the white underwear peeking beneath my skirt.

I huff and close out of the thread.

How immature of them.

In my rush, I shoulder-check a guy walking in the opposite direction.

"Hey, freak! Watch where you're going."

I mumble an apology and jog away before he does something to make me pay for bumping into him.

Five minutes late, and I just know Mr. Thorn will flay me alive in front of everyone. It's an art class, not science. I'm only taking the class because I need the credit.

I swing the door open and rush inside, right before I slam into a petite body.

"You stupid bitch," Katie screeches.

I sink back and raise my gaze to her face.

Katie shakes out her hands and glances at the large brown stain on the uniform shirt beneath her golden jacket. It turns the white material see-through.

Fuck.

Katie lifts her head and settles her glare on me. She bares her teeth in a snarl as she takes a menacing step toward me.

I inch backward.

"Are you going to apologize?" she growls. "Or are you going to keep staring at me like an idiot?"

"Sorry." I shrug. "It's not like I did it on purpose."

I'm not sorry. The bitch deserves it.

Katie's head rears back, aghast at my half-assed apology.

I'll admit, I could have done better, but she deserves worse.

She blinks, and her features twist back into a snarl. "*It's not like I did it on purpose.* What kind of apology is that? Do you even care that you ruined

my shirt?”

“I apologize,” I say.

Katie shakes her head and jabs an acrylic nail toward my chest. “See! You don’t care. The least you can do is sound apologetic. I think you should show me that you’re sorry.”

I inch backward as she steps closer. “I don’t know how you want me to show you.”

“Kneel and kiss it.” She points to her polished shoes.

Snickers fill the room, drawing my horrified gaze to the class watching the entire interaction. I find Elijah’s bored glare. He leans his elbow against the table, his hand cupping his cheek. The only thing that’s missing is the contempt in his stare and the curled lip like he’s disgusted at the sight of me.

I don’t know why it matters that he’s watching this. He could save me any moment now, but he won’t. He’d rather sit on the sidelines and watch Katie embarrass me in front of everyone.

Lifting my chin, I turn to Katie. “No.”

Her eyebrows shoot up to her hairline. “No? You don’t get a choice in this, freak. Kiss my shoes or you’ll pay.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’m going to do that.” I glance at the professor sitting behind his desk. “Aren’t you going to do anything about this?”

Mr. Thorn sips his coffee and drops his chin to peer at me above his glasses. “You’re late to class, Miss Astar. I think this is by far the least of your worries.”

My jaw drops.

Katie smiles, smug, like she’s won this battle. “Kiss. Them.”

I ease back another step. “I’m not kissing your shoes.”

She growls and fists my hair before shoving me to the ground. I drop to my knees and grab her wrists.

Katie lets out a high-pitched laugh. “I don’t care if you don’t want to kiss my shoes. You’re going to do it, then pay for a new shirt.”

“Your dad is friends with mine.” I stumble over my words and call my stepfather my father. “I’m sure it won’t come out of anyone’s pockets.”

She rolls her eyes. “You think I care?”

I grunt as she forces my head down until my mouth hovers over her shoe. Tears burn the backs of my eyes, but I hold them back. I refuse to cry

in front of these assholes, especially Katie.

"That's enough." A deep voice cuts through the screaming in my head, and the room falls silent.

Katie's hand disappears from my hair, and I wait before straightening to a kneel.

Elijah stops behind Katie, his blank expression twisted. Other than boredom or disgust, annoyance is the first emotion I've seen him display when he looks at me.

Katie turns to him and folds her arms against her chest while popping out her hip. "Are you really sticking up for the freak? Seriously?"

Elijah's gaze slides to me, and I stop breathing.

Is that . . . sympathy in his eyes?

It's brief, barely there. Then it's gone just as quickly as it appeared. His gaze darkens and narrow as he turns his focus back to Katie. The cruelty in his eyes is enough for even me to scoot backward. It's like looking at a completely different person.

"We have class, and I won't wait until she gives in to kiss your dirty shoes," Elijah says, the corner of his lip curving into a brief smirk.

Elijah steps past Katie and holds his hand toward me.

My jaw drops.

Am I hallucinating? Have I been transported to some weird new dimension where my stepbrother not only stands up for me, but wants to help me up from the ground?

When I don't take his offered hand, he wiggles his fingers.

"Come on, birdie. The class is waiting," he murmurs.

Glancing past him, I blink at the students watching us. All of them are in just as much shock as I am that Elijah Astar is talking to me. No, scratch that. Not just talking to me, but helping me. Even Mr. Thorn perks up in his seat, eyes wide and his precious coffee forgotten.

Katie slaps Elijah's hand away from me. "She can get up on her own. No need to dirty yourself with her filth."

I glare at her.

Elijah's features slacken, and he turns to her. "Touch me again, and that will be the last time you'll use your hand."

Katie's jaw slackens, and she eases back a step. Her frightened gaze snaps toward me, then back to him before she races out of the classroom.

The class remains silent, still watching Elijah and me.

He holds out his hand to me again and raises an eyebrow. “Well?”

I wrinkle my nose and stand without his help. “I don’t need you,” I grumble.

Elijah chuckles, the sound smooth as caramel. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

I push past him and sit in the only empty spot. Unfortunately, it’s beside Elijah.

Mr. Thorn clears his throat. “All right. Now that the show is over, today we’re going over—”

His voice fades as I zone out. This will be the talk of the day, not that it’s anything new. I’m always the center of attention for the wrong reasons. And if the person who’s been watching me finds out that Elijah tried helping me, they’ll go after him too.

As much as he gets under my skin, I don’t want anything to happen to him.

I try not to pay much attention to how the class ignores anything Mr. Thorn says. They’re all looking at me, watching as Elijah takes the seat beside me and pulls out his sketchbook.

I don’t know what possessed him to help me.

Why now, of all times?

He’s been watching me for years, so he has to know about my old friends disappearing, then coming back with bruises and busted lips. He had to have seen that anyone who smiled in my direction or showed any sign of friendliness toward me ended up in the same situation.

So why would he put himself in danger like that?

I mentally shake away the question and focus on Mr. Thorn as he discusses lighting. My thoughts keep drifting back to Elijah and analyzing what happened. I come to one conclusion, and it’s not only to protect me, but him, too.

Whatever Elijah has up his sleeve, I’m not falling for it.

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CHAPTER 7

ELIJAH

DAY 1 OF THE BET

When Mr. Thorn dismisses the class, Eden leaps out of her chair and charges toward the exit. I follow close behind, a smirk fighting its way onto my face. Funny how she talks a tough game, yet the moment I show her a little attention, she's running from me as if I told her she's about to gain eight inches inside her.

In due time, she will. For now, I have to warm her up to me.

"Where are you going, Eden?" I say loud enough for her to hear.

Her shoulders stiffen, rising to the bottoms of her ears, and she stops in the doorway. She looks every bit like a frightened bird about to be ensnared by the snake. She tosses a glare at me over her shoulder before leaving the room and putting a measurable amount of space between us.

I could close it in a few strides if I wanted to. Yet, I enjoy this game of bird and snake. It makes life more enjoyable. Maybe not for her, but more so for me.

"Birdie," I say with a smile. "You can run, but you can't hide."

Eden spins around and juts her chin up. "Why are you talking to me?"

I stop in front of her. "Easy there, sis. I'm not the enemy you think I am."

She has to tilt her head back to look at me since I stand a solid two feet taller than her. I won't pretend the size difference doesn't affect me.

Because it does, and I don’t understand why. Why her when I tower over other women I’ve been with?

It’s the innocence—the way she looks up at me with wide doe eyes.

“Then what are you to me if you’re not my enemy?” She shakes her head with a sigh. “It doesn’t matter. You shouldn’t be talking to me, anyway.”

I tilt my head. “Why?”

The fear creeping into her eyes hardens my cock. We’re well past the twitch, thrust into the lust-driven emotions I can’t afford to feel for her. Goddamn, I’m a sick bastard.

“You’ll end up getting hurt because of me,” she says.

“By who?”

Her gaze snaps to me, then narrows. “You should know, since you’re so popular. You’re friends with the same people who make my life miserable.”

“I can be your ally.” I bend so our faces are closer. “You’re my stepsister, after all, and family should look out for each other.”

She lets out a dry laugh. “You don’t need anyone to look out for you. And you’ve done a terrible job protecting me all these years.”

“You have no idea what I’ve done.”

“Standing aside and watching everyone harass and bully me? Yeah, you’ve done a lot for me.”

I pitch my voice lower. “I can make it up to you.”

“And how would you do that?” She steps back.

I straighten to my full height and slip my hands into my pockets. “We can be friends.”

“How does that help anything?”

“As long as you’re around me, no one will mess with you.”

She squints. “I feel like there’s a *but* in there.”

I grin.

Such a clever girl.

“But,” I say, “you’ll have to join me in some competitions. Asher needs a break, and I need a passenger.”

“I knew it,” she mumbles. I’m not sure if she meant for me to hear it. “What do you mean, you need a passenger? And what competitions?”

I grab her elbow and lead her toward the front of the school. “It means exactly that. I need someone to ride with me and keep a lookout.”

“You didn’t answer my other question.” She jerks her arm out of my hold and faces me, and I sigh and slip my hands into my pockets.

“I can’t tell you until you prove I can trust you with this knowledge.”

“Is it illegal?”

I grin. “Yes.”

Her eyes widen. “And you want me to be a part of that?” She shakes her head and waves her hands in front of her when I nod. “Absolutely not.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“It means I’m not helping you, and you’re not helping me.” She steps away from me. “Besides, I don’t believe for a second you’d be safe from the person who—”

Eden’s eyes widen a fraction, and she swallows hard.

I step closer, my eyebrows furrowing. “Safe from the person who . . .?”

She eases backward, and I watch as she mentally thrusts invisible walls around herself to protect her from whatever she was about to say. “I just can’t help you, okay? So stay away from me.”

She rushes to get away from me.

I’ll need to try harder to earn her trust. I have seven days to charm her, and she’ll demand more work than anyone else would.

I walk away from the doors and head toward the elevators that will take me to the elite dorms. My smile grows with each step I take. Slipping my hand out of my pocket, I hold the spare key to Eden’s dorm in front of me.

I’m not deterred by Eden’s no. She’ll come around and beg me to help her; I’ll make sure of it.

She’s the frightened bird wandering too far into the snake’s den to realize that she’s in danger.

And she’ll beg for help from the very person who started all of this.

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CHAPTER 8

ASHER

DAY 1 OF THE BET

"Are you about to leave?" Elijah strolls into the dorm kitchen and pulls a chilled glass from the mini fridge.

Something's bothering him.

My twin never drinks unless something or *someone* is getting under his skin.

I'd ask what happened, but I have shit to do. If I'm being honest with myself, I'm still upset about the bet he made with his friend. It shouldn't surprise me that my brother would take away my shiny toy. He's done this shit since we were kids. I love him, but the bastard knows I don't like to share.

I stuff the tools I need for my mission into a black duffel bag, then grab the balaclava from the couch's armrest. I have an idea of what I want to do.

"Did you hear me?" Elijah's voice cuts through my wandering thoughts.

I raise my head to glare at him.

Of course I heard him, and he knows I'm about to leave. He saw me when he first strode into the room with a smug look on his face.

Elijah pours two knuckles of whiskey into his glass. "Make sure no one dies."

I roll my eyes and zip the bag before hooking the strap over my shoulder.

No one will die tonight. They'll just wish for it before I'm through with them. Unless I'm caught sending this message, I plan for this to be stealthy and quick, giving me some alone time with our little stepsister.

She won't know.

Elijah won't know.

It's a secret to be kept between me, myself, and I.

Elijah tracks my every movement as I fish a blue-raspberry sucker from my pocket. I unwrap the crinkling paper and pop the candy into my mouth, then throw him the peace sign before walking to the door.

I may be pissed off at him, but that's not the only reason I want to be left alone.

Everything feels off.

The stress of having to do the dirty work for Elijah and his friends is chipping away at my mental well-being. Our father withholding the inheritance from us doesn't help ease the tension when we could really use that money right about now. To top it off, my borderline obsession with Eden is getting out of control.

It all adds up and creates a big mess that I'll have to clean up later.

Now the world looks like someone flipped it upside down and back upright; it's not piecing together the way it should. The corners don't meet up, and the image is obscure.

I can already feel an episode coming, and I fear this time around, it won't be good.

Then again, it never is.

Before the door shuts behind me, Elijah's voice floats across the room. "I won't need you to ride with me tomorrow evening."

I freeze before slowly opening the door and taking up the doorway. I roll the sucker in my mouth and pop it out so I can clench my teeth together without wasting candy.

My reality slips.

The walls breathe. The floor moves beneath my feet as if it's taking deep breaths with the walls. Static crosses my vision, and everything looks like I'm watching through a different pair of eyes.

Elijah smiles over the lip of his cup. I'll bet everything in my bank that smug smirk is about Eden and the fucking bet.

"I won't need you for the next few races, actually," he says. "I plan to have a certain little brown-haired thorn in my ass take your place for a

while. I need to win this—”

Red fills my vision, and his words fade out.

Hurt. Him.

I don’t register dropping the duffel bag and crossing the room. My fist smashes into Elijah’s face before the bag hits the ground. Blood sprays from his nose, and he grunts. My brother stumbles backward and covers his nose with his hands, his dark eyes rising to glare at me over the tops of his fingers.

“The fuck has gotten into you?” He straightens and hooks his arm back and punches me in the jaw.

I stumble backward and spit the crumbled sucker out of my mouth.

Get him.

Get him before he gets you.

I throw myself at Elijah and tackle him to the ground. It’s a flurry of fists, bites, and curses. I barely feel the pain as he lands a few more blows. Hooking my legs around him, I roll us over so I’m straddling his waist and wrapping my fingers around his neck.

In all the years of us being brothers and having spats, I’ve never gone as far as strangling Elijah. We’ve had our differences over stupid shit, but we’ve always had each other’s backs.

This time, he’s gone too far.

Or maybe I really am losing it by putting a woman above my own flesh and blood.

The thought of him touching Eden, let alone fucking her, makes me want to murder him and anyone else who tries taking what’s mine.

Eden Astar is fucking *mine*.

Mine to torment.

Mine to stalk.

Mine to take apart to learn what makes her tick.

Mine to pleasure with my tongue, fingers, and cock.

Jesus. Christ. I’ve really lost it.

Elijah’s face turns a dark shade of purple the longer I squeeze his neck. His nails dig into my wrists in his feeble attempt to stop me from killing him. And I really want to fucking kill him.

It’s like looking in the mirror as I watch the life fade from his eyes. *Our* eyes.

Elijah’s lips move as he mouths my name.

No, I don’t want to kill him. He’s my brother.

I don’t want to kill anyone.

My heart pounds against my chest, and adrenaline rushes through my veins until I’m trembling in fear. I blink, and I’m standing across the room in the doorway. The fuzziness fades, and the walls aren’t breathing anymore. The voices have quieted, and I’m left in silence.

Elijah stands in the kitchen, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He regards me carefully before slowly lowering the cup to the counter.

“Are you okay?” He eases around the kitchen counter and inches toward me like I’m a frightened animal about to bite.

I let out a harsh breath, nearly spitting out my sucker. Squeezing my eyes shut, I rub the heel of my palm against my eyelid. I shake my head to get rid of the awful visual hallucination.

I suck in a shaky breath and let it out.

“What did you say?” I croak.

I’m losing it. No, I’ve lost it. It’s too much.

Elijah’s footsteps fill the silence as they approach me. They stop in front of me, and I peek at him to find his hand hovering above my shoulder. I don’t like being touched when I’m like this, and he knows it.

“Just now or—”

“Before,” I mumble.

He’s quiet for a moment, and the silence is almost too much.

Dropping my hand from my face, I stare at my brother and almost touch him to make sure he’s really here, that I didn’t actually kill him. Our eyes meet, and my heart bangs against my chest.

Elijah’s gaze flicks away from my face, just past my shoulder. “I said that I’m going to have Eden ride with me for a few nights.” He pauses. “Have you been taking your meds?”

Hard to do when they’re so fucking expensive and we need to save the money we have until we get our inheritance.

“Yes,” I say.

Elijah nods and lowers his hand to his side. He takes a step back to give me space to breathe. “Was it bad?”

I run my fingers through my hair before turning away from him.

It was bad. Nothing new, though, and nothing I can’t handle on my own. I know who I am. I know what I am. And I’m not a killer. I’m not the violent, mindless schizophrenic the world thinks I am.

“Later,” I mumble, and open the door.

“Don’t go,” Elijah calls. “Not when you’re like this.”

Ignoring him, I slam the door shut behind me. I’m halfway down the hall when it opens again and Elijah calls my name. I ignore him and his orders for me to come back.

Just because I have schizoaffective disorder doesn’t mean I don’t know my limits. Being off my meds doesn’t mean he has to coddle me like I’m a child.

I have a job to do, and I plan to get it done so I can go where I feel like I can finally fucking breathe.

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CHAPTER 9

ASHER

NIGHT 1 OF THE BET

Crickets chirp, filling the nighttime silence as I watch the Walker brothers' mansion for any signs of life. The lights are on, but from my position across the street, it's difficult to tell if they're inside or outside. My hope is they're inside, drinking themselves into oblivion so I'm not interrupted while sending a message to them.

I grab the binoculars I shoved into the duffel bag and peer through them.

Rolling my sucker to the other side of my mouth, I check every lit window. There are no blinds or drapes to stop anyone with bad intentions from looking in.

Hi. I'm bad intentions.

I've been hanging out in the woods across from their home for hours, biding my time for the right moment to get in and get the fuck out. They spent most of the time outside until now. I have better things to do, such as creeping into Eden's dorm and curling up behind her for a snuggle.

I did say I'd be her monster, and I've been holding back on her.

I pause at a window when someone walks past it. A flash of dirty-blond hair tells me the coast is clear.

Dropping the binoculars, I crush my sucker with my teeth and toss the stick onto the ground. I crouch beside the duffel bag, unzip it, and pull out the mask to shove over my head. I adjust the holes so I can see what I'm doing, then grab the brass knuckles. Slipping the weapon into my pocket, I

creep out of the woods and make my way to Brennon's car in the circle drive on the side of the mansion.

I lift the Porsche's hood and find the nitrous-line intake above the motor. I tilt my head to get a better look in the dark as I disconnect the line. Lowering the hood, I settle it into place without making a sound. The gas cap catches my eye as I'm about to walk away.

How big of a message does Elijah want me to send?

If I really wanted to, I could add something to the gas tank to make a little boom when Brennon starts the car.

I shake the idea out of my head and turn to leave. A fist slams into my face and knocks me to the ground. I land on my back, and the air knocks loose from my lungs. I wheeze and roll onto my side.

It fucking burns.

Brennon shakes out his hand and crouches beside me. His ice-blue eyes narrow, and he grins. "You thought you could fuck around with my car?"

Austin stops beside his brother, his gaze sliding to me. He frowns. "Who is he?"

Brennon rips my mask off and sucks his teeth. "Elijah or Asher Astar."

I bare my bloody teeth at him.

"What'd he do?" Austin says.

Brennon grabs a fistful of my shirt to keep me in place when I try to sit up. His gaze remains on me when he answers. "I don't know. I came up behind him, and he was staring at the car." He shakes me. "Are you going to tell us what you did to my fucking car?"

I spit a bloody glob at him and grin when it lands on his cheek.

Brennon shoves me back and punches me while I'm down. When I don't make a sound or scream for help, he punches again. By the fourth hit, I laugh. It sends him over the edge, and Austin joins by kicking me in the side.

I ball up to protect my weaker spots, but Brennon forces me to sprawl out.

My laughter turns maniacal.

Keep hitting me, fuckers. I'll use this to my advantage.

Austin slams his fist against my right eye. I grunt and squeeze my eyes shut as black dots fill my vision. I bare my bloody teeth when my ears begin to ring.

A third person steps out of the shadows, and I glimpse him as he moves closer. He says something to the brothers that I don't catch, but at least it makes them stop attacking me like a pack of dogs.

My laughter fills the night as I lie sprawled on the ground, my good eye focused on the stars above me. Sticky wetness drips onto my upper lip from my nose.

I make out Brennon's voice as he says, "Why the fuck is he laughing?"

Austin grabs my ankle and drags me away from the car and down the driveway. I glance at the third man, but I only glimpse a flash of white hair.

Then nothing.

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CHAPTER 10

EDEN

DAY 2 OF THE BET

I SCOWL at the claw as it once again misses the damn bat plushie and grapples with air before drifting to the prize chute and releasing nothing. That's my reward for my hard work.

How lovely.

"Are you *sure* you don't want me to help you?" Shane folds his arms against his chest and glances at me, then at the stuffed bat.

"Yes, I'm very sure." I squint at the plushie. "It'll be *me* who wins it. I don't need help from you or anyone else."

Shane's sigh sets my teeth on edge.

It's not his fault I'm in a bad mood. I haven't been able to get out of this funk since yesterday's weird conversation with Elijah.

Shane mistakes my irritated sigh as a blow to him and holds his hands up in a placating gesture. He lets out a low whistle. "Down girl. I'm just trying to be a good friend and help you."

I squeeze my eyes shut and take a calming breath through my nose.

"What's got your panties in a twist, anyway?" Shane's innocent but playful question really doesn't help the situation here.

Opening my eyes, I fish more tokens from my pocket. "They aren't in a twist, and even if they were, it's none of your business."

"Last time I checked, we've been friends since I found my little grumpy introvert. That makes it my business."

“I’m not grumpy.” I shove the token into the feeder.

“You’re funny.” He snickers. “It’s about a man, isn’t it?”

I grab the knob and direct the claw over the bat plushie. “No,” I say, my cheeks warming.

He raises an eyebrow.

I pinch my lips together and guide the claw above the plush while holding my breath. It inches down, and like all the other times, it grabs air before rising back to the top.

“Kill me,” I mutter.

“No, I’m not doing that.” Shane pats the top of my head with a goofy smile.

I spin toward him. “This isn’t fair. It’ll be the worst day of my life if someone else gets it before I do. Don’t you understand that once it’s gone, it’s gone?”

Shane tilts his head and rubs his nape. “How would you know that?”

“Because I’ve been watching it like a hawk,” I say, then side-eye the game. “Do you think the machine is broken? Or somehow rigged where no one wins anything and the place keeps getting money?”

“No, I don’t—” He frowns and straightens to his full height. “Nice job changing the topic, brat. I almost fell for it.”

I grin. “You definitely fell for it.”

He chuckles with a shake of his head. “No, I don’t think the machine is broken, or rigged, for that matter. I think you have a lot on your mind, and it’s preventing you from focusing on the angle.”

“I hate this.”

“And I can help.”

I groan and drop my head against the plexiglass and stare at the plush. “I don’t think you can, and I don’t want you to.”

Shane leans against the machine and crosses his arms over his broad chest. “You’re too tense, and you’ve got tunnel-vision. You need to open your eyes a little more and focus on a different perspective.”

“My eyes are open, and I am focused.” I jerk back and wave a hand toward the machine. “Stop talking in riddles and tell me how I can win the stupid doll. In fact, stop offering your help. I’m so tired of people saying they can help me, but they never do unless they get something in return.”

Tears burn the backs of my eyes. I hate that I cry when I’m angry.

Shane straightens, his lips parting at my outburst.

I can’t stop the word vomit. “You’re all the same, thinking that you’re better than me. Just like *him*. He thinks he’s *so* much better, and he offers help only if I give him something in return. I hate it. Why can’t he just help me? Why didn’t he *ever* help me?”

I suck in a ragged breath. My cheeks heat more, along with the rest of my face.

Shane grins. “Do you feel better?”

I nod.

Yeah, I feel better after getting it off my chest. Now here come the hundreds of questions. He’ll want to know who *he* is and what *he* wanted from me.

Shane pushes away from the machine and steps closer to me. “I don’t know what the guy asked for in return, but I’m not him, Eden. I won’t ask for anything. Screw the other guy and his bullshit. I want to help you because you’re my friend.”

“Fine.” I take a breath and raise my chin. “What do I do about this other guy? Do I take his offer to help me?”

Shane’s smile tightens. “That’s not the help I was offering.”

I snort. “Oh, you’re not getting that plushie for me.”

“Fair enough.”

“So you won’t give me advice?”

“Fine,” he sighs. “What did he ask for in return?”

“For me to ride with him.”

Shane blanches. “Ride with him? What does he mean by that?”

“I’m not fucking him. I told you, I’m not interested in relationships.” Let alone with my stepbrother, past be damned. “I guess he needs a passenger when he’s competing or something.”

“What’s he helping you with?”

“He says if he hangs out with me, it’ll stop the bullying.”

“And that’s all you’re wanting? Nothing more?”

“That would be nice.” Now that he’s said it aloud, it doesn’t seem like a lot. Then again, neither does Elijah’s request.

If I sit in his passenger seat and don’t have to say anything, it can’t be that bad. Especially if he hangs around me to ward off the jerks.

Shane must see the realization on my face, because he grins. “Sounds like you’re coming around.”

I flinch. “I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

Elijah stood aside while his friends tormented me. His sudden sympathy and desire to help me are ten years too late.

"Anyway," I say, "I've got to head back to the dorm." So I can sit at my desk and zone out while figuring out if I really want to take Elijah's offer.

"Text me if you need any more help." Shane pats me on the head. "But I say, go for it. I'd like to hang out with you outside of this place."

I playfully swat his hand away. "We'll see."

I leave the arcade and take my time on the walk back to campus. It's a little past noon on a Wednesday. I don't have any classes today, which is nice, but that means the courtyard will be busy with other students. I'll have to deal with being called names, tripped, or having drinks and food thrown at me.

By the time I get on campus, sweat beads on my forehead. I duck my head and let my hair fall around my face like a curtain. Hopefully, it'll act as a shield so no one will notice me.

Seven minutes.

Just seven minutes and I'll be back in my dorm, away from everyone.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. The hairs on the back of my neck stand, and I break out in a cold sweat.

Fuck. I know it's not Shane. It's a gut feeling, and it's never been wrong.

My phone vibrates again.

They're out here, watching me, texting me with a new insult or picture.

I lift my head and cut through the garden in the courtyard. A lone figure sits on the edge of the fountain in the middle. He unbuttoned his school jacket; the sleeves roll up his forearms to expose his tattoos. I slow my pace when I recognize the person as either Elijah or Asher. As I get closer, I notice the sucker poking out of his mouth.

Asher.

My stomach rolls when I spot the bruises on his face.

"It's none of my business," I mumble to myself as I hedge around him.

I avoid meeting his gaze while he watches me pass him. His presence alone takes up the space in the garden, as if he's larger than everything in the surrounding area. The weight of his stare demands that I look at him. I fight the temptation, not needing to be drawn into his orbit.

I lose the battle. Maybe it's curiosity or just plain stupidity.

I turn my head and meet his gaze. My legs stop working, and I stand still. Asher's lips curve into a subtle smirk, as if he just won the battle. He rolls his sucker to one side of his mouth and tilts his head as his gaze roams over my body.

I raise my chin to appear stronger than I feel.

He's just as guilty as Elijah for not doing anything to help me.

He raises his eyes up my body and meets my stare again, smirk still in place, and he drums his fingers on the grey slab of concrete on the lip of the fountain.

His smug smile . . . I hate it. Just like I hate him and his brother.

"Tell Elijah he can forget about it," I growl. "I don't need him. Or you, for that matter. I can do it on my own."

I stomp toward the door. Goosebumps rise on my arms, and the heavy feeling of someone just behind me makes me run the rest of the way to my dorm.

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CHAPTER 11
ASHER

DAY 2 OF THE BET

"I CAN DO it on my own." Eden's flushed face and glare won't leave my head.

For the first time, she looked at me, but in all the wrong ways. I didn't think it would upset me as much as it does right now, and yet I'm seething over the fact that when she finally addressed me, she spoke my brother's name instead of mine.

She can do it on her own, she says.

I don't know what Elijah offered. I'm sure it's his way of getting closer to her so he can win the stupid bet.

I follow Eden, keeping a coincidental amount of space between us. There's no way she can prove that I'm following her.

Even with the distance between us, I still catch the trail of her perfume. I take a breath, greedily filling my lungs with her scent.

My cock twitches, and my eyes roll back. I don't know what it is about her perfume that turns me on so much. It could be the flowery scent mixed with a powdery undertone that I've never smelled on anyone else.

Instinctively, I suck harder on the blue-raspberry candy, and it's enough to bring me back into my body. It stops me from coming in my pants like an amateur, too.

The ghost of her taste dances on my tongue, just enough to tease as I glare at the back of her head.

Eden rounds the corner to Glass Hall, where the female dorms are. I lengthen my stride, closing the distance between us so that I can slip into her room with her. She can't leave me after what she said. I need answers.

What did Elijah say?

What did he offer?

Why won't she accept his help when he never offers to help anyone?

What made her change her mind?

Why did she have that outburst when she saw me?

I refuse to leave her alone until she answers every burning question.

Movement in my periphery shifts my focus. Turning my head, I double-take at the flash of platinum hair that may as well be white.

I turn and follow him instead.

Eden will be in her dorm for some time, and I'll catch up with her soon. I hurry toward the white-haired motherfucker and grab him by the shoulder. He turns toward me, his dark eyebrows shooting up his forehead and looking every bit as surprised as I am. I didn't think I'd see him so soon.

A yellow bird hisses with a tiny squeak, then lunges at me with her small open beak. I jerk my hand away from the cockatiel perched on his shoulder.

Rome fucking Graves soothes her with a click of his tongue and by scratching the top of her head. He turns his attention to me once the little creature settles in place with a fluff of her feathers. A flash of malice crosses his features before he locks it away as if it were never there. But I fucking saw it.

"Can I help you?" Rome says.

Does he really think I'll believe in his fake sincerity? Not a fucking chance.

Rolling the sucker to the other side of my mouth, I flick a strand of white-blond hair that's fallen from the coiffed style. The bird hisses and snaps at my fingers again, and Rome doesn't flinch. Only his gaze betrays his irritation.

You're not fooling me, asshole.

I grin, raise my middle finger with my thumb out, and press it under my eye to drag the tender flesh down. My teeth clench together as I pull the swollen skin. I don't show any other signs that the pain bothers me.

"Doesn't that hurt?" he asks, his eyebrows furrowing together.

He should know that it hurts. He was there.

“Pardon my memory, but do I know you?” he asks, still playing the fool.

I drop my hand to my side. My face throbs from the forced smile. It’s worth it, though, just to see the look on his face.

He knows that I know he was there last night.

I give him one last look before walking away. Rome’s gaze follows me, and I don’t have to look behind me to know he’s watching. I stride down Glass Hall and stop outside Eden’s dorm. I raise my fist to bang on her door, but it swings open before I have a chance to knock.

Eden’s eyes widen, and she gasps as she jumps back a step. “What are you doing here?”

I drop my hand and step closer to her, invading her space and breathing in her unique scent.

“Are you going to answer the question or just stand there?” Eden says with a huff. She folds her arms under her breasts.

Rolling the sucker to the other side of my mouth, I lean down until my lips hover beside her ear. “Make me feel better.”

Her sharp intake of breath goes straight to my dick. I’d kill to hear that sound again.

I grin and straighten to my full height before squeezing past her in the doorway. I make a show of glancing at everything in her room, as if I haven’t seen all of this before.

The door shuts with a click, and I turn to face a disgruntled Eden.

“How do you expect me to make you feel better?” She frowns and gives me a wide berth as she approaches her snake’s vivarium.

I sit on the edge of her bed and lean back on my hands. “You have a first-aid kit. Use it.”

While she’s distracted gathering medical supplies, I check the hidden camera I planted on her nightstand a few nights ago. It’s been blocked by her alarm clock, and now that I have time and opportunity, I move the culprit.

Eden turns her head toward me. “Why can’t you go to the doctor for that? And who did all of that to you, anyway?”

I grin. “You sound like you care.”

“I don’t.” She shrugs. “But you’re here, and I’m curious.”

“I got jumped.”

Eden’s eyebrows rise to her hairline. “By who?”

My smile tightens. “You don’t want to know.”

“Why not?”

“Because it might hurt.”

“How so?” Eden’s eyebrows bunch together. “Do you plan to hurt me?”

“Depends.” I glance at the first-aid kit. “Are you going to help me?”

Eden’s posture stiffens, and she stares at me for a moment, probably shocked that I subtly threatened to hurt her.

She can think whatever she wants. I’m sure she’ll come up with all sorts of possibilities. How I’d hurt her would likely be the last one on her list—if it even makes it on the list.

“Help me,” I say.

If I were another man, I would have died on the spot from the heat in Eden’s glare, but I smile and relax.

Finally giving in, she sits beside me on the bed.

“I don’t know how you expect any of this to help you,” she mumbles as she pulls the contents from inside the small tin box. “You need a doctor.”

When I don’t answer, she sighs and grabs a cotton ball, then soaks it in hydrogen peroxide.

“This may sting,” she says.

The only response I give is a noisy suck on the blue-raspberry sucker.

Eden dabs the cotton ball against my temple. With every gentle touch, fire seeps beneath my skin, and my fingers white-knuckle the sheets behind me. She doesn’t seem to notice, though. Her gaze wanders to each cut, likely counting how many I have.

Eden may be a mystery to me, but I know her well enough; she’s sympathizing with me. Normally, I wouldn’t accept anyone’s sympathy or pity. However, I’m greedy as fuck to get anything from her. Especially this forced moment. Anything is better than nothing. I’ll milk the fuck out of this. Just like I’ll milk the fuck out of my cock later tonight while thinking about how she touched me.

Goddamn, I really am losing it.

“Why did you get jumped?” Eden’s tiny voice brings me out of my dazed state.

I grin. She’s talking to me still, and it’s the second-best thing I can get—her taste being the first.

“Because I got caught fucking with someone’s car,” I say.

Eden’s eyebrows pinch together, and she frowns. “Why would you do that?”

“He started it.” I shrug. “I finished it.”

She shakes her head and drops the pink-tinged cotton ball onto the bed before grabbing a dry one to soak in peroxide.

Just the thought of the bastards sparks the embers of my earlier anger back to life. I catch Eden’s wrist and squeeze, then loosen when she flinches.

Slowly, I lean into her until our noses brush, and her eyes widen in surprise. “What does he have that I don’t?”

Eden swallows hard. “Who? Is this about Elijah?”

I roll my sucker and work my jaw.

I hate how my brother’s name rolls off her tongue so easily.

“Say my name,” I growl.

“Why?”

“Say my fucking name.”

Fear creeps into her eyes, and she jerks her arm to get out of my grasp, but I hold tight. She won’t escape me.

“Why do I need to say your name?” she whimpers.

I force a smile and release her. Eden grabs her wrist and rubs where I held her. For a moment, I feel bad that I hurt her, but it’s fleeting. I stand from the bed and cross the small room to the door.

“Asher,” she says. “What the hell was that all about?”

I freeze in the doorway, my eyes sliding shut. Blood rushes to my cock, and I hold back a groan.

“Asher?”

Fuck me, I’m about to eat my words, because I need her to stop.

Opening my eyes, I glance at her over my shoulder and toss her a playful smile. “Thanks for helping me, sis. Get some rest.”

I leave the room and wait until the door shuts behind me before grabbing my phone and shooting a text to Elijah.

ASHER

Good to go.

ELIJAH

Hidden camera in place?

ASHER



When he reads the message but doesn’t say anything, I slip my phone back into my pocket.

Hopefully Eden will listen to me and get some rest before tonight. She’ll need it before the night is through.

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CHAPTER 12

EDEN

NIGHT 2 OF THE BET

THE SPRAY of hot water mixes with my tears as they slip down my cheeks. The great thing about crying in the shower is that it leaves no evidence for anyone to bear witness to.

No one really uses the common bathroom in Glass Hall. Everyone else is lucky enough to have their own in their dorm, while I don't. I was thrown into what I call the spare dorm. The dean is on the same page as the rest of the bullies.

It sucks that even the staff at this elite college join the bullies in making my life hard. I would kill to have the space to shower without worrying someone will walk in while I'm crying . . . or doing other things.

Everything is piling on my shoulders. The emotions are almost too much to bear, but I won't allow it to break me.

The threats and insults from the recent text messages from the unknown number haven't changed. It's the same tactic—a photoshopped image of me with words like *slut* and *whore* written across it.

I haven't slept with anyone. This person thinks otherwise, though.

I blink away the tears and water, my gaze falling on the razor blade I set on the lip of the shower stall. The pain tempts me. It's enough to take my mind off the pain I can't control. The deep, aching kind that fills my chest whenever my thoughts linger on my situation.

I don’t like that I do this. I know it’s not okay, that it’s dangerous, but what else am I supposed to do? Asking for help never worked. My mother did nothing. My stepfather wouldn’t understand. My stepbrothers would rather I disappear before ever helping me.

So I’m left with this.

I grab the razor and hold out my arm to look for a good spot. Not that it matters. Old scars from all the other times stare up at me. The blade sinks into my skin, and as I drag it, a trail of blood follows.

My breath shudders out of me, my eyelashes flutter, and I bite my bottom lip to quiet a whimper as I cut another line, deeper than the last. By the third one, tears blind my vision for a different reason, and I can’t feel anything.

Numbness seeps into my body and mind—the high from the adrenaline that makes this endurable.

I hold my arm beneath the spray of hot water to wash away the blood. After a while, I finish the shower and leave the bathroom in a towel with my toiletry tote.

I hate that the first thing I look at when I enter my room is my phone. It lies in the middle of the bed where I left it, face-down and not displaying the messages that sent me rushing to the bathroom.

Shaking my head, I dress for the night and use the first-aid kit to clean the fresh cuts. I flip off the light and crawl into bed. My head hits the pillow, and I hope to fall asleep right away. Instead, I do the same thing I do every night and lie on my side, staring into nothing.

A small noise creaks through the silence.

I pop my head up and turn to check the room. A hand slaps over my mouth, and I’m flipped onto my stomach.

“Shh. Don’t make a fucking sound or I’ll choke you with my cock,” a man whispers, his voice low and harsh.

I swallow the whimper creeping up my throat. Tears fill my eyes, and I peek over my shoulder, hoping to see him, but it’s dark and he moves out of the way so I can’t see him.

I’m at his complete and utter mercy.

A tear breaks loose and trails down my cheek. He must see it because he snorts a laugh, the sound sending a chill down my spine.

“Tears won’t save you, slut.” He bears down, pressing his body against mine, forcing me to feel his hardening cock against my ass.

My breath comes out fast and shallow against his hand. I squeeze my eyes shut and dig my nails into the arm looped around my front to keep me silent.

I thought I knew what it felt like to be helpless. Everything else pales in comparison. I didn't think the bullying would get to this point.

He chuckles at my reaction. "Don't act like a prude now."

I narrow my eyes and grit my teeth.

He removes his body from mine and shoves my head into the pillow with one hand. With the other, he yanks my sleep shorts and panties down my legs to hang around my bent knees.

I squirm beneath his hold and grapple with the bed to get up. His fingers clench my hair and hold me in place.

He tsks and lifts my hips into the air, then straddles my calves to keep me in the most vulnerable position I've ever been in. He can see *everything* while I'm like this.

"Please," I cry.

"Please, what?" He snorts a laugh. "Please fuck you? Please spare you? I need you to use your words, slut."

I turn my cheek and glare at him from the corner of my eye. "I'm *not* a slut."

"Oh, really?" he says, his voice pitching lower in a purr.

He releases my hair to drag his fingertips over my arm, then stops at the cuts that pulse from my struggle. The adrenaline lessened the pain, but his touch brings it back. His fingers circle my wrist, and he yanks my arm behind my back. I whimper at the burning sensation in my shoulder. Even though I can't see him, I know he's looking at the cuts. Inspecting them and counting the old scars.

I refuse to give him any more proof of my discomfort. The sick asshole would likely get off on it.

He rubs his thumb over one of them, and the weight of his stare rises to my head. "You like hurting yourself?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and bite my bottom lip.

When he realizes I won't answer, he digs his thumb against my fresh wound. "Answer me, slut. Do you like pain?"

I yell and turn my face into the pillow to muffle the sound.

He watches me squirm and cry into the pillow. The curiosity in his gaze shifts to malice. My stomach sours, and I turn my head to peek at him. In

the darkness, I spot the black balaclava mask hiding his face from me. He releases my arm and grabs a switchblade from his pocket. The blade pops out and glints in the moonlight.

“You like pain, and I love giving it.” He flips the knife in the air and catches it by the blade.

“No,” I whimper.

He turns his dark gaze to my face. “You’re a little liar, you know that?”

“I’m not—”

“Such a pretty cunt.” He drags the flat side of the knife between my folds.

Each time he swipes, he presses down on my clit. My body betrays me as warmth pools low in my stomach and tingles zap to my toes.

“Oh,” he sings. “You like that, do you? What if I add a little pain?”

I shake my head, then stop when he smacks my pussy with the flat side of the knife’s blade.

“I wasn’t asking for your permission.” He pinches my clit and rolls it between his finger pads.

I bite back a moan and tense from the pain and pleasure.

He spreads my ass cheeks and thrusts the handle inside my pussy. I bite back a moan, and the pleasure is short-lived when he draws away. His dark chuckle sends heat through my veins. He holds the knife toward me, letting the moonlight hit the glistening handle. My cheeks burn.

“Tell me again how this isn’t turning you on,” he growls.

My lips pinch together.

His laughter comes out low, the sound maniacal. He squeezes my ass and holds me in place as he leans back on his haunches to stare at my pussy.

“If you scream,” he says, his gaze flicking to my face before returning to between my legs, “I’ll keep my promise from earlier.”

My stomach drops. “Please don’t do this.”

He hums with a shake of his head. “Your lips say one thing and your pussy says another. I should punish your mouth, too.”

Tears burn in my eyes, and I swallow a sob.

The man flips the switchblade so he’s holding it by the grip, and he leans forward. The blade hovers over my skin for a moment. Then he carves into me.

My back arches, and I grip the sheets. The tears fall down my cheeks, and I swallow every scream as the blade makes odd movements against my

skin. Each one differs from the last.

He's writing something into me.

I don't know when he'll be done or how long he's been doing this. Time is nothing while he cuts me. An explosion of sensations runs through my body.

Pain. Pleasure. Fear. Excitement. They all mix together.

I whimper and try to crawl away. He grabs me by the waist and holds me still.

"This is your final warning, slut. Move again and I'll fuck your throat."

My blood runs cold, and a shiver rolls down my back. I nod to show him that I'll be good and won't try anything.

He carves into my skin again, and I cry out, flinching away from his knife.

He finishes and blankets my body with his to whisper in my ear, a smile in his voice. "Once a slut, always a slut."

I yelp as he moves off me, taking his weight with him. He grabs me by the arm and shoves me onto my knees in front of him.

"If you wanted to choke on my cock, that's all you had to say." He snaps the switchblade shut and stuffs it into his pocket before unbuttoning and unzipping his pants.

He frees his hard cock and pumps the shaft once.

"If you bite," he warns, "I'll pull all your fucking teeth. Now open those pretty slut lips."

I glare up at him, hating how cocky he looks, even with the mask on.

He's a coward for hiding his identity from me.

I open my mouth and stick out my tongue. The man groans and smacks the tip of his fat cock against the flat of my tongue, the weight heavy and his taste clean.

"Suck." He fists my hair to hold it out of my face.

I lean forward and take more of him into my mouth. Tears burn in my eyes for an entirely different reason as he hits the back of my throat.

"You're barely taking half of me." He tuts. "I know you can do better than that."

I gag as he shoves his hips forward and forces more of his length into my mouth. My hands fly up to his waist, and I shove him back. He thrusts deeper, until my nose meets his pelvis. He takes up every inch of space in my mouth and throat.

My shoulders rock with a dry heave, and I stare up at him, begging him to pull out so I can breathe.

He stares down at me, his eyes narrowed and every bit evil.

“Touch yourself.” He tilts his head. “And lift your shirt. Then maybe I’ll let you breathe.”

My eyelashes flutter, and dark spots creep into my vision. I raise my shirt to free my breasts, then reach between my legs, blindly rubbing my clit. I didn’t think I would ever get turned on choking on a cock while rubbing myself. But heat pools low in my belly, and tingles spread through my body until my toes curl.

“Fuck, that’s it,” he groans. “Make yourself come.”

The black dots widen until they’re all I can see. Right when I think I’ll pass out, he pulls back and lets his cock slip out of my mouth. I suck in gulps of air. He doesn’t give me much time before he rams in until my nose meets his pelvis again. Over and over, he fucks my throat, each thrust harder than the last.

Undignified sounds come out of me that I never thought I could make. I gag on his cock.

“That’s it, baby,” he growls. “These are the only noises I want to hear from you.”

My fingers flick over my clit faster. They match the same rhythm as his hips. It’s easy to pretend he’s touching me. My mind conjures images of him fucking me like this.

It’s so fucked up that I’m fantasizing about my attacker—my bully. My body won’t listen to my brain and betrays me by getting more turned on as he continues fucking my throat.

My eyes slam shut as my orgasm takes hold of me. I arch my back and grab his hip with one hand, the other still between my legs as I work myself through the climax.

“There she is. My little slut, coming from being used like a fuck toy.” He pushes my head forward as he thrusts deeper into my mouth. “My turn.”

My eyes widen, and I grab both his hips as he unleashes on me. I thought he was rough before, but it’s nothing compared to how fast he’s going now. He yanks my head back and holds me in place. His hips smack against my face. His thrusts turn frantic, losing their steady rhythm as he chases his own climax.

His cock swells, and he pulls out at the last second. Hot cum lands on my face, each burst splattering in different spots. He strokes his shaft to work out every drop with a deep groan. I flinch as the last of his load lands over my eye and in my eyelashes.

The man steps back, tucks himself inside his pants, and pulls out his phone to take pictures of me. The bright flash blinds me.

"So pretty with my cum on your face." He crouches in front of me and fists my hair, yanking my head back.

I glare at him and bare my teeth.

He tilts his head, his eyes lowering as he looks me over like I'm nothing more than a slab of meat. When he lifts his dark eyes, he leans in closer until his covered mouth hovers above my parted lips.

"This is where you belong, Eden," he murmurs. "On your knees and sucking my cock. I'll see you again soon."

He slaps my cheek twice and straightens to his full height.

A lump forms in my throat as I watch him leave the room, the door shutting behind him with a final thud.

I don't know how long I stay kneeling on the ground where he left me. My body trembles, and my mind replays what happened.

I didn't want to do that with him . . . right? I hated how rough he was with me—I think.

Shaking my head, I stand on wobbly legs, fix my clothes in place, and stumble out of the room to the bathroom across the hall. I look at myself in the mirror and flinch at his cum on my face. I turn the water on at the sink and gather it in my palms to splay it over my face.

Over and over, I wash the evidence off me. I scrub until my skin is red and raw.

I turn and lower my shorts to look at what he carved into me. Tears slip down my cheeks, and I grit my teeth.

