
CROWNS & COLLARS
THE
Midnight
CONTRACT
DAISY JANE

The Midnight Contract

CROWNS & COLLARS
BOOK ONE

DAISY JANE

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Contents

Foreword

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
The Blackwood Contract

Curious about the others?…
Acknowledgments

About the Author
Also by Daisy Jane

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To the readers who want to escape and dream of a life where a rich, filthy-mouthed hung hunk knows just what you need and only has eyes for you. Enjoy Cassian Blackwood.

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Foreword

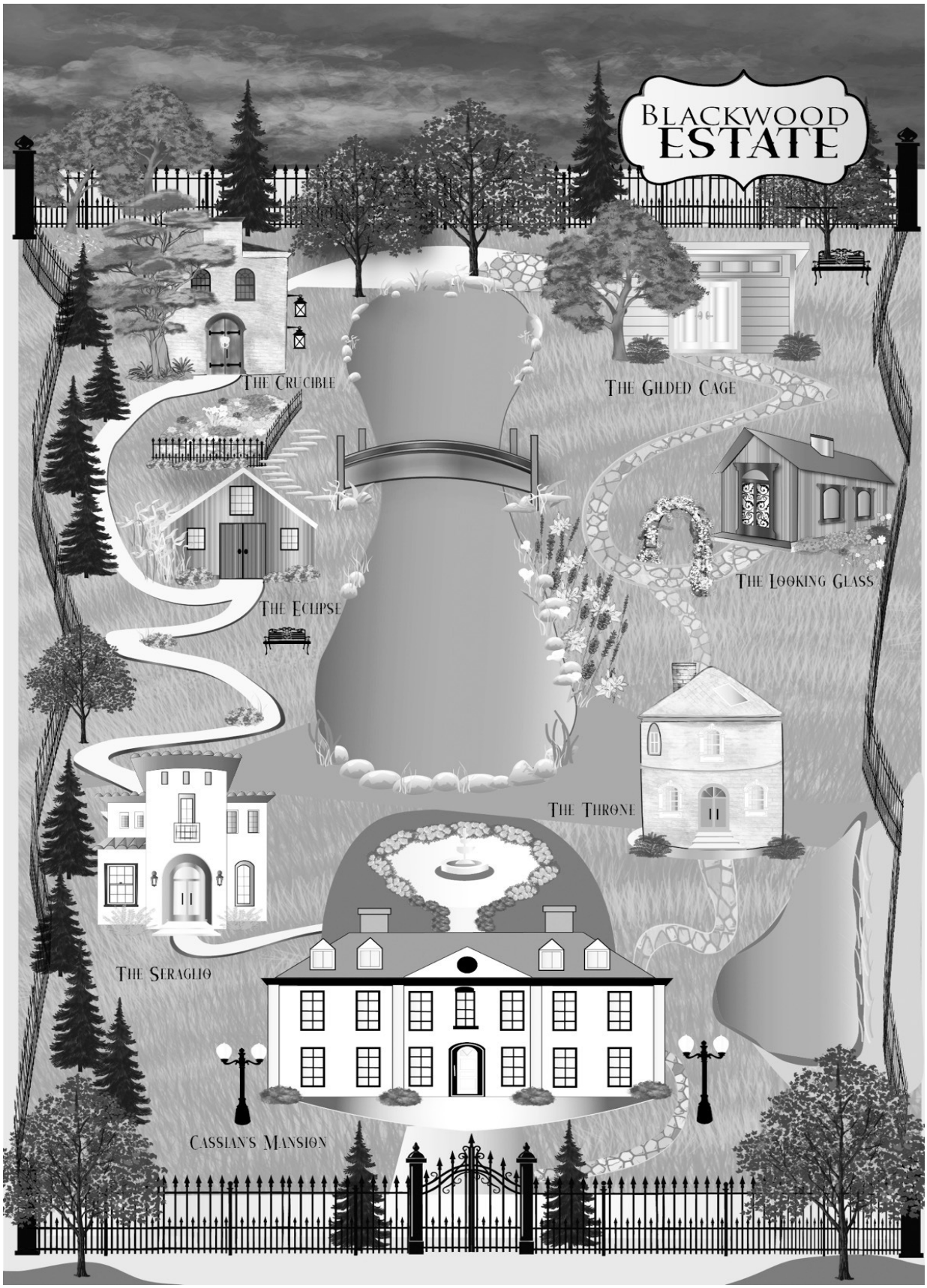
This book was inspired by the classic story of Cinderella. With that said, I want to be transparent about the content and potential advisories inside, as this book is very naughty and quite kinky.

This book contains:

- Off-page violence
- Off-page excessive alcohol consumption
- On-page anxiety and panic attacks
- The following consensual kinks:
  - Verbal degradation
  - Fluid play (including watersports)
  - Bondage
  - Pain exploration
  - Subservience (kneeling, crawling)
  - Heavy toy usage (wands, clamps, etc)
  - Group sex scenes (not including MCs)
  - Sex club scene settings

Please read accordingly.

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BLACKWOOD ESTATE
THE CRUCIBLE
THE GILDED CAGE
THE LOOKING GLASS
THE ECLIPSE
THE THRONE
THE SERAGLIO
CASSIAN'S MANSION

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CHAPTER

One

ELEANORA

THE WORKROOM TUCKED behind Moreau Boutique smells of starch and floral fabric softeners, both scents I've come to absolutely loathe after all these years. I imagine baristas feel the same way, starting their jobs in love with the smell of roasted beans and frothy, sweet morning drinks, only to seriously despise them two months later when they realize people will go scorched Earth over a cup of joe. I'm the barista of the Moreau workroom, it seems.

I sit at the long cutting table under the industrial tube light, the one that flickers and creaks intermittently day and night, the only light Vivian has had installed. Outside, Manhattan moves in glittering indifference, laughter carried on a breeze, shuffling feet happily discovering new shops, cabs honking for attention or out of aggravation, the whoosh of street sweepers taking away the mess of humanity. Life exists boldly and glaringly outside of this workroom and yet inside, the air is stifled and warm, heavy with the weight of unfinished work and dying dreams.

My dying dreams.

I guide the needle through midnight silk with the careful precision my father showed me when I was young, before he died and my world narrowed to this room.

Okay, not *just* this room since Vivian does allow me to have a second room, where I sleep—the attic above the main house.

Benevolent, right? That's my stepmommy, kind and giving through and through. She hates sarcasm, so in my head, where she can't hear me, I am the sarcastic queen.

When I'm done with my stitches, I tie off the thread, cut it, and slip the work onto the waiting form.

I've been working back here for twelve hours today, which isn't abnormal in the least. The gown on the form is almost finished, and I roll back in my chair, tipping my head to the side to take it in. Warmth crawls up my spine as I survey yet another beautiful couture gown designed and hand-sewn by me.

And this one is a personal favorite.

An evening gown commissioned by a woman who will never know the hands that created it, who will never have heard about the person who dreamed this design up when she was just fifteen years old and still tucked flowers behind her ear in the garden while sketching in an old Mead notebook.

The woman who ordered this will receive a piece of art, call it a dress and give all the credit to Vivian. I can already envision her smiling that hideous, thin-lipped, controlled smile. Those people that aren't veterans that dress up like they've been in the Army, just to get acclaim—stolen valor, that's what it's called. That's Vivian, stealing my credit.

I guess stealing credit for dresses isn't as important or serious as *actual* stolen valor, but still. That's what she does. Steals all my credit. Claims everything is her.

My shoulders ache as I roll them back before returning to the dress to continue sewing, placing the final few stitches on the piping along the full skirt.

The woman who is going to wear this dress is likely going to attend a fundraiser where she'll drink too much and get too handsy with men who aren't her husband. Maybe she'll wear it to an opening of something ridiculous and walk over a lush, red carpet to enter. The truth is, whoever bought this dress has the freedom to wear it whenever she wants. She could wear it to pick up her groceries—if she even does her own shopping. She could even wear it to grab her kids from school—again, if she doesn't have a person like me doing that for her, too.

But still, she *could* because she's free.

Freedom.

A noun that most people live their entire lives without thinking about. But it's all I ever think about. With every stitch, every sad little spoonful of soup, every night I lay shivering because Vivian has made me make due with a thin old blanket for years—freedom echoes through my veins and dances in my mind.

Getting it, having it, keeping it, *cherishing it*.

But I don't speak of it out loud. There's no point. Who would listen or more than that, who would care? *Vivian?* My stepsisters? Those are the only three people who know I exist, more or less, outside of Fred, the man who collects the garbage and sometimes sneaks me snacks.

To preserve my peace, I only let *freedom* live in the quiet spaces between stitches, in the tiny places where my mind wanders while my fingers work. Sometimes I imagine walking out the alley door and simply not stopping. Not heading back to the main house, not veering away to throw trash into the can, not doubling back to the shop for one last thing but just *walking*.

Walking until my worn shoes fall off, until the orange sky turns black, until I'm somewhere new, I'm someone else, in a place where I can truly exist.

But I can't.

I'm tethered here by Vivian's hand, by my actions, and by the leverage she holds over my head like a guillotine waiting to decapitate me. Sometimes I think being actually decapitated would be less painful than being an invisible prisoner, but still, the leverage keeps me in line.

I place the last seam on the skirt and stretch back against the chair, a pounding pain running through my lumbar, circling my spine. The light above hums. Somewhere in the shop out front, Tess and Fern chat, their dulled voices carrying through the closed door. I reach beneath the table, past the scrap bins and the tub of various measuring tapes and spare zippers, and pull out my sketchbook.

The cover is plain black, the kind sold in bulk at any grocery store or any art supply store, meant for a fourth grader heading back to school. Nothing about it invites attention and that's precisely why I order it each time I order new needles and threads. So Vivian doesn't take interest, though to be fair, if it doesn't have celebrity drama in glossy photos on it, it likely won't garner her interest. Still, I can't take chances.

I open it to the middle.

The sketches in these pages of my private sketchbook are not like the sketches I make for Vivian's clients. *Those* sketches are made of clean architectural lines, details like fabric and thread options in the margins, notes on ways to dress it up or down. Length options. Bodice fits. *Logical things.*

These, on the other hand, are something else entirely.

I run my hand over a sketch I made a few weeks back, one of a gown whose bodice laces closed with a long satin ribbon that can be pulled tight, then released with one deliberate tug. The corseted bodice suggests restraint rather than support, and with it, a skirt that parts along hidden seams to reveal nothing—or everything—depending on the wearer's choice.

My pulse quickens the way it always does when I look at my private designs. When I think of the secret things that my body craves.

These are the designs I sketch for myself in the few hours a night that belong to me. They live in the same private place as the rest of my desires, the ones I learned to keep silent. Desires are dangerous for a bird in a cage. I've seen that come to painful fruition, with high stakes and glaring outcomes.

A memory surfaces as I stare down at my design. My father's hands guiding mine over a piece of ivory duchesse, his voice low and amused. *Feel how it wants to move, Nora. Don't fight the fabric. Listen to it.* He always smelled a little overworked, but like cedar and citrus, too, which was his favorite soap. The memory of him holds the usual sharp tinge of guilt, one that has never dulled, not even a flicker, in ten years. I've only learned how to better work with the pain slicing into me, learned how to speak and move while bloated and riddled with guilt and that familiar pain.

I close my eyes for a moment and let it pass through me the way I always do, the way I believe he would want me to. I acknowledge the pain, the way I fiercely miss him, and then, in order to keep going, I lock it all away again.

I turn to another page.

A new sketch rests against the faded blue lines, half-finished. A column of dark silk with a high collar that can be unfastened only from the back, the buttons covered in fabric, set close together and deliberately complex. Something about the lines make my breath catch. I reach for a pencil, sharpening it quickly, and refine the fall of the fabric at the hip, adding a subtle asymmetry that draws the eye before denying it.

But footsteps echo near the workroom off of the boutique, so I shut the sketchbook and quickly slide it back into its hiding place beneath the table. By the time the door opens, I'm already on my feet, hands folded in front of me, expression purposefully and cautiously blank, giving her not even an inch to work with.

Vivian Moreau steps into the workroom wearing the same pale silk blouse she wears every Wednesday. Her perfume hits my nostrils, making my eyes sting from the pungent floral scent, slightly too sweet, too sharp, *too her.*

"You're still here," Vivian says, as though I have a choice in the matter, as though I'm not here at this time every day for the last ten years. The willpower it takes to not roll my eyes.

I deserve the willpower award.

Her gaze moves over the gown on the form, assessing critically, like she'd know couture if it bit her in her tight ass, like she'd know style if it were her name for God's sake. "The Dalton gown needs to be ready by ten. Mrs. Dalton is particular about the drape at the shoulder. Fix it."

"Yes, Vivian." *Yes, Vivian* are the top two words in my spoken vocabulary. *Fuck off Viv* are the top three words in my *mental* vocabulary.

"I've fixed the drape," I reply, because I have, not because I feel like arguing. She eyes the dress on the other form, apparently Mrs. Dalton's dress, a dress which will be worn for three drunken hours before it's shoved to the back of an overstuffed closet, by the way.

Her eyes narrow. "Less dramatic. I know everything with you is bold and over the top," she says, popping her hands sardonically. "But less is more for the rest of the couture world." She presses her lips into a thin line, taking amusement in talking to me this way. "Fix it," she says, without even giving the gown another glance.

Her eyes linger for a moment, searching for something to criticize, I'm sure. Finding nothing immediate, she turns to go, but pauses with her hand stretched in the open doorframe.

"And Nora." My name lands like a dart against a board, pointed and slightly off. I know what's coming, because each time I fight for my work or point out anything at all, I receive the same threat, the same reminder. "Remember, your grandmother's care is not inexpensive. Neither are keeping certain histories quiet."

The door closes behind her, leaving me in the workroom with the threat I've heard so many times, it'd lose meaning if it were possible. But she's got me and she knows it.

I glare at the closed door, poking holes in her words. Actually, keeping my history quiet has no price for her. She simply keeps her mouth closed, and that's free. But I swear the woman gets off on threatening me, reminding me daily of all the ways in which she can make my already limp and boring life much worse.

And though I haven't an ounce of respect for her, I obey her because I believe her.

She can make it worse. And she will, if she needs to.

Alone again, beneath the flickering light, I stare at the silk on the form next to the finished gown, waiting for me, patient and perfect. I pick up my needle and return to the shoulder seam on Mrs. Dalton's dress, each stitch even, invisible, and exact. Just the way he taught me.

Somewhere in the city, people are preparing for evenings that belong to them. Somewhere, someone might wear a gown that has been designed without fear, by someone happily living their dream, by a seamstress who is allowed to live in more than two rooms.

I keep my head bent and my hands steady.

The sketchbook remains beneath the table, hidden, its pages full of things I'm not supposed to want and things I'll never get to make.

I finish Mrs. Dalton's gown before dawn and sleep for a few hours on the narrow cot in the corner, not bothering to wade through the streets this late, only to go up to my cold room above the house.

And tomorrow I will do it all again, with no end in sight.

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CHAPTER
Two

CASSIAN

THE LATEST PACKAGE from Moreau Boutique arrived this morning, the earliest delivery my FedEx man can make—just shy of six A.M. I think he prefers delivering to the mansion early in the morning, when the place isn't shrouded by perpetual twilight and purposefully mysterious lighting.

There's a quiet urgency in his steps when he runs back to his big white truck after an evening or late night delivery, but when I watched him on the security cameras this morning, he had a cool saunter, one that comes with sunlight and likely knowing the odd recluse whom you are delivering to isn't going to jump down from an oak tree and scare the bejesus out of you.

Sure, I'm making assumptions, but after ten years of not leaving my house, I've come to learn and accept a few things.

Manhattan knows me only as the man who owns the estate that puts all other estates to shame, the man with so much money he'll never be able to spend it all, and the man who, once a year, opens his gates for the Midnight Masquerade. Beyond that I am rumor, ledger, signature. A name without a face. Which suits me perfectly. Faces are overrated and, in my particular case, actively hostile.

I call for my assistant as I stare down at the package, heart racing, palms sweating. Rich beyond measure or not, there are only a few things left in this life that I enjoy, that bring me fulfillment and moreover—that make me feel good.

Fashion is the only thing that still makes me feel slightly less like a monster occupying my own skin. Cloth does not flinch when I touch it. Silk does not ask questions. A perfectly cut suit can, for a few hours, persuade me that the body inside it is tolerable.

David opens the door to my third floor office, where I reside for most hours of the day. After all, recluse doesn't quite have that twinge of interest if it isn't also tethered to *ungodly, filthy rich*. So I work here in my home, in this particular room, for most of the day. "Good morning," he greets, snicking the door shut behind him.

Typically, we leave it open, but because there are tons of people here preparing for my annual party, it must remain closed. When the usual staff is here, it's okay. But temporary staff means I must stay hiding within my hiding, no ifs, ands or buts.

I tip my head in greeting as I shove my hands into my pockets, rocking on my feet. "Good morning, David. Would you mind unpacking these and hanging them there?" I nod, but he doesn't have to look because there's always an empty rack in my office waiting on the day the Moreau shipment arrives.

He'll move them to my private dressing room this evening, but on the day they arrive, I like to be in the same room with them. Look at them. Take breaks from insidious phone calls with greedy people and lose myself in just the fantasy of what they offer.

Fine. I'm a little weird about my suits. But they are one of the only things that make my skin hum, that make me feel like I could, if I wanted to, live beyond this estate. Nothing makes me feel the way these suits do.

I watch as David unpacks the velvet garment bags from the box, the metal snick of hanger on rack nearly flooding my mouth with saliva. When he finishes, he collects the empty box, promises breakfast will be up shortly, and leaves, of course closing the door behind him.

Outside, a bird cries for its mate and a gentle November wind licks at the stone walls of my home. A delivery truck sounds its hazardous reverse noises, and decorators arguing over where to hang my tapestries echo from somewhere in the mansion. But even still, alone in my office, nothing is louder than the anticipatory thudding in the hollow of my throat.

The sealed garment bags tempt and tease me from the rack, their zippers a barrier to the beauty and awe waiting inside. I swallow against the knot of

desire, feeling myself thicken between my thighs, and tug at the soft black silk resting against my cheekbone.

Closing the few steps between myself and the bags, I work down the line, the metallic whoosh of teeth unzipping, making sweat bead along my spine. Once they're all open, I take a step back, and shake my head, arousal and enchantment surging through my veins, coiling at the base of my spine.

God, they are exquisite.

I should have mentioned before, I don't *only* order suits. Though I order plenty of them, for myself and everyone who works at my estate, or works at my club, *Veil.* What started as wanting the boutique to believe I held onto some normalcy in my reclusive life in the form of having a partner, has now given way to a second obsession, and a far-fetched dream.

I can't stop ordering gowns as well as suits, and dreaming of a woman who may one day live here with me and wear them. Though I realize that won't happen. I only interact with the world once a year, and in ten years, that hasn't led to a single date.

And what if a woman at my ball did want a date? Would I even reveal myself to her, as in, tell her I am that Cassian Blackwood who has stashed himself away in a tower like Rapunzel? No. And for laughs, let's say that I was so taken with someone that I did share my identity, that means I'd have to take off this mask and let someone see me for who I am now.

Never.

Admitting I am Cassian Blackwood isn't the hurdle. It's taking off my mask that prevents me from letting anyone know who I am.

Still, I order gowns once a month and fill a closet for a woman who does not exist, not hiding this from David, or my brother Lucien, the two who know me best, who I am closest with.

I can't weather their sad stares, so I take the dresses to the other closet myself.

I lift the first gown—a column of smoke-grey silk that looks almost severe until the light catches the microscopic beadwork at the hem, each crystal placed so the fabric will move like liquid metal when the wearer walks. The second is black velvet cut on the bias, the seams engineered to cling and release in ways that should be impossible without stays. The third… I exhale slowly through my nose, feeling my cock twitch in my slacks. The third is the one that will ruin my sleep for the next three nights. Ivory faille overlaid with a lattice of black thread so fine it resembles cracks

in porcelain. Not frivolous design, not decoration but intentional *architecture.* I run my fingers over the fabric, finding the hidden zipper, and expose the lining—more ivory faille.

I turn the ivory gown inside out with careful hands, reading the construction the way others read legal contracts. There—again—the almost invisible reinforcement at the waist that will let the dress hold its line without a single bone. I groan at the way the lining has been pieced so the weight distributes across the shoulders rather than the spine. Secrets, tiny, brilliant, viciously clever secrets stitched into every seam.

Inside, at the waist, I spot a detail that only exists to the internal structure, a string of pearls. A groan lumps up in my throat as I run my fingers over the delicate beads, realizing that they have an extra strand and that there's an extra hook—that this is a detachable pearl thong, hidden away only for the kinkiest of wearers to understand and enjoy.

Fuck.

Vivian Moreau does not sew like this.

Okay, I haven't met Vivian because of the whole not leaving my house and not letting anyone know who I am thing. But I know it isn't her behind these designs, as she claims.

David has told me all about Vivian, about the way she was confused when he asked for a chain between the buttonhole and pocket on my vest, about how her forehead filled with grooves when he mentioned cuffing and front-pleating my Parisian slacks. I have, for some time, not bought that she herself designs any of the Moreau pieces, despite her boasting that very thing.

I have ordered from the boutique for seven years. The work has always been elegant, precise, and classical. But over the last few years, they've evolved, and I've only grown more hungry for them. For pieces like these, because they are something else.

There are private jokes told in stitches and bias. They are the work of someone who understands hungry bodies the way a locksmith understands a lock—someone who has looked at the rules of couture and decided most of them are optional.

I set the gown down and reach for the accompanying note, written in Vivian's familiar, tight cursive. *I hope these please you, Mr. Blackwood. I have designed and sewn these for you and my daughters have packaged them with care.*

Daughters.

This is the first I’m hearing of Vivian’s daughters, and my pulse threatens to make me dizzy when I realize that I’m an inch closer to knowing the hands behind these creations.

Maybe one of the daughters is the actual designer and creator? David has never mentioned daughters, which leads me to believe they've never been there. He reports back on *everything*.

I need to see these daughters. I need to know who is the actual designer of these pieces that have stirred part of me back to life. And if I am in the presence of the woman who created these pieces, I’ll know it. Her eyes will hold the secrets of her creations. Of that I’m sure.

I almost smile beneath the mask. *Almost.*

These pieces make me feel seen. By someone who has never met me. By someone who somehow understands the quiet war between desire and concealment better than I do. By someone who perhaps longs to be submissive in a gown, the way I long to run my fingers over the soft lines of her body while I command her to please me.

The Midnight Masquerade is six weeks away. It is the single night of the year in which I can, in the company of anxiety, walk among people—because I control who attends, and everyone will look like me—face covered in a mask.

One night of sanctioned anonymity. One night when the half-mask I wear even in empty rooms will blend like theatre instead of a shield.

I cross to the desk, pour a finger of brandy and drink it, then do two things I never do: first, invite someone new to the masquerade and second, write the invitation in my own handwriting, something that David usually does on my behalf.

Vivian Moreau and her daughters are formally requested to attend the Midnight Masquerade as guests of the estate.

I seal it before I can talk myself out of the idea.

Whoever is building those secrets into these garments, whoever has the audacity and the precision to create such kinky pieces under the ruse of couture, will be in my house.

Under my roof.

Close enough that I might finally put a face, or at least a name, to the only person alive who makes me feel almost human again when the fabric settles against my skin.

I adjust the silk mask, even though no one is watching, and allow myself one small, thought:

What if I find her?

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CHAPTER

Three

NORA

I SIT AT MY TABLE, tired hands working on a half cup of coffee, needle flashing through black silk, and try not to think about how many hours of my life I have spent making other women look stunning in candlelight.

I want candlelight, damnit. Or hell, at the very least, to sit in the sunlight for a few hours.

The client is already in the fitting room, evident by her voice piercing the velvet curtain, radiating through the closed workroom door. She says something to Vivian, and I shudder at the high pitch of her tone, the kind of shrill voice that belongs to Manhattan money that never lowers itself to indoor volume. Vivian is out there doing what she does best, smiling, agreeing, taking credit for every stitch that came from my hands. Well, doing what she does *second* best, because the woman has become a gold-medal winner in being an absolute bitch to me.

I bite off the thread. If she says one more time that the bias cut was *her* idea, I am going to sew her lips shut.

Ugh, I wish.

The door hits the wall as she shoves it open. Vivian appears with the custom gown draped over her arm, sharp eyes narrowed at me. Her perfume is right on time, smelling like something someone sprays in the bathroom to mask stench.

“Eleanora.” Vivian’s voice feels like the cool blade of a knife being dragged along my spine. “Mrs. Dalton feels the waist is unflattering.”

I look up and she kicks the door closed before I can spot Mrs. Dalton, likely standing behind her in a silk slip, arms crossed, wearing the expression of displeasure almost gladly. *God, rich people are the worst.*

“Unflattering,” I repeat. “The waist is made so it doesn’t dig into her ribs when she sits. It’s literally the best thing that a dress can do for a woman.” Well, a *boring* woman.

Vivian’s thin lips snap into a line of hate. “Fix it.”

I take the gown. The construction is perfect. I know it is. I spent four nights getting the weight distribution right so the skirt would move like water. Mrs. Dalton just wants it tighter because she equates tightness with sexiness. She likely sends her meals back at restaurants and returns her latte at Starbucks, too. People like Mrs. Dalton wouldn’t know good taste if it climbed into her mouth and lived there.

“Of course,” I agree, because that’s really all I can do. “I’ll make it more painful, as requested.”

Vivian leaves, ushering Mrs. Dalton back into the fitting room with soft reassurances. I hear the same shit I always hear when anyone has an issue.

I was just too ambitious with this design.

She never says my name. She never credits me. Sometimes, instead, she’ll blame her two daughters— *“Fern and Tess took over the stitching, I merely designed. I’ll speak with them. You’re right, this isn’t the way I’d envisioned.”*

The only thing those two know how to sew are arguments with each other. And I guess the whole wild oats thing is true for them, too. They’re still single and still banging anyone who looks their way.

I spread the gown on the table and start unpicking the waist seam with controlled rage. The needle is steady but my mouth? That’s always my struggle.

“Unflattering,” I whisper. “You are a masterpiece and she is a walking turd with bad taste and split ends.”

The bell over the front door chimes. I don’t bother listening to the greeting to try and decipher who is in the shop, because I’m always stashed away in here like a plague, and I’ll never see them anyway. And as the big party in Manhattan nears, I’m sure it’s just another client, another

emergency, that will lead me to another afternoon of pretending I don't exist while I make all of their dreams come true.

But the voice I hear halts me, gives me pause as I tug out the waist seam. Muffled but deep, belonging to a man that I think I've heard a few times before. The kind of voice that has never had to raise itself because the world already leans in, whether due to who he is or, in this business, *who he works for.*

"Delivery for Vivian Moreau and her daughters." That much I hear clearly.

I freeze with the seam ripper still in my hand.

Vivian's tone changes instantly, and I roll my eyes at how bright she becomes. The sound of a vicious predator scenting prey, which in her world is simply social opportunity. "Yes? What is it?"

Paper rustles. There is a long, stunned silence.

Then Vivian says, very carefully, "The Midnight Masquerade."

I set the ripper down on the cutting table.

Everyone in Manhattan wants an invitation to that ball. No one knows how the list is made. People have been known to invent dead relatives, fake titles, and once (allegedly) pretend to be a delivery driver to get closer to the Blackwood estate gates.

The host, Cassian Blackwood, is always discussed in papers and tabloids, as one of the wealthiest, unseen men in Manhattan. He never accepts interviews. He simply owns the biggest estate in the city and is one of Forbes most wealthy men and, once a year, opens the doors to a night where masks are mandatory.

And somehow, *we* have just been invited.

Well. Our household. Not me specifically but not *not* me either.

Vivian comes into the back room still holding the heavy cream envelope like it might dissolve. Her cheeks are pink. For a second she looks almost young.

"Drop everything," she says.

"Excuse me?" I let Mrs. Dalton's dress whoosh to my feet because she said so, but also because I know it will annoy her to take her so literally. These little victories are really all I have.

"The Moreau Boutique has been invited to Mr. Blackwood's Midnight Masquerade." She tosses the cream colored invitation onto the cutting table,

and it lands open, black ink exposed, our surname in plain sight in loopy, gorgeous lettering.

I raise an eyebrow. “How generous of the mysterious Mr. Blackwood.” A rich guy who never leaves his house and throws big parties? I am not impressed. Must be nice to have so much freedom you choose to ignore it.

Vivian ignores my sarcasm the way she ignores everything inconvenient. “This is the most important invitation we’ve ever received. Please, measure Fern and Tess, and get to work on their gowns with matching masks.” She licks her lips, a little smirk forming. “Take my measurements first, of course, since I’m the reason we’re invited.”

Lord help me but I snort. I know better, and I’m usually a pro at restraint because there really is no other choice. I have no idea why we were invited to this shindig, I really don’t. But there is just no planet that I could live on where Vivian earned anything.

She didn’t earn Moreau Boutique, she hasn’t created any of the gowns or sport coats that hang in the windows, and to think that somehow she did something great enough to earn an invitation to the most elite social gathering in Manhattan?

Impossible not to snort. I’m just glad I didn’t full-on chortle. Vivian really hates chortles. Mine, in particular.

On my feet, I step around Mrs. Dalton’s gown, and snag the measuring tape that hangs from my belt loop. She brings a weathered hand up, in my face, her pursed lips twitching.

“*After* Mrs. Dalton’s gown is finished," she corrects, just as Mrs. Dalton’s impatient voice flings itself at the workroom door.

“I expected it this morning, and now I have to wait?” she hisses, as Fern wobbles her way through explaining.

“Mrs. Dalton, I am so terribly sorry. My mom is working on it now. I can drive it back to your place this evening.”

My mom is working on it now.

Psh. Your mom is guarding the door like a soldier, keeping me here like a prisoner, but I guess Fern’s not lying. That *is* Vivian’s job. Keeping me here, running my fingers bloody, forcing me over this table until my back can no longer straighten and I’m seeing double and dreaming in stitches.

Mrs. Dalton sniffs, accepting the apology like it sickens her, but ultimately agrees to the home delivery. The bell chimes again and Vivian’s gaze pinches on the gown at my feet. “Finish it before four so Fern can be

on the road shortly thereafter." Fern slides in behind her mother, arms folded across her chest. "We owe her flowers now, too, Mother."

Vivian turns her head slightly toward her evil offspring, but doesn't take her menacing eyes off of me. "That comes from your end, Nora, because this whole thing could have been avoided if you stuck to the sketch."

Sinking back into the chair at my desk, I snatch the perfect gown from the floor, holding it in my lap. "My end, huh?" I shake my head most dramatically. "Shucks, I guess that means no caviar and steak for me tonight." There is nothing *on my end* to take from, and that's the joke. She understands, motioning with a whip of her head for Fern to disappear, and she does.

The underlings obey, always.

"Lose the smart mouth, Nora, and get to work." She turns and closes the door, and the back of my neck heats.

"You will fix it today, now."

"I heard."

"And you will make it tighter."

"Even if it means she can't breathe or sit down?"

"Especially then, because that's what she wants and that's what I told her I'd do."

I look at the gown. The seams I spent nights perfecting are already half open. Something sour settles in my belly. Vivian steps closer and somehow, her voice drops even lower, like something slimy that swims at the bottom of the sea.

"Do not forget, Nora, all of the things at stake."

I keep my eyes on the silk. "My grandmother's care. Yes. I'm familiar."

"Not just her care." Her tone is soft, almost kind, which is always worse. "But what a bad girl you were, and who saved you."

There it is.

The second weight.

The one that slinks shame through my shoulders and sets off sickness at the back of my throat. The one that makes me feel like I deserve this back room. I swallow. The sarcasm wants to rise and cover everything, the way it always does, but I just can't. Not when it comes to this.

"I know," I reply.

"Good." Vivian smooths the front of her blouse. "The invitation is the best thing that has happened to this family in years. Perhaps if Fern and

Tess can meet someone worth their time, and they can marry, maybe then you can come out front sometimes. But you will not do anything weird, do you understand? No experiments. The designs and final gowns will reflect classic couture."

My big come up is working in the shop sometimes? Suddenly the world seems nothing but bleak.

"Correct Mrs. Dalton's waist and have the first sketches of our gowns sent up to my room at the house before ten."

"Ten in the morning tomorrow?" I offer foolishly, because I know the answer.

She smirks. "Tonight. I want the first sketches tonight."

My heart races and I don't know what comes over me but I surprise myself when the words leap out. "Am I invited, too? To the party?" I roll my lips together as she blinks audaciously. "It said you and your daughters." My vision tunnels as anxiety fogs all other abilities but to stare at her and wait. "I'm your stepdaughter. And I think Mr. Blackwood wouldn't like it if you excluded someone on that basis. I mean, the invitation didn't say I *can't* come."

It's as if she expected me to ask, or rather, prepared for it. "You have nothing to wear."

And whose fault is that?

"I'll make something." My heart is racing with possibility. "I can make something in a day or two." Her eyes narrow menacingly. "Nothing overstated," I clarify. "I'll make a nice dress for myself, but it won't be as nice as the ones I make for you and Tess and Fern."

She sighs. "If you can have it done and have the rest of your work complete, and if you can find a way to get there, by all means. But remember, you have been studying abroad, you're not here with permanence." The same speech she gave the garbage man when he noticed me years ago. *She's been abroad, and she's going back*, as if to explain my lack of existence and sudden appearance on planet Earth. Even though I talk to Fred through the door every week and he's not an idiot. He knows I'm basically a one-woman sweatshop, and that I've only ever been abroad if you consider the dumpster England.

Then, as hastily as she entered, she walks out. The back room is quiet again except for the soft tick of the old clock on the wall and the distant sound of Tess humming something off-key in the shop.

The invitation lies on the cutting table where Vivian left it, cream paper and black ink and a wax seal that looks like it cost more than my entire wardrobe—which isn't much considering my wardrobe is like five things.

I pick it up. The paper is heavy. Expensive. The kind of thing that doesn't belong in the hands of a woman who exists in merely two rooms.

I turn it over in my hands.

Cassian Blackwood.

The man no one sees. The man who orders our most complicated pieces and never asks for alterations. The man who gets my secrets sewn into his orders, because he never sends them back and in fact, seems to like my little accoutrements. The man whose measurements I have memorized without ever meeting him.

I have built coats for him that could hide a second spine. I have cut evening jackets that make the wearer look taller, broader, more solid than any human has a right to be. I have hidden every structural secret I know inside the linings because something about those commissions always feels like they are asking for my secrets.

And now he has invited my enemies into his house, to his big, fancy party.

Well, technically he's invited all of us, though he has no clue that I exist.

I should feel triumphant, because maybe my work is what got them invited? I don't know. I should be, at the very least, curious. Instead I feel the familiar weight of Vivian's words settling into the same old bruises, ones she gleefully digs her thumbs into whenever she can.

My grandmother. My past.

I set the invitation down and pull Mrs. Dalton's gown closer. I push the needle back in and pull the thread dutifully tight. I work in silence for a long time, taking apart the careful engineering that made the dress incredible and replacing it with the kind of constriction the client wants. Every stitch feels like a small betrayal of the fabric, of who I truly am, of everything my father taught me.

When I finally stop, my fingers ache and the light outside the high window has faded into the color of old bruises. Traces of purple edged by faded oranges.

I hang the corrected gown on the form and stare at it.

It is beautiful again. Just less merciful.

I pick up the invitation one more time. The broken wax seal catches the soft moonlight bleeding into the workroom from the barred window.

She said I could go.

I give it another few minutes to sink in, then put the invitation back on the table, turn off the lamp, and sit in the half-dark for a while longer than I should, listening to the quiet of a shop that belongs to someone else and a life that is only partly mine.

Outside, Manhattan keeps moving. Inside, I've never felt more alone. Parasthesia bleeds into my forearms and fingers when I think of that pearl thong I hid in the waist of the gown I sent to Mr. Blackwood, an element I've sketched into gowns of my own that I've never made. Between my legs, there's an ache, a longing pulse, a deep desire to be discovered.

What would those grating pearls feel like between my legs, what would being told to wear it in mixed company—*our little secret*—feel like? And how good would it feel to be told to take them off, kneel, and wait for his next words?

I lick my lips and close my eyes, and listen to the city, and get out my favorite collar—one I made ages ago and sometimes wear when I'm alone. I know what it represents, but I've never had the courage to name it, because naming it would be admitting I want yet another thing I'll never have.

I simply hold it, running my thumb over the leather and lace, and focus on the bleary buzz of a city that lives within reach but is yet so far from me. I force myself to think of the simple gown I'll make, the fact that Vivian isn't denying my ability to go, the reality that I am going to leave this hellhole for a single night.

Even if it's an uppity party where I don't really get to meet anyone because we'll all have masks on and because I'm forced to lie about myself, still.

I'll get a few hours of freedom.

I focus on that freedom and flip through my sketches until I find *the dress.*

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CHAPTER
Four

CASSIAN

I SIT across from David in the office, the guest list spread between us, a bourbon for each of us on either side of the desk. The fire crackles low, tossing orange light against our feet and calves. Outside, darkness envelopes the estate.

I've had a full day of work selling off flipped Brownstones before selling a property in France, and ending the day by investing in a tech start up on the West Coast. I ate a nice steak at my dining table alone, enjoyed a glass of red wine, swam laps in my pool, and indulged in a steam before my shower. And now, David and I are going through his research on the guest list.

After the club members accept their invitations, they're vetted for a final round, to make sure there's been no questionable behavior in their recent actions at the club or in their lives that would warrant them being uninvited or revoked from the ball.

"Final pass," David says, tapping the margin with his pen. "All members have been vetted again. Everyone is good."

I nod. The masquerade ball is the only night I allow the world inside the walls of my home. Well, a sample of the world, that is. A very kinky sample. Though the general public has no idea, the only attendees of this shindig are vetted, NDA-signing members of my exclusive and private kink club, *Obsidian Veil*.

The night is perfect. Efficient and controlled. It is the closest I come to mixing with society and one night is always enough.

David slides a single envelope across the desk. My own thick cream stock, the Moreau Boutique logo inked into the paper. I pop open the envelope with my thumb.

Vivian Moreau accepts. She will attend with her daughters.

Something tightens under my ribs. I set the card down carefully and look at David. “One of them is the true seamstress.”

David looks up. “I know you believe so, but how can you be certain?”

“The gowns that keep arriving have so many secrets,” I start, an image of a woman with her wrists bound with silk flashing behind my eyes. She made a suit jacket for me last year that had a pocket square that, when unfolded, became a wrist tie. Once, she made a liner that hid a blindfold.

“It cannot be Vivian. She doesn’t fit the bill and with everything you’ve told me, I believe she’s lying about being the designer.” I sigh and stroke a hand needlessly down the edge of my mask. “But maybe one of Vivian’s daughters is behind all this. I need to meet them both.”

The door opens without a knock and my younger brother Lucien strolls in, already reaching for the bourbon. He glances at the guest list, then at the open invitation, then at my face.

“So,” he says, pouring two fingers, “you invited the kinky suit lady.”

I don’t answer. I’ve shown them what this seamstress is hiding in these garments, the things she’s done, what she’s created. They understand why they speak to me more than just a well-fitted suit.

He tips the glass toward me, smiling that sharp, knowing smile. “Breaking your own rules, Cassian. Inviting a non-club member.”

I keep my eyes on the fire.

David steps in, straightening the knot in his tie at his throat. “The Moreaus signed NDAs. Club members know better than to share anything with a non-member.”

As new members are voted on, current members will know not to speak of anything club related with the Moreaus. And security will see to it that they do not leave the main house. Still, I remind Lucien of this.

“We’ve already made security aware that they are not to leave the main room, so I’m not really concerned with Vivian discovering *Veil* rooms. She’ll spin everything she sees as gold, because she’s so desperate to be here in the first place.”

The ball is indeed only *Veil* members, but it’s for more than just filthy fun. It helps me put faces to names as I drift through like a waiter.

I remember Lorelei Cathaway from three years back. She’d sold me a hotel which I had every intention to flip and make a fortune on, so when David pointed her out to me at the ball, I was surprised to overhear her pitching a real estate scam with fake mortgage loans to a big name politician. Despite her great love of water bondage and her ability to stay true to her NDA, I had to revoke her membership the very next day, and kill the deal. We were within the contract date to cancel, and I did, because as much as I like making money with fellow kinksters, it's more important to me to make money with *good* people, not snakes.

Lucien’s voice softens, a smirk spreading across his face after he drinks the bourbon he helped himself to. “Just admit it. You think the lady making these kinky suits and dresses is your soulmate.” He pulls the word apart like taffy, teasing and sing-song. But it doesn’t bother me.

I lift my glass and find the crystal cold against my palm, then take a sip and finally smirk back at my brother. “I want to find her and make her an offer.”

The offers I make in person at the ball come in the form of a business card and time written on the back, and when the person inevitably calls, I thank them for responding to my assistant leaving them the card.

It’s never been questioned. The allure of leather and sweat all around them, paired with booze and everything they’ve ever dreamed of makes it quite hard for them to care about a *waiter* wearing a mask, delivering a business card.

He pours himself another drink and slams it with a hiss. “Ah, so you’re on the take. You want to buy her up before someone else does.”

I volley my head, the scar etched into half of my face growing achy beneath the mask. Phantom pain. Years later, at random times, I feel the pain I felt the night I got this face. I take a drink to numb it, and answer my brother. “Something like that.”

David cuts a glance my way, knowing all the things that lie beneath the blanket of *something like that.*

I do believe in soulmates, and the way this seamstress has stitched my dreams into these pieces calls to me like nothing ever has before. David knows this, because he knows me very well.

“I don’t like Vivian Moreau, and I have to be frank. I don’t think she’s the designer, but I also don’t know if it’s either of her daughters.” David too refills his glass and for a moment, we all enjoy the fire. Then– “Badd is still building a whole background and profile, but so far, from what I know, they’re a lot like their mother. Any time I’ve made comments on specific tailoring, thread, the hang of the fabric—they all look at me like I’m speaking German. And if they were indeed behind these designs, wouldn’t Vivian brag about that? Wouldn’t she use that to shove herself into wealthy circles? Social circles are all she really cares about, and after looking into her, it’s apparent that marrying her daughters into wealth is number one on her agenda.”

Lucien presses a hand against his stomach, keeping his baggy hoodie trapped to his chest as he leans forward, fishing mixed nuts from the bowl on my desk. “Doesn’t the boutique do well? Why does she need them to marry up?”

David retrieves a linen handkerchief from his pocket, blue in color with a white striped print, his initials embroidered onto the corner. He passes it to my brother who has already begun dusting his fingers on his knees. “Oh,” he smiles. “Thanks, man.”

“The boutique,” David moves forward, swiping through his iPad to look, no doubt, at the file Badd Brothers Security has so far compiled on the Moreaus. “Does well, but not well enough. Their residence looks like it’s in some level of disrepair, both daughters attended Ivy League schools and from what I can tell, she’s got the appetite of the wealthy on a meager budget.”

