

ADRIANNA CROSS



ONCE

xO

I FIND

YOU



xO



Once I Find You

ADRIANNA CROSS

OceanofPDF.com

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Content Warning...

This is a **DELICIOUSLY DARK** romance...

💀 enter at your own risk (and reward) 💀

For a full list of trigger warnings and kinks, click [HERE](#).

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For the girls who see a sexy criminal on a wanted poster and think... “I can find him.”

I hope daddy Kane is exactly who you’re looking for.

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CHAPTER ONE

Scum of the Fucking Earth

KANE



“What’s wrong, shithead? Nothing to say now?” I pull my hands back, the garrote wrapped around his throat digging in as he tries his damndest to scratch at his neck to relieve the pressure.

I fucking love when they plead and fight for their life.

“You want me to stop, huh?” I mock loudly in his ear, and all he can muster are continued gasps. “Did you stop? When you heard her crying and begging, did you fucking stop?”

He knows now. He knows he’s fucking dead, and he hasn’t got a chance. He knows who I am and why I’m here. If he didn’t before, he does now. It doesn’t take much longer until he finally gives, and I pull the wire tighter for good measure.

“I didn’t think so.”

I finally release his neck, letting his lifeless body collapse to the asphalt.

Hmm... I guess I’ll just leave him like this. I didn’t plan on leaving behind such a mess, but I guess it makes no difference as long as I pour some bleach on him.

I walk back into his home from the back entrance and rummage underneath his kitchen sink. *Ah*, there you are. When I walk back into the backyard, his body is still laying awkwardly beside his shed. I take the bottle and pour the bleach over his neck and hands to make sure no trace of me is left behind.

Because God knows, I am *fucked* if there is. I’m the most wanted man in the tri-state area. And it’s not just the fucking cops. Those goddamned *internet sleuths* are on my ass. I swear, there are over a dozen Facebook and Reddit pages dedicated to “unmasking” me. To figure out what kind of man I could be.

Am I a good man because I kill pieces of shit who deserve it?

Or am I a bad man? Because the truth is, I fucking *enjoy* it.

I've never pretended, even to myself, that I'm right in the head. Maybe I lost my shit somewhere between Afghanistan and losing Sadie...

But it doesn't matter. Even if my life goes to shit, I can go down saying *I'm* the man who took out the evil that plagues our society. Even if this makes me a bad man, I wouldn't give a fuck. I'm doing what everyone else is too scared to do.

I load myself back into my pickup truck, tossing my leather gloves on the passenger seat as I start her up.

The inner city is quiet tonight; actually, that seems to be the norm nowadays. I won't boost my own ego by saying I've personally lowered crime, but I'd be lying if I didn't say that I've contributed to it. They know I'll come for them now, and that I'm capable of taking them out quietly, one by one. I don't give a shit about petty crimes, or drugs—that's never going to stop.

But *them*.

The fucking scum of the earth. The ones who think they have the power and right to touch and abuse those who can't defend themselves. The sickos who—

I can't even think about it or I'll boil over again, and I already had my stress relief for the night.

I let myself back in through the shop and up the stairs to my apartment. "Finally, you must be hungry, huh?" I ask my dog, Bacon, as I walk in the door. "Come on," I say as I roughly pet his head and lean down to pour him his expensive canned food. He quickly goes to town on it as I sigh, finally setting my shit down on the counter and slowly slipping off my balaclava.

I walk over and start the shower, taking off my clothes so I can make sure they're clean. I don't let anything get bloody, but you have to expect some mess when you're killing someone. Strangling them...that's the easiest and cleanest way. Slow enough, too, so I can make them suffer helplessly as they fade away.

I slip off my dog tags, hanging them up on the wall hook as I take my compression shirt off and look at my used body in the bathroom mirror. My hand runs down my side as I feel all my scars and really *look* at myself.

I *look* at the fucked-up beast that stares back at me. It's what I was made to be, what I trained to be for years as an Army Ranger. These hands aren't

good for anything except killing or hurting someone.

I shake off the reminder and step into the shower, the warm droplets relieving the tension in my body as I exhale. I have to open the shop early tomorrow—*fuck*, today already. I shouldn't have gone so late.

After I wash myself, I take the extra body wash in my hand and rub it over my cock.

Fuck, I need this release.

My other hand steadies me against the shower wall, and I let my head fall forward as I pump my cock. My eyes are sealed shut as I imagine someone beneath me, taking it deep. Taking whatever I give her. Holding her against me by her hair as I fuck deep into her throat until she's a mess of drool and tears, until I reward her by cumming down her throat.

"*Fuck yes*," I growl as my release comes in tandem with my daydream. I stand there for a moment to catch my breath, rinsing my hands before I turn the shower off and dry myself.

My hair drips as I walk out of the bathroom with the towel on my waist, spotting Bacon waiting on the couch. "You know you're not allowed on there," I remind him softly, but sternly and he hesitates but gets down and onto his own dog bed.

"Good boy, go to bed," I say as I pat his head, passing him to go to my room and sleep for as long as I have left.

I WAKE up as the sun shines into the bedroom, groaning as I force myself up and walk over to the living room. I flick the television on before brewing my coffee, listening to the news channel's shitty jingle blaring.

"NWS News, this is Eliana Ramirez reporting live. I'm here at the scene of another brutal murder, and this is a reminder the police are still on the hunt for the man responsible for the string of killings through the tri-state area, dubbed 'The Hangman.' This time, the victim was forty-two-year-old Marcus Williams, of Rio Vista Heights. Police are—"

I sip my fresh coffee as I let it play, lighting my cigarette and walking over to the door to let Bacon down into the shop. I walk down with him, letting the sound of the television slowly fade, and the smell of motor oil and metal hits me like a bouquet of roses.

This shop is what's kept me sane since I discharged from the army. I needed to be useful somehow, and it isn't like killing is going to pay the

bills. I wanted a simple life. I guess...I always hoped to have one since I was a boy. Now, I'm almost forty and I've come to realize that life will fuck you any chance it has. It's impossible to keep happiness, to keep everything you want.

At least for someone like me.

The shop is rough around the edges, but it's home. I found it by chance when I was driving through looking for whatever I can get to live in temporarily, but I knew this was it. A small mechanic shop with a little apartment on top. It's all a man like me needs, someone who doesn't require any sentimental shit.

Business is slow sometimes; I only have one car to work on today. I'm not prolific at this, I just grew up around cars and fixing them in my pop's old shop. Most people would choose somewhere with more fixings than I have to offer, but I put myself wholly into each job I do. It's a great distraction.

The glass door of the shop opens and chimes the old bell dangling from it, and I set my mug atop a table and round the corner to see who came in. It's a short man, much older than me, waiting patiently. "Sir," I say as I offer my hand to him, "Kane Mercer, what can I do for you?"

"Name's Frank. Oh, I'm not too sure what happened to the old thing, seems to take a dump on me every few thousand miles. I took it to the dealership, but I just can't afford it. I was hoping to get an estimate from you," he says, sounding defeated.

"I can take a look. Did they say what it was?"

"They said I needed a new transmission."

I sigh. "I'll take a look. You never know, sometimes it could be something a hell of a lot cheaper. You can leave your keys and number on the counter, and I'll call you this afternoon."

"Thank you, young man. I'll just wait here for my wife to come get me."

Young man? That's been a while. I nod, and he sits in a chair in the small lobby as I go behind the counter to fill out some paperwork.

I hear rustling as he picks up the newspaper on the little table beside him, surely trying to pass some time reading. "Shame about the killings. You've been hearin' about that Hangman fella?" he asks, shaking his head and turning the page.

Shame? I don't answer, just giving a curt nod to be polite.

“I mean, what’s the point in the manhunt? Back in my day, anyone who laid hands on a woman or child got what they had coming to ‘em, no questions asked.”

I grin at his words, finally looking up. “That’s how it should be.”

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CHAPTER TWO

This is the Plot!

LAYLA



“Oh my god! Crys, look!” I exclaim as I shove my phone almost in her face. I can’t help it—everyone online is talking about the newest killing last night in Rio Vista. I say it a bit too loud, and everyone in the diner turns. I awkwardly smile at them and turn back to Crystal.

“Another?”

“Well, he takes a few days off sometimes, but usually never more than a week. I mean, there’s a lot of people to get to, so he has to be diligent.” I’m sure my smile is a mile wide as I bring the phone back to my lap, looking down at the screen.

Crystal sighs. “Layla...don’t you think it’s time to try to move on? You worry me with how obsessed you are over this guy.”

“Why? There’s no harm in looking up to someone. I mean, he saved me, Crys, he’s like my hero. How can I move on from that?”

“I know babe, but...” She sighs again as she turns to me seriously. “I just don’t think this is healthy. I mean you’re constantly online, your whole life has just been totally taken over by this guy. I’m just worried you’re losing the plot.”

“Losing the plot? *This* is the plot!”

“Yes, okay, he saved you. Now, you should be living your life to the fullest. You should be out, dating, and letting me drag you to the club with me! Your birthday is soon and you can finally legally drink, and you have to let loose a *little*. Please, or I might have you committed to a ward.”

“I *have* tried. I just...feel yucky whenever I talk to guys. I mean, they’re so flirty and always trying to be so charming, and then they think if you like them, they try to touch you more and it just freaks me out a little.” I sigh as I lock my phone and set it down on the table.

I'm not sure what it is. I think whatever he did to me broke me forever. I feel unable to be comfortable around guys in a romantic way. Moreover, I just don't feel *it*. You know...*it*?

"I know, and maybe it would be good if I introduce you to someone instead? Someone I know, and maybe I can tell him that he shouldn't—"

"No, Crys, I just don't know. I really don't want to meet anyone right now. Can't we just go out, just us? I promise I'll try to let loose."

The waitress interrupts us, setting down our plates before we dig in. I'm thankful for the few moments of peace so I can think more about everything. I really do want to go out and have fun with Crystal. I just don't like clubs or bars, because whenever you go out, men come from the shadows and immediately try to dance with you or talk with you. It just makes me uncomfortable. I know Crystal loves it though, and I'm happy she gets to enjoy things like that freely. I wish I was normal too.

Ever since...*that*, I just can't feel much in that department. I have my therapist and she's great, but no matter what, when it comes to *it*...nothing.

"Earth to Layla," Crystal says, waving her hand in front of me.

"Sorry. I swear I'll go and be excited."

"Babe, I don't want you to pretend to be excited, okay? It's your birthday. I just think...maybe if you found someone you kind of like—"

"Crys, I—"

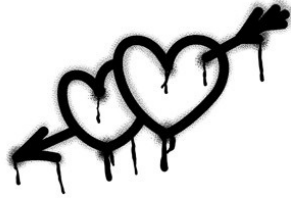
"No, wait, hear me out first. If you found someone you even just have a fraction of attraction for, maybe you can push yourself a little. I think if you just did something, *anything*, kissing even, you might feel relief after. You know? Like, it's worse in your head and you just need to let it out so you can try to physically move on."

I get what she means...and maybe she's right. But there's only one person I've ever even felt a fraction of attraction to. But if I tell her that, she'll be even more worried about my *obsession* as she calls it.

"If I promise to discuss it with my therapist, can we drop it for now? I appreciate you trying to help me, it's just complicated."

"I know it is, I just want what's best for you. You deserve it."

I nod with a smile. I love Crystal, even though I know she doesn't fully understand how I feel...it isn't her fault. She's lucky that she doesn't understand.



When we finish eating, we leave our favorite little diner and part ways, and I get on the bus and head home.

Well, maybe home is a strong word for it.

It's a little rundown studio apartment downtown. It's...not ideal. But it's what I have, and I need to be thankful for the things I have.

I sigh as I walk in through the broken metal door of the lobby—I thought the landlord said they'd fix it. I make my way up the two flights of stairs, shaking my hair a bit to get the lasting wetness from the rain outside off before I drip onto the floor of my apartment.

"Oh!" I exclaim as I pick up the package in front of my door.

They're here!

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

I excitedly unlock the door and close it behind me, making sure I lock the deadbolts. I immediately rip into it, first picking up the beautiful pink and blue ombré vibrator I ordered. It's the first time I've ever bought myself a sex toy...at the recommendation of my therapist. I set it down and pick up the matching dildo with a suction cup at the other end. *Jesus*. I guess...it's bigger than I expected. But it's okay, baby steps. We'll get to that one once I master the little vibrator.

I was nervous, but I really am excited to try it all for the first time.

Eventually. Maybe soon.

I'm not sure how to even begin, I only know that lately I've been feeling *it*. A little. When I think about the amazing man who saved me; who

got justice for me. Something about him makes me feel something deep inside that I've never had the chance to before.

And I want to be a normal girl. *Woman*. Because women get to enjoy sex, enjoy fun with other people, and they get to do it on their own terms.

After everything that happened to me, I've never wanted sex. I've never even touched myself. Everything to do with sex is just a giant block in my brain that never rattles. I found it hard to imagine how anyone could like it, how it could take over their minds so much that they let it control how they act.

It scares me a little, because what if I become like that if I have sex now? What if I'm as fucked up as he was? He practically raised me. Maybe that weighs on me too.

But I'm working on something Crystal recommended. She calls it, "Saying fuck it, and doing whatever comes to my mind, even if it scares me." So, I'm going to do new things. At my own pace, and *by myself*.

And now, that includes attempting to masturbate.

I take my new toys and put them in the drawer of my nightstand.

Eh.

I take them back out and place them on top of my nightstand, take a step back, and smile. *There*. Maybe it's weird to be this excited, but I can't help feeling a sense of accomplishment just being a regular woman who *owns* toys. Who has them on her nightstand.

I skip a few steps away to my kitchen, humming to myself as I make some instant ramen and grab a diet cola. I hop onto the couch, setting my things up on the coffee table and flicking on the television. I could use a good reality show to put on in the background while I continue my research.

I may not be telling Crystal *everything*. I seriously can't, because I believe her when she says she'll have me committed.

And...okay. Maybe I'm a little *too* into The Hangman. But calling it an obsession just isn't fair. How can you not be into someone like him?

He's spent the last few years taking out evil men, the ones like my uncle. I had heard of the killings of course, everyone did, because a serial killer on the loose is going to get lots of coverage. But regular people shrug their shoulders and move on. I did too.

That was until I saw the news last year. Until I saw my uncle's face on the screen in front of me, labelled as the latest victim of The Hangman. I

thought I must have been dreaming. I felt like this huge weight had been taken off my shoulders and I needed to understand more about the killer; about everything he does.

I wasn't surprised when I found all the online forums and posting boards about him. I always knew people were super into true crime—there are always some fun documentaries everyone ends up watching and gets hooked into the community. But this was personal to me, and I needed to know what everyone else knew about him.

I *need* to know him.

To meet him.

To thank him.

I did everything I was supposed to do. I told my family. I told the police. I filed charges. I told my story to everyone. My mother took her brother's side of course, and that whole side of my family shut me out. After years of being abused, I needed them. I needed someone. I was barely sixteen, and my own mother kicked me out.

The public attorney told me that I'd have a hard time in court because I had no real proof, and it might be better for me to drop the case and cut ties with my family. But that felt so wrong to me. How could I let myself go unheard all over again? What if he did it to another girl? I wanted to fight, to be strong, and show him that I wouldn't let him keep me the meek, quiet girl he tried to make me.

Facing him in court was daunting. No one came to support me, but he came with so many character witnesses. Even though he had been held by police on suspicion of raping me, the judge said that it just wasn't enough to prove he had done it.

I was heartbroken. I would stare at the case status on the court's public page and cry, trying to think of what I should do. I had no choice but to give up. I had let it go on for so many years, and it was just too late. But I don't let myself play the "maybe" game anymore.

Then as if to answer all my prayers, an angel sent *him* to me. Somehow, someone had noticed me. Someone had heard me. He must be looking through public court records to choose his victims, and he chose *mine*.

He saw mine, and he saw that I had no justice. He fought for me, and no one has ever done that before.

So...okay. Maybe I'm a *little* obsessed. But I know I need him. I know someone like him could fix me. For the first time in my entire life, I *wanted*

a man.

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CHAPTER THREE

Okayyy Daddy!

KANE



It takes a few hours, but once I identify the problem and fix it for him, I finally get my ass up from the hard cement floor of the shop and wipe my greasy hands with an old rag. The dealership was definitely trying to scam the old guy, but I guess he's one of their main targets.

When I call him up, he lets me know he'll be picking it up soon, so now I'm stuck waiting around with the shop open a bit later than I'd like.

Bacon has already wound down for the night, napping on his dog bed that's kept in the shop. I'm surprised he hasn't realized it's about to pass his dinner time.

I take a few minutes to clean up, move his car out front, and lock the garage as I move to sit on the uncomfortable wooden stool behind the counter of the shop lobby. I sigh and take out my phone when I hear that familiar *ding*, and I see a text from my buddy Mason. We met in the army, and he's probably the only person in my life besides my family.

MASON

yo...did you see this? >link.NWSnews.com<

Great. Now what?

I click the link, and I'm met with a photo.

A fucking *photo* of *me*.

Granted, it's grainy, clearly from someone's shitty home security footage, so you can't make out much. Luckily, I never miss a beat, so I keep my balaclava, gloves, and long sleeve on at all times. But with this, the police might be able to profile me. My approximate height and weight will be fucking released to the public.

God, I dropped the fucking ball. I should have surveyed the area better before I chose to go around the side of that house. This is going to get out fucking everywhere.

ME

fuck.

MASON

ha. losing your touch, old man?

Fucker. I could sit here and remind him that this “old man” ran fucking laps around him and was in charge of his ass for years in the army, but I’m too annoyed to even get into it with him.

ME

mind your manners.

MASON

yeah yeah. I’m still gonna be coming next week, so make sure I won’t be getting arrested with you if you can haha

Goddamnit, I almost forgot about that. I’ll have to set up my guest room this week. I’ll also have to move my next victim up so I can spend time with Mason while he’s in town.

I sigh as I open the article again, scrolling down through the stupid press release they wrote along with my photo. I get to the bottom of the page to read the community comments.

DANSMITH84: FINALLY. MAYBE NOW THEY CAN CATCH THIS LUNATIC.

JOJOTHE_C: WOOOOOW I LIVE LIKE 3 BLOCKS FROM HERE!!!!!!

MARYANGLIN1972: I'D CLIMB HIM LIKE A TREE

STELLATHEANGEL4: OKAYYY DADDY!

Daddy? What the fuck?

PENNYGIRL99: SORRY BUT IM FOLDING....THEY DID NOT NEED TO SHOW ME THAT THE HANGMAN WAS BUILT LIKE A LINEBACKER

USER726241: NOT ME ZOOMING IN

JUICYYYYYJ777: SHIIIT, ID LET HIM CHOKE ME TOO

What the fuck is wrong with women these days? Have they gone mad?

Before I can even process the rest of these *deranged* comments, the little bell chimes and I look up as I see the old man, Frank, and who I can assume is his wife. I greet them and set my phone down as they walk over to the counter.

“Thank you again, this is half what they quoted me at the dealer to replace it,” Frank says with a relieved sigh as he hands over a few hundred-dollar bills.

“No problem, she should be running just fine now. You can come back whenever she acts up again.”

“This one too?” he jokes lovingly as he gently pats his wife’s arm. She clicks her tongue with a smile as she playfully swats him. She takes the keys and goes to wait in the car while we finish up here.

I can’t help the small smile that forms on my face. It must be nice... having someone like that for so long. “Your wife is beautiful.”

“Yeah...you should’ve seen her forty years ago! Don’t know how she picked me.”

We finish up, and he takes my business card with him so he can recommend me to some of his friends. Well, easy enough money and he was nice. Plus, all the better if he supports *both* of my businesses.



The rain hammers against the shutters of my apartment and the metal roof of the garage. I guess it’s peaceful. I chose to move all the way here because I didn’t mind the idea of rainy weather most of the year. It drowns out all the other noise of life. I need the noise or else I’ll sit and think too much. I have a habit of getting stuck in my own head.

I guess I have no hobbies, except for working on cars, killing, and working out. I don’t enjoy watching movies, I don’t enjoy strolls on the beach, and I certainly don’t enjoy meeting new people and going out to socialize.

It’s just me and...

“No Bacon, you ate already,” I say sternly as he whines by his food bowl, as if I starve him. He just stares at me with his sad, desperate eyes until I finally sigh and get up. “Fine, one more goddamn treat. But that’s it, you beggar.” His tail wags while I open the plastic treat jar and I toss him his favorite bacon-flavored treats.

As much as I didn’t want a pet at all...I guess it’s nice to have something to take care of. If he wasn’t here, I’d just be talking to myself; stuck in a never-ending routine, alone in my head.

Bacon kind of fell into my lap. This homeless man was sitting on the median with a puppy, and a sign offering him for ten bucks. It pissed me off, and I passed him, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what kind of terrible fucking person could buy a vulnerable puppy for so cheap, and what could happen.

So, I turned the fuck around. I was on the road, and I had nothing to take care of a dog. I stopped at a diner and brought him a side of bacon after I ate, and he barked at the smell of it.

Hence the name. He’s a bit of a mutt, but he’s loyal, like me.

“Okay? I gotta get some shit done now,” I say as I pet his head and make myself go get the guest room cleaned out a bit for Mason.

As I move shit around, I can’t help but be reminded that I have to move *that* box. The one I’ve been avoiding since I moved in here and put it out of sight in the guest room. My eyes keep finding it, and I can’t stop myself from walking over and opening the lid.

I sigh and pick up the broken picture frame that lays atop everything else and wipe the light layer of dust off the glass. The feeling I get when I see them is just... too hard to bear.

I knew I couldn’t stay in the army any longer after I lost them. I wasn’t myself anymore. It was something I should’ve done long before, so I could’ve been there for them. If I had been there like she asked me to be, they’d still be alive.

“Sorry,” I mutter, my hand touching the glass. I’ve said it a million times, but it never makes anything better. It can’t bring them back.

When I was pulled aside as I led recruits in training, I already knew something was wrong. It didn’t matter who was around; I dropped to my knees, and for the first and only time in my life, I sobbed.

Losing them turned my entire fucking world upside down. I’ve had four years now to cope, but it’ll never get easier. All I can do now is make a

difference for them. Be a better man. Be there for people who need me. I'll never make that selfish mistake again.

If I have to kill every person who made the same mistake as the one who killed them, I'll do it. I'll eliminate every fucking predator that exists, to make a world where no one has to feel the way I've been made to feel; this overwhelming emptiness and sorrow that haunts me and follows me relentlessly.

I set the frame down gently back into the box and put the lid back on. I bring it to the front room, setting it in the small utility closet by the front door and closing the door. Maybe one day I'll be able to hang up the photo. I just don't know how to face them yet.

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CHAPTER FOUR

My First Orgasm

LAYLA



When my phone alarm goes off, I groan and click the side button to silence it. I stretch as I sit up, wiping my tired eyes and helping myself out of my bed.

I've been looking forward to today all week—I have a custom cake order for a bridal shower! It's the first time I get to do something as important as this.

When I was a kid, I loved art. I used to draw and paint on any and every object I wasn't allowed to. After...well, I stopped for a long time. Sometime after the court hearing, I went to this group therapy hosted for all ages, and I was introduced to decoden art. I instantly fell in love, and knew then I wanted to find a way to make it something I could actually do when I grew up. Of course, the next best thing was cake decorating, and I knew for sure that besides being able to do something I liked and was good at, that I'd be able to have my cake *and* eat it too.

Maybe I should've been a comedian?

Anyway, one day, it'll be *my own* bakery. But for now, I did accomplish my dream of growing up and working at a bakery where I get to decorate all kinds of cakes. It took a lot of practice, but I want to be the person who everyone wants their special cakes from.

I smile as I pick out my outfit for the day, landing on my favorite light blue jeans and a light purple jacket. I adjust my jacket a dozen times in the mirror before shaking my head with a sigh.

"Not today, Layla. You have to be confident today," I remind myself, and release a breath, turning to grab my purse and hurry out the door.

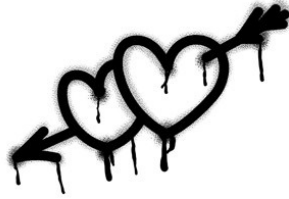
It's still foggy and rainy today, but the view is beautiful as I enjoy the window seat in the bus. I'm a ball of excitement as I finally reach my stop,

quickly walking the two blocks to work, Hudson's Bakery. It's a cute place, focusing more on being a dine-in bakery and café, but the people in town know we offer specialty cakes for all kinds of events.

"Good morning, Jenna!" I chime as I walk past the counter.

"Hey, you're early!"

I greet Isobel and Clark and make my way to the back.



The sound of Clark jingling the keys brings me out of my focused trance, and I look up. "Oh crap, is it already six?"

"It's a little past, you just looked so cute working hard I wanted to give you some extra time."

Eh... "Thank you! I'll just put these in the fridge and head out, then," I say politely, grabbing the first cake.

He leans against the metal table, trying to smoothly cross his arms as he watches me. "Well, before you go, I wanted to ask if maybe you've thought more about that dinner?"

"Um, I haven't. Honestly life is so crazy, I just have so much going on when I'm off. So—"

"No worries, maybe once your schedule opens up...maybe soon?"

I nod politely with a smile, and it seems to satisfy him enough to leave the back room and I sigh. Clark seems okay...I just don't have any interest. Though I also feel super guilty rejecting him because he's a good guy. Eventually I have to reject him fully, instead of being nice.

I finish putting everything away, try to avoid another awkward conversation with Clark, and slip out of the bakery. I rush to the bus stop and make it just in time before he notices. All I want to do is go home and get online to continue my research. I think it's exactly the distraction I need right now. I was so caught up in work all day, I didn't even have a chance to check in with my forum friends.

Basically, I've gotten myself pretty deep in The Hangman's forums. True crime people are *no joke*. I've made a couple friends there, and we

always go to our group chat whenever we feel like talking about him or discussing new information we found. We all have a common interest—which is figuring out who he is.

Unmasking him, if you will.

I check our group chat and nearly drop my phone. “Oh my g—” I exclaim loudly, but people on the bus turn and I slap my hand over my mouth.

No way. There is no fucking way. There’s a picture of him?

I can’t take this. I *need* to get home now. I furiously text the chat, letting them know I’m almost home and I’m going to hop on my laptop the moment I get inside.

I practically launch myself off the bus, making my way quickly to my still-broken screen door that leads to my building, and fumble a little before I fully unlock my door.

“I can’t believe this,” I say to myself as I sit on my couch and throw my laptop open. I race to open the tabs from the forum and...I see *him*.

The Hangman.

The man I’m looking for.

He’s *real*. He isn’t just something I’ve made up. He isn’t a hoax.

He’s a *man*. And he’s...huge. He looks like a scary, giant, bouncer.