My slut is marked into my skin. He claimed me. Made me his without my permission.

And I'm scared he'll make good on his promise to see me again soon.

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CHAPTER 13

ELIJAH

DAY 3 OF THE BET

My fingers hover above the piano keys as I mentally prepare to play. It's been so long since I sat on the bench and let my fingers glide over the keys.

I have a class in the next hour and a half—one I wouldn't mind skipping. Why not kill some time by dusting the cobwebs from my long-forgotten talent? Everyone assumes I'm good with my fingers, so why not put them to use for an entirely different reason?

Asher is the musical genius. I prefer the paintbrush and canvas. Something's gotten into me, though. It's drawn me into the grand room with the antique open piano. This old-school instrument is Asher's wet dream. I'm sure he's already played it several times since haunting this school without my knowledge.

Closing my eyes, I envision the notes in my head, and soon enough, I can hear the music.

My fingers glide across the keys, never missing a beat. The room fills with a haunting melody, each note building for something more climactic.

"So how's the dare going, hmm?" Derrick's voice breaks through the music.

I skip a note and stop playing. Opening my eyes, I scowl at him as he meanders deeper into the room, a grin spread across his face.

"It's going fine," I say.

He plops onto the chaise lounge and spreads his arms over the back of the seat. “That’s not what I hear. A little bird said you’re having a hard time.”

“And who’s the birdie?” *So I can kill them.*

Derrick shoots a playful look toward me and tuts. “That’s only for me to know. It seems your sister wants nothing to do with you.” He shakes his head. “Such a shame. I’m sure I could have won her over by now. It makes it easier that I’m not her brother, after all.”

“Is that what you think is happening? That she wants nothing to do with me because I’m her brother?”

Her mouth says one thing, but her reactions say another. Eden can’t hide the blushes and how she ducks her head to avoid looking at me for too long. She must take me for a fool if she thinks I don’t see right through her charade.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Derrick says. “She’d be out of her mind if she ever fell for you.”

“I haven’t tried yet.” I narrow my eyes. “And the week isn’t over.”

“I don’t know, man. It’s been three days, and the girl’s still avoiding you like the plague. Are you—”

“Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.” I stand from the bench and run my fingers over the piano’s keys one last time.

It may be day three of the bet, and I’ve gotten no closer to winning Eden’s affections, but I’ve only just begun. Eden will be mine. I’m sure of it. I need time to get her to trust me enough to get between her legs.

I hate losing, and I don’t plan to lose this bet.

Straightening my uniform jacket, I fix the gold tie at the base of my throat and turn to Derrick. He looks at me with pinched eyebrows.

“What’s that look for?” I say.

“Who said that bit about patience?”

I sigh and step down from the piano platform. “Aristotle. I never realized just how true his words were until now. Maybe you should remember them instead of pestering me about a bet that isn’t over yet.”

Derrick’s grin slips before he catches himself and schools his features. He stands and follows me out of the grand room.

“Four days, then,” he says. “That shouldn’t be too hard, right?”

“You’re the one who’s doubting me.” I cast an annoyed look at him.

He rolls his eyes and raises his hand to hover over my shoulder. His eyes widen when he realizes what he's about to do, and his arm drops to his side.

Derrick follows me out the front doors that lead to the parking lot. "Have you decided what to do about the Walker brothers for what they did to Asher?"

I shake my head. "No, but I'll think of something. We'll let them sit for a while, thinking they got away with what they did. I don't want them expecting a hit back."

They'll get what's coming to them soon enough.

One thing they should know about me is that if they fuck with my brother, I will destroy everything they love.

Derrick's smile loses its playfulness and matches the darkness in my heart. He may be an asshole, and I may tolerate him, but he is loyal to a fault. "I can't wait to fuck them up. I've been dying to get my hands around their throats for a year now."

I hum in response and slip my hands into my pockets. We walk through the parking lot, and a flash of long dark hair in the distance grabs my focus.

Eden walks on the side of the long drive to leave the campus, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. A purple ribbon cinches the hair together and flutters in the wind. She keeps her head low, shoulders tight and nearly touching her earlobes.

Trying to keep herself small and unnoticeable doesn't work. I'm a shark in the water, and she's vulnerable, bleeding, and weak.

And I need to go in for the fucking kill if I want to get what I want out of this bet.

"Get lost," I say to Derrick.

He turns his head toward me, his eyebrows raised. "What the fuck?"

I widen my strides toward my car.

"Seriously, Elijah?" Derrick calls. "You're going to leave me behind for some pussy?"

I unlock the doors with the key fob and slip behind the wheel. The engine purrs to life, and I don't bother buckling my seatbelt. I don't plan to stay in the car for long.

I drive out of the parking lot and tap the brakes to slow the car beside Eden. I roll down the window. "Where are you going?"

Eden turns her guarded stare toward me. "For a walk."

I frown. “Where to?”

“Why does it matter to you?”

She keeps walking, and I keep the car at the same pace as her strides.

“Maybe because I want to spend time with you,” I say.

She lets out a dry laugh and shakes her head. “No, you don’t.”

I sigh. “Get in the car, Eden.”

“No.”

“It’s not that hard to accept help,” I say.

“You’re right.” She stops walking and turns toward me with her hands resting on her hips. “But I don’t want your help. You shouldn’t even be talking to me.”

I frown. “There you go again, talking about what I should and shouldn’t be doing.”

Her shoulders droop, and she glances toward the school behind us.

“It’s for the best,” she mumbles.

“Leave it to me to know what’s best for myself.”

Her gaze slips to me. Sadness leaches into her eyes, and she shakes her head before walking away. “I don’t want to be around you.”

“That’s too bad, birdie. Why aren’t you using your car, anyway?” I tap the gas to keep up with her.

“Because I don’t want to.”

What a spoiled little brat.

Is it because the car was a birthday gift from my father? Does she think she’s too good to accept her stepfather’s gift?

When she got the car, she looked so troubled when he uncovered her eyes to show her. “*Because every girl deserves a pink Corvette*,” he’d said.

“At least allow me to give you a ride to wherever you need to go,” I say, getting back on topic.

Eden stops and turns her whole body toward me. I hit the brakes and stop next to her. I even flash my flirtatious smile that no one can resist.

Her scowl deepens. “Why do you want to suddenly help me?”

“I told you already.”

“But I don’t believe you. So why are you really here?”

“I want to show you something,” I say with a sigh. “And I can’t do that if you’re being stubborn. So get in the fucking car.”

Eden glances at the empty passenger seat, and I study her expression, which goes from unsure to finally giving in to my demands.

Beaming a smile at her, I use all the fake charm to put her at ease as I put the car in park. I get out and grab her by the elbow before guiding her to the passenger side.

“I can get in by myself, thanks.” Eden peels my fingers off her as if I’m the disgusting one.

It won’t be long before she begs for me to touch her in a different way.

My smile tightens, but I give in to her silent request by stepping back as I open the door for her. “I’ll help you with the seatbelt.”

She shakes her head. “That’s unnecessary.”

Eden winces as she sits on the seat and shifts like she’s uncomfortable.

I raise an eyebrow. “Are you okay?”

She nods and shifts again. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

She sighs and peeks at me from beneath her lashes. “I’m okay, I promise. Can we please just go?”

I tilt my head, studying her expression for a moment. She’s still guarded and pinching her lips together to keep from telling me what’s wrong.

I’ll eventually get her to open up to me.

I lean into her personal space and gently take the seatbelt from her grasp. Being this close to her, I breathe in her floral vanilla perfume.

I’m not supposed to like her smell. I only need to fuck her to win the bet. That’s it. There can’t be any emotional attachment or feeling other than contempt or malice.

Yet I can’t stop myself from taking the time to buckle her seatbelt so that I can inhale another breath of her scent.

Turning my head, I meet her nervous stare as I check the strap in the middle of her chest. Eden’s cheeks tint a shade of pink as I purposely drag my fingers over her breast.

“I think it’s tight enough,” she mumbles.

Realizing that I’m still touching her, I shake away the strange feeling of softness toward her. I straighten and close the passenger door before rounding the car and sitting behind the wheel.

I don’t know what the fuck that was.

I adjust my pants so I can hide my erection. Of course I’d get hard just from smelling and touching her. Or maybe it’s the way she cowered before me and avoided my gaze.

“Where are we going?” she says as I put the car in drive.

I peek at her before focusing on the road. “You’ll see.”

And hopefully, it’ll help persuade her to accept my deal.

I have four days to win her over, and I need to convince her I’m something I’m not. That means I need to pull everything out of my arsenal.

And those pictures from last night will be my trump cards.

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CHAPTER 14

EDEN

DAY 3 OF THE BET

ELIJAH OPENS the door to the local shake-and-burger shack and gestures for me to go in first. I side-eye him as I pass him, fully expecting him to close the door in my face and laugh about how stupid I am for falling for his trick.

It wouldn't surprise me if he did.

But he doesn't. He waits until I go by him before following me inside.

This place is a hole in the wall. I've been here a few times after a shift at the pub. It was never packed like it is right now.

The servers weave through the tiny tables. The air buzzes with different conversations, and when I inspect the patrons here, I notice that most of them are college students.

They must have had the same idea to grab lunch between classes.

I want to leave.

I can't be here.

Elijah's hand presses into my lower back to keep me walking through the room. I'm rooted to the spot, sweating bullets about being here.

What if the secret texter is here?

What if he punishes Elijah?

I step back.

"Why are we here?" I mumble to Elijah.

He eases the pressure on my lower back and looks down at me with furrowed eyebrows. “I told you. I want to show you something.”

I gesture toward the room. “Not much to see other than the assholes of Astar Elite. I’d rather be anywhere else but here.”

Elijah tucks me closer to him, and he leans down with a mischievous smile. “If you’d rather be anywhere else, then how about my dorm?”

My lips part. “Wh-what?”

Elijah flashes a smile before grabbing my hand and leading me to the only empty table. He grabs a chair and pulls it out for me.

I bite the inside of my cheek and glance at him before easing myself onto the chair. The cuts on my bottom send electric zaps up my back, and I swallow a whimper.

Elijah grabs the chair across from me and drags it beside mine and sits down. I suck in a breath when he winds his arm behind my chair and rests it on the back of my seat.

I tilt my head to look up at him, then around the room.

Why isn’t he afraid?

Old friends have ghosted me. At first, it confused me. Then I’d pass by them and notice bruises and cuts on their faces. It doesn’t take an idiot to know that someone was sending a message. Not just to them, but to me as well.

Make friends and you’ll pay with their blood.

“Did something happen to you?” Elijah’s question filters through my mini panic attack.

I blink and look up at him. “What?”

“This is the second time you’ve winced while sitting down.”

I avert my gaze. “Aren’t you worried?”

“About what?”

“Getting caught hanging out with me.”

His eyebrows twitch.

I sigh, annoyed that he’s playing dumb. “I know you saw the people I used to hang out with and how they ended up. Aren’t you scared you’ll end up like them?”

“Not at all.”

“Why not?”

He bends closer to me, and he bumps his leg against mine—I don’t know if it was by accident or on purpose. All I know is that it makes my

stomach flip.

“Because I hold more weight around the school than the silly little friends you had in the past. Do you really think I’m scared of anyone?”

I shrug a shoulder and avert my gaze again. Looking into his eyes is like being trapped in a black hole. There’s no escape. No ability to breathe or think. Elijah Astar is enigmatic. He’s his own solar system, taking up every inch of space and conquering anything—and anyone—who gets in his way.

When I return my focus to him, I’m sucked into his dark, broody eyes again. They track my every move, every twitch of my expression.

I huff. “I’m not worried about you, if that’s what you think this is.”

“You don’t care about me, hm?” His grin widens. “If you don’t care, then why are you worried about me getting hurt?”

“I’m not. I wanted to warn you about the risk of being seen with me. Do whatever you want.” I roll my eyes and settle into my seat.

Elijah tosses his head back with a deep laugh, as if he finds my warning the silliest thing he’s heard all his life.

“I don’t see how this is funny,” I mumble.

I shiver as he plays with the hair near my nape, his fingers twirling and unwinding the strands. He acts as if he’s done this thousands of times.

What is he doing to me?

His laughter dies down enough for him to say, “You have nothing to worry about, birdie.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” I try to force the feel-good shivers away. It’s been so long since someone played with my hair. Let alone a man.

“Isn’t it fitting, though? You love birds.” He grins, amused by that fact.

“Why are we here, Elijah?”

He sighs and drops his hand from my hair. “Because being seen with you is the whole purpose of bringing you here.” He taps my shoulder. “Look around and see for yourself.”

“I already did and nothing is—” I swallow my words.

Oh.

The snobs of Astar Elite wouldn’t have passed up the easy opportunity to mock me the moment I walked through the door, yet no one has said a thing. No one has thrown food at me, either.

I hate that he’s right, that his mere presence will relieve me from being bullied.

Maybe he could protect me from the man who broke into my dorm last night . . .

"Do you really want me to ride with you?" I say, fidgeting in my seat. "It can't be that simple. I don't think you really want to help me. There's something else you want."

"Are you sure you're okay? Because you're acting like you're sitting on hot coals." He nods toward my lap again.

I shift in my seat and play with the silverware rolled in a napkin. "I'm fine."

"Whatever happened, birdie, I can help you. Just think about it."

A waitress stops at the table and takes our order. It's a nice saving grace—one that I desperately need.

If I tell Elijah what happened last night, he'll look at me differently. I don't know how to articulate what happened. I'm still confused about my reactions to it.

I'm tempted, very tempted, to take his offer. The only thing standing in my way is my fear that Elijah will yank the rug out from beneath me.

But I don't know that I have another option.

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CHAPTER 15

EDEN

DAY 3 OF THE BET

THE WIND BLOWS in my face as Elijah drives well past the speed limit to the campus. I wouldn't mind the breeze if my hair wasn't blowing all over the place. I pulled the ribbon out of my hair earlier, and now I regret it. It'll be next to impossible trying to tie it back now.

"Here," Elijah says. He pinches an elastic band between his fingers and holds it toward me.

I frown at it while awkwardly holding my hair out of my face. "Why do you have that?"

"Has anyone ever told you how charming your questions are?" He tosses a teasing smile at me before turning his focus back to the road. "It's okay to accept help."

"I still want to know why you have a hair tie." I pluck the offered band from him and pull my hair into a low ponytail.

"Do you really want to know?"

I nod.

Elijah turns his brooding eyes to me, the corner of his lips curving into a subtle smirk. "It's for when the woman is sucking my cock and doesn't have one, and I don't feel like fisting her hair."

"That's disgusting." I wrinkle my nose.

He chuckles and returns his attention to the road. "You asked."

I can’t get the visual out of my head. Not only that, but the memories from last night also play out again. Instead of the man wearing a mask towering above me, it’s Elijah’s face that I’m looking into.

A shiver creeps up my spine. Warmth pools low in my belly, and I hate how I’m reacting to him.

There must be something wrong with me.

I peek at Elijah from the corner of my eye and scrape my front teeth against my bottom lip before releasing it. Shaking off the weird feelings, I turn forward and watch the world fly past us.

I sit straighter in my seat when I notice a purple retro sign. “You can drop me off over here.”

“Come on, birdie,” Elijah says with an annoyed sigh. “I warned you that you didn’t have to know.”

I shake my head. “No, stop the car.”

“It’s not—”

“Stop!” I point at the arcade.

He swerves the car to the side and parks by the curb.

“You’re wanting to go here?” He raises an eyebrow.

I open the door and swing out my feet. “I need something here. You don’t have to wait for me. Thanks for the ride.”

“I drove you out here, so I’m taking you back.” He turns off the car, slips out of the seat, and rounds the vehicle.

Butterflies dance in my stomach again as his hand engulfs mine. Elijah smiles, and it’s completely different from the cocky looks he’s tossed my way, or even the tight, cruel looks he used to give me.

“Thanks,” I mumble, and jerk my hand out of his hold.

He dips his chin in a barely there nod and gestures for me to walk ahead of him. I dart past him.

Why am I reacting like this?

He’s my stepbrother, for God’s sake, not some chivalrous young man.

I gulp in a deep breath as soon as I’m out of his orbit and inside the building. He stalks behind me, though. His gaze burns the back of my head.

“Why did you want to come here?” he says. “Were you that desperate for a date with me, birdie?”

“This isn’t a date,” I mumble.

His chuckle follows me, sending more heat through me that’s every bit wrong.

I make a beeline for the token machine. Digging in my pocket for change, I ignore Elijah's amused stare as he stands beside me. My fingers brush against cloth, a string, and nothing.

Shit. I forgot to grab money before I left. Closing my eyes, I sigh.

I wasn't heading here to begin with. I needed to walk to clear my head before going to class. A class that I have officially skipped with Elijah.

"Need some help?" Elijah croons.

I drop my arm by my side and take a deep breath through my nose. "No. We can leave."

"Allow me." He nudges me out of the way, grabs a ten-dollar bill from his wallet, and slips it into the machine. It spits out tokens at the bottom, and I awkwardly gather them before leaving his side and striding to the claw game.

The purple bat plushie sits in the corner where I left it, still waiting for me to win it and take it back to my dorm. Thank god no one won it since the last time I was here.

Elijah stops as I feed a token to the machine. He looms by my side, watching as I work the claw closer to the plushie. His silence says he's annoyed that I wanted to come here. Maybe I'm reading him wrong.

I tap the button to descend the claw. It creaks as it lowers to the plushie. I hold my breath and grin when the claws clutch the corner and don't let go.

"Oh my god," I breathe. "I've been dying to get this little bat, and it's finally happening."

The claw rises to the top, bringing the plushie with it. It jerks as it stops, and the bat falls into the pile of other prizes.

My stomach sours. I lean back on my heels, glaring at the plushie.

"You'll burn a hole in the side of my face the longer you stare," I say to Elijah. I feed the machine another token.

"I'm trying to understand why you want this doll so badly. Why is it so important to you?"

"Because I like it."

The claw descends, taking its sweet time. Holding my breath, I watch as it inches closer, then misses the bat by an inch and rises to the top.

I sigh and close my eyes.

"Do you want it?" Elijah murmurs.

I nod.

"Then move. I can help you."

My eyes flare open, and I shake my head. “I want to be the one to win it.”

“It’s okay to accept—”

“Haven’t you ever wanted something so badly that you did everything you could to win it?” I spin toward him. “Without receiving help?”

His dark eyebrows scrunch together. “I never wanted anything because—”

“It’s handed over to you on a silver spoon.” I let out a dry laugh. “You’re no different from the rest of them.”

Every single person at Astar Elite is a spoiled rich kid who grew up to be a successful and snobby young adult. They take everything for granted. Their parents’ legacies will be handed over to them, and the kids don’t have to lift a single finger for it.

Elijah’s gaze darkens as his mood shifts. The air thickens with tension, and he moves closer, crowding my space. I inch backward and bump against the machine. Elijah rests his palms on the plastic by my shoulders, boxing me in.

My heart races, and I gulp in shaky breaths as I look up at him. He towers above me, reminding me of our size difference.

He leans down until his face hovers an inch from mine. “I’d watch your tongue. I may not have come from rags and slept my way into riches, but I know what it’s like to be desperate for something. Desperate enough to do whatever it takes to get it.”

I lift my chin to show that he doesn’t scare me. It may be a lie, but he doesn’t know that.

Elijah bares his teeth in a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. He cocks his head and gently tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. The gesture is soft compared to how he’s looking at me. I suck in a startled breath as he drags his fingers over the column of my throat before circling his fingers around my neck.

“What do you know about being desperate?” I whisper, hating how my voice comes out husky.

His grip around my throat tightens before loosening. Elijah’s hold on my neck is firm enough to tell me he’s in control while still allowing me to breathe.

This isn’t how stepsiblings are supposed to act. I brush aside the tiny voice in the back of my mind.

His gaze drops to my lips, lingers for a moment, then returns to my eyes. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“I’m afraid my answer to that question would make you cry.” He gives another long look at my lips before pushing away and putting space between us. “So I’ll call a truce. For now.”

I fold my arms against my chest. “How kind of you.”

“I am kind.” Elijah turns his gaze to me, smirking. “And generous. Is that all, or do you need to keep playing these childish games for a plushie that means nothing?”

I grit my teeth. “It may be a plushie, but it’ll be my plushie. And that’s all I wanted here. But if Your Royal Highness is ready to leave, then take the lead.”

I wave him ahead. I don’t know why I put up such a big fight. He wants to help me, but the whole thing makes me uneasy.

A flash of annoyance crosses his features before he locks it away with a shake of his head.

On the drive back to campus, Elijah turns on music at a low volume. A few of the songs I recognize. He doesn’t fill the silence with conversation like he did at the restaurant or the arcade. I must have struck a nerve.

Good. I’m glad that I got to him, just as he’s getting to me.

I shouldn’t have these weird thoughts and feelings about him, dammit.

I peek at him from the corner of my eye, curious if he’s still annoyed. His left hand rests on the steering wheel, while his right grips the shift stick. His focus remains on the road. I can’t shake the feeling that he’s watching me from the corner of his eye.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and my heart sinks to my feet. I can’t stop myself as I grab my phone and open the message from the unknown number.

It’s as if he can sense me returning to campus to get caught in his web again.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Thinking about you and those sinful lips.

I think the school should see how those lips fit perfectly around my cock.

attached image

My stomach twists in knots.

I'm on my knees, eyes red and glossy from the tears that stream down my puffy cheeks. His thick cock stretches my lips apart, and my shoulders tense as he hits the back of my throat.

I quickly exit the thread and flip my phone so the screen is against my lap. I peer at Elijah from the corner of my eye, making sure he didn't look over and see that embarrassing picture of me.

He can help me, the tiny voice whispers.

If I take Elijah's offer, I don't have to tell him about the late-night visitor and the texts from him. It'll all go away. *He'll* go away.

"I'll do it," I say.

Elijah turns his head toward me, his eyebrows raised in surprise. "You want my help?"

I nod. "Yeah, I do."

"What made you change your mind so fast?"

My fingers tighten around my phone, and I swallow hard. "I've been thinking about it for a while. Weighing the pros and cons and whatnot." I glance at him. "The pros outweigh the cons."

"What are the cons?" His knuckles turn white on the steering wheel, and I'm unsure if he notices.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

The trees thicken outside, and we approach the high gates to the elite college.

"And you're sure you want to make this deal with me?" Elijah side-eyes me. "You'll have to keep your end of the bargain in order for me to help you."

"I'm aware you're not doing this out of the goodness of your heart." I cast a half-hearted glare at him. "So yes, I'm sure."

His smile sends my heart racing. It's the same smile he wore when his darkened eyes looked up at me from between my legs—if it was him, but I'm banking on it.

"Then you're coming with me tonight to a race," he says. "Meet me outside by eleven sharp, and wear something slutty."

My lips part. "Something . . . slutty?"

"It's part of the rules."

"Do you and Asher have to wear slutty clothes, too? Or is it just me?" I don't even have anything slutty to wear.

He raises an eyebrow. “Are you wanting us to wear slutty clothes?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then don’t ask questions. Just do as I say and trust there’s a reason for it.”

What kind of reason is that? And what races are they going to that would require me to dress slutty?

I flinch at the memory of last night and the words carved into my skin. Elijah is supposed to protect me from rumors, not play into them.

He parks the car in the lot and shuts off the engine. I shift in my seat and wince at the spark of pain in my bottom. Elijah turns his head and glances at my lap before raising his eyes to my face.

“Is there anything you need to tell me?” He reaches across the console and rests his hand on my leg. His fingers curl on the inside, too close to the apex of my thighs.

I stare at his hand, my pulse thundering in my ears.

I hate this. I hate that he’s touching me and I’m eating it up like it’s the first meal I’ve had in years.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me,” Elijah murmurs. He strokes my bare skin with his thumb.

Swallowing hard, I lift my gaze to his face. “There’s nothing to tell.”

Why am I protecting my bully?

It would be so easy to say that someone broke into my dorm and made me suck his dick. That he’s been texting me for a long time now, each threat becoming worse than the last.

The disappointment in Elijah’s gaze is enough to make me wilt even more.

It’s hard enough being back on campus where the bully is. Disappointing Elijah is like the nail in the coffin, and I don’t understand why. He’s nothing to me. His approval holds no weight. And yet, I don’t want him to stop touching me. I don’t want to let him down.

I am truly and utterly messed up in the head. My moral compass is off-kilter.

Elijah squeezes my thigh one last time before he ends the not-so-innocent touch. “I’ll walk you to your dorm.”

I nod and get out of the car with him. The walk through campus is silent between us. I expect him to touch the small of my back to guide me

forward, but he doesn't do that. He keeps his hands to himself, depriving me of the good, funny feeling.

Why am I acting like this? I want nothing to do with him, especially anything romantic.

It's lust. It has to be.

I hold my head high and watch the people we pass, fully expecting them to yell at me or chase me down. It never comes. They glance at us, then move on.

Elijah was right about keeping me safe. His popularity acts as a protective bubble for me.

We stop outside my dorm room, and I pull my key out to unlock the door.

"Thank you," I mutter. I slip inside and go to close the door.

Elijah catches it and fills the doorway. I jerk my gaze up to his face and inch backward as he crowds my space.

"Remember, eleven sharp by my car." He rests his hands on my waist and leans down as if he's about to kiss me.

I hold my breath, my eyelashes fluttering shut. I wait for his lips to meet mine. Instead, he gathers my hair in his fist and gently jerks my head to the side to expose my throat to him. I suck in a breath as he kisses below my ear.

Heat floods my body, and I shudder.

It could have been an innocent kiss. But nothing about Elijah is innocent. The rumors about him being a playboy can't be for nothing. He knows the right buttons to push, and he's already getting beneath my skin.

I'm a fool for falling for it, and yet I can't help it.

His lips curve against my skin. He knows that he captured me.

"I'll see you later, birdie," he whispers into my ear.

I release a shaky breath as he backs away and leaves me standing alone in my room.

Now that he's gone, my head clears the lust haze. That's what it is. Lust. For my fucking stepbrother.

Fuck me, he played me. I promised myself that I wouldn't get tangled up with a man. And here I am, with Elijah coiled around me like a snake.

And I want more.

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CHAPTER 16
ASHER

NIGHT 3 OF THE BET

THE BOTTOM of my sucker clacks against the backs of my front teeth as I wiggle it. I glare daggers at my twin. I know he can feel the scorn because he's refusing to look at me.

When he's around his friends, they're his sole focus.

I'd like to say that I don't understand why he brought her along for the meetup tonight. But I do. It's all part of his plan to lure her in and make her trust him enough to spread her legs.

The sucker clacks against my teeth, and I tongue the inside of my cheek as my eyes wander to her. My gaze rakes over her body, drinking in the shorts that reach mid-thigh. The loose knot at the bottom of her band tee reveals a sliver of skin on her stomach. Enough to send heat through my veins and between my legs. I haven't been able to shake the chub I've been sporting since setting eyes on her when she joined us by the car tonight.

I want to catch the bottom of her shirt between my teeth. Better yet, I want to lick the insides of her thighs and work my way closer to her pussy.

Her moans echo in my head, and the ghost of her fingers in my hair joins them.

I roll the sucker in my mouth.

Having her here gives me another chance to watch her. To learn everything about her reactions to what she'll witness later if things go the way I think they will. I also want to see how she looks at Elijah.

Is she already falling for the act?

Eden lingers behind him. She's put distance between herself and me, never once turning to look at me either.

The irony.

Elijah ignores her. She ignores me. I ignore the world for her.

It's a full circle, isn't it?

Derrick's leery gaze shifts to Eden every so often, his smug smirk appearing before he catches himself and rubs his jaw. The others may not have caught it, but I did.

My fingers curl into tight fists, and I stuff my hands into my pockets to keep from doing something about it. He thrusts himself into things never meant for him. One of the many reasons I can't stand him.

If there's one thing Derrick deserves to win, it's my brass knuckles to his jaw.

Will I do it? Probably not. However, I'd love to destroy his ability to eye-fuck her. I don't care that he gives her a hard time; he can't fool me. The asshole wants to fuck her. Why else would he give her shit all the time?

Derrick's gaze slips to her again, the same look crossing his features.

My scowl deepens, and I clack the sucker against my teeth.

Feeling my stare, Derrick's attention slips toward me, and his skin pales.

Good.

I'm glad he fears me. In fact, I'm happy that I scare everyone because that means no one will bother me. Except for the one person I wanted to be bothered by.

Elijah turns to Eden and settles his hand on the small of her back. "Are you ready for a little practice run, birdie?"

Birdie? That's interesting. It's a cute nickname for her, don't get me wrong—she's obsessed with birds—but there's another name that suits her better.

She tilts her head back. "Practice run for what?"

Elijah peers at me, silently communicating what he wants to do. I already know he's up to no good, so I don't need to ask questions.

"A race." Secrets fill his cunning smile. "Asher will ride with you, and he'll show you what's expected."

Nothing is expected. It's common to ride solo while street racing, but she doesn't know that.

My eyes narrow.

What's up his sleeve? He's the one trying to win the bet. Not me. In fact, I hate that he's even turned her into some conquest. She's mine to do with as I fucking please.

And I'm not his lapdog.

Eden glances at me, looking less pleased than I feel.

Elijah's lips curve into a sly smirk, and he stares at me as he says, "Derrick, let me drive your Mazda."

"Uh, do you really think that's smart? Or are you just getting cocky, thinking you're going to—"

"Asher can't show Eden anything if he's not racing anyone." Elijah turns to Derrick, stone-faced and done with his shit. "And admit it. I'm the best in the group."

"Cocky much?" Derrick scoffs.

For once, I have to agree with him.

Elijah holds his hand toward Derrick. "Give me your keys."

Fuck all of this.

I stride past Eden and snatch the keys to the GT-R from Elijah before closing the gap between Eden and me. Each time I move toward her, her eyes widen, little by little. She tilts her head back to look up at me as I tower over her.

"Come on, little ghost," I murmur before stalking past her to the car.

I hold the passenger door open for Eden and lock eyes with Elijah. His dark eyebrows scrunch together, and he tilts his head as he looks between Eden and me.

I know that look. I grew up with it and even share the same expression when I'm deep in thought. Over my dead body will he figure out my secrets. He'll never know what I did to her with my mouth or how I think about her while I'm in the shower.

He can't stand her.

I want to figure her out.

He has his secrets. I have mine.

Fair is fair.

I flash him a grin, and the muscle in his jaw flutters as he clenches his teeth. Elijah spins toward Derrick, snatches the Mazda keys from him, and stalks to the car.

I turn and help Eden with her seatbelt.

She sighs, annoyed. “I don’t know what it is about you and Elijah that makes you think I can’t do it myself.”

“Just being a good big brother,” I say.

I turn my head to look into her eyes as I buckle the harness straps. My lips curve, and I stroke the bare skin on her thigh. It’s brief, barely there, but she reacts so beautifully to it.

Pink tints her cheeks, and she avoids looking me in the eye.

How interesting.

Even though she huffs and pretends to be put off by me, she can’t hide her body’s reaction. I’m no mind reader, but I’d bet all my money that she’s thinking some dirty shit about me right now.

Taking one last deep breath of her vanilla scent and forbidden desires, I pull away and straighten before closing her door.

The purr of the Mazda’s engine breaks through the night. Even though the windows are tinted, I don’t have to see Elijah to know he’s watching me.

I round the GT-R and stride to the Mazda.

Elijah rolls down the window. “Finish line is the arcade across town.”

I grin.

Of course it’s the arcade. Why wouldn’t it be, since that’s where Eden enjoys going?

“Winner gets her pussy first,” Elijah says.

My smile falls, and I scowl at him.

He smirks and rolls up the window.

That fucking asshole.

I stalk to the GT-R and rip open the door before sitting behind the wheel.

“What’s wrong?” Eden perks up in her seat.

“Everything,” I mumble.

“What?”

Shaking my head, I start the car and line up beside Elijah. Katie and Derrick stand to the side. Katie holds her white shirt above her head as she wears nothing but her polka-dotted bra and denim shorts.

“Hold my thigh,” I say.

“What for?” She glances at the road ahead of us, then at me.

“You’ll see, but I’d hate for you to find out the hard way.”

She won’t. That harness has her locked in and she won’t go anywhere, but I’m greedy for her touch. I only hope she’s naïve enough to fall for my ruse.

Derrick takes the shirt from Katie and counts down from five with his fingers. He tosses it, and before it hits the ground, I stomp on the gas. Elijah’s car rockets forward beside mine, our tires peeling against the pavement and kicking up dust and smoke.

I’m shoved into the seat. Elijah takes the lead. Not for long, though. I’ll allow him to think he’ll win, but it’ll be over my dead body. Not when *she’s* on the line.

I glimpse Eden sinking deeper into the leather seat and white-knuckling the straps over her chest.

“Hold my thigh, little ghost,” I say loud enough for her to hear over the growling engine.

“Seriously, why do I need—” She lets out a choked gasp as I drift around the corner to a different street. Eden grabs my leg to hold herself steady. If she cleared her head of her panic, she’d realize that she’s going nowhere. For the second time in a span of a minute, I pray she doesn’t realize this.

My lip curves, and I peek at her from the corner of my eye, catching her staring at me, baffled and annoyed.

“I warned you,” I say.

“You didn’t say *what*, though.” Her hand squeezes tighter as I drift onto another street—the fastest route to the arcade.

Elijah drifts behind me, and he gains more ground with each passing second until he’s beside me in the opposite lane.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting pulled over?” Eden says.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“This is a GT-R R3 with 623 horsepower. A cop can’t keep up. Besides, did you forget the weight of my last name?” I peek at her. “*Your* last name, too. Cops don’t scare me.”

“Then what does?”

My grip on the steering wheel tightens, and I shift my focus to the empty road ahead of us. I turn a sharp corner, and Eden braces herself on my thigh.

Usually, it’s the speed and the thrill of racing that gets me hard, but now I’m hard for an entirely different reason.

Why the hell is she doing this to me?

She’s forbidden. Eden Astar is my stepsister, which means she’s off-limits.

It didn’t stop you the last time you made her come on your tongue, a tiny voice whispers in the back of my mind.

The forbidden fruit is always bitter on the tongue at first, but the more you consume it, the sweeter it gets. And I want to consume Eden, whichever way I can get her.

I suck hard on the candy and follow the bend of the road that pushes Eden into me. Elijah races beside me, swerving into my space to intimidate me every so often. I know his secrets. I know how he plays. He can’t use these tactics against me and win.

I drift into another corner and press the gas pedal. We’re thrust forward as we fly past the arcade. I hit the brakes and spin the wheel to drift around, right as Elijah pulls up and stops beside me.

Elijah rolls the window down as I inch past him, the same speculative look on his face.

It wasn’t just in my head earlier. This *practice run* with Eden was a test.

A test for me.

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CHAPTER 17

ELIJAH

NIGHT 3 OF THE BET

I DRUM my fingers on the armrest of the leather sofa in the dorm I share with Asher. He's been in the shower for well over twenty minutes, doing God knows what.

The events from earlier play on repeat in my head.

Asher's slight hesitation when Eden showed up raised an alarm. Then how his eyes tracked her the whole time. He never gives a shit about my friends, and I don't mind that, but his sudden interest in our stepsister is another alarming behavior. It wasn't as if he was gathering information, after all.

He *watched* her, his gaze dark and curious.

What about her is causing him to lose sight of the plan?

His reaction to me making a bet with Derrick is starting to make sense. It's all becoming clear. I didn't realize his feelings for Eden.

It all clicked into place tonight.

Asher is attracted to our dear stepsister, and he refuses to admit it. Now I'm torn between strangling him for wanting to stick his dick in her and using this new information to win the bet.

Why her, of all people?

Is it the forbidden aspect—which also intrigues me?

Is it rebellion against me or our father?

I’m not above admitting that sleeping with Eden is an act of subversion. Our father loves and cherishes his stepdaughter, and I love the thought of destroying her until not even he can love her anymore. He’ll have to live with the image of his perfect little girl’s face covered in my cum.

Just the mental image makes my dick twitch.

The shower shuts off in the bathroom. I blink and drop my head backward onto the plush cushion to look into the hallway.

The door opens, and Asher steps out with a towel wrapped low around his waist. The knot in the front barely holds it together. He stalks across the hall to his room, then stops, his shoulders tense and back straightening.

My lips curve into a smile.

Asher slowly turns and glares at me.

“Is there something you need to tell me?” I tap my finger on the leather armrest.

Silence.

He knows that I know. Now it’s a battle of wills.

I sigh and stand from the sofa, then saunter toward my twin. Getting the truth out of him will be like pulling teeth. Asher’s not one to kiss and tell—or, in this case, pour his heart out about a taboo subject.

Asher squares his shoulders, and his guarded gaze fills with a blazing fire. If I’m not careful, I’ll end up burned. I’m not looking for a fight. I’d rather reach out with an olive branch and hope he takes it.

“How about we work together, hm?” I stop in front of him and slip my hands into my pockets.

Asher’s eyes narrow, and he takes a step back.

“I’m sure she can’t tell the difference between us. Same tattoos, same hairstyle,” I say. “You can continue your stalking and pining, and it’ll help me win this bet. No one will be the wiser.”

He freezes, then closes the gap in one stride and crowds my space. His chest bumps against mine, and I hold my ground, refusing to let him intimidate me.

“The cat is out of the bag, Asher. No more secrets.” I lean forward and lower my voice. “Do you want her?”

A snarl breaks free from Asher, and he moves in a blink. My back slams against the wall, and his hand fists my shirt in the middle of my chest.

I let out a loud laugh and rest my head against the wall. “You fooled me for a while, but you can’t hide things from me forever. You know better

than that.” I grin. “Besides, if you want her, this is your chance to have her.”

Asher bares his teeth and white-knuckles my shirt.

“You won the race,” I say. “I’m a man of my word. Her pussy belongs to you.”

But that doesn’t mean other parts of her don’t belong to me, a tiny voice whispers in the back of my mind.

Asher’s gaze darkens, and his hold on my shirt loosens just enough for me to notice.

My grin widens. “My assumption was correct, then. You want to fuck our sister.”

He releases me and steps back, putting space between us as he averts his gaze.

I should be angrier about this. I’m annoyed, maybe even offended that he chose her over me. But I understand the power of pussy. Just not enough that I let it control me.

“Sleep on it,” I say, straightening to my full height. I step away from the wall. “In the morning, you can decide. Hopefully, you’ll make the right choice and help me.”

Asher’s gaze flicks back to me.

“You get the girl,” I say, “and I win the bet to sell the Mazda.”

Asher’s eyebrows furrow. Confusion replaces the fiery rage in his eyes.

“I didn’t plan to keep the car.” I smooth the wrinkles out of my shirt. “We could use that money for whatever we need.”

Our last name is wealthy. Our father isn’t left wanting. However, Asher and I are left with a limited fortune; our father deposits a certain amount into our accounts every month. He wants me to wed a woman and produce children before he’ll hand over the inheritance he’s holding above our heads. Until then, the money that I’ll get from the Mazda will have to suffice.

Asher’s features slacken, and he steps back.

I slip my hands into my pockets. “I have four days to win her over. Are you in? Or will you continue standing in the way?”

Asher clenches and unclenches his fists at his sides. “I don’t know how to . . .”

I arch an eyebrow. “You don’t know how to . . . ?”

He rolls his eyes and looks away with a huff, clearly frustrated with whatever he’s trying to convey. His face flushes with a blush, and he rolls

his lips inward as he peeks at me from the corner of his eye.

It finally clicks.

A smile creeps onto my face. “You’re a virgin.”

His head whips toward me, a fight on the tip of his tongue.

Holding my hands up in a placating gesture, I say, “I’m not judging you. I can help you, just like you can help me.”

His tense muscles slowly loosen, and his blush deepens to red.

When he doesn’t look like he’s about to pummel my face, I lower my hands. “You want to sleep with her?”

His lips pinch together, and he nods once.

“You want her to be your first, or would you prefer practicing with someone else?”

“*Only* her.”

Smirking, I nod. “Then I’ll tell you everything I know. We can work as a team and when it comes time, you’ll be the one to fuck her.”

Asher nods again.

I ignore the jealousy tightening my chest. I’m tempted to tell him never mind; the words cling to the tip of my tongue. I swallow them and shove away the strange feeling.

I never get jealous. Especially because of my brother.

He can have her, just as long as we get this done before the seventh day.

I wave a hand toward his towel. “Get dressed and come back out. We can talk more about how to fuck properly when you’re done.” I walk toward the living room. “Last thing I need is for rumors to spread that I don’t know what I’m doing with my cock.”

If everything goes as planned, Eden will think it’s me fucking her. And so will Derrick.

I pull my cellphone out of my pocket and check the time while I wait for Asher.

1:11 a.m.

Slipping the phone back into my pocket, I stride to the kitchen and grab the burner phone from the drawer where Asher and I keep it. I open the screen and type out a message, then hit send.

My lips curve into a wicked smile. I have other plans after I give Asher a few pointers.

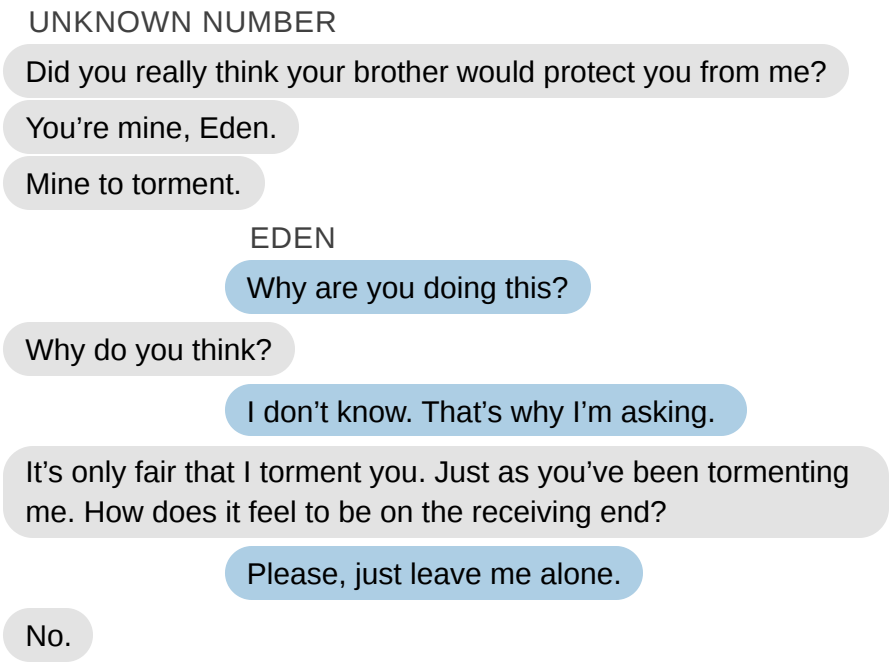
A little birdie is waiting for me.

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CHAPTER 18

EDEN

NIGHT 3 OF THE BET



Two letters. Two measly letters, and they're enough to tear my world apart.

No.

The fear kicks in. It's four in the morning, and I haven't slept since returning to the dorm after the race. My eyes are heavy, and my head is

fuzzy from exhaustion, but the terror keeps me on high alert. I can't close my eyes, let alone sleep, even if I try.

A tremor wracks my body as I stare at the door, waiting for it to open and for the masked man to fill the doorway.

What did I do to deserve this?

Who did I upset in my past life to go through this kind of torment?

My phone buzzes with a text message.

I squeeze my eyes shut and tremble.

"I shouldn't read it," I whisper. "Don't do it."

My hand inches toward my phone, already knowing where it's at on the bed. I open my eyes and pull up the thread with the unknown number.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

I see you. You look so pretty, trembling with fear.

My heart sinks into my stomach.

I. See. You.

I slowly turn my head toward the open window. I'm an idiot for thinking he wouldn't linger outside to watch me.

A hand slaps over my mouth, and I'm shoved backward onto my bed. He wasn't outside watching me. He was already in my room!

My head hits the pillow, and I stare up at the masked man, his eyes dark and full of delight. Tears blur my vision, making it harder to see him. I struggle against his hold as he straddles my stomach and presses his weight into me. He catches my wrist and turns my palm up and kneels on it, then does the same with the other.

"You have no survival instincts, do you?" He tilts his head, his eyes roving from my face to my chest before flicking back up again. "Is it because you want me to use you like the slut you are?"

I shake my head.

His finger taps my cheek. "I don't believe you."

I glare at him.

"F-k uhu," I say through the hand over my mouth.

"I didn't catch that." He cocks his head so that his ear is closer to me. "Repeat that."

"Assh-ol."

“One more time.” He removes his hand and pinches my cheeks together. I wince as his fingers dig into my skin and hit my teeth. He turns his head when I don’t say anything. The corners of his eyes wrinkle from a hidden smile. “You have nothing else to say?”

This fucking asshole.

I flinch as he shifts his weight and leans back on his haunches. He undoes his belt with one hand, then unbuttons and unzips his pants to free his erection.

“Since you have a smart mouth, let’s busy it for a moment.”

He raises himself, pushing more of his weight into my palms. My cry comes out muffled.

The man moves closer until his cock pushes against my lips. “Suck.”

I shake my head.

He tuts and releases my cheeks. I suck in a breath, ready to scream, but he hooks his finger in my mouth and lowers my jaw. His cock rams over my tongue, and he pulls his finger back as he pushes until he hits the back of my throat.

He groans. “Go ahead, slut. Suck and get me nice and wet. I have something better for you.”

I scowl up at him and hollow my cheeks as I suck him. He pulls back just enough for me to rub my tongue on the underside of his dick.

The man stares into my eyes. He threads his fingers through my hair and tilts his head as he watches me suck him as if my life depends on it. Because for all I know, it does.

He taps his finger on the top of my head. “Do you think your brothers will save you from me?”

Tears slide down my cheeks. He’s big, and he’s rough as he thrusts his hips forward to fuck my throat.

“You think I don’t see everything?” *Thrust.* “I see how you look at him.” *Thrust.* “Would you suck his cock like this, too?” *Thrust*.

A dull ache throbs between my thighs, and I squeeze them together to stop it. But the masked man is right. How can I think of my stepbrother while I’m being violated? Maybe it’s my brain finding a way to make this enjoyable instead of scary.

The man rips my sleep shirt up, freeing my breasts for his cruel gaze. He yanks out of my mouth and drags his cock between my tits.

“You’re getting lazy. How about I use these instead?” He pushes my breasts together to enclose his thick cock, and he thrusts forward with a groan. “Is it because you’re thinking about your stepbrother, hm?”

I sob and shake my head. “No.”

He huffs a laugh. “I don’t believe you. Just admit it, slut. You want your brother to use you like this.”

I grit my teeth and look between my breasts, watching as he fucks them. Each thrust is harder than the last. His fingers dig into the soft flesh, likely leaving behind bruises.

“Go ahead,” he says with a grunt. “Moan his name.”

“No!”

He slaps my tit before grabbing it again to hold in place. “Say it.”