I think of all the beautiful suits, the stunning gowns, secrets and promises sewn into every stitch, and stroke my chin in thought. “I’m surprised the boutique isn’t talked about everywhere. The quality is unmatched.” *The designs are sinful.*

Lucien collects a few more mixed nuts and crunches them loudly. As head of my personal security, his job is pretty easy since he simply employs a team of experts. But he’s my brother, and I like having him near. And if it were just me and David, I hate to admit, we may die of stuffy boredom.

“Yeah but rich people like big names. Fashion show designers and stuff. Once when I was dating this model, she got me a seat in the audience and man,” he says, shaking his head as he sinks back into the leather tufted chair that is, really, just for him. “Loads of richies. I guess they buy all that

crap once it's off the runway and that's how they make up the majority of their wardrobes so I'm not really surprised."

David's eyebrows raise. "Moreau does have a solid reputation for incredible work but they just haven't exploded. They haven't been discovered, I should say."

I should want them to be discovered. I should want the things I cherish so much and hold so dearly to reach a success that helps their operation, that makes their lives easier. After all, that is what they want, and if I love Moreau's work, I should want that for them.

But I'm selfish, and grouchy—so Lucien says, and I don't want anyone to have them but me. I don't want someone else to discover the hidden ties in a waistcoat that double as a restraint device, I don't want another man like myself to realize he can take off the leather detail on the skirt of his wife's gown and smack her bare ass with it. I don't even have anyone to use that detail on, but still, *I want it all for myself.*

"I need to know who is behind these pieces," I say, vulnerability and desperation laced into every groove of my voice. "So I can make that person an offer for their atelier." I avoid meeting eyes with David, because he knows what I'm hoping for, and ever since my accident, I don't voice those hopes aloud, and I certainly don't share them with the people around me if I'm not even brave enough to admit them to myself.

David locks his iPad and crosses one leg over the other. Lucien looks between us and drags a hand over the top of his hair, which he insists on wearing in a slicked back ponytail despite the fact that he would look much better with a shorter cut. A cut that resembles a man with his life together and not a man that will use his morning coffee cup to collect change.

"What if it's not the daughters, though? What if it's like, some guy they have in the back? Or like, what if they're ordering all these pieces overseas and just putting their label in them?"

The skin beneath my mask suddenly flares with heat and grows itchy. Ignoring the discomfort, I reply to my brother's concerns.

"They're made in-house. David had work done on pieces he picked up for me and waited there. There is someone there doing the work. I have no doubt. And as to it being a man," I trail off, seeing the detailed thin, boning of one of the dresses I got a few months back in my mind, each piece only centimeters apart, no two stitches alike but all of them absolutely perfect. "He'd have to have really small hands."

David gets to his feet and gathers our empty glasses, making his way to the door. “We’ll know soon enough. We’re just three weeks out.” He catches my eyes. “If there’s nothing else, I’m going to head home for the night.”

I nod. “Thank you for everything. Have a nice evening.”

He nods to my brother to say goodbye, and closes the door behind him. Lucien sighs, stacking his feet in David’s empty chair. “You wanna bone the chick making the suits and kinky dresses, don’t you?”

I shuffle papers on my desk and click around on my computer.

Lucien drops his feet to the floor and drags his chair close to the edge of the desk, and reaches across, grabbing my wrist. “It’s okay to say you want to be with someone again.”

Embarrassment, grief, and pain burn in a heady cocktail at the base of my skull, and my neck grows hot and flushed. “I want to see who is behind these designs and be the one who turns them into something more.”

Lucien makes a show of looking around my home office, the very one that rests on the third floor. One of twenty-six rooms in this estate. “You are so loaded that you could start pissing it all away today and still have enough for this life and the next.” He fishes some more mixed nuts out but doesn’t eat them just yet. The next time he speaks, his voice is low, and it makes the back of my neck unusually hot. “You deserve to have what you want, and I want to help you get it.”

I let my gaze find him, the fire setting a ruby backdrop in the hearth behind him. “I want to meet this designer so I can be the one who capitalizes off her creativity, before anyone else.”

He finishes the nuts and stashes David’s handkerchief in his pocket as he gets to his feet. “Okay, well, we’ll find her.” He points at me. “Or him.”

I get to my feet, too. “Why did you come by?”

He tosses his head back then slaps his forehead, laughing. “Fuck, that’s right.” My brother digs in his pocket and holds out a USB drive, and slaps it onto my desk. “Badd Brothers pulled the security footage from Moreau. So now you can see whatever it is you’re hoping to see.”

I look down at the drive collected from the security company Lucien first subcontracted, but one that I now own. “Thank you.”

He says goodbye, and the moment he’s gone, I head upstairs to the closet I keep locked, and slip inside. Under the glow of incandescent lights, I take in all of the gowns I’ve ordered from Moreau.

Some with detachable spanking devices, some with removable bondage, others with simple ties that act as wrist or ankle restraints, another that has removable boning that snaps into place as a leg spreader. It’s so subtle that only a dominant who has used these things or a submissive who has experienced them would know.

And something tells me, the designer is one of the two.

Deep in my locked away, unspoken hope, I pray it’s the latter.

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CHAPTER
Five

NORA

"HOW, HAROLD?" I pull the pencil out from behind my ear, where I keep it tucked, and make a gentle mark on the fabric before folding and pinning it. Harold, the crow that lands on the window in the work room, says nothing. He's a pretty bad friend, only coming when I put crumbs in the window or showing up to squawk and scare the daylights out of me. But he's pretty much all I have.

"I agree. Maybe Mr. Blackwood's people have been charmed by Vivian, and therefore, maybe the invite is because they genuinely like her?" I pause, and blink at Harold who is currently decapitating a small worm. "No way," I say, shaking my head. "There is no world in which Vivian could charm anyone, and I have to think, with a Richie Rich weird guy like Mr. Blackwood, his people are probably like, I don't know, Batman's butler." *Roy? Dean? No, Alfred*. "Intuitive and smart. They'd have to be."

I continue measuring, marking and pinning, working on the skirt for Fern's gown for this big mysterious ball we somehow got invited to. I'll admit, to myself and a crow, that I'm truly confused.

I get to go, so I shouldn't get caught up in the details about why we were invited in the first place. After all, if we weren't invited, I wouldn't be able to go either. But I asked her if I could join, and on a technicality and because she's so afraid of some faceless, rich recluse, she said yes. For once, I used her fear against her, and not the other way around. That's a victory in itself.

Still. Since no one knows I exist, my brain keeps circling on the fact that they got invited. *Them*.

The trio of assholery and bitchiness.

They litter, my stepsisters will literally bang anyone with a wallet bulge and honestly? They're not even that smart. Not that smarts are the whole package but they're part of it. And when they tossed out their textbooks after every semester, I snagged them, and read through them. And not only were there zero highlights or dog-eared pages, they were quite clearly brand new. But textbooks aside, one conversation with Fern or Tess tells you all you need to know.

And they're not hard workers. They're not even regular workers. In fact, the three of them are anti-workers.

I clean the shop. I design the gowns. I do all the sewing and stitching. I take the photos of the work on the form and print and laminate them in the back room, for the binder up front. I steam and iron, wash and fold. I mop and make sure everything is perfect.

They drink champagne and schmooze asshole ladies who have been spending their husbands money for so long they think they earned it.

By all counts, Vivian and her daughters do not deserve an elite invitation to a grand ball hosted by some millionaire dude. No way.

"Maybe he's like a total creep and this invitation is predatory. Maybe he's gonna like, harvest their organs or traffick them or something," I sigh to Harold, but when I glance up at the barred window, he's gone. Probably flew off in favor of catching a blue jay or harassing a tourist for their croissant.

I'd choose a croissant over me, too.

I've been making custom suits and gorgeous gowns for Mr. Blackwood for years. I think it's been seven, actually. Some of my most creative work—work that pushes the boundary between the Moreau sketchbook I openly hand over to Vivian, and my other sketchbook, the one that holds all the things I'd make if I were free.

Things I'd wear if I had someone to wear them for. Things I'd make for my partner, if my partner wasn't a murderous, oversized bird.

I don't know, though. If Mr. Blackwood were to be inviting the Moreau Boutique creators (*ha*) due to their (*ha*) creations, why did he wait so many years? If I may say so myself, my designs have been absolutely killing it since I started. Sure, they've gotten better because Rome wasn't built in a

day, but still. They've been incredible since day one. Clearly he knows this or else he wouldn't continue to place orders.

Not to mention, in the hour of free time I have maybe once every few days, I've been known to scroll on my phone. Check out the fashion blogs and trending articles in *COUTURE COSMO*. My work is, no joke, some of the best. And it has secrets that other garments don't have, whether the buyer knows that or not.

My work is special.

The invite is probably from Vivian charming some rich assistant or something. I wrinkle my nose in disgust as I imagine Vivian blowing some assistant to get this invite.

Gross.

But, maybe Mr. Blackwood's assistant is super into uptight, silver-haired ladies who see the world down the slope of their nose? Could be. I mean, there's someone for everyone, right?

I've spent the last week wondering about this. In fact, I've spent the last week making their gowns for the ball while wondering about nothing but this. I've also forgone my cot in the attic in favor of staying in the shop. After all, three custom gowns on top of my daily work load has put even my skills to the test, and when I've come to a stopping point each evening, it's already well into the morning and trudging back through the alley, across the street, through the neighborhood to the house for a mere two hours has felt absolutely pointless.

I've got the same lovely cot here in the workroom that I do at "home" so I've been sleeping here. I think the little restroom Vivian had built into this workspace was built with the idea that I may not get to leave sometimes, and while that should make me mad, I'm just grateful it's here. And that the water is as warm as it is at "home."

And a bonus of sleeping here is that sometimes Fred, the man who gets our dumpster, pops in and hands me a drink or a treat, too. I like Fred.

Other times the bakery next door puts out day-old muffins and bagels, and when I time my trip to the dumpster just right, I can snag some goodies and stash them away for later.

This is why I'm friends with a crow. We both eat from the street. Though his reason is from nature and mine is from nurture, or lack of nurturing. Vivian feeds me, and gives me money to go eat every once in a while. But to say I'm not starving half the time would be a huge lie. I'm

pretty sure Vivian thinks that being a seamstress is a no-calorie job, but then again, what basis would she build anything on when she's really never worked a day in her life?

Running the bodice beneath the machine, inside out as I attach the skirt, I get lost in the low whir of the motor, and soft tug of fabric beneath my fingers. Every so often, there are quiet moments, like these. Where I don't think about my dad. I don't think about what I did all those years ago, or things like Vivian and her underlings being invited to that party. I simply create, and find myself so in-tune with the machine and the work that I feel unbelievably at peace.

These are the moments that allow me to get through each day without stabbing Vivian in the eye with a sewing needle. These moments and the time I steal away for my own sketches. My dream line I'd create if I ever had the chance.

A line of couture for men and women alike, who love to dress all fancy and formal, but with a little edge to each piece. What comes off as a metallic touch or leather accent to the common eye would be the reason for the piece to the knowing. The cuffs. The whips. All the things that make my skin tingle when I close my eyes and allow myself to dream.

What would it be like to be gifted a gown like that? By a lover who wants to use its decor against my flesh, to bring me so much pain that nothing but blinding pleasure comes out of it?

I roll my lips together, aware of the pulsing between my legs, the one that echoes there and slides up the base of my spine, ignored. Always ignored. Unless my crow wants to transform into a hot man with dark hair and a penchant for making me obey, I have no other choice but to ignore all of my urges. The urges I seem to have been born with, but fated to deny.

Most days and nights, work keeps me preoccupied. But those moments where I get to sketch in *my* sketchbook, when I get to release all the ideas that have plagued my mind for so long that my fingertips sometimes burn when I can't bring them to life—that's when my mind goes to that place.

The place of wanting something I've never had, something I'm sure exists but won't ever be mine. A place where pain and pleasure kiss, where obedience is erotic and reward is intoxicating.

Slipping the finished gown onto the free form beside the work table, I rifle around in the tub of thread and packaged needles and produce my

notebook. My heart races at just the sight of it, knowing what lines those pages.

Flipping it open, I draw my knees together tightly to numb the ache and stop at the page I had in mind. A sketch I drew a year ago when I imagined a world where I can wear my wildest designs and be applauded for them.

I trace the curve of the skirt, and run my finger up the graphite line that forms the gaping slit in the taffeta. Tension and need coils tightly in my belly, feeding the pulse between my legs.

This dress would give my body touches of freedom—one leg on display, the sweetheart neckline offering my cleavage to take the tiniest of breaths. But it would also give me the discipline I so desperately want—a fitted, corseted bodice, so tight that my lungs will burn deliciously the entire time I wear it. The silk draped at the waist, forming a beautiful bow in the back, one that with the right tug can turn the decorative touch into something to bind my wrists with.

I dig out the velvet pouch from the drawer of scraps, and retrieve the lace and leather collar. The one I made ages ago and can't seem to bring myself to do anything with but take out and hold, touch and dream.

This collar goes perfect with this gown. Though I don't have the courage to wear it, I'll bring it with me. It will give me the confidence I need to dream—to believe that I can fit in at some fancy party, and that I have every right to enjoy my few hours out.

The invitation sits in the middle of the work table, a measuring tape and half a spool of silver thread resting on top of it. Still, I see the words. I see his name. And when I look down at the sketch of my most erotic, perfect gown, I know that without a doubt, I'm going to go to that ball in *this* design, not the one I picked before. It's got to be this one, come hell or high water.

Excitement swallows my insides, leaving a smile stretched across my face in the dark workroom, the sun beginning to peer in through the small window.

I've already been back here for six days, what's another few? I have another dress to make.

And I don't have much time.

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CHAPTER
Six

CASSIAN

"SO I WAS in your closet this morning, looking for that jacket you said I could borrow. I couldn't find it, you've got so much stuff. You'll have to get it for me." Lucien stabs his fork into my eggs, because he's already eaten his own. But as the party nears, my appetite always wanes. Despite the fact I've seamlessly integrated into the party for many years without anyone discovering who I truly am or nudging my mask off my face, I can't help but grow nervous as the date approaches.

I sip my coffee as my brother makes quick work of the rest of my eggs, and moves onto my fresh melon slices. "I could have made you more, you know," I tell him. He drags his napkin over his mouth, sinking back into his chair for a breather.

"I'll never get over the fact that you don't have the chef cook every meal. I mean, if I had your money, I wouldn't even change my own socks." He smiles, stroking one hand over his slicked hair, which is down today, the ends dusting his shoulders. "Hell, if I had your money, there's not much I would do."

That's what most people think. *If I were rich, I'd do nothing all day*. But nothing is boring, and despite the fact that I don't flaunt my wealth at openings and parties, I'm not boring, and I don't like being bored.

"I don't need a chef all the time. I'm fine with making my own breakfast and lunch," I pause, then smirk as I add, "or asking David to do it."

Lucien laughs.

“And I keep telling you I’ll let you buy part of Badd Brothers, and we can expand them to the West Coast like they’ve been wanting,” I tell him, referring to our security company that I purchased after being exceptionally pleased with their work. The company is comprised of three brothers, and when they didn’t want to sell, I did what a rich man always does: made them an offer they couldn’t refuse.

I purchased all of the best equipment and servers they needed not to run the operation they were running but the one they dreamt of running. In return for being owned and receiving hearty salaries, they have autonomy of which jobs they take. I kick them jobs when they’re into someone I’m connected to, but outside of that, it’s been a great deal. They’re solid brothers, albeit strange. Though who am I to call strange? I’ve worn a mask for ten years. Not even figuratively speaking, but literally.

Lately, I’ve been convincing Lucien, who heads my home affairs in the way of security and management, to invest in more opportunities with me. As much as he sings about wanting to be a millionaire, the truth is, I have yet to convince him. But I won’t quit trying. I never do.

“Yeah, I know. And I might. I just… I don’t know. Does owning a stake in a bunch of companies fulfill me?” he asks, rhetorically, but still, I answer.

“The money you get from owning a stake in a bunch of companies is what will fulfill you. Your toes in the sand in Bermuda, sliding your hand over the supple leather in a luxury car as someone drives you somewhere, the ability to slide a black card over a countertop to make someone else’s dreams come true. *That’s* what fulfills you.”

He blinks at me, and reaches up, dusting his hand against his cheek the way he does when I know he’s passively thinking about my face. My injury. What happened and who I am now.

“But you don’t do those things,” he comments, and he’s not wrong, except—

“I could, though,” I say with a smile.

He laughs a little, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. He’s sad for me. He’s always sad for me. But I am not sad.

I’ve leapt through the hoops in therapy to end the self-loathing sadness. Well, sadness at least. I’ve accepted that I am a stowaway in my own life, but am proud to have a life in which I can hide in. Most can’t.

“Just consider it.” I smile, then grab the remote. Lucien stacks his feet on the edge of my desk and I cross my legs, getting comfortable as we settle in for the footage.

Lucien so aptly named the footage from Moreau Boutique *the footage*. I waited for him to watch it with me, to help temper my excitement. After all, if there is someone else working in that shop the way David so believes, and if it’s a man or old woman at the helm of all the beautiful things in my closets, I think I may come a little unhinged.

The urges I have. The person I am deep inside, beneath the scar and the suit, he is hungry. Starved. Absolutely famished for his needs. And I believe this seamstress, this goddess who designs things that feel so very meant for me, understands my needs. I believe she holds needs of her own, that just so happen to pair well with mine. A cautious, boring mind could not create these pieces. Only a mind like mine, that seeks punishment, who craves submission, who wants to hold a private secret in a room, a person like that is behind these designs.

I’m sure of it.

But I’m liable to tear down this house in a frenzy when I lay eyes on her, with all of my pent up *need*. I’m certain Lucien is aware of why he’s here, to keep me tethered to reality, to remind me when I see her that I do not yet know who she is or what she wants, and that I cannot burn down the world to get to her.

Not yet.

But we don’t say those things to one another because we’re men and men like to sit in their feelings and eye one another until one breaks the silence about something innocuous.

“Can I get a soda for the movie?” Lucien asks, on cue.

I reach into the fridge beneath my desk that houses Cokes and waters, and toss him one as I hit the play button.

The screen illuminates, split between four frames: one is a view of the back alley, centered about twenty feet away from the shop door. There is a dumpster with MOREAU stenciled on it, resting next to a large, black can that reads FRESH GARBAGE, with the logo of the patisserie next door on it.

The second camera faces the shop from across the street, a shot in which I have no clue how Badd procured, but that’s why they’re the best. The third shot seems to be an unmoving aerial drone, giving me a view of

the entire shop, the front and alley as well. And the final shot is the parking lot off the alley where the people who work at the shops on this row would park.

It is everything I need.

The footage begins at the end of a work day almost exactly, and without taking my eyes from the screen, I ask, “have they edited it?”

Lucien slurps his Coke. “No, they were aware that you’re looking to see who comes and goes after hours.”

“How many days of footage is it, remind me?”

He catches a burp with the back of his hand as Vivian and her two daughters exit the shop in camera two, the taller of the two girls lingering to lock up. “Seven exactly.” He points to the screen as I hit pause. “The taller one is Fern. The other is Tess. They went to NYU. Badd says Fern tried to blackmail a professor into having an affair with her, but it went sideways when the professor reported her to the dean. Vivian bought her way out of it.”

Zooming in on the paused frame, I study Vivian’s face. Somehow she’s exactly what I envisioned. Sharp features, with a pointed nose and strong chin, and a jaw that looks like it’s clamped shut in anger most of the time. She stands tall, but for the slight curve in her neck making her lurch forward a touch. Her silver hair is pulled into a bun, low at the base of her skull, a silver MD pin slipped through. Her fingers are long and boney, and the girls have largely the same structure.

“I’m all for not judging a book by its cover because I am the poster child," I say dryly, “but David, once again, is not wrong with his assessment.” I look at the one called Fern, whose dress is ill-fitted to her thin body, whose high heels have gaps at the end as if they are too big, and whose jewelry is more center of the mall cart than couture. Tess is in the same boat, wearing a silk dress that drapes too low, whose hem sits too high, whose high heels are patent and don’t at all go with her clothing. “They do not seem like they could possibly be responsible for things like this,” I say, lifting my suit jacket so it opens, revealing the hand-sewn midnight and cerulean striped satin lining. From the inner pocket, I produce a chain. And hold it out for my brother to see.

“Pocket watch?” he asks, nose wrinkled.

I smirk. “To the common eye.” I dig deeper, pull the rest of it out, and with two clips, show him the handcuffs they make. His eyes widen.

“Fuck, that’s cool.” He takes another sip of Coke. “Yeah, I get you, those two do not seem like kinky dress makers.”

“But a book and its cover,” I remind him, earning me a little laugh from Lucien.

“I don’t know. When I look at you, I think kinky, eccentric rich guy.” He crushes his can and places his palm out for another. I reach into the fridge and grab him one, passing it.

“Yes but no one looks at me,” I remind him. And the truth is, not even Lucien looks at me the way I am forced to look at myself. “But when I meet them at the ball, I’ll know for sure.”

I hit play on the footage, and we continue watching as the three women make their way down the street, slipping into what I know is a restaurant, despite the fact it’s out of frame. “Badd says they eat out every night at this swaggy place down the street.”

We continue watching, and Lucien sips loudly, a sound that actually has come to comfort me. People who complain of over stimulation have never spent years alone in the same house. Lucien’s slurps are solace, though I’d never admit it. I don’t want him to feel bad for me, because the more he feels bad, the less he lives. My pain is mine alone, and not his to share.

“What if they wear gloves?” Lucien asks as we watch the footage on 3x, people scurrying down the shop street with bags hanging from their hands, vulgar birds pecking at crumbs in the gutter.

“Who?”

“The sisters. Tern and Fess.”

“Fern and Tess,” I correct. “And it won’t matter. I mean, sure, seeing their hands would definitely give away whether or not they’re actually designing and crafting these pieces but…” I shake my head, the two hour mark hitting as Vivian, Fern and Tess, among a crowd of others, appear on the street again. This time, they hail a cab.

“Badd says they live in one of those Brownstone knock-offs, a few blocks away.”

We continue watching, and one day bleeds into the next, the chaos of a downtown Manhattan shop-lined street turning into nothing more than a boring blur when sped up. And in the first few days of footage, no one enters in the morning or leaves in the evening but Vivian, Fern and Tess.

Not another single soul.

After uncrossing and recrossing my legs several times, sighing enough to make me lightheaded, and draping my elbows on my knees, Lucien turns in his chair, facing me. I run my fingers over my hair, itching to touch my face beneath the mask. When nerves get the best of me—which is rare—I yearn to touch the scar. I don't know why. Sick sort of comfort, I guess.

"What if it's Vivian and she's not lying?" he muses quietly, almost carefully.

I shake my head. It's not just what David has aptly observed, or the things we've learned from Badd's background checks. "It can't be her."

It just can't. It just… doesn't align.

He bobs his head slowly, glancing down at the tips of his black work boots before cautiously looking at me again. "You could give Executive Match another try."

My skin stings from his insinuation, or rather, from how plainly he sees me and what I'm after. "If it's Vivian, I will still make her an offer for Moreau." I swallow against the angsty knot of bullshit lodged in my throat, and work against the urge to touch my mask, to slip my finger beneath and stroke the forever sore skin on my face. "That's what I'm after."

My brother just stares at me for a moment, not bringing up the match-making service for millionaires again. Instead, we both face the TV, and continue watching the footage as if we're looking for the designer I want to buy up and not the woman who is my missing piece. I love him for playing along.

Day four. Nothing. Vivian, Fern and Tess don't seem to ever use the backdoor to the alley, except to stack the bags of garbage next to the dumpster. Even then, it's just an arm that swings out, as if they're too good to go outside. The man picks up the trash on the next day, clearing the dumpster and taking the bags, poking his head in the back door a moment or two before he goes. Probably telling them to put it in the actual dumpster.

Another day of footage. More tourists in I LOVE NY t-shirts sauntering down the sidewalks, women with little dogs in purses or on leashes clicking their way in heels to their next lunch or Botox appointment, men in suits talking on cell phones like the deals just can't wait, birds and people who litter, unhoused people and street sweepers.

A few go into the shop—a few faces I recognize from the Midnight Masquerade roster, a few I recognize from tabloids and newspapers—and always Vivian, Fern and Tess.

But *no one* else.

Day six comes. The sun arches high over the shop, and life goes on and on. But never once does anyone enter, stay, and leave in the evening. Not a soul.

Lucien speaks up. “It could be Tess. She’s wearing fashiony stuff.”

I snort. Lucien prefers cargos and t-shirts with boots to suits, and it works well for him as the man who coordinates my deliveries, keeps my security in-tact, and deals with those who need face-to-face engagement, like my drivers, gardeners and likewise. Tall, fit, with dark hair, dimples and an infectious smile that we once shared, Lucien fares well with his blue collar wardrobe. He’s dated a plethora of women and men, models, dancers, a few actors, you name it. With that being said, he’s never needed fashion. He’s never relied on the cut of a good suit to make him feel handsome, to feel human again.

“Oversized sunglasses and a bag twice the size of her head does not mean she understands fashion, it means she reads tabloids and possibly liked Paris Hilton ten years ago.”

He makes a show of flicking his finger beneath his nose. Maybe I am a snob, and maybe he’s not wrong. But again, good suits and the dream of a woman here to wear one of these gorgeous, ornate dresses is sometimes the only thing to get me through the loneliest of days.

We continue watching, and I even slow the last day down. I lean forward and tune out the chirping birds in the oak outside my windows, forget the noise of gardeners working on my boxwoods, ignore the ping of emails coming in begging for my money. My focus is deep, but nothing changes.

There is no one in that shop but Vivian, Fern and Tess.

I sigh, pulling at the stress that tightens the back of my neck.

Lucien gets to his feet and takes the iPad off my desk, his to-do list for the ball in three days already loaded. “Old Viv may be the kinkster you’re after.”

I know I would sound foolish to detest it, especially after this. But in my heart, the same way that I know I need dominance, the way I know I am made to make deals and decisions to change lives, I know that Vivian isn’t behind these.

Camera footage be damned. I’ll get to the bottom of it. Now I have to.

On his way out, I stop him. “Are you bringing anyone to the ball this year? I didn’t see a name for your plus one.”

He fidgets with the zipper on his Carhartt jacket. “Amalia.” The submissive he’s been seeing privately for quite some time. He met her at *Veil*.

“Glad to hear that,” I say, because I want him to have everything, even if I can’t. Then add, “and I’ll get you that suit. I’ll have David bring it to you at home tomorrow.”

He nods his thanks, and snicks the door closed behind him on his way out.

I stare at the TV screen for a few more seconds, trying to reconcile what I didn’t find with what I was sure I would. I’ll figure out what’s going on, I just need to see them all, eye to eye. I’ve learned to discern a person even from behind a mask, as long as I can speak to them at the ball, I’ll figure it out. I’m certain of it.

Turning back to my computer, I’m a little surprised to see the name waiting in my inbox.

Marston Wellingham

Incendiary Fashions

Mr. Wellingham is one of the top names in fashion. He isn’t a designer, though with his eye he could likely design a line to sweep Manhattan. Instead, he tracks emerging talent and makes multi-millions by snagging new, gifted designers and pairing them with hungry couture labels. A fashion liaison is what he calls himself, but in my world, he’s just like me. A man with a good eye, whereas mine seeks startups and invaluable property, his is after fashion, and what makes people like me spend money.

Once I see his name, exhausted at my desk in front of the window with night’s mellow hues melted across my feet, wearing a piece made by Moreau, I open the email with a hurried click.

Mr. Blackwood,

I hope this email finds you well. I know your annual to-do is on the horizon, and you’re likely underwater with caterers and decorators, so I’ll make it quick.

My point in writing to you is to notify you of an emerging talent in Lower Manhattan. This place has been on my radar for several years, but I’ve been moved to contact you now because of the recent pieces that have caught my eye.

The gowns have shown unusual structural design, which I've come to understand as normal for this shop. These elements made me think of you and your forte for investing in things with potential, and because of that, I have a fruitful offer.

Should you have interest in backing Moreau Designs, the boutique where these designs are made in house by the namesake of the company, Vivian Moreau, I believe we could bring them to scale and make a fortune. Because they are unlike anything I've seen, rather than pitching to a current designer, I would create a label under the Incendiary brand, which we could equally fund.

Included with this email are photos of a few of the pieces I've seen. Take a look for yourself.

I look forward to hearing from you.

All the best in fashion,

Marston

Marston will not be ignored. He's like a dog who caught sight of a fly. He won't let it go until he's captured it, and while he's starting with me, if I say no or ghost him, it won't end with me. The urgency to discover who is behind these designs slams into my chest, making me grip it through my shirt, searching for a breath.

It's not unreasonable that another trained and talented eye would have and did catch on these couture gowns. They're unique in a way the kink and fashion worlds have never aligned, or ever seen. Nonetheless, it irks me that someone else wants to praise her other than me.

Wealth and seclusion has made me a selfish man, I make no claims that it hasn't. And part of what drives me is ownership, possession—*dominance over the things that belong to me.*

And in some sordid and twisted way, this designer, she belongs to me.

I know this because I am curious and alive again in ways I thought I may never be. And she has done that. Her raw talent. Her hands.

It cannot be Vivian.

The photos attached are of two gowns, as with all Moreau pieces, the craftsmanship and skill is obvious in every adornment—every perfectly placed stitch, each link of chain carefully crimped to be a delicate shoulder strap to most but easily adaptable collar and hand leash to others, the pearls that line the waist of the skirts that serve as a tease for the wearer if she knows what to do—all of it.

Again, more than ever, no part of me believes Vivian Moreau is behind these designs. The only thing she's behind is a ruse, and I'm nearly ready to set life aside to prove it. To find who is behind these silent vows of submission, these prodigious designs.

I pace the halls, my shoes clicking against the fine polished wood, my hair tussled from how often my hand has visited. I do not enjoy being anxious, having energy course through me that cannot be outpaced by a treadmill or a gratuitous expense.

I don't want Marston sniffing around my designer and cutting her some deal. If anyone should bring her work into the light, it should be me.

Staring out over the banister, I take in the reflection of early moonlight gleaming against the floors, tapestries with medieval scenes of restriction and bondage already hung in preparation of the ball. The large piece overlooking the twenty foot stone hearth is my favorite.

It dons a maiden, wearing a long skirt, which is tied up around her waist to expose her bare legs and round, pink ass. Holding in a sea of cleavage is a fitted, almost too tight corseted top, with puffed cream sleeves. Her golden hair is limp and lifeless around her face, which is covered in round, accentuated beads of sweat, blue thread wide stitched around each drop to draw your attention. That's where my eyes go first—her tears, the emotion that weeps from her soul in the scene. I don't interpret them as tears of pain or disgrace but rather, pride and freedom. Below a small nose rests thin lips, curved ever so slightly. The common eye may not see her subtle smile, but I do.

Her wrists are locked in shackles, chained to a stone wall as she surges forward, trying to escape her sir's whip. Her bare skin is pinkened by his strikes, and his pants are tented at the crotch from the excitement of infliction. My cock awakens as I take the tapestry in, one I've seen a hundred times easily. Still, I love it. I love what it represents. And like me, I imagine he was just as stiff when he slipped the key into those cuffs and freed her, running his lips along the battered skin, whispering promises of care of adoration right before he slipped inside of her and made her eyes roll and her toes curl.

With that thought, I traipse to my room and into the closet, which is so egregiously oversized. For the last year, this closet has made me angry, irrationally so. It would not feel so large if half of it was not empty. It would not feel so large if someone shared it.

But those thoughts only edge in with excitement now, because even though I don't have a name, or a face, or any indication of who I am chasing, there is at least now the thought of someone. The idea of more. And that hope is what has me sifting through the lower rack of my coats, stopping only when the crushed velvet bag catches my eye.

The sound of the zipper descending scatters bumps up my arms, and my pulse ticks up in a way it only usually does when someone is kneeled before me, waiting for my words.

A flick of my finger and the arm of the coat falls out, candescent beneath the warm lights in my closet. Sweat beads between my pecs, and the warmth I felt a moment ago returns to the back of my neck, spreading through my limbs as if it were infectious.

I take the cuff between two fingers, rolling the fabric, taking note of the larger openings stitched in for cufflinks. When trying it on and popping my sleeves, I'd assumed I'd choose from one of the many pairs in my collection, but I find myself patting along the pockets until my hand lands on a lump. I dig my hand into the breast pocket, and produce a small, black velvet pouch.

There's a twist of exhilaration in my gut, and the sweat that has formed on my chest now appears along my shoulders, shrouding me in anxious warmth. Tugging the pouch open, I turn it upside down into my palm and watch as two custom cufflinks topple out.

White gold with lace inset. Actual lace, not printed or manufactured but rather, a small piece of what looks to be hand sewn lace has been set and pressed, and bound with glass and gold. The lace is unlike most lace, a pattern I haven't seen for years, if ever. It looks vaguely familiar and yet I can't recall where or if I have actually seen it.

I turn the delicate pieces over in my palms for a moment before slipping them back in the velvet pouch.

For the first time in a long time, rather than controlled detachment, genuine curiosity and feverish anticipation edges my psyche.

And goddamn it, I'm enthralled.

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CHAPTER
Seven

NORA

I NEED A STIFF DRINK, an orgasm, a huge pizza, and about ten hours of sleep.

The best I'm gonna get is a power nap, a day-old muffin, and maybe, if I can sneak out, a cold Coke from the hot dog guy on the way to this fancy schmancy ball.

I keep my hands at my tailbone as I wait. Vivian, Fern and Tess were given their gowns yesterday, but today, the day of the ball, is their final fitting. They fit, as I knew they would because I don't make mistakes, and now I have to watch them twirl, bend, run their hands down the skirts, and look at themselves from all angles.

Fern catches my eyes in the mirror, and casts me a cautious smile. Fern and Tess aren't total devil spawns, and every once in a while, we have okay moments. Smack that on a greeting card, Hallmark: *for those okay moments*. Smiles in the reflection of a mirror is the gift I'm given today.

Finally, after minutes of silence that felt like traveling to space and back, Vivian sighs, not meeting my eyes. "These will do." She turns to Fern and Tess. "Feedback?"

Fern shakes her head, gleaming at herself in the mirror. Tess smiles at me. "They're lovely, Nora. Thank you."

Her praise crawls over Vivian's skin like worms, and her upper lip curves in controlled disgust. That's my stepmommy. I hold back my

satisfied smile before Vivian whips up an issue, and wait for them to change so I can rehang their gowns and zip them into the velvet garment bags.

Fern and Tess disappear into the shop, the metallic ping of curtain hooks against the rod piercing the quiet as Vivian glares at me.

“I’d like a detailed clean of the shop, and inventory of the threads, bolts, buttons, and other accouterments before you go.”

I look around the disheveled work room where I’ve been stowed away for weeks now, making all of our normal orders, their gowns, and then mine, which I thankfully finished late last night. I haven’t been “home,” though I’m really playing it fast and loose with the word *home* since I’m more of a live-in punching bag slash maid, still.

“But I need to get ready for the ball,” I say slowly, cautiously, like I’m walking across a minefield.

“And if you get your chores done, you can get ready,” she says, hooking finger quotes around those last two words as if the idea of me cleaning up well is far-fetched, like magic, or fairytales.

I look around the work room again. “Inventory will take me hours, and the ball starts in three.”

Fern and Tess exchange looks, and for a second I think that maybe one of them will defend me. One will step forward and say, *enough is enough!* Instead, Fern chews the inside of her cheek, and Tess drops her eyes to her feet.

No back up. Why am I surprised?

“Well then,” Vivian says, “don’t let us keep you.” They make a move for the door but the girls stumble into her back when she stops, peering back at me. “And if in some miraculous turn of events, you make it out of here, please remember your guidelines, and what’s at stake.”

I don’t nod. I don’t say *yes, Vivian.* I don’t do anything but stand there with bleary eyes like a fool as I process… I’m not going to be able to go. There’s hours upon hours of work waiting here. By the time I’m done, this ball will be over, and my opportunity for a few hours of freedom, finally wearing something my two hands have made is gone before I’ve even tasted it.

I stand in a trance for what seems like forever, but can only be a few minutes, because it’s five o’clock, and there’s a quiet knock at the alley door. I trudge over and open it, and a smiling Fred is standing there, a sweating bottle of Coke in his hand.

“Heya honey,” he greets, passing it to me. “How’s it going?”

The question is all it takes to send me into his chest, in full on tears. Fred has a daughter my age, so he knows how to handle it, backing me into my chair, twisting the bottle open gently, passing me sips as I pour out my guts.

When I’m done, he scratches the side of his jaw and says, “so balls are real, huh? I kinda thought that was just fairytale bullshit.”

I sniffle. “They’re real.”

He bobs his head. “Makes you wonder about UFOs and stuff, too, then.”

I blink at him. “I guess.” A long sigh tears out of me. “I’m sorry I unloaded on you like that. I just… wanted out of this hell for one damn night, you know?”

He looks at his watch. “Doreen is out tonight. Seeing *The Producers* with her card club.”

I sniffle. “That’s nice.”

His smirk is crooked and wide and so warm. “I’m saying, let me help you get through this to-do list and then you can go. Come on, two of us at it means half the time, right?” He nudges me. “And cut some corners. Throw some of the unironed stuff in a pile, she’s never gonna know, it’s not like she’s back here much anyway.”

TECHNICALLY, I have been invited. And yet each moment of the journey here, and now as I stand at the proverbial pearly gates, everything feels clandestine, brimming with risk.

What if they turn me away because my name isn’t on some roster? *What ifs* echo through my mind as I wave off Fred, who worked his ass off with me for two hours. For a man with big hands, he is surprisingly nimble and fast when it comes to counting corset buttons. He smiles, waving back, and men with ear pieces in suits look at him as if he is the scourge of the Earth. And once he’s gone, they look at me that way, too.

“I’m invited,” I call to them, digging out my invitation. “It’s cool.”

The back of my neck is hot, so I turn away from them and step toward the other group of men in suits, the ones standing at the massive doors. Doors with ornate designs carved into them, gold lion’s head doorknockers

on each. Damn, this Blackwood guy is really something. Doorknockers are such a flex. No wonder Vivian was drooling for this invite. She's probably hoping to marry Fern or Tess off. Or both, if that's his thing.

In heels that used to be Fern's, ones that I've brought back to life with heel tips, epoxy, some spare paint and of course elbow grease, I turn on the steps with a click. It's almost jarring that the sound of clicking heels is coming from me, the girl who is normally in faded sneakers riddled with holes, or barefoot. From ten paces back, a man introduces himself as Bretton as he tips his chin up, like Secret Service. His blonde brows tug together, lines striping his forehead. "Madame," he calls. "Are you coming in?"

I split my gaze between Bretton and the massive estate splayed out before me, then look down at the burgundy crushed velvet under my shoes. A red carpet of sorts, leading into the mysterious and coveted Manhattan event—the Midnight Masquerade. And this ear piece guy called me *Madame*.

A shiver wraps my spine as heat coils in my belly. My toes curl inside my heels, and the gown that I made feels like sex against my skin. I've never felt so alive, and I'm on some guy's porch, *technically.*

"Yes," I smile, then take the stairs carefully. With the velvet pouch hanging from my wrist, my favorite and most naughty piece of jewelry I've never gotten to wear stashed inside, I remember exactly why I'm here.

Freedom.

A few hours to be me, to wear what I love and feel like a fucking goddess. To drink alcohol and talk to someone that isn't Vivian, or bless him, Fred.

I'm almost to Bretton, but a couple brushes past, a woman wearing a sleek black gown, hugging every one of her voluptuous curves, her face shrouded in secrecy by a white mask, the cheek painted pink. Her hair is long and blonde, just like mine, but styled up, with pieces overlapping and twisting, something so fancy she must've visited a salon.

Of course she did. Everyone here likely had their hair and makeup done. They're all… millionaires. Or at the very least, the elite. I shake my head, feeling like such an outlier, such a misfit, like this was a huge, naive, stupid mistake when—

"I love your gown," the woman says to me over her shoulder before her date slips his arm through hers, and tugs her toward the suited men at the

door. I stare at her, in her gorgeous slip dress and red-bottomed heels, her suitor dressed to the nines in a full tuxedo, cuff links shining as the moon ricochets off. I watch until they disappear inside, catching a small glimpse of the thriving party before the doors are pulled promptly closed.

"Madame?"

I turn and startle when Bretton is below me one step, still towering over me with his height. I notice now that the lapels of his suit are Peau de Soie. Looking up, the moon rests behind him, his features partially shrouded by night, I stare into his dark eyes and dust my palm down one of his lapels. "I made this," I whisper, knowing this specific shade of French fabric, sourcing it from the salesman directly when he visited Vivian last summer. My eyes skim the buttons, all wrapped in the same special silk. I only made a few suits like this before I was ordered to use the remaining Peau de Soie for gowns for Vivian, Tess and Fern.

Bretton stares down at me, and the sharp features of his profile glaring against the moonlight. "Mr. Blackwood purchases all of our suits."

I blink, a breath trapped in my throat, my chest aching within the confines of my gown, the secret pearl thong stitched into my dress shifting against my center as I steady myself between two steps. My heart is racing as an orchestra hums from inside, delicate notes that wrap my spine in heady desire.

"Really?" I breathe out the question, hoarse and quiet, discovering how nervous I actually am once the word leaves me.

He nods toward the doors but not before eyeing the invitation in my hand, my stepmother's name nearly highlighted by moonlight. His hand falls to the place between my shoulder blades, leather driving glove against my bare skin. Guiding me up, the nearer I get, I realize the doormen are wearing earpieces and one of them quietly says something to the other as I approach, and in unison, they pull the doors open.

Music spills out at my feet, violins and cellos, I think maybe a harp, too. Hushed conversation and alcohol-loosened laughter eases the edge of my anxiety just some, and when I'm a few steps inside, chilled air nipping at my exposed skin, I turn to thank Bretton. But the doors are shut, and he's gone.

Suddenly, I'm among what feels like at least a hundred women and men, all of their identities literally masked, ball gowns of all varieties sweeping along the shining wood floors. Music infiltrates my senses,

continuing to numb my worries, and beneath the cover of my mask, a small laugh escapes me, and I can't help but grin.

Moments ago I was choking on my label of outsider and now, somehow, I'm nearly invisible because of how well I fit in.

"Miss," a voice says, and a man I've never seen before proffers me a flute of champagne as he bends slightly at the waist, like I'm someone who deserves a bow.

My cheeks flame and I become grateful for the mask, grateful to hide my childish excitement. He bows, I'm getting champagne, and no one is staring at me like a sore thumb.

"Thank you," I reply, using my gloved hand to gently take the glass, making my best attempt at looking proper, looking like I belong. I wander a few paces deeper into the main room, my breath holding still in my throat as I take it all in.

Candles, tall and white, burning as they're held steady in ornate candlesticks, ones you'd read about lining the walls of a dreamy castle, with intricate scrollwork and acanthus leaves carved into perfectly polished silver. Waiters seem to float through the space, silver trays resting on white gloved hands, doling out cocktails and fancy foods that I've never even seen. A string quartet dressed in all white takes up the back corner, where a wall of tapestries cover the windows behind them. I drift nearer, one gloved hand tugging the bottom of my mask so I can better take in the scenes woven into the tapestries.