I quickly save the image to my laptop and open it up so I can zoom in. When I do, I try to scan *everything*. I see that he has some sort of full mask on; the kind that covers everything, including your neck. The same kind you’d see a robber wearing. It has a design, though you can’t see the full front of it as his head is turned, it’s undoubtedly a skull.

I let my eyes move down, and...*holyfuckingshit*.

His muscles are begging to rip the tight black fabric covering his arms. His broad shoulders, which are barely contained in that shirt. I can even see the fullness of his back since he’s half-turned.

I never really imagined what he’d look like. I assumed someone like him must be strong, since he chokes his victims with an object and somehow overpowers them for long enough to accomplish it. I assumed maybe he was handsome, because I *felt* like he was. Otherwise...it never mattered to me. I know that no matter who he is, he’s exactly the person I want.

My eyes dare to go further down, and land on his taut legs, down to his large boots. They remind me of something they wear in those military

movies.

“Wait—”

I look back up, and zoom in, and I do see it. Dog tags. I wouldn't have known that's what they were, except that I was looking for them. This means he was in the military, right? Isn't this a step closer to finding him?

I go back to the forum, and I see everyone posting their theories about who he could be. Cop, butcher, personal trainer, convict, firefighter. They go on and on, everyone chiming in with ideas and reasons why it needs to be looked into. I excitedly type up a whole comment explaining my theory, but I stop before I press “post.”

Not everyone here admires him like I do. What if I post this and everyone agrees, and the circulation of the post leads to his arrest?

I can't do that to him.

I *have* to protect him the same way he protected me.

I delete my words and sigh. I can't trust everyone on the forum. I know anyone can just make an account, and see everything posted here. There are thousands of members already. I have to make sure *no one* can find out who he is, or else he's in danger.

Only one other comment suggests military, so I comment on it trying to deflect their opinion, and hope that they move on from it.

If I'm actively trying to find him, I have to make sure no one else can even come close. I wonder if he knows how many people sit and research him?

I move to open my thick notebook, which I've filled with notes, newspaper clippings, and anything I can about The Hangman over the last year. I've been studying everything I could. I'm trying to figure out *how* he chooses his next victim. I know for sure he must go on the public court website, but how does he choose who is next?

It seems almost random. *Almost.*

Except that he seems to go by severity sometimes, then sometimes he goes by age of the accused's victim, sometimes he goes by length of time acquitted, sometimes he chooses only those never sentenced.

He changes it up every quarter. He's very smart. It's hard for people to sit and put together *when* he changes, because he rotates that as well.

But I *think* I have him figured out. I think I know who he's going for next. If he does; then I can find him. If he kills who I think he will, then that

means I've unlocked his pattern. And I'll know the one after that, too. Then, all I have to do is find where they live. And then, I will find him.

It's exciting...but also anxiety-inducing.

I sigh and close the notebook, laying my head against the couch. I really am worried now that someone will find him. Plus...everyone seems to be losing their minds over how sexy he is. And I'll admit I'm jealous. I mean, it's hard to see everyone say that.

What if he wouldn't like someone like me? Maybe he'd prefer someone more conventionally attractive, or someone more experienced.

Someone less broken.

No, that's it. No more being afraid.

I stand up from the couch and march over to my bed, pick up my pretty vibrator, and sit on the bed.

I've watched a lot of porn and read a lot of romance books, because I want to know how sex is *supposed* to be. Maybe fictional sex wasn't the best idea for learning...but that's all I had. And I've learned *a lot*.

Now, I just want to learn how to feel good. I'm just so afraid it's going to suddenly...not feel good. That if I don't practice now, maybe if I try to have sex, I'll suddenly relive everything from my past and ruin it.

And what if...I find him, and he wants me too, and then I totally ruin the moment. I'm sure he won't know what to do with me if I do, and I don't want to fumble my chance with him.

I want to feel sexy.

And maybe bold. And confident.

So, fuck it. I can be bold. I'm not scared to try. I lay back against my pillows, and I pull up a porn website on my phone. I watch for a few minutes...but I don't really feel *it*. *Come on Layla, there's literally sex in front of you!*

I sigh. What can I do? Should I just...do it and wait to feel the need?

I use my thumb to leave my browser application, and subconsciously I go straight to the forum. I open the picture of him again...and I really let myself appreciate him without thinking about the semantics of figuring him out.

I zoom in, looking at the absolute tank of a man on the screen and I...imagine.

I can imagine those strong hands on me. The way his size and strength could lift even someone who weighs as much as I do. I imagine him picking

me up and tossing me onto his bed like a man starved. The way he'd stalk closer to me with that mask on, telling me that he's going to take me. Telling me how bad he needs my body and wants to make me his.

I turn on the vibrator for the first time, and with a deep breath I slip it past my pants into my panties, and I jump a little when I feel the sensation hit my pussy, pulling up just slightly.

It...isn't bad at all. I take another breath and let it move back down over my clit.

He'd spread my legs open after tearing off my clothes, and he'd settle between my thick thighs. He would lift his mask up only enough for his mouth to be uncovered and then flatten his tongue to give a single lap from the bottom to the top of my pussy. His tongue lingering on my clit; flicking quickly as his hands clench my thighs with a bruising grip, as if he was trying to stay controlled.

I'm a moaning mess, giving completely in to the pleasure he's giving me. He expertly tongues and sucks on me; his animalistic growls against my pussy causing vibrations that only further my peak.

I feel undone when he tells me to put my eyes back on him, and he tells me to cum for him. That he needs it. He begs me to cum as his finger does the work on my clit, talking me through it until I—

“Ah...”

A wave washes over me. My whole body quivers, and I slump back into my bed. It takes me a minute to process it, but *holyshit*.

I just had my first orgasm...because of him.

CHAPTER FIVE

If Not Me, Then Who?

KANE



“Like I said, everything is fine. The police don’t seem to have any idea who I am. The video itself is choppy, and they have no footage besides that,” I grumble into my phone as I walk down my stairs from my apartment to the shop.

“Well, you should probably lay low for a while. They might be secretly watching. Waiting for your next move,” Mason replies.

“No, because if I do, they’ll think *I’m* afraid. They’ll know that there’s something identifiable enough in it that I went into hiding.”

“You’re a stubborn old man, you know that, right?”

I sigh as I lock the glass door to the shop. “I have a goal. I can’t let something as benign as this stop me.”

“So...what *will* stop you? What is this goal?” he asks.

I think for a moment, sticking my keys into the back pocket of my jeans and turning to head back upstairs. “I want to instill fear. As long as I can until...”

“Until?”

“Until I have a good enough reason to stop.”

What is it that I’m waiting for?

I hadn’t planned to become a “serial killer.” I simply needed an outlet for the rage and depression I had fallen victim to after Sadie and Mel...

“You know, no matter how many of those fuckers you kill, it won’t bring them back, right?”

“Of course I fucking know that. I—” I stop myself, taking a breath as I run my hand down my face. Bacon comes up to me, nudging my knee for attention as if he can sense my distress. “I just don’t know what else to do with myself. If I don’t stay busy, I’ll stew.”

“You would do better going on a dating website. I’m sure they make one for grumpy old men looking for MILFs,” he laughs.

“Yeah, yeah. Keep fucking laughing. This dog is already too much for me. No one would enjoy living with an old army vet who doesn’t leave his auto shop anyway.”

“You forgot that they probably wouldn’t want to date a serial killer,” he teases.

“I’m hanging up,” I say as I click the button.

Douchebag.

As if I need the reminder that I’m alone.

“What do you think, Bacon? Are we lonely?” I squat down and pet his head. He excitedly laps at my hands as I chuckle and try to scratch his cheeks. “I think we’re alright. I don’t take good care of people anyway,” I say with a sigh as I stand back up. “Tough it out. That’s all I gotta do.”

I walk over to the old, boxy computer in the corner of my bedroom. It still works fine enough, I don’t need anything fancy. I only use it to access the court’s records database and public criminal information, plus the sex offender tracker. Nifty shit the internet has added.

They’re basically setting these deviants in my lap. They make it easy as fuck to find them, and every single detail about them. If they didn’t make it onto the sex offender list, I can still find them. There are a few completely free websites in which all you need is someone’s full name and state of residency, and it will tell you everything.

Past addresses.

Current address.

Phone number history.

Email addresses.

Relatives; and all their information is also accessible in the same way.

Criminal history is always behind a paywall, but that’s why the court’s public website is helpful. Plus, with someone’s full information, I can look up any public arrest records. I can’t risk signing up for an account and paying to access any information. I already had to have Mason talk me through how to block my IP address when I first started using this.

I have a specific target in mind. Unfortunately, I’m in a bit of a rush here otherwise I’d spend a day to follow him for a bit; just to see his patterns. But I need to have this handled tonight...because I already know

who my next target is after this one, and I need that one gone before Mason comes to town.

I have to be careful.

To cover my tracks and to keep police from figuring out who I'm killing next, it's required me to track a rotation I've made up. It would be virtually impossible for someone to crack it. It was random to begin with and only has a little bit of structure. Just enough so that I can follow it without fucking up. I sometimes have specific kills I plan, but they have to land in my rotation, otherwise they have to wait. In the meantime, I do these searches to find someone suitable for my rotation who *deserves* to be in it.

And I've found my target for the night that fits.

"Samuel Green," I repeat out loud to myself, as I squint at the computer screen. Two counts of sexual misconduct with a minor. One count of aggravated sexual battery. And...guess where he is?

He lives just a block from a supermarket, only a town over from here, and he even has a job at a music store downtown. He gets to live his life normally...as if he didn't assault anyone? As if he didn't ruin someone else's life? As if he isn't some sick pervert and danger to everyone around him? As if he *deserves* to be a member of fucking society? To draw breath? The judge let him accept a plea deal, and the cunt served only *one* year out of his three-year sentence.

One.

This is why I do what I do.

The justice system lives to serve the evil and strip every fucking right away from the victim. Can you even call it the *justice* system? Because I've yet to see it work.

I served time in the army because I was able to. I have always believed in fighting for my country, even if I didn't want to accept that most of it defends and allows even *worse* than what people like Samuel Green do. Maybe it meant defending them, but most of all I wanted to protect the people who needed it. Do the hard shit.

I've grown up with the same phrase on repeat in my mind: *If not me, then who?*

My father was a tough son of a bitch, and he raised me to be like him. Take shit from no one, protect women, and live an honest life. He isn't around anymore, but I think he'd be proud of the way I've tried to redeem myself. He'd never have forgiven me for what happened to Mel and Sadie.

He would've blamed himself worse than me, even...so it's for the better that he didn't have to be around to know what happened to them.

But I live with it.

Every day, it repeats in my head, in those moments where the air is too still and the city traffic dulls for a *little* too long, the silence blaring in my ear.

All I can see when I close my eyes is Sadie running into my arms.

"Uncle Candy Kane!" I sweep her into my arms, holding her in a tight hug as her small arms go around my neck and she kisses my cheek. "I missed you!"

I chuckle and look over to see my sister. Her dark hair is cut shorter now, and I can see her tired face. She puts on a smile for me though, and I hold Sadie in one arm as I put my other one around Mel and pull her in.

That was the last time they visited me in Georgia at my base. Right before everything went to absolute shit.

I can't keep thinking about this. I have to get ready.

I force myself off the desk chair and move to get dressed. Once I finish and tie up my boots, I sigh as I grab my small pack of gear.

"Be a good boy, I'll be back soon," I tell Bacon before turning and heading toward the door.



The windshield wipers drag slowly across the glass of my windshield. The rain isn't relenting anytime soon. The roads are mostly empty at this hour, just the occasional flash of headlights passing me in the opposite direction.

Good.

I keep one hand on the wheel as I drive, looking around at the dark of the night that surrounds my truck as I try to find some sort of distraction. I turn up the dial on my radio just enough to drown out my thoughts.

I won't think about Sadie.

I won't think about Mel.

Tonight is about Samuel. To make him understand that the time to reap the consequences of his actions has finally come.

Sometimes I wonder if they expect me, if maybe they look behind their shoulder when they walk alone at night. If they double-check that they've locked every door and window. If they now live in a constant state of paranoia.

I hope they do.

I hope every creak of their floorboard keeps them awake. That every shadow outside their window makes them wonder if tonight is the night. That the harsh rain beating the roof might shadow the sound of me breaking in.

They're always too afraid to answer me when I ask if they did, it's a shame.

I turn down a narrow residential street and kill my headlights as I park at the corner. I sit here for a moment, watching. No one seems to be walking around, no one seems to have any lights that stay on at night outside of their homes.

I turn the ignition off, then slip on my balaclava and gloves.

Goodbye, Samuel Green.

CHAPTER SIX

I'm Coming to Find You

LAYLA



“Ugh,” I groan as my alarm goes off right next to my ear. I pick my phone up, missing the button a million times but eventually succeeding. I sit up, scratching my head with a yawn and get up and walk to the bathroom.

I hum to myself as I brush my teeth, finishing up and taking my time to get ready. I have to make sure I’m not too early for the bus this time or I’ll get soaked again.

I change and spend time putting my hair in a loose side braid—I’ll have to get my money pieces touched up soon or I’ll start looking crazy. I finish fussing over myself and grab my purse and my keys.

Crap. I almost forgot my phone again.

I double-back for it and head for the bus stop. When I get seated, I pull my phone out and send a text to Crystal.

ME

I did it.

CRYS

did what?

ME

you know...

CRYS

YOU HAD SEX?

ME

WHAT? no! but I used the vibrator. and...it was actually good

CRYS

i'm sooooo happy for you babe. I told you it would work!

I smile to myself as I let out a breath, catching the passing city view in the bus window beside me. Maybe I *am* normal. I don't know why...but I feel like today is going to be a really good day. I look down at my phone when I feel another vibration and see one of my online friends from the true crime forum texted the group chat.

GABI

Weird update. Someone was found dead in their apartment this morning by their girlfriend. But...he only killed two nights ago. What's going on? >>news.link<<

What? Already?

I click on the link, and immediately I see the face of a man at the top of the news article.

Holy shit. No way. No fucking way!

Man, Samuel Green, found dead in his apartment building. Police suspect that the assailant is "The Hangman," a local serial—

I knew it. I knew I was right. Every hour and late night I spent plotting and researching has *not* been for nothing. Samuel Green is a one-off for him, and he only does those right before he switches his pattern. And next on his wheel...

ME

why do you guys think he did that? It's weird right? he's never done this before

GABI

Well...maybe he's panicking. The photo really is a huge lead.

Crap! That's right! He must be worried the police are catching up to him, so he's rushing some of the killings now so that he can figure out what to do next.

Wait...if that's what he's doing, then is he going to do another quickly?

ME

thats true...but isn't that dangerous?

GABI

I mean, he's clearly smart. Maybe he's doing it for a reason. I'll let you know if I come across anything else.

I have to spend some time preparing today. If he really is panicking and changing his pacing all of a sudden, then I don't have a lot of time left. I can maybe figure out the following victim again if I miss this one...but it isn't a guarantee. I'm *sure* of this next one, though. If I don't find him, it'll take months to get ahead of him again, if I even can.

It's settled.

The bus finally reaches my stop, and I head out and then into the tall building,

"Hi, I'm here for Mrs. Benedict," I say with a smile to the receptionist. She nods and tells me she's ready for me. I walk over to the wooden door, and knock.

"Ah, Layla, you're early," my therapist says with a smile as she opens her office door for me.

I walk in, heading to my usual spot on the couch. "Yeah, I was looking forward to updating you!"

"Oh?"

"I finally did it. I bit the bullet and...I bought a vibrator and I used it."

"Wow, that's amazing to hear! I really want you to know your sexual health starts with your mind first, being able to feel open again to pleasure is a huge accomplishment."

I nod, letting out a relieved sigh. "Yeah, I...guess it was hard. I kind of *made* myself do it at first. But now I'm happy I did. I think I had built it up so much in my head that it became scary."

"Sometimes we have to push ourselves outside of our comfort zone. It's hard, but to build your way through trauma you're going to be uncomfortable. You're going to be scared. That's totally okay. Even if you end up needing more time, that's okay too."

"It's just...um, I guess I...have a reason. I mean, there's a guy I kind of like." Is that even a good way to describe him? A guy I like? Because that doesn't even seem worthy.

"Really? You haven't mentioned him before," she says as she changes her posture to a more comfortable position.

"Yeah...it's just that, before, I didn't think there was a chance. I mean he's—" I pause as I look around trying to think. "He's someone I met online! So you know, we haven't met yet. I just wanted to feel better before I met him."

“Well, ‘feeling better’ is a pretty broad statement. We’ve talked about not using those, because I don’t want you to think that there’s something *wrong* with you.”

“I know! I just mean, I want to enjoy it. Him. Like, I want to experience the whole, ‘girl meets boy and they fall in love,’ thing for once in my life.” I realize I sound a little crazy after I say it, but I don’t care. Maybe that is what I expect. I know the moment I’m across from him, I’ll feel all those amazing things swirling inside of me.

“Well, do you plan to meet soon?” she asks.

“Yes...we actually might be meeting tonight.”

“That’s soon,” she says, surprised.

“I think it’s time. It’s been a long time for me, at least.” Not technically a lie.

“Well...don’t rush yourself. It’s easy to fall into letting others decide the pace because it’s easier, but *you* are the one who decides that.”

I nod along as she goes on. I agree...and I understand her. She always knows the “right” thing to say. But I don’t *want* to think about the pace or where we’re at. I just want to be around him, know him, feel him, and let everything happen naturally. I want to see what happens without feeling restricted because of my trauma.

I feel relieved when the timer goes off, and I eagerly stand up from my seat. “Thank you, I’ll...see you next week?”

“Well, maybe we should talk sooner. I can pencil you in my schedule for a call tomorrow, that way maybe you can work out some of your feelings after tonight?”

I agree and thank her again, giving her a smile as I walk out of her office door and exit the building.

Ugh.

I don’t want to have to explain myself to anyone. I’m not even sure what I’ll tell Crystal. Can I really just keep it a secret? Maybe it’s better if I don’t tell anyone until he’s ready. Then I can introduce him as my boyfriend and... “God! I need to relax!” I say out loud as I cover my giant smile with my hand.

It’s fine. Breathe. One step at a time. I’m going to do my best to not be too eager when I meet him. I know he needs time to get to know me first to see how he feels.

But...on the flip side of that, I also wanna get my feelings across to him too. How the heck can I do that without scaring him off?

Maybe he can't be scared off. He's surely not scared of much, right? So maybe he won't mind. *Ah*, I just can't wait to see his face after all this time.

My phone rings loudly and I answer. "Crys!"

"Hey! I was watching your location and noticed you left therapy, so I called."

"Stalker, much?" I giggle.

"Yeah, yeah. You know I always watch where you go. You make me anxious taking the bus everywhere. God knows what could happen. Anyway, you're off today so why don't we hang out? Maybe go shopping so we can find something to wear for your birthday?"

"Oh...um I can't today," I say as I reach the bus stop.

"What? Why?"

"I...have plans?" Well, I kind of have to lie, right?! I mean I can't just say, *'I have plans to stake out a convicted sex offender's home, hoping a serial killer shows up.'*

"Uh...I have a date! I totally forgot to tell you! I mean, with that guy from work who keeps asking, remember?" I say quickly, hoping she believes me as I take my seat on the bus. I'm an awful liar.

"Clark? The one you said you're not interested in?"

"Yeah...maybe I need to give him a chance."

"Well, I'm happy to see you going out but I hope he didn't pressure you. Seriously Layla, it's okay to tell people no."

"No! It's fine I swear. It might even be fun. I think I'm going to wear that shirt you got me last year, too."

Crystal sighs into the phone, almost sounding relieved. "Well, fine. But you're not getting away easy, okay? I demand you tell me every detail tomorrow. I'm busy but I'll call you in the morning."

"Okay, talk to you then!"

"Please be safe!"

I hang up and sigh. *Ugh*. I hate lying to everyone. I feel like a terrible person. Eventually, once everything comes to fruition and has time to settle, I can tell them. I just know that everyone is going to try to talk me out of this, and I *have* to avoid losing the little bit of confidence I have.

I know I'm crazy. I know I'm being reckless, and maybe I'm a *little* bit hopeful. But something deep down inside me is saying that this is right.

That *he* is right. And I'm trying really hard to start listening to those feelings and not ignore them.

I refuse to live my life thinking *what if* constantly. I already spent years being silenced and repressed and now I can do anything I want. *Right?*

As I finally make it back to my apartment and close my door behind me, I take a deep breath. Okay, Layla. This is it. Tonight is the night. *Holyshit.* What am I gonna wear to this mission? I panic and rush to my dresser—it isn't long until the room is covered in clothes I've tossed around.

I need to look...mysterious, but approachable. Maybe not as colorful as I usually am and...maybe tighter clothes? Oh! I finally have an excuse to wear those black boots!

"This will do," I say as I stare at myself in the mirror. I picked something full black and a bit tight but covered. I think it's sexy enough and...maybe he'll be impressed that I look like someone who knows how to break into a house?

Crap. How do I break into a house? Will I even have to? Do I just stand outside and wait for him?

I pull out my phone, sending a quick message to my forum group chat.

ME

okay guys. I think I have it figured out. how much do you wanna bet that a man named Peter Reed is found dead tomorrow?

WENDY

Oooh, fun! I'll bite. You still been trying to track that forreal? Thought you gave up months ago.

ME

yes...duh! and I swear I'm right this time.

My phone dings from one of the girls, but it isn't in the group chat.

GABI

hey...so, Peter Reed? How did you come up with that name? You haven't been sharing your research in the chat lately.

Weird. I wonder why she would privately text me.

ME

uh, just a good guess? i've been busy. i can show you guys sometime soon.

GABI

yeah, please. i want to compare. i've been taking some too and i think we need to talk

She doesn't talk much in the chat anymore, but she was one of the girls who used to help me brainstorm when I expressed how badly I wanted to find him. But nowadays, she seems to be too busy for the chat. The chat dings again, and I decide not to reply to her right now.

WENDY

Hm, I'll wait for you to be awake then. Isn't it late on your side of the coast? Go to bed!

ME

yep...I am now. night!

I finish grabbing what I need, and head for the door, stopping at my little mirror there as I make sure my hair looks perfect and my lip gloss isn't messy.

Okay, *Mr. Hangman*. I'm coming to find you.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

This Fantasy Ends Here

KANE



“Yeah. I’ll be there Monday to pick you up from the airport, quit your nagging,” I say gruffly into the phone as my truck pulls up to a stoplight.

“Well I don’t want to be alone at the airport waiting. There’s a *killer* on the loose, you know.” Mason laughs and I click my tongue.

“God, you fucking wear me out. How long are you staying again?”

“Ah, let’s see what happens. Maybe we can be roommates.”

“Not even if pigs fucking flew. I gotta go, I’m parking.”

“Okay, I’ll call to remind you again tomorrow,” he says before hanging up.

Please fucking don’t. I throw my gear shift into park and undo my seatbelt, grabbing my mask and slipping it on over my head and neck. I slide my gloves on as my eyes flick up to double-check the surroundings before I get out.

Well shit, this is a pretty nice neighborhood. Guess I’m not surprised a man like him was able to bribe his way out of the conviction he deserved. I walk down the street, staying in the middle to avoid motion sensor cameras and lights. Should be simple. He’s supposed to be home from work as usual; his new wife is away on vacation according to her social media, and she hasn’t posted pictures of any pets.

I finally get close to the house, looking around as I find a neighbor who seems to not have bright lights on their side yard and slip through there to reach his backyard. It’s...quiet. His car is in the driveway, so he’s definitely here.

Why do I have such a weird feeling about this? Maybe I’m just being paranoid. I’m being extra careful now that I realize I had been careless getting caught on camera, so there’s no way anything can go wrong.

I quietly get to his back door, grabbing my lock pick, but...it's unlocked? The fuck? Does a pretentious rich asshole like this really just live without fear? I take an extra look around, and open it fully, letting myself slip inside. I close it quietly behind me and turn back around and just listen.

Still quiet. No snoring? No television left on? My brows furrow as I quietly shuffle, rounding the kitchen to the living room. I can feel the hair on my arms raise, and I slowly reach for the tactical knife attached to my belt, unsheathing it and holding it close.

Not a second later, I hear the floor creak in the darkness. My instincts take over as I rush the figure, pinning them to the wall with ease as I hold my blade up to their neck.

"Wait!" she yells.

What the fuck is a girl doing here?

"Shut your mouth," I say lowly, pressing the blade against her neck without letting it break the skin.

"U-um but there's really no one here, I swear!" she pleads and I hold position as I turn my head to look around and listen. The smell of vanilla is overwhelming me.

"How do you know? You live here?" I demand.

"No! I-I just um, I guess I...I can explain! I swear Peter Reed isn't here!"

My jaw clenches imperceptibly, and I stand there. What the fuck do I do? Who is this? I try to think, but I don't have much time to decide if she's setting me up. "Prove it. Scream for help. Make it sound real," I growl quietly into her ear. If this was a set-up, either that piece of shit or the police would come out to help her. She pauses for a second, and I move my knife to remind her I'm not fucking around.

"H-help! Please! Someone help!" she yells, and nothing. I look around, deciding to release her and step back only a couple feet to flick on the living room light and see who the fuck I'm dealing with.

She straightens up, and though her breathing is deep, our eyes meet. Her brown doe eyes stare right into me, and I stop. *Shit*. She has wavy, bright copper hair, with the front pieces a bright blonde. She's in a tight black outfit, like some damn cat burglar. And fuck, is it holding onto her soft curves like it was stitched right onto her.

Focus, Kane. You're so utterly *fucked* right now.

I don't know her. She isn't...related. A young hookup? She can't be over twenty.

"Who the fuck are you, and how do you know Peter Reed?" I ask, staying far enough away to escape her sweet smell, but close enough that the threat of my knife lingers for her.

"I—okay," she says, taking a breath. "I um, honestly had a whole thing prepared but now I guess this isn't going how I planned so," she says, gesturing awkwardly with her hands.

What in the hell is she going on about? "Get on with it," I throw out.

"Whew, okay. Let me start over. My name is Layla and...I came here because I needed to find you."

Find me? No. This girl couldn't have "found" me. She's working with the cops. I can't let myself be taken away because she looks so innocent. I'll let her go on and see if her body language gives her up.

"I-I know you don't know me, but you know my uncle. You killed him last year. Jack Ryan?"

Jack Ryan? I think for a moment, and eventually a vague memory surfaces, or at least familiarity. "And? What? Come to turn me in? Cause let me tell you this, little girl, I don't give a fuck if—"

"No! I mean I came because I wanted to meet you! I needed to thank you, because you saved me. I mean, you totally changed my life. I've... been finally able to start healing. I couldn't have done that without you."