“Fuck you!”

He laughs. “Say please.”

He rams his cock between my breasts. The skin rubs raw after the spit on his shaft dries. My back arches, and I flinch, pushing him into me. He holds my breasts with one hand and reaches into his pocket to grab his phone.

“Ready for more pictures?” The camera clicks as he takes photographs. “Say his name and it’ll be over.”

I bite my bottom lip and squirm beneath him.

More pictures. More embarrassing blackmail. Who’s to say he won’t record a video of me moaning Elijah’s name?

I squeeze my eyes shut and pant. The man’s cock rams harder, and I jerk backward on the mattress. He leans over me and fucks me, his breaths harsh and quick.

With my eyes closed, it’s easy to pretend it’s Elijah doing this. Warmth pools between my legs, and I squeeze my thighs together as the throbbing intensifies.

“Elijah,” I moan. “Please.”

“Say it again,” he growls.

“Elijah!”

He groans, and cum spurts onto my lips and the base of my throat. His thrusts slow until the last load pools between my breasts.

I open my eyes and lick my lips.

The fantasy is over, and I’m back in my dorm with the masked man as he tucks his softening cock back into his pants. He snaps a few pictures of

his handiwork, then moves off me.

Waving his phone in the air, he walks toward the door. “Thanks for the pictures. I can’t wait to show your brother the video, too.”

I sit up and scramble off the bed. “Wait! Please don’t show him!”

He stops at the door and turns to me, the corners of his eyes wrinkled with another hidden smile. “What will I get in return?”

I freeze. “You want something?”

He slowly nods.

I swallow hard and cross my arms, my fingers trembling as I rub my biceps. “You’re fucked up in the head.”

He takes a step toward me. “And so are you.”

“No, I’m not.”

He takes another, closing the gap between us. “You’re a filthy fucking liar. You were moaning like a whore, and if I stick my hand down your shorts, I bet I’ll find you soaking wet. So let’s try this again.”

He stops in front of me. I have to tilt my head to look up at his face.

“What will I get if I don’t show your brother how turned on you got thinking about him while I fucked your tits?”

I lick my lips and wince when I taste him. I rack my brain for what I can give him, but I’m coming up blank.

What would a sick asshole like him want from me?

“I won’t tell anyone about you,” I say.

“Not good enough.” He moves closer, and his chest bumps against mine.

“I don’t know what you want.”

“You know exactly what I want.”

“Sex?”

He chuckles and backs away. “More than that.”

“More than sex?” My eyebrows pinch together, and I grit my teeth.

He slips his phone into his pocket and opens the door. “Think long and hard, whore. What will keep me quiet?”

“I-I don’t know!”

“I’ll give you a clue.” He turns to look at me over his shoulder. “What would I want with a slut like you?”

My skin becomes clammy. The man leaves and the door slams shut behind him.

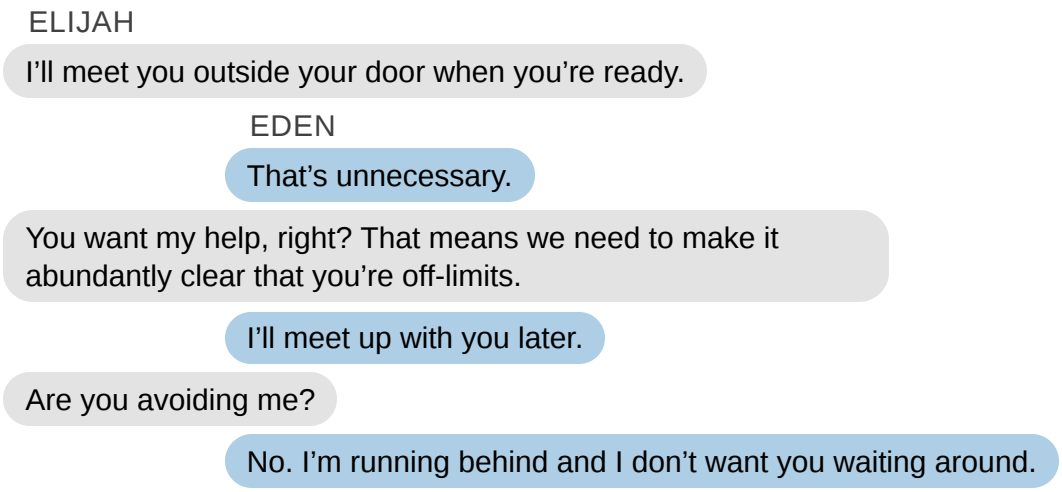
“He wants to use me,” I whisper into the empty room.

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CHAPTER 19

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET



ELIJAH OPENS the text and leaves me on Read.

I wince and lower my phone.

Mission accomplished, I guess. This is what I wanted—for him to leave me alone so I don't have to look him in the eye while thinking about what happened four hours ago.

I peer at Lavender's enclosure, seeking comfort from my pet snake. She's curled around a branch, her head hovering above it and her beady eyes on me.

Sometimes, it feels like she understands what's going through my head and how I feel. I mean, she was in the room when it all happened, which is unsettling at best.

I close my eyes and take a fortifying breath.

Screw the morning classes. I don't want to go. And I especially don't want to face Elijah or Asher.

"Hold my thigh."

I wince at the memory of Asher's demand.

"I'll give you a clue. What would I want with a slut like you?"

I shoot up from my bed and pace the room. My fingers burrow into my hair and shake the strands at the roots.

"Hey, Eli," a girl outside the door says. Her high-pitched greeting filters through my chaotic thoughts and the chest-tightening, impending doom.

I spin around and face the door.

Is he really here?

My phone buzzes on the bed, where I abandoned it.

"What are you doing outside *her* door?" the girl says.

"Open the door, birdie." Elijah knocks three times.

I take a step back.

Shit. He really is here.

Memories of earlier resurface and play out in clips.

The man fucking my mouth, then my tits, demanding that I moan my stepbrother's name. And I did, all while imagining it was Elijah fucking me and not some faceless bully.

If the pictures and the video get out . . .

If Elijah sees any of it, I'm screwed. It'll be all over for me, and I'll have the reputation of being an even bigger freak. For different reasons, of course. All because I got turned on by my stepbrother.

Elijah bangs on the door again, and I flinch before snatching my phone from the bed. Lying on my side on the mattress, I text the unknown number with shaky fingers. I backspace a few times to fix spelling errors, then hit send.

EDEN

Use me for whatever you want. That's what I'll give you in return.

Just please don't show Elijah the pictures.

I wait a few seconds, hoping he'll text me back. But he never does.

I'm sure he'll make me regret offering myself to him. He'll use me for his sick desires and make me say things I don't actually mean.

I meant it last night. The thought creeps into the forefront of my mind, starting small, then growing like an out-of-control weed.

Elijah knocks on the door. "I know you're in there, Eden. If I have to get the key from the dean, I will."

I glare at the door.

Why can't he give up and leave me alone?

I give my phone one last longing look, hoping the masked man will message me back. I can't face Elijah without the confirmation that he won't leak the photos and videos of me.

The knocking stops, and everything goes quiet.

I loose a shaky breath and close my eyes.

Good. He's gone away and will leave me alone. I don't think the dean will give a student a key to a dorm, no matter what their last name is.

Exhaustion settles into my bones, and I curl up under the blankets. I got maybe an hour and a half of sleep after the masked man left. I spent a good portion of the morning spiraling in the pit of despair and freaking out about the pictures and video being leaked to the whole school.

But now that Elijah has gone, my worries seem to go with him. My eyes drift shut, and I just allow myself to breathe.

"Morning, sleepyhead." Elijah settles his hand on my waist over the blankets. "Don't tell me you're skipping classes today?"

I don't remember falling asleep. My bed dips behind me as Elijah sits. Spinning onto my side, I look into a pair of onyx eyes glittering with mischief.

"I don't feel well." I clear my throat and avert my gaze.

His hand disappears from my hip. He rests the back of it against my forehead. "You're not running a fever."

"Please, just go away." I jerk away from him and wiggle across the bed. The mattress is large enough for me to toss and turn, but Elijah takes up all the space.

“Oh, no you don’t.” He frowns and throws back the blankets before looping his arm around my waist and jerking me into him. He rolls us over so I’m on my back and he’s settled between my spread legs.

My mouth opens and slams shut several times. Elijah threads his long fingers through mine, and he pins my hands above my head so I have no way to escape him.

I swallow hard and stare up at him.

“What’s really going on?” He tilts his head, looking unbothered about being in a position like this.

“N-nothing.”

His eyebrow rises. “Liar.”

“Elijah,” I whisper, “should you be over me like this?”

A smile creeps onto his face, and he rakes his gaze over my body, leaving a trail of goosebumps and fire on my skin. He lifts his head and meets my eyes again. “This is quite the position.”

I nod. My clit throbs, and I squeeze my legs around his waist.

Elijah’s lips part on a quiet sigh. “But you don’t hate it. Naughty girl.”

My gaze drops to his mouth, and I stare, longing to kiss him.

It’s so messed up that I’m having these thoughts about him. That we’re even like this right now. But I can’t stop myself as I lean up and press my lips to his in a chaste kiss. When he doesn’t move, I drop my head onto the pillow and turn my cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

Elijah releases my hand, pinches my chin between his index finger and thumb, then turns my head.

“What—”

My words die as his mouth covers mine. He steals kisses from me, each one lasting longer than the previous.

My mind blanks.

Elijah’s tongue flicks against my lips, demanding that I open for him. I can’t help but give in, and I don’t feel a single ounce of guilt as our tongues tangle together.

He kisses just as he acts—ruthless, controlled, and every bit sinful. He steals every breath and breathes back into me.

Elijah lowers himself until his hips meet mine, and he rocks against my center. His fingers tighten and hold me in place as he moves like he’s fucking me.

“Do you want me to stop?” he whispers between kisses.

I let a shaky breath into his mouth. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s find out, then.” His kisses turn feverish, his teeth nipping my bottom lip before he soothes the sting with his tongue.

His thrusts push me deeper into the mattress and bump me backward. He swallows my gasp and catches any sounds I make in his mouth. Something hard and big grinds against my core, and I don’t have to think too long about it to know what it is.

Elijah is just as turned on by this as I am.

The friction isn’t enough to make me come, but it’s enough to cloud my head and blind me to reason.

Am I hallucinating? I have to be. Or maybe I’m dreaming and this is some fucked-up way for me to cope with everything that’s happening.

I turn my head, baring my throat to him. He kisses the corner of my mouth and drops down until his chest presses against mine. I squeeze his hands and arch my back, loving and hating how good this feels.

It’s freeing.

He doesn’t know it, but this validates my weird attraction to him. I shouldn’t like him like this, but Elijah must feel the same way.

He smiles against the corner of my lips, and he releases one hand to slide his palm down my arm and between us to cup my breast. “We’re already running late, birdie.”

I wince as his fingers dig into the bruises the masked man left behind. His whispered words are like a bucket of cold water dropping over my head, clearing the lustful haze he put me under.

What the hell am I doing?

Exactly what the bully said. I’m getting turned on by my brother.

I wiggle beneath him, trying to get out of his hold, but I end up grinding against him.

“Fuck, Eden,” Elijah groans and leans into me. His hard length presses against my center, and my legs squeeze around his waist to pull him closer.

He grips my breast harder and drags his tongue along my jawline.

“I’m not opposed to a quickie before class.” He nips my throat.

“Get off,” I say. “What the hell are we doing?”

Elijah raises his head, his eyebrows furrowed together. He lets go of me and moves to his feet. I sit up and fix my sleep shirt in place, all while avoiding looking into his eyes.

“Eden,” Elijah says, his serious tone sending my heart into a race.

I leap to my feet and busy myself by looking for a clean uniform.

What is wrong with me?

Why do I want him to finish what we started?

Why am I disappointed that he listened to me and stopped?

It can’t be right for me to want his touch, especially after being violated by that man. Right?

“Eden, look at me.”

I swallow hard and face him. Slowly, I raise my gaze to his face and hold my breath.

Elijah closes the space between us and stops in front of me. He tilts my head back to look into his eyes.

“What we did—”

“It was a mistake.”

His eyes narrow. “A mistake?”

“I don’t know what came over me.” I swallow hard and avert my gaze. “It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“You’re making it seem like I wasn’t taking part in any of that, and I very much was.”

I shake my head in his grip and catch my bottom lip between my teeth before saying, “Please leave so I can get dressed.”

He tilts his head. “We’re not done with this conversation.”

He releases me, and I let out a shaky breath as Elijah strides to the door, giving me one last glance before leaving the room.

My shoulders sag, and I touch my lips that still tingle from his kiss.

I won’t kiss him again, though. I won’t fall victim to the masked man’s accusations.

It will *not* happen again.

I glance at the door, where Elijah waits on the other side.

I don’t think he’s on the same page as me. And he’s right. He was very much into it as well. But I have to stay strong. I will not fall for my stepbrother.

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CHAPTER 20

ELIJAH

DAY 4 OF THE BET

A PAINED GROAN escapes me as I adjust myself in my pants. I haven't been this hard until Eden. I was so close to winning her over and fucking her.

"Hey, Eli." A blonde twirls a lock of hair as she struts toward me.

I cast a glare at her before leaning against the wall beside Eden's door. A few more girls in the busy hall toss sideways glances at me. All of them share the same lustful hope that I'll show them attention.

I couldn't give a single fuck about them. Not right now. Not when there are only days left after spending four of them trying to win over Eden's affections.

My head thumps against the wall as I relax further. I slip my hands into my pockets and curl my fingers into my palms.

I'm so tempted to open the door and finish what we started. Not for the sake of the bet, but because I can't stand the pain of being so close to coming and being denied.

I smirk, despite my sour mood.

She kissed me. I didn't even have to try hard to tempt her. And she wanted to play clueless with me, like I was the one who started it first.

"Eli," another woman calls.

I grit my teeth and fist my hands in my pockets.

No wonder my brother prefers solitude to surrounding himself with people. I normally have no problem with being in the limelight, but right

now, I despise it.

The door opens, and Eden steps out. Even in her school uniform, she's absolutely divine.

I drink in the skirt hugging her wide-set hips, the hem barely reaching the school's allowed length. Her top and jacket fit snugly around her breasts and stomach—a tease of what I want to see. Eden tucks a lock of black hair behind her ear and avoids looking me in the eye as she stops by my side after closing the door behind her.

"Are you ready?" I say.

She nods.

"Good." I push away from the wall and rest my palm on her lower back. "I'm famished. We'll get breakfast before we do anything else."

"You didn't want to try making your move?" she mumbles while we walk down the hall.

"Pardon?"

She peeks at me. "The girls who were hanging around you?"

I force a smile. "Why would I try to make a move on them?"

"Because you have quite the reputation."

I slow my steps and turn my head toward her. "And which reputation is that?"

She's silent for a moment. I'd kill to know what's going through her head as she looks at me with furrowed eyebrows and a questioning expression.

I hold back an amused grin.

"The reputation that says you sleep around." She tilts her head. "Which other reputations do you have?"

"I don't think you want to know."

"Because it might disgust me?" She rolls her eyes.

I hum a response, leaving it at that.

I don't think it would disgust her. However, if she knew my true intentions, the world would crumble around her.

We walk into the dining hall packed with people who have the same thought as us—catching something quick to eat before classes.

Eden's posture stiffens, and she scans the crowd, on high alert.

I firm my hold on her lower back and guide her to the coffee shop. After ordering two iced coffees and banana bread with cream cheese, we stand aside while we wait for our breakfast.

Eden continues searching the crowd and waits for the moment when they yell at her or throw things.

It'll never come.

I meant what I said; being around me means she'll have immunity.

People whisper and steal glances, but that'll be the most they do. They'll gossip and spread rumors like wildfire. None of what they say is extreme enough to ruin Eden's reputation more than she's ruined it herself.

Her terrible reputation isn't enough, though. I want to see her cry. I want to destroy her ability to come back from this.

"How is this possible?" she says.

I blink out of my thoughts and grab the iced coffees from the counter. "What do you mean?"

She gestures toward the crowd. "I mean, how is the plan working?"

"You have trust issues, don't you, sis?"

"Don't call me that." She scowls despite her face tinting pink.

I'd love to call her sis while fucking her. It's twisted and fucked up, but watching her curl into herself and stumble over her words is enough to make my cock hard.

"So you prefer birdie, then?" I hand her an iced coffee.

"Neither." She looks at the coffee and banana bread in her hands with a frown. "You didn't have to get me this. I could have paid for my own."

"If you don't like being called sis or birdie, and if you don't like me paying for things, then why are you blushing?"

Her gaze remains on the coffee. I smile as the pink tint on her cheeks darkens.

"Anyway," she mumbles. "You never answered my question."

I sigh and walk away, already knowing she'll follow me like a little duckling. Or in her case, a little bird too afraid to fly out of the snake's den.

"Well?" she says.

"I didn't take you for a fool." I sip my drink, then peek at her.

"I'm not."

I let out a dry laugh. "Are you sure? Because it's obvious where I fall in the social hierarchy here in school. My reputation ensures no one will try anything with me or those around me."

"Your reputation is about you being easy, not about—"

"Do you think I'm easy?"

She blinks. “Why does it matter what I think? You’ve never cared before.”

“I’m curious if you think I’m as promiscuous as the school makes me out to be.”

I’ll admit that I am very much a playboy of Astar Elite. So much so that my father had to pull me aside and tell me to stop letting my dick lead me around.

It’s ten shades of fucked up and frustrating that I want to know what *she* thinks. Not that any of it matters.

“I wouldn’t know since I’ve never paid attention,” she says with a sniff. “I had other things to worry about, as you may well know.”

I walk ahead of her to catch the door and hold it open for her. She ducks past me, and I follow her through the courtyard.

“You paid enough attention to hear about my reputation,” I say. “Enough that you can form your own opinion about me.”

Eden turns her head toward me, her mouth opening and then closing.

I wink at her. “If you’re going to lie, please don’t box yourself in. And be sure to make it believable, too.”

Eden casts a glare at me before widening her strides to walk ahead of me. I follow, admiring her body and lingering on her ass.

I can understand why my brother wants to fuck her.

We’re already late for our classes, and I’m in no rush to attend any of them. I catch Eden’s wrist and guide her toward a shaded bench sitting beneath a tree.

“I want us to enjoy our breakfast before doing anything else,” I say when she gives me a confused look.

She checks the area for any onlookers.

“No one is looking. Even if they are, that’s the whole point of me hanging out with you. Now, sit.”

She scans the area one last time before giving in and sitting beside me on the bench, leaving a sliver of space. She inches to the right to put more distance between us.

I catch her by the thigh at the hem of her skirt. Her head whips toward me, her eyes wide and doe-like, much how they were earlier this morning while I kissed her.

“You act like I have cooties.” I squeeze her thigh once.

“I haven’t heard that word since middle school.” She shudders as I stroke my thumb on the outside of her leg.

I tilt my head and watch her reaction as I continue touching her. “Do you dislike being touched?”

She peeks at me from her lashes and turns her focus to the banana bread. “I don’t dislike it. But shouldn’t you not be touching me there?”

“Do you hate it?”

“I think it’s inappropriate.” She swallows hard before taking another bite.

The corner of my lip twitches as I fight back a smile. “Not as inappropriate as what we did earlier.”

She sucks in a quiet breath and stops chewing.

Got her.

I take a bite of my banana bread as she forces herself to eat. Even watching her do something mundane is addicting.

“Why don’t you drive your car?” I say.

She blinks. “I’m not sure why that matters.”

“My father—” I shake my head. “Our father gifts you a car, and you don’t use it. I’m curious about why.”

She takes another bite, choosing silence.

I sigh. “Fine, sensitive topic. Why do you like birds so much?”

Eden peeks at me from the corner of her eye, then down at her breakfast. “Because they’re ignored and looked down on.”

I tilt my head.

She picks at the banana bread. “Do you ever look at the birds when you walk outside, or do they blur in the background?”

“I don’t pay much attention to them,” I say.

She nods and turns her face toward me. “Exactly. I love birds because people skip past them. They’re free from everything, except for the few who are cruel to them.”

My teeth clench together.

It was a dig toward Derrick, not me. When he killed the crow, I’ll admit it infuriated me as well.

A tiny smile dances on her full lips. “Did you know birds have different personalities? They can be very loyal too. Pet birds are one-person creatures, showing their devotion and loyalty to them. I like that they have sass and can be ornery.”

I smirk. “I didn’t think birds could be like that.”

She finishes chewing and stuffs the wrapper into her pocket. “Thanks for breakfast. I need to go to class now.”

“I’d like to know more about you, birdie.”

She turns her face toward me, and a grin stretches across my face.

She glares at me. “What’s so funny?”

“You have something on your cheek.”

She ducks her head and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

My grin widens. “You didn’t get it. Allow me . . .”

I bend down and drag my tongue over the cream cheese. The sound of her sharp inhale goes straight to my cock and hardens it again. I didn’t realize how much of an uphill battle this would be.

“Elijah,” she whispers.

I groan and flick my tongue on her upper lip before pulling away and straightening. “Keep saying my name like that, and I won’t hold back again.”

She checks the area again, and I pinch her chin between my fingers, turning her face toward me.

“Eyes on me, birdie.”

“You really shouldn’t have done that.”

“You’re always so worried about what people think.”

She narrows her eyes and jerks her chin out of my hold. “I can’t help it. Not after being tormented for almost all of my school life. It’s not something I can just stop doing because you’re now in the picture.”

“It is that simple.”

She shakes her head with an annoyed huff and stands. “Thanks for breakfast. You don’t need to walk me to class. I can manage on my own.”

I raise an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“I need space from you. I can’t think with you around.”

I grin and glance at her lap. “Do you think with something other than your brain when around me?”

“I’ll see you later.” She turns and walks away.

I watch her until she disappears around the corner. Then I pull out my cellphone.

ELIJAH

Keep an eye on her. If anyone tries anything, nip it in the bud and let me know.

ASHER



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CHAPTER 21

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET

Once I'm far from Elijah, I slow my pace. I've already missed the first class, and I'm in no rush to attend the second one, since it's art.

With Elijah.

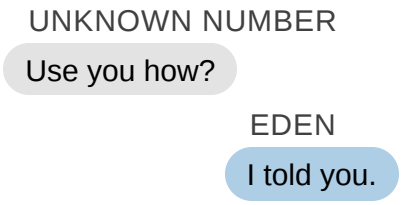
I can't think clearly around him, but at least I know it's not just me that feels that way.

Elijah Astar is just as attracted to me as I am to him.

I can't wrap my head around that. I thought his reputation would have mattered more to him. Clearly, that isn't the case.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to listen to some music when I see a missed text message from the unknown number.

My heart drops, and I open the thread.



His response comes quickly this time around.

Think hard about this, Eden.

I'm seconds away from spreading the pics and video of you moaning like a slut. Do you want that?

My stomach twists into knots.

I glare at the screen, imagining it's him instead.

"Asshole," I mutter.

After checking the area to make sure he won't pop out of nowhere and drag me somewhere private, I drop my gaze to my phone and type out the message.

Use me like I'm your slut.

That's right. You're my cum slut, aren't you?

Yes.

Say it, Eden.

I'm your cum slut.

attached images

I've never felt so humiliated until him.

Tears burn my eyes when I scroll through the pictures of the nights he used me for his sick and twisted pleasure. The final one is a screenshot of me saying I'm his slut.

My phone buzzes in my hand with a new message.

Think before you tell anyone about this.

No one will help you. Not even your brother.

I lean my shoulder against the wall and suck in a shuddering breath.

What the hell did I get myself into?

Gently biting my thumb, I glance at Elijah again. I lost count of how many times I've been stealing glances at him during class. So many times that I've stopped counting.

I should care. I really should, but I don't.

I can't stop thinking about this morning with him. Or the fact that I moaned his name while with another man. The last one was against my will, but it's still sticking with me and won't let up.

Elijah sits in front of his easel, paintbrush in hand. He carefully paints a portrait of a woman. There aren't any details other than a round face and eyes that almost match mine in shape and color.

It's wishful thinking that he'd paint me. Who am I to him other than his stepsister that he kissed and dry-humped one time? And what the hell has gotten into me? He's a man, for crying out loud.

I turn to my blank canvas and frown.

I've never been artistic. My interest lies solely in animals and helping them. More specifically, birds.

Elijah and Asher are the artistic geniuses. Both of them can paint as if it's a walk in the park. They can play the piano too.

My gaze strays to Elijah again and settles on his hand. He drags the paintbrush over the canvas, leaving behind a trail of dark hair. Each stroke of his brush is careful, as if he's touching the woman and not a cold, lifeless painting.

I shift in my seat to stop the tingling between my legs at the memory of the time I woke up with him between my thighs.

I think it was him, anyway.

I don't know what compelled him to do that to me. Why would he go back to ignoring me like I didn't exist? What was the point? To punish me for existing? Because if so, he did a great job. He showed me what it was like to be desired, then snatched it away as if I didn't deserve it.

Until this morning.

My phone buzzes.

My eyes slam shut, and I calm my racing heart.

The phone burns in my pocket, and I can't resist taking it out and reading the message. My shoulders sag, and I let out a relieved breath.

MOM

Your father and I would like you home for the weekend. We're celebrating Ruby's birthday tomorrow, and we'd like you and your brothers to be a part of it. Please play nice with each other.

I raise my head and squint my eyes.

I can't believe I forgot it was my half-sister's birthday this weekend.

I reread Mom's text. The second pass sours my mood even more.

The last thing I want is to spend the weekend with the people I won't get along with. Despite the change in mood, I'm still leery about Elijah. Asher is . . .

I'm not sure.

If I don't go to the party, however, I won't hear the end of it from my mother. It'll be a weekend spent with rich snobs playing golf, birthdays be damned. Joe always wants to play golf with the guys and his friends.

I sigh and lower my phone to my lap.

"I'm assuming you got a text as well," a deep voice whispers into my ear.

I jolt and turn toward the person.

Elijah smirks and leans forward, his elbow resting on his knee while he cups his jaw. "Someone's a little jumpy."

"How did you move so silently?"

"I wasn't being all that quiet. You were zoned out." He winks. "Besides, it's not that hard to be sneaky with you."

My lips part. Seriously? He's going to make that innuendo right here in class? Especially years after saying nothing about what happened when he woke me up with his mouth?

Elijah tilts his head, his dark eyes flicking back and forth as he takes in my flustered state. "Such a peculiar reaction to an innocent tease," he mumbles. "Is there something you need to tell me, birdie?"

I scoff and avert my gaze. "Is there something you need to tell me, Eli?"

"Elijah."

My gaze slips back to him. "What?"

"My name is Elijah. Not Eli."

"And my name is Eden. Not birdie or sis."

He leans in and brings his frustratingly good scent with him—expensive cologne and body wash. “I like the sound of my name on your tongue. So don’t cheat me out of hearing every syllable.”

There’s no way he’s flirting with me in the middle of the classroom.

“What are you doing?” I whisper when I look at him again.

He raises an eyebrow, but the corner of his lips curve. Every bit cocky and frustrating. “What do you think I’m doing?”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, *sis*. Why would I do that?” His smile widens, looking every bit like the Cheshire Cat.

I swallow hard and peer around the classroom again.

Elijah pinches my chin between his fingers and turns my head toward him again. “They won’t do or say anything.”

I scoot my chair back and gather my things to leave class.

Only five minutes remain, and I’m willing to take the risk of seeing the dean if the professor has a problem with me leaving early. I can’t be around Elijah for a second longer.

He’s teasing me, and I hate admitting it, but I love it.

I spare one last glare at him. He watches me with the same amused expression, relaxing in his seat beside my abandoned chair.

My face heats, and I rush out of the room with the feeling of his eyes on the back of my head. I just hope he doesn’t follow me and do something more about the tension growing between us.

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CHAPTER 22

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET

STEAM CURLS in the shower stall as I stand under the hot water. The heaviness from the day's events lessens enough for me to loosen my muscles and enjoy the relaxation.

I figured I'd decompress a bit before driving for three hours.

That place never felt like home. I was the specter, watching others live their lives to the fullest. I didn't fit in anywhere, despite my stepfather trying to include me in family activities. It was hard to enjoy anything because of my stepbrothers. They made it clear that they didn't like me. All by just ignoring me.

Then there's Ruby, my little half-sister. The boys cherished her and treated her like a spoiled princess, while they treated me like a ghost.

I hate that once upon a time I worried about what they thought of me.

Now look at me. Hating men and confused because of the masked man and Elijah.

An ache builds between my legs at the thought of him. A shudder rolls through me, and I cup my sensitive breast.

That's the thing. I didn't hate his touch. It reminded me of what happened and how good it felt. I've never come as hard as when he ate me out and fingered me. After that, every orgasm by my hand has been lackluster. It's never strong like what he did to me.

We crossed the line again this morning, blurring the boundaries between right and wrong for a moment of weakness.

I slip a hand down my stomach, between my legs. Biting my bottom lip, I close my eyes and dip my fingers between my folds and smear my wetness onto my clit. I conjure the memory of this morning. The memory fades and another takes its place. The one from the late night when he crept into my room.

I imagine what would have happened if he had kept going. He would have ditched his clothes and settled his hips between my spread thighs. I would have wound my arm around his neck and pulled him in for a searing kiss that steals both of our breaths away.

It's so messed up that my stepbrother turns me on.

The masked man does too, and I hate admitting that to myself. Maybe I'm trauma-bonding with him. But something about him feels familiar. Whether it's his voice, his taste, his smell, or even his touch, I can't put my finger on it.

I let out a shaky breath and roll my clit with my middle finger. I imagine it's Elijah's fingers working me closer to an orgasm. Wetness coats the insides of my thighs, and I smear more onto the bundle of nerves before flicking it harder.

The memory of Elijah's darkened gaze looking up at me from between my legs pops into my vision.

I throw back my head and squeeze my breast harder.

His lips were curled in a deviant smile as he worked me closer to an orgasm. I'll never forget how unhinged he looked. He was just as turned on as I was when he feasted on me like it was his job.

"Elijah," I whimper.

The shower curtain ruffles behind me. I snap out of the fantasy and spin around.

"What are you doing in here?" I squeak. I cover my breasts with one arm and my pussy with the other.

Elijah leans against the stall, folding his arms across his chest. He smirks as his eyes rake down my body and back to my face. "Did I interrupt something?"

"Get out." I inch backward to put space between us. "You're not supposed to be in here."

“I’ve been in here before.” He glances around the large community bathroom before looking at me again.

“I don’t care what you did with someone else, but I don’t want you to see me like this.”

His smile falls. “With someone else?”

“You’re pretty annoying, you know that?”

A grin stretches across his face again. “You think I’m pretty?”

I take a deep breath through my nose to calm myself. “What do you want?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

His eyes snap to mine. “What were you doing before I interrupted?”

“Washing myself.”

“You’re a filthy liar.” He smirks.

“What I do alone is none of your business.”

“So you *were* touching yourself.” He makes it into a statement like he just won a battle.

“What do you want?” I ask through clenched teeth.

His lips part as if he’s about to answer, but the bathroom door opens, then slams shut. My heart drops, and I peek past Elijah to see who interrupted us.

Fuck.

He doesn’t move. Instead, he watches me panic about getting caught with my stepbrother in the shower. It’s not a good look and will only damage my reputation further.

No biggie, right?

I move without thinking and grab him by his jacket collar, then yank him into the stall with me. Water sluices down my head, and Elijah grabs my hips, then turns us so his back gets soaked. I slide the curtain shut and hold my breath, hoping the stranger won’t investigate the noise.

“What are you doing?” Elijah whispers as he squeezes my hips.

“Shut up,” I whisper, then slap my hand over his mouth for good measure.

His eyebrows rise up his forehead, and his lips curve against my palm. He crowds my space and walks me backward until my back meets the cool tile wall.

My heart pounds like a drum. I can't tear my eyes away from his face, especially his eyes. His gaze darkens with the same hungry look I saw years ago. And this morning while we made out.

His eyes rake down my chest, leaving behind a trail of fire. I suck in a sharp breath, realizing I stopped covering myself in a rush to get him in here with me.

I'm naked. He's dressed.

And he's looking at me like he wants to eat me until I'm a puddle at his feet.

"Eden?" Katie's voice echoes in the bathroom, and footsteps approach the shower.

I turn my head, looking at the closed shower curtain like I can see through it. "Katie? What do you want?"

"I wanted to speak with you about something." She stops just outside the curtain. "Can you come out so we can talk?"

"No!" I grab Elijah's vest beneath his opened jacket to hold him in place. Or maybe it's because I'm afraid my weakened legs may collapse.

"It's important."

Elijah's hands wander down my hips to my ass and cup my cheeks.

I lick my lips before saying, "Can it wait until later? I'm kind of busy."

Elijah's eyes dance with amusement. I don't need to know him that well to understand he's about to do something I won't like. He squeezes my ass cheeks, then lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist and white-knuckle his shoulders as he pins me against the wall with his hips.

A small sound escapes me as he presses his erection against my core. He dips his head and slowly kisses over my throat.

Katie sighs. "I don't think I can wait. This is the only time I can be alone."

My eyelashes flutter, and my eyes roll back as Elijah finds a spot on my neck that makes my toes curl. I grind my pussy against him and tilt my head to give him more room.

Elijah's lips curve against my neck in a hidden smile.

"Um, so," Katie says. "I wanted to apologize for how I behaved toward you."

My lips part on a silent moan. Elijah's hand slips between us to dip his fingers between my folds. He peppers kisses to my ear and catches my earlobe.

“You’re so wet,” he whispers. “Does it turn you on that she could catch us like this any second?”

I shake my head and stop when he rolls my clit and kisses a sensitive spot beneath my ear.

“You didn’t deserve that,” Katie says.

“Why are you”—I lick my lips and clear my throat—“apologizing now?”

Elijah slips a finger inside me. I arch my back and tilt my head until it thumps against the tiled wall. My mouth opens on another moan that I smother with a bite of my lips.

“Because,” Katie says. She sighs in resignation. “Because I saw Elijah has been hanging out with you. It’s taking a lot of pride to admit this, but I’m a little jealous and don’t want to be on his bad side by continuing to be mean to you.”

If only she knew *how* I’m hanging out with Elijah right now. With him kissing over my neck and finger-banging me.

He leans his head back with a frown and peers out of the corner of his eye at the shower curtain. Slowly, his focus turns back to me, and his features turn thunderous.

Is he seriously angry *for* me?

He looks seconds away from going off on Katie. So I do the one thing I can think of to stop him.

I loop my arm around his shoulder and bury my fingers in his dark, damp hair. Lifting myself, I smash my lips against his. He sucks in a breath, pausing for a moment before kissing me back.

“But anyway,” Katie says awkwardly, “that’s all I wanted to say.”

Elijah’s mouth moves against mine, each kiss harder and more demanding than the last.

It feels different from the way he kissed me this morning. Almost as if he’s unsure of what he’s doing but putting all of himself into it. He even tastes different. I can’t put my finger on it. Sweeter.

He slides a second finger into my pussy and fucks me fast and hard, not giving me a chance to catch my breath. Elijah swallows my whimper with more mind-drugging kisses. Our teeth clack together, and he nips my lower lip.

“Eden?” Katie says. The shower curtain rustles.

I tear myself away from Elijah and turn my head toward the curtain.

“Okay!” I bite my bottom lip to quiet a moan as Elijah rolls his thumb over my clit. “B-but I’m not forgiving you.”

“I understand,” Katie says.

My eyes roll as my orgasm builds. “Please—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes!” My toes curl and I drop my head to look between Elijah and me as he finger-fucks me harder. With my stomach in the way, I can’t see shit.

“I’ll see you later,” Katie says.

Go away. Go away.

“Maybe we can hang out and start over,” she says.

Elijah lifts my leg into the air for a better angle as he drives his fingers deeper inside my quivering walls. Blinding white light and glittering dots fill my vision.

“Fuck! Yes!” My legs tremble, and I hold my breath as the orgasm takes me under.

“Okay. I’ll see you later.” Katie’s footsteps fade as they reach the door. A second later, it slams shut behind her.

I toss my head back and moan.

“You naughty fucking girl,” Elijah growls. “Keep coating my fingers in your cum.”

Breaths shudder out of me, and I shiver as the last of my orgasm fades. I whimper when he pulls his fingers out of me and pops them into his mouth.

Elijah and I stare at each other in silence. I hold my breath, waiting for him to say or do something more.

I wiggle in his grasp, realizing what something more would mean. The movement drags my sensitive core against his erection. Elijah sucks in a breath and fists my hair at my nape. He rocks his hips against mine in slow, hard thrusts.

“Be careful, baby,” he murmurs, his voice husky with desire, “or you’ll find yourself bent over, taking every inch of my cock.”

“Aren’t you ashamed?”

I know I am. I can’t believe I just did that with him.

His chuckle comes out low, dark, and sinful. He grinds his erection against my pussy. “Does this feel like I’m ashamed?”

I swallow hard and barely shake my head.

His smirk lasts for a second before he blinks and it’s gone. His eyebrows pinch together as if he’s finally realizing what we’re doing, and

he drops me to my feet.

"To answer your earlier question," he says, "I came here to tell you that you're riding with us back home."

"But I don't want to."

He whips the shower curtain to the side and steps out. His uniform sticks to him like a second skin, and he drives his fingers through his hair to get the wet strands out of his face.

"Don't care," he says with a shrug. "Get dressed and meet us outside."

He turns to look at me. His gaze drops down my body, taking in every naked inch before he smirks and leaves me alone in the bathroom.

All of that just happened so he could tell me that I'm leaving with him and Asher?

"You could have waited to tell me that!"

My face heats; even my ears burn from embarrassment.

The door thudding shut is Elijah's answer to my outburst.

I know that jerk heard me.

And now I don't know if I can face him again.

The car ride home will be awkward. It will be hard to avoid thinking about what just happened. And how the hell will I be able to look at Asher without being reminded too?

I won't be able to look my stepfather in the eye without feeling guilty for grinding against his son's dick and letting him finger-fuck me.

I can't go. There's no way I can go.

I'd rather risk seeing the masked man than be stuck in an enclosed space with my stepbrothers.

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CHAPTER 23

ASHER

DAY 4 OF THE BET

E

Are you done?

ASHER



Popping a new blue-raspberry sucker into my mouth, I watch Elijah read the message. He doesn't reply, though, which is typical for him.

I'm surprised he doesn't request the results of my assigned mission. Likely because he's busy packing our things for the trip.

I roll the sucker in my mouth and glare at my phone.

Something isn't sitting right.

Eden and Elijah are up to something. I can't put my finger on it.

I tuck my phone into my pocket, then shut the hood of Eden's car. I swipe my hands together to rub away the grease. It's nearly all I can smell, and I hate it. I want the vanilla-and-flower smell back.

No, what I actually want is the sweet scent from Eden's pussy.

Bringing my right hand to my face, I sniff my fingers and grin. She let me touch her. Kiss her. Whisper dirty things into her ear. Even through the grease, I can smell her arousal. I didn't wash my hands after spending time with her.

I stride through the parking lot toward the Camaro. Elijah doesn't want to drive the GT-R. We modified it for street racing, which means no back seat, and we can't have that. Unless Eden is willing to sit on my lap.

I smirk at the thought and stop beside the purple sports car.

It won't be long before Eden sneaks off with her packed bags without getting caught by Elijah or me. Can't have that, either, so I took care of the problem after leaving the bathroom.

After years of watching Eden, I learned she's flightier than she realizes. She'll bolt if she senses any hint of confrontation. Same goes for anything she's not comfortable with—which is why I'm surprised she didn't run the moment I slipped my finger inside her wet pussy.

My little ghost was uncomfortable, but she still grinded against my hand like the needy little slut she is. Because that's what she is. She's a slut for her brother, and soon enough, she'll take every inch of my cock.

Eden needs to come around and realize that she wants it, too, and that she wants *me*.

Movement catches my eye.

My gut feeling was right.

Eden stalks to her car with her black travel bag wheeling behind her. She stops at the back door and unlocks it before tossing her luggage into the back seat.

I sit on the hood of the Camaro and swing my legs while watching her. I could do this all day, studying her expressions.

Eden doesn't check her surroundings. I'm not hiding from her, and if she just looks to the left, she'll see me a few cars down. She never does, though.

I frown.

Eden ducks into the driver's seat and slams the door shut. I grin as she attempts to start the car, but it only clicks. Over and over. The engine won't start, and it never will until I reconnect the leads to the spark plug.

She can run, but she won't get far.

Eden grips the steering wheel and glares ahead at the courtyard before dropping her forehead against the leather wheel.

I snort a laugh and roll the sucker to the other side of my mouth.

As if she can hear me, Eden turns her head toward me. She peeks at me over her arm as she clutches the steering wheel with her forehead against it.

Her eyes narrow.

“Oh, how wonderful.” Elijah walks past me with the bags and stops at the trunk. “She’s already tried running. At least we don’t have to hunt her down.”

I break the stare with Eden and peer at Elijah over my shoulder. He pops the trunk and lifts one bag into the cramped space.

“Go ahead,” he says with a sigh. “Get her.”

He’s already done with my obsession.

I don’t need his permission to do anything. I wasn’t even looking at him like that. The asshole took it as something else.

I drop to my feet and cast a glare at Elijah before walking to Eden’s car. I crunch the candy between my teeth and lunge for the door right as Eden tries to lock it. I yank it open and grab her by the arm.

“I’m not going with you!” She jerks away from me.

I roll my eyes and drag her out. “Your car won’t start. How do you plan on getting there?”

“You did something to it.”

I shrug. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Don’t play stupid, Asher.”

I shudder and close my eyes. Blood rushes between my legs, and I take a calming breath to force the erection away. It won’t work, but it’s worth a try.

“What did you do to my car?”

I open my eyes and grin. “Why does it matter, little ghost? You don’t use it.”

“That’s beside the point!”

“Yeah?” My smile stretches wider and toes the line of madness. I *feel* like I’ve gone mad because of her.

She rolls her eyes and yanks her arm out of my grip. “It’s not like I was going to walk to our parents’ house. Undo whatever you did to it.”

“Sure.” I snicker and crowd her space.

Eden sucks in a breath and backs up a step, then another, until she has nowhere else to go and is boxed in by me and her car.

I rest my palms on the roof and bend down until my lips brush against hers.

“Why don’t you say please and see how far that will get you?” My voice comes out deeper, huskier.

She glares at me and fists her hands by her sides. It's the most adorable reaction she's given. Maybe I like her fire more than anything else. But not more than the look of pure lust and having those fingers burrowed into my hair.

"Please," she says through gritted teeth.

"Repeat that."

"*Please*."

"One more time."

"Goddamn you. Please, Asher!" She shoves my chest.

I groan, and my eyes roll back for the second time when she says my name like that. I drop my forehead to her shoulder and breathe in her vanilla, flower, and baby-powder scent.

So. Fucking. Addicting.

"Well?" Her question filters through the lust clouding my mind. I lift my head and smirk.

"No." I back away. "You're coming with us."

I open the back door and grab her bag, then roll it behind me to the Camaro. Eden huffs and follows behind, her footsteps harsher than normal.

My twin watches with a bored expression, but he can't fool me. I see the intrigue in his gaze and how it lingers longer on Eden than it should. His eyes slide to me, and a muscle in the corner of his jaw tenses. It's brief, barely there, and if I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have caught it.

Good. Let him be annoyed. He promised I'd have her, that we'd only make it seem like he slept with her. I challenge him to try to take her for himself.

I shove Eden's bag toward him. He takes the handle and glares at me before stuffing it into the trunk.

I grab Eden by the elbow and guide her toward the door and fold the front seat down.

"I told you that I'm not riding—" Eden squeaks when I push her head down and into the car. Her ass sticks out and rubs against my crotch, sparking the embers of lust all over again.

It would be so fucking easy to take her like this—face down, ass up, while my brother watches with a jealousy-filled gaze.

Eden crawls into the back seat, and I sit on the other side.

Elijah sits behind the wheel, his eyebrows raised. He meets my glare in the rearview mirror.

“You’re not going to sit up here with me?”

I scowl.

Eden huffs. “I’d like to be sitting somewhere else.”

“Like my lap?” Elijah says with that frustrating smirk, then starts the car.

“That’s not funny.” She folds her arms.

“I wasn’t trying to be.”

I kick the back of his seat. “Drive.”

Two pairs of eyes turn to me. Elijah and Eden stare at me in shocked silence.

I continue glaring at Elijah, refusing to let him see any sliver of weakness.

He fucking promised.

He clears his throat and turns the key in the ignition. The engine purrs to life, and we roll out of the parking lot and down the long drive to the gates.

Jealousy is jealousy. I won’t explain or apologize for my outburst.

Elijah is better with words, as well as flirting.

I’m not.

So yeah, I’m annoyed as fuck that he’s effortlessly flirting with Eden. Bet or not, I don’t like that my brother is making her blush the way she is right now.

“This will be a wonderful three-hour drive with your attitude,” Elijah grumbles.

It’ll be three hours of me trying to think of a perfect way to make my move on Eden. Three hours of glaring at my brother and wondering just how close he and Eden really got.

She’s not blushing because of me. No, it’s because of my twin.

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CHAPTER 24

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET

TWO HOURS INTO THE RIDE, and except for the hour when Elijah turned on the music, it's been silent. Asher reclines in his seat with his hoodie covering his head. Shadows obscure his eyes, so I don't know if he's staring at me or asleep.

I have to pee so badly that I haven't been able to sit still. Elijah cut a considerable amount of time by driving like a madman, but it's not fast enough for me.

He uses the turn signal and takes the next exit.

I sit up straight in my seat. "Where are you going? This isn't the exit to go home."

"You're right." He peeks at me over his shoulder and turns in at a gas station. "I can't listen to another minute of you shifting in your seat and whimpering."

"I wasn't whimpering."

He scoffs and parks the car next to a pump. "Yes, you were. It was the most pathetic sound I've ever heard."

I open my mouth, an argument on the tip of my tongue when he flashes me a boyish grin and gets out.

Oh. He was teasing me.

I'm so used to men like Elijah putting me down and meaning what they say. That I'm pathetic and a freak. It's become a knee-jerk reaction to argue.

Elijah folds the seat in front of Asher and waves for me to get out. “Come on, birdie. I don’t want you ruining the leather.”

“How is he sleeping through all of this?” I say.

Elijah shrugs. “He’s always been a deep sleeper. Especially because of his medicines.”

I sigh and shift closer to Asher. Our legs bump against each other, and I check his reaction. He’s still fast asleep, his chest rising and falling with deep, even breaths.

“Come on, birdie.” Elijah holds out his hand.

I ignore his offer and bend over to squeeze through the tight space between Asher’s legs and the folded seat in front of him. Right when I think I’m in the clear, my other foot bumps against Asher’s leg, and I fall backward into him. I suck in a breath as I land on his lap and sit up straight.

The world around me freezes.