My belly flips, and I'm suddenly acutely aware of the pearls strung between my legs, the clamps tight around my nipples, the bondage running up the lengths of my thighs. The way it feels to wear a gown that, to everyone here, comes off as another couture design with a few unique elements, all the while, I'm deliciously spent and tortured inside of it—I'm aching, everywhere, in all of the best ways.

I look around, holding my champagne, and realize all of the oversized pieces portray scenes of kink, with one depicting a man whipping a red-cheeked maiden, another with a man forcing a bronze phallic piece past a maiden's lips as he touches himself with his free hand. On another tapestry, one that no one else seems to even be looking at, much less awed by in the way that I am, is a scene of a woman on her knees, head bowed. She's hiding her face, and the man stitched next to her rests lazily on a throne, book in one hand, servants going about their day around them. My heart

slams into my ribs and I have to toss back the flute of champagne to ease the sudden thirst in my throat. No, the thirst is deeper, and it's not just thirst.

It's hunger, it's lust, it's fiery need.

"Which is your favorite?" A deep voice comes from over my shoulder as another waiter appears, silently slipping the empty flute from my hand before weaving back into the crowd.

The man comes to stand by my side, his face partially obscured by a simple white mask, but my head snaps back, taking him in fully on the second pass.

He dons the mask of the *Phantom of the Opera*, and the mask paired with the throaty pitch of his voice has my knees growing weak beneath the skirt of my gown.

I point a gloved finger to the scene of the woman on her knees, bowing most patiently to the man who must be her keeper, her owner, the man who loves her most.

The pearls are making me woozy with need, and the clamps on the peaks of my breasts suddenly feel like too much, like I'd give this man anything to tear this dress away from my body and ease all of my aches. To lead me somewhere, anywhere, and provide me relief.

He extends a hand to me. "May I lead you in a dance?"

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CHAPTER
Eight

CASSIAN

THE DOORMEN TOLD David when they let the Moreaus in, and he tipped me off in under a minute.

I see them, remembering their faces from the surveillance, and am not surprised to spot Vivian immediately latching onto a wealthy banker and his partner, making terse and quick introductions. Hands wrapped on the cherry banister, squeaking as I tighten my grip, my heart races, and the back of my neck fills with prickly, electric heat that stings my senses. I should be taking in Fern and Tess, studying their hands and movements, trying to decipher who the seamstress could be but I can't.

My eyes land on a woman who comes through the door by herself, stuffing a rumpled invitation into a small velvet pouch.

The Moreaus would be the only one to bring an invitation, as everyone else here is well versed in the etiquette of the ball. And I've already seen the Moreaus.

Hunger and authenticity radiate off of her as she strolls gently into the room. My chest constricts, blood pumping through my veins with urgency and heat as my senses race, heart pounding, breath trapped in my throat.

It's her. Evident in every discernable piece of her.

The proportions of her gown, the bodice made to fit her torso, the full skirt barely dusting the tops of her shoes—and the shoes. It's clear they've seen another life, but she's repurposed them for her gown, and the thoughtful details—the heel wrapped in the delicate lace—*the lace that*

matches the cufflinks in my coat, the patent shine of the toe that ties together the edges of her mask—there is so much intentionality in the design.

Men in tailored suits with masks that match the color of their neckties, and women in gowns with handbags made of the same material—that's who fills my home. They are wealthy and are no doubt draped in expensive fabrics and have gone to the best designers—maybe some even Moreau—but their primary focus here is *Veil*, the club I own that this entire ball masks, all the glorious puns intended. They're here, with signed NDAs, seeking out what the party has to offer beyond the main room, beyond the mixer and cocktails.

But her.

Where do they hide her? How did she not appear on surveillance? How did she get here?

She is everything, fair hair pulled into a low ponytail, a strand of it wrapped around the base to hide the simple elastic. I notice again the velvet pouch that hangs from the crook of her elbow as she partially bows back to the waiter when he delivers her a glass of champagne. The way her throat works and her mouth falls silently open as she takes in the tapestries and all of the sordid stories they tell.

I fucking knew it.

Knew it was someone audaciously breathtaking, knew it wasn't Vivian, knew… it would be someone just like this. *I fucking knew it.*

Those words echo in my mind, pulsing, sure and steady as self-righteousness lights a fire in my veins.

I knew that the talent behind Moreau would be… her.

I couldn't see her face in my mind but her form is exactly what I envisioned—slender and petite, with gentle curves kissing her in all the right places, providing the most mouth-watering proportions, silky hair falling between her shoulders blades and delicate gloves keeping her overworked hands hidden from high society. She's not just masterful with a needle but she's clearly smart, and the hungry and authentic way she holds herself, all alone in a room full of strangers, chasing a nameless and faceless invitation, stirs awake the very last quiescent piece of me.

Lucien approaches, likely nudging me to point her out but I don't need it, and I wave him off, encouraging him to enjoy himself, enjoy the party. The truth is, I'm desperate for him to be gone, so I can have one more

minute standing several feet back, alone with a raging erection blooming between my legs, as I take in my next submissive, my future other half.

Nothing aside from my business and the *Veil* has ever felt so right, and I'd even wager those things to win her, I'd bet against everything I have, that's how sure I am it's her, and that she's the one.

But I need a sign. I stroke a hand through the side of my hair, attempt to stay neutral, to steady the crazed beating in my chest, to calm myself, to not put the cart before the horse, so to speak. I made that mistake once, though then I didn't feel as sure as I do now, at one point I did believe she was the one. And she drove steel so deep into me that Lucien refers to my ex as Brutus in femme form.

Like the gold locks she puts on the garment bags as a beautiful detail, I want nothing more than to place gold locks all around her, to keep her here in this estate, to never let her leave. To tear her down and open her up and break her, all just to show her that she is safe with me and that I have her in a way that no one else ever has.

Still, though, I must be sure she wants that, that she isn't just a gifted designer with deep empathy for, coincidentally, the lifestyle I lead. That she designs based on her needs, the way she designs gowns after her own form.

I need her to show me or tell me in some way, and then… she has to want to be with a phantom. A man with a face so ugly even he can't look at it more than once a day.

Someone pinches the back of my arm at my elbow, but I don't take my eyes off of her and the many shades of blue in her tulle skirt.

"Sir," David says, careful not to call me by name. Not even the members of *Veil* know my identity, but merely that I am both the rich recluse, and the man who owns the most vibrant secret kink club in the city. Only David, Lucien and my limited staff know the Cassian Blackwood behind the successful millions and the secret club, and I'd like to keep it that way.

"Yes?" I reply as I trace out the slope of her throat, and envision curling my fingers around her pulse point, feeling her excitement hammering against my palm.

"Lucien—" he starts, and I stop him with a hand, unable to take my eyes off of her.

"I told Lucien to enjoy the party."

The way she tips her head to the side, the way the ends of her ponytail sways against the extremely fitted corset bodice of her gown—honeyed gold contrasting striking midnight blue. Absolutely intoxicating.

"He wanted you to know that Badd was able to build out a full profile on the Moreaus. They have more information now."

David finally garners my focus. His lips twitch. I blink at him, the realization of his words settling deep inside me. I look back at the beauty, who has edged closer to her favorite tapestry, a sea of suits and gowns blurring around her.

"Vivian Moreau is a widow, and Eleanora," he says, following my eyeline to the goddess herself. "Eleanora Moreau is her husband's daughter from his first marriage." He fixes his gaze on her, too. "She's Vivian's stepdaughter. Vivian's gone to great lengths to hide her, to erase her history. She lives with them, and from footage pulled tonight, works in the back shop. Badd Brothers are still working, but so far, that's what they've got."

Eleanora Moreau. My goddess has a name and I'm achingly hard rolling the syllables quietly through my mouth, loving the way they melt on my tongue like butter on a hot knife.

"Thank you, David. I will thank Lucien later."

He pats my back. "You were right," he says softly before disappearing into the crowd.

She tips back her flute, her throat working down her first glass of champagne.

Stiff cock, pulse thrashing, mind reeling—I adjust myself, finger the edges of my phantom mask, and make my way toward the most interesting person I've never met.

At her side, I'm dizzied by the scent of cherries, but waste no time. "Which is your favorite?" The tapestries are different at each Midnight Masquerade, giving the *Veil* members topics of new discussion, keeping all elements of the club alive and vibrant. At one point in my life, the club was my focus, and now it is nothing more than a bleary piece of the background, another watercolor smear in the tapestry of my life.

My beauty gazes between them, and I watch her every breath.

When the gallery sent me the binder of options for this year's ball, the pieces that spoke to me most were those featuring Abelard and Minon, the French couple of the 1500s who partook in what is now categorized as a dominant and submissive lifestyle. Abelard, a Royal Treasurer once burned

by a peasant, forever bearing scars on his face, commissioned scenes of he and his partner to be woven into tapestries, and they were proudly hung throughout his estate for any and all visitors to see.

He did not hide himself. He lived unafraid and bold.

I admire Abelard, as I stand wearing my mask amidst my private club members. I admire the ability to live so boldly and shamelessly. To show his face.

And it feels only even more like kismet that she too is drawn to these pieces.

She lifts her hand, gloved to the elbow, jewels ornamenting the fabric over her ring finger—a detail that lands like warm sand at the base of my skull, because it indicates to me she dreams of wearing a ring, being one side of a partnership. I've seen too many designs from Eleanora Moreau to think the detail is just an embellishment for couture purposes. That detail means something, to her. And now, to me, too.

She points to the tapestry of scarred Abelard perched on a throne, a book in one hand, grapes on a plate on the table near him, next to a goblet of rich wine. At his bare feet, Minon rests on her haunches, her head tipped down, face hidden from the viewer, as she pledges her patience and devotion to him.

Beneath my shirt and coat, sweat blooms along my spine, and my cock aches from my unrelenting erection. But it's more than that. It's an arousal built from curiosity, excitement and the foreboding that emanates from her.

I hoped that piece would be her favorite. It's my favorite too.

I extend my hand, and our eyes lock despite the partial cover of our masks. The kinetic energy around us fades as we see each other for the first time.

I've never seen an indigo so brilliant, made breathtaking by the flecks of celestite near her pupils, reminding me of the Alps, somewhere snowy and secluded. So many shades of glorious blues, and yet so much warmth stares back at me, without even seeing the rest of her face. I can't tell if her lids are hooded by desire, if arousal stings her cheeks the way it stings mine. In just a glance, hesitations, the past, anything keeping me tethered to progress immediately snaps, evaporating in just a bat of her beautiful eyes.

"May I lead you in a dance?" I ask, the smooth terrain of her neck growing needled, bumps of excitement blooming.

She looks at my hand for a moment, not as if considering but rather, disbelief. I feel it in her rapid blinks, and would be willing to bet if I tugged that mask off, I'd find smooth lines on her forehead, marks that tell me she still can't really believe she's here, that she's being propositioned by a man like me.

Her blue eyes grace me once more, and Eleanora Moreau slips her delicate, gloved hand into mine, warm even through the hand-stitched fabric. I lead her through the cluster of partygoers making small talk near the tapestry of Abelard keeping Minon beneath the surface in a shallow well, and abandon her hand in favor of the small of her back. Nudging, holding, guiding, I lead her forward to the place where people are dancing intimately to the low purring of the string quartet.

Heads turn. They move up and down, taking in her dress, taking in her, quiet whispers wrapping us as I tug her body flush to mine, weaving one of her petite hands with my larger one. My grip swallows her in a way that has me stirring beneath the belt, and when she awkwardly slips her other hand over my shoulder, I break our joined hands just long enough to place her free hand at the back of my neck. She grips me immediately.

Rejoining our hands together, I begin to move, and press my lips against her ear as the music moves us forward. "I'll guide, and you'll learn from me." She doesn't know the steps, it's clear, but she follows my lead, never missing a beat.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, forcing backbone into it so that I can hear her. "I didn't know where to put my hand. I've never danced like this before. My first ball, you know?" And then she squeezes the back of my neck again, and the subtle gesture makes my groin tighten.

"I have no expectations for you to know how to dance, but I intend to teach you." My lips actually dust her ear, and the way she shudders against my chest is so pure and beautiful, I could whisk her off this floor right now.

She rears back at little, sapphire eyes glowing from beneath the extravagant mask. "Thank you," she says, flooring me. "I'd very much appreciate that."

I catch her eyes studying the lapels of my suit—the very suit she made for me—before she presses her cheek to my chest and settles against me, tightening her grip in mine, fingers playing at the ends of hair curling over my collar.

I decide at this moment, no matter what, Eleanora Moreau is mine. If Abelard can win Minon, this Phantom can woo his goddess.

I will not relent.

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CHAPTER
Nine

NORA

"I KNEW this party existed but I guess, I don't know, I guess I didn't really know that balls were truly a real thing until I got here," I whisper up to the devastatingly handsome man keeping me trapped against his chest. I can't see his face, but I'm digging his choice of mask. I love *The Phantom of the Opera*, and I'm almost ready to tell him that but his dark eyes peer down at me, shadowed and full of depth, even in the low light of the room.

"No?" His voice is so deep, the one word rattles through my belly, leaving my knees a little weak. I've envisioned wearing one of my designs so many times, but now that I am, I realize how good the pearls feel between my legs. I swallow down the knot of arousal leaping up my throat, the one that wants me to whine and beg for this man to whisk me away.

Don't be a whore, Nora. You just got here.

I shake my head. "I've heard of this party lots of times, you know, at work. But I guess I thought it was more of a social thing where people dressed up but didn't actually dance." His eyes are so intensely focused on me that I become breathless for a moment, and the tightness of my corset only intensifies the tingle in the back of my brain.

"Then it would be a party, not a ball," he says, sliding his hand an inch higher, pressing into me with a gentle force that causes my back to straighten. "Straighten," he commands, as if we're an item and he's got ground to tell me what to do.

But I do it, I straighten in his arms and a hot flutter unfolds in my chest at how good it feels to obey him. His lips dust my ear as he draws me nearer, swooping me through the crowd, my feet following his as he says, “good. Very good.”

We dance with the music, amongst other masked rich people, or at least, people I’m assuming are rich. After all, the guy throwing this, Blackwood, he’s mega-rich. I’ve seen his name splayed across investment articles, tabloids, and the news. One of the wealthiest members of the Manhattan social circle. Still, Vivian was invited. I flex my hand on his lapel, and find myself really seeing his chest for the first time. It was a blur before, adrenaline and desire, but it occurs to me that he’s wearing a suit I made.

I tip my face up to see him, and find his eyes already waiting for me. Dark and mysterious, the twitch of his lips and sharp cut of his jaw has me gushing around the pearls, shamelessly wet and needy. I lick my lips, hoping he can’t sense my dirty secret.

“At work,” he hums, “where do you work?”

I remember Vivian’s words, and realize I’ve already made a mistake. I’m not to mention my work at Moreau, that I am Moreau’s entire backbone. I shake my head, and stare directly into his chest for a moment as my hand smooths over the suit I made. It's shocking and disarming in the best ways, seeing it worn by a man like this, at a place like this.

Fuck it. I’m here. He won’t know.

I’ll never see him again.

I look up into his eyes and speak softly, partially hoping my words get lost amongst the music. “Moreau Boutique.”

His groan and ensuing grip makes my belly flutter, but also makes me nervous, so I start talking again, as a diversion from my anxiety.

“You wanna know something funny?” My voice is lined with nerves, and I’ve never heard myself this way, even when tossed at Vivian’s feet, pleading for her mercy.

Something about this man makes it easy to be my weakest form, and I don’t feel bad about it. It almost feels freeing.

“Always.” He says, before pressing his soft lips against my ear again, echoing, “slow down your feet just a touch and take wider steps.”

I follow his advice and immediately feel myself falling in line with him, no longer dancing the catch-up dance. My chest aches, and I wait for his attention to return a moment later before continuing.

“You asked me to dance, you know, because this is a ball and everything but… I actually made your suit.” I stroke my gloved hand down his chest and swear to God that the man’s muscled body shudders. My eyes widen as I blink up at him, and without seeing the rest of his face, I’m not sure how to read what I just felt. Instead, I continue, cheeks burning beneath the mask. “Random, right? The woman you ask to dance happens to be the woman who made your suit.”

He says nothing, eyes still locked on me like we’re the only two to exist, and the attention is so foreign and so intense, my mouth starts to run away.

“I mean, you probably don’t even pick your own suits. There’s probably a man named Albert that does your shopping and hangs all your stuff up so it’s not like you know, you picked Moreau Boutique but still, in all of New York, you’re dancing with the woman who made your suit.” I feel sweat beading above my upper lip, and get a flash of him licking it away, which urges on my nervous chatter. “Albert is Batman’s butler, so I totally ripped that off but my suits are one of a kind.” Then I awkwardly laugh while my Phantom simply watches.

After what feels like a silence that stretches from the east coast to west, a small smile quirks his lips, and relief courses through my limbs like fire. *Don’t blow it with the first hot guy you meet, Nora. Be cool.*

“My assistant’s name is David, not Albert.”

I smile back at him, wondering if all rich guys who go to masked balls have this same bossy way, with a dry sense of humor. I like it.

“I know you made the suit, and if I were to bite the tips of these fingers,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts, voice tumbling through me rough and hot, making my face and neck burn. The pearls work against my center with each tantalizing step, and everything I want in this moment feels too soon for having just arrived here minutes ago. “And tug these gloves off with my teeth, I’m sure I’d lay eyes on two talented hands that have been hard at work for many years.”

My eyes burn. Hot tears build behind them, in the astute way he seems to know my flesh without having ever seen it. “Yes,” I breathe, my breasts heaving against the wall of muscle he calls a chest. “You would.”

He drops his lips to my ear once again, and I think I could come just like this if it lasted much longer. The gown I made, my nipples clamped, the

pearls, his cologne, everything. I'm on the brink of losing myself, and I don't know if I can stop. "May I show you another tapestry, down the hall?"

I don't know the rules of this party, if we're allowed to leave and wander or not. But right now, I want to make the most of this night. All I can think of is going wherever this man will take me.

I should be scared. I should be thinking of the foolish girls that are featured on shows like *20/20*. I should be hesitant.

But I'm anything but. I'm putty in his arms, and nearly moan as I say, "yes, I would like that very much."

Suddenly his hand is holding mine, our fingers woven together intimately as if he were my man guiding me through the crowded streets of Paris on a romantic getaway. He tugs and I follow, letting him lead me through the crowd of masked partygoers, until we break away into a dark hallway, the cool air relieving the heat on my skin. He reaches for a door as if he's aware of the estate, telling me he's likely been coming to this party for a long time. He could be close with Mr. Blackwood.

Inside the dark room, he twists the gold lock on the door, and the metallic click promises privacy. His eyes peer down at me through the mask as he reaches behind me, flicking on a dim light. I feel his eyes stay on me as I peer around the large room, a velvet lounger centered on a rug in the middle, the fabric the color of rich, red wine. Books line the walls, shelves reaching to the high ceiling, glittering chandeliers hanging from above, all of them off but one in the corner.

"A library," I whisper, finally turning my focus back to my Phantom.

He runs the back of his knuckles down my cheek, and a soft, desperate moan lifts from my lips. I bring my gloved hand to my mouth, cheeks red with embarrassment but fortunately, he can't see my humiliation thanks to the mask.

"More," he says, his voice both rigid and gentle, like steel wrapped in silk, like gentle waters tearing over a jagged stone. He drags his hand down my throat, and captures my neck in his palm, pressing his thumb gently against my beating pulse. Another moan leaves me, without thinking, and he groans.

The noise has my knees weak, and as if he knows his voice will make me buckle, he quickly sweeps me into his arms.

I want to verbalize the fact that he's carrying me, because it seems so wild and unreal. I want to bury my face in his throat and inhale that

patchouli scent that's wafting off of him like a drug. I want to fall to my knees and open the trousers that I myself made and find his thick, aching cock and suckle at it just to hear his moan.

But I can't seem to make myself do anything but stare into the dark eyes leering behind the phantom mask.

He lowers me to the velvet lounge, and drops to his knees at my feet. I reach behind me, fidgeting with the silk tie until it comes free and my mask sails to my lap. I watch his dark eyes rove over every single inch of me, taking in every freckle, the small scar on my chin that I got when I was learning how to ride my bike, the delicate curve of my cupid's bow, each flutter of my eye lashes—he takes me in as if I'm a piece of fine art that he is immediately obsessed with.

Behind that suit that I made with tired fingers, his breathing intensifies, and though I know a fancy ball is meant for better manners, I can't help but let my eyes fall to his crotch, a massive ridge of pleasure tenting the soft fabric.

My lips part, and I have to fight my eyes to not roll back into my head at the sight of him. He's hard.

He's got an erection *for* me.

I didn't think I'd ever experience that, but have definitely dreamed about while slipping my hand into my panties plenty of times.

I want to ask how he knows I made the gowns. Or call him on his bluff that he couldn't possibly have known, since no one does, but then his hands come to the bottom of the gown, and he begins gently rolling up my skirt until my bare knees are exposed. "Hold this," he orders, not harshly, but I obey anyway, reaching out to collect my gown in my shaking hands.

Then, the first time in my life I've ever seen my designs come to life, he shrugs off his coat and pinches the silk tie that lines the waist of the jacket. Two tugs and it's out, and he's looping it around my wrists, binding them the way I've always wanted.

"How did you know that's what it's for?" I ask, voice shaking, my pussy throbbing, my mind reeling knowing that his face is just a few feet from my needy center.

His dark eyes come to mine while he busies himself looping and tying. "I understand every secret detail of your work," he replies, shocking me, leaving me both sated and hungrier than ever. *What does that mean? Does*

he collect suits I've made and know that I've been hiding little kinky elements in them?

With my wrists bound, he kisses the insides of them along the fabric, making me shudder. My nipples ache behind the clamps, and I'm so wet, I'm probably going to stain my dress. "Hands above your head, and lie back."

I don't ask why. I don't ask what he's going to do, because I know it doesn't matter. Whatever he is going to do, I'll let him do it. I want it. I want whatever this is.

I can't even believe I'm here, and that this is happening.

I half expect him to take off his mask, too, so we can see each other. The lights are low even though the desire passing between us is electric and bright.

But he keeps it on. So I ask.

"Take off your mask," I pant, desperate to lay eyes on this man who is changing me from the inside out in a matter of seconds.

He shakes his head. "Mr. Blackwood likes masks on."

I reach for mine, to be obedient and put it back on, but he stops me. "Leave it off for now, your face is too beautiful to hide."

My chest aches from his words, and he continues to roll my dress up to my hips, eyes still on mine as he hooks strong hands behind my knees to jerk me down the lounge a bit. A moan moves through me, sounding much louder than I intended.

"Now," he says, his deep voice rattling between my legs. The cool air of the room hits my wet center, and I've never felt this needy, this horny. "Stay still for me. Let me feel you."

I nod. My mouth is so dry, all I can do is muster a small, whiny, "please."

He strokes one long finger down the inside of my thigh, getting closer to the string of pearls between my lips. "You want me to give you what you need?" he asks, somehow knowing exactly what it is that I need.

I nod. "Yes, please." My breasts ache in the confines of my corset, and I want nothing more than for him to tug down my dress and expose the clamps around my stiff peaks, to see the chain I so thoughtfully sewed into the lining. To hear his praise for the secrets I put in my gown, the same way I put secrets into his coat.

But he’s in control. I know that, because he slips one finger around the string of pearls at my hip, and slowly follows them down to my center.

My eyes fall to his erection, and my mouth floods with saliva. His groan is something I’ll remember for the rest of my life, I swear.

“You’re *soaking*.”

I tuck my chin to my chest, arms going numb above my head, wrists burning with restricted pleasure. “Please.” I’ve never heard myself beg this way. I’ve envisioned it, played it in my mind as I’ve touched myself. But living it, God, it feels so good. His touch feels so good. “Feel me,” I beg, “please, feel me.”

I look down at his strong hand tugging at the pearls, drawing them tight against my clit. He pulls and releases, making the beads grate against my clit, blooming in a way I’ve never seen. I’ve never seen my pussy so pink, so wet, so hungry for touch.

He brings his other hand between my legs, and as much as I want to watch him touch me, I want more to watch *him*, to see his dark eyes and dream of what he may be thinking. When I look up, I find him watching me, and our eyes lock as he gently dusts two fingers over my hole, not pressing inside but merely teasing where his throbbing cock would go if he fucked me.

I wish he would fuck me.

He continues pulling the pearls up and down over my clit, and years of need and desire coil tight in my groin, and behind my head, I grip my hair with both hands as I writhe beneath his touch.

“You’re so hungry for it, aren’t you?” he asks, voice even keel but deep, his cock leaving a smear of darkness against his slacks.

I nod, biting into my bottom lip as I drop my knees apart, moving to the song playing between our bodies. I want him to be in me, I want to feel that thick ridge slip deep inside, I want to feel the hot throb of a man’s need in my pussy, and I want to know the pulse of his orgasm spilling deep in my womb.

I want this man to breed me, right here on this chair, and make me drop to my knees afterward and lick his cock clean, to dig the collar from my pouch and put it around my neck, to keep me, to own me.

But my eyes roll back as he continues using my dress against me, making my clit throb and bloom from the delicious pressure. He moves his

hand from my hole to my groin, pressing into my pelvic bone as he keeps teasing my clit. “Hold still.”

I obey, and quit squirming, sweat beading on my throat as I peer down at the gorgeous man between my legs. “Hold still and let me feel you come.”

I don’t even nod my head. My mouth falls open as a silent cry flies up my throat and out of my mouth. A gasp, that’s all I can manage, as desire blinds me, the orgasm I’ve been holding in finally exploding between my thighs. My pussy clenches and gasps in rhythmic pulses as his dark eyes center in on my orgasm, making me come even harder at the pleased, intense way he watches me. He keeps moving the pearls, and I keep coming, and somehow manage to keep my legs spread wide open.

I feel myself clenching, I’ve watched myself with a mirror before. I know what he’s seeing. A pussy needing to be filled, wanting to serve its purpose—wanting cock, wanting his orgasm, wanting to be left so full that white cream dribbles out of me all night as a hot reminder that I did my job.

He removes his hand, and the pearls settle gently against my clit, and I nearly die when he leans down and places one gentle kiss on top of it. His eyes come to mine. “Good girl.”

I don’t know what it is. Those two words. The soft kiss. The way he watched me come, his focus on me and making me feel good. But I completely, utterly and embarrassingly unravel.

Tears don’t prick my eyes, they thoroughly flood them, welling over and spilling down my cheeks. *Why did I take off my mask?* At least if I was wearing it, I could hide this cringey outpour of emotion.

My Phantom is on his feet then beneath me on the lounge, quickly plucking the silk tie free between my wrists then holding my back to his chest with his lips at my ear. It all happens so fast, him making me come, then him holding me, his erection pressing into my back, but his words are so tender and gentle, I’m not focused on anything but what he’s saying.

“That’s okay. You’re safe. Everything is okay now,” he whispers, each word stretched out a little, his husky voice turned raspy, desire weighing down each syllable. But I can’t turn in his arms, take his masked face in my hands and kiss him. I can’t thank him. I can’t do anything but shake and cry, my body seemingly purging what feels like years of pent up tears.

I don’t know why I’m crying.

The first time in years I leave the damn workroom and I'm lucky enough to somehow catch the eye of some rich hot guy who coincidentally buys my work and this is my reaction?

"I've," I start, my ability to speak clearly stunted by sobs and sniffles. "I've never d-done that with anyone else," I explain, and even as the explanation leaves my lips, it doesn't quite settle right. It feels like shoving the wrong puzzle piece in, trying to make it fit, trying to explain my tears because not explaining them somehow feels worse.

His lips sink into the side of my neck, pressing the softest and most tender of kisses there, and the friction of his body against mine seems to almost immediately bring my chest relief.

My sobs quiet for a moment, and I'm able to steady my breathing as he stokes his hand over mine, clutching the rolled up skirt at my waist. He doesn't say anything else, but simply strokes his thumb over the top of my hand, and I watch the gentle motion, transfixed.

Gently, he slides me off his lap and comes to his knees again, his mask in perfect place as he rolls my skirt back down, covering my bare, quivering legs. Looking up at me, dark eyes blink back, and my Phantom stands and outstretches his hand for me to take.

Now that I'm covered, and the moment has calmed, I feel so stupid for everything. For not knowing how to dance. For babbling. For begging for him to touch me to then erupting into tears.

Oh my god.

I am so absolutely humiliated.

I don't take his hand. I can't. I'm afraid if I do, I won't be able to let go. I'll beg him to let me stay. I'll make my problems his and plead with him to save me from my life.

But this is just a fling.

I know it. I may be trapped in a room, forced to sew gowns to repent my bad choices and be blackmailed my whole life but I'm still a young woman, with a phone and a brain and I know what this is.

It's a fling.

A one-off. Something normal adults do when in the presence of other consenting adults.

He's helping me to my feet, not asking me to run the fuck away with him.

God, Nora, you should not have come. You are way too pathetic for normal society.

I get to my feet without his help, and in heels I've only ever worn this once, I stumble my way to the door, fidgeting with my mask the entire time. At some point, my velvet bag slips down my wrist and I can't tell if it fell off or if it's numb in the crook of my gloved arm. But I don't stop to look. I don't stop at all.

Struggling with the lock, it finally disengages and I don't look back as I walk as quickly as I can out the door, back down the hall, and into the main room.

A man in a suit—another suit I made—stands at the end, a clear device resting in his ear. He wears a plain black mask, unfancy and basic, and watches me as I stride past, chin held high despite the quivering in my bottom lip.

"She's going," I hear him say as I pass through, toward the main room, where rich tapestries of medieval kinky scenes are stitched. I could stay here forever and look at this art. I don't know him, but I like the vibe Mr. Blackwood is all about. But I came here in my naughty gown only to make a fool of myself with the first man who has ever seen me as a woman. If I ran into Vivian, Tess or Fern now, they'd get too much pleasure out of seeing me in tears, seeing me struggling in this element.

I have to go.

"Front door," the man says, and I glance back over my left shoulder to see that he's following me.

Following me? That can't be. This place has a hundred people or more here. He must be talking about someone else. Another couple stands near the door, loitering, and I convince myself that the earpiece guy is likely talking about them.

Why would anyone here care if I left?

I push through the double doors, passing the men in suits—suits I made, which is absolutely still blowing my mind—and then I do what all girls do when their feelings are just too big.

I run.

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CHAPTER
Ten

CASSIAN

LETTING me touch her wasn't sign enough. I know how the setting affects people.

The harp with violins and flutists. Champagne that makes the world buzz. Perfumes and colognes, the world a swatch of fancy evening wear and theatrical masks. Secrecy and whispers. Tapestries of carnal fornication and wild, tawdry desires.

She was turned on.

She let me make her come, which was nearly an out of body experience for me.

But for her, it could merely be the effect of the party. *Veil* members are used to this setting but Eleanora Moreau—*my goddess has a name*—isn't used to these things. I've seen most new members react this way, utterly overwhelmed with the finer, naughtier things, seeking chaos or relief. Some turn to sex—immediate, sneaking off, stripping down, copulating in any shape or form they can, and others turn to the adrenaline chase—wanting to be risky and snap a selfie, wanting to peek beneath masks, pushing the limits in any way they can.

Eleanora chose the first of the two, and thank God she did. And thank God I was the first man to get to her.

I knew in my gut that someone like her stood behind these designs, and the moment I wrapped my arms around her, the way she wept after I brought her to orgasm—I suspected much more.

That she was, indeed, a submissive at heart, creating tailored suits and custom gowns that hid all of her most deep-rooted needs and desires. Still, even as I held her and provided her the simplest and purest aftercare, I wanted more.

I wanted her to give me proof. I wanted her to give me words as proof, but instead, she grew overwhelmed and ran. But I have the proof.

Her velvet bag. A tiny pouch from which she produced the crumpled invitation I'd sent to the Moreau household, it slipped from the gentle crook of her arm as she scrambled out of my hold, and I have it.

It's not the bag that is proof, but what I find inside.

The invitation, yes, but something else.

A collar.

A collar of ownership. A collar that has never been worn, the inside of it has never touched the oils of human skin, never rubbed flesh or tangled in hair, the clasp shiny and new.

She carried it here, with her, and with all of the pieces of couture she's made, it is the exact proof I needed.

This is fate.

"Hey, there you are," Lucien says, a little winded as he closes my office door behind me.

After she ran, I told David and Lucien to keep an eye out. I couldn't chase her in the traditional sense, and draw attention to myself. I'm the king of blending in, so no one truly takes notice of me. But I had security pull the footage of the estate, knowing that no matter which way she went, we'll have caught it. Badd retrofitted the estate with their best stuff once I bought them, and there isn't a single system like mine in all of New York, or even the East Coast.

David slips inside the office, taking a seat across from my desk as I stand with my arms crossed over my chest. Lucien and David are already without their masks, despite the fact the party roars beneath us, and across the estate, and will all weekend. But because she is my priority, and they are loyal, they are here.

"Thank you for being here," I tell them, because though David is my assistant and Lucien also works for me, they too are both *Veil* members. "I'm sorry for you both to miss the party."

Lucien slips the USB drive into the computer below the TV, and David uses the remote to ready it for the footage. "Anyone to get your interest

after all these years is worth missing the party," my brother says gently, giving me the faintest of smiles. "Anyway, I've got plenty of time." He looks at the gold watch on his wrist, and strokes his long hair back, tonight free of ponytails or gel. "Amalia and I are thinking of being Players later. In a couple of hours."

Lucien, who has always been a Monitor, a member who makes sure scenes take place within the established confines and limitations of the club. He's never been a Player—those who join scenes in each room, nor has he been a true Observer—those who enjoy what takes place in the themed room, but only ever want to watch. I thought Lucien may graduate to an Observer, but I'm proud of him for going after what he wants, and it sounds like being a Player tonight is one of them.

David clears his throat. "Who's monitoring if you're participating?" he asks.

"John," he answers, mentioning a longtime member. It was John's idea to install the private gate, the one that members now use year-round to access the six different *Veil* rooms on my property. Tonight's party is the only one that allows them access to my main home, for the great commingling—the initial ball.

Badd Brothers provide security guards at each entry point for the rooms, and Monitors work each room, making sure all scenes uphold club rules of safety, consensuality, and respect. John, calm and confident, will make a great Monitor.

"Did you check with all of the room Monitors to see if they saw anyone?" I ask my brother, because Eleanora couldn't have known for sure which way to run, and it's possible with a sprawling estate like mine, she could have found one of the six play rooms before the road.

"I talked to the guards at each room, so I didn't need to ask the Monitors inside, but no. No one saw her," Lucien says, eyes intensely set on me.

I can hardly see the buildings from anywhere but here in my office. It was a choice by design in order to honor my need for privacy, but my obsession for control made it imperative to keep all club functions on Blackwood properties. Thus, the six rooms scattered about the ten acre estate.

"And all other members who RSVP'd are accounted for?" I barely saw the room full of club members after I laid eyes on her.

“Yes,” David cuts in. “Most have siphoned off from the main ball to their respective rooms, but all in all, everyone is accounted for.”

Members explore the various rooms each time they visit, but tonight is the one night everyone is here, and they’re able to meet new people who share their interests. With one hundred and sixteen club members and ten acres, forty three security guards and eighteen Monitors, I have to be sure that nothing is out of the ordinary. I need to locate Eleanora as quickly as possible, or I just might lose my mind.

David and Lucien nod, in unplanned tandem. “Everything is as it should be.” Lucien looks at his phone, brow furrowed as he reads, then looks back to me. “Badd says she left. It’s on the footage.”

“There,” David says, leaping from his seat, pointing the remote at the screen.

Our eyes dart to the TV, where Eleanora appears, running from the main doors, across the lawn. The footage cuts to a camera on the east side of the property, and zooms in on her as she presses her back to a tree, throwing her mask aside. She looks back, almost seemingly right at one of the cameras, then glances between the direction of the road, shrouded by trees, and the path leading to *The Throne* before making a break for it. Toward the road, she leaps through the small stream, then climbs the fence and lands on her feet, near the service driveway. Her golden hair is muted, between the cameras and nightfall, but I watch it swish behind her until she’s gone, down the drive and into the street.

The camera on the street comes onscreen, and picks her up barefoot, sweat on her upper lip, breasts jiggling in her corseted dress—one that is likely inflicting some sort of sordid pain we can’t see—as she runs to the end of the street.

Lucien answers his phone and the call is short, and clearly from one of the brothers at Badd. “When? What did it say?” He tugs his notebook from his breast pocket and writes something down, sliding it to me.

MANHATTAN WASTE.

“I’ll tell him. Okay. Thanks.” Lucien faces me, and David watches him. “Apparently she was dropped off by a Manhattan Waste truck, and the same guy that dropped her off picked her up at the end of the street. He was… waiting for her.”

My hands burn as I wrap my fingers around the back of my chair and squeeze, jaw pinched. “Who is the driver?”

Lucien nods as if expecting the question. “Badd says it’s the same guy who picks up at the boutique.” He looks nervously between me and my assistant. “He’s a married guy in his fifties with a daughter her age. We don’t know why she was with him or why he was waiting.”

My thoughts spin as I see her in my mind, unraveling for me, begging me, answering all my prayers in one silent gasp.

She is mine.

“Detain him. Bring him here.”

Lucien’s brows quirk. “Here? Tonight?”

David nods to me. “Pull an NDA from the drawer, I’ll take one to Bretton, make the driver sign one on his way in.” No one asks what if he doesn't want to come with Bretton, because we all know that everyone has a price, and I’ll meet it. No matter what it is.

“Lucien, you can go. Enjoy yourself.” I cut David a look. “Once Bretton brings him here, bring him up.”

“I’ll stay once he’s here,” David offers, getting to his feet, already calling the head driver on his headset.

I shake my head, and finger the edge of my mask, the smell lingering on me. “No. I’ll handle it.”

“I STILL DON’T GET why I’m here. It isn’t against the law for me to drive up this street. And I already told you, I was dropping someone off and picking someone up.” The man’s voice hits me before the door opens, and I position myself behind my office chair, gripping it with both hands.

David opens the door, and in walks a tall man, messy brown hair, a day of sweat staining the neckline and armpits of his t-shirt, which has the name FRED embroidered in red on the breast.

“Thank you, David,” I say, as Fred looks between us, casting David one sidelong glance as he disappears, pulling the door shut. The party is still going, in full effect, violin and flutes flooding the hall, the sound of laughter and chatter, too.

“What’s this about?” he asks, running his hand over his head nervously.

“Eleanora Moreau.” Her name is so beautiful, were I not in the presence of this man with a heart full of questions, just speaking it would make me

stiff.

His face softens just hearing her name, and it both brings me relief and heady rush of anger. “Nora, what about her?”

I wait, my silence pushing in around him like sharp knives, the discomfort making him spill. I only have to wait a few seconds.

He shifts his weight on his feet and despite the fact I have no clarity as to their relationship, something fiercely prideful fills my chest when he narrows his eyes at me and says, “She’s a sweet kid. I don’t know what this is about but… if you mean her any harm—”

I lift a hand. “How do you know her?”

His face slackens, just a bit. He stares at my mask, then meets my eyes. “I pick up the garbage behind her stepmom’s shop.”

I recall the truck in the footage. “And?”

He shrugs, eyes still narrowed like he isn’t quite sure of me. Understandable. “I bring her stuff sometimes.”

“Stuff?” Flowers, chocolates, boxes of lingerie—those are the things that flood my mind, and my skin grows stuffy beneath the mask, the back of my neck hot.

Fred looks around my office like he’s only just now realizing he’s inside the Blackwood estate. “Are you him? The millionaire Blackwood?”

“What stuff?” I press.

He spots a photo of me and Lucien, before the accident. He’s trying to figure out if I am one of the men in the photo, no doubt.

“Fred.”

Fred meets my gaze, then scratches the side of his jaw. “Her stepmom is a real witch. Makes her do all the work at that place. There are days, sometimes weeks where she never even leaves the shop,” he explains, his gaze veering to my desk, eyes roving over the files and closed laptop. I’m forced to snap to get his attention back.

Fred blinks at me. “You are him, aren’t you? They say you never leave. Is that true?”

“You call her Nora,” I continue, ignoring his questions.

“I signed that thing your guy gave me. I can’t tell anyone even if you answer,” Fred says, growing comfortable with me. A comfort I do not wish to partake in. I only want answers, and her.

I say nothing else, and Fred sighs. “Yeah, she goes by Nora.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “I bring her food, like hot dogs from the cart,

sometimes a soda, sometimes loaves of her favorite bread." He holds up one hand after pulling it from his pocket. "It ain't like that. I'm married," he says, wiggling his finger. "And my kid is her age, so I see my daughter in her, and I wouldn't want my daughter living like that, so I help when I can. Last Christmas my wife made her wool socks and a sweater, because that work room is drafty as all hell."

Anger sheets over my skin like a jacket. My nostrils flare. "She's… hungry? And cold?"

Fred shrugs. "I do what I can but once I got caught taking her a sandwich and Vivian threatened to have my job." A sad expression finds him. "I got a family to take care of, so I'm more careful now. Just drop stuff off at the back door, if she's there."

My mind is spinning, but I force myself to stay focused so I can be rid of Fred. "And tonight, you brought her here, and took her home."

He shrugs, nodding. "She wanted to come to this party but her stepmother gave her a whole laundry list of things to do, so I helped her get her stuff done so she could make it. I felt real bad, you know, because the poor girl never leaves." He scratches his head. "Well, she walks back up to Vivian's place, where she lives in their attic. But other than that, she ain't like a normal young woman. She just… works."

They hide her and force her to do all the work. I've never been so angry. But I don't say anything, so Fred continues.

"I waited down the street because I figured Vivian would do something to ruin her night and send her packing, and I wasn't wrong. She ran out an hour later and I took her back."

"Back where?"

"To the shop. She didn't wanna go home."

I reach into my pocket and retrieve a wad of cash. I don't know how much, but I close the space between us and hand it to him.

"Is this so I don't tell her about this?" he says, stuffing the money into his back pocket.

I shake my head. "No. It's for your honesty and for helping Nora," I say, trying out her nickname. It's not quite right, because I know they've used it for her so many times. The people that mistreat her.

He squints. "You are him, aren't you?"

I don't say anything, and a moment later, David reappears and ushers him out.

She was mine before these details, her fate woven with mine in a way only God can design. But now, learning of this abuse, I’m going to have to take matters into my own hands.

And I’m going to have to leave the estate.

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CHAPTER
Eleven

NORA

THANK GOD FOR FRED. And tonight isn't even the first night I've said that.

But how pathetic is my life that he knew that something awful would happen at that ball? He waited because he knew mathematically, statistically—whatever—that Nora Moreau is not ball material.

I'd run nearly a mile down the private road before I spotted the MANHATTAN WASTE letters glowing beneath a street lamp. I cried the whole time I ran, and probably had as much snot on my face as I did tears. But he helped me into the truck, gave me a hanky, and asked if Vivian was behind my abrupt departure.

I lied to Fred, and nodded my head, but I think I'll be forgiven for telling an ego-preserving lie like that. What was I supposed to say? *No, actually, Vivian didn't ruin it for me, I had every opportunity to have a wonderful night out and experience life once and for all but I let a guy make me come then had a complete breakdown and ran out like a child.*

Um, no.

I respect Fred too much to tell him something so embarrassing and personal.