Her genuine words pierce through me. I don't let myself think long about the cases; I kill and that's the end. I forget the names and burn them. I can't get attached or engrossed because if I do, I'll relive the feelings of Mel and Sadie all over again.

"You can't be fucking serious. You understand where you are, don't you?" I ask incredulously. She nods, looking sorry. I groan and wipe my hand over my face. "Then what the absolute fuck are you doing here? You know what this man did, don't you?"

"Yes...but—"

"No. No fucking 'but.' He's a serial rapist. What the fuck would you have done if he was here, if he attacked you? Huh? Do you have any idea what would've happened if I wasn't the one who walked through that door?"

She shrugs, her eyes beginning to glisten with unshed tears. Goddamnit. I could never handle women crying.

“Don’t—shit. Look, kid, you need to go back wherever the fuck you came from. I don’t care what your reason is, you’re a fucking liability and I can’t afford it. You’re welcome, hello and goodbye, and whatever else. Okay?”

“I-I’m not a kid,” she says sniffing.

“I don’t have time for this shit. I need you out. Now.”

“No! I mean, at least let me finish!” she begs and moves a step closer. If I was smart, I’d swiftly knock her out and drop her off at a hospital.

“You—”

“Please. I’ve been following your every move for months. I worked so hard for this chance. I swear I only came inside because I saw him leave in someone else’s car, and I knew you’d be here. I would never risk it I promise.”

I take a deep breath to keep myself from saying something I shouldn’t. “How could you have known I was coming *here*?”

“It was the end of your rotation. I...I figured you were saving him for your next rotation of publicized cases. I mean, I was sure it would be tonight because I know you’re so worried about that photo you probably had to rush it.”

The photo? Jesus Christ. This girl thinks she’s fucking Nancy Drew. “No, fuck the photo. No one is on to me. Except *you*, apparently. So tell me why I should leave a loose end untied?” I ask as I step closer.

“Me? I would never out you!”

“It’s a matter of time. The longer you stand here, the less I’m willing to leave you alive. You get that, don’t you? I’m a killer. Now get the fuck out before you get hurt.”

“But you’d never hurt me. You only kill the bad guys.”

God fucking—

“I do what I have to do to protect myself. I have shit to accomplish and I ain’t going down just because some kid stuck her nose in where it didn’t belong.”

“I’m not a kid! And I want to help you!”

“*Help* me? You’re screwing me right now. I don’t care what you say, if you meant it, if you’re really thankful or whatever the hell you *think* you are. You got it off your chest and I said you’re welcome. Now get.”

“I didn’t even get to finish,” she says softly, wiping the single tear off her cheek.

Of course she has more to say. Do I fucking let her speak? Will it get her out of my hair faster? Can I even handle looking at her any longer without forgetting I *need* her gone?

She wipes her eye with her sleeve, taking a breath so she can speak again without her voice breaking. “The truth is...I’m in love with you. I’ve been imagining this day ever since you saved me. I um, I didn’t expect it to go like this, but I don’t mind.”

In *love*? With *me*? I have to get her the hell out of here now.

I shake my head. “Little girl, you don’t know a damn thing about it. You don’t know the difference between gratitude and love. I’m too old for you, and I don’t do relationships. Not now, not ever. Now that we’ve established that, let’s get you out.” I move toward her, ready to push her out the back door. I grab her by the shoulders and easily move her, though her soft protests don’t relent.

“Wait! But I do! I need to see you again, I still—”

“No means no. Listen when I speak. Hear the words coming out of my mouth, got it?” I hold her there, looking into those damn big eyes again. “You will get in your car. You will go home. You will *never* come looking for me again. This fantasy ends here. Do you hear me?”

“But—”

“No. I said, did you hear me?” I demand, interrupting her. She nods weakly again, wiping at her cheek. “Good girl. Now go on home.” I finish ushering her out the back door and close it behind her.

Why the fuck is nothing go as I plan? To top it off, my target isn’t here, and now I have to delay this for God knows how long.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. What if she gets angry that I rejected her and outs me somehow?

No. She’s smart, but not street smart. She won’t get one up on me. She’ll cry and move on, and I just need to learn to fucking adapt to avoid her and anyone else from ever finding my pattern again.

It’s fine, she’s fucking gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I Don't Have to Hide a Body, Do I?

LAYLA



I didn't even get his name! How will I ever find him again? I can't believe this went like this. I round the side yard and walk back to the street, wiping my nose with my sleeve as I try to stop letting the tears fall.

What do I do now? Lose my only opportunity? I shake my head, sniffing as I look down the road.

Wait. The road! He drove here, right? So he parked somewhere? I pick up my pace, wanting to beat him in case he comes out before I can find his car. If I was him...what car would I have? Definitely not this Prius, not this van. "Hm..." I say as I wander down the block, turning the corner, and then I see it. It *has* to be his. There's an old red truck that stands out like a sore thumb in a neighborhood like this.

I quickly pull my phone out, taking a picture of the license plate and then round the corner to make sure he doesn't see me. I'm walking down the road, trying to find the bus stop I came here on, as I stare down at my phone screen. How do I even look someone up with a license plate? Is it legal?

I'm startled when my phone rings in my hands, almost dropping it as I quickly try to answer. "C-Crystal! Hey!"

"Um, where are you right now?"

"Huh?"

"Why are you in some neighborhood two towns over? I've been worried but now it's late and I checked again and it looks like you're just wandering around? What's going on?" she asks, sounding concerned.

"Oh...um yeah I mean I totally just left Clark's house!" I lie into the phone.

"Seriously? You're saying he wouldn't take you home?"

“Oh! I insisted! I have the bus card and—”

“Layla, cut the crap. You’re lying. Please let me come get you, I don’t care if you don’t want to tell me what happened but I’m panicking seeing you out somewhere you don’t know so late,” she begs.

“Okay,” I reply easily, hearing my voice tremble as I feel the lingering disappointment rise to the surface again.

“Just...stay where you are, okay? I’m coming right now!” she says, and I can hear the keys in the background as she hangs up.

I stop and sit my ass right on the curb, anxious but thankful. I know she’s going to drag it out of me eventually. I lied so much, and there’s no way I can make it up to her. I’m a bad friend. All the while, she was diligently checking my location like usual, up late and worried. I should’ve just told her not to get me, or maybe I shouldn’t have even answered. I should’ve just...

“You should’ve kept your big mouth shut. Do you even understand what you’ve done? Spreading your bullshit, trying to ruin me? Don’t act like you’re so innocent, Layla. You’re the one who’s been lying for years. You think anyone wants to listen to a brat who doesn’t know how to tell the truth? Huh?”

I shake my head, wiping my eyes as I look down at my feet, lost in my memory when I see headlights and hear a car door open. “Layla? Hey!” Crystal’s voice gets closer as I feel arms wrap around me, lifting me from where I sit. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

I shake my head, the tears still flowing. I don’t even know why I’m crying. Am I crying because I’m a liar? Because the man I love rejected me? Because these horrible memories suddenly resurfaced and I’m reminded that I’m just a mess of a person?

I don’t know.

“It’s okay babe, come on, get in the car. You’re coming back to my place.” Her voice is soothing as she leads me into the passenger seat. The next thing I hear is her driver door close, and we finally move.

“Sorry,” I eventually squeak out.

“What? Why? You don’t have to be sorry Layla. It’s your life. You’re allowed to have secrets, okay? Even from me. Just please don’t keep dangerous ones from me, because you know I’ll do anything for you. Even hide a body. I don’t have to hide a body, do I?” she asks, turning for a moment, and I let out a small chuckle as I wipe my cheek.

“No. No bodies.”

“Whew okay, ‘cause I would, but I have no fucking clue how to do that, girl.”

“I met him,” I blurt out.

“Oh, yeah, how was the date with Clark then? I’m assuming it wasn’t—”

“No, Crystal. I didn’t see Clark. I met *him*.”

“Layla, why the hell are you talking in riddles? Who are you saying you met?”

“The Hangman.”

The car stops in the middle of the road, and my back hits the seat.

“Layla Ryan, look me in the eye and tell me I just misheard you,” she asks as she turns to me.

“I...I really met him. I found him, Crystal. And...he didn’t even give me a chance.”

“No, no, no. Layla. Please, for God’s sake, you tracked down a serial killer, surprised him, and confessed?!” She shakes her head with a sigh.

“Well, when you put it that way, it sounds kinda bad, but really I had no other choice.”

“*No other choice?* Girl!”

“I’m sorry, okay?” I say, waving my arms. “I know you’re mad and worried, but can you please pretend that part was normal because all I want is to tell you about him and have you maybe understand?” I beg.

She takes a breath and looks at me again. “Okay, okay. I can handle it. Lay it on me.”



“So, now what? You...seriously are going to try to find him again?” Crystal asks, sitting back on her bed with me, now with a bowl of popcorn as promised.

“I have to. Maybe I caught him too off guard, so he wasn’t able to think about what I was really trying to say. If I go see him when he’s...less

stressed out, maybe he'd hear me out," I say as I grab a handful of popcorn.

"I love you, but I don't know if this is a good idea. I am a proud advocate for supporting women's rights *and* wrongs, but this is just...a lot, Layla. I'm worried your expectations are higher than he can ever reach."

"Do you think he could love me?" I ask, looking down at the bowl.

"What? Who would be stupid enough not to love you?"

"I don't know. I have a lot of problems."

"We all do! People don't fall in love *despite* someone's problems, but because they *embrace* them. If he doesn't embrace you, you gotta walk away. Even if you're obsessed," she adds sternly.

I ignore her comment. Is it wrong to be a *little* obsessed, anyway? "So, tell me how! I want to give a good impression this time. Once I figure out how to find him, I want to go there and...show him that I'm confident and worth paying attention to. I want him to really *see* me." I smile, imagining what it would be like.

"Well...how are you finding him this time? 'Cause I am *not* letting you put yourself in a dangerous situation again," she says.

"All I have now is his license plate number, but I'm pretty sure it's useless, because you can't look those up online." I sigh.

"Well, my cousin works at the DMV, so just text it to me. Consider this the only thing I'm willing to do to help my friend date a serial killer."

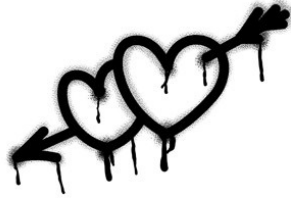
I launch forward, hugging her tightly. "You're an angel! I can't believe it! You'd really do that?"

"Against my better judgment...yes. I guess my love for my best friend overshadows the bright red, flashing sirens going off in my brain. Just promise you won't keep anything about this from me again. Okay?"

I nod.

I feel...lighter. It's a huge relief to be able to tell my best friend everything I've been keeping from her. I can tell she's holding back some of her harsher opinions, but I appreciate that she's *attempting* to be as supportive as possible.

"For now, let's sleep. We'll see what my cousin says tomorrow," she says as she reaches over and switches off the light on her nightstand.



The next morning is uncharacteristically sunny for us, but I'll take any ounce of sunshine I can get. For once, as I step onto the bus, I'm not covered in rain and looking at the darkness. My phone dings in my pocket.

WENDY

Sorry, I guess your theory was wrong. Don't worry, we'll have a group research video chat soon. Miss you guys anyway!

ME

yeah...I guess I was wrong! text you guys later

This is good. I shouldn't have told them anyway, I was just so excited to see him I wanted to tell *someone* something. But now they think I was way off base, so now his secret is safer.

I swipe out of the group chat and open my photos. I smile to myself as I see the screenshotted driver's license I now have saved.

I promise I'll be better from now on about keeping your secrets, *Kane Mercer*.

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CHAPTER NINE

Why Is It Camo?

KANE



What a fucking shit show last night was. I could have handled just losing the opportunity to get my prey. I can always come back for him, even if I have to play the long game.

But *her*? Why? *How*?

How on Earth could she have actually figured out exactly who I was killing next? Had I been so fucking careless that some random twenty-year-old girl can predict my every move?

I covered my tracks. I always keep everything clean. I use a tool with gloves on. In and fucking out. Now the same week my photo gets leaked, this girl finds me?

No, it can't be a coincidence. There's no way I can trust that she truly has no motive here. She must be working with someone else or maybe acting on someone's behalf. Or shit, maybe she's so sweet someone has tricked her into being the front.

Or...maybe she is being honest. Maybe she *is* the victim from that case. I checked last night—the case records have the former minor's name redacted. But even if I let myself think for a second she's telling the truth, I'm still screwed. Because if she's just a naive girl, she's seen my fucking face. Well, not all of it, since I luckily had my mask on. Thank fuck she didn't, because at least she can't identify me from a police line-up.

Fuck.

I can only change my pattern, and hope she never cracks it again. At this point I'm just hoping she isn't undercover and that the feds won't be on me soon. Once that looming threat passes with time, I'll feel better.

I'm lost in thought when I hear someone call out to me, and I bang my head on the underside of the car I've been working on.

“Shit!”

I slide myself out from underneath the car on the creeper and see the man who came and dropped it off. I stand up, wiping the grease off my hands onto my jeans.

“Sorry man, didn’t mean to creep up on you like that,” he offers with a smile.

“No problem, I was just focused. She’s about done now, I just have to run another diagnostic and make sure the warning cleared.”

“Ah, alright. I guess I should come back again later?”

“Well, if the light comes back on, I might have to order a new part. I can overnight it though, if it comes to that. Unfortunately, she’s been having trouble passing the diagnostic, so this is my last try without a new install.”

“I figured it wouldn’t be simple. I guess I’ll just find myself a hotel for the night, my girlfriend is pregnant so she’s not gonna want to hang around to get an answer. Thanks man.” He holds his hand out to shake mine again.

“Yeah, I get it. Get her somewhere comfortable. I’ll make sure this is good for you guys to get on the road tomorrow by noon, no matter what,” I promise.

He nods and smiles again, turning the corner back to the lobby and heading out of the shop, the bell ringing as he goes.

Well, I definitely don’t want to cut any corners if he has a pregnant girlfriend riding in this. It’s safer just to replace the part. I wonder if I have a spare fitting. I walk to one of my workbenches when the bell chimes again. “Coming,” I call out, turning back around to the lobby. Surprising amount of business for a weekday.

“Sorry, I know it’s kind of late in the afternoon now, but I was wondering if you could take a look at my car? Or maybe I can leave it here and come back tomorrow?” It’s a middle-aged woman, looking like she’s in a rush.

“Yeah, it will have to be tomorrow, I can give you a call just—here” I say as I walk over and grab a notepad on the counter and a pen for her. “Write your name and number down and leave me the key. I’ll take a quick look tonight to see and call you in the morning.”

She jots her number down on the page, and thanks me as she rushes back out.

Alright. Guess I’m busy ‘til the weekend. I walk outside and open the garage and pull in the old van. I toss the keys on a workbench and then

close the garage again, making sure I lock it since I have no plans to move any cars again tonight. I go back to my workbench to find the fitting, and then I hear my bell ring *again*.

The fuck? Now who would be coming here?

I sigh as I turn and walk back to the lobby. “Hey, I—”

Shit. Fuck. No. No no no no no. This can’t be happening.

My stomach sinks when I see that bright copper hair. Those same doe eyes stare right at me again. She’s about to speak, but I hold my hand up. I instinctively move forward, rushing past her to look outside and check for cop cars. When I see nothing, I lock the door and shut the blinds.

I run my hand over my face. “You have to be kidding me,” I somehow manage to say, my heart racing as I turn to face her.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to come and apologize for um, surprising you. Maybe it was a bad idea, but I didn’t have any other way.” Her sweet voice is much steadier than it was last night, but I can see that her breathing is uneven. The rise and fall of her chest is shallow, and I can’t help but notice the top of her breasts threatening to spill over her low-cut shirt with each breath out.

Fuck, focus Kane. Do *not* check out the stalker.

She holds her hand out, showing me some sort of fucking *cupcake*.

“I actually work at a little bakery a town over so...I mean I’m a baker! Well, mostly a decorator. But I made this for you as a peace offering so maybe we can start over.” She holds it out more, and I stare down at it. The cake is chocolate with chocolate icing, green sprinkles, and placed in a camouflage liner.

“Is this a joke?” I ask.

“Uh, no?”

“Why is it camo?”

“You were in the military...right?”

How can she know that? How the fuck is she even here? How much does she know?

“Yes, but how would you know that?”

“Oh! Well, I noticed your boots and your dog tags in that photo that was released.”

Shit, seriously? If she came to that conclusion and noticed, then there must be others. Including police. I don’t answer, staring at her without a word because how in the ever-loving fuck am I supposed to handle this?

“So, do you like sweets?” she asks with a smile. A beautiful smile. Unfortunately, one that is going to get me fucking arrested.

“No.”

“Oh.” Her face falls. “I can bring you something else then! I mean, maybe you like savory buns or croissants?”

“No. Do not bring me anything. You can’t be here, alright? I thought we went over this last night.”

“I know you’re annoyed with me, I totally get it after talking to my friend that maybe I didn’t plan well—”

Is she shitting me? “You *what*? Your friend? She fucking knows too? Who else have you told?”

“Don’t worry! No one else knows I swear! She would never tell anyone either because she knows how much you mean to me. Sorry, she also said *not* to word vomit my feelings too fast but I’m not good at holding back when I’m excited.” She has a soft blush on her face, and she looks down as she tries to put some hair behind her ear, but the short pieces don’t comply.

I need to stop noticing everything about her. I need to create a distance, now.

“Look, I don’t know how to spell this out any clearer. I do not have an interest in relationships. You seem nice, I just don’t do them. So maybe you’ll be able to move on eventually and we can put this behind us, yeah?” I have to let her down gently. Imagine I upset her and she threatens to tell the cops.

“You’re saying you don’t do relationships?” she asks, tilting her head, and I nod. “So, it isn’t because of me?”

What does she mean? Does she even understand what’s going on here? I shake my head, hoping that this means she gets it now.

“I’m relieved! I mean, I thought maybe you just weren’t attracted to me. I know I’m not...I mean you’re so well-built, and tall, and handsome, so I guess I’m aware I’m not in your league. But I want to work out more, and I’m...” She keeps talking but I feel lost.

Not in my league? I can’t imagine what the fuck is going on in her head. She’s one of the most gorgeous women I’ve ever seen. Her hair is a bit out there, but it suits her. It flows perfectly down to her supple breasts. Her brown eyes are impossible to look away from. Full lips. Thick thighs. Her stomach the perfect size to hold onto when I’m—

“Sorry, I’m word vomiting again, aren’t I?” she asks, probably noticing me in my trance as I stare at her.

God, this girl is clueless. Too fucking innocent for her own good. Is she really undercover? “Look, you seem nice. But you do realize I’m probably almost twenty years older than you, right?”

She nods, biting her lip. *Fuck.*

“And you realize I’m a serial killer?”

“But you kill bad people. You’re not just mindlessly murdering.”

Okay, maybe scaring her might work. “I kill them, and I enjoy it. I love watching the life leave their eyes. I love seeing them fight and cry and beg and I feel no remorse. I’m a trained killer from the U.S. Army Combat Forces. I can’t even tell you the number of men I’ve killed between those.”

“Did he cry?” she asks quietly, disregarding anything else I said.

“Who?”

“My uncle.”

I think for a second, my eyes shifting to the side. Does she really want to know? “He begged, tried to reason with me. Once he saw I had no intention of listening, he tried to stop me.”

“And?”

And? She wants all the details?

“And I overpowered him. I put him in a headlock and brought him to the ground. I held him still while I took the garrote and wrapped the cord around his neck. He begged until I pulled so hard that he couldn’t speak anymore.”

Just as I think it was enough to make her finally question me, she nods. Her eyes are watering, but she smiles softly at me. “I know it’s probably messed up to say this...but I’m really happy to hear that. I guess knowing that makes him seem...small now. It might help me forget the memory I’ve always held of him. He used to feel intimidating and larger-than-life.”

I don’t know what it is about this girl. She’s strange. But I can’t help the small grin forming on my face at her words.

I’m so fucked.

CHAPTER TEN

Careful What You Wish For



LAYLA

He stares at me like he's trying to piece a puzzle together. My face heats under his gaze, and I suddenly wonder if I look okay. Is my hair messed up from all the wind? I had to walk six blocks because the second bus line was down, and I probably sweat too. "Uh, so, you really don't want it?" I ask awkwardly, looking down at the forgotten cupcake in my hand.

"Just...leave it on the counter."

I smile and walk over to the counter, setting it down on an empty spot. When I turn back around, he immediately turns his head to look away. *Was he staring at my ass?*

"Look. I don't know what to do here. I can't afford to get involved with anyone, and as you know what I do is dangerous," he says, though he looks conflicted. That means I'm definitely getting through to him, right?

"I don't mind," I say sweetly, clasping my hands together.

"Okay, but I do. You should be...I don't know. Aren't you supposed to be in college?"

"Well, I've been working since I was sixteen. I skipped college to follow my dream. I mean, maybe one day I'd like to take professional classes for baking." That would be amazing. Too bad they're expensive.

"Sixteen?" he asks.

"Well...I had to drop out of high school and get my GED online. I kind of ended up on my own so I had to work full-time."

"Why would you be on your own? Because of him?"

I feel a bit embarrassed. I guess I didn't think about the fact I'd have to tell my messy life story to the man I'm trying to impress. "Uh, yeah. I mean, I had to separate from my family. I moved in with my aunt on my

father's side but it was only while I waited to get accepted for a housing program. I had to work full-time so I could make enough to be approved."

He's quiet. *Crap*. He's totally not interested in my backstory. I misunderstood and overshared again. Why would I expect him to care about that?

"And now?"

"Huh?" I ask, not sure what he means.

"Where are you now?"

"Oh...now? I'm in a studio apartment in downtown Ashford. I aged out of the low-income housing program when I turned eighteen, so I had to find something else."

"Downtown Ashford? Where?" Why is he so curious?

"It's on the same block as Heritage Park."

"*Heritage Park*? You live there alone?"

I nod once, a bit confused. He's probably thinking about how it's in a poorer area...and maybe I should've lied? No, no. It's okay, he'd find out eventually anyway.

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "At least tell me you don't walk far from your car to get inside."

"I...take the bus," I admit quietly. This can't be going any worse. *Great first impressions you've made so far, Layla.*

"The fucking *bus*? Are you kidding me?"

I shake my head, my eyes staying locked on his.

"You took a bus last night?" When I nod, he looks pissed. "Do you know how fucking unsafe that is?"

"I can't really afford to Uber everywhere, though. I got a discounted bus pass from the program." I try to defend myself, but I know he still isn't happy.

He runs his hand down his bearded face as he turns to the side, and I take his moment of silence to enjoy him while he doesn't watch me. It's exciting finally seeing him fully unmasked like this. He has well-kept brown hair, dark green eyes, and a kind face despite his constant sour expression. His arms are covered in tattoos, and I bet they spread everywhere. I wonder how hard that chest is...

He passes me and rounds a corner, and I hear keys jingle. When he comes back, he stops right in front of me, and I feel my whole body stiffen. Surprisingly, not in the bad way. The *very, very* good way.

“I’m taking you home, and you’re going to stay there, and not even think about coming back here again, or any-fucking-where else you shouldn’t be.”

“But—”

“Did you hear what I just said, little girl?” he says it like he’s angry... but why do I kinda like it?

“Yes, but—”

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He grabs my arm, not too hard but firm enough that he easily pulls me alongside him as he unlocks the front door and takes me to his truck. He opens the passenger door and motions for me to get in. I hesitate until I see the serious look on his face and begrudgingly get inside.

I put my right arm up and behind me awkwardly to reach for the seatbelt but feel nothing. “Where’s the seatbelt?” I ask as he slides in and closes his own door.

He reaches across me, searching down the side of my seat. His muscular arm rubs against my thighs, and I can feel the butterflies fluttering inside my stomach. It’s rock hard, and almost as big as my wide thigh.

He finally finds it, pulling it up and across my hips, then clicking it for me. I think he also realizes how close we were, and he pulls back awkwardly to put his own seatbelt on. He clears his throat. “It’s uh, been a while since I had a passenger. I keep it tucked.”

The ride is quiet, and I can tell he isn’t used to talking a lot. Fortunately, it’s a bit of a drive from here to Ashford, so I can use this time to try to change his mind.

“So, you must really like cars then,” I ask, trying to make casual conversation.

“Something like that.”

“I like your truck, and the seats are cool.” Instead of two separate seats, the front seat is a bench long enough to fit three people.

“Well, it’s a ‘79 F-150. Not like the shit they make these days.”

I nod, looking down at the seat. Should I...move closer? Would he notice if I just slid a little bit? I bet if it was Crystal, she would have shamelessly undone her seatbelt and scooted all the way to him and put her hand on his thigh. Can I channel her right now?

“If I promise to be more careful, can I come back?” He’s dead silent now, and I feel weird. I *need* to know what he’s thinking, but he has a poker face I just can’t read.

“What do I have to do to get rid of you, Layla?”

“Have sex with me,” I blurt out quickly.

Holyshit! Did I just say that out loud?

He turns his head, the steering wheel slightly shifting but he quickly corrects it. “Excuse me?”

What do I say now? I should take it back. Wait, why would I take it back? If I said it, that means I felt it, right? Should I double-down? “Uh... yeah. T-that’s what I want.” I try to sound confident, but I’m too shocked that my voice cracks.

“You want me to fuck you?”

God.

Yes.

Please fix me.

“Yep.” *Yep?* Seriously, Layla?

“That isn’t enough of an answer,” he says, his voice...deeper.

“Um...yes. Please fuck me.” I’m sure my voice comes out quieter than I meant, but this is all moving so fast. Is he seriously going to do it? Am I ready? I think I am, but now I’m worried I’m going to mess something up. This is my last chance to prove how badly I want him.

“Careful what you wish for, sweetheart.”

I feel my stomach sink as we pull onto my block. Am I even breathing normally? How long has it been since I spoke? I’m pulled from my mini-panic when the passenger door opens, and his imposing figure stands there waiting for me to climb out.

As I get out, he quietly follows close behind me as we walk up to my building. “Oh, sorry—the door is kinda broken,” I say over my shoulder. The broken door hangs off one hinge as it easily opens as I grab the handle. His jaw is clenched, but he thankfully doesn’t say anything about it as I walk to the staircase and he follows.

Why is he so quiet? Why isn't he saying anything?!

We finally make it to the door, and my hand is shaking a little as I try to unlock it. His hand completely covers mine as he helps me turn it, pushing the door open with his other hand.

He closes the door behind him, and I set my keys and purse down on my kitchen counter. Am I really doing this? I'm going to have *actual* sex for the first time? What if—

“What are those?” he asks. I turn to follow his gaze and my heart drops.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

I'm Going to Enjoy the Show

KANE



Her eyes quickly flash to her nightstand as I walk toward it, and she rushes over trying to beat me. I stop her with my arm, keeping her in place. “You asked me to fuck you, and you’re shy about sex toys?”