I wait for Asher to toss me off his lap and growl about how I woke him up, but only Elijah’s soft laughter breaks through my panic.

Of course he’d laugh at a time like this.

Slowly, I turn my head to check if Asher’s eyes are open.

“He’s out cold,” Elijah says with a snicker. “I told you. You have nothing to worry about.”

I lean forward and squeeze through the space between the door and the back seat. My hand finds Elijah’s, and he helps me out the rest of the way. His other hand settles on my lower back, steadying me on my feet.

“There we go,” he says. “See? Not so bad.”

I drop his hand and rush toward the doors to find a bathroom. Elijah keeps pace, but I lose him when I disappear into the single restroom.

After relieving myself, I wash my hands and fix my hair before opening the door. My heart leaps into my throat at the sight of Elijah leaning against the wall across from me, his arms folded over his chest as he looks every bit like a model.

Just the sight of him brings back memories of what we did in the bathroom.

Elijah raises a dark eyebrow. “You’re a jumpy little thing, you know that?”

“I’m not. I wasn’t expecting you to stand outside the door.”

A grin curves his lips. It has to be the first genuine smile I’ve seen directed toward me. “I’m not your enemy, birdie. You don’t need to be so

defensive with me.”

“It’s kind of hard not to be on the defensive. I don’t really know you.” I chew on my bottom lip for a second. “Why didn’t you do anything to help me before?”

“What do you mean?”

“You watched everyone bully me for years, and you stood aside and let it happen. Why?”

He slips his hands into his pockets. “I helped where I could.”

“What do you mean, you helped where you could?” I shake my head. “It wasn’t enough.”

“I tried, Eden.”

“You couldn’t stand looking at me before. Same with Asher. Neither of you could even acknowledge me. I was nothing but a speck of dirt to you.”

“It’s not like that.”

I take a shuddering breath and fold my arms under my breasts. “Why are you helping me now?”

Elijah steps closer to me. The closer he gets, the more the air thickens, and it’s harder to breathe. I tilt my head back to look up at his face as he towers over me. The domineering sneer I’m used to is back, his gaze hardened.

Good. I’m glad he’s annoyed. At least he feels a sliver of what I do about this whole situation.

“I tried to help you, but you were making it difficult. You did things that everyone deemed weird.”

“Like saving birds?” I snort with a roll of my eyes. “If that’s weird—”

Elijah’s palm covers my mouth, and he raises an eyebrow. “I meant it when I said I’m not your enemy. I’m helping you because you’re family.”

I grab his wrist and turn my head to speak. “Does family creep into the bathroom and finger each other?”

Elijah’s gaze darkens. “If memory serves me right, it seemed like you enjoyed my company.”

“That’s beside the point,” I mumble.

He smirks. “You liked it, though. Didn’t you? How I touched you. How it felt with me between your pretty thighs.”

“Stop,” I whisper.

He closes the small space between us until his chest touches mine. It’s hard to breathe with him so close. Everything about him is large,

demanding, and downright terrifying. I've tried to remain calm around him, but he brings out this side of me that I've never experienced. A side that's hungry for his touches.

I'm already too far gone to ignore this.

"You looked at me with those pouty eyes that begged me to kiss you." He fingers a lock of dark hair beside my cheek. "Just like how you're looking at me right now. Admit it, birdie. You want me."

I step back, needing the space between us so I can breathe without him invading every sense.

"No." I swallow hard and peek past his shoulder. "This is wrong, Elijah. You're wrong, and you clearly have no shame."

"*This is wrong*," he says, and tilts his head. "Doesn't that make this that much sweeter? You want me. I want you. What's wrong with that?"

The sound of my racing heartbeat fills my ears.

Why me?

"Is this some sort of sick game to you?" I whisper.

"No."

"I don't date."

He grins. "I don't either."

"You're misunderstanding me." I duck past him. "I mean I don't do anything with anyone."

"We'll see about that. I like a good challenge." Elijah's taunting words follow me as I put well-needed distance between us.

I walk outside and join Asher in the car, but I settle into the front passenger seat this time. While I'd love to sit in the back to keep a distance from Elijah, I don't feel like squeezing into the back again.

This last hour of the drive will be torture—just as I knew this whole trip would be.

It's not long before Elijah shows up, fills the car's tank with gas, and then sits behind the wheel.

It's deadly quiet in the car as he drives back onto the freeway. Not even music plays to fill the silence.

I shift in my seat too many times to count, and I keep biting my tongue before asking Elijah why he's attracted to me. Isn't he afraid of being ostracized by everyone like I have been?

"I don't like being touched," Elijah says, softening his voice.

I blink and turn toward him.

He glances at me for a second before turning back to the road as he drives. “Everyone is always touching me, and it becomes too much.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you said you don’t know me.” He casts a wary look at me. “So I’m telling you something personal that I don’t share with anyone.”

“But you touch me.” I flinch and check if Asher is still asleep. It’s hard to tell with his hoodie up. “I mean, you always put your hand on my back or play with my hair.”

Elijah’s grin comes out tight, and he nods.

“I do.” He softens his voice as if he’s talking to himself. “I don’t know why.”

I don’t know why either, but I hope he keeps his hands to himself while we’re at our parents’ house. If they catch us doing anything outside of normal, I’d imagine there would be hell to pay. Especially if his dad found out.

I’d lose everything.

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CHAPTER 25

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET

"Oh, good. You're here!" Mom's bracelets jangle together as she claps, then opens her arms for a hug.

"Hi, Mom." I let go of my bag's handle, step into her embrace, and close my eyes as I melt into her.

I last saw her over Christmas break. It was only a few months ago, but it feels like ages. It seems even longer since I've had the old version of her. Mom has changed since marrying Joe. She's acts like the uptight assholes my stepfather hangs out with.

"How have you been?" She pulls away. "You haven't called."

"It's been a little busy this semester, and I'm okay," I lie straight through my teeth.

Her eyebrows rise. "Just okay?"

I shrug. "It'll be better if I can—"

"We've been over this before, sweetheart. We want you at the most prestigious school so that you get a better education. You can't have that at a community college."

My shoulders sag. "Right."

There's no point in arguing with her about it. That ship sailed two years ago during my freshman year. She acts as if she's truly concerned about how I'm treated, but nothing is ever done about it. It always got worse.

“How’s school? Are they treating you okay?” She rubs my arm, seeming genuinely interested, but her gaze slips past me and focuses on whatever is behind me.

“Yeah, it’s going great.” I wince. “Anyway, where’s Ruby? I’d like to wish her an early happy birthday.”

Mom’s attention flits back to me, and she smiles. “She’s staying with some friends tonight, but she’ll be back tomorrow. Why don’t you go drop off your bags, freshen up, and come down for dinner?”

I nod. “It’s just dinner, right? Not something else?”

It’s always something extravagant or boring. Or both, considering I never have fun when Mom and Joe show off their money.

Mom rolls her eyes and waves a hand to dismiss my question. “Don’t start, Eden.”

“Right. Nice chat.” I grab my bag.

“There are my boys.” Mom brushes past me and rushes to Elijah. Asher hangs back, his gaze on me rather than my mother. He tilts his head, a smirk dancing on his lips.

I turn and wheel my luggage toward the staircase.

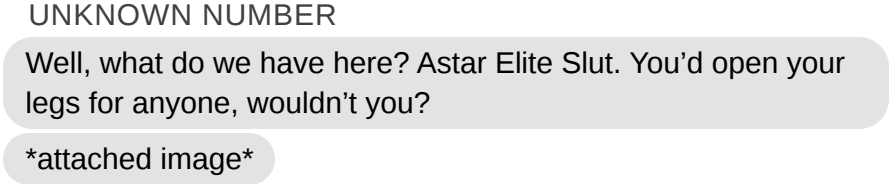
I don’t know why Asher was looking at me like that, but it can’t be anything good. Hopefully, he didn’t spy on Elijah and me while we were in the gas station.

I pass Elijah and Asher’s bedrooms on the second floor, their doors cracked open. Our rooms look the same: huge spaces, bigger beds with canopies, and a door that leads to a shared balcony.

Shaking my head, I enter my bedroom and drop my bags near my neatly made bed. Everything is still in its place, as if I hadn’t been gone all this time. At least someone opened the lace curtains over the balcony door to let in the sunshine.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, and my stomach immediately sinks at the unknown number displayed in the notifications.

I shouldn’t read it. I know what it’ll be. Yet, my body moves on its own, as if someone else is forcing me to look at the new message.



I stare at the picture with my heart in my throat.

I think I may actually throw up.

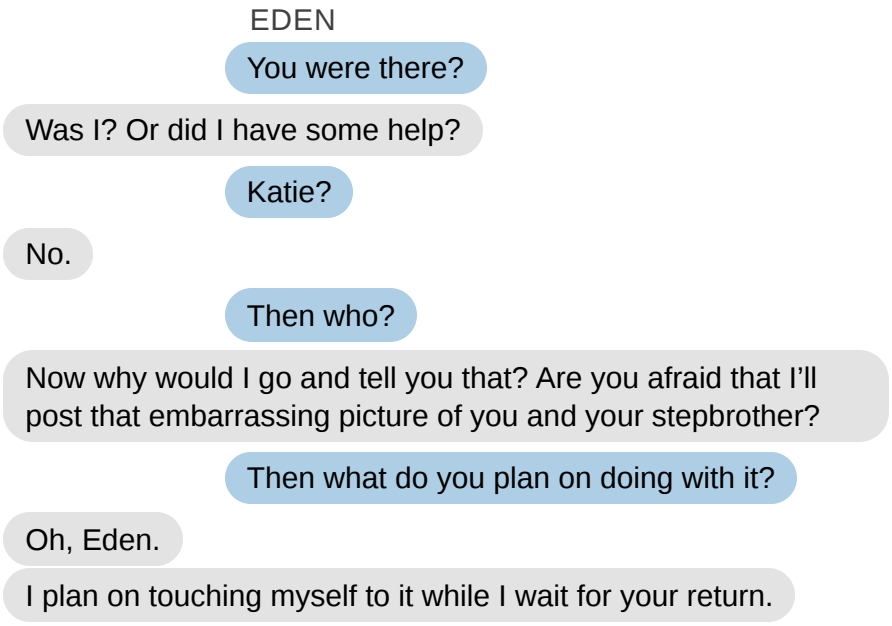
In the image, Elijah has me pinned to the shower wall with my legs wrapped around his waist. We're mid-kiss, our tongues visible in the picture as they tangle together. His arm is tucked between our bodies, but his hand is hidden.

I already know what he's doing. Just looking at the picture, I can feel the ghost of his fingers inside me as they sent me into a toe-curling orgasm.

How the hell did he get that picture?

The only people there were Elijah, me, and Katie. Unless *he* was there with Katie and didn't make a sound while she talked to me.

My jaw clenches, and I type out a message before I can think it through.



Of course he'd know that I'm out of town.

My pulse thunders in my ears until it's all I can hear.

I knew being around Elijah was a bad idea. How could I have been so stupid to believe that he could keep me safe from the people coming after me?

I slip my phone into my pocket and take a few minutes to gather myself. Sounds from the hallway let me know that Elijah and Asher are settling into their rooms as well.

I need to take a shower, and despite this being an enormous home, we three share the bathroom in the hallway across from our rooms. The Jacuzzi tub and the shower with sprays that hit at different angles almost make up for it.

I wait until footsteps lead toward the stairs and the coast is clear.

After grabbing clean clothes, I leave my bedroom and sneak across the hallway and into the bathroom. My feet freeze and I stare wide-eyed at Asher seated on the lounge chair, cock out and stroking himself. He lifts his head and turns his lazy gaze to me, not looking an ounce guilty about being caught.

I can't move. Or breathe, for that matter.

His fist rolls up his shaft and twists at the head before he pumps downward to his balls. Every stroke is measured. Every pump is slow, as if Asher is enjoying the moment. I couldn't rip my stare from him, even if my life depended on it.

"Since you want to watch so badly, sit down," Asher says, voice husky. He jerks his chin toward the lip of the tub.

I finally tear my gaze from his large cock and look at his face. He's staring at me while still stroking himself.

I should leave. It's the right thing to do. We're at our parents' house, for God's sake. What if someone catches us together and questions why I would sit in here with my stepbrother while he's masturbating?

What would Elijah think if he caught me watching his twin touch himself? We're not together or anything, but I can see him getting upset about this.

My feet move on their own. I pass Asher, still watching him as he languidly strokes his dick. His free hand catches me by the wrist, stopping me.

"Spit on it." He dips his eyes to his cock, then back to my face.

My lips part, and I glance at the door before turning to him.

This is so wrong.

Bending at the waist, I gather saliva in my mouth and let it drip onto the head of his cock. Asher groans and gathers the moisture to spread along his shaft.

"More," he growls.

Unable to deny his demand, I spit again and straighten.

"Good girl. Now go sit down."

I scramble to the bathtub and sit on the ledge. Asher tilts his head back, and it thumps against the wall. His gaze stays on me as his strokes quicken. Now that his dick is wet with my spit, each stroke makes a squelching sound.

I shift in my seat to dull the ache between my thighs.

This is the definition of forbidden, and Elijah was right. This makes it that much sweeter.

Asher's chest rises and falls quicker with his heavy breaths. He doesn't say anything or demand I join him. Just looking at me is enough to make a bead of pre-cum well from the tip.

His lips curve into a lazy smile. "Do you want to touch yourself?"

I shake my head, not trusting my voice to speak. It'll give away how much this is turning me on. I just want to watch him. I've never seen a man pleasure himself, and it's the hottest thing I've witnessed.

He lets out a dry laugh and arches his back to fuck his fist. "Then watch me come for you, naughty girl."

His fist pumps faster, and he raises his shirt to bite into right as cum jets from the tip. His groan of pleasure goes straight to my clit. Another load of cum spills from him, and his eyes roll back as he rides the high of his orgasm.

I rub my thighs together and bite my bottom lip. Heat flares through my body, and I have to sit on my hands to keep from ripping my clothes off to cool down.

A final spurt of cum lands on his stomach, and he releases his cock, panting heavily.

We sit in silence.

I don't know what to say or do, and it seems like Asher is in the same boat because he opens his eyes and turns them to me.

"Leave," he murmurs.

I shoot to my feet and rush out of the bathroom. The whole time, Asher's gaze tracks my movements, and the feeling of being watched disappears as soon as the door shuts behind me.

What the hell was I thinking by watching him?

Should have joined him, a small voice whispers in the back of my head.

I shake my head and rush back to my bedroom to toss my clothes on my bed.

Fuck the shower. I need to go outside, far away from Asher. Otherwise, I’m about to say fuck it and join him again.

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CHAPTER 26

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET

My face is still burning when I get outside. I make a beeline toward the stables so I can hang out with my favorite horse, Bane. It'll be safer to stay far, far away from Elijah and Asher, who are not only tempting me, but also making me question my sanity.

What the hell are they doing to me?

I break through the gardens and into the open backyard.

Speaking of temptation . . .

My steps slow when Elijah comes into view. He's shirtless, with a soccer ball hooked beneath his arm as he chats with a few of his friends.

Daniel Spencer.

Gabe Spencer.

Parker Spencer.

Sebastian Morgan.

All equally dangerous, with the same build as a Greek statue. I only remember their names because they took part in bullying me while Elijah stood aside and allowed it to happen. I don't believe for a moment that my stepbrother did anything to help me, even behind closed doors.

The three Spencer brothers were ruthless. They'd embarrass me in front of the whole school when I was a freshman and they were seniors. I called them the Terrible Triplets.

Sebastian turns his stare to me, and his frown deepens. Elijah follows his gaze and raises an eyebrow, his lips curving into a smirk. I can't breathe when he looks at me like that. It reminds me so much of when we were in the shower together.

I duck my head and keep walking.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I've always been attracted to my brothers, but aside from that one time when I woke up with Elijah between my legs, they've shown no interest until recently.

He may have admitted he's attracted to me, but I think he's lying.

This isn't good. Having him around is dangerous for him because of the man breaking into my dorm room, but it's dangerous for me too. I don't want to catch feelings, and I'm already falling into perilous territory.

Elijah breaks away from his friends and jogs toward me. I widen my steps to stay ahead of him. Not fast enough, because a firm grip on my wrist stops me. He spins me around to face him, and he steps closer until he's all I can breathe.

"Where are you going, birdie?"

"To the stable." I avert my gaze.

He tilts his head. "Are you sure you're not just running away after getting caught checking me out?"

"I wasn't checking you out."

"Then were you eye-fucking my friends?"

"I wasn't checking anyone out. I was simply observing my surroundings before moving on."

He strokes my cheek with a finger. "Why are you blushing, then?"

For many reasons that I'm not about to offer. I move my head to the side and glare at him from the corner of my eye. "Let go."

I let out a breath when he releases my wrist. I tense as he settles his hand on my waist.

"You're looking flushed, sis. Is there something you want to tell me?"

I shake my head.

Elijah grins and leans down until his lips hover beside my ear. "I know what lust looks like in a woman's gaze. I'm not oblivious to it." He catches my earlobe between his teeth and softly nips it. "So try again, and this time, tell the truth."

I suck in a shaky breath. "Your friends are watching."

“Let them watch.” He kisses a spot below my ear. “Maybe they can learn a thing or two.”

“Our parents could come out any second.”

Elijah taps my temple and kisses another spot. “Always so worried.”

I rest my hands on his bare chest, hating and loving how good he feels. He’s firm, warm, and forbidden. “Fine. I was checking you out.”

His chuckle comes out dark and silken. “See? It wasn’t that hard, now, was it?” He nibbles my earlobe before whispering, “I was checking you out, too. I still am.”

“You’re disgusting.” I shove him, but he doesn’t budge. It’s like trying to push a wall.

“And you’re fucking filthy, baby.” He straightens and smirks.

“I’m your stepsister.” I don’t know how many times I have to remind him of this, but I feel like a broken record.

“We’re not blood, so I don’t see a problem with it.”

“What if we were? Would you still hit on me?”

He chuckles. “That’s a loaded question, *sis*. How about you answer first?”

“Yeah, you would still hit on me. You give those—”

“You’re a cheeky little bird. I meant if you would still kiss me and let me touch you if I were your brother.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I stiffen.

I force a smile, and his grin fades into a frown. He tilts his head as he looks me over.

“I’ve got to go.” I brush past him and slide my phone out of my pocket, because I’m a masochist through and through.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

I’d sleep with one eye open when you come back, Astar Slut. You never know who’ll climb through your window to find out why your pussy is being passed between your brothers.

I breathe in through my nose and slowly let it out of my mouth.

Now he’s bringing Asher into this.

How the hell does he know so much when he’s back at Astar Elite?

I exit the thread and lock my phone before slipping it into my pocket with shaky fingers. I’m fifty shades of fucked-up because it’s turning me on

to think of him using me for his pleasure when I return to campus.

There has to be someone I can talk to about this.

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CHAPTER 27

ELIJAH

DAY 4 OF THE BET

EDEN ROUNDS the corner and disappears. She does that often—always running away from me and clutching her fucking pearls.

She isn't as innocent as she's making herself out to be. She was grinding her pussy against my dick and kissing me with as much vigor as I gave. No, she's as filthy as me.

The good news is that I'm getting further along with her than I expected. The bad news is that I have three fucking days to sleep with her or I'll lose the bet.

I gather my shirt and slip it on. The sweat slicking my body sticks the material to me like a second skin. I pull the collar and eye the house.

As much as I would love to shower, I need to meet with my father—see if he came to reason and changed his stipulations for me to get the inheritance.

The guys jog toward me and gather their shirts from the ground.

"What were you saying to her?" Gabe nods toward where Eden and I stood moments ago.

Daniel snickers. "Can't be much. The freak never says more than two words."

I level a glare at Daniel. "Bite your tongue."

The brothers and Sebastian turn their full attention to me, all of their eyebrows raised.

“Did you just defend her?” Sebastian says.

Fuck. I did.

I don’t know what possessed me to say that. I can chalk it up to being fed up with everyone else doing my dirty work rather than doing it myself, but that would be a lie. Maybe it’s because I’m so close to winning this bet. If word gets back to Eden, she’ll know I defended her without her being around.

But fuck all of that. I’m not her knight in shining fucking armor.

I shake my head, hoping to chase away whatever the hell is going on in my mind.

“Forget about her,” I mumble.

“Right,” Daniel drawls. “Anyway, did you let Ashleigh know you’re back in town?”

I cringe.

She latched onto me after I took her virginity, and she’s the reason I never slept with inexperienced women again.

“If you so much as tell her I’m back,” I say, “I’ll cut your balls off and stuff them down your throat. Got it?”

He raises his hands with a chuckle. “My lips are sealed.”

“Come on, man,” Gabe says. “It can’t be *that* bad.”

“I’d like to have an uneventful visit.” I slip my hands into my pockets. “Anyway, I need to go. I’ll catch you guys later.”

Time to face the music.

I rap my knuckles on my father’s office door before entering. He raises his head and closes the book he was reading.

“Elijah,” he says with a smile. “How have you been, son?”

I shrug. “Never been better, Father. How’s your back holding up?”

He sighs and rolls his neck. “Cut the bullshit, Elijah. What are you in here for?”

Pursing my lips, I cross the room and sit on the leather seat across from him. “What? I can’t ask how my old man is?”

“You can, but it’s disingenuous.” He sets the book aside and folds his hands together. “What do you want?”

“Are the conditions the same?” I say, dropping the facade.

He glares at me. “I just wanted a weekend where we celebrate Ruby’s birthday and nothing else happens.”

“Nothing will happen. I can promise you that.” I relax into the seat and glance at the framed picture of Ruby sitting on his desk. “You must really love your daughter.”

“*Daughters*,” he says. “As well as my boys.”

My eye twitches. “Do you? Because it doesn’t feel like it.”

“We’re not having this conversation, Elijah.”

My molars grind together. “Of course.”

Father leans back in his seat and folds his arms across his chest. “I told you the conditions, and they won’t change.”

So much for not wanting to discuss this again.

“Don’t you think those conditions are a little too much for a 23-year-old? You want me married and to have a son. I’m still in college, Father.”

He rolls his eyes. “If you want to inherit the Astar estate, you’ll need a wife by your side, and she’ll need to be pregnant with your child. This family business must stay in the family.”

“What about Asher?”

His eyebrow twitching is enough to set my blood on fire. He doesn’t give a shit about my twin. He sees him as defective, unusable. He doesn’t want to risk passing his mental health to his children.

“He can have children,” I continue. “He’s just as fertile as I am. And yet, you seem to forget about him when discussing your lineage.”

“Again, I’ve made myself clear that it must be *you*.”

I stand and straighten to my full height. Fixing the cuff of my jacket, I glare at him from beneath my lashes. “Asher is just as suitable for the business and the inheritance.”

Father shakes his head. “It’s you that must take it. You’re older—”

“By three minutes. But that doesn’t negate his capability to bear children. I hope you’ll think over your decision and change your terms. We’re just as capable of running the business without wives or children.”

“I stand by my decision, Elijah.” Father stands and places his palms on the desk as he leans forward, looking every bit as frustrated as I feel. “Marry and have children. The sooner, the better. Now, can we drop it?”

There has to be another way to get the money and inherit the business.

I force a smile. “Of course.”

His expression softens, and he nods. “Good. Go get your brother. Dinner will be ready soon.”

I stride toward the door.

“Elijah,” Father calls.

I stop with my hand on the door handle and peek at him over my shoulder.

“I love you, son. Please don’t let me down.”

I nod but remain silent.

What can I say to that? I love you too? I don’t feel love for him. Not after he’s shown me his true character toward my brother. His love is conditional. That isn’t love.

I love my brother. My loyalty lies with my brother. He’s the only person I can trust, and I would kill for him.

I open the door and leave the office. If marrying and having a child are the only conditions for inheriting everything from my father, then I’ll need to figure out a way to make that happen.

Three days left of this bet, and I can figure out what I need to do afterward.

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CHAPTER 28

EDEN

DAY 4 OF THE BET

DINNER IS UNEVENTFUL. The conversation flows between Joe and my mother. They invited some friends—not surprised about that, since they always need to have a room packed with people.

Asher sits directly across from me, his arms crossed over his chest and his sucker sticking from the corner of his mouth. He leaves his food untouched in front of him. His focus has been on me the entire time, daring me to look at him.

It's hard to lift my gaze and meet his. Not after what happened in the bathroom, the moment we shared.

My cheeks warm with the fresh memory.

Not at the dinner table. Not when his father is three feet away from me. I'm so afraid he'll find out and disown me, right along with my mother.

My gaze has a mind of its own, and I meet Asher's stare. A shiver runs up my spine, and warmth floods through my body. His lip curls into a subtle smirk.

An unbidden image pops into my mind of Asher naked, between my legs and ramming his cock inside me. He'd be just as rough with me as the man who's been breaking into my dorm room, leaving behind hickeys and bruises that linger for days.

I mentally shake away the fantasy before it becomes something bigger.

Asher raises an eyebrow, his smirk curving wider.

“Is something funny, Asher?” Joe says.

His smile tightens, and he turns his focus to his father.

Silence.

I sink into my seat and jerk my gaze away from him. It lands on Elijah, who’s watching me with his head tilted. His eyes flick to Asher, then me, as if he’s putting together the puzzle pieces.

I’m the first to look away, and I awkwardly clear my throat, earning several pairs of eyes on me. I stand from my seat and grab the table to hold myself up, thanks to my weak legs.

“I think I’m done. I’ll turn in for the night,” I mutter.

“You barely ate,” my mother says.

I force a smile. “It’s been a long day. I’ll have leftovers when I have a bigger appetite.”

“Oh, did you forget, sis?” Elijah stands. “You promised you’d ride with me after dinner.”

My eyebrows furrow. “I don’t—”

“I remember it clearly. We spoke earlier, and you said you’d like to hang out with me some more.”

Mom and Joe share the same surprised expression. It’s the first time Elijah has spoken to me in front of them. He and his brother always made it a point to ignore me. Even his friends share a look, as shocked as my parents.

I fold my arms across my chest. “I’m pretty sure we talked about other things.”

“Did we, now?” He smirks. “And pray tell, what did we talk about?”

Damn, why did I have to open my big mouth? I fell into the trap.

My lips pinch together.

Elijah’s smile widens. *Checkmate.*

Goddamn him.

Mom breaks the tense silence. “I just love seeing you two being so close now.”

She giggles. Actually giggles that Elijah and I are close.

“I’ve been wanting this for so long, and I’m glad it’s happening,” she continues. “All I ever wanted was for you two to get along.”

I shake my head. “Oh, we’re not—”

“We’re *very* close,” Elijah says. “In fact, I’ve been helping her with her *studies*.” He winks at me.

Mom’s enthusiastic claps fill the room. “You two are bright students.” She glances at Asher. “And so are you, honey.”

Asher looks bored with the conversation, but his gaze never strays far from me.

“Please tell me you’re getting close with Asher, too?” Mom looks between us, her eyes glistening.

I awkwardly clear my throat. “Yeah, we’re close too.”

Maybe too close. I literally watched him masturbate and would kill to do it again.

A flicker of emotion crosses his features. It’s gone just as quickly as it came, and I can’t put a name to the emotion.

Elijah rounds the table and stops by my side. His hand settles on my lower back, and I look up at him, then at his friends who watch us with closed-off expressions. I can’t tell if they’re mad, shocked, or genuinely surprised by Elijah’s openness with me.

It’s just as new to me as it is to them.

“If you’ll excuse us, I promised Eden a night she’d never forget,” Elijah says, and he leads me out of the room.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter.

“Hmm? What’s that?” Elijah chuckles.

I tilt my head and glare at him. “Our parents are going to think we’re fucking.” I whisper this, even though we’re no longer within earshot of everyone.

How could he be so bold? Right in front of our parents, too.

Elijah smirks. “We’d actually have to be fucking for them to think that. Are we fucking, birdie?”

“I don’t know, are we?” I clamp my mouth shut and look away. “Don’t answer that.”

His chuckle comes out smooth and dark, like hidden desires wrapped in warm caramel. “We can change that. I want to change that.”

“But we won’t.”

“You’re a terrible liar, you know that?” He tugs a lock of my hair.

“I’m not lying.” I roll my eyes. “Was it really necessary to do all of that in front of our parents?”

“It was.”

“Why?”

He turns his darkened gaze to me, his lips curving into a wicked smile. “Because you needed to see that being with me won’t faze our parents.”

“I told you I don’t date.”

“And I told you I don’t either. I fuck, Eden, and I plan to fuck you until all you can think about is how good it feels to ride my cock.”

I take a moment to find my words. “Do you see me as some kind of conquest?”

“I don’t think you’re a conquest.” He hums in thought, then says, “No. You’re way, *way* more than that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Elijah stops walking. I turn to him, and my eyes widen. Asher’s beside him, fuming as he regards the both of us.

How long has he been there?

Shit. He heard everything we talked about, and now he knows the weird relationship between his brother and me.

“We’ll meet you outside,” Elijah says to him, not looking an ounce bothered that his twin listened to our conversation.

He knew?

“I want us to have a little fun tonight,” Elijah says. “Get the keys to the Porsche, and we’ll meet you outside.”

Asher casts one last glare at me, then at Elijah, before he walks in a different direction.

“He heard everything,” I say. It comes out as a weak statement.

Elijah turns his head toward me. He raises an eyebrow. “He did.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

“No.” He walks ahead of me and slips his hands into his pockets. “He won’t tell anyone.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Just because Asher is the quieter, more observant of the twins doesn’t mean he wouldn’t tell someone. He almost looked jealous that Elijah and I were talking about fucking, but that could have been all in my head. Just like Elijah wanting to fuck me is all in my head. He says he wants that, but I think he’s just trying to wind me up.

I follow Elijah into the spring evening. Fireflies dance in the gardens ahead of us, and crickets chirp.

“Oh,” I say as I look up at the sky. “A full moon tonight.”

He hums as he looks at the moon. “It is. And it’s pink.”

I grin. “You know what that means?”

Elijah turns his gaze to me, amusement dancing in his eyes. “No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“The pink haze is a symbol of rebirth, or to bloom newer and better things. The spiritual meaning is to set intentions and let go of things that no longer serve you.”

“You really believe that?” he says.

I shrug. “I guess.”

“And you believe tonight is the night to set intentions?”

“So they say. What do you want, Eli?”

His eye twitches. “I thought we’ve been over this before.”

“I don’t want to fuck you.”

He smirks and shakes his head. “No, I mean you calling me Eli. I want to hear my full name from your lips.”

I swallow hard and avert my gaze.

He chuckles and plays with a lock of my hair. “You get flustered so easily. Just how many men have you been with?”

“Nope.” I duck past him and stride toward his car. “We aren’t discussing my sexual experiences.”

“I’d love to know.” He catches me by the arm and spins me around to face him. He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. It’s tight, like he’s covering his annoyance more than anything.

“How many women have you slept with?” I say.

“That’s not what we’re talking about.”

“Isn’t it? You want to know how many men I’ve slept with, so it’s only fair I bring up your sex life.”

I can’t stop the mental image of a naked, sweaty Elijah fucking someone else. A toss of jealousy and lust mix together inside me, confusing the ever-loving shit out of me.

Me? Jealous and turned on by Elijah?

The world has to be ending.

“How many men have you slept with, birdie?” he murmurs.

“Why do you want to know?”

He steps closer and drags his fingers down my arm to thread with mine.

“Are you a virgin?” His voice lightens into a teasing tone, a smirk dancing on his lips.

“No,” I say, keeping a straight face and hoping he believes me.

Elijah Astar, a spoiled rich boy who expects the world to bend over backwards for him, wants to know if I’ve slept around. He’s the playboy.

Maybe I haven’t slept with anyone, but I’ve done other things. He doesn’t need to know that, though.

The garage door opens—my saving grace. A car’s engine purrs to life before the Porsche rolls out and stops beside us. The beautiful shade of deep green glitters beneath the stars.

The tinted driver’s window lowers, and Asher rolls his sucker to the other side of his mouth. His gaze drifts between Elijah and me.

“We’re taking the same route,” Elijah says to Asher, his focus still on me. “Winner earns a secret from Eden.”

That sneaky son of a bitch.

“I don’t agree with the terms.” I glare at Elijah.

Asher’s expression doesn’t change. It’s the same bored look, as if he’d rather be anywhere else but here, playing Elijah’s games.

I hate thinking this, but he’s the better of the twins. He’d rather do his own thing and leave me alone, unlike Elijah.

Elijah leads me by the hand to his car. “Too bad, birdie. Maybe Asher will win and you won’t have to share the secret I’m dying to know.”

For my sake, I hope he’s right.

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CHAPTER 29

EDEN

NIGHT 4 OF THE BET

WIND WHIPS my hair over my face, but I don't let go of the straps holding me in the seat as Elijah races through the streets. Asher keeps by his side, both cars taking turns moving in front of the other.

It's a close call.

I'm not sure if it's because the guys really want a secret from me or they're just highly competitive and want to brag that they won. It could be the latter. I want it to be the latter. However, I'm beginning to suspect their attraction isn't just for show.

My stepbrothers are fighting over me, and I'm overcoming my shock. Slowly, of course.

Elijah drifts around a corner and stomps on the gas.

I sink into the seat as my stomach flips from the opposing forces. I grin and close my eyes, enjoying the feeling it brings.

I haven't had this much fun in . . . ever.

Elijah hits the brakes, and I jerk forward, my eyes flying open. The car drifts around as he turns the steering wheel. Dust kicks up and surrounds the car.

"Having fun, birdie?" Elijah puts the car in park and peeks at me with a subtle smirk.

"Yeah," I say with a laugh. "I am."

The dust settles, and I realize we're in an empty parking lot.

Elijah rolls down the windows to let the night breeze blow through the car and cool us down.

I'm sweating for an entirely different reason now.

Being alone with him in his car is nerve-wracking. Not because I'm afraid he'll do something bad to me. It's because I'm afraid I'll give in to his demands and do everything I've been denying myself since the night he ate me out.

He shuts off the engine and relaxes into his seat before looking at me. "Time to pay up, sis."

"Shouldn't it be Asher who tells you a secret?"

He slowly shakes his head. "Are you a virgin? And I want the truth this time."

I raise my chin despite feeling an inch tall. "How about a different prize?"

Elijah slowly blinks and tilts his head, as if he's considering my offer. "Fine," he says. "I'll play. What's the other prize you're offering?"

I unbuckle the straps with shaky hands. Elijah's gaze makes it that much harder to do.

He's watching me like a predator would watch its prey.

Taking a deep breath, I lean over the console. Elijah holds still with a mischievous gleam in his eye, refusing to meet me in the middle. He knows what I'm about to do without even saying it.

My head inches closer until I can feel his breath tickle my parted lips. Elijah's eyelids hood as I close the gap between us. My lips brush against his for a moment. I mean it to be brief and chaste.

Elijah's groan is my only warning before he fists my hair at the back of my head and yanks me over the console to straddle him. I suddenly forget how to breathe. His tongue shoves past my parted lips and tangles with mine.

There's no sweetness in the kiss. No gentleness. It's all domination, teeth, and tongue. He shows no mercy, preferring to nip my bottom lip, then soothe the sting with his tongue before he dives back in to deepen the kiss.

He grabs my waist and rocks his hips against mine, forcing me to feel the large bulge in his pants.

I've never made out with anyone until him. I'm afraid it's showing through the sloppy kisses and unsure strokes of my tongue.

His lips curve into a smile, and it's the only hint I need; this was part of his plan. If I didn't answer his question about being a virgin, he'd find out by other means.

Not only did I fall into the trap, but I ran right into it.

The cunning asshole.

He lifts his hips to grind against me. My breath shudders at the feeling of his erection against my core.

Elijah's hand sinks until it dips beneath my skirt and grabs my ass through my panties. I rock my hips against his, hating how my body moves in response to him.

His groan shoots straight to my clit.

One kiss isn't enough. It'll *never* be enough. Him touching me but not doing anything about it will never be enough.

Elijah ends the kiss by trailing smaller ones along my jaw, then down my throat. I tip my head to the side, giving him more access. He takes advantage of the opportunity by sucking a spot just beneath the corner of my jaw.

I shudder and rock faster against him, earning another deep groan from him. His hand disappears from beneath my skirt and cups my sensitive breast. A whimper escapes me as his thumb brushes over my hardened nipple through the thin material.

"Keep fucking yourself on my thigh," he murmurs. He leans back so he can watch me. "Leave a mess on me, baby."

His taunt is ice-cold water dumped over my head, and it snuffs every ember of lust heating my skin. I pull away from him and settle into my seat, away from him. It's not enough space.

I can't think straight while I'm near him.

"I didn't mean to do that," I mumble.

"Are you sure? Because it took one little kiss to make you unravel like that." His gaze drags down my body.

I glare at him. "It wasn't supposed to drag on like that, and you ruined it."

"Did I? Because it didn't feel like I was the one ruining anything." He tilts his head, nodding toward the erection outlined through his pants. And the dark spot where I was grinding on him.

I look away while squeezing my thighs together.

"Take me home, Elijah."

“I promise you’ll come crawling to me. You’ll beg me to fuck you, Eden.” Elijah starts the car. “And I promise that I’ll fuck you into the mattress.”

I don’t say anything. But we both know what I’m thinking.

I know I will. I’m so close to saying fuck it and throwing all caution to the wind.

I’m losing sight of why I don’t want to date or do anything with anyone.

I want Elijah. He wants me.

Same with Asher, a tiny voice whispers in the back of my mind.

We drive past Asher, who’s been parked off to the side, waiting for us. He glares at us through the lowered window, even though he can’t see us through the tint. The sucker’s stick moves up and down as he watches us pass by him.

For a moment, we lock eyes, despite him being unable to see me. I shrink from the rage in his gaze and stare ahead.

Elijah doesn’t break the silence the rest of the way home. It’s deathly quiet, and a smidge awkward too. I don’t know what to say, and it feels like Elijah wants me to squirm in any way he can get it.

I’m out of the car and inside when we arrive. Elijah grabs me by the elbow and leads me to the kitchen.

“I’ll make you some tea to relax,” he says.

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead.

We stand in silence as he prepares the tea. I check my phone now and again to fill the time while I wait. I don’t know why I’m entertaining him and allowing him to make me a drink. It’s so unlike me.

Maybe I’m trying to gather enough courage to tell him that I’ll only sleep with him once. Because God, do I want to do it.

Elijah turns and hands me the mug of steaming tea. “Get some sleep, birdie. This should help you relax.”

My lips part as he leans in and pecks my cheek before he walks away.

I look down at the mug and squeeze the handle. Next time, I’ll tell him . . . because I can’t fight this anymore.

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CHAPTER 30

ASHER

NIGHT 4 OF THE BET

I STAND outside Eden's open bedroom door, seeing nothing but red. I can't sleep when the image of Elijah kissing Eden keeps popping into my head. He talked about fucking her, even while knowing I was right there.

I stare at Eden's sleeping figure in the middle of her bed. Her chest rises and falls with deep, even breaths. Not even watching her like this calms the turbulent storm inside me.

She must feel so fucking good, sleeping so well after grinding on my brother's lap.

It should have been me kissing her and squeezing her breasts until she was breathless. It should have been me who made her tilt her head back and rock her hips against mine as I kissed her neck.

Only I can give her what she needs. Not my brother.

The asshole won the race on purpose, denying me both her secrets and more time with her. I'm the one who wants to know them, not Elijah. He doesn't give two shits about her.

Watching them was pure torture. Like shards of glass slicing through my skin. I surprised myself by showing self-restraint when I didn't yank open the car door and drag Eden off Elijah's lap.

My fingers curl into my palms. I roll the sucker in my mouth until the candy clacks against my teeth, but not even the blue-raspberry flavor can soothe me.

Elijah promised I'd be the one to fuck her. He said I'd be the first and only. That slimy asshole planned to fuck her anyway.

I don't share, yet I'm hard at the mental image of her making out with my brother. I'm angry and turned on at the same time, which confuses me even more.

A shadow falls next to mine by the door. I don't need to look to know it's Elijah.

"You want to know what it's like?" he murmurs.

I tighten my fists until they turn white.

I nod.

"Then let's find out together." A smile bleeds through his voice.

My back straightens. My dick jerks at the promise of doing anything with her, even if she's unaware.

I could practice on her while she sleeps. She won't know that I'm clueless, and once I sleep with her when she's awake, she won't know that she was my first.

I take a step inside her bedroom, my gaze glued to her and my heart racing. Then I stop.

I said I'd be a monster for her, but how far am I willing to go?

Elijah comes to my side and tilts his head as he considers me. "Do you need me to talk you through it?"

I glare at him.

"I was only asking." He holds up his hands and steps aside.

Just how fucked up and monstrous do I want to be with her?

"I want her awake," I say. I don't want her to see how inexperienced I am, but I want to look in her eyes.

I want her watching as I sink my cock inside her pretty pussy.

He considers me for a moment, then sighs. "Strip while I wake her up. But we only want her to see *you*, got it?"

Nodding, I follow Elijah to Eden's bedside. I kick off my shoes, then strip out of my shirt, pants, and boxers. I pop my sucker out of my mouth and toss it onto her nightstand.

Elijah pulls back Eden's sheets and strips her out of her sleep shorts, leaving her naked from the waist down. Fisting myself, I stroke my cock and bite back a groan as Elijah spreads her legs.

Blood rushes to my cock, hardening it until it's painful.

I’ve seen her naked many times. This time around is different. This time I get to do something about it.

She’s so soft everywhere. Stretch marks line her stomach and the insides of her thighs. Her heavy breasts carry the same marks that beg to be traced with my tongue.

Elijah shares a look with me, warning that he means it about not being seen. He moves to the head of her mattress and motions for me to get on the bed with her.

I move onto my knees between her spread legs, my gaze falling to her pussy.

Fuck. Me.

She’s perfect.

Elijah grabs her shoulder and shakes her awake. She’s dead to the world.

I stroke my shaft and squeeze the tip with each upward pass.

Eden’s breath hitches, as if she’s about to wake up, but then she settles deeper into sleep.

He looks at me, his lips pinched and eyes letting me know I may not get what I want.

Fuck all of that.

Releasing myself, I move onto my stomach and wind my arms around her thighs before diving into her cunt.

It’s been so long since I’ve tasted her, and it’s been haunting me for years. I swipe my tongue up Eden’s folds. With two fingers, I spread her wide open and flick her clit with the tip of my tongue. Her pussy reacts so beautifully to my touch, as if it remembers how good I can make her feel. After a few more strokes, her arousal drips out of her and coats my mouth with the wetness. Eden’s legs stiffen, and she grinds herself against my tongue.

I raise my gaze to her face and watch—just as I did the last time—as she wakes up.

She mumbles something incoherent. Her eyes have a faraway look as she becomes more alert—or as alert as she can get. She takes a shuddering breath, her confused and half-lidded gaze falling on me as I suck and lick her like it’s my fucking job.

“Elijah?” she mumbles, voice thick with sleep.

I narrow my eyes.

Of course she'd call my brother's name. She's meant to think I'm him, but that doesn't stop the rage from burning in my veins.

Eden threads her fingers through my hair, and she arches her back. She mumbles something slurred. Her mouth falls open on a weak moan, her movements just as sluggish as she rides my tongue.

She can't say his name if I make her come.

I glare at my brother, and my tongue stops for a split second. Elijah is palming his erection outside his pants, desire darkening his gaze. The shock wears off—because of course he'd get turned on watching this, just like I was turned on watching Eden with him.

I thrust my erection against the mattress, needing friction as Eden lets out more mind-drugging moans.

I need to bury myself inside her, but I need her orgasm more.

"Fuck her with your fingers," Elijah murmurs, his voice deeper than normal. "Get her ready to take you."

I unhook my arm from around her and shove two fingers inside her wet pussy. They slide in with no resistance until the last knuckle. Her cunt sucks me in deeper, her inner walls warm and wet. I thrust like a madman, then slip a third in to stretch her wider so she can take me.

Eden throws her head back and rocks her hips against my mouth. She mumbles something else, but I'm too far gone to hear anything.

It's just like the first time I ate her out. Something takes over, and I'm homed in on making her come, no matter how my performance is. I latch my mouth onto her clit and flick it repeatedly with my tongue.

Her whimpers turn into loud moans, and she drops her chin to watch me. Her grip tightens in my hair as her inner walls clamp onto my fingers.

"Well, look at that," Elijah says, voice still husky. "You made her come. She's so wet for you already. Fuck her now."

I lap her one last time before I pull my fingers from her and move onto my knees. I guide the tip of my cock to her opening and meet her gaze. She sucks in a sharp breath and rests her palm on my abs, as if she's trying to stop me.

Eden's gaze drops to my cock, and she wiggles her hips, teasing me as she takes the tip inside her body. A breath hisses through my teeth, and I look down to stare at where we join.

She doesn't push me away. Or say no. She only spreads her legs wider.

I knew she was a slut for me. Now I have the proof. Eden can act put off all she fucking wants, but now we know she wants this as much as I do.

Flicking my gaze back to her face, I hook my arms under her knees. I ram forward, sinking until I bottom out. A groan slips out of me. Eden yells and arches her back.

I freeze.

Elijah lets out a shaky breath. “Jesus Christ. She’s a virgin.”

I don’t know if his whispered comment was meant for me. I don’t care either way.

She’s a virgin, just like I am.

That knowledge somehow lights the fire in me, and I pull out, then slam back in. The bed thumps against the wall with each hard thrust as I fuck her.

She lets out the sluttiest little moans and urges me to go harder. So I do. I fuck her as if she’s nothing but a hole to be used.

“Slow down. You’re going to come too fast,” Elijah says. “You need to feel her come on your dick. It’s one of the best feelings in the world.”

Gritting my teeth, I glare at Elijah. He pulled his cock out of his pants and is now stroking himself as he watches. Pre-cum beads at the tip, and the excess skin smears it when he strokes up, then back down.

Seeing his cock doesn’t bug me. If anything, I get harder at the thought of him coming inside Eden, just like I plan to do. I don’t share, but it’s like I’m looking in a mirror with Elijah. We have the same features, same tattoos. Same everything. It’s easy to pretend he’s me.

I slow my pace and let out a shuddering breath as I hold back my orgasm.

“Rub her clit,” Elijah says. His strokes become maddening as I roll my thumb on her bundle of nerves.

Eden fists the sheets and cries out as I fuck her faster.

The sound of our flesh clapping fills the room. The bed thumps against the wall again, and I couldn’t give two shits if our parents hear us.

Eden lets out a garbled moan, and her eyelashes flutter before her eyes roll back.

I wait for them to open again. For her to scream with pleasure. But nothing comes.

Elijah huffs a laugh. “She fell back asleep. Don’t worry, you can still make her come.”

I'd ask him how he knows that, but I clench my jaw and focus on fucking her in the same maddening tempo that edges me as well. The familiar tingle at the base of my spine intensifies. I'm so goddamn close to blowing my load inside her. It's too painful to hold back.

"Fuck," I growl.