I had him bring me back to the shop, where I'm currently sitting in my bra and underwear, staring at my ball gown on the dress form in front of me.

My nipples still ache from the clamps, but now that the adrenaline has waned, I realize it felt good. All of the things I was unsure about—the pearls, the clamps, the severe corsetry—it worked out the way I planned. It heightened my sexual senses.

Though what I hadn't accounted for was how high they would already be, and how the gown only added that much more intensity. Maybe if I was wearing something like what I designed for Fern or Tess, I wouldn't have let that man take me into a room and touch my bare pussy. And maybe then I wouldn't have run away.

I close my eyes, and run my hand up the side of my throat, the place where he pressed his lips and assured me everything would be okay, that I would be okay, and I know that no matter what I wore tonight, I would've given myself over to him.

Something about him had my attention from the moment he stood behind me and asked which tapestry I liked best.

His voice was commanding but not to the point where I felt scared.

His hands on my body were guiding and teaching, not aggressive or pushy.

The way he taught me how to dance while also unspooling me from the inside out, with just a few words.

I open my eyes, blinking at my worn dress in the moonlight, the bottom of the skirt shredded from running in the yard, and through the street.

I pull my hair up and slide a pencil through it, getting it off of my neck as heat licks at my spine just thinking about the evening.

And that's when I realize—

"My bag," I breathe, bringing my hands to my temples. My bag slid off on the way out. Sure, it was just a pouch I use for clients when I make them custom cufflinks, but it's not about the bag, or the crumpled invitation.

My collar. My favorite piece, a piece I designed with a dream life in mind, one that I'd often take out and wear when I was all alone. It was in the bag, and the bag is gone.

My favorite collar is gone.

I try to tell myself that it doesn't matter, because I never would have worn it around other people, that it's too far off the beaten path of designs to be worn in mixed company, as if I ever would be in mixed company.

I try to tell myself that it's no big deal. I only wore it a few times a week in private anyway. And it's not like I lost my favorite sketchbook.

But still.

It’s gone, and I can’t help but let tears sting my eyes as I think about all of the things I’ve lost. My father, my freedom, and now, my favorite earthly possession.

Pulling on last night’s t-shirt and pajama pants, I climb into the cot and settle my eyes on the small, barred window. My crow is there, eating God only knows what, while the traces of champagne still fizz in my belly. But once that last bubble pops, all traces of my night at the ball will be gone, and I’ll be back to normal life.

Somehow, I didn’t expect the drop that would come after returning from the ball. If the night had ended normally, without me running away in tears, I think I’d still feel this strange low. It’s from knowing that people are out there, wearing my suits and gowns to parties, making small talk and chatting about their weekend vacations, drinking alcohol while taking in huge pieces of historical art.

And I’m here. Forever here because of my bad choices.

I try not to think of that, and instead, focus on my grandmother. If I were to run away from here, she would suffer, and rather than punish myself for something I did years ago, I tell myself it’s just as much about keeping her safe as it is spanking me.

I close my eyes, and listen to my crow stab his beak into the concrete window sill, and think about him.

The Phantom at the party. *My* Phantom.

Who is he? Did he go to the ball for a hookup?

The tapestries in the ballroom fill my brain, all the medieval scenes of kink and pleasure. A smirk crawls over my tired lips as I envision Vivian, Fern and Tess seeing those pieces of art, but not being able to have their honest reaction to them. After all, the ball is full of uppity rich people and that’s Vivian’s dream—to be in that crowd. She can’t be disgusted at what everyone else seems to enjoy.

That little bit—imagining her silently squirming—gives me pleasure.

Reaching down, I grab my phone from beneath the cot and open to my favorite sleazy celebrity site, and start scrolling through photos of cars arriving on the Blackwood property. In all of the photos, I don’t see my Phantom.

I lock my phone as my eyes grow heavy, and force myself to think about anything but my Phantom, my fate, and the mess I made of the night.

I think of Mr. Blackwood, and his kinky art and his fancy party. I think of what it would be like to live on a property like that, with what looked like mini houses scattered around the estate, man-made woods and streams built in. What must it be like to be so rich that you can build your own perfect world to exist in, and never need to leave?

As I fall asleep, I think about the recluse, and the parallels between us.

He never leaves, by choice, but I think I'd love to live there, too. I don't really blame him. And yet I never leave here, and all I want to do is escape.

The next time I open my eyes, my crow is gone, and my eyes prove too heavy to keep watching for him. I try not to think of my lost collar as I fall into an exhaustive sleep.

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CHAPTER
Twelve

CASSIAN

DAVID'S MOUTH OPENS, then closes. Lucien does the same, lips parted, brow furrowed, eyes wide.

I crack my knuckles, then drag my hand along the row of suits in my closet where we are currently having this meeting.

"Do you not know where it is?" I ask David without taking my eyes off the rows of fine menswear. In seven years, I've practically replaced any and all other brands in my closet. It's all Moreau, and with the developments of last night, it feels like fate had a hand in it all.

I believe in fate. And that's part of what made my accident so utterly painful to accept. If I can believe the universe brings me good things as a reward, that surely must mean that the bad things are also deserved. And I never felt I deserved what happened. And yet, it still happened. It led me down a very dark hole of trying to repent for a sin I didn't know I'd committed.

"I know just where it is, but Cassian…" David's words trail off as I pull my favorite suit from the closet, hanging it on the steaming hook.

"This is the one for today," I tell him, stepping back to stand between him and my brother. Lucien stares at me, I feel his gaze burning into my profile. David wastes no time, retrieving the steamer from the mahogany cupboard, plugging it in and setting it to low.

He faces me, and my skin beneath the black vinyl mask is itchier than ever, because I know what I'm about to do. Still, in their presence, I lift my

chin with confidence, and shove my hands in my sweatpants pockets. Around the main house, though it's now morning, the ball still roars on my property. After midnight, *Veil* members left my home in favor of the rooms around the property. In favor of kink.

"You're really going to leave the house?" Lucien repeats my plans, his words stretched out, full of awe. "Seriously?"

I roll my neck, listening to the harsh cracks, trying not to let it make me jump. "I am."

David begins steaming the suit, and he's done it so many times, he's easily able to split his focus between the garment, and this conversation.

"I think it's good," he finally says, earning a smile from me.

"I mean, I do, too," Lucien bumbles, nervously tying off his dark hair into a low ponytail behind his head. "I do, I've been telling you for years you should get out, that out there isn't the enemy."

"Yes." I tap my chest. "Here is the enemy, I know."

Lucien scoffs. "You act like I don't have a degree in psychology."

I shake my head. "No, I act like you're not the one with half a face."

Silence eats up the energy in the space, and guilt settles along my shoulders at my choice of words. I never mean to use this against anyone, truly. I sigh. "I realize that I could face society, and hold my head high. But also I realize it would be met with a barrage of stares and whispers, and once everyone realized that Cassian Blackwood is a disfigured man with a sordid past, I'd feel that in my bank accounts. My business partners. I'd feel it everywhere. And the beautiful little flutter of facing my fears immediately dissipates when I think of the consequences, Lucien. And that is the truth of your psychology."

He doesn't say anything to that, because we all know how very right I am. We also all know that I'm wealthy enough to lose clients and lose business, and that the truth of it all is? I can't bring myself to face the stares and the whispers. I can't.

"So you're gonna wear the silicone mask, and go to Moreau?" Lucien finally asks, voice a little timid.

I nod. "I am."

We stand in silence, because this mask is one I've railed notoriously against in the past. Lucien had it made, with my compliance via hours of photos and face moulding from the top special effects artist in the city, and

it was supposed to allow me a way to go out casually without being stared at.

It’s good. For a small conversation, for a quick chat at a coffee counter, for the exchange of goods for money—it doesn’t raise eyebrows. It’s good enough to pass for a real face.

But I’ve hated it. I’ve spent years with it in a box in my closet, refusing to trick people, claiming it's better for me to simply stay here, in my sprawling estate. After all, I built *Veil* here to feel part of the world that matters to me, whether or not I myself visit the *Veil* rooms on property or not. I attend the ball, and watch people seek out their desired rooms midweek through my office window. I watch security footage. I feel, more or less, a big part of the world that matters to me.

Or, I did.

Until Eleanora Moreau sauntered into my home with a shattered backstory and a radiant smile. I was intrigued by her talent, floored by her skills, absolutely taken with what she created for me before I saw her.

But when she ended up being every bit the goddess I’d hoped, wanting all of the things I’ve been aching to discover in a future partner, everything changed.

“So… you’re going to go, what?” Lucien is still working it all out in his head. David asks no questions, but finishes steaming the suit, and retrieves the library-style ladder from the corner. He rolls it to the center of my closet, and begins climbing.

“I’m going to go talk to her.” That’s true, but it doesn’t feel right. I scrub a hand over the back of my neck, and roll out the kinks with a sigh. “I’m going to ask her for a meeting.”

Lucien casts a glance up at David, who is busy sorting through boxes at the top of my closet. My brother finally looks back at me. “How will you even find her? I mean, if they keep her hidden?”

“Fred says she’s in the backroom. So I will seek out the backroom.” Sweat bubbles on my flesh beneath my mask. The idea of leaving this place has my heart racing, but not with excitement. With something else.

Anxiety.

I swallow against the painful knot of angst in my throat, and think of her. Just a flash of her long lashes, remembering the soft way she begged for me, the easy way she obeyed me, it gives me resolve. I can do this. For her, I can do this.

“A meeting,” Lucien repeats finally.

“A meeting.”

He scratches the side of his jaw, then tucks a long piece of hair behind his ear. “I think you may weird her out calling it that. You know, most of us call those dates.”

I roll my eyes. “Not a date. A meeting. To propose a business contract.”

David comes down the ladder with a crisp white box in his hands. He sets it down on the wardrobe island. “To buy her work? To steal her from Moreau? Or… to be your submissive?”

Just the word submissive said aloud has me gripping the counter, blinking down at my shoes. Lucien brings his hand to my shoulder, but I swat him away.

He thinks I’m thinking of the last time I had a submissive, when my face was still my face. He’s thinking of what happened, and how it ended, and how it’s led me to a life of being secluded in my tower.

But that’s not what I’m thinking about at all.

“It’s… surprisingly not that,” I say quietly, still blinking down at the shine on my leather shoes. I’m almost embarrassed to admit the next part, but if I can’t be honest with these two, then I’ve really isolated myself internally as well as externally. I look up and find David and Lucien both watching, patiently listening. “It’s just… I’m obsessed with the idea of her. I know, I don’t know her yet, so I’m wise enough to know it’s the idea of her. But still, I find that she’s all I can think about. Having her here, under contract, showing her the rooms, the club, giving her all of the things she doesn’t have in return for…” I trail off, knowing exactly how to finish that sentence, but feeling too bold to do so.

“Her.” My brother has no qualms with finishing my thought.

I nod. “Yes, in return for her.”

“So it was never about her business at all. The atelier, all of that was just a ruse,” my brother continues, not pressing me but moreso, piecing it together aloud.

“I’ll give her the atelier, that wasn’t a ruse. I’ll give her anything and everything she wants and needs.” *As long as she gives me herself.*

David begins unboxing the mask, and pulling it gently from the form it rests against inside. “It needs some powder coating on the inside but otherwise, it’s ready for you.”

He looks at me. “I think you’re ready. And if you make the right offer, I think she’ll say yes.”

I nod, because the heat stalking up the back of my neck is suddenly overwhelming.

“Will you wear this around her, or just while you’re out?” Lucien asks, fingering the edge of the mask box.

I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I rock my bodyweight on my feet, but the answer comes to me so simply, that I can’t ignore it. That’s how fate works, after all. “Only while I’m out. While we’re here, I’ll wear the mask I wore at the ball.”

“The Phantom,” David states.

I nod.

Lucien pats me on the shoulder. “I think you’re brave. And I think she’ll say yes.”

“Every girl dreams of an illusive millionaire making all of their dreams come true,” David reassures me.

I cock a brow. “In those dreams, that millionaire is suave, *with* a handsome face.” I hate laying my insecurities out, but I need reassurance. As weak as it is to admit, I do.

“You are those things. You are suave,” David says casually, as if he’s not powdering me with deeply thoughtful sentiments. “Polite, charming, and confident. That’s you, that’s suave.”

Lucien reaches into the bottom drawer on the wardrobe island and produces the tin of dusting powder, and passes it to David. “And I know you’ll refute this with every morsel of your being but, you are handsome, Cassian. The scar–”

I cut him a silencing glance.

David’s voice is low when he says, “come on. Let’s try it on.”

My brother steps behind me, pats me on the shoulder in a way that makes my chest tight, then slowly unfastens the black mask that I wear everyday. It’s the same shape as my phantom mask, except it covers both eyes instead of just the one, and my entire cheek on the damaged side. I close my eyes, and know the moment it’s free when cool air nips at my skin.

When I reopen, David stands in front of me but a foot apart, gently blotting my scarred skin with a cool, terrycloth towel. Briefly, our eyes lock, and he gives me the faintest smile before continuing to gently cleanse

and dry my skin. After draping a towel over my shoulders and chest, Lucien passes him the powder, and he begins gently blotting my face.

"You can't open your mouth or else the power will go inside so I'm taking this opportunity to tell you that you're a handsome man," Lucien starts, standing behind David as he works. "Your scarring is there, I won't lie, but it adds character. It gives you a depth that others lack. And you still look a million times better than most. And I'm not just saying that. As your brother, I have the unique position of not having to lie to you." I peer at him through one blinked eye and he smirks.

David places the puff back in the tin and reaches for the silicone mask, which must be handled with the utmost care. Lucien slips a headband over my head while David prepares, and with my hair off my face and my skin prepared, I'm ready.

Five minutes later, I'm suited and masked, and Bretton is giving me a look of awe as I step onto the front entrance, asking him to drive me into the city.

For the first time in ten years.

I ASKED that David and Lucien let me go it alone. I feel oddly protective and territorial over Eleanora, and approaching her is something I have to do alone. Bringing a posse with me when she's kept by a posse herself felt insensitive and overwhelming.

Bretton has looked at me no less than forty times since we've left my estate, and I don't have it in me to raise the partition. Finally, as we arrive outside Moreau, and he's putting the town car into park, the burning gets the best of him.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Blackwood."

I can't help but let my fingers worm their way over the side of my face covered in soft silicone. It feels almost normal, and it looks real. I know, because I have a brother that wouldn't lie to me. Neither would David.

"And it's good that you left the house," Bretton adds, growing a little nervous when I don't immediately respond. "David comes here a lot. It must be your favorite place."

“All of the staff suits come from this place,” I tell him, which causes him to bob his head quickly.

“Yeah, we love them. They’re nice. Thank you for always providing us with great uniforms.”

I smile. “Thank you for your discretion today,” I reply, hoping he reads the unwritten subtext of the statement.

He salutes me in the rearview mirror. “Absolutely.” He grins. “I’m just really happy you’re out.”

I was going to get out just now, but his words have me bolted to my seat, hand resting on the handle. “I don’t mind staying in. I like my estate.”

He blinks, trying to digest the fact that staying in one house for ten years is something I enjoy, when other people can’t even stay in the same room for ten minutes. “So what’s kept you home so long?”

I scratch the side of my neck, my flesh beneath the silicone suddenly prickling with nerves. Ignoring it, as to not dislodge or move my shield, I smile and answer him as best as I can. “I haven’t had a good reason to leave,” I tell him, which is the truth, but not the whole truth. But it’s enough for Bretton.

He peers out the passenger window at Moreau, then back to me in the rearview. “Well, enjoy your time. I’ll be out here when you’re ready.”

With a duck of my head, I’m out of the car and onto the sidewalk.

New York is absolutely dizzying.

People bustle by, cellphones pasted to their hands, focus on their screens instead of the sidewalk and world around them. Some carry large drinks they slurp from, some have shopping bags looped around their forearms to their elbows. Some people look like people I’d do business with—in suits, blouses, shiny shoes or respectable closed-toe pumps, while others look like they’ve avoided showers for as long as I’ve avoided the public. The air is filled with the scent of burnt hot dogs, stale coffee and tangy skin, and as I take a few steps toward the boutique door, a man in a bike messenger uniform with no bike bumps into me.

“Get out of the way, you ugly cocksucker,” he growls as he pushes past, a little white helmet strapped to his head.

I touch my face, run my fingers over the smooth silicone, and hate that his words give me a moment of hesitation. *Ugly.*

It’s not the worst thing to be, and yet, to me, it’s all that I am.

I know I’m a million other things, but some other part of me feels those things pale in comparison to my ugliness.

The shop door opens, a bell dinging, snapping me out of my self-loathing haze. The woman is all smiles with a velvet garment bag draped over her arm, the little gold lock at the top catching my eye.

Eleanora. You are doing this to get to her. To have her. To follow your fate.

The woman disappears into the crowd and I catch the door right before it closes, taking a moment to step inside and let my eyes adjust to the low-light of the couture setting.

Gowns on forms, dresses on racks, suits on mannequins, ties on hangers —the boutique is as charming as I thought it would be, with a variety of styles I’m surprised to see.

Plain.

Business casual.

Simple.

This is what they make her create for the normal people, the people who don’t want to know that their wife’s gown includes a naughty pearl thong, that their suit jacket bears boning that brings delightful pain. Most of Moreau appears to be *for the normal*.

There’s a corner in the back with suits like mine hanging beneath a chandelier, and my heart races at the sight, knowing that’s clearly *my* section. I step forward, the scent of lavender and disinfectant stinging my nose when—

“Hello there, welcome to Moreau Boutique,” Vivian greets, her features much sharper up close than expected. Her gray hair is styled in a way that can only be described as a Victorian twist, or something from the 19th century. She smiles, red lipstick smeared across her front teeth, her eyes trickling over my chest and down my suit. “Ah,” she coos, the sound grating on my already prickled sensibilities. “You’ve been here before.”

I peer around her to the dark suits piped with black satin, at the sign hooked around the hanger that says *cumberbundt available*. Behind that rack, there’s a door, and it seems to be purposefully hidden.

“Yes, I’m a customer,” I reply, returning my focus to Vivian. As prepared as I am in all walks of life, for some reason, I didn’t think of this moment.

I need a story.

A plan.

A plot to distract her with.

A high-pitched voice crows from somewhere in the shop, causing me to stand a little taller, and Vivian's brow to droop.

"Well, I can tell I'm needed but have a look around. Since you're a customer, your measurements will surely be in the system. Excuse me for a moment," she says, the voice from the back room sounding off again. Only, I know that isn't Eleanora. I know she couldn't produce such a grating sound. "What was your name?" she asks as she treads backward to the corner of the shop where the door hides.

She's back there.

I know she's back there. It makes sense with the footage alignment.

"Erik."

Vivian's face falls to a frown before she catches it, forcing on a smile. "I'll be with you in a moment, Erik." And then she strides to the back of the shop, shoves the rack of beautiful suits aside, and pushes open the door, using her booted heel to knock it closed.

But it doesn't shut, it stays perfectly ajar by just an inch, and I close in on it, hovering near the rack, listening.

"We have clients in the shop, can this honestly not wait?" Vivian hisses, attempting to keep her voice down, but unable, the rage taking full hold. "Fern, I expect more from you."

"But Mom," comes Fern's voice as she stomps a foot into the ground, the smack of a sole against concrete evident even without sight. "Nora refuses to let me see the sketch book."

Nora.

She *is* back there. Fuck. I knew it.

The mask makes me hot, or maybe being out makes me that way, I don't know. But sweat dampens my neck and nape, and a sickly feeling rolls through my veins. I peer in, only slightly, and catch sight of her.

My chest tightens, and my nostrils flare.

Eleanora stands in ripped jeans, cuffed above her ankle, a torn t-shirt on her thin frame, bare shoulder exposed. Her blonde hair is up, a pencil driven through to keep it that way, the soft slope of her throat where I once pressed my lips on full display.

She looks down at her feet, a sketchbook held tight to her chest. "I'm working out of the sketchbook. If I give it to her now, I'll virtually have to

pause what I’m doing.” She looks up, timid, fatigue and hunger hanging in dark crescents beneath her shining eyes. Eyes that seem so dull in this setting, unlike the way they looked at my home, at my ball. Up at me.

“I know you want me to get as many gowns finished as possible,” she adds quietly, appeasing Vivian.

Vivian looks between them, and it’s the first time I’m seeing Fern this close, too. She’s not ugly on the outside, but it’s clear the insides need work. It’s not her fault, she’s a product of Vivian Moreau—what chance did she stand?

“Give Fern the book. If you need to stay late, so be it.”

Nora’s mouth falls open, wobbles a bit, an argument climbing up her throat and I think it’s going to perish on her tongue until— “I have to stay late again just because she can’t be patient for once in her life?” she snaps back, and I can’t help but smirk at the way she stands up for herself.

Vivian steps closer to Nora as Fern tugs the book from under her arm, looking like a child who just won a victory in a silly squabble. Of course, that is what she is, despite her age.

“Should I ask your grandmother to be patient next month when rent is due? Should I ask the retirement home to be patient while I decide if I want to pay said rent? Hmm?” She takes Nora’s chin in her bony fingers and forces her to meet her gaze. “Don’t think that because you got to go to one ball that you’ve earned other rights here. Do you understand?”

Nora doesn’t speak, but instead, nods.

I step back into the boutique a few paces, just in time for Vivian and Fern to exit the room, snapping the door closed so hard that the shelf of champagne flutes behind the register rattles a bit. Vivian is using her grandmother’s care against her.

What a peach.

“Erik,” Vivian says, looking a little surprised I’m standing so close. “Have you found anything you’d like to try on or order?”

I need time. I need to be left alone and get to her, in that room.

I shake my head. “No, still browsing. I do my best shopping alone.” I show my teeth, and tap my upper lip. “You’ve got lipstick here.”

Her cheeks flush, and she brings her hand to her mouth, covering it as she runs her tongue over the crimson. “Thank you,” she says, not quite sounding thankful. “And I’ll leave you to it. Let myself or my daughter Fern know if you need anything at all.”

She scurries away, joining Fern behind the desk, her back to me. I wouldn't normally point that out. It's ungentlemanly to do so.

But to hell with this monster for keeping someone like Nora a secret. For using her. For talking to her like shit. For making food and spare time something she must earn.

I wait a second, making sure Vivian doesn't turn around, and when she's got her face buried in a compact with lipstick and liner out, I move toward the door.

I place my hand on the knob, but pause when I catch my reflection in the mirrored wall behind the rack of suits.

It's my old face looking back at me. The face I had when I fought my way from the bottom to the top. The face I had when I made my first million. The face I had when I thought I'd met the first and only woman who ever understood me, the same woman who took that face from me in a matter of seconds.

This never happens.

I never have things come rushing back.

I don't have PTSD.

I've long since come to terms with what happened.

And yet—

She stands behind the closet door, where I told her to hide. I didn't have Badd then. I didn't think I needed security beyond a doorbell camera and some deadbolts. From my spot tied to the corner of my four-post bed, the mirror on the back of the door was more like a window into truth than anything else that night.

I'd yelled for them to not hurt her.

I'd begged for them to let her go.

I'd pleaded for her life, and the life of the child inside of her.

I told them I'd give up anything.

They gagged me, left me drooling and immobile, completely naked, their attack timed in the throes of a torrid scene with her. Alex. My partner. My lover. My world.

And the mother of my unborn child.

He threatened to beat her mercilessly, and stormed off to where she hid, and I'd never felt so hopeless, or been so scared. But the door swung partially closed, and that's when I saw it.

Alex walked her fingers up one of the intruder's shirts, grabbed onto his collar and pulled him down into a hot, sinister kiss.

I turn on my heel, and walk quickly to the door, ignoring the way Vivian asks me if I need help again, if she can do anything for me, ignoring everything but my tunnel vision that takes me through the overcrowded sidewalk of New York and back to the town car.

I find myself gasping for air in the backseat, tugging at the top button of my pressed dress shirt, seeking comfort, a breath of fresh air, something to calm me down.

Bretton is saying something. I don't know what. His words are a rush of noises against the clattering in my mind. I tell him to take me back, to go, I think that's what I say.

I push one hand against my hairline and use the other to find the seam of the mask, which blends effortlessly against my flesh. I pull, but it fits so well, it's a struggle to make progress, and each time I pull and it doesn't budge, the faster my heart races, the more I see of Alex, the more I hear her angered tone ringing in my ears when I was finally ungagged.

I can't breathe, and throw back my shoulders in an assault against the finely made jacket, the back of it tearing open at once. I yank off the sleeves and shrug out of what's left, chest heaving, sweat dripping down my spine, and beading profusely beneath the mask.

One harsh tug as I gasp, the edges of my vision clouding, my pulse hammering so hard in my throat that I think I'll be sick.

The silicone gives, and the partial-face falls into my lap, leaving me completely bare.

Bare but able to breathe.

My head falls against the leather, and I drape my palm over my chest, kneading at the panic and discomfort that have suddenly made a home there, near my heart. The world whips by the window, everything outside of this car a blur of noise and color, but I can finally breathe.

Minutes later, I caution a glance at the rearview mirror, and find Bretton watching me as he slows down at a red light. He blinks, and for a moment I think he's going to look away, to put the partition up, to leave our encounter in the rubble.

But he clears his throat and says, "Fuck, that's gotta feel good."

I don't understand. I swipe at the sweat above my lip. "Wh-what do you mean?" My voice is thin from the chaos.

“I mean, I didn’t know you were wearing a mask but now that you have it off, damn, man, that had to be uncomfortable. Hot and whatnot.”

He isn’t shocked by my real face. Or, if he is, he’s not letting on. At all.

In fact, when he looks in the rearview, I don’t find him analyzing the pink, soft skin that looks melted and sore. I don’t see his eyes veer up and down over the long gash carved into that side of my face. He’s just looking at me, like normal.

“It actually wasn’t.”

His eyebrows lift.

“Until it was,” I add with a gentle laugh that allows for him to laugh, too.

We don’t speak again until we’re in front of the estate. Bretton opens the door for me and when I get out, he nods his head at me. “I’m here anytime, Mr. Blackwood. Wherever you want to go.”

I shake his hand. Inside, with a torn suit jacket and half a face in my hands, I realize, this was too big of a step. I make my way up to my office, defeat heavy in my shoulders, and get to work on a letter to miss Eleanora Moreau.

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CHAPTER

Thirteen

NORA

EVEN MY CROW has a more fledgling social life than I do. He's currently flying around a dove, likely trying to catch it and potentially murder it but hey, it's something.

I catch another yawn with my hand, and continue feeding soft fabric through the machine, the droning noise it makes soothing the exhaustive tension from my shoulders and neck, just slightly.

One in the morning. That's what time I finished last night, because Fern insisted on drinking a Frappuccino and sifting through the sketch book for two hours up front yesterday. I blame the mail man for not coming on time and serving her up all those tabloids and glossy celeb tracking magazines she likes.

Okay, *I don't blame him.*

I blame Vivian for not realizing that giving precious Fern everything she wants all the time isn't good for her, or the shop. But Vivian will always choose to put me through agony at the cost of anyone or anything.

Plus, she's still mad that I actually managed to get to the ball two nights ago.

She pressed me over five times as to how I completed all those chores, and once, I even told her the truth. I told her the garbage man helped, to which she rolled her eyes and said, and I quote, "your little sarcastic and ironic bit has grown tiresome over the years, Nora."

The crow lands on the window sill with a gray feather sticking out of his beak. His beady black eyes stare in, almost directly at me. “So you got him, then?” I ask, folding over the fabric, feeding the final fold through. The piece I’m working on now isn’t custom but rather, a piece for the boutique. A simple skirt meant to be paired with a matching tank bodice.

Yawn.

But they sell as well as my fun designs, and let’s face it, I have no choice. If Vivian told me to sew clown clothes, guess what I’d be doing?

The crow pecks his head through the bars, and one of these days I swear he’ll realize his entire body can fit through. Years ago, there was a screen. But it blew off in a bad storm and even though all of the most important things to the boutique are stored back here, Vivian never had it replaced, the same way she didn’t fix the space heater or the shitty light.

It’s because I’m back here.

She’d rather punish me than protect what’s important. See what I mean?

“You better go,” I tell him, knowing that I’m waiting on the witch as we speak. I asked her if I could go see my grandmother this weekend—didn’t ask for a ride, but merely, permission to go. Twice I caught a bus on the weekend and went and saw her and both times, Vivian warned me that if I didn’t get her permission, she’d move my grandmother and not disclose where she is.

I am twenty-six years old and I have to ask my stepmom for permission to see my grandma. Could my life be more sad?

When the final stitch is placed, I flatten the skirt on the cutting table and retrieve my steamer. While it heats, I get out my phone and quickly scroll through the fashion blogs to see what’s new. Not much. A few shows here in Manhattan this weekend, but nothing I’d go to even if I could.

Boring designers that think shoulder pads and boxy cuts are the height of cutting edge fashion. I lock my phone and slip it into my smock when the door opens, the creaking hinges making me straighten. Pavlov’s dog drooled when he rang the bell. My spine straightens when the door opens. I’m nothing more than a conditioned animal.

“Nora.”

I turn in my chair and place my hands in my lap, taking in Vivian’s frown, and the way she has her hair pulled into a tight bun. She’d make a great witch if she ever wanted to be an actor. She’s got the look, and the entire vibe.

I stifle a smirk.

“I’ve considered your request,” she starts, and my heart drops, shattering into a million pieces at the pit of my belly. I force my face to stay impassive, because she gets a thrill from my pain. “But I need you to take the screens off at the house this weekend and wash them and get them back on.”

My father used to do that job. I can still see his white hair shining beneath the sun as he alternated hosing off the screens, and my bare feet as I played next to him in the lawn.

“Okay.” That’s all I’ll give her. I won’t beg. I may try and sneak out and see grandma on my own at some point, but I’ll do it when she least expects it. Not this weekend. This weekend, I’ll spray screens. “That’s fine.”

She looks around the workroom, and tips her head to the side when her eyes land on the crow in the window. I don’t know what it is at that moment but Vivian’s eyes come back to mine. “If you get done before lunch, you can go.”

My proverbial tail wags, and I blink my eyes a few times to fight my flagrant surprise. “Okay. Thank you, Vivian.”

She nods toward the skirt. “I’ll send Tess to bring it out once it’s steamed.”

“Okay.”

She waits, and this is the point where she wants me to fall all over myself for her mercy, and it’s not that I want to, but seeing my grandma is quite possibly the most important thing I have in my life. I lick my lips, and set my shoulders back, and force on the most uncomfortable smile I can muster. “Thank you so much, Vivian.” *Thank you for making me work half the day and race across town on a smelly ass bus in my sweaty work clothes to see a woman I should be able to see whenever I want.* “You’re benevolent.”

She turns, and closes the door, satisfied with my grovel.

I gag a little, then turn back to my work station, and steam the skirt for the next few minutes. Moments after I’m done, Tess comes in and collects my work without a single word, and leaves, slamming the door so hard my brain rattles.

I get to work unspooling fabric from the bolt, ready to create the matching top for the skirt, when a gentle tap meets the alley door.

It’s not Friday. Friday is garbage day. Literally no one else has ever knocked or tapped at that door but Fred. Fred on Fridays. I sit up straight, squinting at the barred window, searching for Fred’s truck. Maybe he’s doing a pop in? I was upset last time I saw him, and he’s such a nice guy.

But he’s not out there. There’s nothing but alley and rotten old garbage cans and the muted noises of Manhattan.

Another knock, still soft, but this time, with slightly more backbone. I get to my feet, quietly padding across the workroom space, and pull open the door.

A man stands before me in a Moreau suit, one I designed, from the Fall 2024 collection when I was big into buttons matching the piping down the legs. He smiles, a bit awkwardly, thin lips framing out slightly crooked but white teeth.

“I like your suit,” I tell him, lifting my eyebrows as I take in my work. I pat the chest over his left peck. “Where’s the pocket square? It really ties in the buttons and leg piping.”

He ignores my comment, and slips his hand inside the suit, into what I know is the hidden pocket against his chest. Producing a thick white envelope, the man passes it to me, my name written in loopy cursive on the top. *Eleanora.*

“This is for you,” he says, nudging the envelope my way.

“I see that,” I tell him, taking the envelope from him, my heart quietly racing in my ears. I’ve never had mail. I’ve never had a special delivery.

And somehow, the man from the ball comes to my mind. And I know without a doubt, this is from him.

“So he found me,” I state to the suited man, my Phantom’s words swirling in my brain. Not that I haven’t spent the last two nights replaying every single moment with him, but the limited words we spoke to one another are permanently etched into my brain. I smile, because I know his name. “David?”

He looks a little surprised, but nods. “Nice to meet you, Miss Moreau.”

I open the envelope, and quickly read the handwritten note.

Eleanora,

I would like you to meet me at the St. Regis Hotel tomorrow evening at eight o’clock. Two East 55th Street, at Fifth Avenue. Room 201. I have a proposition for you. I will send a car to pick you up behind the Moreau Boutique.

Looking forward to reuniting,

Your Phantom

"I knew it," I smile, looking up at David who is busy peering around me, snooping into the backroom. I kick the door open wider with my barefoot. "You don't have to be nosey. You can see." I peer back at the fabrics strewn over the cutting table. At the various machines threaded and ready to go. At the racks of bagged couture waiting to be collected by their rich buyers. "Pretty basic stuff."

His eyes come back to mine. "Can I tell him you've accepted?"

I stare at the invite, and remember that tomorrow is when I'm slated to see my grandmother. I look back up at David before glancing with caution at the door behind me. The part of me that has seen Netflix crime documentaries and is well aware of bad guys, despite the fact my life is limited to two rooms, says, *maybe don't accept*. Maybe chalk that ball up to a one time amazing thing, keep your vital organs, and pass.

But the part of me who has lived my life in two rooms, who has lived to serve others in the worst and least rewarding ways possible, she's a lot louder in my head.

"Listen, I wanna go but… can the car pick me up from the Shady Grove nursing home instead?"

David nods, thumbing something into his phone when he asks, "Visiting grandma?"

I blink at him, then narrow my eyes. "Is the Phantom stalking me or what? It's one thing to know my name, and another to know my grandma is in a nursing home."

"My boss likes to learn everything he can about the thing he wants most." He nods his head. "The car will be out front of Shady Grove at six, so we can get to the St. Regis by eight." Then he slips off the back step, walks ten feet down and joins another suited man in a town car, and they back out of the alley and disappear.

My boss likes to learn everything he can about the thing he wants most.

I'm that thing.

Am I a thing? I'm a woman but… God, to be that masked hunk's *thing*. To be used and made to do exactly what he says, to be a vessel for his needs and desires.

The word thing echoes in my brain as I stuff the invitation into my smock and close the door, bracing my back against it. Heat flares in my

spine, coiling between my legs as I replay that single turn of phrase in my mind, over and over, cheeks growing ruddy, the back of my neck getting hot.

Thing.

I look around the shop, wondering what I can sneak "home" in my bag tonight, that I can change into at Shady Grove. I don't know what the Phantom is going to propose, and since I'm virtually chained to this shop, I don't know what I can accept. An ice cream date late at night? Maybe a phone call on the nights I sleep here?

But a girl can have a fantasy, so I tightly roll a simple black gown with an adjustable thigh slit and heated breast plates into my bag, and force myself to get back to work. Even if the proposition is for me to make gowns for him, and not for a date or another tawdry few minutes together, I'd accept. In a heartbeat, I'd accept probably anything he offers, as long as I can.

The rest of the day is nothing more than a heated blur.

I HAVE YET to tell grandma about attending the ball. Or even the fact that our family was invited. Mostly because I'm afraid I won't be able to keep my mouth shut once I start going, and I really don't think my adorable grandma wants to hear how I got *fingerbanged* at a masked ball and driven "home" by a garbage man.

Sorry, Fred.

I do, however, take my sketchbook from the boutique and share with her all of the wonderful things I've made since I last saw her, and what's on the agenda for the rest of the year. She flips pages slowly, her weathered eyes taking in every footnote, every eraser mark, every single detail. I love how focused she is, and I really can't wait until I've saved enough money to get her away from here.

Not that anything is wrong with Shady Grove. It's nice. Very nice, actually. But there could be nothing nicer than being with the family that loves you, that much I do know.

I braid her hair while she finishes sifting through the final pages of the book, adding a silk bow at the end, from scrap fabric I shoved into my bag

yesterday. “I’m still planning to get a place as soon as I can,” I remind her with a sigh as I pull the satin bow tight, then knot it to make sure it stays. “And as soon as I can, you can live with me.”

She closes the book, smoothing her wrinkled hand over the cover. “You write like him.”

I sit down on the bed, across from the chair she’s sitting in, and cross my legs. I wore my overalls here, but brought the dress in my bag. After a subway and bus ride, it desperately needed some airing out, so I hung it in grandma’s closet the second I arrived three hours ago. I peer at it, then back at her. “I know. I try to. I always loved his handwriting, especially his cursive.”

She smiles, stroking her fingers needlessly over the worn cover as she peers back at her closet for a moment. “So tell me about this date.”

I tuck my hair behind my ears, and decide now, nearing seven thirty in the evening, is time for me to take out my French braid and let the tight waves loosen. I shake out my hair, and shove the scrunchie up my wrist. I did tell her I’m getting picked up here for a date, but we got so pulled into catching up about everyone else, this is the first time we’re actually talking about me.

I let out a long, heady sigh and press my palms to my cheeks, feeling the excited heat blooming in my skin.

Grandma giggles. “Oh no. You’re in trouble. You’ve got the look of love.

I shake my head and let my hands fall into my lap. “How about I tell you after, if it goes well?”

She nods. “That sounds great.”

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CHAPTER
Fourteen

CASSIAN

I SPENT the afternoon drafting up this contact with my lawyer, after much of the morning was spent going through the report Lucien brought me from the Badd Brothers.

Most of what was in their report were things I pieced together on my own, but it was nice seeing it all in black and white. Nice seeing it in certainty.

Eleanora Moreau is the only child of late designer Winfield Moreau, who died ten years ago, going on eleven. His death was while in a coma that started from a heart attack, but according to the newspaper articles that circulated at the time, he had been sick with various ailments for quite some time. Cancer, to name one.

Since his passing, his widow, Vivian has run his brand and his shop with her two daughters from her first marriage. Winfield's mother, Connie, lives in Shady Grove, and has been there almost exactly since her son passed. Prior to his passing, and in his obituary, she is listed as having lived with them.

Eleanora is never mentioned again online or in print, not since the obituaries ran years back. She has no social footprint, no college alumni listings, no White Pages, no cheeky grinning photos posted on now-dead media sites. Nothing. Not a single bit of information exists about her online, and if it did, the Badd Brothers would have found it, I have faith in that.

Badd deployed a few cameras around both the boutique and the Moreau property in the last two days, and from what I can gather, Eleanora exists between the two places and nowhere else.

Saturday evening she walked six blocks home, and this morning, she washed screens in their yard while Vivian, Tess and Fern had gone out. Badd followed the women, and reported in the margins of their notes that the three went shopping, and though they were back with plenty of time to take Eleanora to Shady Grove, still, she took the subway, then caught the bus the rest of the way.

It seems as if she is the family secret, though I have no clue why anyone would keep such a talented goddess a secret. I fear it has to do with what Fern and Tess lack as much as it does with Vivian's rampant jealousy for a woman that she should love like a daughter.

Whatever it is, though it may be everything to Eleanora, in truth, is unimportant, because it's going to end now.

That is, if she says yes.

I run my fingers over the edges of the phantom mask, finding it much more comfortable than the silicone. Or maybe the comfort is in my mind, because I know with all reason and rationale that the silicone is perfectly comfortable. Still, I like this mask. And I know she likes it.

Or at least she did a few nights ago.

Eleanora adores her grandmother, and it seems as if Vivian's proverbial carrot is Connie's care. She dangles it in front of Eleanora to keep her quiet, to keep her working, to keep her designing the couture that keeps Manhattan coming back. That's a strong love my beauty has for her grandmother.

I like that. I like how much she's willing to give for her family.

I would give my life for Lucien's, if the need arose. And once upon a time, I was willing to give my life for Alex's.

Alex.

My panic attack.

It's going to be different this time.

Those are the words I repeated to myself over and over as I drafted my letter to Eleanora, and as I drafted the contract earlier. It's going to be different. Eleanora is not Alex, nor is she like her in any way whatsoever.

On top of which, Badd continues to vet Eleanora.

I've also taken a nice nip of whiskey to squelch the nerves that threaten to ruin this moment. I won't let them. David and Lucien rode with me to the hotel in the back of the town car, Lucien spending the journey assuring me that I am doing the right thing. That moving forward is right, and it's beyond time.

"I mean, you guys don't know each other, like at all, so that's weird a little but… she came to a masked ball run by an invisible millionaire so when it's all in that context, it's less weird and way more romantic."

I tend to agree with him.

I shake his hand, and he takes the town car to a shop downtown, to buy things for his upcoming scene with his new partner. David stays with me, ready for what comes next, for anything I may need. I say goodbye to him as I enter the room and he takes a spot at the end of the hall, getting comfortable in a red chair draped in rich gold and blue paisley fabric.

I like the St. Regis. It makes me feel at ease. I never brought Alex here. It is unstained and pure.

Sitting at the table I had placed in the hotel room before my arrival, I walk my fingers over the neat edge of the contract, take a deep breath, and wait. I don't think of my nerves, the accident, my face—instead, I remember her.

Her soft voice. The playfulness in her tone. The way she whimpered and begged so beautifully. And how she unfolded into a million gentle pieces afterward, allowing me the courtesy and honor of piecing her back together.

And then, at eight *on the nose*, she knocks. Awareness curls hotly in my spine, making my arms and legs tingle. I finger the edge of the mask as I get to my feet and lift my chin, striding to the door, opening it without hesitation.

My god. To think that I thought I knew beauty before I knew of Eleanora. And I don't mean Alex.

I mean, I once called a tangerine sky melting over an exhausted summer sun beautiful. I grew a garden full of Gertrude Jekyll roses, their centers pink like bubblegum, the edges of the petals colored like a mature raspberry on the vine. Those, too, I called beautiful. They were so gorgeous, I took photos of them, made them into prints in my library. I thought they were, as I said, *so beautiful.*

Perfectly mixed Manhattans.

The night sky littered with stars and promises.

Tender moments in my darkness.

All things I once thought without a doubt were beautiful.

Now I know how wrong I was, what a fool I've been. Because Eleanora Moreau is the definition of beauty, and nothing else holds a candle to her.

"Hey," she smiles, waving her hand a little nervously, her bottom lip pulled beneath her teeth as peers around me, then right into my eyes. "If you were planning to like, harvest my organs or traffick me or something, I want you to know that my grandma knows exactly where I am and if I don't go home after this," she warns, leaving the end of her sentence unattended.

Freckles appear at the bridge of her nose, dancing across the apples of her cheeks as her skin flushes pink. Her hair is down tonight, the ends of the honeyed silk brushing the bottoms of her breasts. In a black satin gown with a thigh slit that has my stomach clenching, she has my heart absolutely racing. My skin flushes beneath the mask as I pull the door open wider and step back. "Ah, so I'll have to harvest your kidneys and traffick you on one of our impromptu dates, then." I smile. "Understood."