“Yes! I mean, no! I didn’t mean to leave these out at all,” she says as she tries again to go for them, but I hold her there.

I pick up the ridiculous colored dildo and hold it in front of her. “When did you use this last?” She looks flustered, and I’m losing patience. She just came on to *me*, and *she’s* being shy? I need to get this over with. If this is what it takes for her to stop chasing me everywhere, then I’ll do it.

Not that I’m fucking complaining. It’s been years since I’ve let myself have anyone. As much as I don’t trust and can’t stand this girl for suddenly appearing and turning my life upside down in less than twenty-four hours, I can’t help but imagine her bent over this bed. Reddening her ass for what she’s put me through as I push myself deep inside of her.

Fuck. I’m hard already. “Open.”

She nervously complies, and I move the dildo forward to touch her lips, then slowly push the tip in her mouth. Her eyes don’t leave mine, and I can’t look away from her wet mouth as it takes what I give it. I pull it out slowly, her saliva slicking from the tip to her tongue.

“You still taste yourself on it?” I ask, and she bites her lip.

Fuck it, I can’t hold back anymore. I toss it on the bed and grab her shoulders to push her back onto the bed next to it. I pull my shirt off and climb over her. She pulls her own shirt over her head, mimicking me, but I can still see the trembling of her hand.

Am I really that scary looking? Are my scars that hard to look at?

I pull down her leggings and throw them somewhere behind me. God, look at her. Her perfect, voluptuous body is on display under me. She's wearing a purple bra which barely contains her, and her panties match perfectly, with a bit of glitter that matches those cups. Fuck, she really must have been planning for this. I palm her breast, kneading it with my hand as I undo my belt.

I can see how wet she is through her panties. Fuck, I can't lose focus. Fuck her, and get the hell out of here before more shit goes wrong. It's a win-win.

I look down and unzip my pants, and suddenly her hands go to my chest. I look back at her and see her eyes wide. "C-can't we maybe kiss first?" she asks.

Kiss? What does she think this is? Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to this.

"Or not. Sorry. It's okay." I can see her chest rising and falling quickly, but as I take myself out of my boxers, she closes her eyes. Why? They're pinned shut, and I don't move.

After a moment, her eyes open a little. "Aren't you gonna...do it?" she asks, her voice giving her away.

I tuck myself back into my boxers and stand back up.

"What are you doing?" she asks quickly as she sits up.

"I'm leaving, Layla. You don't seem like you're ready for this, and I'm not the right man for someone like you."

Her face contorts a bit as she takes in my words, and maybe that sounded harsh. But fuck, this girl needs someone to help her. No one is around for her, that's obvious. She's trying to force herself to have sex with a stranger? A serial killer? When she's clearly traumatized?

"Why? I can do it!"

"I don't want to do it like this, Layla. You need to never invite strange men into your apartment again, you hear me?"

As I go to zip my pants up, her hands desperately grab my arm. "Please. I'm sorry. I-I know I wasn't honest, but I swear I want it. I want it so badly you have no idea."

Something in her voice...just makes me stop. I stay still and listen.

"I haven't done it. Not since...you know." Her confirmation of what I guessed after her reaction to me makes my eyes involuntarily close as I take a breath. No matter what I think about this crazy girl, I can't stand hearing

that. I want to go back in time and torture him. I should've taken my fucking time.

"But I want to! I didn't want to, for so long, but then...when I'd sit and think about what kind of man I'd trust with my body, all I could think of was you. That's why I said that it didn't matter who you were or what you looked like. I just...wanted you. Want you! I mean, I still do. I didn't know what would happen or how I'd feel but I don't want to stop."

"You don't want to stop? You can't even *start*. I can't take you like this, Layla. It goes against everything I believe in. You're not ready."

"What can I do to prove it? Please, I swear I'm ready. I'll never get over it if I can't make myself do it. I know I'll be okay, and I feel safe with you. I just need you to help me." Her plea is hard to ignore. Her sweet voice and big eyes and...

"Please. Give me a chance to prove it. I want to replace my memories so all I can think of is you instead."

God, how can she beg so perfectly? How long can a sinner like me hold back? "I told you before, I'm not a good man."

"You mean everything to me. That's why...it's okay. Even if you never speak to me again, I know I'll at least be different after. I won't be scared anymore."

I can't do it anymore. Begging me with her wet, doe eyes to fuck her. I have never in my life imagined myself denying sex to the sexiest woman I've ever seen while she begs me for it. What a fucking idiot I am.

"We do this my way," I say reluctantly, pointing my finger at her. She perks up instantly, nodding. Fucking deviant.

"But I'm not fucking you, you're not ready. But I'll help you."

"Then what are you going to do?" she asks, looking up at me while she bites her lip again.

Fuck, she's lucky I have self-control.

"I'm going to enjoy the show."

"The...show?"

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“Get on your knees. Take that with you,” I say, pointing at the dildo still laying on the bed.

Her face is a bit flushed as she picks it up, turning to me as she stands. “I’ve...never actually used this one yet,” she admits.

Good. I want to see her face as she feels it enter her for the first time. Wait, what the fuck am I thinking?

Don’t get too into it, Kane, or you’re screwed. This is a one-time thing. Just helping someone.

“What did I say?”

She takes in a breath, looking at me as she slowly sinks herself down until she’s on her knees before me. “Now what?”

“Now, pull your panties to the side and rub your pussy. Spread your wetness all over yourself.”

My eyes are stuck on her as I watch her tentatively move her hand, pushing her panties to the side and doing exactly what I asked.

Her movements are slow, but I can tell she feels it all intensely. I bet she’s so damn sensitive right now...

“Good girl. Stick it to the ground, right here,” I say, motioning to a spot in front of me with my foot. She nervously picks the dildo back up, lining it up and pressing the suction cup onto the wood. She looks back up at me, waiting for my next instruction.

“Well? Go on.”

She looks back down at it, thinking. I guess if she backs out now, it’s better for her. I’ll go, and I’ll pretend this never fucking happened. Pretend *she* never fucking happened. I’m surprised when she sits up a bit, moving herself forward on the floor so she can position herself over it. I can still see the tremble of her hands, so I grab her chin, bringing her gaze up to me again.

“Look at me. Pretend it’s my cock.”

Her eyes flicker to my still-hard cock, straining against my boxers and half-zipped jeans. I know she wants to see my cock again. “Use your words,” I remind her. Her mouth opens, but she closes it again. I know she wants to say it. I know she can beg so well. I know underneath the anxiety, there’s a woman who wants to say the filthiest things. She’s holding it all back. “Don’t be scared. Say whatever you want.”

“I-I want to see it,” she says, still hovering over the toy.

“That’s all? You think that’s good enough for me, sweetheart?”

Her eyes finally meet mine again, and I nearly fucking come undone when she speaks again.

“I want your cock, daddy.”

Fucking hell. My jaw clenches hard, and my breathing ragged through my nose, and I undo my zipper again and let my cock out. Her eyes are wide as she finally looks at it properly, maybe thankful now that she’s only riding the toy this time. “Sit your ass down. Let it in,” I say with a fake sweetness as I palm my tip.

She obeys, slowly lowering herself, and I can tell the moment the tip meets her entrance because she pauses, her eyes looking down again. Getting in her head again.

“I said look at me,” I growl, grabbing a handful of hair at the base of her neck, firm enough to tilt her head up to look at me. “That’s it, go lower.”

She sinks herself lower, her mouth opening with a small moan as it finally enters her properly. “Good girl, you can take it all the way, can’t you?” She nods, trying to fit it as she gets to the curve in the middle. The new angle elicits another moan, and she keeps slowly moving down. While one hand stays in her hair, my other starts pumping my cock in front of her face.

“You can take it, just like that,” I coo as she makes it all the way to the base. I can tell it’s hitting a spot deep inside her, and she groans softly as it stays in place. “Rock yourself back and forth. Fuck, how does it feel, huh?” I demand. I watch her start to slowly rock until she realizes the pleasure it causes and she subconsciously goes faster.

“A-ah it feels so good,” she whimpers.

“Louder.”

“It feels good!”

“That’s right. You still want it?” She nods desperately, still rocking herself. “Now ride me. Up and down. Show me how perfect you look.” She automatically does as I say, crying out as she goes up and back down, the sensation of the curve moving through her overwhelming. “Rub that needy clit. Give me a good show.”

The sight in front of me...I’ve never seen anything fucking like it. Layla’s riding the dildo, fingers on her pussy as she spreads it gently to rub her clit. Her breasts half-spilled over the cups of her bra, giving me a perfect view of her pink nipples. Her beautiful brown eyes stare at my cock

as she becomes a moaning mess, brows furrowed together as she chases the feeling she so desperately needed.

And fuck, I'm chasing it too. I don't even realize it when I start pumping faster, enthralled in the vision before me. "Take it. Fucking take it just like that. Good girl." My words come out desperate and gravelly, so close to release. I can tell she's close because she's so damn loud. So fucking responsive.

Shit.

When she goes back down again this time, she stays there, rocking again to feel that same pressure as she rubs her clit faster, crying out loudly as her orgasm rips her through her, her body trembling. I'm lost in her before I notice I've covered her face in my cum. We're both still coming down from the high, and I release her hair. Her hands fall forward, and she catches herself.

"Woah," I say gently, steadying her. "You need help?"

She nods, her eyes meeting mine. I put my hands under her arms, helping her up slowly. She whimpers softly as the dildo finally makes its way out, and I easily lift her onto the bed. "Oh...I'll make a mess," she says quietly, seemingly worried about her sheets.

"Messes can be cleaned. Stretch your legs out." She does as I say, and I take some tissue from her nightstand to wipe her face.

She sighs in relief, her legs tired and tight from the effort and the hard floor.

I step back, finally fixing myself, and grabbing my belt off the bed. I need to get the absolute fuck out of here and not look at her face again.

"Kane?" her small voice calls. "Please don't leave me."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Act Natural!

LAYLA



I'm not sure why the words come out. I guess seeing him get ready to leave just made me panic. I know I'm not being fair, that he's ready to go. But part of me feels like maybe this changed something, and I can't let this opportunity slip through my hands.

He's quiet as he slips his shirt on, then he turns to me. "We're not doing this. This...thing," he says, gesturing to the floor where we were, "was because you asked. Now you're supposed to hold your end of the deal."

Why did I say, "have sex with me?" Why couldn't I have said, "date me?"

He puts his shirt back on, and I watch his washboard abs disappear from my view. He sighs when he sees me sitting here, watching him and looking ready to cry. God, I'm screwing this up by being so emotional all the time.

"Never fucking invite anyone here. Do you hear me? Don't tell anyone you live alone again, either." I nod and he sighs. "You don't need to rush shit you're not ready for. I could've taken advantage of you."

I know he's right...but he just doesn't understand me yet. I've spent years grappling with the idea of having sex. I want to have sex. I want to get over everything. How can I move on when I'm stuck in the past, and filled with memories I can't erase?

"You wouldn't have done that."

"How do you know that? You don't fucking know me, Layla. I'm not a good man. I've killed more men than I can count with my bare hands and I don't flinch. I've lost everything already. I have nothing else to lose and nothing stopping me. You should be afraid of men like that."

"I've lost everything too," I insist. "I...I guess I don't know you well yet, but I know enough to know that you're not a bad man."

“Stop...looking for ways to defend me. And don’t say ‘yet,’ this was it, remember?”

Yes. I remember. *Buuuut...I will choose to forget.*

“Can I at least ask you why?”

“Why what?” he asks, stopping closer to my front door.

“Why did you start doing this? The killing?”

I can tell that my question has struck a chord. Maybe it was too personal? But I want to know. I want to know everything about him. Even if he said something horrible, I’d understand him.

“I don’t talk about that,” he says dismissively.

“I won’t judge you, I swear.” He’s silent, and I speak up again. “I’ll tell you a bad secret too.”

He shakes his head, running his hand over his face. “I need to go. Please, leave everything be. Move on. You’re young, go explore and... whatever other shit people your age do these days.”

I don’t even have a chance to protest before he walks out, closing my door behind him. My ears ring from the silence, and I can’t help the rush of emotions.

It’s okay, Layla. Give him a few days...and I’m going back. *This time, I’ll try something different.*



The next day goes by like a blur. I went to the bakery and had the most boring day of my life. I usually love going to work...but now I have too much on my mind.

I feel relieved when I make it back to my apartment, slipping my shoes off with a sigh. Maybe I’ll treat myself to some takeout? I don’t feel like making ramen again tonight.

ALYSSA

Hey! We’re getting on the call in 10

WENDY

I'm already on

ME

ooo okay let me order food and change and i'll be there!

I quickly go to grab some comfortable sweats and a long sleeve and get myself ready to relax and become one with my couch. I've been looking forward to this call all day, it's been forever since I've gotten to unwind and talk to my forum friends.

I order some fast food from my phone, and plop down with my laptop. When I join the call, I'm interrupting Alyssa and Wen as they're already arguing.

"Seriously? Of course her fucking parents killed her! There's no way you believe some random guy broke into her house and did that to her and left undetected?"

"You guys are still arguing about that?" I butt in with a laugh.

"Finally, someone with some sense. Layla please, explain to Alyssa that she's wrong."

"I mean, sorry Aly, I really might have to agree with Wen. I think her parents at *least* know something, even if they didn't do it."

Alyssa sighs and rolls her eyes exaggeratingly and we laugh. "Hey, where's Gabi? She said she'd be here."

Wen shrugs, and I check my phone. Gabi is just...not too into video calls usually. She sometimes joins in just to talk. I think maybe she's shy? Or a loner? And I know she probably feels left out because us three are always spamming the group chat.

"We should probably make a new group chat," Wen ends up saying.

"What? Why?" I ask, looking up from my phone to check on my food delivery.

Alyssa and Wen both stay silent for a minute, then Wen speaks up. "It's just...she mentioned that she thought you were being kind of weird. Like, because of the name you sent and then you took down some old comments from the forum and she noticed. I mean we don't agree, I think she just is reading into it, you know? Like you know she's always been kind of suspicious of everyone."

Crap. How the hell would she have noticed I deleted those? They were old comments, but they were ones I was worried might incriminate Kane by

accident, so I went back and took them down. I actually took a lot down... “Do you think I should call her? I mean I can explain why and maybe she’ll join the chat after?”

“Yeah, call her. I told her she’s just being paranoid. It isn’t like you’re keeping anything from us, we’ve been doing this together from the beginning anyway, right?”

God I’m so bad at faking! *Act natural!*

“Yes! Of course not. I’ll call her now.” I hop off the video call and take a deep breath. What the hell?! Why would Gabi even tell them that? Is that why she texted me to ask to compare notes? Was she testing me?

I pick up my phone and dial Gabi, and it only rings a couple of times until she answers. “Hey, I probably won’t make it to the call, I have some family things going on tonight,” she says, already about to hang up.

“Wait! I just uh, Wen told me you were wondering about my comments, so I just wanted to explain myself.”

“Okay.”

“Okay...right. I just...you know since I was wrong about Peter Reed I realized I must have messed up somewhere down the line. I wanted to delete everything that I wasn’t sure about, so no one else got thrown off too. That’s all!”

“I see.”

Oh my god. She sees right through me, doesn’t she?

She’s quiet for a moment, then continues. “Don’t worry about it. Sorry, I should’ve just texted you. I just really wanna figure this out, you know? It’s important to me.”

“I didn’t realize you were that serious about it,” I say. Had she always been like that? I thought she was doing it for fun like Alyssa and Wen.

“Well, I am. But I shouldn’t have done that behind your back. All good, right?”

“Uh yeah, for sure.”

We exchange awkward goodbyes, and I hang up. Maybe I *was* being weird. I should be more careful next time. I’m terrible at this “discreet” thing. Oh well.

When I get back on the video call, Alyssa and Wen barely care about the conversation I had with Gabi, so I forget about it too. As we ate our own dinners, we end up talking about a bunch of different cases, and eventually watched the new documentary series that came out this week.

I *really* missed these nights. I think I needed this distraction to decompress after everything that's happened with Kane. But...I also feel anxious. If, let's say, Kane and I end up together, what does that mean for him and what he does? Does he stop killing? Do I have to protect him forever and hide it from everyone?

I need to get to know him more. I respect what he does, and his agenda. I agree someone has to do something about the tens of thousands of evil people who walk among us...but I'm scared of losing him. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would sacrifice his freedom forever. He must know *when* the end would be for him.

Maybe it can be me?

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We Didn't Even Really Have Sex!



KANE

“Just get your ass in the truck,” I grumble, tossing Mason’s duffle bag into the backseat of the truck.

“Jeez, what’s up *your* ass?” Mason laughs as he hops in.

“You know it’s the crack of dawn, and you’re already here complaining about my truck, joking about this and that—”

“Whatever, how about I make it up to you by buying you some breakfast?”

I can’t say no to food. I could go for a big platter right now.

Mason goes on and on as we drive from the airport, telling me about everything he’s been up to the last few years. He left the army not too long after me, and if I had to guess, I think the real reason was that he saw how fucked up I was after what happened to Mel and Sadie, and he didn’t want to end up stuck somewhere far from anyone he loved. At least someone can learn from my mistakes.

He’s been working as a private trainer in some fancy gym, so he loves bragging about all the ladies he gets to be around. Don’t get me wrong, Mason is a stand-up guy. I had to teach him to be when he came under my wing at the ripe age of eighteen; but he can be a damn shameless playboy when he wants to be.

Regardless, I’m just happy he’s figuring himself out. He’s only twenty-seven now, so he has a long way to go. He doesn’t have much family to speak of, so I feel like I accidentally adopted him when he joined the army.

Guess I have a tendency to pick up strays.

I park my truck on the corner, and we walk into the little diner near my shop.

“Hey Kane! Oh wow, for two today?” Linda is a nice older woman, and the only waitress in this place. I have a routine of coming here every Sunday morning.

“Yup. Found him on the side of the road with his damn thumb out,” I joke as I duck into the booth.

“Nice to meet you ma’am, I’m Mason. Kane’s basically my pop,” he says as he shakes her hand.

“Oh, I like this one,” she says with a smile as she points at him.

Mason joins me on the other side of the booth, and she takes our orders. “So, seriously, what’s up with you? You’re much grumpier than usual.”

Well, if only I could get a certain copper-haired woman out of my fucking head.

“Just a rough two days. I had a lot of shit going on at the shop I had to get done before today,” I say, taking a sip of the black coffee Linda dropped off.

“Yeah? Glad you got good business then. What about the other business?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, peachy.”

“That’s it? You usually yap about it at least a little,” he asks, eyeing me like he can tell I’m hiding something.

But there is no way in fuck he can know about Layla.

“Well, I’m not in the mood. Decided I’d cut down on it since you’re visiting anyway. I’ll be on a break from it till you head out.” When I say that, he sets down his glass of juice, and I groan when I see that damn look on his face. “What?”

“About that...I actually might not be heading out.”

Oh, fuck no. “You *are* heading out, in two weeks, back to your big city life and job.”

“I quit. I know you don’t want me here because of...you know. But I want to be here. You’re all I have, old man. I’ll find my own place, but I’m not leaving.”

My jaw clenches as I cross my arms, but Mason isn’t the sentimental type. If he’s saying something like that...he means it. And fuck if it doesn’t crack my irritation *just* a bit.

“You can’t get tossed into my shit. I have a chance of being found out at any time, I told you that. It’s best to keep your distance so you’re not

dragged into an investigation.” I lower my voice when Linda comes back over, dropping off our plates before walking off again.

“So, why not stop? You and I can spend time together. I’ll help in the shop, bring in some more business with this handsome face.” He gestures to himself with a smug smile, and I click my tongue. “Plus, you can’t do this forever. You’ve done a mighty honorable service, but you’ve spent your whole adult life doing that. The army, taking care of Mel, the killings. When do you get to stop and smell the daisies?”

Do I deserve to stop? To live my life normally when *they* didn’t get to?

“Don’t do that thing you always do. You know you’re not some storybook hero, right? You don’t have to take all this on. Mel and Sadie loved you, what happened to them isn’t on you. It’s on that son of a bitch who did it to them. You already got justice for them, Kane. What are you chasing now?”

“You don’t understand it yet because you haven’t lost everything. I’m atoning for my sins, Mason.”

“You are not a sinner, Kane. You fucking pick up puppies off the side of the road, and give, and give, and give all you have to everyone all the time without even thinking about yourself.”

I look down at my plate, taking another bite instead of replying. What the fuck does he want me to say? I don’t know when I’ll feel like I’ve made up for what happened to them. I don’t know any other way.

Mason sighs, shaking his head. “At least consider it. Why don’t we talk about it again after you think about what I said? I mean it when I say I’m not leaving either way.”

“Fine. Just drop it for now,” I say flatly.

I don’t know what to do, Mel. I wish you were here.



Mason is able to get over tension quickly. He’s already excitedly exploring the shop, touching shit he has no business touching.

“Oh man, you could get so much more business here if you just had a good sign. Why do you leave it so...”

He struggles to pick a word, and I interrupt him. “Be careful what you say.”

“You know what I mean! This place could do with some fixin’ up! I’d be happy to work on some painting or something this week.

“This is an auto shop. It isn’t meant to look nice.”

“Wrong again, old man. Don’t you wanna be successful? I mean, you don’t wanna be working when you’re eighty, do you?”

“If I make it there,” I say lowly, and he laughs at my dark humor as I lean against a table. The truth is I could spend my life in prison if I’m not careful. Maybe that would be better for me anyway.

No, no. That won’t be good for anyone. I won’t take the easy way out.

“I’ll make sure you make it there. Ain’t you excited to have me around?”

“Ecstatic.”

I finally lead him upstairs to unpack his things in the guest bedroom, while Bacon excitedly loops around.

The night feels long. He keeps me up, forcing me to watch some sort of action movie. Truthfully, I did miss him. I guess I did him a disservice by staying away. Have I done everything wrong again? Maybe he was my second chance at family, and I left him behind just like I did to Mel.

Fuck. I don’t know what’s right and wrong anymore.



“Okay, just...don’t fucking drop it all over!” I groan as I watch Mason attempt to bring some paint outside, thinking he can paint the entire shop on his own.

“Well, it’s messy! It’s fine, the rain will wash away what ain’t primed.”

Yeah, my fucking ass it will.

“Whatever. I got real shit to do,” I grumble, stepping back into the shop to work on my numbers for the month.

He's out there for a while, but as I expected, he came in to take a break before even finishing one side. "It's miserable out there, you know? Why would you move somewhere like this?"

"If you don't like it, leave."

He laughs, and plops down on a waiting room chair. It's finally quiet again as I write down the numbers, until he speaks. "Who is that? I thought you were closed today."

I look up, and my heart drops as I see bright copper hair standing outside the glass door. "You've got to be fucking kidding me." I try to quickly make my way to the door, but Mason beats me. "Wait don't—"

"How can I help you darlin'?"

"Oh hi," she says sweetly, tilting her head to look at me past Mason. "I'm just here to see Kane."

"I see," he says, turning to me with a beaming smile. He moves out of her way and she waltzes right inside, hands full. "Let me take that for you," he offers, grabbing the large tupperware.

"Thank you! I didn't know you had company," she says, turning to me.

She knows that I said not to come find me again, right?

"How rude of me, I'm Mason." He puts his free hand out, and she shakes it.

"I'm Layla."

"Whatever this is sure smells good."

Fucker. How am I gonna get her out of here? Worse, how do I keep her from saying the wrong thing? I don't want Mason to know how we met. Or that we...

"Oh! Yeah, well Kane said before he didn't like sweets so um this time I brought some of the savory confections we had left over today."

"No shit? Thank you." He opens the lid and I smack the back of his head.

"Language. There's a woman here," I remind him.

"My bad, I just got excited. Everyone needs a woman's touch sometimes." He elbows her softly with that stupid fucking smile.

"Alright, that's enough," I interject and push him back by putting myself between them. "I think you need to get going."

"What? But I didn't even get to say what I came to say," she protests.

"We had a deal, remember?" I whisper, looking her in the eyes.

"But we didn't even really have sex!"

Mason whistles behind me, a grin on his face. I click my tongue and turn back to her. "Layla, you know good and well—"

"I'm sorry but...I just can't do what you want. It's not fair to me. You're not even giving me a chance. Plus, if you want to bring up the deal then you should hold up your end and—"

"Okay, that's enough." I groan, wiping my hand down my face. I've made a mess.

I have to think about how to go about this. She still knows too much. Maybe...no. That would be crazy. I can't break into her apartment and kill all her data. Can I?

"Go upstairs," I order Mason.

"No thanks, I've got more work to do."

He says that, but he's just fucking standing there like he has front row seats.

I sigh, turning to Layla. "You, upstairs."

She happily listens though, smiling and waving sweetly at Mason as she finds the stairs and goes up. When I hear the door close, I turn to him.

"Wow, Kane. I didn't know you had it in you!"

"It isn't like that."

"No? Then you wouldn't mind if I went upstairs?"

This—

"Absolutely fucking not."

He laughs, shaking his head. "Why are you lying to *me* anyway? What's so wrong with her? She seems like a sweet thing."

"Sweet? Sure. But I can't seem to get rid of her. I told her no already but—"

"*You* told *her* no? Jesus. Okay, let me hear it then. This better be good."

I put my hand over my face as I speak. "Not now. I need to try to talk sense into her." I turn to go upstairs.

"Kane?" I stop, and he continues. "Try to think about what *you* want for once."

What *I* want?

"I don't *want* anything."

"You said you'd think about the diner conversation. Isn't someone like her the perfect chance for you? Why can't you just give in a little and see what happens?"

If only it was that simple.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I'm Seducing You?

LAYLA



As I ascend the stairs and enter his apartment, I breathe in and feel relaxed at the scent of the room. It smells so much like him; warm and musky, with a hint of lingering cigarette smoke. As I close the door, the sudden tippy-taps catch me off guard as a fluffy dog runs over to me.

“Oh my god! Look at you!” I drop to my knees on the floor immediately, and he all but throws himself against me, desperate for pets. “You are too cute!”

I’m having the time of my life on the floor with him as he excitedly spins around every few seconds to get a new spot scratched, when the front door finally opens. Kane stands there for a moment watching us on the ground and I look up at him with a happy smile.

“Guess you met the dog,” he says. “His name is Bacon. Don’t give him too much or he’ll never let you stop.”

“I don’t want to stop,” I get out with a laugh as he climbs even more onto me. “I love him. I didn’t think you’d have any pets!”

“I didn’t think I would either.”