Right when I'm about to lose my battle, Eden's pussy flutters, then clamps down on me. Her thighs clench, and her fingers tighten in the sheets as her eyes move behind her eyelids.

She isn't asleep at all. The little brat is pretending, as if it will chase away reality that she gets off on her brother fucking her.

A quivering breath escapes me, and I shove deeper inside her as her pussy tries to force me out of her.

"That's it," Elijah says. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

He groans, and his fist flies faster on his cock.

"Fuck," I growl. "I'm going—"

"Don't fucking come inside her," Elijah snarls. "We don't want tiny Astar babies with this girl."

I raise my head and glare at him.

Maybe I fucking do. I didn't think about having kids before now, but since Elijah is telling me not to do it, I want to do exactly that.

I tighten my grip on Eden's legs and pound into her. Her pussy squeezes me in pulses. It's enough to send me over the edge. I turn my glare to my brother as I come. I grunt and fill our stepsister, each pulse more toe-curling than the last.

"We don't know if she's on birth control," Elijah says.

I don't fucking care.

To let him know that, I thrust one last time and blow the last of my load into her. See if I give a fuck.

Elijah's eyebrows pinch together, and he moves from the head of the bed to look at where Eden and I are joined. The asshole tells me not to come inside her, but his fist flying over his cock tells me differently.

"You like that, don't you? That I'm going to knock up our sister." My grin stretches across my face, dark and malicious.

I stop moving and look between us. Her pussy stretches to accommodate my wide girth. She's perfect and made only for me.

Elijah's chest rises and falls with heavy breaths. His features twist with conflicted emotion. With a few more strokes, he aims the tip at her pelvis.

Cum lands on her pussy and my shaft. I shove deeper inside her, pushing his cum into her as well.

I don't know what the hell I'm thinking by helping him. I thought I didn't want to share, and I still don't, but the sight of my brother's cum inside our stepsister makes me hard all over again.

It's because I'm looking in the mirror at him. Simple as that.

After he finishes, he tucks himself into his pants.

The room falls into a tension-filled silence. I pull out of Eden and slap my softening cock against her pussy. Her eyelashes flutter.

A grin stretches my lips.

The little brat is still pretending to be asleep.

Another secret that's just between us.

This won't be the last time I fuck her tonight. I need her more than once. Who knows when I'll be able to do this again.

"You want to get her pregnant?" Elijah says. "This can solve the inheritance issue."

I glance at him with a frown.

He gestures toward Eden. "Our father didn't specify who has to marry me and carry my child."

Elijah strides toward the door and doesn't look back as he leaves. It shuts behind him with a soft click.

Silence fills the room like a weighted blanket, and it's enough to suffocate me; I miss the sounds of flesh slapping flesh.

I look at Eden and the sight of her naked body splayed before me. One time isn't enough. It never will be.

I lower myself over her and bury my face in the crook of her neck. My cock slips inside her, and I pump into her, each stroke harder than the last.

"I know you're awake. You can't fool me, little ghost," I whisper into her ear. "I'm putting a baby inside you tonight so you can't ever get away from me. You're mine."

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CHAPTER 31

EDEN

DAY 5 OF THE BET

I CAN'T BELIEVE my mother would invite Ashleigh Shepherd—the golden girl and Queen B—to celebrate Ruby's birthday at the clubhouse restaurant. She runs in Elijah's crowd, and I'm pretty sure they've hooked up. She makes it her mission to belittle and bully me.

I knew Mom and Joe would do something that centered adults over the kids. It doesn't stop me from feeling bad.

In the back room, I'm seated with my mother, Albert and Barbara Edwards, and a few older people I don't recognize. It's messed up that my mother would do this to me. I'd rather scratch my eyes out than be here.

I'm exhausted after last night, and I'd kill to crawl back into bed to catch a few more hours of sleep.

My face flushes with a blush.

Last night was . . .

I have no words. Just feelings.

Asher and Elijah snuck into my room, the latter talking Asher through it while he fucked me.

What I can't get over is that both teamed up, even though it was Asher who did everything. I never thought they'd do something like that.

Even after Elijah left and Asher stayed behind, I didn't open my eyes. Asher called my bluff, but I couldn't bring myself to face reality. I

pretended to be asleep while Asher fucked me until early in the morning. Then he snuck out.

I'm such a coward for not facing him. I've refused to be around them today, embarrassed by what I allowed them to do last night.

I mentally shake away the thoughts. It's better to pretend it never happened. It was a onetime event.

Glancing around the room, I check if the guys are here. I haven't seen them all morning, maybe because I avoided them. Or they're avoiding me.

Why the hell did I agree to come here when I could be in my dorm, playing with Lavender, studying, or doing anything but this?

Ashleigh laughs at whatever Mom said, delicately touching her chest. It has to be the fakest laugh I've heard—and that's saying something, since I've seen it all. Mom grins and touches Ashleigh's shoulder as she says something again, a smile curving her lips. She hasn't looked at me like that in a very long time.

I grab my champagne flute and toss it back.

"Easy there," Albert says. He knocks the back of his hand against my arm. "You don't want to get drunk, do you?"

I narrow my eyes at him and lean out of his reach.

"You've had three glasses of scotch since we sat down." I force a smile. "I think I'll be fine with my one glass of champagne, Mr. Edwards."

His thick eyebrows slash down as he narrows his eyes. "You're a feisty girl. You remind me a lot of my wife when she was young and beautiful."

"*Was*?" I say.

I glance at Barbara, who's sitting beside him. She watches us with a blank face, but I catch the fire in her gaze, though the blaze is dim. Probably from having to deal with this old man who doesn't know how to keep his nose out of other people's business.

Albert leans into me, once again invading my personal space. "She *was* beautiful. But you still have your youth. Don't waste it on poison." He glances at my empty glass.

I lean back until I'm bent to the side because he's still invading my space.

"Shut your mouth, Albert," Barbara says with a roll of her eyes. "And get out of the girl's face."

Jesus Christ, why do men do this? He looks thrilled that he's making me uncomfortable.

I don’t have to look at the other men at the table to know they’re watching. They all prefer to sit in silence because they see nothing wrong with this behavior.

Raising my chin, I scoot my chair back and stand. I don’t excuse myself, because they’d expect that. I leave the table and head toward the exit.

Ashleigh turns her head, her gaze locking with mine. She sneers at me from across the room and flicks her sandy-blonde hair over her shoulder. Turning back to my mother, she continues the conversation as if she’s the daughter.

Maybe she is. Maybe I really am the outcast everywhere.

Fuck it. I don’t care right now.

My phone vibrates as I head toward the clubhouse exit. Icy dread freezes my veins. I pull my phone out and read the message.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

What will the school think when they find out you opened your legs for your stepbrother?

Another message pops onto the screen.

Or how about your parents?

Attached image

I click on the picture, and I fumble my phone, catching it before it falls. My mother’s phone number is at the top in the screenshot. The same picture of Elijah and me in the shower is attached at the bottom, ready to send to her.

It’s not sent, but the thread is there.

EDEN

What do you want?

For you to suffer.

Why?

That’s for you to figure out on your own. Think very hard, slut.

I don’t know you.

Are you sure?

My eyebrows furrow together.

Do I know him?

Shaking off the question, I tap my finger against my phone and look at the image he sent.

What will it take for you to not send that screenshot to my mom?

You and your brother. I want to see you two fucking.

You’re just going to use it against me.

It’s that or I send the picture of you and him to your mom.

Your choice.

I stare at the message in horror.

He wants me to beg. To scramble and plead that he won’t ruin any more of my life.

I refuse to give that to him. He’ll get off on it and push me to sleep with my brother anyway.

“So that’s who you’ve been talking to,” a deep voice says behind me.

I jump and shove my phone into my pocket as I turn around. Elijah’s face hovers inches away from mine, so close that his breath tickles my lips.

“Where did you come from?” I step back.

“I saw you leave, so I followed you.” He straightens and slips his hands into his pockets. His gaze slides to my hidden phone like he’s still able to read the messages between me and the nameless man.

“How long has he been messaging you?” he says.

“You weren’t supposed to read those.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I’m supposed to help you with the bullying. I can’t do that if you’re hiding any form of it from me.”

Letting out a breath, I avert my gaze. “It’s embarrassing.” I can’t believe I just admitted that to him, but I can’t stop myself from the word vomit. “I

don’t know who he is, but he’s been texting me for some time. There’s really no way you can help me with this.”

“Is it just texting?”

My gaze snaps back to him, and I nod. I can’t admit that the person on the other side has been visiting me during the night.

“Have you blocked his number?”

“Yeah, and he keeps changing it so his texts go through.”

“What else has he said?”

“How much did you read?”

Elijah frowns. “That he wants to see us together. What else?”

“I don’t like that he’s bringing you into this.”

“Give me your phone, birdie.” He holds out his hand.

I quickly shake my head. “No.”

He steps closer and tilts his head. “Remember that I’m on your side.”

My heart hammers so hard that I can hear it. My knees wobble, and I sink further away from him.

“I don’t want you to see everything he sent,” I say. “Just tell me what we can do to make him stop.”

“Why are you protecting him?” His expression darkens, and he steps forward, easily closing the gap between us.

I take another step back. “I’m not protecting him.”

“Then give me your phone.” *Step*. “I won’t know who it is unless you show me.” *Step*.

“You won’t know.” My back meets the door, and I take a breath as I tilt back my head.

Elijah rests his forearm beside my head, and he stares into my eyes as he fishes in my pocket with his free hand. I shake my head and fight to get the phone back from him, but he easily overpowers me and holds it out of reach. He turns the screen toward me to use my face to unlock the phone before he scrolls through the messages.

“Elijah, please,” I whisper.

I swipe for the phone, but he raises it higher and keeps scrolling. Every second that passes, his eyebrows dip lower and lower until he’s scowling at the screen.

After he finishes, he turns his glare on me. “He touched you?”

My arms fall to my sides, and I drop my head against the door. Tears pool in my eyes, and I nod once.

“I’m sorry that he’s bringing you into this, too,” I whisper.

Elijah shakes his head and mutters a curse under his breath. “I’ll take care of him.”

“How?” I let out a dry laugh. “Do you know who it is?”

“I don’t. But I have my ways.”

“Elijah—” I swallow around the lump forming in my throat. “I’m sorry.”

His features soften. It has to be the first time he’s looked at me like this. As if he feels bad that I’m going through something traumatic and feeling hopeless. He cups my cheek and strokes it with his thumb.

“Don’t be sorry,” he whispers. “It’s not your fault.”

“It feels like it.”

He lowers his head until his mouth hovers an inch away from mine. “Eden, it’s *not* your fault. Whoever this guy is, he’s fucked in the head. He’s the one that’s—”

“Eli!” a woman squeals.

His lips clamp shut, and his eye twitches before he peeks over his shoulder at her. I follow the line of his gaze and frown at Ashleigh. Elijah straightens and puts space between us so we don’t look like two lovers caught together.

“Oh, it’s you,” Elijah says, his tone dry. “How pleasant to see you, Ashleigh. I’ve been avoiding you all morning. How’s your boyfriend, Max?”

Ashleigh walks toward us, her steps more like skipping than anything else. “We’re not together anymore.”

“I’ll let you two catch up.” I shove the bar on the door.

Elijah catches me by the elbow and drags me back to him.

“We’re not done talking yet,” he whispers in my ear.

Releasing me, he turns back to Ashleigh, his features blank, but his lip curls as if she smells like shit.

The same look he always gave me before he started helping me.

I shudder and rush through the door.

He can say we’re not done talking, but I can’t stand talking more about what’s been happening. I’m at the *if I don’t acknowledge it, it doesn’t exist* phase. I also don’t trust that Elijah will take care of the problem. I think he’ll make it worse.

I take a deep breath before starting my trek back to the house. It’s a twenty-minute walk, and I need it to clear my head.

I don’t know what Elijah has in mind to help me with this man who’s been texting, but knowing him, it won’t be anything good.

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CHAPTER 32

EDEN

NIGHT 5 OF THE BET

SIPPING MY MIMOSA, I lean against the deck's railing. The sun set fifteen minutes ago, turning the sky into pretty shades of orange, blue, and pink. Fireflies dance in the grass in the backyard, making the moment feel magical. The fairy lights on the railing help.

The kids play while the rest of us mingle. I've been doing my best to avoid Asher and Elijah since everyone else returned from the clubhouse. I still can't look them in the eye after last night. Not only that, but Elijah now knows about the texts and some of the things the man made me do to him.

My gaze slides to him again for the . . . I don't know how many times. I've lost count. Elijah ditched his contacts, and now glasses frame his dark eyes. He has no right to look that good while wearing glasses.

Scratch that.

He has no right to look that good in general.

He's been moving closer to me, but thankfully, people stop him mid-track and keep him busy in conversation.

I'm over the guilt of being attracted to him because he's my stepbrother. So what if we grew up together? It's just as he said; we're not blood. I don't know what's stopping me from getting with him. Maybe it's nerves, or maybe I'm now afraid of what he thinks of me after finding out about the nighttime visits from the bully.

He sips a whiskey sour while talking with Miss Anderson, Ashleigh's aunt, and a few other women who've flocked closer to him. They're eye-fucking him, and he's going along with it, grinning and flirting back with them. Miss Anderson is in her forties, and Elijah is twenty-two. There's no way anything could come out of that.

I roll my eyes and push away from the railing.

It doesn't surprise me that older women circle Elijah like vultures. I just hate the weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. Almost like jealousy, and there's no way that I'm jealous.

My fingers tighten around my drink as she giggles and playfully slaps his shoulder, then touches his bicep. Elijah's jaw clenches, and he shoots a glare at her before schooling his features and grinning.

But I caught it, and it's like a tether that draws me toward him.

I squeeze past the vultures and stop beside Elijah, my arm brushing against his. He looks down at me, his gaze guarded and hard to read.

"Your father is looking for you," I say.

He raises an eyebrow. "Is that right?"

I nod. "He said it's important."

Elijah tilts his head, still staring at me with that uncanny expression. Before I wither into a husk beneath his brooding expression, he turns to the older women with a beaming smile that's so fake it's convincing.

"Ladies, if you'll excuse me, I have to go." He raises his drink in a salute before turning and resting his hand on my lower back. He guides me away from the group of women and waits until we're out of earshot before saying, "He's not really looking for me. What's the real reason you pulled me away?"

His touch burns through my shirt and into my skin, leaving behind a trail of fire that goes straight between my legs.

That damn memory of last night is getting to me more than it did earlier.

Or maybe it's the alcohol that's buzzing through my veins and making me more sensitive to his touch.

I quietly clear my throat. "She touched you."

He turns his head, slow and meticulous. "She did," he drawls. "Are you jealous, birdie?"

My cheeks heat. "That's funny. I thought I was helping you." I step away from him. "I'll leave you alone."

Elijah catches me by the wrist and pulls me into him. “Tell me the truth,” he murmurs.

“Why does it matter?”

His dark chuckle sends a shiver down my spine. “Because I want to know if you’ve been thinking about that kiss as much as I have. I need to know if the thought of another woman touching me makes you see red, just like knowing another man touched you is making me see red.”

My heart thumps harder against my chest. I peek at him from beneath my lashes.

Does he know I was awake while he and Asher were in my bedroom? He did in the beginning, but he didn’t know that I was pretending afterward.

Does he think I forgot about it? Or are we all just pretending?

Instead of asking, I say, “I didn’t want to.”

“I’m not saying you did.” He releases my wrist and skims his touch over my palm before threading his fingers between mine. “But I want to so badly remove the memory of him from your body.” He leans down until his lips are beside my ear again. “Do you want that, baby? For me to touch you?”

I swallow hard. “It doesn’t bother you that we’re stepsiblings?”

He catches my earlobe between his teeth and nips. “I’m unapologetic about what and who I like.”

“You like me?”

“Yes, silly girl. I like you.”

“What about the threat? Aren’t you afraid of your reputation being tarnished because of me?”

“No, I’m not afraid of a ruined reputation.”

The vultures from earlier enter the room, their hushed whispers and cackles filling the silence.

Elijah straightens and leads me toward the hallway.

“Where are we going?” I say.

He guides me to the staircase and spares me a glance before ushering me up. “Somewhere more private.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I check to make sure no one is around or following us. We haven’t really done a good job of being inconspicuous.

“I think it’s a perfect idea.” Elijah winks at me. “The party is a dud, and I need some entertainment. I’m sure you wouldn’t mind that, either.”

He pulls me into his bedroom and shuts the door behind him. The lock slides into place, and I look at it, then up at his face.

“What were you thinking of us doing?”

He leads me by the hand to his bed, then sits on the edge. He folds his hands in his lap and settles his piercing dark eyes on me.

“We’re going to play a game,” he says.

I tilt my head. “A game?”

The corner of his lip curves into a small, mischievous smirk that does nothing to settle the anxiety swirling in my stomach.

“Truth or kiss,” he says.

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CHAPTER 33

EDEN

NIGHT 5 OF THE BET

I STARE AT HIM, his words echoing in my head and taking far too long to sink in. “Truth or *kiss*? You couldn’t have stuck with truth or dare?”

Elijah tilts his head in that egotistical manner that grates on my nerves every time he does it. His cocky smile widens.

“Well, I need something a little more daring to make you tell me the truth. Now, are you up for playing, or do I need to figure out another way for us to get to know each other? You don’t really want to kiss me again, do you?”

He said he likes me. It’s obvious he wants to do it again, but I’m trying so hard to make him see reason. Maybe for my benefit, because I’m losing sight of why I don’t want to do anything with him.

God, I want to give in so badly and make last night happen again.

A strange look passes over his face, then it’s gone as fast as it appeared. “If you don’t want to kiss, then it’s a good incentive to tell me the truth.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Deadly.”

I hate his hot-and-cold behavior. It reminds me of when he would sneer at the sight of me.

“If you don’t want to kiss, then how about you remove an article of your clothing if you’re caught lying? Got it?”

I fold my arms under my breasts. “I don’t want to play this game with you.”

“Then how about truth or fuck?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“You.” He says it so simply, like he’s talking about the weather.

“I didn’t do anything,” I say.

“Is that what you think?”

My lips pinch together, and I take a calming breath through my nose before saying, “Truth or kiss.”

Elijah’s lips curve. “Truth.”

“Do you hate me?”

“No.” He rolls his eyes. “If I hated you, I wouldn’t be playing this game with you. And I’ve already told you I like you. Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.”

“How long has the unknown number been texting you?”

“A year. Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

Elijah rolls his eyes. “That’s surface-level, birdie.”

“Fine,” I say with a huff. “Why do you let me touch you if you don’t like it from others?”

He slowly blinks, and a smile creeps onto his face. “That’s much better. It’s because your reactions are far different from the others when you touch me. Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.”

“When did he start touching you?”

I shift on the mattress, suddenly uncomfortable. “A few nights ago. Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.”

“Are you worried about us getting caught together?”

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “We’ve been over this before. But I’ll entertain you. No, I’m not worried. Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.”

“Are you really a virgin?”

My jaw drops, and I avert my gaze. He doesn’t know that I was awake when he and Asher were in my bedroom last night. He must believe that I

don’t remember anything, and that’s for the best. “Why do you want to know so badly?”

Elijah wags a finger at me with a tsk. “It’s not my turn. Answer the question.”

I avert my gaze. “Yes.”

My face tingles from the weight of his stare, and when I turn back to him, I find him watching me with an odd expression, as if he’s biting his tongue.

“I’m telling you the truth. I haven’t done anything with anyone.”

A dark brow arches. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.”

“Why do you suddenly want to be my friend?”

He doesn’t blink or hesitate when he answers. “Because I want a relationship with you.”

My stomach somersaults. “Like a sibling relationship?”

Elijah smirks. “You can’t ask two questions. It’s my turn. Truth or kiss?”

“Truth.” I scowl at him.

“Have you ever kissed before me?”

“Yes.”

Elijah’s eyes narrow, and he leans forward, closing the space between us. “You’re lying.”

I lean back and shake my head. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” He moves in closer and scowls. “You always swallow hard and look to the right when you’re lying.”

Fuck. “I’m not lying! I’ve kissed before.”

Elijah frowns. “You’re doing it again. That’s three lies. Take off your clothes.”

My jaw drops. “I’m not stripping.”

“You agreed to the rules of the game. Now strip.”

I shoot off the bed and put a good amount of space between us. Elijah remains seated, his hands burrowed in the soft duvet on the mattress.

“I never agreed to the rules.” I take another step backward. “And I’m not playing anymore.”

Elijah leans forward. “You agreed when you started playing. If you don’t take off three things, I’ll do it for you.”

I swallow hard and glance at the bedroom door that's still a good distance away. Turning back to Elijah, I find him in the same spot and looking seconds away from lunging at me.

"Fine," I grit out.

Elijah relaxes and straightens the cuff of his long-sleeved shirt.

Taking a deep breath, I kick off my shoes, then peel my shirt over my head. Elijah's gaze drops to my bra. His features remain blank, his eyes never changing. The way he's looking at me is apathetic at best and disinterested at worst.

I hesitate on the third clothing item.

I don't know if I should remove my bra or if I should strip out of my skirt instead.

Not wanting to be topless, I shove my skirt down and kick it aside. Elijah watches my movements, never showing a reaction.

"There." I hold out my arms and let them drop to my sides. "Happy?"

He purses his lips. "No."

I huff. "I don't know what else to do."

"Take off the third clothing item."

"I did."

"No." He looks up at my face. "You didn't. Shoes don't count."

I glare at him, unable to find any words within my anger. Gritting my teeth, I reach behind and unhook my bra, then rip it off. My breasts spill from the cups, and cool air kisses my pebbled nipples.

"Better?" I growl.

Elijah stares at my chest with the same blank expression. His finger pauses mid-stroke on his jaw. Slowly, he raises his gaze to my face and briefly nods. "Your turn."

I fold my arms over my breasts to hide them from his view. "Truth or kiss?"

Elijah leans on his hands and breaks the blank mask with a devilish smile. "Kiss."

"Why do you want to—" His answer sinks in, and I clamp my mouth shut.

Elijah arches an eyebrow, still smiling like the cat that finally caught the mouse.

"Did you just say *kiss*?" I whisper.

"I did."

“Why?”

He cocks his head. “I said kiss. Not truth. Now come here.”

“What happens if I don’t?”

“Then you’ll have to remove your panties, and I’m sure you’d hate to do that.”

My cheeks heat with another blush. I ease toward him, each step making my heart thump faster and harder against my chest.

Elijah pats his lap. “Straddle me.”

I stop in front of him and ball my hands into fists at my sides. Elijah openly roves his gaze down my body and fixes it on my breasts. His eyes darken, and he raises them to my face, waiting.

Swallowing my pride and nerves, I straddle his lap with my knees on each side of him. Elijah cups my waist, his fingertips digging into the flesh and holding me in place.

“I’m still waiting,” he says, his words a purr.

I take a calming breath and lean down. My lips brush against his in a chaste kiss, and I start to draw away from him, but he cups the back of my head to prevent my escape.

“That’s not a kiss,” he whispers against my mouth.

My stomach flips, and I swallow hard, trying to work past my nerves. He’s chipping away at my defenses.

I press my lips firmly against his and hold still. Elijah huffs against my mouth and deepens the kiss by catching my bottom lip with his teeth, then taking advantage of my gasp by plunging his tongue into my mouth.

This time around is so different from last night in his car. The last kiss was frenzied and left no time to explore. This time around, he’s just as demanding, leaving enough room for me to go mad from wanting more from him.

Every swipe of his tongue against mine is methodical, planned out, and downright sinful—just like the last time.

I shouldn’t enjoy this. I shouldn’t want more from my stepbrother, and yet, here I am, needing his hands on me. Needing him to consume me until I don’t know up from down.

He tugs me over his lap until our hips align perfectly for my pussy to grind over his hard cock. I gasp into his mouth, and he swallows the sound with more hungry kisses.

Elijah is the first to end the kiss. He peppers smaller ones along my jaw and down my neck. I bite my bottom lip to keep from whimpering as he finds a sensitive spot on my throat. My hips rock against his on their own, earning a grunt from him as his hips rise to meet mine.

I'm losing it. No, I've already lost it, and I want more. I *need* more.

"Aren't you going to touch me?" I whisper, my voice husky with desire.

Elijah nips at the spot he's focused on. "Is that what you want, baby?"

"I *am* sitting half-naked on your lap right now."

He lets out a dry laugh and raises his head. I barely glimpse the amusement shining in his eyes before his mouth descends on mine again. His large hand disappears from behind my head and slips into the sliver of space between our bodies. A moan escapes me as he cups my breast and squeezes.

"God, I love the sounds you're making," he murmurs into my mouth.

I arch my back to push more of my breast into his palm. Elijah squeezes harder, then pinches my hardened nipple into a tighter, more sensitive peak.

"Care to make another mess on my thigh?" He pinches my other nipple, then squeezes my breast to show it the same attention. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about how you rode my leg."

I throw my head back and rock faster on his lap. The friction against my clit sends me closer to the edge. All I need is one push and I'll fall into the deep end. Warmth pools low in my stomach, and the familiar tingles build until I'm sure there's no going back.

I crack open my eyes and find Elijah watching me. He leans back on his palms, resting on the mattress behind him, his eyes dark with lust.

Leaning forward, I kiss him again, needing that connection. He sits up and digs his fingers into the soft flesh of my breast as he squeezes. At some point, the kisses become sloppy. Our teeth knock against each other, and he catches my bottom lip, then nips it until a bead of blood wells to the surface. He licks it away.

"Mmm," Elijah groans. "As much as I would love to see you come, sis, we still have a game to play."

I gasp as he moves me off his lap and beside him on the bed.

Blinking away the lust-filled haze, I cover my breasts with my arms and shift in my seat. It's hard to get comfortable when my inner walls are spasming and my clit is in pain from the denial.

I was so close.

Elijah shifts his hips to get more comfortable, not in the least embarrassed about his erection straining beneath his pants. “Truth or kiss?”

I wet my lips and taste Elijah on them. “Truth.”

He plucks his glasses off his face and pulls a lens wipe out of his pocket. “I’m about to ask you a harder question. Remember, birdie, if you lie to me, you have to take off your panties.”

I clench my jaw.

Elijah wipes his glasses with the cloth. “Have you ever fantasized about me?”

I force myself to continue staring at him since he knows when I’m lying. “No.”

Elijah pauses and tilts his head. He holds my stare for what feels like forever, and the whole time I’m unable to breathe. His gaze flicks back and forth over my face. Then he breaks the stare as he sets his glasses back on the bridge of his nose and pushes them up with his middle finger.

“Take them off,” he says calmly.

My jaw drops. “I didn’t lie.”

Elijah scowls. “Yes, you did.”

“I didn’t look away or swallow hard.”

He slowly blinks, and the corners of his lips curl into a cruel smile. “You think I was telling you the truth about your telltale signs?” He tsks. “No, no, no. I’m not stupid to give that information to you. Now, *strip*.”

That lying son of a bitch.

I jump up from the bed. Like the last time, I don’t put on a show for him as I strip out of the last of my clothes. After shoving my panties down my legs, I kick them away and stand in front of him.

“Well?” I say, embarrassed that I’m naked and he’s fully clothed.

Elijah’s gaze dips down my body in a slow once-over. He has the same frustrating blank expression.

“Am I really that—”

“You’re beautiful, Eden.” Elijah’s focus settles on my face, and he shoves his glasses in place with a middle finger. “You have no idea how difficult it is to hold back from bending you over and fucking you until you know only my name. So don’t ever fucking doubt yourself again.”

“What’s stopping you?” I can’t believe that just came out of my mouth.

His shoulders stiffen, and his gaze flicks back to my face, as if he hadn’t been expecting me to ask him that. “Is that what you want? For me to fuck

you?”

My stomach flips, and I awkwardly shift my weight onto one leg. “I-I don’t know.”

“You better be fucking sure, Eden. This isn’t the time to joke around.” Elijah stands and towers over me. He takes one step toward me, then another as I inch backward.

“I’m not joking,” I say.

Elijah’s gaze flicks back and forth as he searches for the lie in my face. When he sees that I’m telling the truth, he says, “We’re not done playing. Lie down and spread your legs.”

My lips part, then slam shut. “A-are you serious?”

Elijah turns and motions toward the bed. “You keep asking me that. When have I ever joked about anything with you?”

I swallow my pride and crawl onto the bed, then lie on my back.

“Open,” he orders.

Taking a shaky breath, I ease my legs open and let them drop as far as they can go. Elijah crawls onto the bed and settles into a crouch between my spread thighs. He cranes his head as he stares at my pussy.

“Change of rules.” He glances up at my face. “You tell me a lie and instead of kissing you on the lips up here”—he points to my mouth—“I’ll kiss you on these lips right here.” He gestures to my pussy.

I drop my head on the pillow and let out a shaky breath.

Here’s to finally letting go.

“Truth or kiss?” I say.

“Kiss.”

He doesn’t wait for me to say anything before he settles on his stomach and dives forward. His mouth latches onto my mound, his tongue swirling over my swollen clit.

I squeeze my eyes shut and grip the sheets. Elijah winds his arms around my thighs and hikes my legs higher to give himself more room as he continues tonguing my cunt. Soft moans escape me until he catches the bundle of nerves between his lips with a groan. I cry out and tangle my fingers in his hair.

This is just like the dream. He did the exact same thing and looked at me the way he’s staring at me right now. His smoldering, dark eyes remain on my face to watch my every expression.

“Fuck.” I groan and throw my head back.

Elijah’s moan goes straight to my clit, and it’s enough to hurtle me over the cliff after being edged while riding his thigh.

I slap my palm over my mouth to muffle my moans as I come. Elijah works me through it and shoves two fingers inside to pump in and out of the spasming walls.

When I come down, I expect him to stop, but he continues his assault. I shove his head, but he doesn’t budge.

“W-wait. It’s too much!” I cry.

His tongue laps at my sensitive, swollen clit. Each stroke stokes the embers of my pleasure and builds another climax. I rock myself against his mouth.

Elijah’s dark eyes rise to my face, and he pins me down with his arm wound around my waist. I can’t look away from him. I don’t think I want to, even though a small part of me feels guilty that I’m doing this with my stepbrother.

A shudder rolls through me, and I whimper as another orgasm crests. Right before I fall, he stops and pulls away.

“Why’d you stop?” I whine.

He licks his lips and sits back on his haunches. “Time’s up.”

“There’s a time limit?”

He moves off the bed, adjusts himself, then lowers the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt. “Stay just like that, and I’ll be right back.”

I sit up and bring my legs to my chest to hide myself from him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He strides to the door and glances at me over his shoulder. “Just a minute. That’s all I need.”

He doesn’t wait for me to respond before he leaves me in the bedroom and shuts the door behind him.

I almost follow him. Instead, I take a few minutes to catch my breath and wait for the aching need to fade before I stand from his bed. I dress in record time and give myself a once-over in the large mirror by his closet door.

My eyes widen at my messy hair and flushed face. I fix the strands back into place. There’s nothing I can do about my complexion and how it looks like I just finished fucking Elijah.

Shaking off the conflicting feelings, I open the door and step out. I grunt as I collide with a wall. Blinking, I realize it’s not a wall but a chest. Hands

grab my waist and shove me back into Elijah's room.

"What are you doing?"

Elijah covers my mouth with his palm and spins me around before shoving me against the wall beside the door.

"I told you to wait for me."

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CHAPTER 34

EDEN

NIGHT 5 OF THE BET

His mouth crashes against mine as he walks me backward and deeper into the room. The backs of my trembling knees bump against the mattress.

"I told you to stay ready for me, did I not?" he murmurs between kisses.

"Elijah," I whimper.

Where the hell did he go? Why did he need to leave before coming back?

The questions fade from my mind like a puff of smoke as his lips move against mine while he pushes my skirt and panties to my knees.

Elijah rips his lips from mine, and he spins me around with my back to him. He shoves between my shoulder blades.

"Ass out," he growls.

The word *wait* sits on the tip of my tongue but doesn't come out.

I'm done waiting, and he is too.

Elijah grabs my hips and jerks me backward, closer to him. Every touch, every word, is harsh and desperate.

He unbuttons his pants and frees his erection. I peek at him over my shoulder, my breath coming out in quick bursts.

"You're so wet for me." He smacks my folds with his cock before slamming inside me.

My eyes roll back as he forces more of his length into me. It keeps going and going and going until he bottoms out.

I thought this would hurt. Or that I would see black dots and my ears would ring because of how sore I am from the last time. The only discomfort here is the pressure from his invasion. It goes all the way to my lower stomach as he meets resistance.

Elijah pulls out, then slams into me again. His hips slap against my bottom as he shows no mercy with his thrusts. I rock into him with every forward stroke inside me. That seems to throw him into a tizzy because he fists my hair and holds me still as he fucks me.

The sounds of our flesh meeting and our harsh breathing fill the room. I bite my tongue to keep from moaning and making it worse. We can't get caught like this.

"Fuck, Eden." He slaps my ass and dips his hand between my legs.

My mouth falls open in a silent moan as he uses my wetness to rub my clit.

"Make a sound, and I'll shove my cock in your mouth instead," he says.

I suck in a strangled breath and freeze.

That's the same thing the man who came into my dorm room said.

It's a coincidence. That's all.

The thought melts my tension, and I move my hips to rock back into him. His hand disappears from my hair and slides around my throat to squeeze. It's enough pressure to make it feel like I can't breathe.

My eyelashes flutter, and my lips part on a silent moan. My muscles lock, and I push onto the tips of my toes as my orgasm sweeps me off my feet.

"Dirty girl," he whispers in my ear. He chuckles beneath his breath. "Do you like it when I choke you?"

I nod and dig my fingers into the mattress, blindly scratching it for purchase.

"I'll remember that." Elijah grabs my hips, and his grunts fill the room, along with the sounds of our flesh slapping together.

He groans, and warmth fills me as he comes. He moves harder, as if he's pushing his cum deeper inside me.

I try to pull away, but he holds me in place, rocking me up and down on his shaft as he pushes deeper with every downward stroke.

"You're not wasting my cum." He slams into me one more time and holds still.

"I'm not on birth control!"

Does it matter? You let Asher come inside you last night.

My stomach twists at the small voice in the back of my mind.

"Good." He pulls out and swipes the swollen tip against my folds and pushes the escaped cum back into me.

I spin around and glare at him. "What the hell do you mean, *good*? Are you out of your mind?"

He grins and tucks himself into his pants. "Maybe I am."

"I could get pregnant." Tears form in my eyes, and I hold them back from breaking free.

"I'm putting a baby inside you tonight." Asher's words replay in my head, and I force them out of my mind. I don't need the reminder, dammit. This isn't Asher that I'm talking to, but it's odd how the twins have the same mentality.

His gaze darkens, and a slow smile creeps onto his face. "I want to see your stomach swollen with my child. You trying to scare me won't work."

I suck in a breath and step back. I fix my panties and skirt into place. "First you said you want a relationship with me, and now you want me pregnant. What else? Marriage too?"

His smile widens, more wolfish than humorous. "I'll see you downstairs."

I grab his arm as he walks away, and I shake my head. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Elijah turns and invades my space. "You. That's what's wrong with me."

"I don't know how it's my fault since I haven't done anything."

"Yes . . . you . . . have." He says each word slowly, bending down until his lips hover above mine.

I swallow hard and hold still. Something's changed about him. His demeanor is off, as if he's a tight cord threatening to snap.

He hesitates before his lips crash against mine, his tongue shoving into my mouth. I suck in a breath and push him away, but he catches my wrists and pins them against his chest.

All I can do is accept defeat, kissing him back as if my life depends on it.

He tastes of raspberries.

The kiss ends too soon for my liking. He catches my lower lip between his teeth, pulls it out, then releases it with a *pop*. His groan goes straight

between my legs, igniting the fire in me again.

"Please," I whisper.

He grins and kisses me one last time before pulling away. "Find me again later if you're desperate for more."

My eyelashes flutter as I open my eyes. Elijah stares at me for a moment. He's looking at me with desire, want, and longing. It's so different, seeing him like this.

I swallow hard. "We shouldn't have done that."

He grins, leans forward, and kisses the corner of my mouth. "I'll fuck you as many times as I want. Do you understand?"

"You don't get to decide that." I turn my head away from him, making his lips brush against my cheek. I try to ignore the fact that I'm even more turned on by his demands.

Maybe it won't hurt to continue fucking him. We're already in the deep end, so why stop here?

I mentally shake away the tiny voice in my head.

If I keep sleeping with Elijah, it'll only prove the person who's texting me right—that I fuck my brother and I'm easy.

Elijah pinches my cheeks between his fingers again and turns my head, forcing me to look into his dark, merciless eyes. "I get to decide that, and I know you want it, too. You want *me* too."

"What if someone finds out? What then?"

"You act as if I'm afraid of the outcome." He smirks. "Have a little trust and quit fighting me."

He kisses me one last time on the lips before he backs away and leaves the room.

I blink, shocked by what just happened.

Leaving Elijah's bedroom, I walk to my door and shut it behind me. I lean against the wall and stare blankly at my bed.

Sleeping with Elijah doesn't shock me as much as knowing I want to do it again. I want to sleep with Elijah again.

And I will.

What's the worst that can happen?

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CHAPTER 35

ELIJAH

NIGHT 5 OF THE BET

My fingers glide over the piano keys, filling the room with the haunting melody. Every note builds anticipation for something bigger, more frightening.

It's dark, much like how I'm feeling right now. I was on the verge of saying fuck it all while I was alone with Eden. So close to breaking my promise to Asher.

Opening my eyes, I settle my gaze on the untouched glass of whiskey sitting on top of the piano. I never touched the instrument this much until getting mixed up with Eden. I haven't drunk this much either.

What the hell is she doing to me?

She deserves every bit of my hatred, right along with her gold-digging mother. I've been nothing but a dutiful son to my father. Yet, it seems I never measure up to him.

He wants me to marry, and I'm twenty-three years old with a long life ahead of me. He also wants me to have a son.

Why the fuck does he think I'm ready to have kids?

A memory of Asher fucking our sister and pushing his cum deeper inside her flashes through my mind. Blood rushes to my cock and hardens it.

I didn't think I would be into something like watching him fuck someone.

No. Not just someone. Our stepsister.

Our father didn't specify who to knock up and marry.

There's the loophole I've been looking for.

I can't stand Eden. Or at least, in the recent past, I couldn't. Now I look forward to spending time with her and learning more about her. I even find myself wanting to fuck her.

A tall form moves in my periphery, and I slow the melody. I play a few more notes, and then I stop with my fingers hovering above the keys. Leaning forward, I snatch the glass of whiskey and toss it back. It burns all the way down and warms my stomach until it feels like there's a fire blazing inside me.

"How did it go?" I return the cup to the piano. The glass thuds against the wood.

I don't care. Let him know that what he did bothers me. See if I give a fuck.

Asher meanders closer to the piano and rolls his sucker between his forefinger and thumb. He pops it into his mouth and sucks for a moment before taking it out. I grit my teeth as he leans against the piano and slips his other hand into his pocket.

"Do you feel better now that you got it out of your system?" I glare at him, hating how relaxed he is, like he's truly satisfied that he got his dick wet with our stepsister.

Asher pops the sucker into his mouth and folds his arms against his chest as he looks at the doorway, as if he's considering going back for a second round.

"Don't tell me you're jealous," he says softly. "You don't know the lengths that I'll go to keep her."

He peeks at me from the corner of his eye and scowls.

"You were only supposed to watch her, Asher," I growl. "You had one job. Watch and report back to me."

He shrugs. "Things change."

"*Things change*." I let out a dry laugh. "You mean falling for our stepsister? Is her pussy really that good that you're putting her above the mission?"

Asher's body stiffens, and he slowly turns his head toward me.

"Don't speak about her like that." He enunciates each word carefully, a threat lingering in every syllable.

“Do you hear yourself?” I laugh and shake my head. “You’ve gone mad.”

His gaze darkens, malice and anger swirling in his onyx eyes.

“You’re sleeping with the enemy,” I say. “You must really want us to have that inheritance, huh?”

When all he does is scowl at me, I shove back the piano bench and stand. Its feet scrape against the polished hardwood floor, filling the room with the god-awful sound. I snatch the empty glass and storm to the wet bar to pour another drink.

The whole time, I feel the weight of Asher’s glare.

He knows I’m right. I refuse to let Eden get between us, but he doesn’t see it that way. Asher would rather get stuck on some fucking pussy—forbidden pussy at that. If our father found out what we’re doing, what Asher has done, any possibility of us receiving the inheritance is likely gone.

We’re playing a dangerous game by risking her getting pregnant.

“You’re jealous.”

My hand slips, and whiskey splashes onto the marble counter beside the cup.

“I’m not,” I say through clenched teeth.

“Then why are you upset about me fucking our stepsister?” Asher’s footsteps draw closer to me. “If she were anyone else, you would have brushed it aside and said not to catch feelings for her.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing? Telling you not to catch feelings?” I set down the whiskey decanter and drop the glass stopper into the opening.

“No. You’re throwing a fucking fit like a child.” He stops behind me. “Just admit it, Elijah. You want her, too.”

“I don’t.” I toss back the whiskey and squeeze my eyes shut as it burns my throat.

He scoffs. “You’re a coward.”

I face him and bare my teeth in a snarl. “Bite your tongue, Asher. You may be my brother, but that won’t stop me from putting you in your place.”

He grins, and it’s wolfish, all teeth. “Maybe it’s right that *you* don’t fall for Eden. I don’t share, Elijah. Not her. Not with you or anyone else, for that matter.”

“You don’t share?” I chuckle, the sound rougher than humorous. “You’re a lying son of a bitch.”

His eyebrow twitches, but he doesn’t say anything. The look in his eyes tells me everything I need to know.

My grin widens, and I step closer to him. The closer I get, the more his pupils dilate.

“You got off on seeing me with Eden,” I say. “It turned you on when you listened to me licking her pussy to get her ready for you. So yes, you like the thought of sharing, but you’re too fucking stubborn to admit it.”

In a blink, Asher tackles me to the ground. His fist flies toward my face, and I don’t have enough time to stop it. I grunt as it slams into my jaw. I laugh maniacally and take the hits from him as he unleashes his frustration on me.

He’s acting like a child, and maybe I am too.

Because he’s right. I’m so jealous that I’m seeing red and lashing out. The issue is that I’m willing to share Eden with my brother, but he isn’t.

Copper coats my tongue, and I laugh harder.

“You’re my brother,” I say between each hit, my laughter increasing. “And you matter to me. So I’m warning you now that I won’t hold back with Eden anymore.”

Asher stops, his fist inches from my face. He glares at me and swings his arm back as if he’s about to hit me again.

I grin, bloody teeth bared. “Did you forget that I have a bet to win? I need proof, and the only way to get it is if I sleep with her.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

I shake my head, chuckling. “Not good enough.”

Asher throws himself off me and stalks across the room toward the piano. I roll onto my side and stand. I swipe the blood from my lip with my thumb and stare at the red stain before returning my attention to my twin.

I bite my tongue. I already have the bruises and busted lip from my father, which is the perfect excuse when Eden asks.

My phone’s notifications ping. After grabbing my cell from my pocket, I read the text from Derrick.

DERRICK

The Walker brothers sent another message.

attached image

My eyes narrow as I stare at the photo.

Without looking up from my phone, I say, “When we get back to the dorms tomorrow, I have another mission for you.”

I catch him in my periphery as he fully turns to look at me, the weight of his stare pressing in.

“When you send a warning,” I say, “I want you to make it fucking hurt for them.”

The Walker brothers have gone too far, and it’s time I put an end to it.

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CHAPTER 36

EDEN

DAY 6 OF THE BET

"YOU NEED to pick up your speed," Shane says with a laugh. "I'll beat you at this rate."

Tossing a glare at him, I stomp on the fake gas pedal and whip the wheel to one side. Our on-screen cars race side-by-side. He flies past mine and speeds toward the end goal.

His *whoop* startles me, and I glance at him as he throws his hands in the air. His name flashes on our screens, right below *winner* in bold.

Sighing, I squeeze my eyes shut and drop back in my seat.

My head wasn't in the game. It's been everywhere else but here in the present time.

The ride back to campus was long and quiet. Unlike last time, Asher was awake and openly staring at me. Even while I was in the front passenger seat, I could feel the weight of his stare, almost as if he were judging me for sleeping with Elijah.

The twins have always been close. Just from observing them from afar, I gathered they had no secrets between them. So I know Asher knows about it, and he looked upset.

"What the hell happened, dude?"

I open my eyes at Shane's question. "I must be more tired than I thought."

“Ah, I meant to ask you about your weekend trip.” He rubs his nape and winces. “How did that go?”

It’s my turn to wince, and I don’t hide it.

“That’s a loaded question,” I mutter. “It went fine, mostly.”

Other than literally everything that happened from the tension, flirting, sex with Elijah, and watching Asher jerk off. Then, yeah, it went fine.

My head has been fuzzy since I’ve been back. Everything is too much. *They’re* too much.

Or maybe it’s me.

Hi, I’m the problem, and I keep getting in my own way.

Saying I’m scared of the outcome isn’t working anymore. I can’t find a good enough reason why I shouldn’t sleep with my stepbrothers.

“Did you not get enough rest?” Shane asks, bringing me back to the topic.

I groan beneath my breath. “Not really.”

I didn’t realize how insatiable Elijah would be. He fucked my brains out as soon as we got back to campus, right before I left for the arcade. It would have been nice to have a nap, but no, he chose to make me scream until my throat became raw.

Then he disappeared afterward. No cuddling. No kissing and talking to me about literally anything.

I don’t get it. He wants sex, but he doesn’t stick around afterward. I thought he’d be the type to talk in bed.

I stand and stride away from Shane and the game. I’m too ashamed to admit to my friend that I’ve been doing things I promised myself I would never do.

I don’t date.

I don’t like men.

But here I am, getting tangled in Elijah’s web.

Shane follows and grabs my shoulder. I spin around and face him. “Easy there. What’s going on?”

“I have this friend—”

“Whoa, hold on now.” He waves a hand. “You have other friends? I’m hurt. Truly.”

He grins, thinking it’ll make me laugh, but when all I do is blankly stare at him, he sighs and shoves his hands into his pockets.

“So you have a friend,” he says. “Go on.”

“She’s in a weird situation with a guy she really shouldn’t be with. He’s hard to trust and . . .”

Shit. I don’t know how much to tell him. If I say the guy is my friend’s stepbrother, he’ll know it’s about me. We’ve talked about our families and growing up.

Trauma dumping and all that.

Shane raises an eyebrow when I don’t say anything.

I let out a breath. “We’ll just say he’s off-limits because of how close their families are.”

He tilts his head. “Like stepsiblings close? Or a family friend close?”

I wince and avert my gaze. “Stepsiblings.”

“Okay, so she’s getting close to her stepsibling. Or is it more than one?”

“More than one.” I peek at him, trying to get a read on him, but he’s closed off, his expression blank as he listens.