She pauses, studying my eyes for a second that makes my throat tight. She hasn't acknowledged the mask, not with her eyes, not with her words. Not yet. Finally, a large smile curves her face, full lips framing beautiful white teeth, not perfect but goddamn perfect to me. "So you're funny *and* mysterious."

She finally enters, her shoulder brushing my chest in an electrifying moment on the way in. I close and lock the door. "You're forgetting disgustingly rich," I deadpan.

Eleanora tosses her little handbag onto the chaise in the room's entry, and saunters deeper inside, spotting the table right away. "Rich, funny and mysterious," she lists, turning to face me. Now her blue eyes crawl over the mask's edges, and my chest tightens, anxiety knotting in my belly. "And masked."

I nod. "And masked."

She tips her head to the side, studying me for a long moment, before turning her head to take in the room. A large bed, two nightstands, floor to ceiling drapes keeping the city at bay, our table with a pitcher and two glasses, a mini bar, the door to the bathroom and an open, empty closet. "Who are you?"

She hasn't signed anything. She hasn't given me her word. She hasn't done anything but dance with me and let me please her just once, in the low

light and hungry privacy of my library.

Still.

The knot that rests at the base of my throat seems to dissipate, because I find myself telling her something I haven't told people in over ten years.

"Cassian Blackwood."

She searches for the truth in my eyes, but with half of my face covered, she can't and won't find much. Her lips part, and my eyes fall to the beautiful darkness between the pink, and I can't help but imagine sliding my cock there, filling up every inch of shock and then stroking my thumb over the tears that would leak from her eyes as I did.

"Liar," she whispers, the word bloated with shock. Perhaps even a little fear.

I reach into my back pocket and retrieve my wallet, and outstretch it to her. She won't find a driver's license since I don't drive and wouldn't keep a photo of my old face on my person—I'm a dominant, not a masochist. Her blue eyes sparkle as she stares at me, her hands opening the leather trifold slowly, almost cautiously. She finally looks down at the cards tucked into the pockets, and I watch with a fist behind my ribs as she slides the first credit card out. My black card.

"Cassian Blackwood," she reads, before she pulls out another, this one my bank card. "Cassian Blackwood." She looks up at me, frantic urgency dancing in her eyes, almost like she believes me even less than before. She plucks out my insurance card, and I watch her eyes carve out my name on the blue plastic before she moves to the next, and the next, all which of course have my name on them.

She watches me intently as she shoves them back in, then sticks out her hand with my wallet hanging open and loose. My fingers wrap her wrist as I take the wallet, and the little shuddered breath that slips past her lips has me rock hard.

I feel like a goddamn animal around her. I can't stop staring. I'm hard. I'm envisioning her taking me while on all fours, collared and leashed, her strewn across my bed with my marks searing her bare ass.

She's it for me. I know it.

Cooly, I release her wrist and take my wallet back, shoving it away. I extend my hand, motioning to the chair on her side of the table. "Please, sit."

“Why am I here?” she asks, but before I can answer she adds, “are you really him? Because no one knows who he is. No one has seen him, in like, years. So why would the real Cassian Blackwood, a reclusive millionaire, all of the sudden tell me who he is and invite me to a secret meetup?” she asks, somewhat rhetorically before dusting the tips of her long fingers against her heart, voice dropping when she murmurs, “*me*.”

“I believe we enjoyed each other’s company at the masquerade.” My heart is hammering at the base of my throat, and the edges of my vision have gone grainy. It’s been a long time since I’ve had to work for something like this. Investors, businessmen, they simply say yes. Ask where to sign. But this matters more than all of that, and I can see, she isn’t sold.

She isn’t sure of me.

“That was—” she stops her words, still not sitting in the chair I’ve provided. The world feels uneasy beneath my feet, and I’d like to sit, to present her with my offer, but I can’t do that until I’ve made her comfortable. Which, behind a mask, is hard. It’s strange, not showing your face. I know that it is. I know that she must feel—uneasy, at best. Clearly sharing my name with her hasn’t bridged the gap.

She takes a small step, and my breath catches in my lungs as she nears me. Her eyes take hold of mine, searching for a sign that I’m telling the truth. Her gaze drops to my hands and I hold them out for her to inspect, and after a moment she looks up at me. “That *was* you.”

I nod.

She swallows, and the sound reverberates through my chest. I want that fearful swallow, but with my protection and safety, under completely different circumstances.

I motion to the chair again, heart racing, cock stiff. Thankfully my dark slacks and the rise of the table’s corner have me covered. But I don’t think she’ll look. She’s processing, giving each moment of this thought, and that only makes me want her more.

“You buy a lot of gowns and I make a lot of suits for you,” she says slowly, as if she’s mapping it all out in her mind. A vision of her locked away in that workroom flashes through my mind, and I know no matter what’s typed in those papers, I’ll give her whatever she wants so that I can give her better. Give her what she deserves.

I nod. “You do. Your work is the finest. You are absolutely the most gifted designer I’ve ever known.”

Her brows furrow, and a tiny line forms on her forehead. And I wish so badly to smooth it out with my thumb as she kneels for me.

"You don't know me."

A smile threatens the corner of my lips. I like her more each passing second. Dangerously so. "That's true. I do not know you but I do know your work." I smile but my body is in flames from the inside out. "As you just mentioned, you make a lot of suits for me. And I also purchase many of the Moreau Boutique non-custom suits for the men who work for me."

She just blinks. Staring at me. Not moving. Not doing anything but watching and thinking. And I get harder by the second.

Her voice is so low that my chest tightens and heat spreads through my limbs like wild fire when she speaks. "Was that why you invited Moreau Boutique to your party? Because you like our work?"

I'm proud of her for connecting these dots. And I know in this moment, with her honesty and bravery standing before me in a thigh-slit dress that makes me feral, I will never lie to her.

"I wanted to know who was designing the suits and gowns I buy. I've known for some time that Vivian, despite her many claims, is not the designer."

She smiles, and something cracks inside my chest, letting in the purest and brightest of lights. A feeling I haven't felt in too many years. Happiness. Making her smile makes me fucking happy.

"She's a complete liar."

I nod. "I was aware. But I wasn't sure who was making them, and my assistant said he'd only ever seen her two daughters."

She rolls her eyes a little playfully, and my cock likes that, too. "They couldn't place a stitch if their lives depended on it."

I nod again. "As soon as I saw them at my party, I knew it wasn't them."

I make a bold move, and step to her, taking her soft, perfect hand between mine. I stroke the tip of my finger over the pads of hers, tracing them out. "These are hands that create."

She doesn't pull her hand back, but her brows pinch again. "That night, did you know it was me? I mean, did you know I was the one making the suits and gowns you were buying?"

"Yes."

She wastes no time. "So you like me because I make clothes you like?"

I don’t know how to answer that, but she doesn’t let me, anyway. She yanks her hand from mine. “You buy gowns. You buy gowns and you–” she drops her voice to a private whisper. “Did that to me at the party.” Her eyes search mine, and yet the accusation is gone from her tone when she asks, “are you a cheater, Cassian Blackwood?”

My answer is immediate. “I would never.”

Her retort comes quickly. “So who are the gowns for?”

I clear my throat and motion again to the chair. “That’s part of why I invited you here. Please,” I sound less desperate than I feel. “Have a seat?”

She eyes me and I pull the chair out. She sits, the ends of her silken hair dusting my knuckles as I help her get closer to the table. I have the strongest urge to wrap my hands in her hair, to see her golden locks splayed out around my knuckles as I tug her head back with force and come to the throaty sound of her pain. I clear my throat, and take a seat across from her, pouring us each a glass of water.

She doesn’t even look at the manila folder on the table, the two pens there. She just stares at me, and though my mask is perfectly in place, I feel seen in a way I hadn’t expected.

I finger the edge of the mask and swipe at sweat on my cheek, and she watches me.

“The Midnight Masquerade is a party for my private club,” I begin, because it feels like the easiest place to start. She cocks a brow, reaching for her water. She doesn’t drink but rather, runs her fingers down the side, through the condensation, before bringing them to the back of her neck.

“Are you hot? I can turn the room AC on.”

She licks her lips. “What club?”

“*Obsidian Veil*. I created it about ten years ago,” I tell her, and she waits, saying nothing, simply hungrily and quietly waiting for more. I am steel in my slacks beneath the table top, and sweat slides down the hollow of my spine. My need to have her pounds through my veins, bleeding into every free part of me. “It is a club for those who have unique needs. They are vetted and they join, sign documents to promise their discretion, and then have access to all the club offers.”

There’s a plethora of questions waiting inside my answers, and I wonder what she’ll pluck first. But Eleanora Moreau will keep me on my toes, I’m learning, because she tips her head to the side, fingers still playing in the

condensation on her glass. The condensation that reminds me of how wet she was the other night.

Soaked. Absolutely dripping with need.

I swallow against the sudden lump of lecherous desire clogging my airway. I want and need her so bad I can hardly breathe.

“Those tapestries,” she thinks aloud, her gentle voice a soft murmur that wraps my hard cock like velvet. “So the club is for kinky people.”

I nod. “Yes.”

She nods to me. “And you’re kinky?”

I swallow. “Yes.” My heart is pounding so loudly in my ears I can hardly hear. “And so are you.”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t chase my statement, and pull it apart. Instead, she asks, “what do the club members do?”

I lift my palms. “Whatever they please. They have access to six rooms on my property where they can observe or participate.” She finally takes a sip of her water, and as much as I want to do the same, I don’t. I hold my confidence, unfaltering, and add, “Those who participate are Players. The rooms are themed to cater to specific kinks. Members can move from room to room, all the rooms are on my estate and open all the time and they can come and go whenever they please. The Midnight Masquerade is the one time a year all members are together.”

She finishes the water, and I pour her more as she peels apart what I’ve just handed her. “So you hide out in your mansion, but you let people come and go from your place all the time?” She shakes her head, tucking soft, golden hair behind her ears as she thinks aloud. “Then people must know who you are. The reclusive thing is a myth, then?”

I lift my chin, feeling hot beneath the gentle fabric her hands created. My cock is nearly weeping at this point. “I have left my house twice in the last ten years. Once to come to Moreau and give you this,” I tap the folder, “and tonight.”

“You came to the boutique?”

I nod. “I did.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“I saw you.”

“But you didn’t—I didn’t—”

The truth comes easy in her presence, despite how weak it makes me feel, and for what I’m about to ask her to give me, the least I can give her is

the truth. In slivers. “I had a panic attack in the shop, and left before I could talk to you.”

Her eyes soften, but not with pity but moreso, interest. And relief lifts invisible weights from my chest in discovering that she isn’t pitying me. I hate pity. Pity and staring, that’s why I hide. “I’m sorry you had a panic attack.”

“My estate is large. The playrooms on my property are graciously spaced out, and they are only visible from one room in my home. I have my privacy, and to answer your question, members do not know who I am. I do not engage in the playroom activities, and the ball is masked, and so am I.” I smirk. “I sometimes pretend to be a waiter.”

“Gatsby,” she smiles, and my chest nearly explodes.

“That’s my favorite book.”

Sadness makes her eyes droop, and her full lips fall into a flat line. “It ends sadly.”

“I don’t think of myself as him, if that’s where you’re going up there,” I say, tapping my head. I can’t be Gatsby. He’s beautiful. “I don’t intend on dying in a pool at the hands of my lover’s lover,” I deadpan, teasing.

It earns me the faintest of smirks from her. “That’s good.”

I reach for the manila folder, but she stops me with a question. “So you created the club so kinky people could have a place to be kinky, but you don’t partake?”

“Partaking is for them.”

She looks at my hands, and my heart skips a beat. When her eyes come to mine, her voice is so soft, my chest threatens to cave in on itself. “What’s for you, then?”

“You.”

I think she’s going to argue that I don’t know her. That she isn’t mine. I half expect her to get to her feet and storm out.

“The dresses were purchased for my future submissive. I didn’t know her size, but the more of them I bought, the more I believed the designer was making them for herself. For what she deeply wanted.”

Still, she listens and so, I continue.

“You are a submissive. You seek pain mixed with pleasure. I’ve seen that part of you sewn into all of your creations. It’s why I invited Moreau to the ball. I needed to meet the woman who wants the very thing I crave to give.”

She just blinks. “Does Vivian know the ball is a sex-club meet up?”

I shake my head. “No. Members all sign NDAs, and Vivian did as well. She just believes she was invited to a who’s who.”

“She’s looking for husbands for Fern and Tess,” she says quietly.

I can’t preamble any longer. “Are you a submissive, Eleanora?”

“I don’t know,” she admits.

“Does the idea of belonging to someone excite you?”

She looks at her hands on the glass, and when her eyes return to mine, they’re hazy, fogged, ethereal. “Yes.”

My cock weeps.

“Do you like the idea of enduring pain only to be given the most intense pleasures?”

She swallows, and I think of owning her throat. “Yes.”

“Could you submit to someone, as long as they made you feel worthy?” I swallow, and carefully form the next word so that it isn’t too bloated with hope and intentions. “Loved?”

Her answer comes so fast my head grows dizzy. “Yes.”

“Did you like being told how to dance? Did you enjoy being praised that night?”

Our eyes hold. My groin is pounding with need, sweat sliding over the arches of my shoulders beneath my suit. I can smell her arousal from here, I swear to everything, I can.

“It was the best night of my life.”

I push the folder to her. “I have been in awe of your work, and now, Eleanora, I am in awe of you. And I invited you here to ask you to enter into a contract with me. To be my submissive for sixty days.”

She fingers the edge of the folder, but doesn’t open it. “David said that I am the thing you want most.”

I finally take a drink of my water, and her lips part with a light sigh when I gulp it down. I lick above my lip. “You are.”

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CHAPTER

Fifteen

NORA

OH MY GOD.

Oh. My. God.

"I don't see how I could be the thing you want most," I say, hating how thick insecurity curves my speech, but I can't help it. Cassian Blackwood is mega-rich. Everyone knows who he is. He hosts what I now know is a super kinky famous party and I gotta say, the party is so much cooler now that I know it's for kinksters.

And he wants me. To be his thing. His submissive. At his use. Obeying his every command.

For sixty days.

"Not many people see themselves for who they truly are. I just feel fortunate that I've seen you before anyone else has." He leans forward, sliding me a gold pen. "Please, let me take you through the details."

I open the folder, but pause before looking at the papers inside. "You told me you're Cassian Blackwood. But do I ever get to see your face?"

He stares at me, but no answer comes, and nerves get the best of me, and I begin filling in the blanks. "I get it. This is sixty days. Temporary. You want to remain faceless forever."

I pick up the pen to fidget, but can't take my eyes off him just yet. "I saw this documentary about people who win the lottery. And how they wish they never would have told anyone because everyone asks them for stuff like, nonstop, and then makes them feel like shit if they say no." I tap the

pen against the papers, still staring at the two darkest, most beautiful eyes I've ever seen. "Is it like that? Not showing your face."

A beat passes, and he doesn't reply, only nods to the paperwork. "Let's look at the contract."

Finally, I look down at the typed words that fill the crisp white papers in the folder.

The purpose of this contract is to provide a safe, structured dynamic in which Ella may explore her submissive desires without shame, while Cassian offers protection, guidance, and the resources she has been denied. This is not ownership — it is a chosen power exchange. For sixty days.

"Ella?" I ask, looking up to discover Cassian watching me. When the crow watches me, when Vivian watches me—I hate it. But to find those dark, knowing, curious eyes on me feels like a compliment. One I want to get lost in.

"Eleanora is your birth name. It is beautiful. But when you're with me, I want you to be a version of yourself you've never let yourself become," he says slowly, the timbre of his voice settling deep between my legs. "Nora is the name they use for you, and from what I know, you are greatly mistreated. Therefore, I cannot bring those associations to what we will have." He sits back, linking his hands together on top of the table. "To me, when you are mine, you are *Ella*."

My heart is thudding so wildly behind my ribs that I feel dizzy, so I reach for the glass and finish it, then return my focus to the contract.

Throughout the sixty days, Ella will receive non-negotiable benefits, on Cassian's behalf. They will be as follows:

- *All outstanding debts to Ella's grandmother's nursing home, Shady Grove, will be paid in full immediately.*
- *Lifetime secured care for her grandmother, including but not limited to medical care, nursing, in-home care, and equipment. And a trust will be established in Ella's name only.*
- *Full funding for her own atelier (studio space + startup capital), independent of the contract end.*
- *Legal and physical protection from her stepfamily (including restraining orders if needed, PR handling, and security).*
- *Dedicated design studio inside Cassian Blackwood's estate + time protected for her creative work.*

- *“The Phantom Line” — her designs will be launched through Cassian Blackwood’s private network with full credit and profit. This will belong to Ella independent of the contract end.*
- *Ella will eat every meal without missing any, including breakfast, lunch and dinner, and she will eat three additional snacks a day. This is to keep up her energy as a submissive and to emotionally remedy the damage in her past, having not had free access to food.*

Seven bullets. Seven life-changing bullets that immediately answer all of my life’s troubles. My eyes burn. My mind whirs with questions, and hope tangles itself in my doubts as I look up at him.

“Are you serious?” I shake my head, wishing my eyes didn’t sting with unshed tears. “If this is a joke, it’s super fucked up.”

He recesses back a little, like my words have wounded him. “I would never joke about giving you your life back.”

I shake my head, still so unsure as to why this man would do all of these things for me. “Why? Why would you fix my life this way?” I’m embarrassed that this gorgeous man who made me cry also knows that I’m hungry. My life is so humiliating.

He clears his throat, and when his eyes leave mine for a moment, something tight leaps into my chest, clenching, all-consuming. The air gets thinner, harder to breathe, but the noise in my mind falls away when his gaze comes back to mine.

“As you know, I don’t leave my home for any reason. Not until you.” He opens his matching folder, but keeps his eyes trained on me. “I am very drawn to you, Miss Moreau. And I would like you to be my submissive for sixty days.”

I shake my head, because as flattered as I am, still, it doesn’t quite make sense. “But what do you get out of this? You’re a bajillionaire. You have a kink club. You surely have access to the most beautiful women who are into whatever you’re into.” My nostrils flare as my words sting my eyes and throat. He could have anyone. And he’s saying he wants *me*. And he wants to fix my life in return for just… me? “It doesn’t make sense. You can have anyone you want. Someone whose life you don’t have to fix.”

Cassian Blackwood, the reclusive millionaire, the man who made me come so hard that I cried in his arms afterward like a fool, stares at me as he

simply replies, “I don’t want anyone else. I want you.” His finger slides up the pale curve of the phantom mask before falling into his lap as he leans forward. “I want your beautiful eyes and your soft lips, your supple curves and your talented hands. Your brain, your unrivaled, ingenious brain that designs the most intimate, secretive, intoxicating suits and gowns I’ve ever known. Your wit, your innate nature to submit and please, I want you, Ella.” He shakes his head, sifting a hand over the top of his perfectly coiffed hair, like perhaps he’s struggling to maintain control. Over wanting me. *Me.* “I need you. I need you to be mine.”

I don’t know what to say, and he knows it, reading me better than I read myself. “Keep reading, my darling,” he says softly, the term of endearment everything I need.

I tip my head down, and make out the black font through hazy eyes.

Cassian Blackwood’s non-negotiable expectations for Ella Moreau during the sixty-day contract:

- *24/7 power exchange during the term. Ella will obey all established protocols, address Mr. Blackwood as he designates, respond as he designates, and keep herself readily and freely available as he sees fit.*
- *Ella will provide honest communication of her needs, her limits, and her emotional state at all times.*
- *Ella will design work for The Phantom Line, the line which she will retain creative control over during and after the contract. Ella will no longer return to Moreau Boutique nor will she create for Moreau Boutique or any Moreau-related ventures.*
- *Ella will have no contact with her stepfamily without Mr. Blackwood’s knowledge and approval.*
- *Ella will always provide full transparency about her well-being.*

I know what all of this means. I’ve wanted all of this. I’ve dreamed of having my own line with creative freedom, without fear of being judged for all the naughty things I want to sew into my work. I’ve dreamed of waking up one day to discover that Vivian wasn’t even real, merely, a nightmare. A figment of my sordid imagination.

And now, this gorgeous, rich man who touched my body like it was made for him is giving me that. And more.

“I can’t believe this.”

His lips flatten. “Vivian’s lies are unbelievable. These are just legal contracts. Highly believable.”

His reply softens the tightness in my chest, and I manage a smirk. Even in this weird situation, he’s managed to break the tension.

“What I mean is, you are giving me everything I want.” *Everything*, I think, because while I’ve sewed restraints into gowns, clamps into bodices, wrist ties into suits, all along I’ve wanted to be on the other side.

The receiving side.

The side that obeys, endures, takes. And he’s giving me that, too. “Everything,” I whisper, finding the courage to say it, while still bashfully hiding behind subtext.

But Cassian Blackwood seems to know me so well. He nods. “I know you want these things, and I am not referring to your grandmother’s long-term care, or freedom from your stepfamily, Ella.” He lowers his voice to a whisper, and it reverberates through my clit. “You need this as much as I do, and that is why we’re here. Fate has brought us together.”

Fate.

How can fate be real if my father is dead? How can early death brought on by his only child be his fate? I shake my head, eyes blurring from tears. “I don’t think I believe in fate.”

He doesn’t seem fazed by my reply. “You will. At the end of this contract, you will.”

I don’t know what to say, so I tip my head down and keep reading.

Daily Protocols (to be refined together):

- *Day collar worn at all times (removable only with permission or in true emergency).*

Day collar. I think of the beautiful collar I made myself years ago, the one I’ve been carrying around with me like a rabbit’s foot for years. The one I lost at his party. The one I made not knowing for sure why I made it or when I would even be able to wear it. He believes in fate, and I’m not so sure, but this feels like something to believe in.

I look up, and find him unfurling his fist, *my collar* resting in the center of his palm. “You made this. I know you did. And you brought it with you that night. And I am a dominant who wishes to have a collared and

contracted submissive.” His smirk devastates me. “And you don’t believe in fate.”

I don’t know what to say, and my nipples are so hard beneath my gown, my center so wet, my mind moving so fast. “I–I love that collar,” I say quietly.

He looks at me. “I love it, too.” Our eyes hold, and my breath grows needy, heightened, nearly frantic in my chest, but he knows. “Take a breath, darling. Deep and slow through your nose, and light out your mouth.”

I obey, and take the breath the way he said, feeling the world grow steady around me again. The simple act of obeying, and being made to feel better by doing it, has me utterly soaked. I’ve never wanted to be laid down so badly.

“Keep reading,” he commands, and I find my eyes snapping back to the contract.

- *Obedience (kneeling preferred).*
- *Daily hygiene protocol followed, to be detailed in person at the time of signing.*

Fuck. I’ve always wanted to kneel. In my wildest fantasies, I am always kneeling.

- *Address Mr. Blackwood as “sir” in dynamic contexts.*

Paresethesia takes over, and my heart races.

- *Posture and service expectations (detailed in attached schedule).*

Scene & Play:

- *All scenes pre-negotiated or alternatively are shaped by Mr. Blackwood using standing consent, with safewords, avoiding limits.*
- *Hard and soft limits: to be listed by Ms. Moreau during negotiation*

- *Testing will be performed at the start of the contract to ensure good health in both parties. Testing will be provided and paid for by Mr. Blackwood.*
- *Female oral or injectable contraception will be discussed at length. Contraception will be procured by Mr. Blackwood and taken by Ms. Moreau in the fashion he sees fit. He is open to discussion on type and form, but it will be a necessity.*

I think he knows exactly where I am in the contract and I look up, finding dark eyes locked onto mine, making my insides soft like jelly, but tingly and hot, too. Birth control means he wants to have me without a condom.

I bring my legs together more tightly, because there's a deep pulse in my groin at the thought of this beautiful man inside of me, with nothing between us.

"If I agree, do we negotiate limits now?" I ask, my nerves veering quickly into excitement. Even if this is just a cruel dream I'm playing on myself and I wake up in Vivian's attic in a few hours, I'm rolling with it.

He nods. "Yes."

I continue reading.

- *Safewords: red, yellow, and green, as the traffic light system is in full effect.*

I look up at him, and he seems to know just where I'm at, despite the fact he's not even glanced at his own contract that I'm aware of. He's just been watching me.

"Red is full stop, and stops a scene immediately when you say red. Yellow is a slow down turn of phrase, and I will check in with you when you use it." He smiles. "Traffic lights."

My eyelids suddenly feel heavy, and I find myself glancing at the sprawling bed nearby, wondering if he'll lay me out there and ruck up my dress, and drive his fingers into me or taste me before he lets me leave.

Or better yet, force me to my knees and make me take him in my mouth.

I've never done that before, but I'm dripping at the thought.

“Continue reading, my darling. Let your mind wander when you’re through,” he says, winking. I place my focus on the contract.

Mr. Blackwood’s hard limits: do not touch or attempt to remove his mask at any time for any reason. Breaking this rule will result in the contract being null and void. He showers in private, always, and this is not open for discussion, though he is able to watch you shower/bathe.

“I haven’t gotten there but, I assume you’ll have me sign an NDA.”

“It’s part of the contract, yes.”

“So if I’m signing a non-disclosure, what’s the fear in showing me your face? You know I wouldn’t ever be able to point you out after this.” The way I worded that is true, but doesn’t feel quite right. “I never would do that, anyway, because I know it’s not what you want.”

Cassian rolls his neck, a pop echoing around the room. “The mask stays on. Keep reading.”

I can’t take my eyes off of him. “So I’ll never get to see your face?”

He shakes his head. “No. And no showers together, either,” he says, reciting what he knows I’ve just read. Cassian swallows and the thick slide of his Adam’s apple is so transfixing, I want to crawl over this table and run my thumb over the masculine ridge. “Keep reading.”

Aftercare: Non-negotiable and extensive. Cassian commits to physical and emotional aftercare after every scene. Ella agrees to communicate fully in those moments.

My hands begin trembling when I recall the way he held me after, the soft kiss against my throat, the tenderness in his hold. I look up at him. “I want this.”

He nods. “I know.”

I keep reading.

Confidentiality & Privacy: Mutual. Neither will disclose the dynamic or personal details without explicit consent. A non-disclosure will be signed by Miss Moreau. Cassian Blackwood’s PR team will handle any external threats.

Termination & Exit:

- *Either party may end the contract early with 7 days’ written notice and a final conversation.*
- *If Ella chooses to leave at day 60, all promised benefits remain hers in full.*

- *If both wish to continue, a new contract or permanent dynamic will be negotiated.*

Renegotiation Clause: At any point either party may request a formal renegotiation session. Changes must be written and signed.

The idea of doing this and leaving him after sixty days feels so hollowing, but I don't focus on that. After all, choosing the one negative thing now could ruin it all, and I wasn't lying when I said I want this. As crazy as it all has come to be, I want this more than anything. I would give up the ability to design for this, yet he's giving me my own line, my own work space—he's giving me everything.

"And you just want me?"

He nods. "You, your honesty, and your consent."

I shift in my chair, and the strap of my dress slips off my shoulder. Cassian's tempting eyes follow my hand as I push my hair back, exposing more of my skin.

"Don't tease me," he says simply before nodding to my strap. "Pull that up, my darling."

I obey, and ask, "is that what you'll call me? I'll call you sir, and you'll call me your darling?"

His tone darkens into something sinister that makes the pressure coil tightly between my legs, waiting to explode. "I'll call you whatever I please, and you'll enjoy every single nickname I give you." He leans forward, and table creaks beneath his strong frame, and it makes me gasp. "Right now, you are my darling. But sometimes you'll be my gorgeous little mouth. My willing hole. My slut, *my thing*."

Oh god. I rip the cap off the pen and Cassian laughs, the noise echoing around the room like a safe hug as he leans back. "Fate," he chuckles darkly. "I'll make you a believer."

I start to sign, but he gives me pause. "Before you sign, don't you want to know what your day to day will look like?"

Oh shit. I cap the pen, and feel the heat between my legs fill my belly and chest, and color my cheeks. "I'm embarrassed I didn't ask." I lick my lips, look down at the contract, and begin with my portion—giving him an update on how exactly I feel. "I'm embarrassed to be so in need of so many things that I'm willing to sign myself over to a virtual stranger. And I don't

mean that to hurt your feelings.” I tap the pen against the contract where it outlines my verbal check-ins. “I mean to obey.”

He sighs, dark eyes blinking behind his half-faced mask, studying me, analyzing me, figuring out pieces of me I haven’t shown him just yet. But he doesn’t judge me. I don’t get that from him at all.

“I want this with you far more than I’ve wanted anything in a very long time,” he admits slowly, teasing out the words, edging me. “And I’m not embarrassed of it.” He gets to his feet, and treads toward me, coming to stand directly behind. His large hands come down on my shoulders and I don’t mean to, but I moan.

He bends, the heady bergamot base in his cologne doing nothing but adding gasoline to the ceaseless fire of need burning bright between my thighs. I’ve always loved abroxan scents, when men come into the shop and leave traces of it behind, and I clean at night, eagerly sniffing it up like a peasant beggar. Now I don’t have to.

I’ll have this man for sixty days. I’ll smell him on my flesh, on my clothes, I’ll taste him and he’ll taste me.

I place my palms flat against the starched white cloth on the table, suddenly a bit unsteady from these crashing realizations. His lips tease the back of my ear and bumps run down my back when the tips of his thick fingers dust my shoulders as he tugs my hair back.

“You will sketch your designs next to me, on your knees, while I work. You will make me feel whole each day, absolve me of my ill moods how I see fit, make me feel good the way I want, and in turn, I will give you the most exquisite pains and the most breath-taking pleasures. I will show you things inside yourself you did not know were there. Do you understand, Ella?”

Ella.

It sounds so beautiful when he says it. It is beautiful. It’s perfect, because he gave it to me. He is making me, even if for sixty days, a new person, a person I actually want to be. A designer of her own free will. Adored and used. *Free.*

I nod. “Yes.”

His teeth find my neck and I gasp. “Yes?” he questions.

My heart is racing, and there’s a pulse in my clit hammering so hard, a brush of my panties will have me orgasming. “Yes, sir.”

His lips press to the place where he bit. “Good girl. Now,” he says, reaching for the pen, sliding it between my fingers in a way that forces our hands together. My eyes nearly roll into my head at the weight of his hand on mine. The perfect fit.

“You will have your own room, but you are welcome and encouraged to join me in mine. Though I will never force you.”

He presses the tip of his finger into the part of the contract allowed for me to write in my limits. “Do you know what hard and soft limits are?”

I shake my head, wishing he’d reach down between my thighs and find everything I’m feeling for him. “No, sir.”

His body heat, the feel of him hovering behind me, suddenly disappears and a moment later, he’s in his chair again. I stare at the pressed lapel of the suit I made, then up into his waiting eyes.

“A hard limit is something you’re not interested in exploring. Ever. And a soft limit is something you’re not ready to explore just yet, or a limit that has an intimacy barrier still intact.”

Intimacy. I’ve always found that word to be so romantic, and hearing him say it makes it feel even more so.

“Is your only limit the mask and showering?” I ask him.

Cassian nods. “And of course, your limits are my limits, my darling. What you don’t want, I don’t want. Where you aren’t ready to go just yet, it is in my hands to decide when to safely take you there. Do you understand?”

I nod and find the words coming so easily. “Yes, sir.”

He studies me for a moment, and finally his eyes rove over my breasts, his mouth parting when he sees the stiff peaks poking the satin, begging for hands, for clamps, for teeth.

“How many partners have you experimented with?”

I keep the pen in my hand because I think it pleases him. He keeps glancing at it. There’s something about guessing at what makes him happy that makes me feel alive.

I shake my head. “None, sir. I am a virgin. In all ways.” My cheeks flood with heat and color, and I keep my promise to my sir and admit the truth. “Except to myself. I touch myself.”

He groans in response, rubbing curled knuckles down his chest. He clears his throat when he speaks again.“I see. And are you comfortable establishing limits as we go along? It’s hard to know what one doesn’t like

if one is not experienced," he says, his nostrils flaring as he recrosses his legs beneath the table.

I nod. "I'd be okay with that."

He nods to the folder. "Page six is the amended limits page." He smiles just partly. "I came prepared."

I press the pen to the paper, but before I sign, this time I stop myself. "All of these things that you've promised. When do we sign documents to ensure those things happen?" I hate bringing it up, but I need to know my grandmother is safe and no longer under Vivian's rule as quickly as possible.

"Tomorrow," he says. "Come to the estate, and we'll sign those together. The trust in your name, her care documentation, the accounts set in your name, the clothing line, all of it. We'll sign those tomorrow. We will start our sixty days, then, tomorrow."

I believe him.

No part of me questions a thing about this man, despite the fact I'm not even sure what he looks like. It may be crazy, I may be crazy. I don't know. But I do know that I want this.

I cap the pen.

"I'll sign this one tomorrow, too, then, sir."

For a moment he looks disappointed but then he sits up straighter and says, "Smart girl." He gets to his feet again, and helps me from my chair, and we're now standing so close, his minty breath ghosting my lips, my heart racing—I want so bad for him to kiss me.

But he presses his lips to the top of my hand. "Tomorrow, the car will pick you up at Moreau at noon, out back, where Fred visits you," he says, causing a niggle of excitement to worm down my spine. He knows about Fred. What else might he know? "Bring your things. It will be the last time you are ever there."

My head is spinning. My heart is racing. I don't ask about explaining things to Vivian, or what will happen if she reports me missing. Because I honestly do not care. Fuck her. I'm getting a fairytale.

"This is like a fairytale," I whisper.

"If fairytales were full of spankings and praise, then, yes, it is." His words send a rush of pins and needles through my veins. *Spankings. Praise.* He kisses my hand again, and a moment later, the hotel door swings open, and David waits on the other side.

David ushers me out, and I follow, still staring at my Phantom. I stare at him until the door closes, and that night, back in the attic at Vivian's, I close my eyes and see him all night in my dreams.

My Phantom, Cassian Blackwood.

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CHAPTER
Sixteen

CASSIAN

"DAVID SAID she looked happy when she left." Lucien scratches the back of his head as he peers out the window at the gardeners fixing a dead spot on the lawn. He points, tapping the glass. "*The Eclipse* had a scene outside last night."

I finger the edge of my mask, getting used to wearing the one from the ball. Knowing that's how she sees me, that she's comfortable with this one, it has me growing fond of it, even favoring it over my everyday black mask.

I eye my brother. "And were you part of it?"

He smiles proudly. "Amalia and I *were* the scene. But I feel bad we killed the lawn."

My lawyer gets to his feet, ignoring our conversation as always. My secrets will die with him, because legally they have to. "Mr. Blackwood, everything looks good."

I turn my back to the window where the team re-sods a portion of the ruined lawn. Those who visit *The Eclipse,* one of the six themed rooms on the property, receive sexual thrills from things like sensory deprivation and psychological play. For the people who want to show up at the estate and turn their brain to offline mode, and feel only what their body receives. I learned long ago to not be shocked by someone's sexual needs, and as much as I view my younger brother as someone who would prefer to be submissive in the bedroom, I understand now the reasons why I am wrong. I took care of him our entire childhood, and it only makes sense that he

would want to hold the reins with his partner, to regain what he feels he lost. Control.

Sexual kinks are like that. And there is no shame in needing and wanting things that fill the bucket where other categories have left you empty. Too many people associate kink with shame, and build anger and unhappiness because of it.

“Good, and the trust is irrevocable and in her name?” I confirm, wanting everything to be airtight, wanting there to be not a single reason why Ella won’t sign and commit today.

I fucking need her to commit to me. More than anything.

Still, I remain poised and in control. That’s what it’s all about, after all. The dichotomy of my internal obsession balanced with my outward appearance of utter control. That’s the fun part.

“Yes,” he agrees, shaking my hand as David ushers him out. I face Lucien. “Do I want to know what killed the lawn?”

He smiles, fondly remembering his escapades from the other night. Lucien may be dominant like me, but his preferences are all over the place. He frequents all the rooms, and I’m pleased that the last ball pushed him to be a Player. I’ve always thought he’d get a lot from that role. “The feet of the spanking bench.”

I nod. “Ah. So your partner endured prolonged public pain play.”

He turns to me, pride shining in his eyes. “A three-hour scene. A few people stopped by here and there during but Cassian, it was like she and I were the only ones in the world who existed. I just kept asking her if she could take more, and she just kept saying yes. It was like the only word she knew for sure had meaning.”

Ah. The offline feeling. As a dominant, I find myself getting there only during aftercare, while the submissive typically experiences it mid-scene. Those who solely want the mental escape, however, get there much quicker. They enter a scene already devoid of worry and reality. It is quite beautiful. Kink is quite beautiful.

I extend a hand and my brother slides his into mine. “I’m happy to see you enjoying the club.”

He looks confused. “I’ve enjoyed it for years, Cassian.”

I shake my head. “Not like this. Participating is a different beast in and of itself. And I can see you’re… different.” I pat his shoulder. “In the best of ways. I’m proud of you.”

He stares at me, his dark eyes holding mine. He never looks at the mask. He doesn't see it, not all these years later. “And I’m proud of you. You left this place. You found someone. You took the leap.” He slips his hand out of mine and returns his prideful gaze out the window. “I didn’t think you ever would.”

I watch the gardeners toss strips of vibrant sod over the patches of dead earth, one of them swiping along his forehead with the back of his wrist. “I didn’t either.” I stand a bit taller, if only in my mind. “Alex is behind me. Ella is my future.”

Lucien doesn’t jump in and agree, but mostly because he too has no belief in fate. He’s ruled by reality in most cases, except for when he’s here, wrist deep in doling out orders and tying up his partner. He thinks it’s too soon for me to make such a bold statement. I know how to read his silence, and that’s exactly what’s left in the quiet.

“I know it’s right, Lucien,” I tell him quietly as the gardner turns on the hose, and begins wetting the new lawn. “She made those pieces I’ve been filling my wardrobe with. She got my attention years ago, before I ever even met her at the ball.”

Lucien sighs, and reaches for the rest of his coffee sitting on the side of my desk. He sips slowly, both of our gazes still on the lawn outside. “You know,” he starts, “You always said once I go deeper into myself, I’d break through the other side and understand things I never understood. And when I had Amalia on that bench, the sky filling in the world around us, I felt so in tune with her, with what she needed even though she could hardly speak —and afterward, our bond when she was in my arms. The way she looked at me, with eyes on our backs from the shadows...” He shakes his head, sipping his coffee. “I understood what you meant. And I don’t know about fate. Fate still feels like unicorns and castles, but, I do know, Cassian, that I trust you. And if I trust you to guide me, I shouldn’t doubt you know the best path for yourself.”

We shake hands, turning just as David reenters, holding the doorknob in one hand. “Your suit is pressed and ready.”

Lucien leaves his coffee on the edge of my desk, bringing his hands together in one solid clap. “Good luck.” He smiles, and I return it, tugging the strap of the mask nestled in my hair. He eyes the strap, and my movements. “And if it works out the way you’re hoping, and she signs… consider showing her all of you.”

The skin beneath my mask instantly burns at the thought of exposing the most hated part of myself to her. David clears his throat in a gesture of goodwill that allows for me to avoid replying to my brother.

“Ah, my cue,” Lucien smiles, then heads out, his footfalls growing quieter each moment. Once I hear him exchange words with Bretton at the front door downstairs, I thank David for steaming my suit, and head to my wardrobe.

She’s slated to be here in one hour.

I’ve run a few miles on my treadmill. I’ve lifted weights. I’ve gone for a swim in my indoor pool. I’ve made several business calls, I’ve signed on the dotted line to acquire a new production plant overseas. I’ve taken a steam, and a long, self-relieving shower. I had a late breakfast with my brother.

I should put on the suit that she made for me two years ago, the one that is my very favorite, and go back to my library and wait.

I find it poetic to have her sign the contract in the place where we first connected. I had David bring in and hang the Abelard tapestries in the library, too, in hopes that reminding her of that night would coax her nerves away. Because I know she enjoyed herself that night.

Closing my eyes, I run my fingers over the gowns hanging in the closet —in her closet, though I didn’t know her when I began purchasing them. I didn’t know they’d be worn by the woman who made them. A submissive from the club, someone who would catch my eye as I walked the catwalk upstairs, someone who stole my breath and attention—that’s who I truly thought would wear these gowns I’d been collecting. I’d foolishly dreamt of them fitting her in a twist of fate, but fully too recognized I may have Moreau alter them.

But it’s her.

And there’s a four letter word echoing in my chest because *it’s her.*

Opening my eyes, I take in the gowns and all their obstreperous secrets. The way some of the skirts are paneled, and the front panel can be torn away for *access.* The pearl thongs designed to look merely like an accent but serve, to those who know, as a means of edging torture and widespread pleasure. The corsets with nipple clamps built in. The steel woven into the bodices that grow heated with wear, gently warming the skin. The ankle cuffs and hooping that slip from the seams of the skirts to create a binding, spreading device.

Ella wants these gowns to be used on her. I'd be willing to bet that the gown she wore to the masquerade had naughty little details sewn in, aside from the pearl thong.

A woman with a mind like that, that's the type of woman that is meant to be my other half.

But after meeting her, I know it's not just what she can create and what she wants behind closed doors, under the silk and satin of my sheets.

Her humor. Her wit. The way she teases.

The way she didn't press me about my mask. Even Lucien, my blood, still presses me about the mask. David, too, for that matter, always trying to convince me the world would still spin all the same if I took it off.

But she didn't.

My heart begins to race, my pulse thudding loudly in my eardrums, making my clenched jaw ache. Sweat peppers my hairline out of nowhere, and I turn quickly, tugging the door shut behind me. Cool air of the dressing area between the two closets brings immediate relief. The panic that found me in that room immediately dissipates, and I run a finger around my collar, tugging the fabric away from my throat as I ease into my closet.

David waits, eyeing me as he shines the shoes that match today's suit.

"I didn't know you were in here," I tell him, fingering the tie on the back of the mask.

He lowers my shoes to the floor, tucking in the shining towel at his waistband. "I wondered if you might… need me," he says, dragging the words out slowly, arranging them in a way he hopes doesn't offend. I know what he's saying.

I thought you were in here having a panic attack, and I worried.

I let out a sigh as I pluck the tie behind my head, letting the mask fall from my face. I don't ask David to tend to me while I dress—this isn't the 1800s—but I must admit, I'm not upset that he's here.

His presence further alleviates my anxiety, which is a little comical for a man who chooses to be away from society for most of his adult life.

"I'm fine, thank you."

David doesn't move. Not even his face budges an inch. "You're sweating," he points out, nodding to the glistening sheen on my forehead.

I swipe it away with the back of my hand. "I'm okay."

David moves past me, toward the door, to leave me in privacy while I change, but pauses. "We're having her and her family completely vetted.

We'll know better now. It won't be like Alex."

I smile and nod, and he leaves, trapping me in my closet with my favorite suits and my worst fears. Sure, Ella is vetted. We know she isn't an Alex in the making, nor would I ever think Ella could be capable of anything that Alex did.

Now that I've found her—my beautiful, perfect, slutty queen—my worries have grown. I know anxiety plays these tricks on me, but I also know part of my worries are real, founded in actual possibility.

What if she doesn't return the feelings I have for her? What if, after sixty days, I have to let her go?

I drop my sweats and step out of them, then reach behind my head, tugging off my t-shirt. In front of the wardrobe mirror, I take in my bare reflection.