I stand back up, and Bacon seems to lose the initial infatuation with me to greet Kane happily. “Well, you’re lucky. I wish I was allowed to have a dog at my apartment.”

“Look Layla, let’s not beat around the bush here. You and I need to figure this out. You can’t just...keep showing up unannounced to my shop. Mason is staying here for a while and even if he wasn’t, we had a deal.”

“Well, if you gave me your number then I can text you next time and I won’t have to just show up,” I offer sweetly, batting my eyes.

“Absolutely not. I’m not looking to—” He stops and sighs. “I won’t be able to get rid of you, will I?”

I take a deep breath, preparing to give the mini-speech I practiced in my head on the bus ride here. “I decided that I won’t let my chance at possible happiness pass me. I think you must be a little attracted to me, too. We won’t ever know how we really feel if we just...deny ourselves the opportunity to see what happens, right? So, no. I won’t go anywhere, because I think I’d also want someone to fight for me and not give up easily.”

“Sweetheart, I know you have this image of me being this mythical hero burned in your head, but it isn’t reality. I’m a thirty-nine-year-old retired army veteran turned small-town mechanic. I’ve got no family, nothing exciting going on, and no plans to change where I’m at. Do I even need to mention that I’m a serial killer?”

There he goes again.

Sweetheart.

Eeek! The sound of it coming off his tongue just makes my insides twist.

Okay, come on Layla, focus. This is a serious conversation!

“Well...if we’re talking about what’s wrong with us, I bet my list is longer than yours. I...am the definition of lost and without family. I still go to therapy, but I know I still have some problems sometimes because of what I’ve been through. And maybe I’m a *little* overzealous. I have nothing except my little apartment. I don’t...have any way to convince you that I’m worth whatever risk you think I am.”

He doesn’t say anything, but I’m hoping maybe I can make him understand me better. I don’t care who he is or what he’s done, or even that he thinks he isn’t worth anything now. *I* think he’s worth it. I know there’s so much more to him than what he keeps on the surface. Someone who does what he does *must* have so much underneath.

And after spending the last year or so fantasizing about him and dreaming up my own reasons why and what kind of person he’d be, I’m not going to just walk away. I *will* know him.

Even if we don’t end up together, at least I got to know the man who changed my life.

“I don’t know what I think of you. I think you’re crazy, and I might be making the biggest mistake of my life by even *considering* allowing it for even a minute.”

“So...you’re considering it?” I ask, perking up.

“Do you only hear what you wanna hear?”

I nod eagerly, just waiting for the moment he breaks. He’s so close.

“Okay. If I give you my number, you swear not to show up uninvited?”

I nod again, and he sighs, pulling his phone out and handing it to me.

I type in my number, name myself, and quickly send a text before he changes his mind. I smile and hand it back over to him.

“‘Sweetheart?’ Really?” When he sees the name I saved myself under, I see the smallest glimpse of a grin peek out from his typical grumpy demeanor.

“I like when you call me that,” I admit, biting my lip.

“Yeah?”

All I can do is smile in response, and he lets out a huff. His massive chest flexes as he puts the phone in his back pocket.

“I’m really not sure what to do with you,” he says, his voice slightly gravelly.

“I could think of a few things you can do with me,” I blurt out boldly.

Who am I and what have I done with Layla?

“You can’t keep trying to distract my frustration with you by seducing me, Layla.”

“I’m *seducing* you?” *Shit*, I didn’t mean to ask that out loud!

My embarrassment doesn’t even have a moment to settle as I hear a chuckle from him for the first time since we’ve met. “Yes sweetheart, you’re seducing me. My head is telling me to send you on your way before this goes any further.”

“But?”

“But...my other head is currently straining against my zipper.”

I look down, and quickly back up again, my face burning. He is not joking. I saw the outline of his length under his cargo pants perfectly.

“You okay?” he asks, and I nod like an idiot.

“Yes! Of course! I mean, I’m cool, yeah.” *When will I learn to shut up?*

“You should just tell me if you’re uncomfortable,” he says, his eyes boring into mine.

But I’m not uncomfortable. I don’t ever feel that way around him. I guess I just don’t know how to act? Maybe I’m worried I’ll still suddenly feel weird because I *still* couldn’t even have sex last time.

“I’m not! It’s just that...I don’t know. I know I ruined it when I asked you to have sex with me because I panicked a little. I just...since I haven’t

had sex since *that*, I can't seem to push it out of my head on my own. That's why I wanted you to just do it."

"Look at me when I say this." He grabs my chin with his large hand, and my eyes meet his before he continues, sounding almost disgusted. "You have *never* had sex, Layla. What happened to you was *not* sex. Don't ever say that shit again, you hear me?"

I nod again, but this time I can feel my eyes burning as they begin to water.

"You don't deserve for someone to 'just do it' with you. When you have sex for the first time it's going to be because you're ready, and because it feels good. Do not let anyone, *including me*, have you unless you feel those things."

It's always been easier for me to use the word 'sex.' Using the other word means having to tell people *out loud* what happened to me. Then I have to deal with their obligatory "sorry" and pity and I don't *want* to be pitied. I'm okay. I've always downplayed it because...it's much easier for other people to feel comfortable hearing, and it saves me from having to explain myself.

I *know* it wasn't small. I *know* it was bad. But I just don't know if I'm ever going to be able to look at someone again and admit to them that I was raped. Does anyone even realize how hard that actually is?

"I'm sorry. I just want to feel it. I know if I can just...feel it—" I stop to wipe my wet cheek with the back of my hand. "If I can feel it then maybe I won't be afraid. If it's so different from what happened to me, then I'll finally know the difference."

"I get it. I didn't before, but I do now. That still doesn't mean I'm going to fuck you when you feel like this. When I fuck you, it'll—"

"When?" I whisper hopefully.

"Goddamnit. Stop doing that to me." He sighs, but his eyes never leave mine.

Doing what?

"You're damn tenacious. You should become a lawyer. Or a debt collector."

I giggle at his attempt at a joke, my anxiety forgotten as I wipe the remaining tears from my face. "Sorry. I just feel really happy. I mean I feel better right now, because of you. I like that you don't feel sorry for me. Everyone usually does."

“How can I feel sorry for you?” he says, not missing a beat. “Look at you. You’re here. You have the guts and energy for all this. You...” He stops himself.

“Me?”

“You’re *okay*, Layla. I don’t know how else to put it. You being here and being okay is more than I can hope for. I don’t think I deserve the credit of being labeled your ‘hero,’ because I didn’t save you. *You* saved yourself. All I did was try my hand at playing executioner.”

To be honest...I was worse before you did that. I wasn’t really okay. I would go to therapy, and I would smile, and I would be tough because that’s what made people feel more comfortable. I wasn’t good to myself. I barely ate. I barely looked in a mirror or took care of myself. I was scared of everything.

I can’t say it. What would he think of me? Right now, he thinks I’m amazing and strong...and I want that.

“I haven’t seen that face yet.” He tilts his head, and I realize my horrible thoughts must have made me look just as unsavory.

“Sorry.”

“Not gonna tell me?” I shake my head, but he doesn’t push. “That’s okay, sweetheart. You don’t have to tell anyone shit. You know that?”

I smile, giving one curt nod. “Thank you.”

“You should go.”

What?

“Go? But we’re...” *Not doing anything, Layla.* I promised myself to act cooler and less needy but I’m not good at it.

He sighs again, looking down at me with a conflicted expression. He steps back and leans against the kitchen island. It’s hard not to watch his hard, built body flex whenever he moves. “I don’t have the balls to tell you to get lost, sweetheart. Whether it’s because I don’t know if you’ll out me, or because I’d feel fuckin’ guilty, or both. You’ve accomplished whatever it is you’ve been doing either way. Happy now?”

I perk up instantly, my downcast expression immediately leaving my face. “Really?”

“This doesn’t mean more than that, got it? Don’t go thinking up any crazy ideas because I said that. I’m not even sure what to do about the whole idea that you’ve somehow found me and...God knows who else may have, too.”

“What? No! I mean I know I told my best friend and I’m sorry, but I really had no choice. She would never tell a soul. And I swear in all the true crime groups I’m in that follow you that no one has any idea. I mean, no one has posted any,” I assure him. Does he really think I would put him in danger?

“Do I even wanna ask about these ‘groups?’”

“Well...maybe I can show you next time you come over.”

Ha. Perfect. It’s casual...not too pushy.

“You might have to. I need to be sure of what you’ve been posting, too.”

“I’ll show you anything! I swear at first I wanted more help finding you...but once I realized I didn’t want anyone else to, I deleted anything that might help anyone else. I promise. I’ll delete all my accounts if you want.”

Okay, relax. Too late to take it back now.

“Let’s just wait to talk about it.” I nod, and we stand there quietly for a moment. It isn’t awkward, but I don’t know what to say.

Well, I do know what I *want* to say. But I can’t make myself form the words. *Just say it, Layla!* “Can I stay? Um—I mean just a little longer maybe?” I don’t want to lose this moment with him. I feel like we’ve finally gotten over this hump and if I don’t keep moving, we might slide backward again.

“What do you want, Layla? Because there’s nothing to do here.”

I want you. I want to feel your breath against me again, smell your familiar manly scent as you come way too close, and have you feel how badly I mean that I want you. I want to show you just how much everything you say and do for me makes me feel like a brand-new woman and not some little girl who can’t handle anything. How can I even pretend that I don’t want to jump him after everything he just said to me?

“I just—” You know what? Fuck it! “To be honest, I originally came for a redo.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fucking Vixen

KANE



I don't understand this woman. She's so quick with her emotions and lets them fly all over the place the moment she feels them.

I know exactly what she's asking for. Maybe she really does feel like she ruined something because we didn't have sex, or that it's why I'm hesitant with her. But fuck if I'm not just constantly using all my self-control to keep myself from overwhelming her with the desire she causes in me.

"You can stay even if we don't have sex. You know that, right? I'm not agreeing to this because I'm waiting for something."

She's beet red, far surpassing her copper hair. "I know. It's just that I... feel really good right now. You know exactly how to do that to me."

I raise my eyebrows, crossing my arms and she immediately becomes flustered again.

"No! I meant, you know the right things to say. And...it really was why I came. I guess I did come for that because I didn't want your last memory of me to be...that. I know you seemed upset when you left and I've been anxious that maybe I totally ruined my chance."

I feel guilty when she finishes over-explaining. I didn't mean to leave abruptly and leave her feeling insecure. Being around her after something so intimate was fucking with my head and shit was getting too real for me.

Fuck, it's a shit excuse. What kind of man makes excuses for hurting a woman? I knew that she was volatile and I still did it. I'd slap Mason upside the head for making someone feel like that. If I can take on discomfort to ease hers, that's what I'm supposed to do.

"You didn't do anything wrong. I didn't leave because of what we did or didn't do. I just don't think you're thinking clearly about me and I'm sure

as hell not thinking clearly about you.”

She looks relieved, her shoulders moving down a bit as she lets out the breath she was holding. “Then what are you thinking?”

“I’m...thinking about how I really must be fucked in the head to want a woman half my age. I feel like it’s wrong when I’m supposed to be the voice of reason here, but you don’t seem like the type to listen to reason. So, what can I do?”

I’m surprised by the honest answer that seeps out of me so easily. I’m usually more controlled than this. I’m out of my fucking element here. Flirting and...whatever this is with a woman? I haven’t done that in years. I’ve fucked plenty of times, but I’ve never had the time or capacity for more since...well, I guess I never did it before the army either. I was too busy with Mel and taking care of Dad.

I guess I really haven’t ever let myself do something like this.

Maybe Mason is right for once? But even if he is, is Layla really the one I want to experiment on? If I’m shit at this then I’ll only end up hurting her more.

Plus, my life is a goddamn ticking time bomb because I could get caught at any second. I can’t go back in time to reason with myself not to kill.

Shit, do I suddenly fucking regret everything I worked for over a woman?

“I think you’re brave, and I’m trying to be brave and honest too. If we’re both honest then we can think clearly, right?” Her chocolate eyes almost sparkle as she looks at me. If I could see everything from her perspective, maybe I could be hopeful too.

I don’t know how someone who went through something so traumatic has it in her to look at someone like this.

To look at *me* like this.

The feeling stirring inside me is as dangerous as any war. The primal need I have to protect this happiness and innocence that radiates off her in waves is overwhelming. All I can feel right now is a need for that warmth. A warmth as bright as her crazy copper hair.

I’m not even aware of my own movements by the time it happens. I envelop her completely, backing her against the counter as my lips press harshly onto her soft ones.

Fuck, I'm not sure what's going on with me. I should've told her she can't stay any longer tonight.

The only sounds in the room are the sucking, kissing, and heavy breaths. She melts into me easily when I pull her closer, my hands gripping her soft ass as I easily lift her onto the counter before me. I pull back slightly, and her flushed face stays close to mine. "Are you sure you want this?" She nods, but it's not enough for me. "Words, Layla."

"I want it." She's quiet, but her tone is wanting. She must think my silence means that I'm changing my mind, because she speaks again. "Please, daddy."

Fucking vixen.

I shouldn't have reacted the last time she called me that. I don't think I ever would have thought I'd like a woman moaning that to me.

"Then lay back for me," I coo, and she takes an expectant breath as she lays herself on the counter. "Open." Her legs lose their tension, and I push them apart with ease. I gently take her heels off, then tug on the waistband of her leggings and slide them down along with her panties.

I'm surprised by the red lace, though. Did she wear them for me? Did she *buy* them for me?

I can't let myself think about it for even a moment longer, because the sight in front of me deserves my full attention. Her beautiful, pink lips are like a magnet as my mouth is already on her without hesitation.

I let myself feed on her like I'm feral. Like I'm on death row, and she's my final meal. My mouth fully encapsulates her, and I let my tongue enter her.

Fuck. It's so good.

So fucking sweet.

I can't get enough of her in my mouth.

I want to fucking swallow her whole.

My upper arms hold her thighs in place as I feast. Her hands have already tangled in my hair, pulling and pushing at every movement I make on her as pure fucking ecstasy escapes her mouth.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? Are you close already?" I rasp as I let myself pull back from her pussy, one of my hands unwrapping from her leg to bring it to her entrance. "I'm going to get you there. Okay?"

"Y-yes daddy." She's breathless, and I know she forced the words out because she knows I wouldn't continue otherwise.

But...hearing her call me daddy while spread open in front of me is too fucking much. My aching cock is pressed hard against my jeans, but this isn't about me right now.

Right now, this is all about her.

I slowly dip my middle finger inside, and when she responds beautifully to my touch, I let myself speed up. My tongue finds her clit, lapping at her desperately as she writhes. I add my ring finger and let both fingers curl up inside of her.

“Ah!”

Her fingers tighten in my hair, and I growl into her as I flatten my tongue on her and double-down.

“You gonna cum for me?” I lift my head up enough so I can watch her face, keeping my fingers at their steady pace inside her.

She can only nod as her mouth is too busy calling out my name. My fingers push deeper, pistoning and she instantaneously lets go. Her entire body quivers, and I keep hold of her with the arm still linked around her as my other hand doesn't relent; making her ride out the wave of pleasure as her hands try to push down on my hand to stop the overstimulation. I move my tongue immediately to her again; pulling my fingers out to lap her release.

“Ah—” The groan escapes my mouth, and I immediately shudder. My cock jolts against my zipper, and pulses.

Shit.

Fuck.

Don't tell me I just fucking came in my pants like some horny teenager. Never in my fucking life has this happened to me.

I stop the movement, letting her body relax.

And fuck, I need a moment myself.

“You did so good,” I praise, and I let myself stand up fully again to lean over her, standing between her legs and bringing my face to hers. I put my lips onto hers; our tongues mingling as another moan slips out from her. “You see how good you taste, sweetheart?”

“Hey, I finished the—oh, shit. My bad,” Mason's voice cuts through the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Power Rangers

LAYLA



My stomach sinks when I hear his voice. We were so wrapped up in uh... well, each other, that we didn't even hear the door opening. In a panic, I try to sit up but Kane holds me down, still covering me with his large body.

"Don't you know how to knock? Get out."

I hear the door shut again, and Kane looks back down at me.

"He didn't see anything, I promise. Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah of course. It's fine." *Welp*, I've lost my coolness again.

I feel relieved either way that Mason didn't see me naked. I guess maybe it isn't a big deal, but I'm barely used to anyone seeing me like this. I already had to work up a strong nerve to do it for Kane. Especially after sex...because I suddenly feel more vulnerable and admittedly less sexy after losing the high from my orgasm.

He moves back enough to give me room to move again, his eyes flickering back down to my pussy as I quickly close my legs and sit up. My cheeks heat as he looks back at my face.

"Don't act coy now, you just came all over my tongue."

Jesus, I don't know how the hell to react when he says crude things like that to me. This man gives me no reprieve at all! "I'm just hot," I quickly say, fanning myself to cover up the lie.

"Ain't that the truth," he says with a bit of a sigh, adjusting his jeans. He finds my leggings that he tore off me and hands them back to me. "Do you need a minute?"

"What? No, I'm really fine." I slide off the counter, and fumble with my rolled-up pants and panties as I try to slip them back on.

Once they're on, he rolls his eyes to himself as he calls out to Mason from where we stand in the kitchen. "You can come in now, asshole." The

door immediately opens, and he walks in with a bright smirk.

Holy shit, was he standing at the door? I think I'm going to drop dead.

Kane must have known anyway, but he sees my red face and turns to Mason, holding his finger out to point at him. "You gonna apologize?"

"I live here now too, you know. You should've put a sock on the door or something, old man." Kane isn't amused by his rebuttal though, and Mason sighs, turning to me after Kane stares him down. "I *am* sorry, 'cause I'd never do that on purpose. But if you're gonna be coming over now, we gotta set down some ground rules so you don't get me in trouble with the boss-man."

I giggle at the nickname and Mason smiles at me, the tension instantly broken. Kane's gaze moves between us before he clears his throat. "You won't be setting ground rules for anything. This is *my* house, and I'll figure it out. You're not supposed to be here long either, Mason."

"I thought you'd be less grumpy after that, but damn. Is it because you —" Mason points at Kane's pants, and Kane grabs his hand and pulls him into a mock headlock.

"Don't you fucking dare," Kane growls.

Huh? Am I missing something? What was Mason pointing at?

Mason laughs hysterically, and Kane releases him harshly. Kane turns to me, gesturing to his beard. "I'm going to clean up."

I nod, and he walks off his bedroom, leaving me alone in the kitchen with Mason. "So, Layla, how old are you?"

"Oh um, I'm twenty. But my birthday is this Saturday." God, is he about to interrogate me? I don't do well under pressure.

"The big twenty-first, huh? You gonna go out then?"

"Well...my best friend wants me to go out to a club with her, but I don't know. We're at least going to go shopping and out to eat."

He nods, smiling to himself as if he's thinking something. "Clubs are mighty overrated. Plus, I doubt Kane would like to hear about you goin' somewhere like that."

"Somewhere like what?"

When his voice cuts through the room, Mason and I both turn. "Your girl said she's going to the club this weekend."

"She's not 'my' girl. And stop trying to get a rise out of me."

Mason puts his hand up in mock defeat, and laughs. "Fine, fine. Why don't you make us some of your famous steaks now for dinner? I'm sure

Layla doesn't know yet what a great cook you are."

"Really? You cook?" I ask.

"Not really hard, you just put the damn meat on the stove and then take it off. It's not impressive," Kane grumbles, walking past us to grab a skillet.

"He's being modest, he likes cooking. He used to throw down when our battalion got to have barbecues. Don't let him fool you," Mason says, patting Kane on the back.

"Oh! You were in the army together then?" I guess I've been so distracted since I got here, I didn't even try to figure out *who* Mason actually is to Kane. But it makes sense; Mason is also well-built, and he seems to respect Kane like some sort of authority figure.

"Yep. I enlisted right out of high school, and he was my sergeant when I joined. Eventually he transferred to the Rangers, and once they let me, I transferred to be in his unit."

"Rangers? Like...Power Rangers?"

Mason bursts out laughing, and Kane turns his head over his shoulder to interject. "No, the Army Rangers. It's an elite light infantry unit, not some fucking pretend superhero."

"Yeah, you know, the ones who do all the cool shit—I mean stuff. Special operation raids, counterterrorism, enemy reconnaissance, the *whole* package," Mason finishes.

Wow. I guess I didn't even imagine that Kane ever did something that important in the army. I mean...I guess I don't really know anything about the differences between military branches anyway. It explains why he is the way he is though, and it suits him perfectly. Now I'm just imagining him in a uniform, bossing people around...

"What you smiling like that for?" His deep voice tears me out of my fun daydream and I shake my head.

"Nothing! I just think it's really awesome. You've done a lot."

"Yeah, I guess," he says, pulling the first steak off the heat. "You two go sit down already, you're talking my ear off while I concentrate."



The sudden dinner was delicious, but I know Kane was staring daggers into Mason because of how much we talked. He's a super nice and outgoing guy, and he's easy to talk to. I'm surprised Kane would be so close to someone like that because he seems like he prefers the quiet, and Mason is very...opposite of quiet.

I feel like I finally got to learn more about him tonight, though. I wish I could ask a million more questions, but I'm trying not to act too crazy since he only *just* agreed today to let me come around and text him whenever.

Okay...he didn't say I could text him *whenever*. But he gave me his number, and he can tell I like to talk a lot, right? So he must expect it.

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"It's late, I'm gonna drive you back to your place," he says, standing up and grabbing my empty plate for me.

"Oh, you don't have t—"

"I didn't ask, did I?"

I slowly shake my head, and Mason whistles. "Well, I'm gonna go take a shower finally. It was nice to meet you, Layla, I'm sure I'll see you again real soon."

"You, too!" I smile. I stand up and grab my purse but when I try to turn, Kane appears behind me and holds me still with my back pressed against him.

"You two are getting awfully cozy."

Oh.

My.

God.

Is he jealous? Like actually jealous? Like he likes me, and he's upset because he thinks I could like someone else?

Breathe, Layla.

"O-oh? I don't think so. I'm just being nice."

“Didn’t your daddy ever teach you not to be too nice to men you don’t know?”

“Um, well, he wasn’t around so...” Nice reply. Now he’s going to think you’re deranged because you have daddy issues.

Wait. *Am I deranged because I have daddy issues?*

“Then I’m going to tell you. *Don’t* be nice to men you don’t know. And if you’re going to a club this weekend, you better remember that. Got it?”

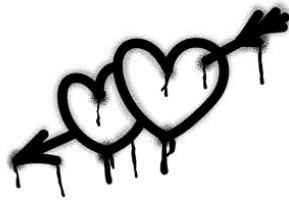
Yes daddy.

“You’ve got to stop doing that to me,” he growls in my ear.

Oh crap! Did I say that out loud?

“Come on.” He steps back and slaps my ass as if to tell me to get going, causing a small yelp from me.

And I’d be damned if I didn’t secretly have the biggest smile on my face.



“I don’t know, I thought about it, and I guess it wouldn’t be too bad,” I say loudly, hoping Crystal can hear me on speaker as I’m far from my phone trying to clean up my living room.

“Yay! This is so exciting! Okay, in that case, maybe I’ll meet you at your place since you’re already near downtown? Then we can just get ready together. Oh! Your gift is totally late too, so I doubt it’ll come in time for this weekend.”

“You don’t have to get me anything anyway, you know I don’t need much.” I shake my head to myself as I walk back over to grab my phone.

“Yeah, but you know I love gifts. Oh, before I forget, I kind of forgot to tell you...but I’m kind of seeing someone. Well, it’s not like it’s serious, but I met her online and...”

“Her?” I ask.

“Yeah, well, I know I usually date guys but I’m kind of tired of them. Especially after what happened with Ricky. I’ve always wanted to be brave enough to explore my bisexuality but...she kind of appeared on my social

media and it just snowballed from there, you know? And she's great! She's kind of shy in person, but she's seriously filling my cup right now."

"Wow Crys, I'm proud of you! Soooo...you're gonna bring her, right?"

"Is that okay? It's your birthday, so I wasn't sure?"

"What? Of course it's okay!"

"Okay! I'll just have her meet us there though, beforehand it is *you* and *me* time only, I promise. And...what about your serial killer?"

I laugh, finally plopping myself down on my bed. "*Kane* would never be caught dead in a place like that. He doesn't really scream 'party guy.'"

"Because he's old?"

"No! Because he's serious. Jeez, come on! He isn't that old. He's...seasoned."

She snorts. "Seasoned? Well, I won't pretend he doesn't look good for his age, but girl, come on. He's almost twice your age."

"I thought love was love?" I reply, my voice a higher pitch as I remind her.

"Ugh, okay. Fuck. Fine. I'm not judging you, okay? I'm just mostly worried that you're going to get your heart broken by this grown man who doesn't take you seriously."

"He might not take me seriously *yet*, but I just know it's gonna work out, Crys. I really like him. I've just...I don't know. I can *feel* that this is who I'm supposed to be with. And he might need some more convincing, but I am so close to getting him to feel the same thing."

"Okay, okay. I trust you. Ugh, I have to go, my mom is calling me, and I've been ignoring her all week already. We'll talk more later, bye!"

She hangs up fast, and I sigh and toss my phone to the side. I know she's just looking out for me, but it kind of hurts to think she doesn't trust me. Once she gets to meet him, I'm sure she'll feel less worried.

I know that no matter what, I'm going to see this through. I feel even better about it after today, because now I know he likes me, even just a *little* bit.

Maybe I should try the jealous thing again?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Easy Access

KANE



The shop stayed busy enough through the week, and I've been taking whatever time I can to show Mason the ropes. He's a hard worker, but I'm not sure he's ready to work on a car by himself yet. He needs full instructions and he can't diagnose shit on his own, but he'll get there.

I've let myself ponder him staying. I don't feel as adamant about him going back as I was, but I still just don't see why he'd leave the city and the life he was making just to be in this crap town with me. I want him to get settled, meet a nice girl, and have a *normal* life.

I'm not sure I can give that to anyone.

I'm still undecided, anyway. I feel so goddamn confused. Between Mason and Layla, I don't think I can continue my killings. I don't even know if I'm fucking okay with that. I don't feel like I've done everything I can do.

And what if I stop, and everyone knows I have, so *more* shit goes down?

I'm not stupid enough to think that the justice system will ever change. They will do as they always have—catering to the evil and deranged. Because underneath their elitist masks, they're the same type of people. The same ones who get off on abusing women and children. The same ones who find camaraderie in the ones who stand before them in court. Why do you think they don't bring the hammer down the moment it's proven?

But I don't mind being the hammer. I *like* being the hammer. Moreover, I want to prove that I can be. I guess...what I know of Layla, it makes me feel a sense of pride. I'd never ask for details, but I can only assume based on the public records. Which I *may* have checked again. I can't help but feel good that I've brought her a sense of security.