“She’s talking to two of her stepsiblings,” he says with a nod. “Uh-huh. So I’m guessing she’s feeling a little guilty about that.”

“Yeah,” I say. “She asked me what she should do. If she goes all in with them, she’ll face backlash because of their relationship. But she also doesn’t want to not be with them because then she’ll get serious FOMO. I told her I’d get a second opinion. That’s where you come in.”

“And her stepbrothers are okay with sharing?” Shane rubs the back of his neck with an awkward smile. “Because sometimes guys can be territorial, but I think in this case, with them being brothers, they’re probably used to it and have done it before.”

I clench my teeth at the thought of Elijah and Asher sharing the same woman. I push that thought aside. No way am I going to get jealous over some nameless chick.

“I don’t know,” I say.

Shane drops his arm by his side. “Sounds like your friend is worried about what other people think.”

“Yeah. And she has feelings for both of them.”

“Right. Right.” He clears his throat. “Can I ask a question?”

“No, it’s not me,” I say in a rush.

He smirks. “I wasn’t going to ask that, but good to know. What I wanted to ask is if she’s happy being with him?”

My mouth opens, then shuts when I can’t find my voice to answer his simple question.

Am I happy being with Elijah and Asher?

"I . . . I don't know," I say.

It's the truth. When I'm with both of them, I'm way too scattered-brained and worried about getting caught with them. When I'm with Elijah, I have moments where I think about Asher. That car ride home with them was awkward, and I'm sure they felt it too. Whenever I glanced at Asher, I couldn't stop thinking about what it'd be like to kiss him too, and to have him touch me like Elijah touches me.

I turn my head away from Shane so he can't see my shame.

Maybe I just want to get to know Asher.

I clear my throat. "Yeah, I don't know."

"Are you sure?" he says.

"No." I cringe. "I don't know. She says that she gets butterflies whenever she's around him and his brother. That must mean something, right? "

"Do you think he's okay with her being with his brother, too?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Would you ever be okay with a girl you're with getting with your brother?"

"I don't know. I don't have a brother."

"But let's say that you do . . ."

"Okay. Let's say that I do. I probably wouldn't care as long as there's open communication and no one is sneaking around. If she wants both of us, she needs to say it. So if your friend wants both of the guys, she needs to tell them. Who knows, they might be into that shit."

I slowly nod and stare at him, but I don't see him. I can only think of the twins and how they'd react if I said I wanted both of them. They've displayed jealousy in the past over other things, so I would imagine they'd get jealous about this too. The night I pretended to be asleep, Elijah didn't touch me. It was Asher. I heard their harsh whispers, but I couldn't make out everything they said before Elijah left. When Elijah pinned me to the mattress in his bedroom, it felt like he was taking it out on me for sleeping with Asher. That could be in my head though. Maybe I'm reading it wrong.

What I'm not reading wrong is the tension between the brothers.

This is a bigger mess than I wanted.

"Circling back to your friend worrying about this. It sounds like she may be happy where she's at," Shane says. "I'd say fuck everyone else and

what they think. If she wants to be with him and his brother, she should stick around and see what comes of it."

I avert my gaze.

I'm happy where I'm at?

Shit, this is so confusing. I enjoy the back-and-forth with Elijah. He's quick with his comebacks and has been patient with me as I figure my shit out.

And Asher?

There's been more tension between us, and he must feel it too. Whenever he's around, I want him to do more than just steal glances at me before storming out of the room.

"Do you think that will help your friend?" Shane's question drags me out of my deep thoughts.

I blink and look at him. "Yeah. I think she'll appreciate your help."

He beams a smile. "Good. Are you going to the claw game, or are you done for the day?"

I grin. "Oh, I'm not done. I'm going to win that plushie today."

I leave the arcade empty-handed and annoyed.

How hard is it to win the plushie? I'm still convinced the game is rigged.

I feel him before I see him. The tiny hairs on my nape rise, and goosebumps scatter on my arms. I raise my head and meet a pair of dark, brooding eyes.

Elijah ditched his contacts again, sporting his glasses and leaning against his car parked by the curb. He folds his arms against his chest and stretches his legs out to take up more space, one over the other. His sharp gaze tracks my every move as I walk toward him, and his lip curves in a subtle smirk like he won some bet that I'd change my direction and go straight to him.

But there is no bet, and I'm headed straight for him for a different reason.

Talking with Shane helped clear my head. Why stand in my own way when this is what I want?

Each step toward him relieves the suffocating worry and guilt from my chest and shoulders. One by one, the worries lift until I'm light on my feet and giddy about the promise of being with him.

I grin. "What are you doing here?"

"Driving you back to campus." He stretches his arm and pinches my shirt between his fingers to drag me into him. "Don't I deserve a kiss for that?"

My smile widens. "Do you want a kiss, Elijah?"

He groans and drags me into him. His hand cups the back of my head, and his mouth descends on mine. It's quick, but every bit demanding. I clench my fingers into his shirt, not wanting it to end, but he pulls away and smirks down at me.

"You know I have capable feet, right?" I whisper.

"I do, but I want to spend time with you."

I smile and lean into him.

His eyes flick from side to side, and his features soften.

"What is it?" I say.

He grins and cups my cheek, his thumb stroking me. "You have the prettiest smile."

"Thanks," I mumble. "You look good in glasses."

He chuckles. "I didn't compliment you to earn one. But thank you." He eases me back and glances at my empty hands. "You didn't win the plushie?"

I shake my head. "That's what you want to talk about?"

"What is it you want to talk about, birdie?"

"This." I gesture between us. "Whatever this is."

His mood shifts, and his gaze darkens. "You don't know what we are?"

He says it so softly, barely a whisper, but loud enough for me to hear. Elijah plays with a lock of hair framing my face, focusing on that like it's putting him under a spell.

"We never put a label on it," I say.

He releases the lock and looks me in the eye with a smirk. "You're mine, birdie. My girl. My property. My everything. That's what we are."

My heart pounds against my chest, and I burn from head to toe from the shock overtaking me. I'm rendered speechless at Elijah's claim.

Past me wouldn't have accepted it and would have said something snarky. That's not me right now. I like the idea of him being mine, just as I

love the thought of me being his, too.

"Get in the car, baby." Elijah opens the door for me and motions for me to sit.

I duck past him and sit on the leather seat.

The drive back to campus is short, and the whole way there I'm riding cloud nine. It's official between us.

"Stay the night with me," Elijah says.

He parks the car and switches off the engine.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and peek at him through my lashes. "Lavender has been alone all weekend. Besides, I'm still sore."

"Who's Lavender?" His eyebrows scrunch together.

"My pet snake."

Elijah tilts his head, his eyebrows still pinched together.

"What's that look for?" I awkwardly laugh.

Shaking his head, his expression changes to his regular nonchalant mask. "It's nothing. I would have thought you'd have a pet bird and not a snake."

I shrug. "I'd like one, but they require more time and attention. Once I graduate and get a place of my own, I'll be able to get a bird. Until then, it's just me and Lavender."

"What kind of bird would you get?"

I smile. "A cockatiel."

Just like the one Rome has flying around. Flip is the cutest thing.

Maybe it's a sign that I should visit the aviary soon and see how she's doing.

Elijah leaves the car and opens my door for me. He holds his hand out for me to take, and I gladly accept his help.

"Thanks," I mumble.

Elijah smirks and kisses me. My heart jumps into my throat, and I worry about others seeing us like this, but Shane's words replay in my head.

I need to stop being so worried. Whatever happens, happens, but as long as I'm happy, then nothing else matters.

We walk inside the building. With it being Sunday evening, it's not as packed as it would be during the week. So at least I have a few more hours to figure out my feelings and stress about us being caught together like this.

Elijah releases my hand as I unlock my door and push it open. He bends down and kisses over my shoulder, already getting ahead of the game.

My stomach drops, and I suck in a breath. All of my things—my old laptop; the pictures of my passed father I taped to the wall; my aviary books that I kept tidy on a shelf; my crystals in the shape of birds—are tossed around. Some of my things have been shattered to pieces. Broken glass glitters in the dim light.

Someone broke into my dorm while I was gone, and they left a message.

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CHAPTER 37

EDEN

DAY 6 OF THE BET

"EDEN?" Elijah brushes past me, just as shocked at the mess.

I stare at the red spray paint on the wall across from where Lavender's enclosure was.

Elijah reads the words, his voice full of disbelief. "Astar Elite—"

"Slut," I mumble. "Because I'm *his* slut."

Elijah swings his head toward me, anger brimming in his eyes. "Over my dead fucking body."

I turn my focus to the broken enclosure on the ground. Dirt, dried wood, and water are spilled over the floor, ruining my clothes and sheets that are strewn beneath.

"Lavender?" I croak and whip my head around, searching for my pet. "Where's my snake?"

"It's not safe being in here, birdie." Elijah grabs my shoulder. "I can find your snake after you're—"

"I don't care!" I shake him off and rush past him to look for my pet. "I need to find her now."

"After I get you back into my dorm." Elijah strides toward me and grabs my arm.

I glare at him, tears blurring my vision. "Let go."

His narrowed eyes don't leave mine. He's just as stubborn as I am about having it his way.

“I need to find her. She must be scared,” I say after a long pause.

He releases my arm and stabs his fingers through his hair. “I don’t think she’s in here, baby.”

“Then leave and look for her. But I’m not leaving this room until I find her.”

I drop to my hands and knees and crawl over the floor as I call her name. Tears blur my vision the longer I look for her. She’s not in the smaller spaces between the flipped mattress and the desk.

“She has to be hiding.” I hate how my voice comes out shaky as I hold back the sobs.

Elijah crouches beside me and gently circles my wrist with his fingers. “Baby, please. You’re hurting yourself.”

Lifting my head, I glare at him through the tears. “I don’t care. I need to find my snake.”

“I’ll find her, but you’re bleeding.” His expression softens, and he nods at my palm.

Looking at my hand, I suck in a breath at all the blood. I don’t remember feeling any pain.

Elijah tugs at my wrist and eases me onto my feet with him. He turns my hand over, frowns at the glass sticking out of my palm, then lifts his gaze back to my face.

“I’ll take you back to my dorm, and Asher will remove the glass while I look for Lavender.” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “It’s not safe for you to be in here anymore. The person who’s been messing with you? He’s not happy.”

I let out a dry laugh. “I know that. He hasn’t been happy since the first time he broke in here and violated me.”

Elijah’s lips thin. “So it’s safer for you to stay with me.”

“What about Asher?”

He tilts his head, curious.

I swallow hard, afraid he’ll throw accusations at me. The last thing I want is to start our relationship with him wondering if I’m cheating on him with his brother.

“He won’t mind,” he says. “He’ll keep you safe, too.”

“What if he hears us together?”

Elijah smirks. “Already planning on taking advantage of me, birdie?”

When I don’t laugh or smile, he sighs and shakes his head.

“He won’t do anything. The most he’ll do is grumble about it afterward.” He eyes me for a moment. “Unless you want to fuck my brother, too?”

Shame heats my skin, and I avert my gaze. “N-no. That’s not what I’m saying.”

His eye twitches, and he releases my hand. Elijah straightens to his full height and brings me with him. I use his arms to steady myself before I can fall.

“I’ll grab your clothes and other essentials when I come back.” He guides me out of the room and checks my bleeding palms before widening his strides, which are hard to keep up with.

On our way to the elevators, I glance at the floor, seeing if Lavender somehow got out and I missed her. It shouldn’t be hard to notice a snake, but I’ve been so distracted by Elijah on our way in that anything could have gotten past me.

The ride in the elevator is quiet. Too quiet and tense. Elijah’s demeanor changed at some point during the walk. His playful and flirtatious behavior is long gone, and now he’s solemn, along with a new emotion I can’t put my finger on.

Peeking at him from the corner of my eye, I note his tense shoulders and how he keeps more space between us than I like. He’s always been touchy with me, wanting to take up my personal space. Now it feels like continents drift between us.

What changed?

The logical side of me wants to say he’s squeamish around blood. But that can’t be true.

Then my mind lands on it. He changed after he asked if I want to fuck his brother.

I bite my tongue to stop myself from assuring him that I want nothing to do with Asher. It’d be a lie, of course, and Elijah has always been sharp. He’d know right away that I’m not telling the truth.

The doors slide open, and I let out a shaky breath. Elijah steps forward, leaving me in the elevator by myself. I follow him and clutch my hands to my chest so I’m not bleeding all over the pristine floors.

My eyes widen at the open space as we enter his dorm.

Jesus Christ. It’s more of a condo than the tiny area I’ve been staying in. The living room alone is enough to fit two of my rooms in here. The layout

is open, except for the hallway that leads to two bedrooms and a shared bathroom.

Floor-to-ceiling windows make up a wall across from me, overlooking the front of the school grounds. The marble floors outside the dorm change from white-and-gold to black with flecks of gold.

Fitting, since I've associated the twins with those colors—onyx with flecks of amber in their eyes when the sun hits them perfectly.

Asher stands from the large leather sectional couch and meanders toward us, his gaze sliding from Elijah to me. He rolls his sucker in his mouth and drops his focus to my hands against my chest.

"Help Eden with her hands. She may need stitches." Elijah touches me for the first time since we left the room, his hand resting on my lower back.

Jealousy darkens Asher's gaze. His sucker clacks against his teeth.

Elijah takes me by surprise as he turns me in his hold and crashes his lips against mine. I gasp and reach for his shirt, then realize that I'm still bleeding. My fingers hover over his chest. His tongue shoves into my mouth and tangles with mine.

I crack open my eyes and peek past Elijah's shoulder at Asher. My heart thunders in my ears as I lock eyes with him. Asher stopped moving. Even his sucker is as still as stagnant water as he watches me make out with his brother.

Guilt tightens my chest.

It's not like I'm doing anything wrong. I'm with Elijah. Not Asher. And yet, I can't help feeling like I'm cheating on Asher.

Elijah catches my bottom lip between his teeth and nips. I wince and suck in a breath.

Asher's pupils dilate, and he steps forward, then stops.

Elijah soothes the sting with his tongue, then ends the kiss and draws back. He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear and licks his bottom lip.

"Behave while I'm gone," he murmurs.

I nod.

I. Fucking. Nod. Like I'm some dutiful girlfriend who's in love with her boyfriend and would never, ever imagine what it would be like to sleep with his identical twin brother. Let alone let him kiss me like Elijah kisses me.

Elijah parts from my side and strides toward the door. I follow him, unsure what the hell I'm doing, but feeling trapped. It shuts behind him, finalizing the moment and leaving me alone with Asher.

Shit.

My throat clogs with thorny vines. No matter how many times I swallow, I can’t get rid of the feeling.

I’m alone with Asher. And I’m afraid I won’t behave with him, much like he won’t either. Because there’s nothing clean about this relationship or my feelings for him.

I want Asher. And if the incident that happened in the bathroom says anything, he may want me too.

Slowly, I turn to him.

Time to face the music.

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CHAPTER 38

ASHER

DAY 6 OF THE BET

I GLARE at the door Elijah disappeared through without once looking back at me. But I know the motherfucker was rubbing it in my face that he's with Eden.

That felt a little too fucking real.

Watching him kiss my girl was pure torture, but I've never been so turned on in my life until now.

"So you and Elijah, huh, little ghost?"

She lifts her chin. "That's between Elijah and me."

I shrug. "After that kiss in front of me, I disagree."

"That wasn't my fault."

I grin. "You kissed him back and looked into my eyes."

Her face tints pink, and she jerks her gaze away from me.

Checkmate.

I roll the sucker onto the other side of my mouth and drop my gaze to her hands. "Let's get that taken care of."

I stride down the hallway, not having to look back to ensure she's following me. I can feel her, even with my back turned to her. Entering the bathroom, I flip on the light and dig out the first-aid kit.

Eden steps past me and looks lost as she glances around the room like it's her prison cell.

“Sit on the edge of the tub.” I smirk at her. “Since that’s what you’re good at, right?”

Her face turns another shade of pink, and she glares at me before settling on the edge of the bathtub.

I expected her to say something back or insult me for bringing up what happened the other day. But she chooses silence and cutting looks that would wither any man but me.

I grab the supplies from the kit that Elijah packed with more than the standard items that it comes with. After multiple run-ins with the Walker brothers and their friends, we’ve learned to be prepared.

I crouch in front of Eden and gently take her hand. She’s stiff and holds her breath as I inspect the cuts. I grab the long tweezers and, bit by bit, I pull out the glass and turn her hand to catch any slivers I may have missed.

Once everything is cleared, I clean the wounds and use glue to piece the skin together. I lay her hand on her lap, then grab her other to do the same. After a while, she relaxes and lets out a shaky breath.

“Are you going to talk about it?” I say.

“About what?”

I peek at her through my lashes, then look down again to pull out a bloody glass shard. “About what happened in your room.”

“Elijah knows, and that’s all that matters.”

“He talks to me,” I say, and lay the tweezers on the ground. I grab a cotton pad and soak it in hydrogen peroxide.

Her breath hisses between her teeth while I clean the wounds before gluing them shut.

“I know he does,” she says after I finish. “But I don’t want to talk about it with you.”

I lean back on my haunches and look up at her face. “Then what can you talk about with me?”

She bites her bottom lip.

I drop my gaze to her mouth and don’t care how openly I’m staring. She shifts and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Do you talk with Elijah about everything?” she mutters.

I tilt my head and stare at her, unblinking. “Not everything.”

“Does he know about”—she clears her throat and averts her gaze—“you know?”

“When you watched me jerk off? No, that’s our secret.” I grin.

She nods. “Good.”

“Do you want to watch again?”

Her head snaps toward me. “*No*.”

I snicker. “That was a quick answer, little ghost. Maybe you do. Maybe you want to help this time around?”

“I’m with Elijah.” She shakes her head and leaps to her feet. I straighten to my full height, not bothering to give her room. She ducks past me and rushes to the door.

“You may be with my brother,” I say, “but I don’t think you’re that loyal to him, now, are you?”

She freezes and peeks at me over her shoulder. “I would never cheat on him.”

“Do you love him?”

Her skin flushes, and she averts her gaze.

My fingers curl into my palms, and I frown.

She loves Elijah.

I want to fucking kill my brother.

Eden leaves the bathroom. A few seconds pass before the front door shuts, and it’s like the gunshot needed for me to take off after her.

The elevator doors close, and I take the stairs to follow her once she reaches the first floor. Like all the other times, I keep a good distance between us, but I stick close enough for her to feel me watching her. Her strides lengthen as she heads toward Glass Hall to her dorm.

I linger in the hallway as she enters her room, where Elijah is searching through her things.

“Did you find her?” Eden asks.

“No, I’m sorry, baby,” Elijah says. “Did Asher help you?”

There’s a pregnant pause before she mumbles, “Yes.”

Another tension-filled silence.

“He didn’t say anything, did he?” Elijah says, forcing his voice to be light and carefree.

But I hear the tension. The jealousy.

Welcome to the fucking club, brother. You don’t belong here.

The head between my legs says otherwise. My cock hardens as the fresh memory of Elijah eating her out plays in my mind. It was like watching myself from outside my body as he brought her pleasure. It was easy to

think it was me. But the reminder that it wasn't just pisses me off all over again.

"He didn't say anything," Eden finally says.

I suck on my candy harder and peek around the doorway.

I don't know why it's surprising that she wouldn't tell him that I tested her loyalty. Not that I was testing anything other than the line she drew in the sand. That line is blurred and all the way fucked.

"Good." Elijah smiles and holds up a bag of her clothes. "We'll drop this off at the dorm, then leave."

"Where are we going?"

"There's a competition tonight." He glances up with a smirk and meets my gaze. "There's some unfinished business that needs to be handled, and I need your help."

I don't know what he has in store for her or if he's bluffing, but either way, I'll take care of the Walker brothers as I said I would. After Elijah showed me the picture that he received the other day, it's been in the back of my mind.

The Walker brothers hit closer to home by vandalizing Eden's car. She doesn't know yet, and we don't know how to tell her. That'll be a later problem when we get to it.

Not only will the Walker brothers feel our wrath, but so will Rome. He's been circling Eden a little too close for comfort.

I nod and leave to get everything ready for tonight.

This time, there will be a big bang.

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CHAPTER 39

ELIJAH

NIGHT 6 OF THE BET

"I NEED you to do something for me," I say.

Eden's head turns toward me. The car fills with silence and tension so electric that it zaps along my arms.

I point at the Walker brothers' red Mustang. "I need you to distract them for a little while. Can you do that?"

She tips her head to the side. "Why me? Why not you?"

I grin. "Because you're a pretty face and a definite distraction."

She bites her bottom lip and looks away, suddenly bashful. I grin.

"Do whatever it takes to keep their focus on you," I say.

She nods and blows out a breath, then opens the door and exits the car. Asher and I watch as she strides toward the Mustang, her hands clenching into fists before her fingers splay.

She stops beside the Walker brothers' car and bends to talk to the driver. After a moment, both brothers step out of the Mustang and circle her, their gazes dark and full of bad intentions.

Asher sits straighter and rolls his sucker more than normal, the candy clacking against the backs of his teeth.

"They won't get far with anything they try with her," I say. "She won't allow it, and we'll intervene if we need to."

His eyes narrow, and he glares at me for a moment before turning his attention back to her. I open the door and pop the seat down for him to get

out with me. We creep toward the Mustang while the brothers are distracted.

Eden glances at us and reaches for Austin, playfully touching his arm.

Red fills my vision.

She's touching another man, and I want to dismember the motherfucker.

Asher steps away and charges toward them. I grab his arm and yank him back.

"Stick to the plan," I whisper harshly.

He whips his gaze toward me, eyes narrowed and pitch black. His dilated pupils leave only a sliver of color in his irises. He bares his teeth in a snarl.

I clench my teeth and drag him to the other side of the Walker brothers' car, where we won't be seen.

"Focus on the mission," I growl.

Asher scowls at me, then peers around the corner to check on Eden.

I grab him by the collar and drag him back. "Do you have the wrench?"

He pulls the tool from his pocket, his gaze locked on Eden.

I snatch the wrench from him and maneuver the tool on the lug nuts, loosening each one and keeping quiet.

By the time I finish the last nut, Asher leaps to his feet and rounds the car. He stalks toward Eden with the brothers' backs to us. I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose before following him to save Eden.

Asher grabs Eden's arm and drags her away from the brothers. I follow them to the Camaro and meet Asher's stare over the top of the car.

"You almost got us caught," I say.

He shrugs and slides into the back seat while Eden takes the front.

I take a calming breath and sit behind the wheel. Eden glances at me, then Asher stewing in the back seat before returning her focus to me.

"What did you guys do?" she says.

I cast a beaming smile at her. "You'll see."

Her eyebrows pinch together. "It wasn't something illegal, was it?"

"Oh, it's very much illegal, but the brothers had it coming." I start the car. The engine purrs to life and rumbles the vehicle.

"What did they do?"

I consider my next words, debating if I should tell her.

Fuck it. She'll find out either way, and she needs a reason why she had to help me that's better than *because I said so*.

“They—”

“They vandalized your car,” Asher says. He cuts a look at me, then levels her with his stare. “We’re just returning the favor.”

Eden’s eyes round, and her lips part. “What?”

“That car meant nothing to you anyway,” I say. I wince at how harsh my words come out when I didn’t mean for them to.

She glares at me. “It was a gift.”

“That you never used.” Jesus, I need to shut up, and why the hell am I caring so much about her hurt feelings? The whole point of me being with her is just a coverup for me to win the bet.

“I’ll get it fixed for you,” Asher says, smoothing over my careless words.

Eden looks between us, her mouth opening and closing several times before she pinches them together. “It’s not for you to fix.”

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “We’re doing it anyway, and we’re getting revenge for what they did.”

“Who are they?”

“Rivals.”

Eden hooks her thumbs beneath the straps over her chest.

“After I win this race,” I say, “you’re sucking my cock as a reward.”

Eden’s head whips toward me. Her gaze flicks to the back seat, where Asher sits in silence.

I don’t have to look at my brother to know he’s looking at me with the same shocked expression Eden wears.

“What?” Eden gasps, then shakes her head. “Not with your brother here.”

“So if he wasn’t here, you’d suck your stepbrother’s cock?” I smirk at her. “You are fucking *filthy*.”

She scowls at me. “I don’t need the reminder.”

I face forward and grab the shifter. “Don’t worry, baby. He loves watching.” I glare at my brother in the rearview mirror. “Isn’t that right, Asher?”

“Are you out of your mind?” Eden says.

Asher just scowls at me with his lips flattened and nostrils flared.

He needs to get over his jealousy. He needs to see that it’s better if we share her. We can give her whatever she needs individually and together. If I

push him enough, maybe he'll see that. Hopefully this nudges him in the right direction.

Maybe sharing her isn't a bad idea. I need to warm her up to the idea of being with Asher as well. He can't keep hiding that he's fucking her, too.

And I don't plan on sticking around for the relationship.

Katie counts down with her fingers, then tosses her shirt. Before it hits the ground, tires peel as I thrust forward and break away from the lineup of cars.

Eden sinks into the seat, and inertia hits all of us. We drift around a corner onto a different street to take us toward the finish line, with the Walker brothers' Mustang following close beside us.

I smirk and glance at them from the corner of my eye.

Right as they drift, two tires fly off the frame. I snicker and stomp on the gas, then peer at the rearview mirror just in time to watch their car lose control and roll several times before stopping.

"Assholes," I mutter.

The rest of the race is a breeze, and I blow through the finish line. A lot of the cars can't keep up with my Camaro and skills. People hesitate and bite their tongues when they hear the name Astar. I've made my own empire in this world. They don't see me as my father's son but as Elijah Astar, The Merciless Twin.

I find an empty parking lot in the shopping mall where we won't be interrupted.

I put the car in park and shift in my seat.

"Go ahead, birdie," I say. "Take my cock out."

I've been hard this whole time with the promise of Eden's lips wrapped around my dick. Pre-cum weeps from the tip, and I don't give a single shit that I'm making a fucking mess in my pants.

Eden glances at Asher.

I pinch her chin between my index finger and thumb, then turn her head toward me. "Eyes on me, baby. He's not going to help you."

Asher relaxes in his seat and rolls his sucker in his mouth.

Eden's gaze drifts back to him. Longing fills her eyes, and I'm unsure if she realizes how easy it is to read her.

Eden wants my twin.

He wants her.

And I need *more* from her than the samples I've been getting—all because I respected my brother's wish to be the only one to touch her. But I can't hold back anymore. I want to bury myself balls deep inside her.

Her cheeks tint pink as she meets my eyes. "Right here?"

I nod, straight-faced. I'd smile any other time, but I'm impatient as fuck to feel her.

Dropping my hand from her chin, I settle back into my seat. "Go ahead. Show him how well you can suck my cock."

She swallows and wets her lips. She turns toward me and eases over the center console, ass in the air and head lowered. She unbuttons my jeans, then unzips them. I gather her hair into a fist and raise my hips as she shoves my pants around my bent knees. My erection springs free, and I groan from the relief.

Eden sucks in a breath and wraps her fingers around my shaft. She slowly strokes me, bringing the excess skin to the head before pulling it down. Another bead of pre-cum wells from the tip, and Eden leans down, dragging her tongue over the head to catch the drop.

"Jesus fuck," Asher groans softly.

I'm not sure Eden heard him. She's just as far gone as I am, lost to the moment.

"Swallow me down, baby." My fingers cinch tighter around her hair.

Eden peeks at me through her lashes before opening her mouth and sinking my cock into her mouth. Inch by slow inch, she takes what she can. Her warm, wet mouth is a welcome feeling, and one that I've missed. Because of my wide girth, she's unable to take more of me—at least, that's likely what she thinks. I know she can take more, but I'm not the one in control right now.

Eden gags as I hit the back of her throat, tears springing to her eyes. She glances into the back seat at Asher, desire darkening her gaze. I lift my hips to push more of my dick inside her mouth. She gags again, but she doesn't pull away. She lowers her head to take more like the good fucking slut she is.

I turn my head and peek at my brother. He clenches his jaw, his hands fisted in his lap. An outline of his erection is evidence that he's not hating this as much as he pretends to.

"Fuck, you feel so good." My gaze drops to Eden as she bobs her head on my cock. She rolls her tongue on the underside, and my eyes roll back.

Every time she descends to take more of me in her mouth, my hips flex, chasing after her. The tip hits the back of her throat, earning another beautiful gag from her.

I pant and widen my legs as much as the tight space allows.

It won't be long before I come down her throat. I thought I could last longer, enjoy the moment, but it's been too fucking long for me.

A new sound joins Eden's wet noises and my grunts.

Flesh on flesh coming from the back seat.

Smirking, I turn my head toward Asher. His gaze tracks her movements, not allowing a moment to be missed, and his hand flies up and down his cock, matching the same rhythm as Eden's mouth.

My dick jerks.

I didn't think I'd enjoy my brother watching Eden sucking me off. Here I am, seconds away from blowing my load prematurely because the idea of watching her suck *his* dick turns me on even more.

"I'm sorry for what I'm about to do," I murmur to Eden.

She turns her gaze up to me, her eyebrows pinching together. She raises her head, likely to ask me what I mean. I white-knuckle her hair, then shove her head down with a loud groan. Her nose meets my pelvis, and she struggles against me, her tiny hands slapping my thighs.

My head drops back against the seat, and I moan as cum fills her mouth and the back of her throat. My dick jerks with each load, and my eyes roll back as I ride the high of my orgasm.

Asher's moans fill the car along with mine. I don't give a single fuck if he's messing up my car with his cum. This has to be the hottest thing we've done.

I want more experiences like this. The both of us with her.

I didn't think I'd like sharing her or having him watch. This was a push for him to share her with me, but having him in the back seat, watching and jacking off, was a thrilling realization for me too. I want more sharing moments with him. Now if he just can stop being so fucking stubborn and see that we can work together to pleasure our girl.

Fucking ironic that the tables have turned on me.

Watching him fuck Eden was just the appetizer. Watching him come inside her to get her pregnant wasn't supposed to affect me the way it did. I haven't been able to stop thinking about how he pushed my cum inside her too.

I want to keep watching him fuck our stepsister.

I want him to get her pregnant.

I want to get her pregnant too.

Not just because it’ll get us the inheritance, but because the thought of her carrying our child turns me on.

I’m completely fucked and have been since the beginning when I took this goddamn bet.

I let go of Eden and turn my focus to Asher. My cock slips from Eden’s mouth, and she sucks in ragged breaths. I glance at Asher in the back seat. He averts his gaze, his eyebrows slashed together in a frown.

He can act jealous all he wants, but he can’t take back that he got turned on by watching Eden suck my cock.

Once we get back to the dorm, I’ll pull him aside and talk to him. Maybe then he’ll see reason.

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CHAPTER 40

ASHER

NIGHT 6 OF THE BET

My shoes thump against the floor as I rush into my room and close the door behind me. I sweep my fingers through my hair and crunch into my sucker. I need space from the two of them.

I don't know why the fuck I feel like this. All I know is that jealousy and lust mix together in a potent combination that feels like I'm about to combust.

I watched the girl I'm obsessed with give my twin a blow job. Not only did I fucking watch, I jerked off to it and came with the vision of it being *me* that she was taking down her throat.

The door creaks open, and I whirl around, eyes narrowed and fists clenched.

Elijah slips through the crack, his head turned like he's ensuring Eden isn't following him into my room. When the coast is clear, he turns to me and shuts the door behind him.

"Leave," I say through clenched teeth.

It's a warning. There is no holding back now. My brother fucked around with my girl after he promised that she would be all mine. I don't care that he warned me he would pursue her. She's mine and has always been fucking *mine*.

Elijah glares back at me, his strides measured as he closes the space between us. "Don't lie to me about not enjoying what happened, Asher."

I spit the sucker stick out of my mouth. It flies into Elijah's face. He doesn't flinch or back off from me. The only sign of irritation is the ticking in his jaw.

"Right," he murmurs. Then he slips his hands into his pockets. "You're upset. Care to share why you're feeling this way when not even half an hour ago you were coming at the sight of her swallowing me?"

I bare my teeth and crowd his space.

Elijah doesn't back down. He stares at me down his nose and raises two fingers to push his slipping glasses back into place. "Think about how good things will be with her having both of us. The things we can do together."

"I. Don't. Share." Despite growling those words, my cock jerks at the mental image of Eden taking both of us at the same time.

It's just like looking in the mirror. That's all it is.

"What about her?" he says. "Are you going to make her choose?"

"Yes," I snap. "She'll choose me."

That's a lie, and I know it. She wouldn't choose me. Not when she's dating *him*. She's already made the choice, and I'm left on the sidelines.

Elijah's eyebrow rises. "What if she chooses both of us?"

"She won't."

He shakes his head, tsking. "You've obsessed over her for a long time, and yet you don't know her that well, do you?"

I fist his shirt in the middle of his chest and shove him backward. Insults stick to the tip of my tongue. Awful things that I can say to cut him deep, but I swallow them, because I know I can't take them back.

"Don't make her choose, Asher." Elijah's lips curve into a smile. Sharp. Cutting. Condescending. "Do you want her happy?"

"Of course I want her happy," I growl.

"Then remove your feelings for just a fucking moment."

I glare at him.

"I care about her too," he says, softly. Then he winces as if he realizes what he's just said. "What if I can prove that she wants both of us? Would you share her then?"

My fingers cinch his shirt until my knuckles turn white. "What if she doesn't want me?"

Sympathy softens his features. "Is that what you're afraid of?"

"She wants you, Elijah." Red bleeds into my vision. "She doesn't want me. She sees *you*."

“She sees both of us.”

“We’re identical.”

“But we’re so different from each other, aren’t we?”

My teeth clench together, and I breathe through the anger tightening my chest. Beneath it all, I’m hurt and lashing out.

Elijah circles my wrist with his fingers, but he doesn’t peel my hand away from him. “If you’re okay with sharing her, I can prove that she wants you too.”

I search his gaze for any sign that he’s messing with me. He wouldn’t dangle her in front of my face and yank her away last minute. I know my brother enough to believe he wouldn’t be so cruel and merciless toward me.

“You would share her with me?” I swallow hard.

“Only with you.”

“No one else.” I let go of his shirt and step back.

He nods once.

“And you’ll prove that she wants me?” I already know my little ghost gets turned on by me, but I need confirmation she wants to be *with* me, and not temporarily.

I want her forever. Her eternity.

Elijah’s blinding smile stretches across his face. “Yes, I can.”

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CHAPTER 41

EDEN

NIGHT 6 OF THE BET

I LEAVE the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my body, droplets of water running down my skin from the shower. I needed it badly, not because I was dirty but because I *felt* filthy and guilty. What happened in the car was . . . out of this world.

Having Asher watch me suck Elijah's cock shouldn't have been as sexy as it was.

The way Elijah took control and used me for his own pleasure like I was nothing more than a doll for him shouldn't have been something that turned me on either. However, it did.

Who the hell am I and what happened to the girl who didn't want to get involved with men?

Now I have to live with the guilt of wanting both of my stepbrothers.

Elijah and Asher still don't know that I was awake when they fooled around with me in my bedroom at our parents' house. I don't know if I'll ever tell them, but I want more of that. Whatever *that* was.

Guilt creeps up my throat like acid.

Elijah's bedroom door opens, and I duck my head as I rush toward the dresser where he made space for my clothes.

"I need to be alone," I say.

"No, we need to talk about what happened." He shuts his bedroom door behind him, then slips his hands into his pockets and takes a step toward

me.

It’s hard to get a read on his expression. He carefully controls it, only allowing me to see what he wants me to see.

His lip isn’t curled, so that’s a good start.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Elijah’s eye twitches, and he takes another step toward me. “Are you into my brother?”

I avert my gaze and shake my head. “No.”

He stares at me for a moment, studying my expression as much as I’m trying to get a read on him. He blinks, and the spell breaks.

I let out a shaky breath, my muscles loosening.

He closes the space between us and bends down to trail his lips along my jawline. “I want to try something tonight.”

My eyelashes flutter shut. “Like what?”

“I want to blindfold you.”

My thighs clench together. “I don’t think us having sex right now is a good idea.”

“Because you’re worried he’ll hear us?” He tsks. “Who cares? Asher will leave if it becomes too much.”

He catches my bottom lip between his teeth, and I groan as his mouth slants over mine. He swallows my whimpers, exploring every inch of my mouth and tasting every bit as forbidden as this is.

Elijah walks me backward toward the bed, his tongue still thrusting into my mouth like it’s his cock.

Everything around us drops away, and it’s just him and me.

Elijah breaks the moment by ending the kiss and digging through his nightstand for a black silk blindfold. He holds it up and leans forward to cover my eyes, then ties it in the back.

“Can you see?” he murmurs.

I shake my head.

“I need you to trust me. Can you do that?”

“I trust you.” I don’t know when that happened, but I mean every word.

Elijah unfolds the towel from around my body, letting it fall to the floor at my feet. My breasts spill free, and I suck in a breath as he wraps his warm lips around my hardened nipple. His hand cups my other breast, showing it as much attention.

I drop my head back and don't bother trying to control my harsh breaths. Whenever he touches me, I can't stop the reactions I have. It's like a new me takes over. Someone who isn't afraid of making a noise. Someone who isn't worried about anything and everything.

I blindly reach forward, and my palms glide over his chest, then down until I stop at his pants. I awkwardly unbutton, then unzip them to free his cock. He groans into my breast as I languidly stroke him.

"Someone's impatient," Elijah teases, then moves out of my reach.

"Please." I lick my lips and reach for him again.

"Have you ever been eaten out from behind?" His voice comes out deeper, huskier than normal.

"No," I say.

His mouth crashes against mine in a quick, harsh kiss. "Good. Because I would have killed every single man that's touched you."

My lips open, then close.

I don't think now is the time to remind him about the bully who's been visiting me at night. I don't want Elijah to go to the lengths of killing him.

Elijah eases me backward onto his bed, then turns me over. The room falls into a deadly silence. I can feel the shift in the air; what used to be calm and even a little teasing turns tense.

"Did he do that to you?" Elijah growls.

There goes the reminder of the bully.

"Yes," I whisper.

"*My slut*," he murmurs. He drags the tip of his finger over the healing cuts.

I clench the sheets. "If you want to stop, we can. I understand if you don't want to see it."

"Does it still hurt?"

"No."

He slaps my bottom. "Then ass up, baby."

The sheets muffle my yelp, and I raise my hips high into the air.

"That's my girl," he murmurs, and leans forward. "We're going to circle back to this"—he drags his fingers over the cuts—"in the morning."

"Okay." No need to fight him about it. At least he doesn't know my conflicted feelings about the person.

"You're so fucking wet for me already." His fingers hook between my folds and spread them apart. "Did it turn you on when you sucked my cock

in front of Asher?”

I turn my head as if I can see him. My eyebrows pinch together, and the word *yes* weighs on the tip of my tongue. But I bite back my answer, refusing to tell him the truth.

Elijah slaps my ass again, harder this time. “Answer me, birdie.”

I suck in a breath and squeeze my eyes shut.

This shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does right now.

I manage to jerk my chin in a nod.

Elijah spreads my pussy lips wider. He doesn’t acknowledge my answer, which doesn’t help the anxious knot in the pit of my stomach. His tongue swipes from my clit to my opening, over and over.

My lips part, and I arch my back, pushing my ass back into him as he tortures me with his mouth. Heated goosebumps rise on my skin when he thrusts two thick fingers inside me, each stroke deeper than the last. He hooks downward, rubbing against the spot that makes my toes curl.

“So needy,” he murmurs into my cunt. He flicks his tongue against my clit. “Come for me.”

My toes curl, and white dots appear behind my closed eyelids as my body does what he demands. I cling to the sheets and ride out the orgasm as he works me through it. Once I come down from the high, Elijah pulls his fingers out, and the mattress dips as he moves away.

“W-wait.” I turn and blindly reach for him.

“I won’t go easy on you,” he growls in my ear.

I suck in a breath and turn my head toward him. He fists my hair and holds me in place. “I’m going to fuck you raw and hard. Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” I breathe, and my back arches.

“You want me to fuck you like you’re a slut?”

“Yes!”

“You really are fucking filthy for me, aren’t you?”

I rapidly nod. “Elijah, please!”

He taps my lower lip with a finger. “How do you want me to fuck you?”

I know this is a test. He’s ensuring that I know what I’m signing up for, and I’m more than willing to take whatever he gives me.

“Raw and hard.” I lick my lips. “No condom.” My pussy clenches. “I want you to come inside me.”

He smashes his lips against mine before disappearing. His palm cracks against my ass, and he yanks me backward until I'm practically hanging over the edge of the bed. He lifts my ass in the air and lines up his cock outside my opening.

"We'll see if you can handle me," he says right before slamming into me.

Pressure builds inside my stomach as he forces me to take his giant cock. I'll never get used to his size, no matter how many times we sleep together. My back arches, and my lips part on a silent scream.

Elijah's hips slap against my ass with every hard thrust. Inch by painful inch, he rams deeper until he meets resistance. He fists my hair and shoves the side of my head into the mattress.

"You like being used like this?" he snarls, sounding closer than he actually is. Maybe I'm just losing my mind.

"Yes!"

His strokes become even more brutal—something I didn't think could happen.

"Tell me the truth, baby," he growls. "Are you attracted to my brother?"

I bite my bottom lip and rock back into him, taking more of him as he tries to pull out.

Elijah tuts and puts more pressure on my head, then slaps my ass. "Answer the question."

I squeeze my eyes shut, and all I can do is take every stroke of his driving cock.

"Yes! But you two look—"

"Do you want to fuck him?" he growls in my ear.

My pussy clenches around him, and I claw at the bed to get out from under him. "Elijah, please."

"*Please*," he says with a sarcastic laugh. "Please, you wanted me to fuck you. And now you're begging for me to be nice. I warned you that I wasn't going to be soft with you."

"Elijah!"

"Did you think I wouldn't notice how you look at each other?" He emphasizes his question by spanking me twice.

My back arches, and I yelp.

He laughs. "You can act like you don't want this, but you're soaking my cock."

“Don’t bring him into this. He wants nothing to do with me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I nod, tears wetting my eyelashes.

“I disagree.” He spanks me again, punishing me for believing that Asher wouldn’t want me.

He shoves me down to lie flat on the bed. He moves onto his knees to straddle my thighs, and then he fucks me. Every time he pulls back, the mattress springs upward, forcing me to return each brutal stroke.

“He’s never looked at a woman the way he looks at you. He wants you as much as you want him. So answer me, Eden.” He grabs a fistful of my hair and jerks my head back. “Do you want to fuck my brother?”

“I’m with you!” I cry.

“That’s not what I asked.” He buries himself deep inside me and stops. The pressure bubbles in my insides, and I wince at the uncomfortable feeling.

“Yes!” I sob. “I want to fuck Asher and be with him too. I can’t stop thinking about him. Are you happy now?”

He unleashes a dark and twisted chuckle, then releases my hair. “Good. Because you’re already fucking him.”

What?

The blindfold drops from around my head, and I meet a pair of onyx eyes. Elijah kneels beside the mattress, smirking and naked as he strokes his cock. I turn my head, and butterflies fill my stomach.

I’m dreaming right now. That’s what it is. Because there’s no way . . .

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CHAPTER 42

EDEN

NIGHT 6 OF THE BET

ASHER GRINS, sucker in his mouth. He pounds inside me, rising onto his knees and grabbing my hips to lift my ass higher in the air as he rams deeper.

My eyes roll back, and I arch my neck.

"That's it, baby. Come all over my brother's cock," Elijah says with a groan. "Make him come inside you."

My mouth falls open in a scream, and I tense as my orgasm hits me. My toes curl, and shivers roll through me despite the flaming heat burning through my veins.

"Asher!"

His groan echoes in the room, his thrusts turning frantic.

"Wait." Elijah stands and releases his cock. "Hold her up."

Asher's arms scoop beneath me, and he presses my back to his chest. Elijah moves onto the bed and spreads his legs as he gets into position beneath me. He nods for Asher to move me over his cock.

My eyes bulge. "I-I don't know about this."

Elijah grabs my hips and lowers me until the fat head presses outside my opening where Asher is spreading me wide.

"You can take both of us." His darkened gaze flicks to my face. "Do you want us to share you?"

I swallow hard and nod.

“We both want you, and I want to see you take both of our cocks. Can you do that?”

I flatten my palms on his stomach and suck in a ragged breath. “I’m scared you’ll split me in half.”

He smirks. “You’re so wet already. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

He lowers me onto him. He reaches between my legs and works the head into me. I whimper as it stretches me wider, and the guys groan at the same time as Elijah pops past the tight barrier, then slides me onto him.

My arms and legs tremble as I fully seat on Elijah. Asher gently pushes between my shoulders until my head rests against Elijah’s chest, so my ass is sticking in the air. Both of the guys move as one.

One pulls out, the other thrusts in.

“Fuck,” Elijah growls. “You’re such a slut for your brothers.”

My fingers dig into his chest, and I bite my bottom lip. “I swear you’re both going to break me. I’m so full.”

“You’ll be full of us all night.” Elijah smacks my ass.

I cry out as both guys pick up speed. I can only hold myself halfway up and take everything they give me.

The headboard slams against the wall with each thrust, and the room fills with the sounds of our flesh slapping together.

“My filthy fucking girl,” Elijah groans into my ear. “I didn’t know you’d enjoy having both of us at the same time, but you’re so fucking wet for us.”

He reaches between my legs and somehow wiggles his fingers inside me, then brings them to my mouth. He doesn’t wait for me to open. His fingers shove past my lips and hit the back of my throat. I gag and whip my head from side to side, but he fists my hair to hold me in place as he rubs his fingers along my tongue.

“Do you taste that, baby?” he murmurs into my ear. “That’s the taste of forbidden love for your brothers. Keep choking on it.”

This is so wrong on so many levels, but it feels so right.

I truly am fifty shades of fucked up, but so are they.

Asher’s thrusts lose their hard rhythm. He chases his orgasm and groans as warmth floods inside my spasming walls.

“Come one more time, Eden.” Elijah releases my hair to grab my hips, guiding me up and down on his cock with Asher still inside me.

I rock back and forth on him and cough as he hits the back of my throat with his fingers again. My clit rubs against his pelvis, and it's not long before I'm sent into another orgasm. The guys grunt, and more warmth spills inside me.

Their cum leaks from my pussy and smears down my crease and onto Elijah's pelvis. I've never felt so dirty in my life until now.

I fall into Elijah, and he drags his fingers out of my mouth. Asher pulls out of me and stands from the bed.

"Get a rag," Elijah says, not bothering to pull out of me.

My eyes fall shut, and I catch my breath.

"You did well, baby. So fucking good." Elijah plays with my hair and kisses the top of my head. "Get some sleep. You'll need it."

I mumble something and nod, but I'm so tired that I don't catch what I say.

Darkness creeps into the edges of my psyche, and I'm out before Asher returns with a rag.