Years of work in my gym are present, the dedication visible in every etched line and chiseled curve. The convexity of my biceps, the burly veins in my hands, the dip of my hips, the carved precision of my abdominals, the thick strands of muscle swollen in my thighs. My body, by all definitions, is perfect. A dream. Something that makes women and men alike fan themselves and think of naughty, delicious things.

The smattering of barbed hair I keep trimmed over my pecs, and let wander gently down my belly. The way I keep a happy trail neatly carved, guiding a future lover to one of my favorite places. These, too, are things that I know are beautiful, things to be proud of, things that should make me want to stride into a room bare and be fulfilled by who I am on the outside as much as who I am on the inside.

I reach between my legs and find my cock, stroking my thumb along the top of my shaft before giving my balls a firm tug. I harden, quickly, like most men who have not had the company of a partner in many years. I lick my palm and stroke myself again, this time full fist, root to tip. My balls are plump, hanging squarely beneath my shaft, a present waiting to be explored. All of me is a gift waiting to be explored.

I should believe that.

I know it's true. The way I would and will cherish and obsess over every inch of Ella in the ways that I show my adoration, I should feel those things for myself. I know this. Much of kink is about self-acceptance, rooted in one's ability to learn and love their own skin, inside and out.

Still. As my cock stands tall, and I flex my legs, curling my toes against the marble floors, I feel nothing.

I feel no pride in this body I've built.

My hand falls back to my side as my eyes crawl over my reflection, landing, as they always do, on my face.

Half the man I know and used to be, half the man I am now.

Scarred skin. Pink and unusually smooth. My eyebrow only looks somewhat like the other from skin grafts and hair transplants. My cheek bone fails to hold symmetry to the other side, as the bone was damaged in the accident. The elasticity is altered, the skin a bit tighter, a lot less natural.

I've run away with the idea that Ella is my fated mate, my destiny, my other half. I've consumed myself with the idea that if I can save her from her life, provide her grandmother safety, and give her the gift of free creation that she will overlook… *this.*

Overlook me.

David's knock comes softly at the door. "Are you dressed yet?"

I stare at the side of my face that has defined my entire existence for so many years. "Not yet." I swallow against the knot of nerves and pain in my throat, blinking against the stinging feeling behind my eyes.

He walks away, his shoes clicking against the marble on his way out. I take a deep breath in through my nose and let it out slowly from my mouth, then, I set it all aside. I run a cloth over the inside of the mask, cleaning it and preparing it for wear. Next, I get dressed, taking care to fasten all the internal ties of the coat, and adjust my matching cufflinks accordingly. Tugging on socks, I slip my feet into the waiting shoes and adjust the tie at my throat, then retie my mask.

She likes the Phantom. She was going to sign last night, but smartly decided to wait until she had proof she'd be taken care of. I like that. A little impulsive, a little emotional, but still tethered to responsibility and reality.

She likes you. Before there were deals in place to rescue her, she let you touch her. She begged you to please her. She let you lift her into your lap and comfort her.

With those reminders on tap, I roll out my neck, turn off the light, and head toward the library.

It's time to move forward.

FACING the tapestry of scarred Abelard perched on a throne reading a book, a table of grapes and wine at his side, I focus on Minon, reading at his bare feet. On her haunches, head slanted forward with her gorgeous face hidden, my heart hammers beneath my ribs. She is pledging her patience and devotion to him, the very way I am asking Ella to do the same.

"That one is my favorite," she says softly, entering the room with David on her heels.

I turn and ignore the sharp twist of violent desire behind my ribs as I take her in.

Torn jeans, rolled at the cuff to expose slender little ankles and old sneakers. She's got on a sweatshirt, stained by fabric dyes, that rests a little too big on her frame. Her blonde hair is swept off of her neck and away from her face, held in a ponytail behind her. Blue, vibrant eyes full of life and obedience stare back at me as she smiles shyly, a rose flush flooding the apples of her cheeks. "David said the library, and I remembered where."

My cock stirs between my legs, and though I pay a real homage to her for wearing one of her designs, I suddenly wish I were in my sweats. That I was dressed in a way that offered her balance, more comfort.

David closes the door behind her, likely irritated that he wasn't allowed to announce her entrance. I smile. "Good memory."

She takes in my suit as she treads toward me. "I remember everything." Now just a foot apart, I hold my frame steady despite the internal trembling that overtakes me when she slides her palm up the lapel of my suit, over my breast bone. "Like the fact I made this suit two years ago. And never made another just like it." She plucks at the button, covered in chantilly lace, the piping of the cuffs and all the seams done the same way. "I always figured it was someone outlandish who liked these, because, you know, most men veer away from lace."

Her hand is directly over my heart, and if she slipped it beneath the jacket, over my shirt, she'd feel how insane she makes me.

How alive I feel.

"I'm a recluse. Outlandish goes with the territory," I deadpan, teasing her drily in a way that I know she likes. Ella grins, and the pink slips from her cheeks down her throat as she drops her hand from my chest. I feel the loss between my thighs, and behind my ribs. Her dark lashes fan as she peers up at Abelard.

“Do you own these?” she asks, tipping her head to the side to take in Minon’s stance.

I watch as her eyes carefully rove over every stitch, and imagine this is the way she looks at her own work when she creates. Detailed and analytical, precise and thoughtful.

“No. Would you like it if I did?”

Her head snaps up to mine. “What?”

I shrug. “If you like them, I’ll buy them and have them set up permanently. Right now, they’re on loan from the museum uptown.”

She snaps her fingers, while her eyes stay locked on mine. “You’d buy them,” she restates. “Because I like them.” We stare at one another. “Just like that?”

My eyes drop to her lips, plump and pink like bubblegum. I need to sit. My skin slicks beneath the mask. “Just like that.” My voice is gravelly, knees weak. I’m already falling apart for her.

Ella looks back at the tapestry, so I join her. “Why is this one your favorite?” I prod, and merely floating the question makes my pulse leap.

She blinks up at it, sunshine dripping through the pulled shades in the window behind us, illuminating her from behind, making her glow. My heart seems to swell a million sizes at the sight of her, the trace of ripe cherries that radiates from her skin, the tangle of silky hair framing her face. She’s really here.

“He reminds me of you,” she says, surprising me, and suddenly, I’m aware of the mask, of the heated, marked skin beneath it, of the man who stared back at me in the mirror this morning.

I’m about to ask her why, but I don’t have to. “Sitting on a throne with a woman deftly at his feet.” She smiles, then peers up at me. “Kinda weird still, that’s gonna be us.”

The way she so boldly puts it all out there is so refreshing. After years spent hiding, years spent wanting quietly from afar with my sights set on nothing, it feels so good to be so open. And I can’t help but chuckle. “Yes, it will be.” I watch her looking at the tapestry and ignore the frantic thudding of my eager heart knocking at my ribs. “Why is it your favorite?”

It takes her a moment, but she shakes her head with a sigh that can only be described as dreamy. “It’s so simple. Servitude in exchange for something bigger. Love. Devotion. I don’t know but… I love it.”

I nod my head, staring at her profile, trying to etch it into my brain, memorizing every freckle and every line. “I do, too.” My chest feels too tight, my head too light, my need too great, so I break my gaze and peer down at the small bag hanging from her hand. “Is that all you brought?”

She doesn’t stop looking at Minon when she says, “That’s all I have.”

David reenters quietly, waiting for me, for my predesignated orders. I look back at Ella, still taking in the art with so much unexplored curiosity that a second four-letter word echoes in my mind. “What are your favorite foods?”

Ella’s head jerks up to my face. “What?”

She’s here to sign. She brought her bag. It’s time she falls into the comfortable role of obeying. With David looking on, I take her chin in my hand, thumb on the center, and tip her face up to mine. “You heard me. Now answer me, my darling.”

She blinks a few times, calibrating to the shift, but when her lips part, pleasure surges in vibrant colors throughout my body. “Lasagna with garlic bread. And green salad.”

“What else?” That’s one meal. I want to know all of her favorite foods.

Her tongue drags over her bottom lip as her lids grow weighty. She likes my hand on her chin, she likes being forced and she loves obeying. Fucking good girl.

“I like… candy apples. Like from the fair. And peaches with honey.” Her eyes dart to where David stands but come back to mine when I give her face a squeeze. “And french fries. And steamed salmon, with a lot of butter.”

Then she closes her mouth, and I know that’s it. And something tells me that’s the end of the list because her opportunity has also ended there. David closes the door.

“Is he–”

I don’t let her speak. “Before we sign our contracts, I would like to sit with you and… talk.”

I drop my hand away and I swear disappointment flashes in her eyes, and though it’s been years since I’ve got to live this way, I remember it.

I remember everything I love about it. I smile at Ella. “Don’t worry, my darling, there is plenty more of that in store.” I extend my arm to the fainting couch she laid on that night, the night I made her beg and come.

She takes a seat, tucking her bag between her feet.

“I know we have not signed, but I do want to remind you that honesty is what keeps a dominant and submissive relationship above ground, where it’s healthy. If you are not honest with me, this will fail.” The truth is, I’ve put myself in the terrible position of not being prepared for this to fail. I’ve already angled myself to need no one but Ella.

She nods. “Okay.”

I take a seat in a chair across from her, because I don’t trust myself to even have my knee bump hers. Ella’s eyes fall briefly to my erection, but because I ignore it, she follows suit, ignoring it too. As best as she can, at least—her throat and cheeks are pink again, and her eyes are lazy, lips parted.

My hungry little thing.

“Why does Vivian keep you locked away?” The truth of this answer doesn’t matter much to me, seeing as how today I’ve simply absolved her of whatever curse had found her. But I believe the answer matters to Ella. And therefore, it matters to me.

She nods her head, almost like she was expecting the question. “She never liked me. She was always threatened by how close I was with my dad.”

“Winfield.” I want her to know I know his name, and how important he was to her.

Ella blinks a few times, processing likely just how much I know about her for a moment before she continues. “Yes, Win Moreau. Anyway, Vivian hated how my dad took my side when she and I would argue. She’s just always hated me. And…” she trails off, looking briefly at her feet—which I don’t like because it means she feels bad about something—then back to me.

There’s something she’s already not sharing, and on the heels of my speech about honesty. Though I’m rusty. I haven’t had a woman—a submissive—in so long. Perhaps I’m wrong.

“My grandma,” she continues, “is the last tie to my father. My father cared for her. She lived with us, you know, when he was alive.”

“So I read.”

She cocks a blonde brow. “You did?”

“I had my security company build a profile on Vivian when I invited her to the Midnight Masquerade,” I admit, because I want her to know my dedication to her, and to the truth. “I read your father’s obituary.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders deflate a little, and she begins playing with her hands in her lap.

“Stop.” I remain straight-backed in my chair, legs crossed and unmoving. “Stop fidgeting.”

Her hands fall to her sides.

“Explain why you feel disappointed by this news.”

She blinks at me, and still, she’s yet to stare at the mask, only my eyes. “Well,” she smiles, letting out a little huff of air. “I guess I’m sensitive about my dad and I thought I’d get to share that part of me with you, on my own.” Ella fidgets with the ends of her ponytail before she drops her hand again, remembering her rules. “But it makes sense that a super rich guy that protects his identity would look me up. I mean, you can't take any chances that I’m like, crazy or something, right?”

A knot forms in my throat but I speak around it. “Right.” I lean forward. “What I know is small compared to what I don’t know, Ella. And over the next sixty days, I want to learn every single bit of you.”

She doesn’t speak, and I let my words settle for a moment. I know what she’s thinking. *Why learn all about me if we’re done in sixty days?* She doesn’t know that I have every intention of keeping her. Every intention of rebuilding her where the world has failed her. Every intention of making her mine.

“Your grandmother.”

She nods. “She holds her care over my head. Always threatening to kick her out onto the streets if I don’t do as I’m told. And what I’m told is to sit in that drafty ass workroom and create. Create, create, create, all while she feeds me scraps like I’m an inmate and forces me to listen through the wall to her taking credit for everything I do.”

“Do you really believe she’d toss an old woman out onto the streets?” I believe so, but I need to know where her head is at. Is she ruled by fear, or love?

She shakes her head. “I don’t think she would put her on the streets. She sometimes threatens state facilities.” Ella rolls her lips together. “I think it’s moreso, I can’t stand the idea of my grandmother withstanding any more change. I love her too much.”

My ribs seem to squeeze my heart. “How long have you lived this way?”

“You mean, been chained to the workroom?”

I nod.

“Ten years this December. She lets me walk to work and walk “home”, so I do get to be free for about an hour a day.” She rolls her eyes. “That is, on the days I get to leave the shop.”

She’s so blase. So calm. She didn’t run in here and wrap her arms around my neck like I saved her from servitude. “You seem adjusted to it?”

She shrugs. “If I make everyday about being stuck, then everyday, I’m stuck. I mean, I hate it.” She stops, and her lips curve gently into a beautiful, small smile. “I *hated* it. I keep forgetting that I don’t have to go back.” Her voice drops an octave. “Because of you.”

“You hated it,” I continue, ignoring the way her words seem to replace pieces of me, fill in little cracks, tiny holes. “But you made beautiful things with pieces of you hidden in them.”

Her eyes seem to mist over at the comment, and she swallows against nerves and emotion. I want nothing more than to hold her, but I don’t. We’re not there. She must earn it, and I too must earn it, in many ways.

“I did. It felt like the only way I could stand up to her was in secret. Sewing in things that made me happy.” She looks at her hands again, then up at me. When she’s mine, she’ll be broken of these nervous tics, these little habits that string her from moment to moment. She’ll be focused on me, and with that focus will come peace.

That is the gift of true submission.

“He taught me everything I know, and I think that’s the other part of it… I keep sewing because it was his shop, and I’m carrying on his legacy, in some weird way.”

We stare at one another, and I’m overrun with feelings when I look at her. But there are more things that need to be asked.

“I want you to feel secure and safe within the confines of our arrangement, while also being physically and mentally tested in a way that provides pleasure, and growth.”

She nods. “That’s… what I want, too. I mean, I don’t know a lot about this stuff, I just know that it sounds like what I want. It sounds like what I’ve wanted for so long, just.. Didn’t know how to name it.”

“Because you’re new to all of this, we will keep the option open to amend your contract at any time. Not just soft and hard limits, but other things, like rules and allowances. Does that sound fair?”

She nods, but suddenly, it feels like letting her off the hook to let her reply that way.

“Speak.”

She inhales, her breasts pressing against the tired fabric of her old sweatshirt, nipples peeking at me, giving me a glimpse of all that will be mine. “Yes, sir, that sounds fair.”

I recross my legs. “I wrote eating into your contract because it is my understanding that food is something kept from you as well.”

Red blooms in her cheeks, and her fidgeting is almost instant, hands smoothing down her thighs and then sliding over the sides of her hair. “Well, I mean–”

I stop her with my words. “Vivian limiting your food and not giving you money to purchase food is embarrassing for Vivian. Hunger is normal, eating is necessary, what’s not normal and violently unnecessary is starving someone to control them.”

She blinks up at me, trying to be playful when she says, “unless it’s a kink?”

I wink. “Unless it’s a kink.” She likes that I let her break the ice, and I like that she did. I lean forward, pressing my elbows into my knees. “But it isn’t *my* kink. You will eat while you are here. You will gain weight while you are with me. But you will be exercised tirelessly, too.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I don’t like running.”

I lean back and clasp my hands together over my belly, the fine suit soft behind my hands. “Sexually, I will exercise you.”

She sits back, too. “Oh.”

Outside, the gardner’s truck starts up, backfiring, and she jumps a little. Birds chirp, and there are footfalls on the stairs. “It’s busy around here.”

“The house is cleaned when I am working, and I rarely leave my office during the day,” I explain, suddenly wanting to touch my mask. My gut is begging me to run my fingers along the edge to make sure it’s perfectly in place, covering me the way that makes me most comfortable. But it would show that I am thinking about it, and I don’t want her to see me that way.

“But you wear the mask anyway? Even though you’re mostly holed up in your office all day? Or is that just for me?”

Saved by the assistant. David pushes open the library door, calling out to me. “Mr. Blackwood, the dining room is set.”

I look over at Ella. “You’re going to eat, and afterward, I will take you to my room to prepare for the signing and for the collaring.”

I don’t know if she’s scared, excited or both. She nods, and her ponytail bounces behind her back. “Yes, sir.”

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CHAPTER
Seventeen

ELLA

I'M NOT A BIG CRIER. I mean, I say that having just cried in his arms after a life-changing orgasm a few nights ago but truthfully, I'm not. I cried when my dad died, and for a lot of days afterward.

But crying over a pricked finger, unspooled bolt, anything like that? Never. And crying over something good? Well, I haven't had anything good happen. Not in the ways in which someone would be brought to tears. But still, no happy tears from me either.

When Cassian opens the door to the dining room, and across the table is every single dish I'd mentioned—and more—tears fill my eyes. It's not the food, though by the looks of it, he's had David or whoever else run out and get the very best the city has to offer, all in the span of half an hour.

He takes my chin, twisting me to face him. "How does it make you feel? Seeing all the things you want to eat but never had?"

A cocktail of emotions clogs my throat, but I know silence isn't an option. For once, I get to reply. I get to say how I feel and what's on my mind. I never had the luxury in the work room or in the attic. "Overwhelmed," I admit, rolling my lips together, trying to pull his eyes from mine to my mouth. I've already cried once. I don't want him to see me weepy all the time. It's not who I am. "I don't normally get what I want."

He says nothing, but the thumb on my chin sinks deeper, with more force, still gentle.

"Sir," I amend, and his lips turn up at the end.

“You do now. You will always get what you want when you’re with me. But the only way I can fulfill all of your needs is if you tell me. Always tell me,” he says, his tone dredging low, growing rumbly and dark. I like all of his tones that I’ve heard so far, but am curious to hear him when he’s punishing and cruel. My gaze follows his sharp jaw up to his lifted cheekbone, and settles onto his eyes, chestnut colored and so full of mystery.

“Yes, sir.”

He pulls a chair out for me, then carefully drapes a napkin in my lap. I don’t know why it turns me on, but it does. And when his lips come to my ear, my eyes threaten to give in. He smells so good, heat radiates off his body—his body wearing *my suit*.

The dining room table is covered in all of the things I want, knowing that I won’t go back to Vivian, and that for once I’ll leave her wondering—I bring my hand to my mouth and catch an unexpected laugh. I’m just glad it’s not tears.

“Eat, and listen,” he says, then snaps his fingers to bring two men into the room who begin filling plates, sliding them to me, a new fork and knife with each. They leave, and as soon as the door shuts, I can’t hold back.

My stomach burns with years of hunger, hunger I talked myself out of, hunger I told myself could be worse. Being thin is something some women dream of and yet for me, it’s never been a choice.

The first bite of hot lasagna is mouth-watering, and I can’t help but moan around the loaded tines. Spicy sausage with a slightly sweet sauce, pieces of fresh basil and fresh mozzarella. My god. I ate this with my father when I was a child and loved it, and it’s everything I remember it being.

“Another thing I’ve added to our contract is details of your contraception.” He tips his head to the side, and I try my best to eat gracefully, but I feel sauce around my mouth. Still, I keep going.

“Slower. No one will take it from you. There is no hurry,” he says, and it doesn’t embarrass me but instead, relieves me. I knew no one would come in here and take my plate, that Vivian wouldn’t be barging in telling me I didn’t deserve it. Still, hearing it helps.

And I think I’m more broken than I realized.

I nod. “I wondered about that, since it was open-ended last night,” I reply, remembering the way our eyes locked after I read the line about the birth control discussion.

“Tomorrow morning, you will receive a litany of blood tests as well as a physical exam, here at the estate. To make sure you are negative of any and all things.” He nudges the plate of salad to me, and I take it greedily, before sipping my sparkling water from a crystal glass.

“I don’t really need any of that,” I tell him, crunching into a tine full of romaine and anchovy-based dressing. My dad loved this salad, too. “I mean, I know I’ve already told you this but I haven’t been with anyone.”

He stares at me for a moment, broad chest lifting with a trapped breath. I think maybe he’s going to say okay, and call off the testing, but his eyes drop to the table for a brief second, and I realize that maybe this testing isn’t about me. Maybe it’s about him. “You’ll have the testing but results will be same-day. And I’ll give you the same. I too will be tested and you’ll be privy to all of my results.”

“Geez,” I say, reaching for the garlic bread peeking out of the red napkin in the bread basket. “Every time my dad needed any lab work, it felt like it took weeks.” So much butter, so much garlic, so good. Still, I blot the sides of my mouth with the white napkin he placed on my lap, and keep my eyes fixed on my masked man.

“For normal people, it does.”

“And you’re not normal,” I reiterate, “what with the millions and all.”

He hardly smirks, but I love it. “Right.”

I work through the salad and onto the salmon, growing fuller with each bite. He continues to talk while I eye the peaches covered in sweet honey, drooling at the way the caramelized apples shine beneath the dining room lights.

“You have the option of an oral contraceptive, or a shot.”

I don’t know if I’m good at remembering daily things like a pill, and I know this is important. But equally, I don’t like needles. I wrinkle my nose as I cut a bite of salmon from the fillet. While I do not under any circumstances want him to wear a condom and know by the wording in the contract that he does not either, I can’t resist the urge to prod him a little, to see what else lies beneath that suit and mask. *How will he take a little resistance? Will I get in trouble? Is getting in trouble a good thing?*

“You know, traditionally speaking, the quickest and most effective form of contraception is a condom.” I pop the bite of salmon in my mouth and nearly moan at how soft and flaky it is.

A faint smile curves his lips, and he slides nearer to me, draping his strong fingertips over my knee. Even though I have jeans on, his touch is warm and intoxicating, the perfect pressure, the perfect placement, teasing and edging.

“After a long day of crawling to me, being on your knees for me, kneeling at my side like the obedient slut that you are, you mean to tell me, when I throw you across my bed on your back and open those perfect little legs of yours, you want every single moment of tension and tenderness to be numbed by rubber?” He gets even closer, his minty breath dizzying my senses as the fork falls from my hand, clattering against the plate. “You’ll be begging to feel my bare cock inside of you, Ella. Don’t be foolish.” His eyes never leave mine as he reaches for the fork, and places it in my hand. “If this conversation happened after we signed the contract, you’d be on your knees for me right now, burying your nose in my feet, begging for me to forgive you.”

And then, he slides back in his chair, putting a few feet of space between us as he leans back, smirking, the mask shining beneath the lights.

“I’m full,” I manage, my voice hoarse, my body on fire from his filthy words, from his purest admissions. I didn’t know this existed, and now it’s all mine. At least for sixty days. “I want to sign now.”

Another sinister, handsome smirk. “*Slut.*”

If someone called me a slut outside of this estate, I’d be hurt. I’d be angry. I’d argue. But when he says it, there’s reverence to it, something charming, something that makes my belly warm and my pussy wet. It feels like a reward to be called a slut by a man like this, and more than that, it’s a promise I want to keep. A dream I want to fulfill.

“May we sign now, sir?”

He rises, and I can’t help but stare at the massive erection tenting his slacks, the curve of him so long and thick, I bring my hand to my mouth. He wraps his palm around the front of my throat and drags me to him. “Yes,” he says, using his free hand to tug my hand down from my mouth. “It will go there. Very soon, Ella.”

Then his hand is in mine, and he’s tugging me down the hall, and I’m following him up the stairs, through dark hallways lined with framed pieces of art, original paintings and black and white photographs, the walls painted a deep gray, the wainscotting a sharp white. Finally, my mind spinning,

body aching, we arrive at double doors, and he pushes them open, ushering me inside.

His bedroom.

A four-poster bed, huge, outfitted with crisp white pillows and linens, with ceilings that rise so high, they seem to never end. Molding, wainscotting, a large crystal chandelier, silk drapes from floor to ceiling covering multiple windows overlooking luscious green scenery, vases of flowers on every surface, a his and hers set of closet doors leading into rooms that look so big, they themselves could be bedrooms. Carpets line the wood floor, ornate scrolls and gold patterns that make me dizzy. The room is the size of a house, and just when my chest begins to tighten, an extremely overwhelming feeling comes over me, Cassian's arms come to mine, gripping me at my biceps. My masked man looks down at me, caution in his eyes.

"First, we sign. Then we prepare you for collaring."

The folders and papers—someone brought them in, and it occurs to me that this entire day has been planned, from my arrival, to my meal, everything. It's then my eyes fall to my bag, peeking out of one of the large closets.

"My stuff," I trail off.

He strokes up my arms. "As we discussed, you are always encouraged and welcome to stay in this room with me. Your closet is here. Your bag has been placed in your closet here, and your old cell phone has been disposed of, after the numbers were transferred to your new device." He nods to the night table where a brand new iPhone is charging. "But you do have a room of your own. Which we will get to. After."

I swallow, suddenly nervous. Not to sign. Not to be with him. Not for all the things I should probably be quite nervous about. But instead, nervous that Vivian will find me. She'll ruin it. Or what if my inexperience isn't hot, and I can't keep him happy?

What if something ruins everything?

His eyes search mine as my breathing intensifies. "You've taken so much care, you've set all this up and…" I shake my head. "What if I fuck it all up? What if I can't be what you want? What if Vivian–"

He reaches behind me and gives the end of my hair a jarring yank. "Stop."

“Ow,” I complain, and yet, a shiver trails down my spine, leaving my body begging for more.

“Stop worrying. Vivian is in my hands now. And there isn’t a world in which you could ever disappoint me.” He grabs my face. “Let’s sign.”

Standing over the small marble table in his room, peonies in a vase casting a shadow over our hands, he reads the contract aloud, my mind half in and out as I try and take it all in. He mentions the hard limits of his mask and I realize then we’ll never shower together, then Cassian reminds me my limits are open to discussion daily and finally, he signs his name on the line. I’m hypnotized by the curves and curls of the way he signs *Cassian Blackwood*, and when he slips the pen into my hand, I can’t help but look up at him.

“I can’t believe I know who Cassian Blackwood is.” My eyes move to the mask, bold white against his tanned skin. “Well, kind of.”

His eyes narrow. “Sign.”

I sign my name, and when it’s done, he takes the pen from my hand, recaps it and places one strong hand atop my shoulder. “Now, take off your clothing, and I will show you what I want from you in your daily hygiene routine.”

I laugh, because, what? I shower. I’m clean. “You mean, like shaving?”

He doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t smile. “Ella, do as I say, this was outlined in the contract. This is your only warning.” He points to the large ensuite bathroom, and I go, my body flush and heated with him on my tails. Holy shit. I’m actually obeying him. *We’re actually doing this.*

At the sink, I face him, but find none of my shock and surprise in his face. He’s a dominant. He’s a millionaire. He’s a hunk.

This is obviously not his first time.

And that truth settles like a boulder tied to my ankle amidst open water. But I stay above the surface, and begin tugging my sweatshirt off over my head. Next, my hands go to the fly of my old jeans, and then the zipper. I watch him as he watches me, and for a second, want to see what he sees. Turning, I find the space above the double sinks blank, free of the usual mirror in all bathrooms. I face him. He passes me a toothbrush and toothpaste. “Morning and night, always this.”

I squeeze paste onto the brush, curious about the barren wall. “No mirror? I’ve never seen a bathroom with no mirror?”

“There is a mirror in your wardrobe. But right now, I am your mirror. I will tell you how you look,” he says, waiting for me to rinse and spit before nodding to my feet. “Please remove sneakers and socks, and the underwear and bra last.”

As I bend to take off my socks and shoes, I wonder about the mirror. Why doesn't he have one? He’s got a killer body, and that hair. Oof. No mirror is so strange.

But when I stand, all thoughts of the mirror evaporate because he’s slipped out of his jacket, standing before me in slacks and the crisp white dress shirt he’s paired with my suit pants. A gold chain peeks out from the collar, and I imagine the way it sounds thunking against his chest while he makes love to me.

“Ella.”

“Oh,” I blink. “Yeah.”

I reach behind my back and find the clasp of my bra, my eyes on his. He isn’t looking me in the eye anymore, but rather, waiting with bated breath, lip pinched between his teeth. It’s like he really wants to see me naked, but already knows he’s going to love what he sees.

I’ve never felt so good and nothing has even happened yet.

My breasts aren’t huge. I’ve never felt them to be one of my best features. And yet the way he looks has me reconsidering. I let the bra fall to my feet in a whoosh, and reach for the waistband of my panties before he stops me.

His large hand comes to my breast, and he rolls one of my nipples between his thumb and forefinger, eyes finally lifting to mine. “You have beautiful breasts.” He rolls my nipple gently, slowly, sending a hot buzz through both of my breasts. I like the way he touches me, how his touch feels. He pulls his hand back and slaps my breast, hard, making me yelp.

“You like that, too, don’t you?”

I nod. “Yes, sir.”

He nods to my panties. “Off. Show me the rest of you.”

My body humming, I peel off my panties and rise, just as his hand finds my ponytail, yanking the elastic loose. He drops to his knees slowly, and I suck in a breath as he drags his nose along my bare pussy, inhaling me. The corner of the mask knicks my skin, and his hand goes to the tie at the back almost instantly, making sure it’s not nudged. I wonder why he cares so

much if I see him but lose my thoughts completely when he slides one finger between my lips, discovering my secret, making a moan slip free.

"Wet for me already, Ella?"

I can't lie. He's felt it.

"Yes, sir."

He pulls me open just a tiny bit, and flicks his tongue over my clit, and I have to brace my hand on the counter so I don't lose my balance, it's so disarming.

"Tell me when. When did you get wet for me, Ella?" The way he says my name is so drunkening. He touches my clit with the tip of his tongue one more time, then waits.

"When I saw you, in the library."

He brings his hand to my pussy, and grips my lips in his fist, the pressure in my clit incredible as pain moves through my groin from how tightly he's squeezing.

"Then when I saw your—when I saw you were hard, in the library, I got *really* wet. And I've been getting wetter since then, sir."

I gave him the truth, and I close my eyes, waiting to feel his tongue, waiting to be rewarded. But then his breath is on my nose, and he's standing again.

I open my eyes and he steps around me, turning on the large, open shower. His sleeve gets soaked as he reaches in and lets a sponge fill with water, then pumps soap onto it. "Step inside."

I do, and though the water is warm, still, my body erupts in bumps.

He places the sponge in my hand and steps back, that same mouth-watering erection on display. I want him to make me service him. I want him to force my mouth on it. I want him, I want him to give me a chance to show him what I can do, even though I'm not sure yet what that is. I'm almost shaking with how much I need it.

"You will wash in the morning, and again at night. Wash between your legs, keep yourself trimmed the way you are–" he looks at the small patch of blonde hair on my pubic bone. "I like the way you have it now, keep it that way."

I start to wash, as he continues to tell me how I'll groom myself. "Wash your hair everyday. Wear it down unless I tell you otherwise. And Ella, unless it becomes a limit for you, I want you to be ready for anal." He nods to a device hanging from the wall, a silver looking wand attached to a silver

hose. “Turn it left to adjust the flow, make sure the water is warm. Insert it inside yourself, let it fill you. Clean yourself out for me.”

My cheeks flare at this talk. He wants me to clean out my ass for him so he can have me there, and for some reason, it feels horribly embarrassing to discuss. Unsexy. Yucky.

Cassian’s eyebrows lift. “Sex is a messy sport. Don’t be embarrassed. It is the human body.”

I nod. “Ye-yes, sir.”

“Now,” he says, leaning against the counter. “Wash yourself. Step into the spray, and wash yourself.”

My body needs his touch so badly I almost feel like I am going to lose it. “Are you going to join me?”

He shakes his head. *The mask stays on, and showers are a no-go.* His words come tumbling back.

“Oh. That’s right.” I open my mouth to ask but he stops me.

“Pull yourself open and let me see you wash your pussy.”

Oh my god.

I don’t know why I have no reservations to do all of these incredibly bold things but I don’t. It’s him. It’s his voice. It’s this deal. It’s everything, I guess. Or maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s me. Maybe I am born to be this person that submits and gives and in return, is taken care of.

“Okay,” I nod, my hair completely soaked now, thick drops of water plunking onto my bare feet. I drag the sponge between my legs, and rinse it, returning it there for another few passes. He watches in a way that makes me want to perform, so I drag it between my legs again, keeping myself open with my free hand.

“Could you have an orgasm this way?” he asks, sending excitement through my veins.

I nod. “Yes, sir.”

He smiles, huge cock still hard in his slacks, making my insides hungry for things I’ve never had. “Well don’t. You never come until I say so. You never come without me. You never touch yourself when you’re alone. Do you understand?”

I had every plan on easing this ache tonight, in my room. I didn’t think I’d be so bold as to stay in his room right away. And yet, I’m spreading myself, washing myself, completely naked in a way I’ve never been with

another person. Everything is so confusing and at the same time, everything feels so right. The dichotomy is dizzying. Or maybe it's the hot water.

I nod. "Yes, sir, I understand."

"Finish, and get out." He disappears, and I spend a few minutes washing, and as soon as I turn the water off, he appears with a long silk robe, white, with my name embroidered on the back. *Ella.*

He wraps me in it, and towels my hair, leading me to the bedroom in silence that feels more comfortable than not.

I didn't notice it before, but a velvet box rests on his night table, and he grabs it while commanding me to drop to my knees. "Sometimes you will have a pillow, and other times, you must find strength in your discomfort." He strokes a hand over my wet, uncombed hair. "This is one of those times."

My bare knees burn against the short-cropped rug, but my anticipation is so high, it feels like a good burn, like the first sip of hot coffee on a cold morning. Welcome pain. Reassuring pain.

"Hold your hair up." He opens the box and there inside is my collar, the one I dropped the night at the ball. Cassian steps behind me and clasps the collar around my throat, his fingers grazing my skin igniting the fire between my legs. Once it's on, he comes to the side of the bed, taking a seat on the edge while I kneel before him.

"You'll kneel at my side while I work every day. You can sketch during those times, but no more sewing all day. No more working all night. Monday–Wednesday you will sketch, Thursday and Friday mornings you will show the seamstresses on staff how to create your visions, and return to my side in the afternoons."

I nod. "Yes, sir." The thought of kneeling at the side of his desk turns me molten, my legs got hot then numb beneath me, my chest flooding with pins and needles, nipples stiff beneath the soft, cool robe.

"We will eat our meals together and spend the work day together. You deserve time to yourself, but it must be spent in the home. I do not leave the estate, and nor do you, unless expressly permitted to do so. I work out in the mornings and sometimes evenings. You are welcome to join me, or to keep me company, but I will never hold it against you if you want to be alone. Do you understand so far?"

Another nod. "Yes, sir."

My gaze moves over the smooth curves of the phantom, and onto the handsome terrain of his flesh. I like the mask, but I can't help but wonder so desperately what's beneath. He waits for my focus to return to his eyes, and I find myself apologizing for making him wait.

"I have had a workroom made on the first floor, which I will show you tomorrow. I've also hired several seamstresses to create on your behalf, but you are welcome to the pile of applicants my team pulled, should you find you are not happy with my selection."

I nod my head. "Thank you, sir. I can't even believe it." My fingertips press into the carpet, seeking to take even the smallest amount of weight off my knees as the rug digs uncomfortably into my flesh. "Thank you."

He tips his head to the side, watching my hands at my sides, then unfastens his belt, making my stomach flip. *Yes.* Finally.

Only, he stands, reaches into the leg of his pants, digging around, and by the time he produces the long silk strand it's about then I remember what I sewed into this particular suit. *Soft restraints.* "Open your mouth," he says, placing the silk tie in my teeth while he tucks in his shirt, rebuckling before I get to see or taste any part of him.

He yanks the tie from my mouth, making my teeth snap, then comes behind me, nearly making me fall forward when he yanks my wrists back and ties them back behind me. It's tight, and my hands immediately burn hot from the restriction, but when he comes to the other side of me and returns to his place on the side of the bed, the sight of him steals the pain.

All I feel now is need.

More of this. More of doing what he needs, what he wants. More of feeling outside myself but somehow, more of myself than I ever have.

He continues as if nothing happened, an erection still tenting his slacks. "You have ownership and access to anything in the home. The library, the entertainment room, the kitchen—anything. And should you want for anything, need for anything, all you must do is ask me."

I nod my head, a little dizzy, a little sweaty, the ends of my wet hair moving against my breasts as I nod, teasing my hard nipples.

"You do not ask David. You do not talk to the cleaners. You do not interact with anyone on the property but me, unless you've been given permission. Do you understand?"

I nod. "Yes, sir."

“And always communicate your feelings.” He ghosts his hand over my cheek. “I must always know everything about you, Ella. Or else this won’t feel like a gift. It will feel like Vivian’s workroom. Do you understand?”

I do. I understand in a way I didn’t anticipate. “Yes, sir.”

He rises, and I’m forced to face the thing I think I want most, sticking out at me like a sucker I’m dying to lick. Cassian strokes thick fingers through my hair. “Are you ready for your first scene?” he asks before bringing his face to mine. My heart leaps, and I tip up my chin, anticipating a kiss that never comes. Instead he asks again, “Are you ready to feel good, my little whore?”

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CHAPTER

Eighteen

CASSIAN

FUUUCK. If there is a God in Heaven, *thank you*. I am on my private, proverbial knees, because *thank you*.

Ella is exactly what I wanted. What I hoped. What I envisioned.

More than that, she's exactly who I thought she'd be.

And I'm more carried away than ever before when it comes to her never leaving here, never leaving me. Fate has me in a goddamn chokehold.

It's something to be a dominant, getting to plan and play the way I see fit, with a partner who shares my desires. But being absolutely obsessed with my submissive to the point where I nearly have to step away and bite into my curled fist to contain my goddamn pleasure, that's a whole other experience. It's quite the thrill to feel so boldly inside and wear nothing but passive comfort on the outside.

Ella waits for me on her knees at the side of my bed.

I want to tear through his mansion and get back to her, to rip off my belt and shove down my pants and fuck her face like the waiting, greedy hole I know that she is. To feed her in ways she's never been fed.

But that isn't what this is about. Part of my pleasure comes from my ability to maintain control—*self-control*—and to allow us both pleasure at just the right times. Everything has a cadence, like notes of a song, or meters and line breaks in poetry.

I must follow the cadence in order to reap the greatest reward. This, I know.

Yet I’ve never been tested the ways in which my adoration for Ella has tested me. And it’s both exciting and terrifying because I’ve only known her a short time. Even more, I don’t know her yet, not in all the ways that are still undiscovered.

I gather ice from the maker, and toss cubes into the bucket before grabbing a few more items from around the service kitchen. In the mud room, I dig through the supplies Lucien keeps in the cupboard near the door. He and the gardeners are the ones who go outside and forge the morning cold, and I know exactly what they use to combat it. After tossing a few more things into my bag, I stand straight and take a breath.

My heart is absolutely racing. My hands are trembling. Palms braced against the cool stainless steel of the service kitchen counter, I do as I always say and take a long, deep breath through my nose.

Disinfectant, lavender diffuser, the familiar scent of washed linens.

My nerves steady some as I reach up and swipe away perspiration from beneath the mask. I’m used to it, after having my face covered for so many years, but tonight, the mask feels like a burden.

I put it out of my mind as I reach for the top cabinet and grab a bottle of whiskey. Snatching a glass, I pour myself a few fingers.

The first sip does nothing to my frantic senses.

She signed.

She’s collared.

She’s at the side of my bed waiting.

Maybe very soon, it will be our bed. I’d tell myself not to jump ahead, to leap into the unknown with my heart on my sleeves and all my hopes in a bag behind me but it’s far too fucking late for that.

The night I laid eyes on her at the ball, I did that. After all, she came. Locked away, threatened, scared—she risked it all to come. She had to have some hope that her life would change, and I am that hope.

I am her salvation.

It’s not my ego behind these bloated statements. It’s what I truly believe. This is what it’s like to believe in destiny, and though I’ve spent years wishing to have my face back, perhaps it took Alex, it took that betrayal, it took years of building a thick skin and getting comfortable with my scars to lead me here.

I don’t know.

I pour another drink and finish it. I could drink the entire bottle and not have it rattle my performance, not with how I'm feeling now. But I won't. I don't want any part of this to have a haze, to be wobbled by booze. I just need to take off the edge so that Ella does not see anyone but composed, controlled, dominant Cassian.

I leave the glass on the counter, gather my things, and make the trek back to the master bedroom, taking my time as I walk through my mansion. She's been waiting already for several minutes. The anticipation is probably making her wild. I could make her wait hours if I wanted to.

Another time, I will.

Not today.

Before I reach the bedroom, I stop off in the office, where I know David is working. I ordered him to work from the office today, unsure of what was in store. I wanted to make sure I had privacy.

Inside, my brother sits across from him, despite the fact I know it's his day away from the estate, where he works in an office at one of my real estate development companies. My brow furrows, but I don't step inside. I'm set on Ella, business be damned.

"Lucien, is everything okay?" I look between my brother and David, who lets out a sigh as he pinches the bridge of his nose, exasperated.

"Adam Bartholomew," David says, and already, I believe I know.

"What did he do?" I question, but before either can answer, I add, "If his membership needs to be revoked, if action needs to be taken–"

David lifts a hand. "Lucien believes we consider club suspension and remediation."

Lucien gets to his feet, and comes to the door, patting my chest. "Go. Go and enjoy Ella. Take the entire day off. Adam, the club, work, it will all be here when you return to office tomorrow."

I know this is true, but still, I press. "What did he do?"

Adam Bartholomew parallels myself in many ways. He's quite wealthy, has his hand in many pots where business is concerned, he holds a deep betrayal in his past that he was hesitant to share upon his vetting for *Obsidian Veil*, and he's a dominant.

Where we differ is in the subtext and finer details of dominance. Though he's been through several reformation sessions with the *Obsidian Veil* therapists, Adam has, in the past, been cruel. And not for the kink, but because of his own emotional deficiencies. He has used his power in ways

that *Veil* members, especially scene Players, have promised they would not. He's taken advantage, been ruthless, cruel, unforgiving. And not to serve a greater scene or allow his submissive or the overall moment a greater good, a higher purpose, an elite ending. It's been because he lacks the ability, from time to time, to control what's wrong inside him. He channels it negatively instead of positively, but I'd thought he'd grown. I thought the therapy had helped.

"His submissive is his partner." I shake my head. "He loves her." I will never for the life of me understand people who hurt those they love. On purpose. With full knowledge of what they are doing.

These people are my least favorite type of people. I hold them higher on the cruelty hierarchy than I do people who hurt strangers.

"We need to cut off his membership and pursue legal action for him breaking the contract," David says.

But Lucien is like me, and sees the bigger picture. "Then he does what? Leaves *Veil* and hurts her without the safety of the club? Without therapists? Without actual consequence? He becomes jaded and therefore, more unsafe?" Lucien shakes his head. "We have to help him. He isn't a bad man. He's hurt."

"Do not say hurt people hurt people one more time, Lucien," David sighs, still pinching the bridge of his nose.

I don't even consider staying. These are the two people I trust most. They can handle it, at least for today.

"No one comes to the third floor for the rest of the day." I look at David. "Please tell the staff to go home. By nine o'clock I'd like no one on the estate."

David nods, and Lucien grabs the door, trying to close it. "Go. We got this. Just… go." He smiles, and it's the first time in years I've seen pure happiness in his reflection, not tinted by pity or sadness.