I never let myself think of the countless survivors and victims whose lives I've changed. If I do, I start imagining *them*. If I stop the killing, what will I be? Who am I without it? I barely feel like I deserve the fucking air I breathe if I stop. Like if I don't spend the rest of my gifted days here being useful, that my life is pointless.

"You fixin' to keep rubbing that till it breaks in half?"

Mason's voice rips me out of my thoughts, and I realize I've been sitting here polishing the same spot on this car this whole time. I shake my head, standing up and tossing the towel on the workbench.

"Lost in thought? 'Cause it's her birthday?"

Shit. I spaced that completely. "No, just a lot of shit on my plate, Mas."

"I thought maybe you were thinkin' about how she's about to get wasted and maybe hookup with some guy."

"Yeah, shithead, thank you," I grumble, wiping my hands on my jeans and passing him to get to the counter. "And she isn't hooking up with anyone."

"Why? It isn't like you're obliging. Seriously, what kind of idiot man turns down a woman begging for it?" He laughs, shaking his head at his own hypothetical question.

"The ones who don't like to take advantage of vulnerable women," I remind him.

"Or, maybe the one who is afraid of what being with her implies, but pretends it's because of *her* that he isn't doing it."

Goddamn him. "Mas, mind your business. I don't need you poking me like that. Shit isn't simple."

"I guess it isn't simple. But I can at least say that she seems like she's genuine about you. You're not still thinkin' she's going to yap to someone, are you?"

I sigh. "I don't know. I don't think she would on purpose, at least. She's the type to talk without thinking. One fucking wrong sentence to the wrong person, and I'm done. Besides that, she's on all these... 'true crime' groups online. Who knows, Mas."

"She'd never do that. I bet she'd do whatever you said, anyway."

"And *that*, might be the problem. I'm not qualified for that. I already—" I'm about to say that I already failed at taking care of someone. I let Mel down. Now what, I take in some young girl who *clearly* needs guidance and

someone to hold her hand through life? I fucked that up before. I'm not good at being there for someone.

"What happened to them was *not* your fault, Kane. You and I were deployed."

"Yeah, well I shouldn't have fucking gotten deployed. I should've run back home the moment Mel asked me to."

"Mel was an adult—"

"She needed me! She fucking—" I stop myself, taking a breath to lower my voice. "She was alone, raising a little girl, and she was in over her head already. I thought supporting her financially was enough, and that I'd enjoy my time with them whenever I had the chance. It wasn't enough, though. Not when that fucking..."

When my words die out, I feel his hand on my shoulder. "It's alright. You didn't know. No one knew. It was random, Kane. You can live the rest of your life whining about what you *could've* done, but now look. The world just placed a do-over into your lap. Layla needs you."

Layla needs you.

I don't know. I guess I didn't think of it like that. I don't know what the fuck I think anymore.

"Come on old man, let's make dinner and clean up. I wanna enjoy the weekend."



By the time my eyes open again, I find myself passed out on the couch where I'd been with Mason. He made me watch some boring movie again, and I couldn't help myself. I stretch my arms, turning my head to crack my neck and sit up a bit. Fuck, what time is it anyway? I wonder if she's still out.

I reach for my phone, and my heart sinks.

Six missed calls. Two voicemails. Even more texts than that.

I sit up straighter, immediately going to click on the voicemails. The first one is short.

“Ahh Crys, not that one! Oops, Kane! I was wondering...maybe you should come. My friend’s girlfriend is coming and I guess I...stop! I said I didn’t want that!” She laughs, and the voicemail ends abruptly.

I quickly click on the next one. *“Sorry I called you a looooot...I don’t know. I’m standing outside because I just wanna go home. I missed the bus and Crystal left with her girlfriend...and the taxi was kinda expensive. I wanted to ask for a ride but you’re probably asleep. I think I’ll walk a few blocks over to check the subway times. I just um, I wanted to say that I’m sorry for sending so many texts and um, calling so much. I know it’s annoying. I guess now I’m sitting here alone with my drunk thoughts and realizing that maybe I’m—what? No, sorry I’m okay. I’m...waiting for my ride. Huh? No, I—”*

And it ends. Who the fuck was she talking to? Some random person? It must have been if she lied about having a ride. Why didn’t she call again? Why does all communication fucking stop?

I’m already grabbing my keys and heading downstairs. I scroll through her texts, which are mostly drunk babble. Except one.

SWEETHEART

I need yo u daddy i cant stop thinkig about your mouth on me i wish youd com e get me because i needed it. i need you

Layla needs you.

Shit. What if she accepted a ride from someone? What if she walked all alone in the dark, drunk and fucking vulnerable and someone took advantage of her? Took her and...

I don’t know where to go. Do I go to the club? These are from two hours ago. Should I check her place instead? My adrenaline is pumping harder than it has in years. Goddamn her, why isn’t she picking up? Why is her phone fucking dead now?

I decide to drive downtown and pass the nightlife but I don’t see much. It looks like people are calling it quits for the night and heading home. Fuck, I don’t see her. Do I get out and look? *No*. Check if she’s home first.

I quickly drive to her apartment, and I throw my truck in park and hop out, the door slamming. *Please*, fucking be here. The broken door allows me entry, and I walk up the flights of stairs until I reach her door and pound on it.

After a minute, the sound of locks sliding through metal hits my ears, and the door slowly opens. “Kane?”

When I hear her voice, relief floods my entire body. *Thank you, God.* I move forward, fully opening her door to pull her against me. “Fuck, sweetheart. Why is your phone off?”

“Oh, um, it’s on the charger now, it took forever to get home so it died. Did...you call me?”

“Did *I* call you? *You* called *me*, Layla. You told me you were all but abandoned in the middle of the damn night at a club downtown, and then you went MIA. Why did you do that?”

“Sorry, someone ended up offering me a ride and then he wouldn’t really leave me alone so...I went on my way to walk to the subway, but then I guess the train was down. So I had to keep walking until a bus came, because only one was running, and—”

“Why didn’t you plan this better? Why would your friend just leave without you?”

“Well, I told her to, because her girlfriend started not to feel well. Well, I think she just didn’t like me, so...”

She rubs her arm, and I let out a breath. *Fuck*, I was so stressed. I fucked up so badly. I should’ve stayed up longer. I knew she was going out tonight, I should’ve anticipated that she’d need me. “I’m sorry.”

She tilts her head. “Huh? For what?”

“For not answering. I should’ve been there. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“What? That isn’t your fault. I was being an airhead anyway...I spent the last of my money on drinks so I couldn’t order a ride. I was stupid,” she explains with a smile.

“Why didn’t you ask me?”

“For money?”

“Anything. You can’t just...go out and fucking strand yourself somewhere in the middle of the night, Layla. Do you know what could’ve happened to you?”

“Sorry.” Her voice is quiet, and I know I’ve been raising mine. I take a breath, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Don’t do that to me again. I thought you were in danger.”

“Were you really that worried about *me*?”

Was I worried? “Look at me. I just fucking drove through all of downtown looking for you before I came here. Never. Again. Do you hear me?”

She nods, and I relent. I take a moment to look her over, and *shit*. “This is what you wore tonight?” She nods again. “You seriously walked yourself around downtown at ungodly hours of the night in *that*?”

“Do you not like it?” Her voice is small again, and she looks down at herself.

Fuck, I don’t know how to talk to women.

“I like it, okay? But I’m worried about who *else* likes it. The type of scum who gallivant around at that time of night in this part of town, sweetheart.”

“Are you mad?”

I want to say, “fuck yes.” But seeing her like this, looking up at me with those sad eyes, I can’t. “No, I’m not mad at you. I was scared, alright?”

“I’m happy you came. I mean, I thought you were ignoring me tonight because I was being annoying.”

“You’re not annoying. I fell asleep watching some movie with Mason. I...If I had heard your first voicemail I would’ve been there.”

“Really?”

God, what am I even doing now? I keep telling myself I’m on the fence of what to do with her, and then when she’s in front of me as sweet as ever I just fucking fall. “Don’t think this means I’ll be going out to clubs.”

She laughs, nodding as she steps closer again. “So, you’ll stay, right? It’s late.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Please? It’s my birthday! Well, it was. But it still counts, right?” I sigh, and she celebrates already, as if I said yes. She takes my hand in her smaller one and pulls me deeper into her apartment to lure me away from the door. She pulls me clear to her couch, positioning me like a mannequin, so I oblige and sit. She follows, sitting right onto my lap.

Her dress is so short that it all but rides completely up, showing me the glimpse of pink underneath them covering her hips. My hands move to her ass instinctually, tugging slightly on the fabric. “This is all you wore under?”

“Easy access?”

My hand comes down on her ass, not hard enough to hurt, but a warning. “For who?”

“You, daddy. I wanted you to come and see what I wore for you.”

Fuck, I can’t help it. Maybe it’s because I’m still tired, but I have no fight left in me. “You want me to believe you wore this for me?” She nods, biting her lip. “I don’t believe you.”

“I only want you,” she admits breathlessly. “I...have never wanted anyone else.”

Usually when someone says that, you take it with a grain of salt. No one means that. You just *feel* so much in the moment, you *think* you feel that way. But with Layla...I wonder if that’s true. I wonder if that’s why she’s so determined to tempt me.

And fuck if it doesn’t feel good to be wanted by her.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Can He Even Breathe?

LAYLA



I feel embarrassed when I admit that. But...I want him to see how serious I am. If I have to admit all my deepest thoughts, I will. I just want him to know how badly I know it's *him*. It can't be anyone else.

His hand explores my ass, gripping one cheek tightly and lifting. "Fuck. Do you even know that you're a vixen?"

I'm sure my smile is a mile wide. "Am I?"

"Don't play coy. You're on my lap, telling me I'm all you want. That's dangerous."

"I mean it, though." I look into his eyes and move myself on his lap, my core grinding over his budding erection in his jeans. It feels *so good*.

"I know, baby. You just need to cum again, don't you?"

I nod desperately and he tugs on the top of my thong, causing it to draw up. I feel the pressure from the fabric against both of my holes, and I move my hips again desperate for friction.

"Fuck, I want another show. You gonna give me one?" I nod again, and he pulls the panties down now. I quickly oblige, slipping them off, and he rests me onto his thigh. "Show daddy how desperate you are to cum again."

I put my arms atop his shoulders and tentatively move my hips. My clit grinds directly on top of his jeans, and the dragging against the rough fabric is just the right amount of pressure. It's a bit degrading, grinding myself against him like I'm in heat.

Well, I guess I feel like I am whenever I see him. The sight of him...the smell. I could get lost in it. I'm *desperate* to.

His large hand on the back of my neck keeps me from turning to mush on top of him. He moves his other hand to my hip, tentatively moving me until he finds no protest, and then he begins to move me himself.

“Please,” I whimper.

“*Please*, what?”

“Please give me more.”

He stills me on his thigh, and my heart thumps loudly in anticipation of what he’ll do with me next. His hand tightens behind my neck, pulling slightly on my hair and causing a sensation I’ve never felt before. *Does having your hair pulled actually feel this good?*

“I can take it. Please,” I remind him.

He looks so conflicted, though. His jaw clenches, and his hand drops from my head to my other hip. He suddenly hoists me up, eliciting a small yelp from me. My knees are on either side of his head, resting on the top of the couch cushions.

“Ride my face, and if you do good, I’ll give it to you.” *What?* I can’t just...sit on him like this!

“I don’t know what to—” I start to protest, but he pulls me down by my thighs and my pussy lands on his face. My hands instantly go to his hair, pulling and holding on for dear life.

Life...Can he even breathe?!

I want to ask, but I’m too lost in the moment. His tongue expertly moves all around me, and I can’t even guess where it goes next at any moment. And...I’ve never felt this good in my life.

Life...again? Wait...seriously, can he breathe?

I’m sure he can sense my panic each time it happens, and this time he pulls me back enough that he can speak again. “You keep lifting up, sweetheart.”

“Uh...well yeah, duh! I’m going to like, break your face, or smother you.”

He laughs, a deep rumble that I never got to fully hear before, and I feel my cheeks rise from the huge smile that naturally erupts from me. “I thought we had a deal?”

“We do!”

“I’m a tough guy, sweetheart. I think I’ve survived worse than being trapped between a woman’s thighs. All you have to do is close your eyes and enjoy how I make you feel. Can you do that for me?” I nod, though he can’t see my face, he must have felt the subtle movement from my body.

“Yeah? Do you like that? Tell me.”

I'm too turned on to be embarrassed, but every time he talks to me like that, I get so nervous. I just don't know how to effortlessly talk sexy like he does. Do I make him feel like the butterflies are going to shoot out of him when I speak, too? I bite my lip, finding the words I know he'd like to hear. "I like it, daddy. I want it."

"That's a good fucking girl," he practically growls.

He pulls me forward a little, and I let myself rest gently on top of him again. He pulls me harder against him, moving his face side to side, and the new sensation immediately forces me to sit properly again as my eyes roll back.

I'm so close. Everything feels so intense...even more than it was last time in his kitchen. My head falls back, and my hand in his hair tightens. His grip on my thighs isn't loosening, and I'm going to have to take that as a sign that he's enjoying himself too; because I can't stop now.

I grind my hips, my pussy sliding across his face with each thrust. His nose rubs against my clit every time I move forward, and I can't help myself but speed up as it quickly brings me to the edge—

My whole body shudders on top of him, my hips slowing down but not fully seating themselves still as I try to ride out this feeling for as long as I can. I'm still moaning, my hands still tangled in his hair when he quickly lifts me as if I weigh nothing and carries me up the single long step to my bed. He tosses me on it and climbs over me. His eyes are dark like a beast; his face and beard slick from my wetness and release.

"Fuck, I can't take it anymore. I need you." His voice is still rough, but desperate. For *me*. "You feel alright?" he asks, and I nod, still dazed. His hand softly rubs my head as I nod, and I can tell he's still worried about me. "Come here."

He sits back, his jaw clenching as he tries to control himself, and extends his hand to me. When I immediately take it, he pulls me forward, and I sit myself on his lap with my shins resting on the bed. He unbuckles his belt and undoes his jeans enough that his hand can finally grab his hard-on through his boxers. I watch, my eyes locked on to the veins on his arm as he pulls it out. I can *feel* the heat of it, and a shiver of anxiety rushes through me for a moment. My eyes flick up to his, and he grabs the back of my head knowingly.

"You can do it again, can't you? I want you to do the same thing you just did, baby. Close your eyes and enjoy me. Daddy's going to take care of

you the whole time, so you can let go. I'll know when you need to stop."

His words do soothe me, but my insides still scream. Why? Screw the voice inside my head. Screw my body for not listening when I push myself. Screw everything that made me like this. I hate it. I want this so much, it hurts. I won't let anything stop it this time.

I take a deep breath, lifting myself, and I think I surprise him because his body tenses in anticipation. I close my eyes like he said and fight off every thought swimming through my mind. His head brushes my opening, and a quiet whimper escapes my mouth.

I have my eyes shut tightly, and I suddenly feel his forehead against mine. "You can do it, sweetheart. Fuck—just like that." He falters when I start to move, and his hand in my hair tightens.

You can do this. It's Kane. It's Kane. It's—

"Look at you, fuck, you're doing so good baby. Keep going. I know you can take it, because you're such a good girl. You feel so damn good," he rasps in my ear. He grips me tightly, and I'm amazed by his restraint. It would be easier if he took me...but maybe I do need to do this myself.

He's bigger than the toy I rode for him before, though I'm so wet I'm not meeting any resistance. "A-ah," I moan, finally sitting down as far as it can go.

Holy shit. He's inside me. Like...actually.

My eyes open, naturally attempting to look down, but he grasps my hair and keeps my face up to his. "Just look at me. How do you feel?"

"I..." I feel good...I think. I don't feel as anxious...but now I'm a little scared to move. But I feel impressed that I did it on my own. And I feel... *full*. In the best way possible.

"Move, Layla. Fuck me like you did your toy. I'm just here for the show."

I crash my lips onto his, desperate to feel him on me. To smell him. To feel completely smothered by him so that he's all that takes over my mind. I can taste the mixture of him and my juices, and he moans into my mouth. I move myself up, his thick length rubbing against every wall, and I feel lost in him.

It's a blur; a mess of sweaty skin and ungodly noises take over the silence in the room. I move up and down on him as his hand on my ass guides me. I open my eyes again and wrap my arms around his neck.

I didn't know sex was this intimate. Porn just doesn't do this justice. The way you can lock eyes with someone and not need to say a word? We're speaking completely with our bodies, and it feels so good to be this close to someone. To trust someone implicitly and have no barriers between us.

"Fuck, I can feel your cunt gripping me. You going to cum on my cock, baby? Take what you need, I've got you."

That was all I needed, and I grind myself back and forth as he helps lift me up and back down; both of us chasing our release. I cry out when it finally hits me, and it only takes him a couple seconds after. He pushes me down fully on his lap and pushes himself inside me as his cum fills me.

*God...*that was amazing. Better than amazing. I feel on top of the world. Wait.

He just...came inside me.

"Kane?"

"What's wrong?" His question is immediate, and I realize I made him think he did something wrong. Well...he kind of did, right? I mean, is it my fault? I know nowadays girls are always on some form of birth control, but I never saw a reason to be, considering.

"No! Nothing! I mean uh...you just, I mean I didn't think about it, but we didn't use a condom."

His eyebrows raise, and he suddenly realizes what I'm insinuating. "Shit, I guess I didn't think about it. You're not...?" I shake my head, not needing him to finish his question. "I'm sorry, that's my fault. We can figure it out in the morning, alright?"

I nod, and he pats my thigh, signaling for me to get up. Once I do, he gets off the bed, putting himself back in his pants. "You're staying, then? Until morning?"

"Pull my arm, why don't you," he jokes, walking off into my bathroom.

Holyshit. He's really staying. We just...and he...

What does he mean in the morning, anyway? I'm not sure how I feel about taking a pill like that. Is it okay to just risk it? Maybe it wouldn't happen after one time anyway. Or does he mean we'll figure it out in the morning, because we need a *permanent* solution? I mean, we might have more sex, right? I sit back in bed, smiling to myself like an idiot as I clutch my comforter and pull it up to my chest. I really had sex. With Kane.

When he comes back out, I can't help but let my eyes excitedly rake down his now barely clothed body. "Up. You should go to the bathroom before you go to sleep."

"Why?" I ask, already moving to get up.

"Because I said so. Every time you have sex, you do that, got it?"

"Okay," I agree, walking past him. I guess I have a lot to learn still...but I'm happy Kane is the one teaching me everything.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

I've Finally Found You

KANE



When she comes back, I'm already getting myself into her small bed, which must be fucking twin-sized. It's fine. I can't leave, even if I'll be uncomfortable all night. I don't even think I'll be able to leave her again at this point.

She climbs in beside me, and I wrap my arm around her to hold her while we lay on our sides. "Sorry, my bed is probably a little small."

A little?

"It's fine, sweetheart. Just sleep." No sarcastic comments out loud tonight. Right now, all she needs is comfort, and fuck, it sounds nice to let myself relax for once.



I open my eyes again; the sun shining through the wide windows beside the bed. I forgot I wasn't home last night. Actually...I don't think I've slept in a bed with anyone like this. I have always avoided it for obvious reasons. It creates too many *expectations*. For which I've accidentally created way too fucking many of last night.

When I try to sit up, she quickly stirs and turns around toward me half-asleep. "Kane?"

"I'm here. Sleep more," I whisper, leaning down and resting my forehead onto hers.

“I’m scared you won’t be here when I wake up again.”

Fuck, this was all a horrible idea. I can’t even fucking process all the different reasons that I shouldn’t have done any of this. When she looks up at me like that, I break. How the hell does she do that to me? “I’m not leaving yet. I’m going to make breakfast, because I’m starving.”

“Oh...I’m not sure what there is,” she says as she sits up, rubbing her eyes.

I walk over to her fridge, and I am fucking appalled. There are some diet sodas, a few random juices, some leftover cupcakes, a jar of pickles, and eggs. I turn to her and she looks down, scratching her head. Surely her fucking cabinets have *something*, right?

Oh, I was very wrong. This woman has the largest box of instant ramen I’ve ever seen, and *maybe* some random canned fruits. Jesus fucking Christ. “You really don’t have groceries?”

“Well...they’re expensive right now. I usually have ramen or...leftovers from the bakery. Sometimes I order takeout.” She shrugs and walks around the small island and puts her elbows down on it, leaning over to rest her head on her hands.

“Little girl, this is not how you live. I’m going to fix it, and you’re going to make sure you eat real food. Got it?” I can’t believe I even have to tell her this.

“Okay daddy,” she replies with a smile on her face.

“Careful,” I warn, pointing my finger at her. I *cannot* fuck her again until I figure this all out. She watches as I take out her carton of eggs and decide I might as well do *something* with what she has here. It’s done pretty fast, and I plate it and slide it over to her.

I plate my own, leaning back against the opposing counter as I eat. The sunlight streams through the windows, and a ray shoots directly onto her. Her bright hair glows perfectly against the light, and it suits her. She’s completely unaware of my gaze, and enjoying the food after a night of drinking, I’m sure.

God, she’s beautiful. She’s definitely too good for someone like me. Or anyone. I can’t imagine even one fucking man who could deserve someone like her. How will she even meet anyone genuine when she’s this trusting?

On the other hand...I can’t keep her just because of that. Her entire existence is a can of worms, just waiting to pop. If I don’t stop it, I’m not sure how much longer I can last without being unmasked. I can’t be as

hopeful as Mason; thinking I can just stop the killings and go about my life, as if everyone else will stop caring or looking for me.

My hole has been dug deep, and it's only a matter of time I'm placed in it.

"I think I might have rubbed my friend's new girlfriend the wrong way last night," she blurts out to break the silence, staring sadly at her phone screen now.

"Yeah?"

"Ugh, it's just, she seemed familiar, so I kept insisting, and I was so drunk I was a mess." She sighs into her hands, shaking her head before removing them again. "I should apologize, right? I mean I was just trying to be friendly because I was excited for Crystal, but I think I'm a bit much for some people sometimes. I'm a little hyper."

"Who cares? You shouldn't apologize for being yourself. You can apologize for being wasted, but not that. If she has a problem with your personality, then she's the one who has to adapt."

"Okay, maybe you're right. Thank you." She smiles, and lets out a relieved sigh now.

She needs a lot of reassurance. *And* attention. *And* help.

Fuck, it gets harder and harder to just wash my hands of this.

"Oh, so, what should we do about the...um, you know," she asks awkwardly, pointing slightly down.

Double fuck. I forgot all about that. Why did I even forget that last night? I must really have started to lose my mind with my age. I can't get a girl pregnant at thirty-nine. I look back at her, and her sweet face stares back, waiting. Her chocolate brown eyes search mine, and her soft, pink lips pucker slightly as she thinks. God, it felt good to be inside her. To fill her with my...

No. Absolutely fucking not. I can't believe I even let myself *imagine* her pregnant with my child. I need to distance myself, at least until I figure out her threat level. Once I have time to assess and neutralize whatever potential damage she's caused online, I can figure out what to do with her.

"Well, that's up to you. Do you want me to take you to the pharmacy? I can get the pill for you."

"Is that what you think I should do?"

Fuck, don't ask me what I'm thinking. "I can't tell you what to do with your body, sweetheart. It isn't up to me at all. I'm just going to help if you

need it.”

“I don’t know...Do you think it’s okay not to do that?”

God, I don’t think I have ever in my life had such a primal desire like this. “It’s fine. You don’t have to do anything.”

“Okay, I’ll wait then. It’s probably not gonna happen anyway, right?”

Right. I nod. It isn’t gonna happen, Kane. Don’t try to delude yourself into thinking *you* deserve a family. You lost your chance at family, and your fucking privilege of having one.

Change the damn subject. “Why don’t you go ahead and show me those forums? While I’m here.”

“Oh! That’s right!” She walks over to her coffee table, grabbing her laptop and notebook and bringing it over to the island. “Um, I guess I’m a little embarrassed by it, but it has everything I collected over the last year. My notes and ideas and how I figured out your pattern,” she says awkwardly, biting her lip as she hands over the thick book.

I open it, and *shit*. It really does have everything. Every newspaper clipping, some printed out online news articles, and a bunch of information on each victim, including their photo. I look up at her, and she quickly stands straighter.

“What? It’s weird, right?”

“You did all this, Layla?”

“Um, yeah.” She seems embarrassed, like it’s shameful to have done all this work. But how?

When I look at her, I don’t see this wildly intelligent mastermind of an investigator. But she is exactly that... “To find *me*?” The question leaves my lips before I can stop myself.

“Yes. To find you.” She smiles and *fuck* I can’t help it. I grab the back of her head with my hand and smash my lips onto hers. It’s rough and messy, and I take her bottom lip between my teeth as I pull back. When I look back down at her, her lips are partly swollen, and her eyes slightly dazed.

“You did a really good job,” I tell her, and she smiles, and she lays her head against my upper arm.

“Thank you.”

I won’t forget how furious I am over *how* she physically found me...but this is just impressive. She’s brilliant. Her talent is being wasted here, in this shitty town, in her shitty apartment, stuck being an employee instead of

having the resources to follow her dreams. For someone like her to have been failed by the system and left to drown on her own...

She opens the laptop and loads up whatever website this is. I've certainly never heard of it. "So, basically, there's like, thousands of forums on here. It's specifically meant for true crime, so you can follow whatever groups people have made for different cases or people. I'm in eleven different ones about The Hangman. So, each is a little different anyway, some focus on theories or facts, or just all-around discussion. Here." She turns the screen toward me and steps back.

I sigh, pulling it forward so I can look through it. She's not fucking kidding. There are hundreds of comments on most of these posts, and thousands of people following each group. Are people seriously *that* obsessed with true crime?

"I deleted everything I needed to, but there are a lot of people who are all posting their own theories too. I mean, most people love you, obviously, but there are definitely some who don't or...maybe police check these too. I don't know."

Yeah, I'm sure the police are all over this shit. Which is bad, because if she's posted before, she might already be on some list. The question is if police have any *real* leads. If my photo had done it, I'm sure they'd have come for me already. They wouldn't wait me out, they'd make a big show of tracking me down and arresting me.

"So?" Her voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I sigh.

"So, I don't know, Layla. I'm not seeing anything terribly convincing anyone has posted, I guess. I have a lot I have to figure out."

"About the killings? Or me?"

"Yeah, sweetheart, the killings. I don't know...how to just stop."

"But you want to?"

I look at her, and my answer feels obvious. Like I'm a fucking *idiot* for even considering that there's anything else I could ever want besides her. But I've *become* The Hangman. I've dedicated my last few years embodying this role and...slowly losing myself in the process. But I didn't give a fuck, because this is important. It *was* important. Suddenly I have something new to live for, *really* live for. I don't have to just go through the motions and punish myself anymore.