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CHAPTER 43

ELIJAH

NIGHT 6 OF THE BET

BLOOD RUSHES to my cock all over again as I watch the video I recorded while fucking Eden. I don't know how many times I've sat here in the living room, witnessing the scene from beginning to end. One of the times I jacked off to it, specifically at the part when I joined my brother and double-penetrated Eden.

I'd propped my phone on the nightstand to record it all, intending to send it to Derrick as proof that I got my stepsister to sleep with not only me, but with Asher as well. It's the whole point of me being with her.

Or at least, it was. Maybe not for Asher since he's obsessed with her and refuses to fully admit it.

I click the video, and options pop up. I tap the send-in-text option and bring up Derrick's name. The video attaches in the message. My thumb hovers over the send button, and I stare at it for what feels like hours.

Glancing up from the phone, I look at the hallway leading to the bedroom where Asher and Eden are sound asleep. I've sat out here, watching the video and debating if I should do this for two hours. It's the third time I've attached the video in a message. Every time, I've deleted it and stewed.

Once I hit send, that will be the end of everything between Eden and me. She'll close me out for good. I could beg for forgiveness, but that's beneath me.

As for Asher . . .

He'd never forgive me if Eden closes him out, too. I see that happening, and I won't have my brother if I do this.

I want to win the bet, but I'm loyal to my brother first.

But Eden . . . She's crawled beneath my skin and is right there next to Asher with my loyalty. I don't know when the hell this happened, but I don't want to lose her either.

Then there's the jealousy to consider. Do I really want Derrick seeing Eden naked as she takes our cocks? The sick fuck would probably get off to it.

Footsteps break through my thoughts. I turn my phone over, then click the lock button on the side as I turn my head.

Asher, dressed in nothing but boxers, crosses the room and sits beside me on the couch. He stretches his legs, digs into the crease of the sofa, and pulls out a hidden sucker. He unravels the wrapper before popping it into his mouth.

"You didn't do it, did you?" he asks softly. He peeks at me from the corner of his eye. His muscles tighten, and he clenches his hands in his lap.

He's already worked up about the idea of me sending the video to Derrick.

"No," I say.

He nods, silent and likely on the same train of thought that I've been on for the last few hours.

What will happen if and when I send the proof to Derrick?

What will come out of it, and how will my relationship with Asher end up?

I fold my arms against my bare chest, then stretch my legs, mirroring Asher.

"You won't forgive me," I say, meaning to make it into a question, but it comes out as a statement.

I already know the answer.

"No." He turns his head, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched.

"I figured," I mumble.

"Are you going to do it anyway?"

"I never lose a bet."

Asher scowls at me. "So your pride means more than your feelings for her and me? What happened to the plan to get her pregnant?"

I drag my palm over my face and drop my head back against the cushion. “We can still get her pregnant.”

“By force,” Asher growls. “But I don’t want my little ghost being forced. I prefer her willing.”

“You realize that what we’re doing is fucked up, right?” I peek at him. “And we don’t know if the plan will work, or if our father is vindictive enough to withhold the money from all of us.”

He shrugs and rolls his eyes. “I don’t give a single shit if it’s right or wrong. She’s mine.”

“*Ours*,” I say, my eye twitching.

Asher’s lips flatten, and he glares at me. After a minute, he lets out a breath and turns his scowl forward as he relaxes into the seat.

“Fine,” he mutters. “Let’s make this perfectly fucking clear. I’ll share with only you, Elijah. I won’t share with anyone else. Got it?”

I nod. “Trust me, I won’t allow another man to touch her. So I think we’re on the same page here.”

The room falls into silence.

I glance down the hallway, as if I can see Eden in my bed from here.

“Do you really want to get Eden pregnant?” Asher says.

The thought of her stomach swollen with our child has blood rushing between my legs. I don’t hide the fact that it turns me on. After sharing the same tight space inside Eden, I’d say it won’t bother him in the least that I’m tenting my boxers.

Jesus, we’re a pair of sick fucks.

Smirking, Asher stands. “Glad you’re coming around, E.”

He meanders down the hallway, chuckling.

“It’s about time you admit that you’re as into Eden as I am,” he says. “Now get your ass back in the bedroom. We have our work cut out for us.”

My cock jerks at the promise of fucking Eden and coming inside her.

He stops and faces me. “And grab some water for us. We’ll need it.”

Oh yeah. We’re definitely fucked up. Hopefully, this plan works out. Otherwise, we’re only bringing Eden into the mess we’re creating.

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CHAPTER 44

EDEN

DAY 7 OF THE BET

I'M BURNING UP.

A bead of sweat drifts down my temple, leaving behind a cool trail on my skin.

I force my eyes open as I shift beneath the heavy blankets. When the heat doesn't let up, I kick down the comforter and turn onto my side and into a warm body. An arm slings around my waist and tucks me closer to the furnace.

I lift my head and blink several times.

One of the twins lies beside me, one arm covering his eyes while he sleeps and the other arm banded around me. I look behind me at the second twin. He sleeps on his stomach, the back of his head facing me.

Shit. It's hard to tell which one is which when Asher doesn't have a sucker in his mouth.

I turn my head and look at the twin on his back. My gaze drags down his body until I stop on his hard cock.

That's definitely Asher.

He's thicker than Elijah.

A quick glance between the two, and they look the same down there, but I've gotten to know the guys well enough to tell the difference.

I gently ease Asher away from me, and his arm tightens around me. He brings me into him to lie halfway over him, my breasts crushed against his

side. I grunt and wiggle away, but it’s like fighting a python. He’s wrapped around me, refusing to let me leave his side.

“Let go,” I growl under my breath as I squirm again.

“No.”

My heart pounds harder. I lift my head and suck in a breath when I find a pair of onyx eyes staring at me. Asher smirks and tucks me closer against him.

“I’m burning up,” I say.

“Then lie over me,” he says with a lazy smile. “I’m cold, and need you to warm me up.”

“You’re lying.”

He shrugs. “You don’t know that.”

“You have sweat on your forehead, too.”

“It could be from anything.” He nuzzles the hair beside my ear. He catches my earlobe between his teeth, sending feel-good shivers up my spine.

“Are you going to warm me up, little ghost?” he whispers.

My cheeks burn.

Unable to resist, I roll over him and rest my head against his chest. Our naked bodies mold together, and his erection rubs against my stomach. He cups my ass cheeks with his large hands and squeezes. I bite my bottom lip to keep from whimpering.

“Aren’t you tired from last night?” I whisper.

“No. I have a lot of catching up to do.” He smacks my ass. “And I’ll never catch up.”

Our eyes meet, and we don’t need to say a word for us to understand what’s being said in that one look.

Asher flips us over in a blink, and he guides the tip of his cock outside my opening. His lips crash against mine, his tongue shoving into my mouth as his cock rams into me.

I wince, but he doesn’t soften the blow. He barely gives me time to adjust to his size before pulling out and plunging forward in brutal strokes.

“Don’t make a sound,” he whispers into my mouth. “You’re all mine right now, little ghost.”

I let out a shaky breath into his mouth, which he greedily swallows before thrusting his tongue against mine. It matches the same rhythm as his cock—slow and hard.

I wrap my legs around his lean waist, loving the feeling of his warm, firm body against my softer frame. With each thrust, I'm shoved closer to my orgasm. I didn't think I had it in me after the countless times the guys made me see stars last night, but it builds, creeping closer and coiling in the pit of my stomach like a taut string threatening to snap.

My head lolls to the side, ending the kiss, and I crack open my eyes, meeting another pair of onyx eyes. Elijah smirks, watching as Asher fucks me to within an inch of my life.

I don't think Asher knows that Elijah is awake. His head hangs over my face, eyes locked on me.

My eyelashes flutter, and my back arches as the orgasm rips through me. I tip my head back and scratch my nails down Asher's back as I ride out the waves of pleasure. He groans and pounds harder into me.

"Get her on her hands and knees," Elijah says, breaking through the fuzziness in my head.

Asher lifts his head and glares at his brother for a moment before pulling out of me. He helps me up and flips me onto my stomach before lifting me onto my hands and knees. He enters me from behind and groans.

"Fuck, baby." He slaps my ass as he pounds into me before completely stopping and letting out a shuddering breath. "Suck his cock, little ghost."

"Well, look at that," Elijah says. He moves onto his knees in front of me. "You're about to make him come early, birdie. Suck my dick and give my brother a chance to come down from the ledge."

I open my mouth with a moan. I lower my head onto his cock, taking as much as I can. He fists my hair, guiding me further, just like the last time I sucked him.

"That's my good slut," Elijah says, his voice a purr.

My heart skips a beat, and my pussy clenches onto Asher's cock.

I didn't think I'd enjoy being degraded by my stepbrothers. Especially after the bully did nothing but that while he used me like I was nothing more than a hole to him.

Elijah thrusts until the tip hits the back of my throat. I cough, then gag. Drool escapes from the corners of my mouth and drips down my chin. I look up at Elijah with tear-filled eyes, gauging his reaction to seeing me like this.

I'm a fucking mess.

My pussy clenches again on Asher, and he grunts, then thrusts into me in slow, languid strokes.

Elijah watches me with desire in his dark gaze, his jaw clenched as if he's holding back from coming down my throat.

"Fuck her harder," he says while still keeping his gaze locked on me.

Asher rams into me, shoving me forward onto Elijah's dick. It sinks deeper, reaching into my throat. I dry-heave and squeeze my eyes shut.

Over and over, Asher bounces me back and forth between them.

"Keep sucking, birdie." Elijah's fingers clench tighter in my hair.

I hollow my cheeks and suck his cock. My clit pulses from another orgasm building.

"She's so fucking wet, bro," Asher growls. "I think she likes being used like this."

Elijah tilts his head, his lips curving into a merciless smirk. "Is that right? Do you like your brothers spit-roasting you right now?"

I can barely nod.

"Noted," Elijah murmurs, and then he smacks my cheek twice. "I'm about to come. If you waste any of it, we'll do this all over again until you get it right."

Asher's thrusts lose their rhythm. He fucks me harder into Elijah. His cock swells inside my mouth right before cum shoots into the back of my throat and onto my tongue. Elijah moans and drops his head back, exposing his throat to me. Asher's groans join his brother's as warmth floods inside me.

"Swallow," Elijah warns. "All of it."

I work my throat as I swallow all of his cum. It's hard to keep up with each jet that shoots from the tip, but I finally swallow the last of his load and look up at him.

Elijah smirks. "That's my good cum slut."

The guys pull out of me at the same time. Elijah kisses me softly before getting out of bed and leaving the room to get a rag to clean me with.

Asher gathers me in his arms and rolls us over so I straddle his waist, my head against his shoulder and his back on the mattress.

I never thought I'd be in a position like this with my stepbrothers. Both of them at the same time. Not once did they show malice or jealousy toward each other while they shared me.

Asher taps my shoulder and twirls my hair around his finger. “What are you thinking about?”

I close my eyes with a heavy sigh. “About us. All three of us,” I say. “Is this a onetime thing or—”

“It’s forever, little ghost. You’re ours.”

I push myself up and straddle his waist. “I don’t know if it’ll work.”

“Why do you think that?”

I lower my gaze to his chest as I draw invisible doodles on him. “The person who’s been texting me won’t be happy about this.”

“The person who’s been texting you?”

“He’s the reason I’m staying here. He’s blackmailing me.”

Asher pushes onto his elbows, his eyebrows scrunched together. “What kind of blackmail?”

I glance at the doorway where Elijah disappeared. Asher catches my chin between his fingers and turns my head toward him again. I suck in a sharp breath at the anger brimming in his dark eyes.

“Answer the question,” he says, his voice deeper.

“Elijah didn’t tell you?”

He clenches his jaw and barely shakes his head.

“I don’t know which is better to do. Show you or tell you.” I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow hard. “He’s been using me for—”

Asher moves me off him in a flurry. He gets out of bed and searches through our clothes before finding my phone. He unlocks it—all without needing to ask for my password.

“Asher?” I move off the bed and rush to his side.

He scrolls through the messages and stops at the pictures the unknown number sent me. I watch him as he looks through the pictures. His expression darkens, his mood changing for the worse.

I shrink away from him, not wanting to catch his bad side.

Asher turns his focus to me after a moment and shoves the phone into my hands.

“Go to class,” he murmurs. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“What about—”

“It’ll be taken care of.”

“You know who it was?”

His lips flatten, and he doesn’t answer my question.

I don’t want to push for any answers, given how his mood drastically changed. I leave the room and pad across the hallway into the bathroom to take a quick shower. When I come back out, the guys are gone and I’m left alone.

I don’t know what happened or where they went, but the unknown number may not be as anonymous as I thought he was. The pictures upset Asher enough for him to close me out.

Whatever it is, I’ll have to find out later.

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CHAPTER 45

EDEN

DAY 7 OF THE BET

I WALK OUTSIDE and descend the wide steps leading to the school's front gardens. The spring weather warms my skin, and the sun peeks through the tree's boughs. I lift my gaze to the sky and smile at the circle of crows overhead.

"The freak is looking at them again."

I blink and turn toward the voice. A man passes by, tossing a dirty look at me. A woman walks on his other side, her head turned toward me and a huge grin on her face.

I shudder.

It's not just a smile that shows she's happy. It's the type I used to get all the time—sarcastic, snotty, elitist.

I am but scum beneath their shoes.

They walk away, and I barely catch her whispers. "Did you see the clips?"

"It's just a fluke. Nothing more," I mutter.

I mentally shake away the weird interaction and stride down the path leading to class. It's weird not having Elijah beside me, talking about nothing or teasing me. He made it a habit to always chauffeur me to my classes, no matter how out of the way they were from his.

It's not like I need him, but I'm not too proud to admit that I miss his company.

I pass a group of girls on my way to the building. Their gazes track my movement, and they snicker, whispering to each other.

“I can’t believe she did that,” one whispers loud enough for me to hear.

A bead of sweat runs down my temple, and ducking my head, I quicken my pace.

What the hell is going on?

I enter the next building and jog to my class. My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I rush to my desk. A black mass lies on the surface, and I stop dead in my tracks. Tears form in my eyes as I stare down at the dead crow, its wings spread wide and eyes open and sightless on me.

Snickers fill the room.

“Something the matter, freak?”

“Did someone hurt your wittle friend?”

“Grow up, you disgusting bitch.”

“Is your brother going to kiss it and make it all better?”

More laughter.

I reach for the dead bird.

“Oh, there you are!” Katie’s voice filters through the buzzing in my brain and the laughter in the classroom.

I numbly raise my head without bothering to brush away the tears.

Katie crosses the room. Her gaze falls to the crow on my desk before slipping back to me. Sympathy fills her eyes, and she stops before me.

“Oh, Eden,” she coos.

“What’s going on?” I whisper.

“Who would do that?” She points to the bird.

I swallow hard. “I don’t know. It could have been anyone.”

“Does it matter?” a guy across the room calls. “I think she has more important things to worry about, like—”

Katie slaps her hands over my ears and yells something at the guy before turning her head toward me. She grabs my hand and yanks me behind her as she rushes toward the door.

“Where are we going?” I dig my heels into the ground and look back at the bird. “We can’t leave her here.”

Katie stops and glances behind me before turning to me again. “We’ll come back for it.”

She pulls me into a private hallway alcove where we aren’t a spectacle for everyone. She turns to me and grabs my hands. I don’t know why she

thinks I want to be touched by her or treated like I'm her best friend.

"Is it true?" she whispers.

"Is what true?" I yank my hands out of hers and back away a step. "What the hell is going on?"

A tear falls down my cheek, and I swipe it away.

Something is wrong.

The whispers. The dead bird. Everyone is calling me a freak and going back to bullying me as if Elijah never helped me.

Katie's expression crumbles, and she digs her phone out of her purse. "It's better if I show you."

She taps the screen a few times before turning the phone toward me.

My stomach drops, and I cover my mouth to keep from retching.

It's a short video clip of me on all fours. Elijah and Asher are behind me, both of them fucking me at the same time. One pulls out, and the other rams forward. I'm pushed harder into the bed, my face scrunching up in pleasure. The clip plays for ten seconds before starting over again. It takes a moment for me to see the big white letters at the top of the screen.

"*Astar Elite slut fucks her brothers* 😂🥵"

I stumble backward and grab the collar of my uniform shirt to loosen it.

Katie lowers the phone and looks down at it with a smirk, still watching the clip of me getting railed by my stepbrothers.

"That's you, right?" she says. "Fucking your brothers?"

I swallow hard and swipe away more tears. "How did that—"

"So it is true." She laughs. "It seems like your stepbrothers don't really care about you, since they recorded this. I heard you don't even look at the camera once. It must've been that good, huh?"

She locks the phone and slips it back into her purse before looking up at me with a deviant smile. Gone is the nice, friendly Katie. The bitch that I know her as—the bitch that she *is*—is back.

"That's really messed up, you know?"

"That's cruel," I say, my words coming out in a croak.

"Oh, no." She touches her chest with mock sympathy. "I didn't mean the video was messed up. I meant you fucking your brothers is messed up. How could you do something like that? With *them,* of all people?" She snorts a laugh.

"I thought . . ."

“You thought, what? That you meant something to them?” She shakes her head and takes a menacing step toward me. “Elijah can be convincing if he wants to be, can’t he? He convinced me that he liked me at first. That he wanted to be with me. It seems you fell for the act, too.”

“He cares.”

She lets out a loud laugh and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “No, he doesn’t. Elijah is merciless. Asher is the same. Did you forget that they’re called the Merciless Twins for a reason? They don’t feel anything but hatred.”

“He—” I choke on my words.

Elijah and Asher said they wanted to be with me. They said I was theirs. I didn’t think this would happen. I didn’t realize they were even recording us last night.

I’m such an idiot for falling for their lies. For falling for *them*.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Katie rolls her eyes. “You really thought your stepbrothers would be into you like that? Did you think they’d fall for a girl like you?”

She laughs, piercing my ears with the annoying, high-pitched sound.

“It all happened because of a bet Elijah made with Derrick.” She smirks and checks her nails. “And look at that. You fell right into Elijah’s trap.”

“A bet?”

“Elijah bet Derrick he could make you sleep with him in seven days. You stupid fucking girl. He doesn’t want you.”

I stumble back a step and glance at the classroom door. There’s no way I can go back in there. I want to get the dead bird, but I can’t bring myself to save it if it means enduring the jokes and insults.

I can’t show my face around here anymore.

Everyone knows.

They all saw the clip.

I spin around and bolt away from Katie.

Away from the class.

Away from everyone.

I rush out of the building and sprint toward the main area so I can get my belongings from my dorm.

It’s time to leave Astar Elite and the Merciless Twins behind. For good.

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CHAPTER 46

ASHER

DAY 7 OF THE BET

I CLENCH my fists at my sides and creep toward Elijah's turned back in the art room. He never went into detail about what he texted Eden. He never said he was doing anything more than just texting.

Come to find out, he's been visiting her and carving into her ass, then making her suck his cock while taking pictures.

He hid this from me, knowing that it would upset me. He took advantage of our sister in ways that could be detrimental to our newfound relationship with her. If she finds out about this, it will be over for not only him, but me too. She'll run from us and never look back.

"I already know what you're going to say," Elijah says without having to turn around. "I know you're mad at me."

I stop and glare at the back of his head.

Elijah drops his paintbrush into the murky water and turns in his seat to look at me. Guilt sags his shoulders, but anger burns in his dark eyes behind his glasses.

"I won't apologize for what I did," he says. "I meant everything I did with her, and I'm not taking it back."

"You touched her before I did," I growl. "Not only that, but I thought you cared about her. I guess that was a lie too."

He snorts a sarcastic laugh and shakes his head. "That's not at all what I'm saying, and you know that." He levels a glare at me. "This is what

you’re upset about? Not that I forced our sister into sucking my cock and fucking her tits?”

“You always tell me everything.”

He nods. “I do.”

“But you didn’t tell me about *that*.”

I stand by what I said. He made it sound like he cares about her too. He even admitted it last night when he cornered me into sharing her with him.

“You’re right. I didn’t.”

“How are we going to tell her about this?”

He shrugs. “We aren’t.”

I narrow my eyes, and the sucker clacks against my teeth. “When she finds out—”

“She won’t.” He stands from his chair and straightens the cuffs of his uniform jacket. “It’ll go to the grave with us.”

“What lies in the dark always comes into the light.”

I close the minimal space between us. Elijah doesn’t cower or show any fear. I fist his jacket and shove him backward. His chair knocks over from the force and fills the room with the loud clatter.

He slowly blinks and slips his hands into his pockets. “This will remain in the dark, and she’ll never know. I’ll be sure of it.”

My lip curls in a snarl. “That’s outside of your control.”

His eyebrow twitches. “Do you plan to tell her?”

I shake my head. The last thing I want is to be the reason for her tears.

I really am a goner for her. I may be her monster, but she defeated me a long time ago. It took until now for me to realize it.

“Then she’ll never know.” He pats my shoulder. “You worry for no reason.”

I shake him off me and back away. “This castle is full of secrets, Elijah, and I’ve heard many over the years I’ve been haunting here.”

His eyebrows scrunch together as he frowns.

I back away another step, closer to the door.

“Secrets that were never meant to be heard, and I still came across them.” I hold up two fingers. “Two can keep a secret, as long as one is in the grave.” I lower my index finger, leaving my middle finger up.

Elijah’s eyes narrow. “Are you threatening me?”

I grin. “No. I’m just stating the facts.”

“Asher . . .”

I turn and leave the room.

Striding down the hall, I pass by several people.

Whispers reach me, but they aren't loud enough to make out.

I blink several times and shake my head to clear the hallucinations.

Because that's what it has to be. Hallucinations of whispers and not people talking about me as I pass by them.

I don't care what Elijah says, the secret will come out, and all three of us will be thoroughly fucked.

Until then, I plan to spend time with my little ghost and make her fall in love with me. She may not love me as much as I love her, but maybe one day she'll reach the same level.

A flash of long brown hair catches my attention. Soft whimpers reach my ears—so soft that I shouldn't be able to hear them. Maybe it's because I'm connected to her in ways that shouldn't be possible as well.

I widen my strides and follow her as she runs down the hallway.

Something's wrong. Something happened.

Even though I keep my focus on her, the whispers from everyone amplify and the pieces start to connect. The odd looks I receive now make sense.

"She fucked her brothers," a female student whispers to her friend.

"Both of them?"

"At the same time."

Their laughter dies a quick death as I pass by them.

They can talk shit all they want, but they can't do it with their full fucking chests when I'm around.

My jaw clenches and I fist my hands at my sides, holding back from attacking everyone whispering about Eden.

How the fuck did they find out about what happened?

I shake away the question. It doesn't matter right now. All that matters is Eden as she runs, putting distance between us when all I want is to protect her from the world.

All I know is that this is Elijah's fault, and it will be his fucking mess to clean up.

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CHAPTER 47

ELIJAH

DAY 7 OF THE BET

THE CONVERSATION with Asher plays on repeat in my head as I work on the painting before me. It's come along since the last time I worked on it. The woman's soft brown eyes stare back at me, as if she's already upset that I deceived her.

I lower the paintbrush and clench my jaw.

My phone buzzes in my pocket with a new notification. I ignore it and glare at the painting.

Two can keep a secret if one is in the grave.

I hope to God Asher didn't mean that he would kill me or that he would do something to himself.

I shake that thought away.

He wouldn't do it.

He wouldn't leave Eden behind.

I may be blood to him, but our stepsister means more than everyone else. It's not offensive to me. Or upsetting. It's merely a fact.

Eden Astar wiggled her way under my brother's skin and into his heart. Just like she did with me.

My phone buzzes several more times with new notifications—enough to pull me out of my thoughts. I drop my paintbrush into the water and reach into my pocket to see what the fuck is going on.

Footsteps approach from behind.

“There you are,” Katie says.

I turn my head and glare at her from the corner of my eye. “What do you want?”

She shrugs a dainty shoulder. “I wanted to check on you. See how you’re doing.”

“I’m fine,” I say. “You can go now.”

“Are you sure?” She walks past me and stands beside the easel. Her gaze flits to the painting, and her lips curl downward.

Good. I hope it stings that I’m painting another woman and not her.

She shifts her attention to me and folds her arms beneath her breasts. “It seems like you have a new muse.”

I relax into my seat. “Jealous, Katie? It’s unbecoming of you.”

“I’m not jealous.” She rolls her eyes. “I came here to see if you’re okay.”

“I’m curious. Why do you care if I’m okay?”

She shrugs. “Because it seems like you may be upset, what with the news going around the school, and I want to comfort you.”

I snort. “The only reason I’m upset is because you’re here. And what news are you talking about?”

“Rude.” She sighs and looks at her nails. “So you haven’t heard the rumors?”

“I’ve been stuck in this room for the last two hours. I haven’t heard anything.” I tilt my head. “Even if I had, it’s none of my business unless it involves me.”

Her gaze flicks up, her lips curving into a smile. “Are you sure about that?”

“It involves me,” I murmur. “Are you going to keep playing games, or will you tell me?”

“Have you thought about giving us a second chance?”

“You’re busy sleeping around with everyone, and even if you weren’t, I’d never get with you again.” I frown. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Have you checked your phone?”

I grab my cell phone from my pocket and ignore the texts from Asher and the others. One stands out from the rest. Opening the message from Derrick, I stop myself from crushing my phone in my tight grip.

A video clip of Eden, Asher, and me replays. I read the message at the top of the video and scowl.

“Looks like you won the bet,” Katie says. “Derrick said it’s a twenty-minute video of you two fucking your stepsister, but it cut off in the middle of you guys still going at it. Did you fuck *her* all night too?”

I lower the phone and glare at her.

She smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Aww, don’t look at me like that, pookie. I thought this was what you wanted.” She steps closer and drags her finger along my tie. “I’ve missed you, Elijah. I think we would be good together.”

I catch her wrist. A thrill buzzes beneath my skin when she winces and tries to ease her hand away from my grip.

“Don’t. Fucking. Touch. Me.” I release her, one finger at a time, and back away. “How did Derrick get the footage?”

She tucks her hands behind her back, but she can’t hide that she’s rubbing her wrist, thinking that I won’t see it. “He said you sent it to him late last night. You don’t remember?”

I check the text thread with him.

Fuck.

The text must’ve gone through when I fumbled my phone when Asher came into the living room.

I sprint to the stairs that will take me to my dorm. Fuck the elevator. I don’t have time.

If I got the text message from Derrick, and Katie knows about it as well, that means the entire school knows. Eden will run.

I fucked everything up, and now I’m losing not only Eden but also my brother.

I run up the stairs, taking two at a time to the third level. I rush to my dorm room and unlock the door, praying that Eden is still here.

“Eden!”

Silence.

I stalk to my bedroom, finding it empty. Her clothes are gone. My heart sinks into my stomach. I check the bathroom. Empty.

She left, and I don’t know where she would go

I pull out my phone and send a text to the only person I trust to find her.

Are you with her?

Asher leaves me on Read. I can’t be mad at him about it. What’s happening is all my fault, and he warned me.

And now Asher will never forgive me for losing Eden.

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CHAPTER 48

ASHER

DAY 7 OF THE BET

SHOVING my phone into my pocket, I widen my strides and follow Eden as she rushes down the hallway. I warned my brother this would happen, and he didn't want to listen to me.

Secrets *always* come to light. Someone always fucking finds out.

I didn't expect it to happen so soon, especially from a video that Elijah sent. Now the entire school has seen Eden taking two cocks at once. They've seen her face contorted in pleasure that was meant for Elijah and me only.

I want to beat every single person I pass.

They have the video.

They're playing it.

They're laughing.

I clench and unclench my fists.

Eden's bag wheels behind her as she races down the hall and turns the corner. Everyone laughs at her as she passes, and she's right back to being the butt of the joke.

"Who would have known the freak was a whore?" a guy says in a fit of laughter. It's loud enough that both Eden and I hear him.

Eden ignores him and keeps walking.

I fucking can't.

The tightly strung cord inside me snaps, and I grit my teeth. The sucker crumbles between them. The stick breaks in half, and I spit the candy out of my mouth. Once Eden is far enough away, I make my move.

I throw myself at him, my fist hooking into his jaw. The other fist connects in another hook, and he cries out as he falls backward. Blood gushes from his face, and he cups his nose, wailing like the little bitch he is.

I grab him by the collar of his uniform, then shove him backward into the wall.

Leaning down, I bare my teeth at him. “Call her a whore again, and I’ll cut out your tongue and feed it to the fucking dogs.”

His eyes widen. “E-Eli?”

“Wrong fucking brother.”

His tanned skin pales, leaving him white as a ghost.

“I-I’m sorry, Asher.” He swallows hard. “It was just a joke.”

“Just a joke,” I mutter. My fingers circle his throat, then squeeze.

Red tints his skin, and his eyes bulge as he stares at me, pleading for me to let go of him. I grind my teeth so hard they threaten to shatter any second.

“I’m just joking.” I drop my hand from him and take a step back. My lips curve into a humorless smile.

“You’re out of your fucking mind.” He coughs and sags against the wall, his hands going to his throat and landing on the red finger marks I left behind.

I glare at him and take another step back, torn between strangling him or catching up with Eden.

The latter wins, and I turn and sprint down the hall where Eden disappeared.

Punching the asshole didn’t help. Threatening him didn’t either. At this point, I want to burn the school down with everyone inside it, including my brother.

He took the one thing that I love from me, so I want to take everything away from him.

I shove the front door open and descend the stairs, two at a time. Eden’s black hair flutters in the wind, her bag dragging behind her as she races through the gardens toward the parking garage.

Pumping my arms, I chase after her. She reaches her pink Corvette before me and throws open the back door. I slap the door shut and spin her

around.

“Where do you think you’re going, little ghost?”

She looks up at me with tears clinging to her eyelashes, her eyes puffy and swollen from crying. My heart shatters. I didn’t think the icy organ would ever thaw, but the sight of my stepsister’s tears reduces it to a melted puddle.

I did that. Elijah did that.

“I don’t want anything to do with you or Elijah,” she wails, then shoves me in the middle of my chest.

I catch her wrists and walk her backward until she bumps against her car. Her chest rises and falls with heavy, uneven breaths.

“You don’t have a choice,” I murmur.

“Did I ever have a choice?” She glares at me and stomps her foot.

“You did,” I say. “Every step of the way. You had a choice, and you chose us. You can’t leave.”

“It was all a fucking lie!” She yanks her hands out of my grasp and shoves me. “It was all a stupid bet so you could spread it around the school that I slept with my brothers. You fucking won.”

Before I can say anything, she keeps going.

“Katie told me everything, Asher. She reminded me that you and Elijah are the Merciless Twins of Astar Elite. I’m nothing to you but a fucking joke. You win.”

She shoves me again.

“Are you happy now?”

Shove.

“Did you get what you wanted out of it?”

Shove.

I grab her wrists and push her backward against the car, pinning her hands against the top. The position thrusts her breasts upward, and her head falls against the warm metal.

“No,” I snarl. “I’m not happy about this.”

“Well, that’s too bad.” Her voice cracks, and she sniffles. “I have nothing else to give you.”

“You’re wrong.”

I want her heart. Her love. Her warmth. Her everything.

“It wasn’t a bet for me, little ghost.” I shove my leg between her thighs. “My feelings for you have always been genuine.”

She lets out a dry laugh. “You don’t feel anything but hate.”

I glare at her.

“You’re a selfish, cold-hearted, merciless asshole!” She spits in my face.

The glob runs down my cheek, cool and full of spite. For a split second, fear fills her eyes, then dims. The spark is gone, and I can’t fucking stand that.

When I said I wanted to know everything about her, to take her apart and learn, I didn’t mean for her to lose her spark.

I became the monster for her. Now I hate myself for it.

Gritting my teeth, I step back and release her. Eden sags against the car and drops her arms by her sides. Guilt, shame, and an unknown emotion pass over her features.

It’s like she’s saying goodbye to me.

She grabs her bag and tosses it into the back seat of her car. The door slams shut, and she awkwardly shuffles to the driver’s side.

I move without thinking, striking her in the back of her head with my fist, then catching her when she falls.

She can’t leave me.

I’ll never let her run away from me.

She once looked at me with love, and I’ll have it again.

No matter what it takes.

Turning Eden onto her back on the couch, I tilt my head and stare at her. Her black eyelashes dust the tops of her cheeks, looking like dark crescent moons. Freckles kiss her skin along her nose and cheeks. I’ve counted them many times over the years, and I’ve continued to count them, noticing the new ones after she sat in the sun.

The front door slams shut, and footsteps race toward the living room.

“Did you find her?” Elijah rounds the couch and stops. His gaze falls on Eden, and he lets out a shaky breath. “What happened? Why is she tied up?”

I glare at him.

He turns his focus to me and winces. “I’m sorry, Asher. I didn’t send it to him on purpose. It was an accident.”

I don’t give a shit if it was an accident. It still happened, and now we have to clean up his mess and pray that Eden will still want us once it’s over.

Elijah glances at Eden again. I hate the soft glaze in his eyes when he looks at her. Is this how I look when I watch her every move?

“Do you plan to keep her tied up?” he says.

I shrug. “Until she comes around and promises she won’t leave us.”

His gaze snaps to my face, and he relaxes.

I scoff. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m still angry with you. I won’t keep her from you, either. If she still wants to be with you, then it’s her choice to make.”

“I’ll make sure she does.”

“We’ll see about that.”

He slips his hands into his pockets. “I’ll take care of everything.”

“How?”

“Just trust me in this.”

“I’m not sure I can do that.” I pull a sucker from my pocket and untwist the wrapping from the candy.

“Then you can help me or watch. I don’t care. Either way, I’ll take care of it.”

“Our father will find out. If he hasn’t already.” I pop the sucker into my mouth and roll it to one side. “Are you prepared for the talk with him?”

“I’ve been prepared since the night you popped her cherry and came inside her to get her pregnant.” He rolls his shoulders and levels his gaze on me. “Which is why it’s so important that we win her back. She could be carrying our child.”

I grunt and lean into my seat. Laying Eden’s legs over my lap, I relax into the couch and rub my thumb in small circles on her bare calf.

She could already be pregnant.

My cock jerks at the thought.

“This has been the plan, Asher. Get her pregnant and marry her so we can get the inheritance.”

I glare at him.

Is he going to tell Eden this plan? Or will he do what he’s done this whole time and keep her in the dark?

More secrets that will leak. More heartbreak.

Just like all the other times, he reads my mood. “I’ll tell her.”

I nod and roll the sucker from side to side. “What if she’s pregnant with my child?”

“It doesn’t matter.” His face softens. “What our father and society think about people with schizoaffective having kids doesn’t fucking matter. You’re just as important as everyone else. I’ll love your son or daughter as much as I would if they were my child.”

I nod and let out a breath. “I’ll join in taking care of the problem. We’ll need someone who’s good with electronics, and I already have an idea of who.”

Elijah tilts his head, questioning who I have in mind.

I level him with a look. “Rome Graves.”

“The bird guy?”

I nod. “He’s the one who was with the Walker brothers.”

His jaw slackens. “That night?”

I dip my chin in a nod.

Elijah pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’ll ask later, but I’m afraid to know why you didn’t tell me.” He drops his hand and turns his cold eyes on me. “We’ll figure everything out. For now, get her into my room, and we’ll start planning.”

I look at Eden’s sleeping face.

It’ll take a lot to get her to trust us again. To openly love us.

Until then, we’ll prove our worth to her.

We’re not the Merciless Twins for nothing, and the school will feel our wrath. We’ll start with Derrick.

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CHAPTER 49

EDEN

I CRACK open my eyes and wince at the throbbing pain. It feels like someone is jackhammering an icepick through my eye and into the back of my head.

"Fuck." I wince again.

I blink several times, hoping it chases away the pain. After a while, it fades, and I look around.

The setting has changed.

I'm no longer outside my car with Asher.

Sunlight beams through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The rays land directly on the bed and fire into my eyes. It's not exactly helping the lingering ache in my head.

Sleek black furniture sits near the windows. A chessboard waits on a small table between the chairs. A matching dresser is tucked against the wall near the bed's headboard.

I'm definitely not in my dorm.

I roll onto my side and move my arms, only to be stopped short. My hands remain behind my back. Peering over my shoulder, I try to see what the hell has me tied up. I move my legs and realize that I'm tied down there, too.

Everything comes into focus in my mind. Asher knocked me out and brought me back to Elijah's bedroom, and now I'm tied like a captive.

A lump forms in my throat when the rest rushes in.

It was all fake. They didn’t mean anything they said. I’m nothing but a bet to them. They made me believe they had feelings for me, and they made me fall for them.

Tears sting my eyes, making the puffiness worse than before.

The video clip flashes through my head, dulling everything around me. I cringe and squeeze my eyes shut.

All I ever wanted was to belong, and the guys made me feel like I was finally accepted for who I am. But it wasn’t because they cared for me. The Merciless Twins made me their sole focus to make a mockery of me. I won’t be able to show my face around here ever again. Screw what my stepfather and mother want out of me. I can’t continue living this lie.

Tears slip down my cheeks, and I swallow hard around the lump in my throat. A whimper escapes me, and I muffle it by biting my bottom lip. I don’t want the guys to know I’m awake. If I pretend to sleep, they can’t talk to me.

Voices carry through the hallway, and I squeeze my eyes shut. I suck in a quiet breath when footsteps come down the hall, then stop outside the door. It creaks open.

“Is she awake?” Elijah asks.

Silence.

I wait for the sound of the door closing, but it never comes.

“Yeah,” Asher murmurs. “She’s still out.”

“How hard did you hit her?”

“Enough to knock her out and bring her back here.”

“We need to catch Rome while he’s still here. I hope to God he’ll help us.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” Asher says. “I have dirt on him.”

“More secrets?”

“I meant what I said about secrets always coming out.”

Their footsteps shuffle over the floor, and the door shuts.

I let out a shaky breath and roll onto my back. My eyelashes flutter as I open my eyes, and I suck in a breath.

Asher and Elijah stand at the end of the bed, their dark eyes on me.

Asher grins, his sucker pushing against the inside of his cheek, and he folds his arms. “Brat. You thought I couldn’t tell if you’re asleep or not?”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” I glare at him.

He shrugs a shoulder. “Neither do I. I’d much rather do other things with you.”

“It’ll never happen again. I refuse to let you make me into content to use against me.”

He narrows his eyes. “What happens between us stays between us.”

“Liar.”

“Now, why would I lie to you?”

“I don’t know, maybe for the same reasons you lied to me before.” I wiggle my arms. “How long do you plan to keep me tied up?”

Asher and Elijah share a look before they turn to me.

“Until you don’t run from us,” Elijah says.

I let out a humorless laugh. “Why would I stay here with you guys? I hate it here.”

“We’re taking care of the problem, birdie,” Elijah says.

“The problem?” I scoff. “It’s here in the room with me. Both of you did this. And now you’re acting like it’s someone else’s fault. It was all a lie the whole time. You made me fall for you both while you didn’t feel a thing for me.”

My chin wobbles with a sob, and I hold it back. They don’t deserve to see my tears. They don’t deserve to watch me fall apart.

“It wasn’t a lie,” Elijah growls. “What we feel for you is real.”

“How long have you been doing this?” I say.

Elijah’s eyebrows scrunch together. “Elaborate.”

“Don’t play dumb. You’re the one who’s been texting me. Was it you?” I jerk my gaze to Asher. “Did you break into my room and violate me?”

His eyes widen, then narrow to a scowl.

Elijah snorts a laugh and slips his hands into his pockets. “Direct the blame toward me. It’s been me the whole time, baby.”

My stomach flips, and I sink further into the bed. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’re mine.” He moves around the bed and stops beside me. “You’ve always been mine. Just like you’ve always belonged to Asher.”

“This is so fucked up,” I whisper. “You broke into my room. Carved into me. Made me do this to you . . .”

“Yeah, baby. I did. You sucked my cock, and I fucked your tits. I made you my slut, and you loved every fucking second of it, so don’t you dare lie about it.”

My mouth opens, then snaps shut.

I hate him. I hate how right he is.

I was scared when he did it, but deep down, I accepted it. He pulled me from the light of what's good and right and dragged me into his darkness, allowing me to set myself free.

"Do you think that will win me over? That I'll forgive you for everything you've done?" I say instead. "You made me into your slut. I was nothing to you. I'm still nothing to you."

"I never said you were nothing to me." Elijah bends over me, his face hovering over mine, and he places his palm on the pillow beside my head. His lips brush against mine as he speaks. "Baby, I claimed you a long time ago. What's mine is mine."

"The bullying," I say. "The name-calling by others. It was both of your doing?"

They tilt their heads at the same time. It's eerie how similar they can be. They share a look before turning back to me and nodding.

"Both of you were the puppet masters," I mumble. "You made everyone else do the dirty work for you."

I squeeze my eyes shut and suck in a shuddering breath.

All the weird things that happened at school, becoming the target—it all makes sense now. It's been this way since my mom married their dad. The friends I had disappeared and came back with bruises. They chased everyone away from me, isolating me from the world.

I've fallen for their lies and for them. It's too late to go back now. I'm in too deep.

"Do you even like me?" I whisper, my voice cracking. "Or was that a lie, too?"

Elijah mutters a curse before his lips crash against mine. I turn my head to get him off, but he chases me, shoving his tongue into my mouth. I can't keep fighting him. Instead, I lie still. He cups my cheek and nips my bottom lip when I don't kiss him back.

"Open," he growls.

I suck in a breath and part my lips. Elijah thrusts his tongue into my mouth, tangling it with mine. I can't stop myself from kissing him back with as much ferocity.

I should feel elated that he's kissing me and claiming me with his mouth. Instead, my heart breaks, and a small cry escapes me.

He pulls away, his eyes hooded as he looks down at me. Silence stretches between us before he turns and leaves the room without saying a word.

Tension fills the air, electrifying and raising the hairs on my nape.

I turn to Asher and glare at him before rolling onto my side, giving him my back.

“Leave me alone.”

“No.”

“I’m angry with you.”

“Then be mad at me.”

I get more comfortable on the mattress, hating how it’s like lying on a cloud. It dips beneath Asher’s weight, but I refuse to look at him. I gasp as he grabs my hips and rolls me onto my back.

“What are you doing?” My eyes widen as he pulls out a pocketknife and flicks out the blade.

He looks at the knife before turning to me.

“Are you going to hurt me?” My voice comes out in a squeak.

“No.” He grabs my ankles and wiggles the blade beneath the ties before flicking his wrist and cutting through them. My legs fall open, and he tosses the knife aside on the bed to spread me wider.

“Don’t touch me.” I kick his hands away.

He catches me by the thighs and drags me toward him.

“You can be mad at me all you want, little ghost. I need a taste of you.”

I shake my head.

Asher jerks my legs apart and trails his fingers up my thighs. “Are you done pretending? Because there’s no room for that.”

I swallow hard and stop kicking him.

Asher smirks and peeks at me from beneath his lashes. “There’s my good girl.”

My heartbeat thuds in my ears as he pushes my skirt around my waist. He holds my stare as he slides my panties to the side, exposing me to him. Asher’s gaze rakes down my body and stops between my legs.

“Do you want to know why I call you little ghost?” he murmurs. He tilts his head and moves onto his stomach, his face inching closer to my pussy.

I bite my bottom lip and nod.

I understand why Elijah calls me birdie. He doesn’t have to explain since it’s in the name. But little ghost never made sense.

He catches the end of his sucker between two fingers, then pulls the candy out of his mouth. He twirls the stick, and the blue top spins, entrancing me as I watch the movement.

“It’s because you’ve haunted me for years.”

His blue-coated tongue peeks from between his lips, wetting them. His gaze flicks up to my face for a moment before turning back to the candy, and he smiles.

“The taste of you was like candy on my tongue. So sweet. So ripe and needy. I couldn’t get enough of you that night, and I still can’t get enough, no matter how many times I lick your pussy.”

My eyes widen.

“It was you?” I breathe.

I thought it was Elijah all this time. It made more sense that it was him since he was the one who led me along this whole time, making it seem like he really was into me.

Asher leans forward and drags his tongue between my pussy lips. The tip flicks my clit and draws a guttural moan from me.

“Asher, please,” I whimper. “Free my hands.”

He smirks and moves onto his knees, then leans back on his haunches. “No. I don’t want to ruin the fun. What good is that?”

He licks his lips with a groan. His eyes roll back and he drags in a deep, shuddering breath.

“Fuck, little ghost.” He opens his eyes and pins me with his darkened gaze. “You still taste so fucking good.”

He holds his sucker up with a wicked smile, flashing his teeth before lowering it between my folds.

“W-wait,” I moan.

He tuts, shushing me. He grabs my thigh, spreading me wider as he rolls the candy outside my opening. Then he drags it to my clit.

“I want to taste you all fucking day,” he murmurs. “Soak my sucker, little ghost. Give me something to remember you by.”

I whimper as he presses the sucker down on my clit, then rolls it. I shudder and bite my bottom lip to keep quiet, but I still make noises, no matter how hard I try to keep quiet. Asher forces them out of me as if he’s a man possessed.

“No matter how angry you are with me, you still moan like my needy slut, don’t you?”

He hums and drags the sucker down to my entrance. He tears his fixated gaze from my pussy and focuses on my face, watching my reaction as he sinks the sucker inside me.

“This is so fucked up.” My back arches, and I suck in a harsh breath as he pushes the candy until his fingers wiggle inside me as well.

“Not as fucked up as you, baby. Your pussy is swallowing my candy as if it’s my cock.” He bites his bottom lip and tilts his head as he thrusts the sucker in and out of me.

“Asher,” I whine.

“That’s it, moan my name. Maybe I’ll let you come too if you ask nicely.”

I shake my head and pant. My clit throbs like a heartbeat, begging for attention.

He chuckles and pinches the bundle of nerves between his other fingers. “Aww, poor baby. You want to come?”

My eyes slide back as he rolls my clit between his fingers. He drags the sucker out of me, then rams it back inside. He swirls it, rubbing against the sensitive part that has my toes curling.

“P-please,” I murmur breathlessly.

“Look at me.”

My eyelashes flutter as I open my eyes.

He grins and thrusts the sucker with slow, measured strokes. His thumb and forefinger roll my clit between them.

“There she is,” he murmurs. “There’s my girl. You look so good being fucked by my sucker. Such a sick, twisted freak.”

“A-Asher,” I whine.

He grins and removes the sucker, then pops it into his mouth.

“Wait,” I whimper.

He moves off the bed. “Get some rest, little ghost.”

“Come back!”

He strides to the door and looks back at me. “Don’t ever fucking question our feelings for you.”

My jaw drops as the door slams shut behind him, leaving me a mess on the bed.

I drop my head against the pillow and stare up at the ceiling. My orgasm fades, leaving me in discomfort and unsatisfied. He punished me. I never expected Asher, the one who’s been obsessive over me, to punish me.

I don’t know what else he has in store for me, but I have a feeling it’ll involve a lot more edging.