Ella has done that for us.

BACK AT MY ROOM, I open the door, hard again at just the sight of her waiting, wrists bound, hair still slightly damp from her shower.

When the door snicks closed, she jumps a little, chin coasting to her shoulder as she tries to peer back to me.

I run a finger around the collar of my shirt, and get rid of the top few buttons, allowing the room's cool air to nip at my warm, flush skin. The mask slides but I reach behind my head and tighten it, ensuring it does not move.

“You’re back,” she whispers. Seeing relief in her spine, the way her body softens upon my arrival, simply from me being here—heat blooms behind my ribs and it gives me pause.

Her anticipation makes all of this so much more sweet.

I place my things down on the floor behind her, the sound muffled by the area rug, and come to stand in front of her. Unbuckling my belt, I open my pants, obsessed with the way her mouth falls open and her eyes drop to my groin. She wants it. And God, I’d love to give it to her.

But not yet. We have testing to do, and anticipation makes the reward that much sweeter.

I reach into my slacks and slowly, it dawns on her exactly what I’m doing. It should. She’s the one who sewed removable silk ties into these slacks. I’ve used one to bind her, now it’s time to– “this one will be used for your mouth,” I explain, tugging the tie free from where it is nestled into the lining on my leg. “Is this what you envisioned when you stitched these in?”

“Wrists and ankles, I thought but… this is better. It’s going to be warm against my skin, from being against your skin. And that’s…” she sighs. “Much better.”

We lock eyes. “Remember your safe words. Remember that at any time, you can stop or slow anything. The scene is in your hands, Ella.”

She nods, and then I move her hair behind her back, and tangle my fingers in the ends just to feel a little more of her. “Open,” I command, and her jaw parts as I place the silk over her mouth, and tie a bow at the back of her head.

“This is your first time being gagged, yes?” I move to the edge of the bed, and sit in front of her. She nods.

“This is the gentlest way to do it. I won’t be so gentle in the future. And you may be scared, but I promise, you will like the result.”

She nods, her lids growing hooded, sweat glistening along her collarbone. I reach down and swipe at the tie, opening the robe. I can’t take

it off anymore since her wrists are bound behind her back, but I don't want her completely naked for this.

Our relationship is brimming with vulnerability, and too much too soon can be hard to process and hard to move on from.

Small steps. Soft ties. Partial nudity. No cock. That's what she gets today.

"You can watch today. There's only so much anticipation one can handle in the beginning, so I'll refrain from blindfolding you."

She nods.

"And in the future, my darling, there will be far less explanation."

She doesn't nod this time, but squeezes her eyes shut and takes a deep breath through her nose, pushing it out around the tie separating her lips.

I get to my knees in front of her, her head coming to the center of my chest. I place my hands on her shoulders, half silk, half skin, and look down into her eyes. "Do not be anxious." I dust my lips along her collarbone, and lower, sucking in the tip of one nipple. "Be ready."

A gentle moan presses against the tie in her mouth, and with an erection that is starting to ache, I reach around her to where my things are waiting. My heart is racing, my body aching for this, to do this with her. *Finally.*

From the bucket, I bring out a singular piece of ice, the cold water melting down my fingers. I place it in my mouth, and suckle, and her eyes follow the movement like her breath depends on it. Lowering, I bring my cold lips to her nipple, and suck, causing her back to arch, pushing her body toward me, ever so slightly.

I drag the ice around the dark circle of her areola, and she hisses behind the gag, so I reach into the bucket, and get another piece, and repeat the motion on both breasts.

Her spine trembles, and her nostrils flare, but I watch her as I tease her body with the cold. "The extremes are what makes the pleasure so intense," I explain, placing both ice cubes in one hand. I lift the ends of her hair around the tie, and cup my palm to her neck, making her tip forward, catching her by the breast with my free hand.

"Ah, ah," I scold. "Hold steady. Teach your body to accept without reaction." I bring my lips to hers, dusting but not kissing. "These are the easy ones. Don't fight."

She nods, and maybe even whimpers, I don't know. My pulse thuds in my ears, my cock pleading relentlessly for attention in my slacks. I take

another piece of ice, enjoying the way her gaze bounces from my groin to my face, like she wants to see both but can't decide which she wants more.

I slide my hand beneath her robe, and drag the piece of ice up and down her spine, and it melts to nothing after just a few passes.

"You're so hot, my darling," I tease, drawing out the words as she snaps her eyes shut, focused intently on her task—not moving.

Another piece of ice, and I circle her nipples again, groaning at the stiff little peaks, at the way they call to my teeth, beg for clamps, practically plead to be slapped. I get a flash of Ella in this very bed behind us, propped on pillows in the center, a dark-headed baby boy in her arms, his mouth latched to this breast as she feeds him, adoringly gazing down at what we've created.

The fantasy is so vivid, and it feels so good, so real, that it fills me with the urge to punish her for making me believe it so easily. I reach into the ice bucket and fill my palm, then slip my hand between her thighs.

I push a cube past her soft lips, and she tries her hardest but flails when the ice slips inside of her warm, wet pussy.

"Do not move. Final warning."

She nods, and peers down at my wrist, my hand hidden between her legs. "Look at me, Ella."

She does, so quickly that my chest tightens at how obedient she is. How pliable and willing she is.

I slip another cube inside, and though she groans behind the gag, she doesn't move. She stays straight, her spine unwavering, her will unfaltering.

Heavy drops of water curl the lips of her beautiful pussy, but I push another cube inside, and another, until my palm is empty. Her shoulders shudder, and as the ice melts, the cold water trickling out of her and down her thighs, she falters. Her breasts tremble and shake, and it's the first moment of weakness that earns my punishing hands.

I slap her breast, immediately marking the skin pink from the swat. Not hard, but hard enough to get her eyes back open, back on me.

"I said not to move. I said to look at me. Did I say those things?"

She nods.

"Speak around the gag, even if you sound foolish."

"Yes, sir," she mumbles around the silk.

I reach into the bucket again, and get more ice, holding it to the back of her neck like before when I bring my lips to hers, hunched over her smaller

size. “It feels good to have your mouth stuffed with something that touched me all day, doesn’t it, my slut?”

She nods, forcing out words around the gag. “Yes, sir.”

“Just wait until I’m filling your mouth with my cock. You can’t wait for that, am I right?” I don’t let her reply as I bring the ice to my mouth and slide it past my lips, then back into my hand and between her legs. I push it inside of her and she struggles then to keep her focus on me. Her lids are heavy, and I know how she feels.

“Yes, sir,” she garbles.

I reach down, stroking a fingertip over the top of her knee, the portion not ground into the rug. “I bet your knees hurt. But all good sluts have tough knees. Will you make yourself tough for me, slut?”

She nods, trying to get out the words but her breathing is growing labored, her chest rising and falling more quickly. A tremble runs through her shoulders, and I gather more ice, and bring my lips to hers, placing the softest trace of a kiss against her mouth, pushing several more ice cubes inside of her.

Ella’s moans are lyrical, beautiful and soft, wrapping my spine like velvet, leaving my cock as hard as steel. I reach back again, and find the warmer, snapping it in half, bringing its immediate heat roaring to life. She blinks at me, and I can see she wants to look down at my hands, but obeys, keeping her eyes on mine.

“Good girl, a very good, obedient slut.” I reward her with praise, because she deserves it, then, I reach between her legs where her pussy is cold and dripping icy water, and I press the small heating pad against her cunt.

Her head jerks back as she moans, the contrast of cold inside and hot outside overwhelming, dizzying and utterly confusing. But she was told not to move.

I swat her breast, then the other, and with my hand still holding the hot pad to her lips, I lower my face and bite her breast, around her areola, then her nipple. She whimpers but manages to stay straight, no more moving.

“It’s disorienting. You want to come on my hand, but the cold, the hot, it makes it hard, does it not?”

She nods, but doesn’t speak, and I let that one go.

I look down to see my teeth marks on her flesh, and nearly lose my composure. I need relief as bad as she does, and I intend to get it. In a way

that tortures us both.

With the heating pad still pressed to her cunt, I drop my thumb over her clit, and her frantic cry fills the gag.

She's soaked, and it's got nothing to do with the ice. I move my thumb over the blooming little bud, sticky and hot, made slippery by her body's reaction to me and what we're doing.

"Is this better than the pearls?" I ask, making her recall that night, the first time I brought her to her proverbial knees.

She nods.

I make slow, deliberate circles around her clit, teasing, edging, drawing out the agony of her need as her eyes grow hazy and heavy, though still focused on me. My flesh is hot beneath my mask, sweaty and slippery, my heart absolutely pounding behind my ribs. I look down to find my cock hard as ever, testing the limits of my slacks.

I move the pad of my thumb over her clit, and she moans, a sound so beautiful that it renders me paralyzed for a moment. She's close. I can feel how close she is.

I take my hand away. "Eyes on me," I remind her, though she hasn't faltered. I reach into my slacks and fill my hand with hot, hard cock, pulling it out. "Do not look, Ella. It isn't yours just yet."

She nods. "Yes, sir." The words are messy and low against the tie in her mouth. Her thighs begin to tremble but not from fatigue but from need. She needs to come, her body is on the brink of betrayal if she doesn't.

But teasing is so fun.

I stroke myself and groan, and if I didn't have to keep my eyes on hers, I'd tip back my head and roar from how good it feels to touch myself after touching her pussy.

For now, I must watch her. She must earn my trust.

"I am so hard for you, my little slut, so hard it hurts," I tell her, voice thin and hoarse. "I have so much cum for you, my balls are heavy with it. And I've been holding it for you. There are so many places I want to put it." The heating pad slips from my hand and hits the floor. I bring my warmed fingers to her mouth and shove two of them past the gag, pressing them onto her tongue so she has to taste the heat as I begin naming them. "Here."

I stroke myself. Precum makes the slide easy, slick over the ache. I reach between her legs and tease her opening with the pad of a finger—

circling, pressing just enough to make her feel it, never giving her more. “And here. Here so fucking badly, my little slut.”

Her legs shake hard. The tremor runs up through her core, making her belly and breasts quiver, but she holds the position. I slide my palm under the robe, over the full curve of her ass, and pull one cheek aside. Both of us groan at the contact. I press a fingertip to her hole and feel it tighten, reactive. “And here.”

I bring that finger to my mouth, taste her on my tongue, before dropping it to her sternum. I drag it slowly over her breasts and down her belly. “And here, too. So badly here.”

I circle her clit again, then lift my slick fingers to her face and paint them over each eyelid, and along the bridge of her nose. “I’ll make you a masterpiece here, too.”

Her eyes fall closed as she gives into the fantasies strewn out before her, and it earns her another harsh swat, her breasts pink from my punishment. She opens her eyes, those shining blue orbs connecting with mine right as I slide my hand between her thighs.

Her entire body is overcome with trembles, so I stroke her clit to calm her, to feel how wet she is, how needy she’s become.

“You’re close,” I observe, and she nods her head, forcing out a bated, “Yes, sir.”

I take my hand back. “If you look down at all, I will not let you come. Do you understand?”

She looks confused, but nods, adding, “Yes, sir.”

I reach between her, gathering her thick slickness, and bring it back to my shaft, stroking. From behind her, I gather the small towel I collected down stairs, and keep it at my side.

“Keep your eyes on mine. I want you to see my face when I come for you, my beautiful, perfect slut.”

She moans, she whimpers, she nearly collapses as I use her arousal as lube, pumping and jacking my cock in quick strokes. “I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been waiting for your needy little body, your desperate cunt. Do you know how long I’ve waited for you, Ella?”

She doesn’t shake her head, she doesn’t move. Her nostrils flare as she keeps her eyes on mine, an internal war raging within. She wants to look at my cock. She wants to watch me spill for her, erupt everywhere in a fit of dominant passion. I can see the war in her eyes.

But she will obey.

I know she will. Because in her heart, she wants to please.

Please me.

I pump, swiping my palm over the wet head of my cock, groaning as I slowly work myself over, every veiny inch. I reach for the towel, my belly tightening as the burning need to come coils tight in my balls, my brain growing fuzzy.

“Oh god,” I grunt, lifting the towel as the first shot of my orgasm breaks loose, hitting the white terry. Again, and again, each hot buzz in my core lets loose a thick rope of cum. So much cum. Each pass of my hand brings another shot, but her eyes stay on mine, despite a tear that litters her cheek.

I ball up the towel, warm and damp, and press it against her nipple. “That warmth,” I tell her, bringing my mouth to hers as my other hand comes to her pussy, over her clit. “That warmth is my cum. Do you like how hot my cum is?”

She can’t even nod. Her hips break loose, on a tear against my hand, grinding forward and thrusting back, my thumb sliding over her swollen clit once, twice, until—

“Oh,” she warbles around the silk gag. Her belly tightens, and her head falls forward, and I carefully slide one finger over her lips to feel the gentle pulsing of her orgasm, the way her hot little pussy convulses in need.

I move the cum soaked towel away from her body, tossing it aside as she straightens her spine, reminding herself to obey as her pussy continues to beg and come for me.

Slowly, I stroke her clit until she’s so sensitive she whines into the gag, but like the good girl she is, her eyes don’t leave mine. I take my hand away, sticky from her, and shove my cock into my slacks. I reach behind her, and take off the gag in one quick pull, and in my next move, free her wrists with another tug.

She collapses against me, and I wrap my arms around her, collecting her small frame against mine with pride and ease as I get to my feet. I sit on the bed and push myself back, keeping her in my lap and against my chest.

Ella is panting, kind of moaning, but clinging to my shirt with her hands. She buries her face against my warm flesh, the portion exposed by the open buttons, and it’s then I feel her tears.

I stroke my fingers through her hair. And begin what may be my favorite part of dominance.

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CHAPTER
Nineteen

ELLA

I DON'T KNOW what to say. I don't even know how to define how I'm feeling.

Overwhelmed? But not in a bad way, just in an intense way that makes it hard to think clearly. My heart is still pounding, despite the fact that… it's over. I'm warm and fuzzy everywhere, even though just a minute ago my insides burned from the harsh chill of ice. And my body, despite swats and nibbles, feels better than it ever has, like I'm coasting up an endorphin rush still, even though the scene is clearly over.

I cling to Cassian, Cassian Blackwood, the man that just a week ago was no one more than tabloid gossip and elusive myth. And now I've signed a contract for him to take away my life's problems, and give myself over to him.

I lift my head from his chest, immediately missing the warmth of his body, and the scent of his sweat-kissed skin. Even a little sweaty, he smells like bergamot and dreams.

Through his partial mask, he peers down at me. "Tell me how you're feeling, when you're ready."

His hand strokes down my spine, and it makes me curl deeper against him, seeking out more of him. As much as we're still so much strangers, I've never felt closer to someone.

"No one has paid that much attention to me, like that, ever," I whisper as he fishes a hand between my face and his chest, swiping my tears.

“That’s just the beginning, my darling. Does it overwhelm you? To be a plaything, my focus, my entire world?”

His words set something ajar in my chest, but in a way that feels right, like a shift that allows me to breathe. Finally.

I shake my head again. “It’s alarming how right it all feels. How much I want this, even though somewhere inside me, I know there should be hesitancy because we hardly know one another.” I admit one more thing. “I feel ashamed for it, too. For how right it feels, if that makes sense.” I tuck hair behind my ears with bleary eyes, and try to explain myself. “I should want equality, I should want… I don’t know,” I sigh. “I feel ashamed for liking it all, and that’s the only way I can describe it.”

He kisses the top of my head. I don’t ask when he’ll have my mouth—I just wait and dream, glad to have any part of him he gives me.

“Do not be ashamed. And do not think of this as a power imbalance. We are equals, in all ways, but what moves us, what makes us wild, that is how we’re different from others. But never be ashamed.” He smiles, then adds, “And we will become closer than you’ve ever been with anyone else very quickly,” he assures me, stroking his fingers down my back. “Let’s start now, while your body unwinds. Ask me what you want. Talk to me as you please.”

I feel myself smiling at how easy it is. “How much did you learn about me from your security company?” The question surprises even me, because the question hadn’t felt so urgent, so loaded on my tongue. Not until I opened my mouth.

His hand never stops stroking, unfazed by my question. That reassures me, makes me feel like there’s no games, no planning, no getting his story straight.

“A month before the ball, I had them look into the Moreau household. I never believed Vivian was behind those designs, and David—” he pauses, dusting his fingers on my bicep now as he pulls me closer while he talks. “I’m not sure if you know this but David is the one who would pick up my orders from Moreau.”

I smile against his chest. “I figured. He is your assistant after all.”

“Right,” he continues, stacking his chin on top of my head. “Well, even David has never bought Vivian’s story. He’s questioned her about cuffing, design–”

My laughter cuts him off. “Vivian couldn’t sew a button on for a million dollars.”

“Exactly. And David was wholly aware of that. And that’s what led us to poking around. Initially, I thought perhaps it could be Fern or Tess at the helm. Or maybe even both.”

I can’t help but sit up, the side of my face covered in partially dried, tangled hair. “Cassian!” I chide, playful but partially serious. “Fern or Tess?” I stroke my hand down the piping on his thigh, my wrist grazing his along the way. “I rolled this and stitched it myself. I hand sew all the seams and piping details. Do you have any idea how challenging that is? Fern and Tess—”

He reaches out and pinches my nipple, hard, and I collapse into him with a smirk. “Ella, as soon as I saw them, I knew it wasn’t them.” He takes my hand off his chest, and carefully strokes his fingers over the pads of mine. He traces a scar that runs the length of my index finger.

“Slipped on the threading machine once,” I explain about the pink mark.

“Right, and their hands were pure. They did not walk like they were even remotely familiar with the fatigue of a long day’s work.”

I swallow as the story grows more intense, thinking of this man searching for me without even really knowing I existed. And me, alone in the workroom, talking to a crow, wishing to be found. Hoping to be freed.

My eyes burn, but I manage to swallow down the sudden lump clogging my throat. Thankfully, Cassian continues. “That’s when Badd Brothers, my security company, found you.”

My pulse leaps at those words. If they found me, what else did they find about me? Does Cassian know what I did? I lick my lips and stroke my fingers through the hair on his chest, loving the way every piece of him reminds me of how strong he is, how dominant he is. Though I worry what he knows, I find peace in touching him, in being with him in this new after. “What did you find out?” I ask, trying to sound unafraid, trying to force curiosity into my tone, natural and light.

He sighs. “Not as much as I’d like. You don’t have much of a footprint, though now I’m assuming that's because Vivian was likely trying to hide you.” He peers down at me, and with the fading sunlight pouring through the window, I can see a faint trace of my reflection in his mask. “The moment the world lays their eyes on you, they will know that you are the gifted creator behind Moreau Designs. They will know she’s a fraud.”

I blink a few times, trying to steady the overwhelming rush of feelings from his compliment. “Do you really believe that?”

His eyebrow dips, and I know if I took off that mask, I’d see two furrowed brows. “Do you think I break my own rules for just anyone? Of course I believe that.”

He gets to his feet and pulls me to mine, cinching my robe then gathering my hand with his. A moment later, we’re standing next to my tiny little bag, the one stuffed with my handful of things, and staring at the closet full of dresses. Dresses that I made.

“Years of buying these for no one,” he says, dragging his fingers along the fabrics. “I’ve been obsessed with the hands that made these for quite some time. Only recently did it occur to me to find you.”

I knew these were here. But seeing them makes me weak in the knees. Thinking of him adoring my work, a man like this, with this estate, his money, an assistant for God’s sake.

“What took you so long?”

He smiles, and I wish so much he would take off that mask. I wish he could trust me enough to know that I would only etch his face into my memory, but would never share it with another person after these sixty days are up. It’s not in my character to betray that way, and certainly I’d never betray a man who is going to give me so much.

He doesn’t answer my question, but instead shares a secret, and it feels much more sacred. “Can I tell you something?” He looks up at all of my creations. “When I first started buying these, it was in hopes that the gossip chain was at play. That Vivian would tell others that the reclusive Cassian Blackwood had a partner. They were a decoy. To make me seem more normal.”

When he finally looks at me, he sees how puzzled I am. “Your house is like a small city, Cassian.” I shrug. “I don’t find it all that odd that you don’t leave. If I had this place, I may never leave either.”

He collects my hand, strands of shiny dark hair falling over the edge of the phantom mask before he shucks it back. His lips dust my knuckles. “Then,” he continues, “I started to fantasize about having another submissive. One who perfectly fit them. And I couldn’t stop buying them, I couldn’t stop hoping to meet someone to fit them, and me.”

My eyes burn. How incredibly romantic. “Cassian, that’s beautiful.”

His smile is slow, and intoxicating. “What’s beautiful to you is weird and obsessive and far-fetched to others.” He shrugs. “Others being my brother and David.”

I don’t feel bold enough to ask him what number I am, where I fall in the line of submissives he’s been with, but another question burns my lips, and I can’t help but ask. He left the house for me, but there could have been plenty that came here for him.

“Why do you want to wear such fancy suits all the time? I mean, you don’t leave. No one sees you except some staff. Why not just wear comfortable clothes?”

His face falls, expression changing from something light and tender to something rougher, eyes going dark. He flips the switch on the wall, and the closet goes dark, and instead of linking our hands together on the way out like he did on the way in, he says, “come on, this way,” while ushering me out.

Outside the closet, still in his room, I wrap my arms around myself and stare up at him, his dark eyes giving nothing away. I don’t know what happened. One moment we were sharing thoughts and now he seems… upset. I reach for his elbow but he looks down at my touch in a way that makes me recess.

“Cassian, did I upset you?”

He doesn’t answer me, and it doesn’t seem fair, because the one thing I’m held to in this contract is communication and brutal honesty, so, I say that. “You said before I signed, and after even, that I have to communicate how I’m feeling.”

My back is against the closed closet door before I have a chance to think. His body presses against mine, his heaving chest pinning me there. “I am in control. Do not take advantage of my kindness and assume I owe you answers that don’t belong to you.” He grips my breast over the silk robe, squeezing in a way that sends heat through my bones, centering on my groin. “Do you understand you are not in control?”

I nod and he grabs my breast harder, twisting. “Speak.”

“Yes, sir. I am not in control.”

He releases me, and steps back, and out of nowhere he seems to be out of breath, panting a little, restless in his own skin as he treads toward the bed.

My mind is spinning, but when he calls me back into his arms, I go, because I want to, not because I have to, which he tells me as he positions me between his legs, reaching to the nightstand to gather a comb from the drawer.

“I’m sorry to have reacted that way, but it is important that we respect the dynamic of the contract. I have no problem sharing things about myself but on my time, in my way,” he says, gently tugging the comb through my hair, now mostly dried. Tugging my hair to one side, he presses a tender kiss to the side of my neck, and it makes my eyes close, and my heart pound.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I say, meaning every word, already finding myself hooked on the ritual of our titles. “You did just tell me to ask you things, though.” I nibble the inside of my mouth, wanting to be obedient, but it’s been years of not being able to talk back. I’m still figuring out where the line is.

“That’s true, I did. I take responsibility for… that,” he says, before quickly adding, “Turn, my darling. Face me.”

I turn around on the bed and find him leaning over, exchanging the hair brush for a bottle of lotion—lotion so fancy, it has a single French word on the label. He pumps it into his palms, and begins smoothing it over my reddened knees, sore and aching from the rug.

“That feels nice, thank you, sir,” I whisper, already feeling so turned on again, despite the rollercoaster of emotions, and the newness of it all.

He peers up at me, not pausing his hands when he says quietly, “it will alarm you just how right it feels, despite the fact it’s so new.”

“What will?” I ask, my voice thin, my skin pebbling from the dichotomy of his deep voice and soft touch.

“Being mine.” He tosses the bottle aside, and pats the center of the bed, where I climb up and sit next to him.

He massages my hands while we talk. He asks me how long I’ve been sewing, what my favorite things to create are, how long I’ve felt the submissive urges inside me. We talk about the decor in his room, and he tells me about the mansion, and having it built. He tells me a little about Lucien, his brother, who works for him and has an apartment in the city. I file away every detail he shares, trying to build a broader picture of Cassian in my mind.

With the mask, and all the rules around it, I can't deny that even though I'm in his arms and in his bed, doubt enters my heart, lingering around the edges of my mind.

Am I on a need to know basis, only seeing half of his face, signing away my ability to speak about us, because he has another life? Is he married? His finger shows no ring wear, and I can't imagine that he'd lie to me all while preaching how honesty is the path. *He said he never would do that*, but what do I really know?

I don't want to doubt him. And I don't want to doubt him on our first night together, at the beginning of this long journey. I want to scoop up every morsel of him and stash it away to feast on once this is over, but it's hard.

It's hard when I can't see his face. I can't ask anything I want, but when I'm given permission, still, I'm in a minefield of sorts. I can't fully have him, though I am, in these roles, expected to give myself.

It's night one, and I feel myself falling. But I feel confusion wrapping my ankles and pulling me down, just the same.

As he rubs lotion into my bare legs, he asks, "how did you feel in the scene?"

I answer easily, because the truth is always simple. "So good. The best I've ever felt." Then, despite my doubt, I give him the gift of another truth, even if I'm playing a card I should keep to my chest. "I trust you, sir. In a way that I can't explain."

He leans forward, and presses a kiss to my forehead, stroking his hand down my cheek. "Tomorrow morning, the nurse will do the tests, and we can have more of each other after."

I nod.

Cassian has a tray of food sent up to the room, and we eat together in bed, still just talking. It feels alarmingly natural, tangling our toes together beneath the sheets while he feeds me bites of medium-rare steak and makes sure my hair stays behind my shoulders.

It feels magical. And who warned me not to be afraid of how good it feels?

Cassian.

And when night steals the rest of the light, and the master suite grows dark, Cassian asks me the very thing he told me that he would ask when we negotiated.

“Do you want to stay in here, Ella, or should I show you to your room?”

I want to stay. I want to stay forever, even though I realize the thought of forever is foolish after a day.

But the way I waited to sign the contract until I could see the other documents—I was smart. I wasn’t overcome with feelings, riches, a handsome man and his kinky ways. I was smart, and I have to be smart now, not to save my grandmother, but to save myself.

I smile as he holds out a nightgown, the same color as the robe, the material rich and thin, something I’d buy in bolts for Moreau but could never own, not on myself.

I take the gown and force rigidity into my voice. “I think I’d like to see my room, and stay there tonight.” I smile, despite the fact I feel more like crying than smiling. “Thank you, sir.”

I don’t even let myself see his reaction. I can’t. The disappointment in his face will break me, will have me falling onto my sore knees and begging him to forgive me.

But he gave me this option for a reason. He knows that he must offer me a chance to breathe, or else at the end of this, when he cuts me loose, I’ll have no choice but to suffocate without him.

I follow him down the hall, and don’t even allow myself to take in the lavish surroundings. He tells me where I can find towels, where I can find toiletries, how to use the remote—none of which I care about. Not right now. I keep my eyes on my feet and simply say, “thank you, sir. Goodnight.”

I caution a glance, finally, after what feels like an eternity of silence. His masked face stares back at me for a moment before he nods his head. “Goodnight, my darling.”

He closes the door, and I crumple onto the bed, my entire body is shook by his choice to still use that term for me.

I want Cassian Blackwood far too much, secrets and all. But more than I want him, I want to survive after this contract ends, when he slips me out the door with paperwork and a new life. I want to survive but if I let myself drown in him, I will.

This was the right choice.

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CHAPTER

Twenty

CASSIAN

"SO I'M YOUR THERAPIST NOW?" Lucien blinks as I pace the office in front of him, all while he casually sips espresso.

"You're my brother," I remind him. "And you haven't left yet."

He shrugs. "Amalia is working late. And this whole Adam thing needs handling." He loosens his man bun, then reties it with a sigh. "I didn't think you'd leave your room for the rest of the night."

I reluctantly sink down into my office chair as David reenters the office with a file in his hand, pausing for a moment, shock twisting his face. "Cassian."

I catch my forehead in my hand as the clock in the corner chimes, reminding me it's only eight o'clock, and Ella is in her room for the night. "Yes, I'm here, and not with Ella."

Lucien walks to my side of the desk and retrieves a can of Coke from the mini fridge, the carbonation hissing as he pops it open.

"Trying to stay awake to see Amalia?" David questions, spotting the empty espresso cup, eyeing the Coke in Lucien's hand.

My brother nods. "You got it." He slurps soda, and I truly didn't think I'd be seeing my brother or David until tomorrow. He eyes me. "What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

David slides Adam Bartholomew's file over my desk. "Then busy yourself with this."

I don’t need to open the file. I know Adam’s history, and I know what he likes, where he lands on the scale of interests here at *Veil*. I even know his partner, Cate. And without hearing of the incident, I’m almost certain I can recite it.

“You do too want to talk about it,” Lucien says, taking the file from my desk, leaving his can where it was. “Or else you would’ve stayed in your room all night.”

“Did she press about the mask?” David cautions.

I shake my head, shame warming my back, heating my neck. “You’d think, right?” I can’t help but sigh. “Something far less innocuous but… it hit a nerve.”

David and Lucien blink at me, waiting for me to fill in the blanks. David crosses one leg over the other after sitting across from me, fair hair still neatly combed, even at the end of the day.

“She asked why I wear the suits if I don’t leave the house. If no one sees me, why do I care to dress so nice.”

Though I’ve never implicitly explained this, they know me well, and they knew me well before the accident, too. I caution a glance at David, then my brother, and find their knowing eyes on me.

“It’s stupid to be rattled by it, I know.”

A moment of pause, then, “you could explain how they make you feel. It would be a compliment to her as well,” Lucien offers gently.

But I shake my head. “Then I’d have to explain a lot more than that. And… I don’t want to.”

David brushes lint from his knee. “If she is who you believe she is, and if fate is the thing you think it is, eventually, you’ll have to share with her. About Alex, about everything.”

Silence.

Lucien doesn’t rush to offer more words, because there isn’t much to say. David is right. I know he’s right, and I’d already independently arrived at that location on my own. I know I have to tell her. But the bubble is bliss. The bubble where the past cannot touch us—despite the fact the past has scarred half of my covered face.

I get to my feet, having arrived at a logical middle, something I can tell her, a way of explaining myself. “Don’t kick out Adam,” I decide aloud as I make my way around my desk, toward the door. “Lucien is right. We have to help him or else he’ll be worse off.”

“What’s the solution then?” David calls after me.

“Role reversal. Contracted. For twelve months. He agrees to it, or else we let him go, and we press charges against the contract.” With that, I close the door, and find myself hot-footing up to the third floor.

I STAND in front of her door for what feels like an hour, but is maybe only a handful of minutes. I smooth my hands along the sides of my hair, and tug at my partially buttoned, untucked dress shirt. I still haven’t changed. Her scent lingers in the creases of my slacks, in the folds of my shirt, and it is burned into my own skin.

I run my fingers over the edge of the phantom mask, take a deep breath, and knock gently.

She’s awake.

That’s one small victory. Then again, it is only a bit after eight. She probably hasn’t gone to bed at this hour in quite some time. I know I haven’t.

The door swings inward, and there she is, in the silk white nightgown and matching robe, blonde hair wavy around her shoulders, blue eyes blinking up at me.

“Sir,” she whispers, though I can tell she doesn’t mean to whisper. Instead, the word is lined with surprise, and maybe a touch of happiness, too.

“May I come in?”

She lifts one shoulder and pulls the door back, wider. “It’s your house.”

I stride inside and turn, taking the door from her hand so that I may close it. “It’s your room, Ella. Nothing in here is mine, except you.”

Pink floods the apples of her cheeks. “I’m still getting used to that.”

I stare at her eyes, wide, blue pools of hope and youth. She’s twenty-six to my thirty- eight, and yet she feels even younger. Her virginity, the way she’s not been under the sun’s harsh rays every day, her inexperience, all of it. I take her smaller hands in mine, not breaking contact to shove the dark hair that falls over my mask.

I look disheveled. Like shit. But I feel worse with her in here alone.

“When you asked me why I wear the suits,” I start to explain, stroking my thumbs over her knuckles, “I should have told you that I wear them because they help me feel… normal,” I say, deciding that’s the best way to describe it without unloading details. “But instead of saying that, your question reminded me of the ways in which I am not normal, and I got a little lost in that for a moment, and that’s why I closed off. That’s why I behaved the way I did.” I bring her hands to my lips, and dust kisses against her knuckles, staring into her eyes as I do. “I’m sorry, my darling. I’m sorry that I put a wall up because that is not my role. That is not who I want to be to you.”

She watches me kiss her hands, and swallows, the lump in her throat mirroring the one in my chest. “I’m sorry, too,” she says finally, her feet edging nearer to mine.

“Why are you sorry?”

Ella shrugs, and brings my hands to her cheeks, rubbing them against her face tenderly as her eyes close. Being cherished by her is a gift that makes my entire body grow warm, and my eyes burn. “I don’t know. I just am. I didn’t want to upset you. I didn’t want to come here,” she breathes, finally blinking up at me.

“To the estate?” My heart pounds in my ears.

She shakes her head, and I’ve never felt such relief. “No, to my room. You weren’t honest with me but I also wasn’t honest with you.” She rolls her lips together, clearly deciding how much she should share, because something heavy weighs on her mind.

“Tell me, Ella. Honesty, remember.”

She nods. “I was scared to stay with you tonight. Scared of how good it feels with you, how easy it is.” Her eyes search mine, and the rest of the world ceases to exist.

I can’t tell her that I don’t plan to let her leave, because the truth is, if she wants to go, I’ll never prevent it. I only mean to make a world for her that she doesn’t want to escape. And as long as I wear this mask, I think I can.

Without it, though, I’m not so sure. How could a beauty love a man with a face like mine?

“I’m going to shower. If you want to sleep with me tonight, come to my room in half an hour. If you think it best to have distance, I understand.” I want nothing more than to feel her curled against me tonight, for the rest of

my nights, but she has to have the freedom that I promised. “I just needed to apologize for shutting down. As your dominant, I can promise you, that will not happen again.”

She nods, and I turn, and leave her room.

I don’t ask if I’ll see her, I don’t ask if she’s going to come, I simply tread down the hall until I’m at the double doors, and slip inside. My heart races as I shower, and my mind runs laps as I towel off and slip into pajama pants, silk like the pajamas I’ve filled her closet with, but black to contrast the innocence of her white. At the bathroom sink, I pull open the drawer and retrieve the black nylon hood, one that goes over my entire head, but leaves one side of my face exposed.

My sleeping mask. Because even I don’t want to be alone in the dark with the truth.

I tug the curtains open, letting moonlight lap at the baseboards and rugs, leaving shadows of tree branches and lazy leaves dancing against my walls. I slip into bed, the lotion I rubbed on her skin present each time I shift.

I drape my hand on my chest and blink up at the ceiling, closing my eyes when the door cracks open. I peer over and see Ella, without her robe, closing the door quietly. I push up to one elbow and catch sight of her in the moonlight, golden hair illuminated, fair skin glowing.

“Is it okay?” she whispers, looping her hand around the post at the foot of my bed, finger playing in the ornate, carved wood. I nod, and I see the moment she notices the hood, the way my face is partially and safely covered at night, too.

But she doesn’t say anything. She simply pushes the straps of her gown off each shoulder, and the fabric pools at her feet. Her bare body steals my breath, immediately making me hard. I pull the bedding down, making a spot for her, and she climbs onto the mattress, pressing her body into my side, fingers immediately moving through my chest hair.

“Is this okay, sir? Is it okay that I sleep naked?” She peers up at me in the partial darkness, taking in my hood. “I just… I never have and I’ve always wanted to.”

I reach down and fill my palm with one warm, smooth globe of her ass. “It’s perfect.” I kiss her forehead, and catch her hand on my chest. “Remember, you are not to touch my cock without my permission, my darling, in case you have wandering hands.”

She attempts to peer down at where I am tenting the sheets, but I catch her chin in my fingers. “Don’t even look, my little slut,” I whisper, placing a soft kiss at the end of her nose. “Goodnight. I cannot wait to wake up to you in the morning.”

She sighs, nestling against me. “Goodnight, sir.”

THE COVERS ARE around her waist, bare, perfect breasts exposed to the early sunlight as she sleeps quietly next to me. She moves about the bed a lot, but I was thrilled to be stirred awake by her. Excited by the little sleepy noises she made as she readjusted in her sleep, her hands finding my neck, my chest, reaching for my waist.

I love how tenderly she wants me in her sleep, and I can’t wait to bring down the final barrier today. I’ve already slipped out of bed, changed, and enjoyed a workout and shower. I admire her again as I smooth my hands down my suit pants, ones I got at Moreau just last month. Stepping quietly into the hall, I close the door behind me. With my phone, I call David, and tell him to send up the nurse, as well as to have Marcel, the chef, begin breakfast.

I collect her robe from her bedroom, and come back to my suite, taking a seat on the edge of the bed as I stroke my palm in the creamy valley between her plump little breasts. Her nipples pebble to my touch, her skin growing bumpy as her eyes slowly blink awake for the day.

She pushes to her elbows. “Is everything okay?” she asks, voice thick with sleep, the noise of it making me thick, too.

I slide my hands behind her, and lift her up, then drape her robe over her shoulders, slowly feeding each arm in. Pulling her hair from beneath, I coast my palm over her cheek before tying the silk at her waist.

“The nurse will be in to take your blood in a moment.”

She yawns. “Already?”

I pull the covers over her bare legs. “The sooner we get it drawn, the quicker we have our results, and can move forward. Did you decide on which form of contraception you want?”

“The shot. It works within five days. But if you plan on having me sooner, the copper IUD works immediately.” She flushes. “I’ve heard my

stepsisters weigh the pros and cons plenty over the years."

"The shot." I can hold off for a few days, make her earn it, and show her how controlled I can be.

Silence hangs between us for a moment as she registers what that means. She licks her lips, pushing tangles of hair from her face. Another yawn.

"We will have breakfast afterward, then get to work."

The nurse knocks, then enters, and Ella's eyes drop to the bandage in the crook of my arm. "You're done?"

"I am. Shower after, meet me in the dining room. Do you remember where it is?"

She nods, and I kiss her cheek while holding her face in my palm. Her hair is soft against my fingers, and she faintly smells like my skin, and though I have a full day of work ahead of me, I can't help but think of everything I want to do to her tonight. The way I'll be able to stroke my fingers through this silken hair whenever I please, how she'll be there, obediently waiting for my words, for whatever I have to give.

I kiss her forehead, starved for her lips but I can see her hunger, too. The way she leans toward me, and doesn't quite want me to go. As much as I want to crush my mouth to hers and fill her with my moans, to spit just to listen to her swallow it down, to spray myself along her pink tongue until it's creamy white—*she* wants it just as much.

And it is my job to make her earn me. To make her earn her release. Her pleasure.

I smile. "See you at breakfast, my darling."

ELLA IS RAVENOUS AT BREAKFAST, apologizing to me several times when she leans in to scoop more scrambled eggs from the center of the table. In a simple slip dress—one of many I filled her closet with—and her hair down, feet bare, collared throat—she's a dream.

It will be challenging to work, but then again, we must settle into reality together. That's part of it.

Alex, whom I've done well not to think of while in the presence of Ella, comes to mind as I refill our coffee mugs.

She never had patience to submit, not in the way we agreed she would, or in the traditional sense. The red flags were there, upon hindsight, but I'm only really realizing that now that I'm in the presence of Ella. A woman who submits so naturally, you'd think she was born to be mine, and I hers.

That four letter word appears in my mind again, nearly haunting me at this point. "Slow down, my darling," I order, Ella's hands immediately slowing as they reach for toast and the butter dish. I pat her thigh. "Remember. No one is coming to take any of this from you. It's yours."

Her impish half-grin is yet another thing that floods me with pride. Taking care of someone who takes care of me, that's all I've ever wanted. But to feel like she is truly my other half almost takes my breath away if I think about it for too long. So I focus on the paper, on the mergers in the business section, on the stocks that illuminate my phone screen, all while she enjoys a breakfast she hasn't had in far too long.

After she's through, I lead Ella to my office, where David waits for the day's plan, and Lucien waits, likely to meet Ella.

They both get to their feet when we enter, and I can't help but radiate pride as both David and Lucien greet her with warm smiles. I'm proud to have such a beautiful, talented, smart woman at my side, my collar on her throat, and equally, I'm as proud to introduce her to two trustworthy, important people to me, people I know will always treat her well.

"Oh," she says, bringing her hands together behind her back, dropping her eyes to the floor once she realizes others are in the office.

I lean over, bringing my lips a few inches from her ear, and speak privately to her as they wait. "You can greet them. You have my permission to interact."

I nod at David and Lucien, and the four of us meet halfway, sunlight making the normally dark office space feel alive. Or maybe it's how I feel. Right now, it feels like the life in this room could be coming from my chest.

David outstretches a hand. "Hello again, Ms. Moreau."

She smiles. "Hello again, David."

Lucien extends his hand, and she tips her head to the side, studying him for a brief moment before she slides her hand inside of his. Lucien is partnered, and my ally through and through, but still, seeing her hold his hand when he wears a face so similar to the one I used to have, I can't help but be filled with irrational jealousy, if only for a moment.

His grin is broad, but bounces between us, never lingering on her too long because, as my brother, he likely senses my jealousy. My nostrils flare when he says, “Hello, Ella. I’m Lucien. It is very nice to finally meet the talent behind the work.”

I turn to her. “He never wears your suits.”

He tosses his head back, laughing uproariously. “That’s true. I’m more of a cargo pants and t-shirt kind of guy. But my brother loves them, and everyone here wears them,” he says, turning to tug on David’s lapel. “And I like looking at them.”

She smiles. “You two look alike,” she says quietly, ignoring his compliments.

I’m surprised by her comment. She has only seen half of my face. Still, she looks between us in a way that has sweat beading beneath the phantom mask.

“You’re brothers?”

Lucien punches me in the bicep, but I stand rigid, unmoving, accepting his blow as I glare at him. I’m ready for them to leave us, to have her alone, and to have her focus on me and only me.

“Oh yeah. We are. I’m younger, if you couldn’t tell,” he says, stroking his fingers through the sides of his hair where there are no traces of gray. Ella looks up at me, surprising me when she reaches up and sweeps the tips of her fingers through the tiny strands of silver hair at my temples, smiling.

“I’m surprised he let you talk to us,” Lucien continues, but David is onto me, already guiding him toward the door.

“I’ll be back before lunch to go over a few things,” David says, as Lucien waves goodbye at Ella, and dances his eyebrows at me.

“Thank you, David.”

“It was nice to meet you both,” she calls quietly after them, but as soon as the door is shut, she turns to me, questioning disposition gracing her soft features. “Do they know?”

I blink at her. “Know what?”

She runs the tips of her fingers over the leather collar on her neck. “That we’re… in contract. That I’m your submissive.”

“Yes, they know. Lucien is a dominant, too. And he has a partner. And David, well, he is my assistant. He knows all there is to know.”

She nods, taking in the information, another question on her lips when her eyes land on it. The small pillow waiting next to the foot of my desk.

I can’t miss the way her breathing picks up, how the pink in her cheeks spreads down her throat, how her nipples grow plucky beneath the dress she’s wearing, the one I bought for her.