I'm aware of the implications that come with being known as a serial killer. How many as well-known as me have actually gotten away with it?

Maybe one? Two? It's unrealistic. But I knew exactly what I was getting into. If you asked me last month, I'd say fuck it, take me to jail and throw away the key.

But now? I have Layla. I can't disappoint her. I don't *want* to disappoint her. I know damn well I don't deserve her, but that won't stop me from hoping that I can feel this forever. She looks at me and sees the man I always aspired to be.

"I don't have a choice. If I don't stop now, more shit might come out. The photo was damning enough, and now that I've seen those forum discussions, I don't think I can go on. I only would have to hope no one can figure me out as easily as you did with whatever information is still up."

She nods, looking up and around like she's deep in thought, though she doesn't say anything immediately. She looks down, twiddling her hands. "So...hypothetically, if I said someone *may* also have come to some of the same conclusions as me and...I *may* have accidentally said Peter Reed's name to them...how bad would that be?"

I run my hand down my face. "Are you being serious, Layla?"

"Um, well, I wasn't sure how to tell you, but I promised to tell you everything so...yeah. I'm sorry. But honestly, I don't think she *actually* knows. She's just...intense."

I should have known it had been too good to be true. I already knew I had to be worried about her telling someone before, and I had decided not to dwell on it. But that was fucking wrong.

"Are you mad?"

"Yes," I reply.

"Please don't be mad. I'm sorry! It was before we met and...I messed up. I took it back but honestly, she just didn't believe me. I convinced her that I was—"

"Layla, I don't want to hear it."

"Yes, sir," she says sweetly, trying to give me those puppy eyes.

This girl is my worst fucking nightmare. "Lucky for you, I have to get back to the shop to help Mason. But this isn't over, got it? You're still in trouble, little girl."

She watches me as I slide my shirt back on and fill my pockets with the crap I laid out before bed. "Just...don't do *anything* else, okay? Be good." She nods, walking over to me and going up on her toes to kiss my cheek. I tilt my head down and our lips meet, and she lowers herself back down.

I walk to the door, and leaving her here is...hard. I have the impending feeling that something will happen to her. But I can't just insist more, either. This is *new* and confusing. All I know is that I need to not let what happened in my past repeat itself.

I get to my truck, but as I open the door my phone dings. I assume it's her, of course, so I smile to myself as I pull it from my back pocket.

But...it isn't. It's an unknown number and attached is a picture. Of me. Outside of Layla's apartment.

UNKNOWN

Hello, Hangman. I've finally found you.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Lover Girl

LAYLA



I hum to myself as I try to clean up the apartment a little more. I really need to get a new dresser so I stop making a mess every time I have to pull all my clothes out to pick an outfit. *Oh well.* As I pick up a shirt from the floor, I see something metal catch my eye poking out from under my couch. I reach over, and it looks like a big...folded knife? It isn't the same one Kane always has clipped to his belt, though. Does he really carry more than one?!

I struggle to get it open, but once I do a gasp escapes me as I almost cut my finger. "Oops," I mutter, holding it up. I turn it over in my hand, watching how the light catches on the sharp tip. Jeez, this is kind of dangerous, right? Is it legal to just walk around with these things? I move my hand and stab it into the top of my nightstand. "Woah." Cool! Maybe I should keep it? I retrieve it and place it in my purse, nodding to myself in approval. I think Kane would like me to carry it around, anyway.

WENDY

hey, are you busy?

I'm surprised when Wen texts me, and I quickly reply.

ME

no, whats up?

My phone immediately rings. "Hey? This is a fun surprise," I say as I answer.

"I know! Since I'm a couple hours ahead I figured you were finally awake by now. Anyway...I just wanted to check on you. You haven't replied in the group chat like, all week."

Ops. "Ugh, yeah, I'm sorry. Honestly, I've had a busy weekend—"

“Oh, happy late birthday! You didn’t see our texts I don’t think. What’s got you so busy, huh? Don’t tell me you’re withdrawing from the *Single Forever* club?”

“Thank you! And, well...maybe? I guess we have a lot to catch up on.”

“Ah! Okay! I’ll tell the girls you’re okay then, they were worried too. I mean, Gabi was worried because you went MIA, and you know how she is. She thought maybe something bad happened.”

“No! Just...normal things! I have to work today, so I probably won’t catch up with the chat until tonight. Shit, I have to hurry up actually,” I say, looking up at the clock.

“Okay! Talk later, *lover girl*,” she teases as she hangs up.

Ugh. I feel like everything in my life is catching up to me. I haven’t emailed my therapist back, either. It’s hard to lie to everyone. The only person I can be honest with is Crystal...and she’s busy now. I don’t really want to overload her when she’s trying to work on a new relationship, too.

Will I ever be able to really *keep* this secret forever? I’m so terrified I’m going to blurt it out to the first person who asks me the right question. I guess Kane is right to be angry at me.



Today was a productive day; on the bus ride to work, I called back my therapist to reschedule our next appointment for a few days from today. I guess I’ll have to practice my ability to not spill my guts again for it. At work, I was able to make a few cute custom cake orders at the bakery and took some more for the next few weeks.

Now, I’m working on the ritual of organizing my leftover icing colors to save for the future so I don’t waste them, which is honestly kind of relaxing.

“Hey! I’m glad you’re still here,” Jenna calls out, walking into the back. “I wanted to let you know, we’re gonna be closed Wednesday through Friday this week because we had a death in the family, so all of us are going to be driving down to Redding. I know it’s last minute, so I’m sorry.”

“Oh no, it’s totally okay, I’m so sorry to hear that!” Well, it isn’t really okay, because I need my full hours to pay bills. But...it’s family, so I have to be understanding. I guess that’s a risk you take working for a business owned by a family you’re not in.

“It’s okay.” She waves her hand. “No big deal, we weren’t close. But my parents are making us all go and they insisted on closing up.”

“Um, but I do have a big cupcake order on Thursday?” I remind her.

“Oh shit! Hm, well, it’s okay. Here.” She digs in her purse, and hands me a set of keys. “These are mine, so don’t lose them. I’m not coming in tomorrow anyway, so I won’t need them ‘til we’re back next Monday. Just make sure you keep everything locked.”

“Oh, sure, thank you. I’ll be careful.”

“Anyway, I think it’s just Isobel and Clark tomorrow, but they’ll make sure the till is empty and everything else is done. I’ll tell Clark to keep the security system off for you, so the alarm won’t go off when you come in. Dad won’t let us give the code out, obviously. Okay, I gotta go or else Isobel will leave my ass here,” she huffs with a smile, and waves as she runs back around the corner and back to the front of the store.

Well, I guess I get to at least clock in when I come bake the cupcakes... but missing twenty-four hours of work is gonna suck. I’m barely going to be able to pay my phone bill as it is...and I can’t ask for another extension on my electricity bill. Ugh, I don’t want to ask for help. Kane told me to... but I don’t like it. What if he feels used?

No, it’s okay. Maybe I’ll just be really careful and use up my ramen supply this week, and then maybe Kane will make dinner again when I get to see him. I’ll take the leftover sandwiches from the display home today, too. I only *just* got Kane to open up more to the idea of me, and I don’t want to spoil it by being even more needy than I already am.

I try to finish up quickly to make the next bus, and when I walk outside, the rain is already starting again. It’s beautiful outside, the fall leaves now cover the pavement and give pretty little pops of orange and yellow all over. It reminds me that I should go to the pumpkin patch early to get a big one before they’re all gone.

Every year, the pumpkin patch opens two weeks before Halloween, and every year, I’m always busy and miss out on the first few days. But...since the store is gonna be closed, maybe I can go this year. Maybe Kane would come with me?

I giggle to myself, imagining someone like him walking around a pumpkin patch picking one out. As I sit at the bus stop, my phone rings, and my heart soars when I see his name across the screen. He's calling *me*? This is a first!

"Hi!"

"I see you left work, are you alright? Are you walking to the bus?" his deep voice asks, almost strained.

"Huh? How would you see that I left work?"

"I shared your location with myself last night after you went to the bathroom."

What? Did he? I pull the phone away from my face and quickly go to the app on my smartphone and...wow. He actually did. And...his is here too. Why am I smiling so wide? "Oh, okay."

"I'm on my way, so don't get on the bus. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Don't talk to anyone."

He's so...intense right now. I wonder why? "Okay. I'll wait, I promise. I'll just sit on a bench out of the rain."

He hangs up, and I excitedly keep checking the app to check how close he is as I wait. I make sure to hop into the group chat, though I don't think I'll have time to reply to everyone. I laugh when I see Wen telling everyone I have a new boyfriend and I'm too cool for the weekend calls now.

ME

I'm gonna see him right now, I promise I'll catch up tomorrow!

Maybe I should text Crys too. Well, I'm sure she'll blow my phone up when she sees me there again anyway.

When I look up, I see Kane's red truck and happily stand, then skip over and let myself in. "Hi," I say again, sliding in. He doesn't look too happy for some reason, and it makes me feel guilty. Is it because of me? I slide closer and kiss his cheek, and I feel relieved when I see that small inkling of a smile form on his face.

"Hi, sweetheart. I didn't plan on it, but I think it's better if I take you to and from work from now on. I don't want you riding the bus anymore."

"Really? I mean I'm happy but...isn't that annoying for you? Why would you wanna do that?"

"Because...it's not safe, and I can. Don't question me, alright?"

He always sounds mean, but I think I've learned him by now. He's not lovey-dovey, and that's okay with me. He shows his love by enforcing his rules, telling you how it is, and showing up for you. It feels *really, really* good to have someone taking care of me like that.

"Okay. I'm just excited to see you every day," I say with a smile, laying my head on his shoulder as he drives.

"Yeah...Maybe you should stay with me tonight."

"Yeah? I can?" I ask, almost too loudly.

He rumbles a soft chuckle, and his arm works to move the gear shift. "Yes, you can. I'm not too impressed by the security of that apartment building, either. Shitty part of town, too."

"Yeah I know, but there are only so many buildings that qualify for my low-income program. This was the best option I could get."

He clicks his tongue, his jaw clenched as he looks forward at the wet road and drives. "Maybe you should just stay with me."

I turn, my eyes wide. "What did you say?"

"When Mason finds a place, there'll be more room. For now, it'll be tight, but—"

"You want me to move in with you?" I ask eagerly. *Relax*, Layla, be cool.

"I...Yeah."

Holyfuckingshit. Is this really my life? How did I get here? What did I do so right? I never in a million years expected to hear these words out of his mouth. Only a *week* ago he was still telling me to leave him alone. I guess pussy really does change a man?

"Obviously it'll be complicated—for now you can just stay over, and we'll grab a bag for you. We'll figure out the rest later. Okay?"

"Okay! Yes!" *Take a breath, you sound way too enthusiastic again!* "I mean, cool. That sounds fine."

"We'll discuss it more later. Let's just stop by your place and head back. I promised Mason burgers tonight and he keeps texting me, whining."

I nod, taking a breath as I take it all in.

I have a boyfriend. A *live-in* boyfriend.

And I can stop worrying about rent. And I don't have to buy a bus pass anymore. Maybe I can start saving a little bit every month for my bakery? Maybe...we'll get serious, too? When do you even decide that kind of thing?

What about...the other thing? Is he doing this because of the small possibility I could get pregnant? I guess I'd feel crappy if I made him feel obligated because of what I said. I probably should've just let him take me to get the morning-after pill so he wouldn't have to worry about it. *Damn it, Layla!* I should have thought it through more. Of *course*, he's feeling obligated to have me move in with him after that. I was hoping he was asking because he liked me a lot...

Oh no.

Now I'm going to think about this all night. How do I manage to always misread *everything*?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Carrot Cake

KANE



Fuck, it's so hard to be dishonest with someone who implicitly trusts every word I say. She looks at me as if I can do no wrong. It hurts me to know that I'm someone who can look her in the eyes and pretend, even when she has that big, beautiful smile on her face.

But if I tell her someone is blackmailing me, she'll feel guilty. If she realizes someone has been watching her and following her, she'll panic. Though I want to be angry at her for having put me in this position in the first place; I need to hold back. I know she didn't purposely expose me to someone. I know she didn't realize someone was watching her. She's completely unaware of the lurking dangers of the world and the fucked-up people in it.

That's why she needs me. As much as I thought I could kick her out of my life and move on, I'm fucked beyond repair over this woman. The idea that someone else could have her was hard enough. The idea that someone is now threatening her safety?

Lord help them when I find them.

All I have to do is eliminate the threat before she finds out about it. I want to protect her from having these thoughts that plague me. She deserves a life where she can freely...skip about and eat cake, or whatever the fuck she does. If this unknown person tells her about my past...I don't know if she would ever look at me the same again.

Would I still be her hero? Would her eyes still sparkle when she looks at me?

When we finally make it back to the shop, I try my best to keep my face neutral so she can't see the way I'm spiraling. She's so excited that I've asked her to move in, and I wish I had done it simply because I was ready.

I need her close. I need her safe. I can't have some random person going up to her and telling her everything about me. And I have no fucking idea if this person is going to hurt her in the process, too. They're certainly capable of it, and likely not working completely alone. I feel relieved when I see her set her bag down in the living room and drop to her knees to play with Bacon.

For now, this is fine.

"Oh, Layla!" Mason booms, coming to greet her. "What ya doing here?" he asks, his eyes flicking over to me.

"Kane didn't tell you? I'm gonna be staying here with you guys," she says, but as Bacon licks her cheek, she laughs and gives her attention back down to him.

"Oh, no, he didn't." He raises his eyebrows, and I give him a look to say, *I'll explain later.* "Well, that's great. I guess we could use someone who bakes here. I'll get free cake, right?"

"Sure! I'll bring you some when I get off work tomorrow. What kind do you like?"

"Oh, chocolate all the way. I think Kane likes carrot cake," he jokes, but she just tilts her head.

"Carrot cake? Why?" she asks me, and Mason laughs.

"Idiot," I mutter, shaking my head.

She stands up, picking up her bag. "Is it okay for me to take a shower?"

"Of course," I tell her, and she smiles before she locks herself in the bathroom.

Right as the lock turns, Mason turns to me. "So?"

I roll my eyes, sighing as I pull the phone out of my pocket. I open the text thread and hand it over to him. He takes it, and his eyes widen a bit as he reads them all.

"Seriously? You should just tell her about them, Kane. Don't let this person—"

"No, she can't know. I don't ever want her to know that shit. Do you know how it feels to have someone who thinks so highly of you? I don't want her to change."

"I get it, I do. But you're letting this random person blackmail you about telling her. You think you can keep it from her forever? It's gonna be worse when she finds out from someone else," he explains.

And...I know that. But I can't tell her. If I can lure this person out and handle them, I can sleep easy again and not worry about losing Layla anymore. I would have staked out her fucking job if I hadn't had cars to work on here at the shop.

"I don't know who this is, or what they're capable of yet. They say I killed someone they loved who didn't deserve it, and that...fucking worries me. It's the words of someone who may try to flip the same scenario on *me*."

He seems to understand where I'm going with it, and he rubs the back of his neck. "You've never killed someone you weren't one-hundred percent sure of, right?"

"Never," I answer immediately. Never have I ever been unsure. I extensively check each bastard I hunt, and usually they're begging and apologizing the moment I come for them. I can't think of one of them that could have ever been thought not guilty.

"Then why would they say that?"

"Fuck if I know. Probably some sort of sympathizer who thinks the person they love could *never* do something like *that*." I motion dramatically with my hands, and scoff. "Whoever it is, they're *done*. I'm going to find a way to entrap them and tie up the loose end. I'll bury them with my mask and be done."

"For her? You're stoppin'?" I nod once, and he slaps my back. "Good job, old man. I think you've found a good one. You know I'm here to help you make it happen."

I'd never drag anyone into my mess, not even Mason. I don't need anyone's help. I'll get this person on my own, and instead of dedicating myself to killing to compensate for my sins...I'll dedicate my life to Layla. I'll make her happy. I'll keep her safe. I'll give her everything she's ever wanted. And maybe one day...I'll have made up for a fraction of the two lives I didn't save.

"Anyway, I asked what they want, and nothing. I'm just waiting."

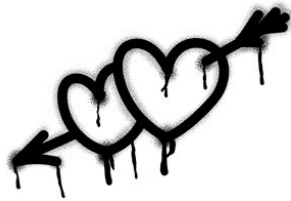
"Just keep me in the loop, at least."

A novel for your next quiet moment.

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Before I can reply, the bathroom door opens and some steam escapes as she steps out. Her bright hair is darkened by the water, and her skin is glowing from whatever the hell she's put on it. "Um, you mentioned burgers before?" she asks, and Mason and I both laugh and I stand up straight again.

"Yes, sweetheart. I'll get on it now."



When dinner is over, she moves to grab her plate, and I put my hand on her shoulder to keep her seated. "Don't do anything, I'll always clean up when I cook for you." She looks conflicted, but nods and thanks me in that angelic voice.

Just being around her will give you a toothache.

When I finish up the dishes, she's already laying on the couch, waiting for me. I was not prepared for how weirdly...*domestic* this feels. I don't know how to cope with the fact I'm suddenly responsible for this girl, and suddenly...she's mine.

I have someone to take care of again.

It feels...right. I feel needed again. Like my life finally has a purpose, because someone depends on me again.

"Hurry up, we should watch something to get in the mood for the season. They're playing *Halloween* right now."

"You like scary movies?"

"Sometimes. I mean I love *spooky* movies. Sometimes I get scared watching scary movies. But I think you'd rather watch a scary one," she explains.

I take a seat next to her. "I don't really like watching movies, anyway. You can put on anything, I'll probably fall asleep."

She laughs and gets comfortable against me. "But do you like Halloween?"

"Not really."

"But you wear a mask!"

"That's for disguise, not for a fun costume," I remind her.

"But I like it. You should wear it for fun, too."

"For fun, huh? What are you trying to ask me, sweetheart?" I take a piece of her hair and rub the end of it with my fingers.

"What! N-no I didn't mean like that! I mean, because you don't seem like you have a lot of fun. And like...you can totally try to uh, I don't know. I lost my train of thought," she rambles, and I know she's nervous.

"That's the only fun I'd be willing to have in it. I can't be seen with it in public, Layla. It's dangerous."

"So...you'd wear it for me? If I asked?" she tests, looking down as she plays with the seam of her shirt.

"Are you asking?"

"I guess...I'm curious," she says softly, and I can tell she wants to say something.

"Hm? About what, sweetheart?" I ask, releasing her hair and putting my arm up over the back of the couch.

"I'm curious what it feels like to have sex with The Hangman."

Fuck. Those words go straight to my dick. "Yeah? You want to know what it's like to be fucked by a killer, little girl?"

"Show me, daddy."

That's it. I *need* this fucking distraction. I've spent the entire day anxiously pacing around, fucked up while I worked in the shop. Now...I need my pretty distraction.

I stand and walk over to the side table that sits by my front door. I open the small drawer where I keep my mask and gloves, and slip only the gloves on, holding the mask in my hand. When I turn to look at her, she's blushing. How much does she really want, though?

"You sure this is what you want, Layla? Because The Hangman isn't as patient as I am."

She nods quickly, and I grin. "Okay," I say, lifting the mask to my head and starting to slip it on. "I'll give you a head start to get downstairs before I get my hands on you, unless you want Mason to hear what I'm about to do to you." She stands up, like she isn't sure if I'm serious.

No, baby. If you asked for it, I'm going to give you exactly what you're asking for.

“Go, because once I have you alone, I'm going to show you what it's like to be fucking owned by me.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We Get To Use My Toys

LAYLA



He watches me as I pass him, like a predator hunting their prey. For the first time, I think I can finally understand those romance books I had read before. I never understood why you'd want someone to talk to you like that, or even chase you.

The idea of a masked man coming after me? Terrifying.

But Kane...

Everything he does excites me. I didn't expect the thrill that comes with having someone safe in your life to explore things like this with. And maybe I'm never going to feel fully healed or normal...but that's okay with me. Because when I'm with him, I feel like I'm the luckiest girl alive.

I go down the stairs, and I can hear him slowly coming down after me; his boots thick and heavy against the wood. What will he really do to me? And how do you have sex in a car garage?

When I turn the corner, there's a muscle-looking car parked in the shop, but it's too dark to tell what it is. There are just tools everywhere and cold concrete. It's pitch black, but there's a bright red light that emanates from the garage door opener. It's kind of scary, and I feel a rush when I hear his boots take the last step. I turn, and he's standing in the doorway, and his dark silhouette takes it up almost entirely.

"This is your last chance to take it back, Layla."

I don't answer, and he slowly makes his way through the doorway, and he goes right to one of the workbenches. "What are you doing?" I ask. It sounds like he's rummaging through something.

He turns back around and walks over to me. "You trust me?"

"Yes." I don't hesitate for even a second. He grabs my arms, holding them together in front of me, and he wraps something around my wrists.

When I hear the familiar noise, I realize it's a zip tie.

"Good girl. You're going to do whatever I say, right?"

"Yes, daddy—" As I finish, he's already lifting me up and sits me on the hood of the car. "Wait, isn't this someone's car?"

"Mason can clean it again tomorrow," he casually says, and pulls my knees forward, causing me to yelp as I fall back against the hood. "Do you care about these clothes?"

My clothes? "I mean...they're just my pajamas," I reply, confused. Without missing a beat, I hear a rustle, and the sound of him unsheathing his belt knife makes my head shoot up. "What—" I hear a loud, tearing sound, and I realize he is slicing my clothes off me. The cold touch of the back of the blade bites at the bare skin of my thigh, and I whimper.

Once my bottom half is fully exposed, he slowly drags the knife up my stomach as I writhe, and he lifts it suddenly to pierce the shirt and jerks down to rip it. The cold air causes goosebumps to cover my whole body, and my nipples are hard already. I shiver as he places the flat side of the blade over my left nipple, and he just barely drags it up and down over my nipple.

"You like using toys, don't you? Well, this time, we get to use *my* toys."

I'm nervous, but it's an equal mix of anticipation and just a *little bit* of fear. There are no toys here. We're surrounded by power tools, wrenches, and car parts. So what could he possibly mean?

He moves forward, and his body heat is like fire compared to the chill from all the metal around me. He grabs my face with only one of his large hands, completely encapsulating it. His face comes close to mine until our foreheads touch. "I'm going to take good care of you tonight, little girl. I'm going to make you cum until you think you can't take it anymore, but you will, because *I'm* going to make you. Once I'm satisfied, I'm going to fuck my pussy until I cum inside you. Do you like that?"

Holyshit. This is most certainly not a side he's let me see yet. I'm so flustered by his declaration that I'm not even sure how to form words.

His hand moves to the back of my head, tugging just enough at my hair to cause me to come back from my thoughts but not hard enough to hurt. I quickly find the words that had died on my tongue, already expecting some reprimand if I didn't. "Y-yes! I like that."

"Good girl," he coos and releases my hair, though he still firmly holds my face. "You're going to let daddy fill you with his seed, right?"

We never talked about it again...but obviously this is confirmation he's fine with the implications. With the possibility of being tied to me forever. And that makes me feel happy...because it's all I want with him.

I also didn't expect it would be hot as fuck that he's insinuating he wants to impregnate me.

"Yes daddy, fill me again, please," I beg desperately, realizing I'm writhing in place just to feel friction.

"Fuck, you sound so sweet when you beg like a slut. I want to hear it all night." He releases me and steps back. Our eyes have adjusted to the darkness, so I'm sure he's reveling in me spread open for him with my hands tied on the hood. He lets himself turn, going deeper into the darkness and rummaging in a toolbox.

I feel like I should be worried, but I'm so wet right now I'd let him do anything to me.

When he comes back, I can't fully see the object in his hand. It sounds like he's assembling something; metal screwing into something else. I'm about to ask what he's doing, but then I hear something whirring.

Is that a fucking drill?

My heart is racing and I want to say something but...I told him I trusted him. I don't want to question him or make him feel like I didn't mean it—I trust him with my whole heart. I don't want to miss out on experiences because I got a little scared.

I gasp when I feel something cold shaking against my thigh. I'm not sure what it is still; but it feels like something sort of ribbed? It's thick and round, but I can't make out what kind of tool it could be.

He brings it closer, and I can feel the rounded tip of the object just *barely* touching my entrance. It's already picking up my wetness though, and I find myself trying to move forward to finally feel some sort of friction, anything.

He chuckles and moves it forward. I moan the moment the object enters me, it's already pulsating in and out. He moves his other hand to hold my other thigh down, and he keeps it at the same depth; about halfway.

It feels so good. I can feel the ribs of it rubbing against me as it spins, and the more I react to the pleasure, the more he allows inside of me. By the time he works it all the way inside of me, I'm an absolute mess. I can't count how many times I've cussed. I know he can tell I'm close, and as he moves in and out of me faster, I'm too aware that I can't move my hands as

I instinctively try to push on the object, overwhelmed with the feeling. He notices and doubles down. I cry out as I'm brought over the edge, and I think I'll finally have some reprieve.

What? He isn't stopping. Why isn't he stopping?

He clicks a button, and it speeds up. "Wait—" I cry, and he leans forward, placing his hand over my mouth.

"You did so good already baby, don't you want to give me another? I know you have a few more in you."

A few?

There's no way.

He ups his pace, and I cry out into his hand loudly as my body quickly approaches another orgasm. "See? Look at you. You feel so good, don't you? Fuck, I love hearing you scream for me."

My body is trembling, and I've never been so overstimulated in my life. It's simultaneously uncomfortable and somehow also the most *amazing* feeling. My body is screaming for me to stop it, but my body isn't mine right now.

It's Kane's.

No. It's The Hangman's.

I'm a mess, tears pricking my eyes as my body moves on its own. "Please," I beg, and my voice is barely recognizable.

"One more for me, my little slut. You're gonna give it to me, aren't you?"

I nod quickly, desperately.

He hums, and his arm starts pumping the drill and not even a moment later, I'm brought over the edge again. This time, he does as he promised and turns off the drill as he pulls it out of me slowly. "You did so good," he praises, removing his hand from my mouth, and softly rubbing my cheek.

God. I feel spent. I'm not sure I can even move. The tremors in my legs stop, and I don't even have a moment to think as he tugs on my tied wrists, helping me off the car. My legs are jelly, and he holds me so I don't fall. He pulls up his mask and kisses me deeply, our tongues mingling obscenely.

He pulls back, and he grips my hair as he gently guides me down to my knees. When I look up, I can see the skull design of his balaclava glowing from the red light. This is like every fantasy I've ever had for the last year...and yet somehow it's even better than I imagined.