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CHAPTER 50
ASHER

THE AVIARY DOOR shuts behind me, closing Elijah and me in the same space as Rome. Elijah walks ahead, his strides leisurely, as if he owns the space he takes up, but I know better.

We're both on edge, hoping the plan works.

I linger behind him, breaking to the side so I can take a different angle.

The same light-yellow cockatiel sits on Rome's shoulder. She fluffs her feathers and extends her neck, as if she's checking us out before chirping to alert Rome to our entrance.

The white-haired, two-faced asshole pops his head up, as if we caught him in the middle of something. He lowers the phone he was glued to. Like the last time I ran into him, a flash of annoyance creeps into his gaze before he locks it away and puts on a mask of friendliness.

"How can I help you two?" He straightens and tucks his phone inside his pocket.

"That's the question." Elijah stops a foot away from the desk. "*Can* you help us?"

Rome looks between us, his gaze lingering on me longer than normal, as if he's remembering that night when he watched the Walker brothers beat the shit out of me.

He turns his focus to Elijah and folds his hands together on his lap. "Bird problems?"

Elijah grins. "You could say that."

Rome purses his lips. “Does it have to do with a little birdie and this morning?”

“Yeah.” Elijah tilts his head. “I figured you could help us with this problem.”

Rome relaxes in his seat and looks between the two of us again, like he’s calculating how to leave and take us out in the process.

“I can’t really help with that,” he says. “My specialty is birds. Not gossip.”

I roll the sucker in my mouth and taste Eden through the sweetness. I stalk closer to the front desk and stand beside my brother.

“Strange,” I say. “You’re really good with gossip and secrets.”

Rome’s gaze cuts toward me, then narrows. There he is. The mask is gone, and he’s no longer pretending to be someone he’s not. “Are you threatening me?”

“Oh, no,” Elijah says with a chuckle. “Not yet, anyway. Let’s cut the bullshit. You’re good with technology, and we need you to wipe the video from everyone’s devices.”

The bird on Rome’s shoulders fluffs her feathers and chirps, as if the conversation is bothering her. Rome soothes her with a scratch at the top of her head, pursing his lips as he considers both of us.

“What will I get out of it?” he says.

Elijah scoffs. “We won’t air your dirty laundry.”

Rome snorts a laugh. “You want me to remove a secret or else you’ll expose another that isn’t yours? Make it make sense.” He shakes his head and looks up at the ceiling. “No, I need something more substantial.”

I roll the sucker in my mouth. “Are you sure about that? I can always tell the Walker brothers you’ve been going behind their backs.”

Rome drops his gaze to me and glares. “If they find out, there’ll be hell to pay. Not just by me, but you two as well.”

Elijah shrugs. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. However, if you help us, we won’t have to worry about that, now, will we?”

Rome’s shoulders tense, and he scowls at both of us. I watch the struggle in his gaze, how he clings to his conviction.

Blackmail works every time.

Bit by bit, Rome lets go of his pride and realizes that he’s fucked either way.

He sighs. “Fine. I’ll help, but only if you’ll help me in the near future.”

Elijah dips his chin in a nod.

Rome sweeps his fingers through his white-blonde hair. “Give me a couple of hours to hack into everyone’s phones and wipe the video. I’ll let you know when it’s done.”

“Good,” Elijah says. “That wasn’t hard, now, was it?”

Rome scowls at him. “You owe me.”

“Then it’s a deal.”

Rome’s gaze flicks to me and remains. His lips turn up in a subtle smirk. “He doesn’t know, does he?”

He doesn’t need to elaborate for me to understand his question.

I shake my head.

No, Elijah doesn’t know what happened the night I was held by the Walker brothers. He doesn’t know that I saw Rome there. Things were said. Things were done. It’ll stay a secret until someone else brings it to light.

Rome smirks. “Maybe that’s for the best.”

Elijah turns to me, his eyebrows furrowed.

I don’t plan to tell him anytime soon. It’s not my secret to tell.

Derrick’s booming laughter breaks through the crowd in the pub. Elijah and I came here to have a word. But in order to do so, we have to pretend as if nothing has changed.

“I didn’t expect Asher to join too,” he says. “The Merciless Twins tag-teaming their stepsister.”

Elijah’s eye twitches. “Things change.”

I despise that we have to play along with Derrick. Rome can delete the video from his phone, just like everyone else’s, but we want to give him a single chance to do the right thing. If he refuses, we’ll make him pay, then delete it ourselves.

I relax in my seat and fold my arms across my chest.

“You can say that.” Derrick laughs. “I think this is even better that Asher joined.”

Elijah levels his glare on him. “Delete it.”

Derrick rolls his eyes. “Don’t tell me you regret sending it to me.”

“Delete. It.”

Derrick blows a raspberry and waves his hand. “No. It’s mine now.”

This sick motherfucker probably saved it in his spank-bank album.

I turn my glare on Elijah. He may have shown his regret and explained himself to me, but this is all his fault.

“This is what you wanted, right?” Derrick says, sobering from his fit of laughter. “You wanted to prove that you could get with your sister in seven days, and you did. We wanted to make an embarrassment out of the freak.”

Elijah’s shoulders slouch, and he stands from the seat at the table. He slips his hand into his pocket, looking every bit like his usual, calm self.

“Bite your tongue, Derrick,” Elijah murmurs.

The blond snorts. “Don’t tell me you’re standing up for the bitch. She got what she deserved.”

I see what’s coming a mile away. Derrick, on the other hand, doesn’t.

Elijah pulls his hand out of his pocket, his brass knuckles in place. He moves in front of Derrick and swings his fist.

Blood sprays from Derrick, and he falls backward in his seat. “What the hell?”

The blond wails as he cups his face.

Elijah grabs Derrick by the collar of his uniform and swings again, then again.

I’ve never seen him lose control like this. We’re Virgos. We gain knowledge and use it against them; that’s how we get what we want when and how we want it. For Elijah to lose his composure, and for me to lose mine, says a lot.

We’ve hit our breaking point, all because of Eden.

Derrick stops moving, his eyes rolled back and head lolling to the side.

I stand from my seat and catch Elijah by the shoulder before he can punch Derrick again. “That’s enough. We don’t want to kill him.”

“I don’t give a shit.” Elijah turns his glare to me, clenching and unclenching his fingers on the brass knuckles.

I drag him to his feet with a scoff. “We don’t have time for you to catch charges.”

A muscle jumps in Elijah’s jaw, and I know I got him. Eden comes before anything else. He can’t beg for her forgiveness if he’s sitting behind bars.

“That’s what I thought,” I mutter.

Elijah slips his hand into his pocket to lose the brass knuckles. He bends down and deletes the video from his phone, then snatches Derrick's wayward teeth from the floor.

I grin.

If he's doing what I think he's going to do, then I don't see that going over well. But Eden could end up surprising me.

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CHAPTER 51

EDEN

HANDS ROAM over my body and squeeze my breasts. Fingers slide my panties aside and dip between my lips, rubbing with agonizingly slow strokes.

I blink open my eyes and turn my head to look at who's touching me.

Shadows creep into the corners, bathing the room in darkness. There's just enough light for me to make out a form crouched by my legs, his tall body bent over and his head cocked to the side as he slides his finger inside me.

"So wet," he murmurs.

"Asher?" I arch my back to push my pussy against his hand. Every touch. Every stroke. It's maddening.

He grins, his sucker sitting in the corner of his mouth. "I left you so needy for me, didn't I? Want me to fix that?"

I smile, but then the day's events drop onto me and sit on my chest. My smile falls, and I scowl at him.

"Aw, baby. Don't look at us like that." He thrusts his finger deeper inside me.

I suck in a breath and arch away from him. "I'm angry with you."

"Then be mad at me. Take that anger out on us."

A different pair of hands raises my skirt and exposes more of my lower half to Asher. I turn my head and glare at Elijah, who's wearing his glasses.

"Don't even think about it," I growl.

He brushes a strand of hair off my face. “He’s already knuckle-deep inside you. I think we’re well past *thinking*.”

I look down at Asher as he slides another finger inside me and spreads the digits. A moan crawls up my throat, but I swallow it, not wanting them to hear. I’m supposed to be upset with them. What they did was awful. I don’t understand why they’re still toying with my already hurt feelings.

Because that’s what they do, a small voice in the back of my mind whispers. *They’re called merciless for a reason.*

Tears spring to my eyes, and I swallow hard around the lump in my throat.

Asher lowers himself onto his stomach. He blows warm air against my clit and looks at me from beneath his lashes.

“Go ahead,” he murmurs. “Beg for it.”

I arch my back and look between the twins. Elijah smirks at me, and Asher waits for me to beg while he teases my clit with air and the tip of his tongue. I turn my focus to Asher and bite my bottom lip.

“So stubborn,” he murmurs.

Maybe I am, but it doesn’t feel right to give in so easily.

Elijah unbuttons my uniform jacket, then spreads it.

“I think I know what she wants,” he says.

My gaze snaps to him, and I hold my breath. He smirks down at me as he unbuttons my shirt, shoves it open, then yanks down my bra to free my breasts.

“You want us to take control, hmm?” Elijah says.

I shake my head. “Don’t you dare.”

Elijah’s gaze rakes down my body, leaving behind a trail of fire that burns me to the core. He tucks his knuckles beneath my jaw and lifts my head so that I’m looking at him again.

“Don’t look away from me,” he says, then directs his next order to Asher while never ending the eye contact with me. “Eat her out and get her ready for us.”

“With pleasure.” Asher tosses his sucker onto the nightstand. He licks his lips and cuts the zip ties before he pulls off my panties and skirt. My shirt, jacket, and bra join them on the floor.

My hips jump off the bed the moment Asher’s tongue swipes over my clit. His moan vibrates into me, and he locks his arms around my thighs to keep me spread open for him.

Elijah moves from my side and straddles my chest, blocking my view of Asher. He undoes his pants and shoves them down to free his erection. His cock bobs as he eases forward until the tip presses against my mouth.

"You want us to take control," Elijah says. He fists the hair at the top of my head. "Just like what I did before."

"Fuck you." I flinch and turn my cheek to him.

He tuts and yanks my head to face him again. "Then come fuck us."

I glare at him through my lashes.

He taps his cock against my bottom lip. "Suck."

That one command makes my toes curl. Asher sucks my clit into his mouth and hums. My eyes roll back, and I part my lips on a silent moan. Elijah takes advantage by shoving his dick to the back of my throat. I cough before hollowing my cheeks and sucking.

It's fucked up that I want them to take the control away from me. To use me, like how Elijah wore the mask and broke into my dorm.

Elijah's fingers tighten in my hair, and he fucks my mouth with powerful strokes, each one hard and slow. Asher pushes two fingers inside me and spreads me open. His tongue laps my clit.

I shudder and lift my hips, chasing my orgasm that builds after I was denied earlier. It renders me motionless, and my eyes slam shut as the climax rolls through me.

"That's it, birdie. Keep coming on our brother's tongue." Elijah fucks my face faster, nearing his orgasm. He stops right as his cock throbs, and he pulls out.

I cough and suck in air.

"Get on your hands and knees." Elijah slaps my ass.

I push onto my knees and glare at him over my shoulder.

Elijah spreads my ass cheeks and pours lube onto my hole. "I'm popping your ass's cherry. I'm a little jealous that Asher took your virginity."

My eyes widen. A warning hangs at the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it instead.

Elijah guides the tip of his cock to my back hole, and he pushes.

"Breathe and relax," he says.

I drop my forehead onto the bed and breathe through the uncomfortable pressure as he pushes again.

"Keep relaxing," Elijah murmurs.

I relax my muscles and squeeze my eyes shut as he breaches the tight ring of muscles. A few more thrusts and he eases the head inside me. I whimper and white-knuckle the sheets as he pushes in deeper, then pulls out.

Asher moves beneath me and raises my hips to lower me onto his cock. My mouth falls open in a moan as he invades my inner walls with his massive girth.

“There we go. Such a slutty little sister.” Elijah spreads my ass again and goes deeper than the last time.

“Don’t call me that!” I drop my forehead onto Asher’s shoulder.

“Then what about, *sis*?” Asher grips my ass cheeks and pulls them apart for Elijah as he pulls out, then thrusts in again.

My back arches, and I cry out as they move at the same time.

“I hate you!”

“If this is how you sound while you hate us, then I look forward to how you sound when you love us.” Elijah slams into me to emphasize his words. I choke on a scream and clutch Asher’s shoulders to keep from bouncing forward as the guys alternate their strokes.

My pussy pulses around Asher’s cock, and I’m hurtled into the orgasm, whether I want it or not. Asher’s breath hisses between his teeth. His cock twitches inside me, and then warmth coats my insides.

“Jesus,” Elijah groans. “Get ready, baby. I’m not done.”

Asher pulls out, then moves from beneath me. “Roll her over.”

Elijah winds his arms around me, his chest against my back before we move. He rolls onto his back and spreads my legs as he fucks me.

Asher kneels between our legs and bends over to swipe his tongue over my clit, then down to my opening. I watch, wide-eyed and surprised, as his tongue drifts lower and lower until he licks around my asshole and Elijah’s dick.

Elijah chuckles into my ear and groans as he rams harder inside my ass. “He’s cleaning you up. He doesn’t want his cum wasted.”

I suck in a breath as Asher’s tongue swipes back to my pussy and dips inside me.

Elijah’s thrusts become a frenzy as he nears his climax.

“Fuck, you’re gripping me so hard.” He loses his rhythm. “Are sure you don’t want us?”

Warmth spills inside me, and Elijah holds still, our harsh breathing filling the silent room. He pulls out, and Asher catches his brother's cum with his fingers and pushes it back into my ass.

"Goddamn, Eden," Elijah breathes. He rubs my stomach in gentle strokes.

I roll off him and keep my back to the guys. "Leave me alone."

"We're not leaving, Eden," Elijah growls.

Tears sting my eyes, and I curse the fact that I cry when I'm angry. "Are you going to keep me tied to your beds until I fall for you both?"

"Maybe," Asher murmurs, then shares a look with Elijah.

My jaw drops. "That's called Stockholm Syndrome."

Elijah scowls at me. "Don't pretend you haven't been falling since the beginning."

"Feelings change," I say. "It was all a lie."

"Not for me, little ghost," Asher says.

"Or me," Elijah says. "We may have gone into it with cruel intentions, but my feelings for you are real. I fell in love with you, Eden. I'm still in love with you."

"Love doesn't hurt. You hurt me."

Elijah snorts. "Love hurts every single fucking day. I can't be around you without my chest hurting when I look at you. I can't think about you without getting hard to the point it hurts. So don't tell me love doesn't hurt."

"That's lust. Not love." I turn away from him.

Elijah grabs my arm and forces me to look at him. He leans in until his nose bumps against mine. "I'd kill anyone for you. I'd destroy everyone and their empire if they tried to harm you, and that's what I'm doing."

"Why do you think we were gone for hours, little ghost?" Asher sings. He gets off the bed and unwraps a sucker. "That video wasn't meant to go out to anyone. It was for us and us alone."

"It still doesn't take away the intentions you had when you first got with me."

Elijah straightens and glares at me. "Then how do you want me to prove my loyalty to you? To show you how sorry I am?"

The room falls into silence again.

I'm not sure what would be good enough. Groveling was never my area of expertise. This is my first relationship, or whatever the hell this is.

When I don’t answer, Elijah gets off the bed and fishes something out of his pocket. He turns to me and tosses teeth onto the mattress near my legs.

I scramble backward. “Please tell me they’re fake.”

Asher snickers.

Elijah stares at me, blank-faced. “Derrick is the one who spread the videos around the school. He wanted to talk through his teeth, so I took them.”

I peek at the guys and inch away from the teeth.

What kind of caveman-type apology is this?

Asher grabs my ankles and drags me down the bed.

“What are you doing?” I snap.

He eases me to stand on my feet. “I’m going to draw you a bath, and you’re going to soak in it while I make something for you to eat.”

I blink and look between the guys.

What kind of twilight zone am I in right now?

The Merciless Twins bathing me and making food for me after they made me look like a complete idiot?

Why?

And why am I about to cave in?

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CHAPTER 52

EDEN

I CREEP down the dark hallway, using my fingers as a guide against the wall. My heartbeat thunders in my ears. I inch closer to the end of the hall, where moonlight beams through the windows and lights up the living room.

I'm so close to the front door. I could leave and never turn back.

What's the point of sticking around when I'll get bullied even worse? Elijah can say his reputation will be my shield, but their reputations are at stake as well.

I creep farther down the hall.

Fuck everyone and everything. Fuck my clothes. They can stay behind. The only thing I need is the clothes I'm wearing after crawling out of bed. After the guys fucked me ten ways to Sunday, we cuddled—or more like the guys sandwiched me and couldn't stop touching me. Their breathing evened out in their sleep, and their arms went slack around me.

I'm still heartbroken about Lavender. I don't know where she disappeared to. My only hope is that she found somewhere safe and no one killed her.

My fingers reach the end of the wall, and I glance at the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. The full moon sits in the sky, clear and blue. I turn my head toward the front door.

It's right there, only fifteen feet away.

If I keep my steps light and catch the door before it slams shut, the guys won't hear a thing. They'll continue to sleep, completely unaware of me

leaving. They'll find me missing in the morning, and by then, I'll be long gone.

I step forward, then stop.

Biting my bottom lip, I clench my fingers into fists at my sides.

"They're monsters," I whisper. "Don't hesitate, because they never did."

I take another step forward.

"They don't actually love you," I murmur.

Step.

"They made me into a joke."

Step.

"It was a bet for them."

Step.

"I can't stick around, even if they have big dicks and know how to—"

I shake my head.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I peek over my shoulder and suck in a startled breath.

Asher grins. He towers right behind me, practically breathing down my neck.

"Keep going, little ghost. Even if we have big dicks and know how to *what*?"

I stumble away from him and hold out my hand to keep him away. "How long have you been behind me?"

His darkened gaze rakes down my body, as if he's seeing me naked. When he lifts his eyes to my face, he smirks.

"I've been following you since you got out of bed." He tuts. "You're very unaware of your surroundings, baby. We've got to work on that."

I back away from him, putting more space between us. "You're going to stop me, aren't you?"

He slowly nods.

"Are you going to tie me up again?"

He nods again.

I swallow hard and take another step.

He eases forward, his stride light and smooth. "Elijah loves you. *I* love you. We don't want to keep you caged up like a little bird, but we also don't want to let you go."

"You don't actually love me." I shake my head, tears stinging my eyes. "You love the idea of loving me."

He takes another fluid step toward me. “You don’t know how we feel. We’re not as cold and merciless as you make us out to be.”

“Where’s my snake, then?” I lift my chin and hold back the tears. “You guys destroyed my room, and now my snake is missing.”

Asher moves in a blink. He grabs my wrist and jerks me toward him until my breasts press firmly against his chest.

“She’s safe.” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear with his other hand.

I shake my head to get rid of his touch. I can’t think clearly with either of the twins touching me.

Hurt flares in Asher’s gaze, and he pulls away, still holding my wrist. He tugs me behind him and walks down the hallway to his bedroom. I hold my breath as Asher opens the door and leads me into his room.

A tank sits by the window, the setup exactly like the one I had for Lavender.

My heart jumps into my throat, and I push past Asher to rush to the tank. “Lavender?”

I peer through the glass, searching for my snake. I let out a shaky breath. She’s curled beneath the rock cave, her little white head poking out, eyes on me.

“She’s okay,” I whisper.

“We may be cruel, little ghost, but not heartless enough to hurt a pet,” Asher murmurs behind me.

Slowly, I face him. His expression is hard to read, but his eyes are soft as he looks at me. I rise onto the tips of my toes and steady myself by placing my hands on his shoulders.

Knowing what I want to do, Asher bends down and closes the space between our lips. His mouth presses against mine in a soft, barely there kiss that I deepen by cupping the back of his head and bringing him in.

I shouldn’t kiss him—he and Elijah did all of these cruel things to me—but for a moment, I just want to pretend that it never happened.

Asher’s tongue spears into my mouth and thrusts in and out as if it were his cock, and I know the night isn’t over.

I’m screwed.

I want them so much. I don’t want to be angry at them, but I can’t trust them that they mean it when they say they’re in love with me.

“Prove to me that this isn’t over,” I breathe between kisses.

“How?” Asher cups my nape and draws me in until I’m flat against his chest. His other hand rests on my hip, and he squeezes my love handle.

I bite my bottom lip and avert my gaze. “You’re supposed to grovel. Not ask me how to grovel.”

Asher shrugs and steps back.

“Are you giving up?”

He shakes his head and grins. “You look disappointed. Are you sure you don’t forgive us?”

I cross my arms and step back. “I still don’t forgive you.”

He nods and grabs my wrist, then leads me into Elijah’s room.

At least he doesn’t tie me up to keep me helpless. Unfortunately, he sandwiches me between them in bed, and Asher keeps his arm around me like a steel band, refusing to let me go.

I fight sleep for as long as I can.

Dread keeps me up as much as the need to run away.

I can’t face everyone at school. They saw too much. They know too much. And they’ll never let it go.

If Asher and Elijah mean that they’re sorry, I wonder what else they have planned. Bloody teeth aren’t enough to make me forgive them. I need more.

I have a feeling that something big is about to happen. I just don’t know what.

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CHAPTER 53

ELIJAH

I STAND at the foot of the bed, staring at Eden and Asher cuddled together as they sleep. Eden can act mad all she wants, but in her sleep, she clings to us as if she's hoping we never leave her side. It took an effort to untangle myself from her and turn her over to Asher.

The king-size bed is too small for the three of us. I make a mental note to myself to find something larger.

I straighten my uniform and keep my steps light as I leave the bedroom. It's early, and I don't want to wake Eden. I'd prefer she gets some sleep while I check with Rome.

I check my phone for a message from him, once again finding nothing.

ELIJAH

Is the job done?

Rome's response comes through immediately. The asshole waited for me to reach out to him.

ROME

It's done. You owe me.

Slipping the phone back into my pocket, I raise my head and stop. A large man stands in the living room, his back to me. I recognize his suit, though.

“Father,” I say, straightening my back. “What are you doing here?”

He turns, facing me with a scowl. “You tell me, son. Why in the world would I drive three hours to come see you?”

“It could be for any number of reasons. Maybe you miss seeing my gorgeous face?” I smirk.

“How amusing,” he says, sarcasm dripping from every word. “Glad to see you have a sense of humor at a time like this. Did you think it was funny to sleep with her as well?”

“No,” I say, and square my shoulders.

The wrinkles on his forehead deepen. “For God’s sake, she’s your sister, Elijah.”

“Stepsister,” I say. “Big difference.”

“*Big difference*,” he growls. He takes a menacing step toward me. “You two grew up together. I don’t care if she’s not your blood. She’s still an Astar, and you’ve made her and our name into a mockery.”

“There’s nothing wrong with our relationship. I prefer you and everyone else stay the fuck out of it.”

“Everything is wrong with it. Do you realize what you’ve done?” His tone rises, bordering on yelling.

I step forward and glare at him. “Lower your voice.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Elijah. I’m your father.”

I scoff. “I don’t care if you’re my father or some stranger off the street. You’re in my space, and I won’t have you waking up the entire hallway because you can’t handle your emotions.”

“Let them wake up,” he snarls. “I don’t care.”

“Well, I’m in love with her, Father. There’s no changing this.”

“Be honest with yourself for just a moment. You’re sleeping with your sister. Your twin is fucking her, too. You’re okay with this? That she’s opening her legs for another man?”

I scowl at him. “He’s my brother. I’m more than okay with this. So are they.”

Father’s lips curl in disgust. “This isn’t some ploy for you to get the inheritance, is it?”

“No.”

“I’ll give it to you now if you walk away from her.”

If he’d made this offer even forty-eight hours ago, I might have been stupid enough to consider it. But now? Now I don’t need a moment to think.

I shake my head and slip my hands into my pockets. “She’ll become my wife and the mother of my children. I don’t give a single shit about the inheritance. You can keep the money and your empire. I’ve already built my own.”

“Be wise, Elijah.” Father closes the space between us and stands an inch taller than me. Enough height for him to inflate his already huge ego. “The both of you need to think this through. I’ll ask again. Do you realize what this will do to our name? It’ll be dragged through the mud.”

I smirk. “Not after I handle it myself.”

“Elijah,” he warns, “whatever you plan to do—”

My smile falls, and I step forward until my chest bumps against his. “I’d burn the fucking world for her. Don’t tell me to stop, because I’ll take you down like all the others.”

“Same here,” Asher says behind me.

Father’s gaze shifts to look at my twin.

“I don’t know you.” He turns his focus to me. “Either of you. This isn’t how I raised you both.”

I shrug. “That’s the wild thing about having kids. They’re their own people who can make their own choices. We choose Eden.”

“And if she gets pregnant?”

Asher chuckles. “She’s already pregnant.”

We don’t know that for sure, but we’ve been working hard to breed her.

Father’s expression falls, and he stares at us, jaw slack and eyes dull. “What have you done?”

“Fucked her hard and raw,” Asher says, rolling his eyes. “Obviously.”

His complexion pales, and his eyes bounce side to side, looking at us both as if he’s just seen a ghost.

I straighten my jacket. “Is that all for the talk, or is there more? Maybe you want to know how she sounds while taking our cocks? Or how about how tightly she grips us at the same time?”

I wouldn’t offer that information freely, but our father has thoroughly pissed me off.

“No need.” Father steps back. “I hope you think over everything and make the right decision.”

“I’ve already made up my mind. I’m sure Asher has as well.”

Father scowls at both of us before showing himself out.

I face Asher and openly grin that he’s in nothing but a pair of boxers with his sucker in his mouth.

“I have two things I want us to do. One must be done while our girl is asleep,” I say.

Asher rolls his sucker to the other side of his mouth and crosses his arms against his tattooed chest. “I’m listening.”

I nod. “It involves kidnapping.”

The corner of his lip tips into a subtle smirk. “I love a good kidnapping. Who is it this time?”

“Derrick.”

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CHAPTER 54

EDEN

THE GUYS WEREN'T in the bedroom when I woke up a few minutes ago. There were no notes left to let me know where they had gone. No text messages either. They're just gone, and they left me free to leave if I want to.

I don't know if it's some test—which would be messed up. They're the ones who broke my trust, not the other way around.

But when I reach the end of the hallway, I suck in a breath and stop in my tracks.

Two large figures tower behind Derrick, who's on his knees. Duct tape covers his mouth. The two men wear balaclavas—the same type of mask that Elijah wore when he broke into my dorm.

Bruises cover Derrick's face, his blond hair matted with dried blood. He's helpless, much like how I've been feeling for the last two days. He peers at me through one eye, the other swollen shut and blackened.

What the hell did the guys do to him?

"Morning, little ghost," Asher murmurs.

"I hope you got some good sleep," Elijah says. "We've been waiting for you to get up."

"What's going on?" I inch closer.

"Getting your power back," Elijah says.

My eyebrows scrunch together. "How?"

"That's a good question," a familiar voice says from the corner of the living room.

I turn, and my jaw drops. “Rome?”

He sits on the couch, a laptop perched on his knees. “Hi, little bird.”

The energy in the room changes. The threat of bodily harm raises the hairs on my nape as the twins move from behind Derrick and cross the room to me. They glare at Rome, their fingers curling around their brass knuckles.

Rome’s smile widens. “Calm down, Merciless Twins. I meant nothing by it.”

“Are you sure about that?” Elijah growls. “Because it sounded like you were flirting with our girl.”

Rome rolls his eyes. “I assure you, my eye is on someone else.”

Asher’s hands settle on my waist, and he tucks me against his side, as if he’s protecting me from Rome. I don’t understand the need to guard me from him. He’s been nothing but nice to me. I would even consider him a friend.

He smirks and turns his attention back to me. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” I step out of Asher’s hold and look between him and Elijah. “What the hell is going on?”

The TV switches on, and a live feed of the living room pops on.

Rome types on the laptop. “The feed is now playing on everyone’s phones.”

“How are you doing that?” I say, inching nearer.

Asher catches me and drags me back to his side, refusing to let me get closer to my friend. I cast a glare at him. He scowls back at me and tightens his grip.

“The short answer is . . . hacking.” Rome doesn’t look up as he types a few more things. Another video screen pops into the corner of the live feed.

“What’s the long answer?” I say with an awkward laugh.

“There’s not enough time, baby,” Elijah says. “Just sit back and enjoy the show.”

He and Asher face Derrick, who’s still kneeling on the ground.

“Derrick has his own secrets,” Asher murmurs. He wanders to the man in question and stops in front of him. “Things that go bump in the night with a cousin.”

Derrick’s eyes widen, and he quickly shakes his head while trying to talk through the tape. It comes out muffled and indecipherable.

“Are you saying he . . . ?” I can’t finish my question, too stunned.

“Yes,” Elijah says. “He fucks his cousin. Regularly.”

“I’m too scared to ask this.” I shift my weight to my other leg. “Are you saying that Katie is his cousin?”

Elijah and Asher turn their heads toward me. I don’t have to see their faces to know they’re flashing wolfish grins beneath their masks.

“Oh my god,” I whisper.

Katie wanted to shame me for fucking my stepbrothers, and this whole time she’s been fucking her cousin. It’s weird how people can project their insecurities onto others.

Asher strolls toward me, his gait loose and carefree. He stops in front of me and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

“You’re going to watch his downfall, little ghost. Right along with Katie,” he murmurs for only me to hear.

Moans break through the silence, echoing through the room. I turn to the TV, and my eyes widen at the video playing on the extra screen. In the footage, Derrick kneels behind Katie, pounding into her while gripping her slim waist and pulling her against him with every hard thrust.

“Say it,” Derrick growls.

“I love your cock, cousin,” she whines.

I cringe and look at Derrick, expecting to find him seething with rage. His good eye fills with tears, and he bows his head in shame.

Flesh slaps together, and Katie continues to call him her cousin.

I don’t know how long it plays or how long I stare at Derrick.

It feels as if someone lifted the weight off my chest and I can finally breathe. I can’t look away from Derrick’s pain. It’s cathartic, knowing that he’s taking my hurt and suffering now. I want Katie to suffer as much as he is, and I’m positive she’s scrambling right now, receiving the same hateful looks.

I hope she hears every mean whisper as she passes people. I hope she’s called a freak. I hope a lot for her, and none of these hopes are good.

She hurt me. So did Derrick.

And the two men I’m in love with are hurting them for me.

Tears fill my eyes, and I take a shuddering breath.

I’m in love with Elijah and Asher; I knew this before now, but it’s crashing into me and leaving me with no other option than to finally face it.

Fingers catch my tears sliding down my cheeks. I blink and look up into Asher’s dark eyes. He lifts his mask and brings his fingers to his mouth,

tasting my tears.

“So fucking sweet,” he murmurs.

“Keep watching, birdie,” Elijah says. “Watch Derrick crumble.”

Biting my bottom lip, I lower my gaze for a moment before peeking at Asher through my lashes.

He tilts his head, his gaze searching mine.

I lick my lips and clutch his shirt; the words hang on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t get them out. There’s so much I want to say. I want to admit that I’m in love with him, and with Elijah, too. But I also want him to fuck me. Right here, in front of Derrick, while the video is playing and his world is falling apart.

I don’t know what’s happening to me, but Elijah was right. I’m getting my power back, and I want to use what embarrassed me for my own gain.

Asher catches the look in my eye and lowers his hand to his belt. “You’re a naughty little slut. You want my cock?”

I nod.

He dips his chin, then unzips his pants. “On your knees, little ghost.”

“Get the fuck out,” Elijah snarls, his footsteps pounding against the floor.

“I’m already on my way,” Rome says.

The door clicks shut and the room fills with moans and flesh slapping against flesh.

I lower myself to my knees in front of Asher. He shoves his pants down his thighs, freeing his erection, then strokes himself.

“Go on,” he says. “Open that slutty mouth.”

I open my mouth and rub my tongue against the underside of his shaft. The thick tip weighs on the flat side of the muscle, and I suck the head. Asher groans and fists my hair to hold it out of my face so he can watch me as I take him deeper into my mouth.

“Jesus fuck.” His breath hisses through his teeth. “That’s a good girl. Keep taking more of me.”

I widen my mouth and lower my jaw to accommodate his size. Tears spring to my eyes as he hits the back of my throat. I peek up at him, needing that connection.

His moan joins Derrick’s from the screen, along with the loud slurps and gags I make as I suck him.

Elijah crouches beside me. He raises his mask to the top of his head, and he grabs a lock of my hair to bring to his nose.

“Do you want him to use you?” he whispers.

I moan and barely manage a nod.

Elijah looks up at Asher. “You heard her. Use our girl for your pleasure.”

Asher releases my hair and cups the side of my head. “If it becomes too much, slap my leg and I’ll stop.”

I hold on to his waist.

Asher thrusts forward, hitting the back of my throat. I gag and sputter around him. He pulls back and rams forward again. His thrusts pick up speed until he’s fucking my face with no mercy.

“That’s my good girl. Keep taking him.” Elijah groans and rubs the heel of his palm against his erection resting beside the inseam of his pants. He kneels behind me.

I can only take whatever Asher gives me as he uses me. I cough and wheeze, unable to accept more than a few gasps of breath here and there.

Elijah leans in until his lips are beside my ear. “How does it feel to take back the power?”

I moan, and my eyes roll back in my head as his hand slips beneath my skirt and past my panties. His fingers swipe up my folds and spread my wetness onto my clit before he rubs. Tingles rush through my limbs, and unbearable heat floods my system.

Asher’s thrusts lose their rhythm, and he pants, his fingers digging into my hair.

“Uh oh, birdie,” Elijah coos. “It looks like you’re running out of time. You better come with him.”

I tighten my hold on Asher’s hips and rock my hips against Elijah’s hand. I moan around Asher’s throbbing cock. Cum fills my mouth, and I swallow each time it spurts into the back of my throat.

My back arches, and I claw Asher as my orgasm slams into me. Elijah’s fingers rub my clit faster, and he dips his middle finger into me.

“So tight,” he murmurs, his voice thick with lust. “So needy.”

Asher bends, and his fingers circle my throat. “Keep swallowing me down, little ghost.”

I struggle to follow his orders. He hums, pleased, and strokes his thumb on my skin.

Elijah pulls his hand out of my panties and leans back on his haunches. His moan sends another wave of heat through me.

"You taste so good."

My face flushes.

Asher steps back until his cock slips out of my mouth. He tucks himself away and helps me stand.

I smile at him, thankful that he did that for me.

Asher's gaze darkens, and his lips part. His hand snatches me by the throat, and he drags me in. I gasp as his lips crash against mine. I love how he doesn't stray from tasting himself on my tongue.

Asher catches my lower lip between his teeth and releases it with a *pop*.

"Does this mean you forgive us?" he whispers.

"What you did hurt me," I whisper.

"I know." His grip on my throat tightens.

"But . . ." I mumble.

"But?"

"But I'm in love with you, and with Elijah. You may have hurt me, but it'll hurt worse if I walk away from you both."

He grins against my lips and kisses me until I'm dizzy and breathless. Asher steps back and turns me in his arms for Elijah to swoop in with the same mind-numbing kisses.

"Say it again," he whispers.

"I love you."

He hums and trails kisses over my jaw. "Have we groveled enough, or do you need more?"

I shake my head. "This really won me over."

He smiles against my skin before pulling back. His grin fades as he turns to Derrick.

"I think a lot of us learned our lesson here." He slips his hands into his pockets and strides toward Derrick. "I like to fuck my sister, and you like to fuck your cousin. Win, win. Right?"

Derrick raises his head and glares at Elijah with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"The whole school knows now. I'm safe from backlash," Elijah says. "You're not. Everything you've ever loved is now mine to destroy."

"Is it safe?" Rome walks back into the room. He meets my eye before turning his attention to the laptop balanced on his palm.

Asher glares at him and moves behind me to drape his arms over my shoulders and tuck me against his chest.

"Is that all for the video, or do you need more?" Rome's fingers hover over the computer's keyboard.

Elijah turns his head and peeks at Rome from the corner of his eye. "That's all."

Rome taps a key, and the live footage on the TV ends. "If that's all, then I'll be on my way. Don't forget your promise."

I look at Elijah. "Promise?"

"We made a deal. Favor for favor," Elijah says.

Rome shoves his laptop into his messenger bag and hangs the strap over his shoulder. He looks at me and casts a charming smile at me. "Don't be a stranger, little bird. Flip would love your company."

"Fuck no," Asher and Elijah growl at the same time.

I scowl at both of them before turning to Rome. "I'd love to see Flip soon."

Rome dips his chin in a nod.

"We look forward to your company." He turns his attention to Elijah, then to Asher. "The Walker brothers won't be a problem for you anymore, by the way."

"What did you do?" Elijah stands and slips his hands into his pockets.

Rome's friendly smile tightens. "Nothing to be concerned about. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have a little peach waiting for me."

Little peach?

I mentally shake off the question.

Rome leaves without another word, and the door shuts behind him.

"So what now?" I ask.

"You and Asher can go out for the day, and I'll take care of Derrick," Elijah says.

"Then, after that?" I say.

Elijah tilts his head. "I'm not sure what you're asking, baby."

"I mean, with us. What now?"

He steps toward me, each magnetic stride sucking the air from my lungs. "I thought we made it clear."

Asher bends down until his mouth is beside my ear. "Very clear. You're ours."

"And we're yours," Elijah says, closing the distance between us.

“You’ll be our wife and have our kids.” Asher rubs my stomach. “But I think we’ve already got one of those things checked off.”

My heart drops, and I lean back to look at him. “I’m not pregnant.”

He smirks. “We don’t know for sure yet, but I guarantee that you’ll get pregnant soon.”

Elijah stops in front of me. “This means that we’re your beginning and ending.”

“That sounds more ominous than romantic,” I mutter.

“You were my first,” Asher says. “And you’ll be my last.”

He was my first, and I didn’t think once about anyone else but the two of them. I had hopes for us, and now I can fully lean into them without feeling like my chest will crack open.

I was his first, just like he was mine, along with Elijah.

I nod. “I like the sound of that.”

Elijah catches my chin, forcing me to look at him. “I love you, Eden. Don’t ever doubt our feelings for you, and know that if anyone crosses you, they’ll face our wrath. We won’t show them any mercy.”

“It’s nice to see the side of you two that differs from the name everyone knows you by.”

“Merciless Twins,” Elijah says with a grin. “How ironic that it took you to turn our worlds upside down.” He kisses me. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

And neither would I.

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EPILOGUE - EDEN

I BITE my bottom lip and watch as the claw descends for the bat plushie.

"It's not the right angle," Asher whispers in my ear. He strokes my swollen belly from behind—a habit he's done ever since I learned I was pregnant.

Turns out he and Elijah knew I was with child long before I did. I'm still salty about it, but I can't be mad at them for it. This was their plan, since they never used protection and I never felt compelled to get on birth control.

"Agreed." Elijah plays with a lock of my hair that I curled earlier for our wedding.

"It's not as easy as you're making it out to be," I say with a huff.

The claw misses and retracts to the top.

The guys hum at the same time.

I glare at them and step back into Asher. "If it's so easy, then you do it."

"Gladly." Elijah pushes a token into the machine and moves the claw over the plushie.

"I swear if you get it, I'm going to divorce you," I grumble.

Asher guffaws and squeezes my belly.

"Not even married for an hour and you're already threatening us with divorce." He lowers his voice so only I can hear him. "We've already consummated the marriage, baby. You can't run from us now."

My face warms with a blush, and I elbow him. He snickers and hugs me against him, his hands still covering my stomach.

“And you’re having our children.” Elijah glances at me before turning his focus on the game. “You can run, birdie, but you won’t get far.”

“We’ll just tie you up again and keep you in our room,” Asher says with a chuckle.

“Okay, that’s enough.” I elbow him again, harder this time.

The claw descends, and it grabs the plushie. My heart sinks, then lightens when the claw releases the plushie last second.

Elijah frowns and shoves another token into the game, then tries again. We watch with bated breath as the claw descends, misses, and rises.

Elijah shoves another token into the game.

I smirk. “See, it’s not just me.”

The guys take turns to get the bat plushie, each time they miss.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Asher growls.

“I’m doing the same thing you did,” Elijah snaps. “So by default, that means you did it wrong, too.”

I laugh at the two of them, earning glares from them before they turn back to the claw game.

“Let me try again,” I say.

The guys move out of the way. Asher feeds the machine a token for me, and I hold my breath as I move the claw over the plushie. We watch as it descends, and I lean on the tips of my toes as it grabs the plushie and raises it.

“Holy shit,” Elijah whispers.

“You fucking did it, baby.” Asher hugs me from behind.

The machine releases the plushie into the slide, and I squeal as I grab the bat. Tears form in my eyes and I hug it against my chest.

“I’m proud of you, wife,” Elijah murmurs before kissing me.

Asher pinches my cheeks between his fingers and turns my head away from Elijah so he can kiss me harder. His tongue slides against mine. He moves his hand down my throat to cup while he kisses me until I’m breathless.

By the end of it, I’m dizzy and have to lean against him to stay upright.

“What do you plan to do with it?” Elijah nods toward the plushie.

I look down at my stomach with a smile. “I want to give it to our babies.”

Both of them place their palms on my stomach, their wedding bands gleaming beneath the arcade’s neon lights.

“I think they’ll love it,” Elijah murmurs.

Asher catches me around my lower back and gently eases me backward so he can kiss me. I smile against his lips, loving the affection from him. When he finishes the kiss, Elijah shares a steamy one with me as well.

Okay, so both of them will reign me with affection. I can’t say that I’m mad about it. It’s nice to finally have the devotion.

The guys lead me outside, both of them holding my hands.

“I don’t know if this is the appropriate time,” Elijah says as we walk toward the Camaro. “But I got a letter from my father.”

Asher digs into his pocket and pulls out a sucker. He unwraps it and pops it into his mouth. He swings his gaze to Elijah, his eyebrows furrowed together.

“What did it say?” My heart hammers a little faster. I don’t know why it’s making me so nervous, but after the explosion at the school, it’s been difficult to let go.

Elijah pulls out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and waves it. “He said he’ll send the inheritance to us, but he wants nothing to do with us after that.”

I slowly nod.

I’m not surprised. He was adamant about them not being with me because of the taboo nature of our relationship. I can’t even imagine if he knew that I’m pregnant with one of the guys’ baby. He’d likely blow a blood vessel.

“We don’t need his money.” Elijah tips my chin up to look at him. “We’ve already built our own empire with you. I’ll tell him—”

“No,” I say and shake my head. “Take the money.”

His eyebrows rise up his forehead. “I expected a different answer.”

I grin. “He’s offering to pay you guys a huge lump sum of money. Why not take it and never deal with him again? Take the petty road, Elijah.”

Asher snickers and winds his arms around me from behind. He kisses my nape. “My little ghost is petty, and I love it.”

Elijah stares at me, his expression hard to read. He tilts his head and cups my cheek, his touch whisper-soft. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, baby,” I say. “Take the money from him and cut him out.”

He bends down and kisses me softly. “Fine. But only for you.”

I grin against his lips and wind my arms around his neck. “It’s always for me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Elijah’s phone pings with a new notification and he pulls out his phone to read the message. His playful expression hardens and a muscle in the corner of his jaw tenses.

“What is it?” I say.

Elijah lifts his head and looks at Asher. “Looks like Rome is calling in for his favor.”

“I was wondering when he would.” Asher rolls his sucker to the other side of his mouth. “Did he go into detail?

He shakes his head and tucks his phone back into his pocket. “I’m sure we’ll find out, though. For now, let’s enjoy our honeymoon and we’ll deal with that later.”

“Good.” I hug both of the guys at the same time as best as I can. “I don’t want you two disappearing right after we got married.”

Elijah pinches my chin between his fingers. “You are more important than anybody else.”

He seals his promise with a kiss.

Rome’s favor is forgotten for the moment. All that matters is my family that I’ve started with these two men and our twin boys.

The End

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DARK STAR SHARED WORLD

MEET THE ZODIACS

AQUARIUS

Reclaimed - Darma Day

PISCES

Visionary - Aimee-Jo Hunter

ARIES

Spitfire - A.L Maruga

TAURUS

Feast - AB. Cynthe

GEMINI

Reckless - Dakota Wilde

CANCER

Ghosted - Nova Kane

LEO

Untamed - Willow Prescott

VIRGO

Merciless - Willow McQuerry

LIBRA

Unbalanced - Brooklyn Cross

SCORPIO

Vengeful - Orion Azure

SAGITTARIUS

Wildling - Rhea Ryan

CAPRICORN

Abandoned - S.K. Pryntz

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Just a fair warning to whoever is reading this that these acknowledgments will be sadder than all the others I've done. I would say I'm sorry, but I'm told to stop apologizing for things. So . . .

To my dear bird Flip. You were the best birb I've ever had. I wish you were still here and sitting on my shoulder as I write these words. But at least now you live forever in a different world where you continue to get scritches, kisses, and so much love and treats. Fly high, baby. I love you so much, and I can still hear you calling for me when our home is too quiet.

To my cousin Shane. I wish you were still here, and that we could sit together and talk about nothing. Conversations with you were always so fun and relaxing. I'll miss the day we went to the casino to blow through money we shouldn't haven't spent on the penny slots and laugh the whole time. I wrote you as a character in my book so your memory lives on as a present for your dad. I think if you were here right now you would smile and tell me how cool it is to be in a book. Well guess what? Now you can live on in a new world where everyone loves you.

To my uncle Drew. I miss you so much and wish you were still here. But I know you're in a better place and reunited with Shane. Watching you mourn his death was hard, but the only comfort I can find in your early death is that you're finally at peace. I wrote Shane as a character in this book as a present for you. It was supposed to be a surprise, but I never got to tell you. And now I can't give you a paperback for you to keep because you're gone. Rest in peace, Uncle Drew.

To my alpha and beta readers. Thank you for putting up with me changing the book a million times, and for understanding the organized chaos that I am. The group chat with you all is always entertaining, and I loved every second when you all guessed which twin was sneaking around with Eden.

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To my editor Brooke. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being there for me. From helping me grow as a writer, to being a friend I can go to while I mourned my bird's death. It means the world to me that you listened to my voice messages of me sobbing and trying to choke out the words as I talked to you. Like I said to Holly and Hazel: you can't get rid of me. You've heard too much.

If you're struggling with your mental health, please reach out for help. The United States suicide hotline is 988. If talking on the phone gives you anxiety, text 741741. Please know that you aren't alone and you're not weak for asking for help.

You're loved.
You're wanted.
You're needed.
You're not alone.

Much love,

Willow McQuerry

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willow McQuerry is a schizophrenic dark romance author who loves long walks in the psych ward with her grippy socks, and having coffee with her demon roommate. Throw in antidepressants, antipsychotics, sleep meds, and mood stabilizers, then it's a party.

They say she'll appear out of a plume of smoke and glitter if you make a pentagram out of ground coffee and leave offerings of Sour Patch Kids, Dr. Pepper, 7 Brew energy drinks, and pictures of your pet birds.



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