I wait patiently as he undoes his belt and pants, and once he's free he immediately guides my mouth to his cock. I'm overwhelmed by his size, and I'm doing my best to keep my mouth wide as he moves in and out. "Just like that," he groans. "Let me fuck that pretty face, baby. Open wider." I try to slack my jaw, and he responds by upping his pace. The sound of his moans as he takes his pleasure somehow makes me horny all over again.

"Fuck, I can't wait anymore." He pulls out of my mouth, and I cough as drool escapes my lips. He lifts me back up and flips me over so I'm leaning on the hood, my breasts flat against it. His cock enters me easily; and my pussy is so sensitive by this point that I'm *embarrassingly* loud as he fucks me.

He grasps my hair, pulling me back enough that he can rasp in my ear. "Fuck, your cunt feels so good around my cock. Is this mine?" His arm moves around my hip, dipping down to rub my clit.

"Yes!"

"That's fucking right. It's mine. *You're* mine." He pounds me hard, and each thrust causes another moan louder than the last. "Fuck, beg me to fill this little cunt."

"Please cum inside me, daddy," I moan, and it seems like it pushes him over the edge.

"Yeah? You want me to breed you?" he groans as he fucks me deep, not letting up on my clit until my body shudders again, and we finish together.

When he pulls out, I can feel some of our mixed release dripping down my thigh, and I can feel his hand rubbing my opening. He gathers the wetness, then pushes two fingers inside of me. "You're going to keep all of it inside you, don't waste a fucking drop." He moves them in and out, making sure his cum gets deep inside.

I feel like I'm on cloud nine. Possibly slipping through it, as I'm hanging on by a thread, but...nonetheless. He turns me back over and uses his knife to cut the zip ties from my wrist, and I rub them. He easily lifts me over his shoulder, and I laugh as he slaps my ass and carries me off to bring me back upstairs.

I find my footing when he sets me down in the living room, and I quickly run to his bedroom to grab clothes for after the shower, and I pick up my phone to check if I had any texts since he's busy turning the water on.

GABI

I know your secret.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I'm a Sap

KANE



When she walks into the bathroom, she looks pale. “Are you alright? What’s wrong?” I grab her elbow, bringing her into me to check her. Was it too much? Is she in pain?

“No! I mean yes, I’m alright. It’s just...well, you might be angry.”

“This is probably the best time to tell me something that would make me angry, sweetheart,” I tease, gesturing between us.

“So...you remember how I mentioned the girl who knew about my Peter Reed theory?” I don’t like where this is going. I nod, and she continues. “I’m pretty sure she knows now that I found you.”

“Ah.” Under normal circumstances, yes, I’d be fucking stressed. I forgot about this “friend” she had mentioned, who seems to also have been trying to track me down. This girl must be behind the unknown number that’s been texting me. I should have known.

“What? You’re not mad?”

Do I tell her about the texts? I can’t show them to her, or she’ll see the threats they made, and ask questions. I just didn’t expect to suddenly feel guilty about lying to her. “I got a text from an unknown number, and I didn’t want to tell you until I knew more. But this obviously must be your little...friend. So, problem solved.” I shrug and lead her into the now steaming shower.

“Really? I can’t believe it! If she knew, she should’ve texted me. Well... I guess maybe she’s angry. I texted her back, but I don’t know what she’s gonna say. And—”

“Relax, sweetheart.” I pull her under the warm stream, and she sighs. I can see the gears turning and the anxiety creeping under the surface. “It’s okay. I’m going to handle everything, alright? I will always handle

everything for you.” She nods, trying to convince herself it's the truth as she closes her eyes and enjoys the feeling of the hot water.

It's fine. I'll have her block the girl, unsend whatever she's able to, and delete her profile on the forum. Then, I'll text the girl from my phone, letting her know that I'm aware of exactly who she is. A little threat will keep her away. If not, I'll have to make a tough choice. If she mentions the police, I'll have to make that decision *very* quickly.

“Were you going to tell me?” she asks.

“If I had to, yes,” I reply easily.

“But you might not have?”

Shit. “I wasn't trying to be secretive, but I don't think it would have been good for you to worry about something like that. I...was worried. I thought someone was stalking you.”

“So...is that why you asked me to move in? And picked me up from work?”

I shrug, working the body wash across my chest.

She turns, opening the shower curtain, and storms out. “Layla,” I call, and her eyes are teary as she looks at me.

“You didn't do any of that because you wanted to, right? It was because of that text?”

Oh. Fuck.

I did not think this through. I forgot that I need to be more careful with my wording. I'm not used to dealing with someone who gets emotional easy, and I don't want to fuck this all up.

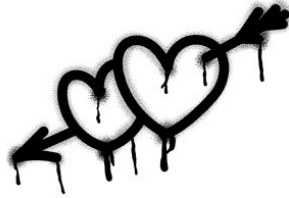
“Layla, look at me,” I insist, stepping out after her, placing my hand on her cheek. “Yes, I was driven to speed this along because of the texts. I was fucking terrified. All I know is that you're safest if I have you, and if I need to have you always, I will. If I had to lock you up and throw away the key, I would. That does *not* mean I don't want this, okay? I want you here. With me.”

If you asked me two weeks ago whether I'd be comforting a twenty-one-year-old girl because I'm too direct, while we stand naked and dripping wet in my bathroom, I'd have laughed in your fucking face.

“No matter how this started, I'm in this. I'm too damn old to play games or have misunderstandings, sweetheart. I don't have the patience or time. I would not have you here if I didn't want you. You're...everything I've ever wanted,” I admit.

Fuck, I'm a sap. What has this girl done to me?

She collides into me, and I let out a sigh of relief as I put my arms around her.



The next day went how I planned. I dropped her off and picked her up from work, and we worked on removing her profile from the forum. She had to explain to her friends *why* it was coming down, but luckily this *Gabi* girl hadn't said a word to the others yet, so we could work on the narrative before she had the chance to sway it.

She spent the night panicking because the girl is completely ignoring her. She had hoped that she could work it out with her on her own, though I knew she couldn't. My Layla is sweet, *too sweet*, not the type of girl to handle blackmailers. I had to assure her that I have it all handled a million times, but she finally believed me.

I'm paying a little visit to this Gabi today. Of course, I had to agree not to hurt her, or Layla wouldn't allow it. I texted the same number she was messaging me from to tell her I was coming to speak to her. She agreed, and said she'd be there. I have to be on high alert, because who knows what this girl has set up. Though, I'd knowingly walk into anything if it's what Layla wanted. It's on the border of Nevada, so I have to drive a couple of hours, but it's worth putting this shit behind us.

I want to focus on my new life with Layla. I'll go there, explain this to the girl, and come to some sort of mutually beneficial arrangement. Hopefully she's compliant.

"*Ben's Diner*," I repeat, as I pull into the gravel parking lot. Pretty small place—seems to be the only thing around besides a two-pump gas station for miles. Well, I guess that's for the better, in case this gets ugly.

The bell chimes as I open the door, and when I walk through, a young girl greets me. "Hi, welcome to Ben's, do you want a booth?" She's already grabbing the menu, and when I don't answer, she awkwardly turns back to me. "Sir?"

“It’s me. I came to talk.”

She looks around, furrowing her brows. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“We’ve been texting. You said we could talk this situation out so we can avoid—”

She looks genuinely confused, and I stop. I pull out my phone and read a number off to her. “Is this not your number?”

“No? I mean, that’s not even the area code here.”

“Yeah, it’s a burner. Texting app, whatever the hell it is people use these days,” I explain, hoping this somehow changes her answer. Because if it doesn’t...

“Sir, I’m going to need you to leave—”

“I’m The Hangman,” I interrupt. Her eyes go wide, and she drops the menu in her hand. I put my hands up, motioning for her to relax. “I came here because of Layla. I’ve been getting texts from this number, and you’re the only person who knows Layla has met me.”

“Look, first of all—I’ve never fucking texted you. I don’t *know* you. If I did, I’d have called the police because you’re a fucking murderer. Second—I blocked Layla, I’m fucking *done* with her, because after a year of getting to know her and being her friend, I’m finding out that she’s secretly *screwing* the serial killer who killed my fucking *brother*. So if you know what’s good for you, get the hell out of here. My last service to her is letting this whole ‘*Hangman*’ thing fucking go for my own mental health.”

Shit. I don’t even have time to think about the bomb she’s dropped about her brother, because all that’s running through my mind is that she isn’t my unknown texter. There’s someone who knows that I’m in Nevada, hours away from Layla. They fucking *planned* on it.

She immediately sees the panic settle on my face, and she must be a smart girl, because she gets exactly what it is I’m realizing. “Shit. Where is Layla?” she asks.

“No,” I accidentally say out loud, and turn to run out of the diner.

“Wait—” she calls out, but I’m already gone.

I throw my truck in gear and spin out slightly as the tires hit the road sideways, before getting back between the lines of the highway and speed. My heart is thudding so fast in my chest, and my hands shake as they clench the steering wheel tightly. I try to call her over and over, but it won’t go through in the middle of nowhere.

Fuck, Layla, I’m so sorry.

I've done it again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

My Brave Girl

LAYLA



“Life is a highway, and I’m gonna ride it all night long,” I sing along as I pipe the cupcakes. It’s actually really fun to be totally alone in the bakery while decorating. No one interrupting me, no one making loud noises and ruining the vibe. Most importantly, I can listen to my music out loud and enjoy the alone time.

God, I can’t wait to own my own bakery one day. Every day could be like this.

I don’t know how long it’ll be...but since I’ll be out of my lease, I can save more toward my own space. Obviously, it would be a lot of work, and I’d have to set something up from scratch. With Kane and Mason though, I’m sure I can make it work. Well, make *them* work.

I’m still kind of annoyed to be missing out on money tomorrow and Friday, but I’ll make the most of the extra time off. I’m hoping once Kane comes to get me later, he’ll tell me everything went fine with Gabi, and we can just put all of this behind us. I tried profusely to apologize and explain myself...but she blocked me. Maybe we weren’t the closest, but we were still friends. I feel guilty lying to them all, but I thought when the time came, they’d understand why I did this.

Ugh. I need to stop stressing over it. I have to focus on finishing these cupcakes.

I hum, swaying my hips. I reach over to grab the candy pearls, and suddenly the lights go out. *What the hell?* I panic-reach for my cell phone in my back pocket and quickly turn on the flashlight. *Crap!* Where is the breaker box? I’ve never had this happen before.

I bite my lip, considering first before I aimlessly walk around in the dark. It would be fine...except it’s so dark and rainy outside, that it’s pitch

black in the back area despite the windows in the front of the shop. I'm scared of the dark, so I don't want to freak myself out while I'm all alone.

Wait, that's right! I walk over to the other end of the long metal table and dig inside my purse. "Aha!" I find the large pocketknife of Kane's I had dropped in here from when I found it that morning. I feel a *little* bit better about wandering in the dark with a decent weapon. I guess I shouldn't have convinced Kane to watch *Scream* with me last night for spooky season.

I get it open and take a breath as I walk toward the back office. The door creaks open, creepily as shit may I add, and I'm relieved when I see the metal breaker box across the room. I take a step inside, and I hear something clang in the kitchen.

What? What the hell was that?

I totally freeze, holding my breath. No one could be in here, right? I locked the back door, didn't I? No, I must have just left something at the edge of the table. You drop things *all* the time, Layla. *Relax*. My breath is still shaky, but I turn back toward the breaker.

Okay, just get the lights on. You got this.

Suddenly, the office door slams shut. I whip around, and there's an imposing male figure standing in the dark. "K-Kane?" I ask, and the figure rushes me. My phone and knife fall to the ground, and we struggle to the floor until he pins me.

He laughs, and the sound of it makes my stomach churn. "You're even prettier in person, Layla Ryan. Surprised someone like The Hangman could leave something so precious alone like this."

"W-who are you?"

"Me? Oh honey, I'm glad you asked. We didn't get to meet properly, because when you two *broke* into my house, I unfortunately wasn't home to host."

No. Peter Reed? That's just not possible. Kane said he had no cameras, and that was—

"Honestly, I figured he'd come for me one day. I was *smarter* than him. I had hidden cameras in all the rooms of my house. Sure wasn't hard to find you, and it didn't take long for you to lead me *right* to him. Thank you, by the way," he sneers, and I try again to move. "Hey, don't beat yourself up over it. It was an honest mistake. You just aren't cut out to be in cahoots with a serial killer, Layla. I came here to *help* you."

"Help me?"

“Do you even know who you’re sleeping with, Layla? Have you ever asked him what happened to Melissa and Sadie?”

Who are they? Exes? Kane has never mentioned those names before.

“You think he’s a *good* guy? He knew Melissa was being abused, and he left her anyway. Wasn’t a surprise what happened to her once he left. Guess he has a bad habit of leaving girls to fend for themselves, huh?” His hand runs down my cheek, and I whip my face to the side to avoid his touch.

God, I’m tearing up. What’s he going to do to me? I can’t even process anything he’s saying about Kane while my body is stuck in fight or flight like this.

“How about this? You’re either with me, or you’re against me. Kane Mercer is done for. I’m going to send all the evidence I have to the police. If you’re good, I’ll delete the files that talk about you. Aiding and abetting a serial killer is a *crime*, Layla. You might go to federal prison for helping someone like him. That’s not what you want, right?”

Come on, Layla! Think! Speak! *Do fucking anything!*

His hand grips my neck when I don’t reply, and he asks again. I shake my head quickly, and he releases. “That’s what I thought you’d say. Why don’t we start by you thanking me for even offering, huh? I bet you can show me how grateful you are. We’ll just have fun until he comes, that way he can watch right before I finally ruin his life. It’s kind of poetic—”

I can’t take another second of this. Is he really bringing the cops here? He can’t be. I can’t let him. He’s clearly got no problem doing whatever he has to do to win. He can’t *kill* me, right? Or else what would he tell the police? I’m not sure if I really wanna test that theory right now...but I don’t know what else to do. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Ah, I knew you were smarter than you looked.” He lifts himself from on top of me, and it’s just enough room for me to lean over and reach for the knife. He immediately realizes I’m reaching for something, though it’s still too dark in here to see. He immediately grabs my arm, and I struggle as I try to move myself forward on the floor to get closer. “You bitch!”

I feel the edge of my phone, but just as it’s almost in my grasp, he gets to it before my shorter arms can reach. “You wanted this?” He holds it up, and I can see Kane calling as his contact flashes on my screen.

He slides to answer, and I scream. “Kane! It’s P—” He puts his hand over my lips to muffle me, and I try to scream through them, but it’s unintelligible.

“Your girl is waiting, Hangman. Oh, that’s right. You left, again. You knew there was danger, but you went anyway. Jeez, why does that sound so familiar?” He laughs and hangs up right as Kane tries to speak. He tosses my phone across the room, making it hit the wall and shatter. “Anyway, where were we?”

I try to kick him in the balls, but he grabs my leg. “You’re going to regret this. I don’t mind doing this the hard way.” He grips my hip, and I yelp as his nails dig into the skin. I keep reaching around, panicking as I beg the universe to let me feel the knife.

Please, let me feel it.

I can feel his hot breath on my face as he comes close to me, and I wince as I suddenly feel the blade cut the tip of my finger. *Yes!*

“I’ve been watching you all week. And let me tell you honey, I—”

I bite through the pain as I grasp the sharp edge of the blade, turning it over in my hand and holding tight. I’m trying to be careful, because I’m only going to have one chance to do this. If he knows I have a knife, I’m done.

“—I like what I see.” He goes on, but I’m not even listening to what he’s saying.

I’m trying to focus on his silhouette, because I can’t really make it out in the dark. *Shit.* I can’t just...wave a knife around trying to stab him in the right place!

I can see part of his head, or at least the outline of it. Maybe if I just go for the side of his head, it’ll work? Like in slasher movies?

Okay, Layla. Hold it tight. Summon the “final girl” energy.

I swiftly lift my arm, and I whip my hand straight up toward where I think his head is as hard as I possibly can.

Wait...did I do it?

I hear choking noises, and suddenly his grip loosens, and I wiggle out from underneath him. I jump up and feel all over the walls until I finally run into the breaker box, and fumble as I try to get it open, flicking all the switches to the right again.

The lights immediately return, and when I turn around, I scream.

Like, *actually* scream as if I’m in a scary movie.

My whole body is shivering from the anxiety, and I try to regulate my breathing as I see his dead body bleeding out on the floor of my boss’s office, with the knife sticking right out of his neck.

Shit. Shit! I killed someone! I—okay. *Breathe.* It was him or you, Layla. You had to do it, or he'd have hurt you. *Right?* I shake my hands at my sides, trying not to freak out. What do you do when you kill someone? Do I have to hide the body? Oh *crap*, I have to hide it, don't I? I lay back against the wall and let myself slide down until I'm sitting with my knees up against my chest.

I don't know what to do. My hands and clothes are covered in blood. I'm a murderer now, aren't I? I'm going to jail?

I don't know how long I sit there for until I hear the office door being busted down, and I finally see him. "Kane?" I ask quietly, tears in my eyes.

"Layla," he replies, rushing over to me, and completely ignoring the corpse in the room. "Fuck, sweetheart, please tell me you're okay."

"I-I'm fine. It isn't my blood."

"Not your blood? Look at your hand." He lifts up my right hand, and I remember that I had grabbed the blade with it. Why don't I feel pain, then? "Shit, Layla. You could've lost a lot of blood. You didn't know?" I don't answer, and he pulls the cloth handkerchief from his pocket and wraps it around my hand like a tourniquet.

"I killed him."

"Yeah, good riddance."

"No, Kane. I *killed* him. Like, I actually murdered someone."

"And?" He looks at me as if I have two heads.

"And...that's bad. I mean, what are we gonna do?"

"Sweetheart, do you know who you're talking to right now?" I guess... he's right. But this isn't normal. And I most definitely don't think my boss can ignore a giant blood stain. "Look at me. You did so good, Layla, my brave girl. You did the right thing. There's one less bad guy on the streets now. That's because of *you*. I—" he pauses, taking a breath as he pets my head. "It doesn't matter what I thought. You're here, and that's all that matters. I will fix everything else. I promised, didn't I?"

I nod, and the tears spill down without a second thought. "I love you. I was so scared I'd never be able to tell you that."

"I love you. I was too," he says with a sigh, putting our heads together. "I don't know how to be the perfect guy for you. I might fuck this up a million more times, but I will never in my life let you out of my sight again, do you hear me?" I nod, and I feel terrible that he's blaming himself for what happened. "Come on, baby. I have a mess to clean up."

He helps me up and reaches down to take the knife out of Peter's neck. "I was looking for this." A small, breathy laugh escapes me, and he follows suit. "Well, Mason's already on the way. Couldn't reach him for hours, but I got him right before I pulled up. We're gonna handle this, and I'm gonna take you home."

I nod, but the question is nipping at the back of my mind. I want to ask...not because it would change anything; because I want to know him completely. But maybe he isn't ready yet, and I think that's okay. He's never pushed me for anything. "You don't have to tell me who Melissa and Sadie are. It doesn't matter what kind of mistakes you've made because...I know your heart. So when you're ready, you can tell me."

"I should have told you when you asked me why. I won't get into the details. Melissa was my little sister, and Sadie was her daughter. I...was deployed when they were killed by her abusive ex. I had fought with her because she went back to him again, and I didn't know how else to get through to her. I chose myself for once and ignored her letters for a few months. Next thing I know..."

"Kane, I'm so sorry."

"No. I shouldn't have done it. I felt sick to my stomach when I read those letters I had left unopened. She was desperately trying to seek help and I...fucking ignored her. If I had just not been so stubborn and—"

"You can't take the past back. I know I wish I could. If I could go back...I'd do everything differently. I'd have saved myself, too. So I guess what I'm trying to say is, everyone feels like that. All you can do is move forward. I bet they both adored you as much as I do, and so I can tell you for a fact they'd forgive you."

He doesn't answer, but his jaw clenches before he breaks out a half smile. "Come on, baby. Let's get you the hell out of this room and cleaned up."

"Okay," I answer, my smile wide as he leads me out of the office.



It was an eventful week, and yes, I somehow got *The Hangman* to attend a pumpkin patch with me, and he even won me a plushie at the strongman game. I'm not sure what he and Mason did with Peter Reed, but I know wherever he is, he'll definitely rot in hell for his crimes. I don't know if I'm over it...but I'll get there.

Because I found the person I will love forever, and I'm thankful for what I have.

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Epilogue

KANE - 5 years later

“Daddy! Hurry!”

“Yes, Hal,” I concede, letting her drag me away from the car I’m working on in the shop and up the steps.

“Okay,” she says. She has a determined look on her face as she holds her hands out to stop me from walking any further into the apartment. Bacon immediately runs over to me, and I bend down to greet him. He’s a bit slower in his old age, but he never forgets to come see me whenever I come back inside.

“Hallie, I told you we can’t let Daddy in yet. I didn’t get the candles.” Layla slides past her, a knowing smile on her face as she comes over and puts her arms around my neck. Her lips find mine, and I hold her close.

“Hurry! I want to do the birthday!”

We both laugh, and I reluctantly pull away. My girls lead me over to the kitchen, and sitting there, my annual batch of chocolate cupcakes. She recreates them for me every year, with her little helper.

Maybe “helper” isn’t really the right word, more like batter thief.

“Happy birthday.” Layla beams with a smile, getting up on her toes and kissing my cheek.

“Happy birthday, Daddy!” Hallie cheers, clapping. “Make a wish!”

“Ah, same wish as always, Hal.”

“Mommy, can we eat the cupcakes now?”

“Yes, yes.” Layla waves her over to the counter, and Hallie jumps up and down and reaches over the counter to grab one. “But Uncle Mason is on his way,” she reminds gently, and Hallie happily agrees as she sits on the couch to eat her well-deserved cupcake.

“You should enjoy your first round of dessert,” Layla whispers in my ear, trying to turn and walk away but I slap her ass before she can move too far.

“Be careful, or I’ll put another baby in you this time,” I warn.

She laughs, walking off and I pick up a cupcake. I still remember it. Though I was livid at the time, I didn’t know I’d be sitting here years later

having the same cupcake baked special just for me. That I'd be married and in love and have a beautiful daughter to raise, that the absolutely crazy girl who hunted me down somehow has become the best thing that has ever happened to me.

I was able to grieve Mel and Sadie and move on. I came to terms with my sin, and for *her*, I made myself find peace. Now, their picture frame hangs proudly in the hallway, and I'm not ashamed to show them my life.

I somehow evaded police, skillfully handled Peter Reed, and even Gabi went back to ghosting after she made sure Layla was okay. She eventually convinced me to let her tell her other friends from the forum, which... surprisingly went well.

Her best friend Crystal actually ended up becoming way more involved in my life than I ever imagined. She absolutely hated Mason when they met and dubbed him a Casanova. We thought they both hated each other, until we caught them fucking in the bathroom at Layla's birthday last year. They still bicker, but I think Mason is happy.

And Layla...shines more every single day of her life. I helped her secure the small space for rent across the street from the shop, and Mason and I built it into her own little bakery. It sure took a long time and a chunk of my savings, but it was worth making her dreams come true.

She was over the moon when she found out about Hallie, even though we were still dealing with some emotional aftermath. She was born to be a mother. Watching her blossom into a confident and happy woman has made me the proudest and luckiest man on earth.

I don't know if I deserve my girls, but I'll sure as shit force myself to live right until I do.

Soon the door bursts open, and Mason walks in with Crystal as Hallie launches herself off the couch to run to him. "Uncle Mason!"

"Hey kiddo," he grins, lifting her up dramatically and swaying her before holding her in his arms. "You ready to go hang out? Maybe we'll go to the movies?"

"And ice cream?"

"Yes, of course, how could I forget that?" He laughs, turning to me. "Happy birthday, old man. You still not at retirement age, huh?"

"Shut it."

"Crys! Here, take some cupcakes with you guys we made way too many, as usual." Layla rushes over, holding Hallie's jacket.

“We’ll be back later,” Mason calls out, and Crystal waves at us as she follows him out.

“Ah, kidless once again,” I point out, immediately grabbing her ass and pulling her toward me.

“Quite the birthday present,” she teases.

“All I want right now is you, sweetheart.”

“Well, you can have me.”

“I know,” I say, picking her up suddenly, and she giggles as I bring her into the bedroom and toss her onto the bed. “And today, daddy wants another show.”

“Anything you want,” she sweetly agrees, slipping her dress off slowly. I palm my hard cock through my jeans, watching my wife undress and tease me.

“Bend over and show me my pussy,” I order, and she easily complies. She puts her supple ass up in the air for me and reaches underneath to spread her pink pussy open for me. She rubs it slowly, spreading her wetness all over herself. “Fuck, that greedy cunt is just begging to be filled, isn’t it?”

“Yes daddy,” she moans, rubbing her clit.

I give my cock a final squeeze as I stalk over to the nightstand, opening a drawer and pulling out the Magic Wand. I crawl onto the bed, slapping her ass hard enough to elicit a yelp. “Flip.”

She turns over, laying on her back and spreading herself open for me. I can see the excitement in her eyes as I finally release my cock. I touch the end of the wand to her clit, and she immediately moans. “How many times are you gonna cum for me?”

“Ah—as many as you say,” she croaks out, already lost in pleasure from the quick vibration.

“That’s a good girl,” I praise, pressing it firmly against her clit. “Rub those pretty nipples, just like that. Good slut.”

She looks like a fucking porn star; losing herself in pleasure while I get a front row seat. It’s all fucking mine. Her first orgasm is quick, and once her fourth hits, it comes even faster. I don’t stop until she’s begging and shaking. She’s only able to mutter a weak “*please*.”

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you, baby,” I mock, sliding my cock easily inside her. “I think you can cum again. I wanna feel that cunt squeeze me.” I move quickly inside her, pressing the wand back down on her clit,

and she claws at my arm as she gets close to her fifth orgasm. “Already? You just can’t wait to cum on my cock, can you slut?”

She can’t form a reply beyond an attempt at nodding, and her pussy clamps down on my cock as she cums on it.

“Fuck, one more. You can do it for me can’t you baby? You can take it,” I grunt, pounding myself deep inside her as she screams my name, moaning so loud I wouldn’t be surprised if people could hear her from the street below. “That’s it, fucking cum,” I growl, and as her pussy grips me again as pleasure floods her, my cock pulsates inside her. I toss the wand to the side to give her a break as I finish riding out my release.

She’s boneless against the bed, and she chuckles when she realizes how wrecked she is. I smile, leaning over to kiss her. I pull back to admire her, and she smiles up at me. Our fingers intertwine as I press my lips back into hers.

I’m so lucky I found you, my girl.

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About the Author

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I can't wait to continue to share my journey with you guys.

P.S. My family seriously can't read this one. Friends...already pushing it, but I'll allow it.

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