I reach into her dress and fill my palm with soft, warm, naked breast and squeeze, not gently this time. She rushes to the balls of her feet with a cry, biting into her bottom lip, eyes leaping to mine.

“My gorgeous slut. Does your pillow excite you?”

Her eyes blink up at me, bleary and hazy. “Yes, sir.”

Releasing her breast, I bring my finger between her lips and tug her mouth open. Dragging the tip along the arch of her bottom lip, I lower my voice and tip my forehead forward, down to hers. “You will kneel near me, and when I want to make use of your mouth, I will, do you understand?”

Ella’s mouth closes around my finger, trying desperately to suck it in, but I pull back out. “Ah, ah,” I scold. “When you need to be fed, I’ll feed you.”

She nods, and I lead her to the pillow, when she falls to her knees in a comfortable crouch almost immediately. I take a seat at my desk, heart thundering behind my ribs, my chest feeling suddenly too small to contain everything I’m feeling. This would have been a task in which I’d have had to coax Alex to perform, to beg her to stay in character for.

But with Ella, it is her character to belong to me this way. It takes great vulnerability and courage to do so, and I already want to reward her.

I want to step out onto the terrace and scream that she is mine, to pound my fists into my chest and declare myself the luckiest man alive.

And for a few moments, I don’t even think of my face.

My breathing is heavy, and I have to grip the side of my desk to not lose total control. She cannot see that feral, starved, obsessed man inside of me. Not yet.

Opening my drawer, I take out the leather bound sketch pad and pack of graphite, and hand them to her, a red box pressed to the notebook cover.

She holds them between her hands like I’ve given her the world.

Not yet, my darling, but soon. If you let me.

“I encourage you to sketch, and let yourself work beyond the limits that were set for you at Moreau.” I open my suit coat, and tug at the chain hiding in the breast pocket, the one that, when clipped together appropriately, forms a small, painful whip. “I know you can go beyond this, so go, my little whore. Sketch the filthiest, most beautiful things and know

that whatever you come up with, you will make them. They will be yours. And the world will know your kinky, beautiful mind, and your talent, very soon."

She nods her head but her eyes fall to the grandfather clock in the corner, which leads me to pinching her chin, and making her face me. "Is the time more important than listening to your sir?"

"I'm sorry, sir," she breathes, licking her lips as she lowers the notebook and graphite to her thighs. "But Vivian will be in the shop shortly. She will notice I'm gone."

Ah.

She's nervous about reality. But I've taken care of that.

"Will the woman who has kept you hidden and hungry for years truly call the authorities when you are not there?"

Ella shrugs, but to me, the answer is simple.

"If she contacts the police, I will know." I keep her chin in my grip. "The chief is a *Veil* member, and he is close with Lucien, who has already notified him that Eleanora Moreau is safe at the Blackwood Estate, in the comfortable and loving arms of Cassian Blackwood."

Disbelief widens her pupils. "Really?"

"I am proactive, not reactive, Ella. Don't worry about Vivian. In fact, your contract specifically forbids it."

My phone rings, and immediately, she knows just what to do. Ella bows her head, opens the package of graphite, turns the page in her notebook, and begins sketching. I answer my call, speaking with a banker in Stockholm about a funds transfer that is slated to go through today.

"Once it does, please notify David immediately, as we're in contract to purchase the Dola building. We're leasing it to a large tech start-up," I explain to the man while I peer down at Ella, the soft scratch of graphite on paper making the hair on my neck rise. Such a delicate sound for such a gentle, beautiful woman, and yet when my eyes fall to the page and see what appears to be a female chastity belt being idealized beneath a flowy ball gown, my groin floods with delicious heat.

I focus on the papers on my desk, the line items I should be following along with my phone call. The man asks how many buildings I've purchased, and I start running the numbers in my mind as my fingers find the top of Ella's head, and begin gently stroking her hair. "Many. That's how I got my start. I saved for two years, and my brother and I were

virtually homeless," I tell the man on the other line, catching Ella's sudden stillness as she pauses to listen. "But I bought the Reinhardt building downtown, we fixed it up while living in the cellar, and sold it for triple. I haven't looked back since."

I'm not sure the banker cared to know all that, but I wanted Ella to know. I wanted her to know that I came from nothing and understand what it means to go from that to this, in the event any of this life ever overwhelms her.

One phone call bleeds into another, and before I know it, two hours have gone by and I've stroked Ella's head, gripped her shoulder, and even bent down once to slap my palm across her breast beneath her slip dress when I found out one of my top performing stocks had split.

She's sketched silently, head down, as instructed.

And I am so fucking hard because of it.

After typing an email proposing an inspection of the Dola building, my phone rings yet again, and I answer it with a sigh. I peer down at Ella still working quietly as the nurse relays to me that all the tests have come back negative, she placed the device I asked for without question, and that Ella and I are both good to go. She tells me David has a copy, and is headed to the office with it now.

No sooner than I hang up does David pop in, noon nearing, paying no mind to Ella when he asks what we'd like to eat. I look down at her, because while I will decide many things for her, I do want her to be fulfilled in the places she was starved. "Tell me what you want for lunch."

"Steak with a caesar salad and a cupcake," she responds quickly. "And a Diet Coke, sir."

I nod at David. "Make it two."

He nods, slipping the folder of medical test results onto the bookshelf near the door, then slips out. David leaves, and I use the remote on my desk to lock the door, a feature I had installed many years ago but never had a purpose to use until now.

Opening my jacket, I take out the chain that she herself sewed in, and clip it to itself several times, constructing the small cat 'o' nine tails. I drag the ends of it against the desk to gather her attention.

Blue eyes stare up at me as she slides the notebook and pencils from her lap to the floor.

"Take your tits out."

She does.

I drag the ends of the metal against them before retracting, snapping them against her nipples, making her yelp. Tears immediately well in her eyes as I do it again, making her lurch forward and snap back in reaction.

“How does it feel to have it used on you?” I question, adding, “does it feel good, my naughty little slut?”

It hurts, I know it does, but I bend down and reach under her dress, between her legs, searching for the answer. I find it when I discover she’s swollen and wet, and let out a low groan as I tell her what I know.

“The test is back. You are negative for anything that would separate us, and so am I. You can see the tests if you’d like.”

She shakes her head, fingers curling around her knees. “No. Not right now, sir.”

I move my hand up and down her slit, gathering the thick arousal, making her fight the urge to explode right then and there, with just the subtlest of touches.

“No? Does that mean you trust what I’m telling you?” I whip her with the small metal whip again, and this time her moan is more throaty, less pained. I can’t help but grin. “You like it, don’t you, my slut?”

She wastes no time to reply. “Yes, sir. It hurts but… it excites me. And it feels so good.”

I slide my thumb over her clit, dragging a deep moan from her belly as I do.

“God,” she breathes, "I want you so bad, sir. I want you inside me so bad.”

I whip her breasts again, the skin already dark pink, the color telling me I don’t have many swats left.

“Look at how needy you are for your sir,” I laugh, feeling the same way she feels, but instead ordering, “take off that dress and get on all fours—no pillow.”

She tugs off the dress and assumes the position, and with her collar peeking through her blonde hair, I can’t help but tell her, as I said I would. “You are goddamn beautiful. I knew it before but now, my god, my darling,” I breathe, running my hand up the column of buttons on my chest, popping each one open.

I shrug out of the jacket and shirt, and tug my t-shirt off over my head, leaving all of our clothes crumpled together on the floor, the sight tugging

at my chest.

Her ass begs for the whip, so I strike her, the metallic clink of chain on chain making my cock throb in the confines of my slacks. Ella moans, she cries out, but she never uses a word to tell me it's too much, she simply accepts my whips with wanton, hungry moans.

After her ass is so pink I know she'll be sore, I drop the whip and slide my hand between her legs, taking a place on my knees next to her. "Suck on my cock while I make you come," I tell her, sliding my fingers through her crack, over her hole, teasing, not giving her pressure where she wants. "Up," I call, "up my little whore and show me just how wet you are, show me just how much you want my cock right now."

"Yes, sir," she breathes, heady and breathless as she pushes to her knees, reaches down past her supple little tits and spreads herself open. Blooming, glistening, and pink, she's so wet for me I have to exercise great restraint in stifling my groan. I merely stare at it, then up at her, into her lazy blue eyes, lids heavy by the weight of her needs.

"You want me to make you come, don't you?" I ask her, my voice holding tight against the drunken desire lodged in my throat.

She nods and the lack of words earns her a slap across her cheek. Ella gasps, not expecting it, hair stuck to her face as she slowly turns back to me, eyes wide.

If it's too much, she knows what to do. She knows the symphony of words that will bring this down to the ground, and she knows she can use them. Our eyes lock, and the noise of life outside this estate seems to fall away, nothing between us but her heavy, unsure breathing.

Her nostrils flare, and then she licks her lips, tips her chin up ever so slightly and murmurs, "Yes, sir, I want you to make me come."

I take her chin in my grasp, eyes set on hers. "That was your reminder to always obey." I reach between her legs and grab her with my fist, tight and abrupt, and it makes her moan, blue eyes growing misty. "This is mine, is it not?"

"It is, sir," she nods.

"And I can make it come, or I can not make it come. That all depends on you."

She says nothing, but that's okay. She's doing good, and I'm so proud of her ability to adapt, to stay in the moment, to not let fear of the unknown overwhelm her. All things I plan to tell her afterward.

“Back on all fours,” I command her, stroking myself through my slacks as she drops back down to her palms, blonde hair shielding her face, dragging against the floor.

I slide off of my chair behind her, and hook two fingers around her collar, her pulse fluttering against me. “I won’t fuck you with my fingers, not the way I know you want. Because you’re a virgin, Ella, and when I take you, I want to see your blood streaked on my cock, in my bed, I want to see the way your pureness marks me. And I don’t want that here, I don’t want that on fingers on all fours.”

She nods her head. “I, I want what you want, sir.” The way she says it without guidance. Without coaching. Like she means it. Like she understands what it is all about.

“And I’m not ready to give you my cock, not even to suck on, because I don’t think you’re ready,” I explain, releasing her collar as I move behind her, gripping her hips. My cock presses into the space between her ass cheeks, and she moans so intensely at the contact that I pull back, gripping myself through my pants, too turned on from how good she is, how pliable she is, how submission runs in her veins.

I slap her ass, hard, leaving a print in the same place that the whip marked her. She winces and whines, but when I reach one hand around her, slipping it between her legs, I know she liked it.

“You’re soaked, my darling. I think I should start calling you my little wet pussy, because that’s what you are, a drenched, swollen cunt, desperate for me. Isn’t that right?”

She nods, but struggles to keep her head up, thighs trembling as I begin to rub her clit at the same time I drive my clothed groin into her ass.

Thrusting, the pressure in the base of my spine coils, hot and bright, the sensation of her bare ass against my clothed cock nearly too dizzying, too good. I slide my fingers against her clit, over and over, making circles, rubbing lazy lines, doing everything she needs to take her to the edge.

“I’m going to work your little hungry cunt for weeks before I let you have me, Ella. You will be so starved for my cock that you’ll crawl across the room and beg for it, beg for me. You’ll promise me anything if I just give you a simple taste.” I hump her ass harder, rub her pussy faster, when her moans break free from her lips, her restraint shattering as she cries out.

“Sir, sir, I’m coming for you sir, oh god!”

Though I don’t explore inside, still, I feel her spasm, swollen and slick. She thrusts back against me, the sight of naked Ella, ass marked from my pain, pleasure radiating off of her body, her cunt seizing for me, me, the recluse, the man with half a face—it’s too much. My groin tightens, and the edges of my vision blur as heat and wetness bloom on the front of my slacks, my cock pulsing ribbons of cum in quick, dizzying shots.

I let out one, loud, wall rattling moan, and splay my arm out beneath her just as she is about to collapse. Carefully I turn her over and collect her in my arms, lifting myself up with my legs just enough to find my office chair, and hold her in my lap. I spin, so the back of the chair faces the office, and we face the wall of windows overlooking the east side of the property.

I blink down at her, tears streaking her face, long lashes splayed out over pink cheeks, full lips parted.

And my heart catches in my chest when her eyes pop open and she says, hoarse and exhausted, “that was incredible. Thank you Cassian, thank you sir.”

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CHAPTER
Twenty-One

ELLA

"I WAS SURPRISED," I admit, when Cassian asks me about the impact play during our scene. "But after kneeling at your side for half of the day, I found myself desperate for whatever you were going to give me. Punishment, pleasure—all of it. I really just wanted your attention."

Turns out, after years of talking to a crow in a window and not being asked by anyone what I think or feel, aftercare is an absolute doozy. In the best ways.

I wipe my eyes as I sit cradled in Cassian's lap, while he strokes my back and runs his fingers through my hair. He asks me how each moment felt, and if I reached my limits at any time.

"Because this is new to you, it's important we discuss your comfort afterward, every time." His voice melts over me, like butter on a hot roll. And I'm suddenly both hungry and turned on. "It's important every time, Ella, but especially important with you, now. So please tell me what you're feeling, and leave nothing out.

I find him so easy to talk to, to share the truth with.

"I enjoyed it all, and I didn't feel close to any limits. And as we sit here and talk," I muse, knowing full well what that fuzzy, dark feeling overtaking my toes is. "I feel…"

He turns my head, and with the afternoon sun shining between us, slowly brings our mouths together, sliding his tongue against mine. Our mouths open and close together as he leads the most intense, slow, dizzying

kiss. He tastes like mint, and something else, something tangy and sweet, and I'm glad I'm already in his lap or else I'd collapse from how good it is. How right it is.

He pulls back. "Tell me how you feel."

I touch my lips like every cliche in every romance movie that ever existed, but I can't help it. My lips burn from the heat of his kiss. Truly. "Worried that I am broken. Worried that wanting to be hit, wanting to be degraded, wanting to be used… I worry that I am the bad person Vivian says I am."

Well then. I had no idea it was going to go there, or go this deep, but that's the truth. I am at fault for something awful, and she's been telling me how bad I am ever since. Maybe she's been right all along.

"My head feels a little swimmy. I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't conflate the two–real life and this."

Cassian kisses me again, this time just a peck. "This is real life. And you, my darling, are experiencing *subdrop*."

I shake my head, and he nods, knowing full well that he'll have to give me a lay of the land since it's my first time here. At least, I think it is.

"After a scene, your body is exhausted, and so is your mind, and sometimes, you enter a state of emotional hangover. But that is why I'm here, to guide you through it." He kisses me. "To make you feel better."

"Aftercare," I repeat, knowing the word from the contract.

He nods. "Yes, and it's okay to be thinking of all of these things. But please, Ella, you are not bad. Vivian has zero gauge on what's bad. She kept you hidden. She forced you to work and kept you hungry. Those are not traits of a woman who should put labels on anyone else. Do you get that?"

I nod, because he's right. But there is one thing he's not considering. One core, crucial, glaring thing he doesn't know.

But he looks down at me with such pride, for how well I did in the scene, and how easily I'm adjusting to him, to us—I can't tell him. I promised honesty, and I will give it everywhere but here. I will. As he holds me tighter, I make that promise to myself right now. I will be open and honest with him to make up for this one lie. This little hidden secret.

He pinches my chin. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." The pad of his thumb against my face directly correlates to the buzzing between my legs, and this right here is what I dreamed of all

those nights alone in the workroom, touching my collar, sketching my naughty gowns… dreaming. I was dreaming of him.

He rewards me with a soft kiss. “I loved using the suit’s secrets with you. I dreamed of this, you know.”

I nod. “Me too.” A chill comes over me, and I realize now as the clouds settle that I’m wet, and cold, and… “I’m so hungry now.”

Cassian laughs, the mask shining against the bright sun pouring through the large windows. I point to the luscious green lawn stretched outside, a small creek nearby, another building behind it. “Can we have lunch out there?”

He nods. “Anything you want, my darling.” He kisses me again.

“I’m so glad you’re kissing me now. I wanted it so bad,” I admit.

He lifts me up and stands me before him, and my eyes fall to his lap, the blooming dark spot centering the groin of his slacks.

“I should change,” he says, tugging at his slacks, putting the dark spot on full display. It makes my cheeks pink.

“I want to see you, sir. I’m losing my mind a little,” I whisper another admission, staring at the spot, mouth watering, mind running with images of us in my mind, things we’ve never done together—things I’ve never done at all.

He takes my chin and forces my eyes up to his, hiding behind that white mask. “When I say you’re ready for it, you’ll have it, my beautiful slut.” A kiss on the tip of my nose. “Get dressed.” He picks up my gown from the floor, stroking my hair behind my ears adoringly. My chest aches with how good this feels, and I ignore the niggle of guilt worming its way through my toes and up my feet, wrapping my ankles like restraints, reminding me that I’m *not* being a perfect girl. I’m not being a truly good girl.

He strides to the bathroom in his office, and kicks the door shut. I tug down my slip dress and finger comb my hair, wading toward the bathroom, listening by the door as I talk to him through the wood.

“I know you’re at the helm of all the choices,” I say, playing with a strand of hair as I peer across the room at my sketchbook, eyeing a particularly kinky gown that has a rip-away skirt and bodice. One that leaves the wearer in nothing but a teddy and stockings. “But I feel ready. I’ve felt ready for a long, long time.”

He doesn’t reply, but uses the bathroom, and listening to him pee even turns me on. I cannot wait to see him naked. To hold his cock, to feel his

warm balls. To suck him. To know what it is like to have *the* Cassian Blackwood lose control inside of me.

DAVID TAKES lunch onto the lawn, or someone does, I don't know, because I can't see. I can't see because Cassian carries me down, and feeds me wine and sandwiches, and rubs my feet and my shoulders, and tells me about what he does for a living—which is buy, flip and sell real estate, along with buying struggling companies and flipping them for profit, among other things. *Veil*, too, now has a healthy income, which he says he pumps directly back into the club. He also promises to show me the rooms on the property later, to show me what the club is all about.

But after lunch, I am back to being nothing more than a quiet thing on my knees at his side. He strokes my hair while he speaks with Lucien on the phone—and he asks me to hand over my worries when he learns that Vivian has notified the police that her "troubled stepdaughter has run away."

I try not to think of her spreading the truth, I try not to think of her at all, and after a hard swat against my pussy, I manage not to.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Cassian keeps me by his side, on my knees dutifully. I sketch. He makes phone calls and drafts emails. I'm asked if being submissive in the presence of his staff is okay, and I agree, and for the rest of the days, David is in and out of the office, but I do not speak to him. Same for Lucien. In and out.

The evenings are spent with a book—a romance novel of my choosing, which Cassian has purchased plenty of for me. I read on the edge of the window sill while he sweats, working out with weights, running on the treadmill, jumping rope—whatever he does, he sweats, and grunts, and I discover I love the gym.

I sleep with him in his bed, only after he puts me through a litany of things on my knees. Crawling to him. Being gagged with a leather gag that I myself built into the choker of one of my dresses. He goes down on me

while I’m blindfolded and cuffed, and I nearly die from how insanely good it feels, and from wanting to touch or see him so badly during.

He rubs my shoulders and teases my feet with tickles as he coaxes childhood stories from me, and me from him. I learn he and Lucien were homeless for sometime after escaping a bad foster home, but that Cassian got them a terrible, one-bedroom place to tide them over until he made more.

When I wake sweating, crying, worried about my grandma Connie, Cassian reminds me that since Shady Grove is paid in full and that Vivian is no longer associated with Connie’s account or services, that nothing can happen to her. One morning, he even calls Shady Grove, on speakerphone, to assure me as much. My grandma is safe.

He also tells me he has a man outside of Shady Grove, one that will not allow Vivian, Fern, or Tess entry. Not that they’d ever go visit her—they never have before. But now, not knowing where I am, it’s a real possibility. One that Cassian will not allow.

He even tells me that whenever I please, Bretton and David will take me for a visit. I want him to meet her, but I know he won’t go. He won’t leave. And I can’t push. Pushing him on that while I’m holding such a terrible thing so secret feels manipulative, so I won’t.

Today, I sketched four new designs while kneeling on my blue pillow at his side, and after, we ate a wonderful meal of lobster together at the dining table. Now, post dessert, I realize I’ve gotten a little drunk off of champagne.

I don’t make a habit of drinking, not only because I’ve previously had no access to it for years but because it once led me to the worst night of my life. But that’s the cruel twist of life, because it not only led me to the worst night but also, arguably, the best.

The night I met Cassian at the masquerade.

I’m thinking of that dichotomy when he forces my legs apart beneath the table, and slips his hand under my panties—satin panties which he has filled a dresser with, all for me, just like everything else I’ve been wearing lately.

I’m spoiled. And I love it.

He rubs his knuckles against my clit, sticky and warm from a day at his side, on my knees for him. “Slut,” he croons, his voice torn, hot and low,

like embers in a fire. “See? It’s why I call you my slut. Because you’re always wet for me. Wet and waiting.”

My eyes feel heavy from the champagne, and with a belly full of buttery lobster, his warm, thick hand touching me in the place that’s wanted touch for so long, my entire body comes alive. Veins full of electric sparks, the back of my brain static with pleasure, my body hollow with a desire to be filled full.

I slip my hands around his neck, and he brings his mouth to mine, the mask unmoving as our tongues tangle, teeth gnash. The kiss grows frenzied, and just when I’m on the edge of something blissful and explosive, he pulls his hand away, and takes his lips from mine.

I moan for him. I whimper his name. “Sir.” He smiles but I can’t stop begging. “Please.”

He stands, taunting me with tented slacks, and extends his hand to me. “I’m going to fuck your mouth,” he promises, as if he’s telling me casual travel plans, “and own your body, stake my claim as the first and only man to be inside your tight, sweet pussy,” he continues, staring down at me with his hand extended, dark eyes piercing from behind the mask. “But first, I have something to show you.”

He wiggles his fingers. “Get up and take my hand before you get in trouble.” The way his lips curl has my insides molten, and I get to my feet, a touch wobbly from the alcohol, and almost moan when I slide my hand into his larger one.

“You’re so much bigger than me,” I comment as he guides me from the dining room into the hall, his body casting a shadow over mine in the low light.

Cassian’s smirk is something I’ll see in my mind every time I close my eyes, for the rest of my time, I swear. “You haven’t seen anything yet,” he teases, though I know it’s not wholly a joke, because I’ve seen his bulge. In fact, my eyes drop to it now as we wait at the end of the hall, at two closed doors.

“My eyes are up here, Ella,” he growls, his eyes narrow behind the mask. He nods to the wall without opening the doors. “Hands up.” I put my hands up and he presses them to the wall, cool beneath my touch. “Stop looking at my cock like a little slut,” he reprimands. “I told you that you’ll have it soon. Did I not?”

I drop my head to my arm and nod, woozy from his words. From being his. From submitting to all of the things I've dreamed of. "I'm sorry, sir."

Cool air nips at my thighs as he lifts my slip dress, and tucks it into my panties to keep it off my ass. Cassian brings his lips to my ear. "How sorry?"

"Very sorry," I tell him, though in truth, I'm not sorry at all. I'd risk staring at his bulge a million times over, because the punishment is pain, and him, and both things I love. "Are you going to spank me, sir?" I ask, my lips smear against my arm as I blink up at him. His neck flushes, he rears his arm back as I slam my eyes closed and—thwack.

The sound reverberates through the empty halls, and the echo of my punishment makes my nipples hard. I drop my head between my arms, and stare down at the way my toes curl against the marble floors, and think of how just a few weeks back, I walked on the concrete floors of the shop, alone, hungry. And sad. I was more sad than I knew, because I had nothing else to compare it to.

I lurch forward as another stinging blow rings out, my ass burning but my groin hot with pleasure. Desire coils tight in my belly as my orgasm continues building, but before I can moan and beg for more, or even apologize as he would like, he tugs my dress down and cool silk whooshes over my partially covered bottom.

He grabs my breast. "Drop your arms, and behave. We're here."

Cassian presses numbers into the keypad on the door—062700—and the lock opens.

"That's my birthday," I tell him as he slowly pushes the heavy metal doors open. He pauses.

"It is your birthday, because this," he says, reaching past my chest to flick the switches against the wall. The room—the size of a football field—illuminates. "This is your work room."

My chest constricts as I step forward. The space is vast—bigger than I expected, the ceiling higher than any ordinary studio, and definitely three times the size as the Moreau workroom. For a moment I simply stand on the threshold, letting my eyes travel the length of it. The first thing that I notice are the lights. Industrial fixtures hang from the exposed beams in measured rows, long black linear pendants and clusters of brass-caged bulbs that throw a warm, even gold across every surface. They warm the space but they're bright, too, serving a purpose while supplying style and beauty,

something I've never had in my workspace. They make the room glow as what happens in here is religious or ceremonial, not work.

I look down at my bare feet, at the cold beneath them. Marble tile, cream with faint gray veining, polished enough that the lights reflect across it in long liquid streaks. The tiles run unbroken from wall to wall except where a massive cutting table rises from them like an island. I take another step and lift my eyes to the walls, and a lump crawls into my throat at what I see.

Along the left wall, floor-to-ceiling shelving holds bolts of fabric stacked with a care that feels almost liturgical. There are hundreds. Silk the color of wet river stones sits beside linen the pale of morning fog. Velvet in deep forest green leans against cotton printed with tiny gold leaves. Rolls of wool, raw silk, chiffon, denim, and unexpected metallics create a spectrum that shifts as I walk toward them. Some bolts have been unrolled just enough that the cloth falls in slow cascades down the face of the shelves. I can smell them already—clean cotton, the faint sweetness of new silk, a whisper of starch.

The cutting table occupies the heart of the room. It is enormous, the pale wood surface inlaid with measuring grids so precise it looks like an architect works here. Rotary cutters rest in leather holsters. Pattern weights shaped like small brass birds hold tissue paper still. On the nearest table a length of charcoal wool has already been laid out, its selvage aligned perfectly with the grid. Scissors with worn wooden handles wait beside it. Everything is ready, as if the room itself has been holding its breath for someone to begin.

Holding its breath for *me.*

Beyond the tables a line of machines gleam. Industrial sewing machines sit at individual stations, needles poised. A serger's loopers catch the light. Thread racks climb one wall in a mosaic of every possible color—cones of cotton, polyester, silk, metallic—arranged not by number but by the way the hues work together, and perhaps even how they'd best suit my work. Nearby, dress forms stand in a quiet cluster, bare and waiting.

Natural light filters through tall north-facing windows set high in the far wall. Dust motes drift in the beams. There is a pressing station with a professional iron, a design wall covered in pinned sketches–my sketches, copied from my book—and swatches, labeled drawers of buttons and zippers, and a rolling cart of leftover scraps that somehow looks like

treasure rather than waste. High above, the black-painted beams and the warm lights complete the architecture. It is both a workshop *and* a sanctuary.

I turn slowly in the middle of the marble floor. The fixtures hum a low, almost musical note. I have never seen so much potential gathered in one room. For a long moment I simply stand here, taking it in, unwilling to break the spell by moving too quickly.

“It’s yours, Ella.”

I finally turn to look at him, but find that he’s blurry, because my eyes are so full of tears. “I never cried happy tears until I met you,” I whisper, a knot of heated emotion lodges in the center of my chest, clogging my throat.

Cassian looks at me for one second, a split second, and before I know it, he’s grabbed my hips, tossed me over his shoulder and planted me square in the middle of the cutting island. The table is cold against my back, but my body is so full of heat, so riddled with need, the cold comes as a relief.

His large hand, hair dusting the top and down his fingers, works at this throat, and an ivory button pops off and skitters across the floor. He can’t work fast enough, buttons flying as he tears his shirt open, bare chest heaving beneath. I sit up onto my elbows and watch him wrap his hands around the low neckline of my slip dress and in one solid movement, tears it open, ripping off my panties next. My sweaty, naked body waits for him, and he growls in his chest at the sight.

Eyes on mine, he takes a step back and when his hands fall to his belt, my legs fall apart. That dirty smirk I love so much curves his mouth. “My willing slut, look at you, so eager.”

I nod. Too horny to play along, too desperate to pretend I’m anything but. “God, I cannot wait for this.”

Cassian walks around the large length of the table until he comes to the panel, and flips a switch. The entire table recesses into itself with a low metallic hum—and as much as I want to be in awe of the adjustable cutting table height, all I can focus on is him. What’s about to happen between us. *Finally.*

With the table much lower, he comes to stand in front of me again. He shoves his pants down while he kicks off his shoes, staying bent over to pull off his socks. When he rises, all I can focus on is the thick bulge of hard

cock behind tight, white briefs. The wet tip of him smearing against the fabric has my body on fire.

He hooks his thumbs in his briefs, and my breath catches in my chest, my eyes almost burning from how locked onto his groin I am. “It will hurt, Ella,” he says, not calling me his slut, not telling me I’m his mouth to use. “It will not be all pain, but there will be pain.”

I tell him the truth. “I don’t care.” I reach between my legs but stop before I touch myself, knowing that if I disobey now, a punishment will be a roadblock between me and getting what I want—his cock.

“So slutty for a virgin,” he croons as he flicks the band down, a huge erection and weighty, full balls springing free. He kicks off the underwear, and takes his shaft in one palm, stroking himself slowly from the base to the tip.

He tugs down, his skin rolling back, the shining, bulbous pink head of his cock appearing as he does. “On all fours, at the edge of the table,” he commands, and I scramble to do it, but he stops me midway.

“Turn around,” he chuckles. “I want you to be my little slutty mouth right now.”

Yes. I’ve never given head, but I’ve wanted to suck him so badly. Every time his hands land on my body, each time he gifts me something that shows he cares, when he strokes his fingers through my hair as I wait at his side—it’s all been building to this, to how much I want this.

He peers down at me, and for a moment I envision him taking off the mask, saying to hell with his rules and letting me see his handsome face. If he lets me in, I will never tell a soul.

“Keep it open until I say, do you understand?” He swats my breast as I open my mouth wide, the hungry spit that was pooled on my tongue immediately dribbles down my chin. Cassian chuckles darkly, dragging his fingers over my chin, collecting the saliva before shoving it back onto my tongue.

“You remember your words?” He asks, and I nod, sucking fingers into my mouth. On this table, eager and naked, pussy aching for him, I do feel like a slut. And it feels good, I feel proud to be so vulnerable for him, with him. “And if you need to stop but you cannot speak, grab my leg. Understand?” Another nod.

“Tip,” he guides, taking his hand from my mouth, pressing my forehead back gently with the heel of his palm. His other hand still mans the beast

between his legs, and when the pink, wide tip of his thick cock dusts my lips, I try to surge forward and capture him, suck him in and taste the clear bead that glistens on the wide slit of him.

But his palm holds me steady, holds me back.

“Ah, ah, my little mouth. Wait.” I feel the heavy heat of his cock before it even lands—the air shifts, then his thick, veined shaft slaps against my cheek with a wet, meaty smack. The impact is electric. A sharp, stinging jolt leaps across my skin and down my spine, and my face flushes hot as my mouth hangs open.

He does it again, harder. The slick head drags across my cheekbone, smearing precum on my skin while the shaft slaps back, the weight of it making my head tilt. Each strike is a little filthy percussion—skin on skin, wet and intimate—and every one of them tightens something low in my belly, promising more.

I can smell him, feel the pulse of him against my face, and the next slap lands so close to my lips that I turn toward it without thinking, wanting the next electric hit, wanting to suck him in and down.

But the heel of his palm keeps me back, still.

“My mouth slut, my open waiting whore. My hole to use,” he chants delicious words that fall down the length of my spine and land between my legs, making me bloom, making me sticky and achy. I need him, and I know it’s going to hurt. I know it will. But I’ve never wanted the pain of him more.

“Please, Cassian, please,” I beg, my words slurred, whimpered, starved. He slaps his cock against my cheek again, but before I can react, plunges two fingers deep in my throat, making me gag around them.

“I am your sir, and when you are with me, you will address me as sir,” he growls, his tone punishing and dark. He presses the tips of two thick fingers into the soft center of the back of my tongue, making me gag around them, trying my hardest not to bite. Spit oozes from my lips as he begins fucking my mouth and throat with the same two fingers he rubbed against my naked clit just a few minutes ago in the dining room.

“You love the taste of yourself, don’t you, my hole?” he asks, voice thinning, his need increasing. His cock weeps, clear precum threading between his head and the top of the cutting table. He pulls his hand out of my mouth and I gasp in hungry breaths, but then he forces my head down,

nose against the cool steel as he says, “lick it up. Lick up the mess we are making.”

My pussy hums and silently begs as I drag my tongue through his salty mess, and through the spit that dribbled off of my chin. He praises me as I do, and my need coils more tightly and violently with his words.

“Good, whore. Good, hole. So obedient. You’ll do anything for my cock, won’t you?”

I can’t nod, I can’t say yes, because he pushes me down again, but this time draws his body near the table as he presses my face into his balls. The skin is so hot that I moan, and he laughs as he orders me to lick them.

“That’s right, praise the place where everything you want is kept. Because that’s what you want, right, slut?” He leans down and the words splay out over my skin. “My cum?”

I nod as I lick and suck, lapping at the hot, pebbled skin and the two huge mounds that lie inside. There is something about his balls that have flipped an absolutely feral switch inside me, and my insides clench as I envision his ceaseless throbbing inside me, emptying them deep where I can make him a baby.

Fingers sifting through the top of my scalp, Cassian yanks me back hard, open, drooling mouth exposed to him. He peers down, two dark orbs glowing behind the partial mask. His lips part, like maybe he’s going to say something, hand down a command or an order but instead he quietly says, “you look fucking gorgeous,” then he plunges his cock past my lips, deep down my throat.

My body wants to gag, reject it and spit it out, but my belly is hot and full of desire, a heavy, drunken pulsing in my clit. I wrap my lips around him, eyes rolling closed at the feel.

He’s so hard. So big. Takes up every free inch of my mouth. It’s thicker that I thought, and the jowls of my jaw immediately begin to burn, but then he starts moving.

Holding me by my hair, he pumps his hips, his cock sliding in and out of my throat, along my tongue as he fucks my mouth. I gag but don’t bite him, forcing my mouth to stay open, to give him what I know feels so good. I know because his eyes close behind the mask, and a loud groan erupts from the center of his chest, echoing around the workspace.

I can’t help but hum my adoration around him as he uses my mouth like the fuckhole it is, like the fuckhole he promised he’d make me.

Though I’m not touching myself, the intensity builds, the pressure grows, and the familiar hot tingle worms down my spine. And just when I think I’m going to get in trouble and have an orgasm, he hollows my throat, leaves my mouth, and slaps his cock against my wet cheek with a spank.

“On your back,” he groans, his voice deteriorating rapidly, like fabric that has been stretched too thin, tested beyond its limits.

I sit up and fall against the cool table onto my back, and spread my legs to make room for him. He’s so big, broad shoulders and heaving chest, muscled thighs and strong hands. Just envisioning the weight of his naked body kissing mine has my hands gripping at the table.

Cassian climbs over me, and without hesitation, crashes his mouth against mine. I love that he doesn’t care that I just sucked him, and kisses me anyway, surely tasting himself the way I tasted me on his fingers. It’s so hot. He is so hot. So perfect.

His bicep flexes as he reaches between us, dark eyes locked on mine. “Are you ready?” he asks, softness edging each word, genuine concern wrinkled beneath the eye I can see.

I nod. He pushes hair from my sweaty face, but doesn’t kiss me again. Instead, he focuses on my eyes as he drags the head of his cock through my lips, setting it right at my entrance. He tilts his hips, and the pressure is intense, the immediate pain a bit blinding.

I cling to his shoulders, gripping him so tightly the bed of my nails lose color. “More,” I warble, my breathing fast, heart racing.

He thrusts a bit more, and the burn of being filled is so intense, but I don’t just feel my body stretching in pain. There’s a flicker of delicious pressure against my clit, a feeling of buzzing delight running down my legs and through my belly.

Cassian gives me an inch at a time, giving me a few seconds to adjust each time he does, but never stops feeding me, never stops staring deep into my eyes.

“There,” he finally says, when it feels like he’s been pushing into my tightness for so long. “That’s all of me. I’m completely inside you now,” he says, his voice thin and frayed, sweat beading on the part of his forehead I can see.

“I want you to fuck me the way you like,” I whisper. “I don’t care if it hurts.” I shake my head, hair stretching against the tabletop beneath me. “I

want it to hurt. I want to hurt for you. So you can feel good, and make me feel all better."

His eyes sweep over my breasts and down lower, where he is lost inside me. Then he looks back to me, our gazes locked in all the things unsaid. "Spread your legs wider for me," he says, pulling out of me a few inches.

My knees hit the table and he peers around us, seeing how wide I'm spread, how open I am, how much I want to give him what he wants. He brings a hand to my chin, balancing his weight on one arm as he tugs my mouth open and spits inside. "Good girl, my perfect, good slut."

His hips start a cadence just then, stroking out then in, alternating paces, slow at first, then growing faster. The heat of his balls against my ass have me seeing stars, and each time he sinks inside, it feels like he's getting deeper, finding more of me that I haven't shared.

"You are so tight. You've been waiting for me, haven't you, Ella?"

I nod but I can't speak. It feels like he's so deep that he's in my throat again, and words are hard. Breathing is hard. But I cling to his shoulders with my legs dropped open, and let him ride me, let him fuck me, let him give me everything he has to give.

Cassian changes the angle, tipping his groin forward so it nudges my clit as his lips ghost my mouth. The friction is just what I need, and he knows it.

My mouth falls open as he slides in and out, his feral grunts making my mind go wild. Envisioning him taking me from behind, pulling my hair and slapping my ass. Imagining him using my face, and painting it, then dragging those long fingers through the mess, smearing him into my flesh.

Him pulsing deep inside me, without the shot in my body, without a barrier that prevents him and me from becoming another life.

"Cassian," I moan his name as sweat slips down the valley between my breasts, and soaks my hairline.

"Come on my cock, my beautiful slut," he groans, the thud of his body into mine making me claw at his shoulders, slap at his muscled chest. "It's an order, Ella. Do it. Do it now."

My spine crescents off the table as he finds my stiff nipple with his lips, sucking it in gently before latching down hard. The bite sends me over as he rolls his hips forward, sinking himself the deepest he can go. I want to cough. I want to scream. I think I'm gonna cry.

“Ahh, my good girl,” he praises, voice threaded with emotion as he stills, absorbing my orgasm, the way my pussy thrashes all around him in violent, desperate convulsions.

He pushes sweat-kissed hair off of my forehead, and peers down at me. I can’t help but try to peer past the eye hole of the mask, to see what he looks like, the parts of him he keeps hidden. But my eyes slam shut when I feel him swell and throb, coming in flashes of hot, erotic bursts.

His grunt, the way his Adam’s apple sinks down his throat, the damp strands of sweaty hair that fall over the white mask, the scent of his cologne and endurance— I clench around him again, unexpected and powerful.

“Hmm,” he moans, “my slut loves my cum. You’re my cumslut,” he whispers as I throb all around him, milking him for everything he can give me, his cock still pulsing hard as he maintains full body control. “My cumslut. Mine.”

That single word holds so much power and truth.

A moment later, it’s over, and my body begins to tremble, and my focus goes a little fuzzy as I process everything. The beautiful, thoughtful room, the way he owned my mouth and claimed my body, the way I feel square in my chest for him.

He pulls out, and reaches behind my head, pulling me up to sit. He places his cock on the edge of the table, and guides us both to study it. Crimson streaks his shaft, and he presses the pad of his thumb into it at the base, and drags it down to the tip, holding it between us.

“You are mine now, my darling,” he says, the term of endearment settling right behind my ribs, where there’s already overwhelming, near-bursting pressure. He gathers me in his arms, and we tread to the bathroom off the workroom, one I hadn’t noticed when we first came in. “This one’s yours, the one next to it is for your employees.”

He sets me down on the counter, and in the nude, cleans me up with a towel, gently wiping with warm water, eyes cutting between me and the mess between my legs. “How was it? How are you feeling?” He produces a small bottle of water from a mini fridge nestled in the corner, where a vanity full of supplies and a small closet sits, away from the enclosed toilet room adjacent to us.

My body is full of tingles. Pins and needles. Drunken happiness running all through me, though it’s got nothing to do with the champagne.

“I feel so good.” I reach out and touch his chest, wrap a dark hair around my finger, and let go. “Thank you, sir.”

He tosses the towel over his shoulder and helps me into a robe he produces from the closet. I can’t help but smirk. “There’s a lot of supplies in here. Do you plan to fuck me in here often?”

He ties the tie tightly around my waist and pulls my hair from beneath the collar. “I plan to fuck you everywhere often. Why not be prepared?” His hand slips into mine as he guides me out, and I watch him as he cleans up the table with meticulous care, swiping a cloth over it after soaking it with disinfectant.

“I consulted Marston Wellingham on this room. To make sure you have what you need. But please know, you can alter it however you need. I want you to have the space of your dreams.”

Flushed, exhausted, my mind still fuzzy, I stuff my hands into the robe pockets as he tosses the cloth into the trash, along with my torn dress. He grabs his socks, tucking them into shoes, and picks them up in a pinch. “Do you know who he is?”

Marston Wellingham is the uppity fashion guy I see in all my blogs. So uppity. He’s always photographed with Anna Wintour and people like that. “The fashion liaison?”

Cassian stands straight. “So you know.”

“Fashion is one thing I followed without Vivian’s deterrence.” I wrinkle my nose as I watch him redress, wishing he would stay naked forever. He fingers the tie on his mask, slipping each arm through his shirt. “I don’t actually know what that means, though. I just know he’s connected.”

He continues cleaning. “He was interested in you. A few weeks ago he reached out to see if I’d heard of Moreau. And since I didn’t want him giving any attention to Vivian, I reached out. And to answer your question, he finds top, undiscovered designers and pairs them with labels with money. Labels who need new lines. Young blood.” He’s finally done, and crosses the space to me, making me giggle when he lifts me into his arms easily.

“You are the top, undiscovered designer. But I told him I snatched you up, and you have your own line. He’s going to weigh in on and help with your line launch next month.” He grins, wide and sexy, so charming I can’t breathe. “Surprise.”

“Line launch?” I don’t know what to say. My eyes well.

“Yes. You’ll host a huge, televised fashion show, he’ll bring in the buyers and brands, and at the end, you’ll no longer be undiscovered. You’ll be huge, and I’ll fund you so that no matter the brand you pair with, you’ll retain ownership. No one will ever make you create anything you don’t want to.”

I can hardly muster the words because emotion is so thick in my mouth. “Thank you, sir. Thank you so much.”

I want to thank him in so many ways, kiss all over him and crawl onto him, slip him inside me and show him with my body, my gratitude. But he carries me upstairs, to his room, and the moment my back hits the soft bed and he climbs in next to me, I fall asleep.

Because life is just too good.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Two

CASSIAN

I STROKE my fingers along her head as she sketches, while some man from Sweden named Magnus rattles on about building codes and working conditions.

I don't care. Money will solve whatever his problem is, and I'm ready to arrive at that conclusion so I can be done with this call, and get lost in my thoughts.

Two weeks ago I took her virginity, and only about a thousand times a day since, have I envisioned the way her innocence looked smeared up my shaft.

Since then, we've been insatiable—both of us. I promise that's the best word to describe it.

Not only has she slept beside me each night since then, but we've engaged in so much of life together. Routines, for one. She sews and works with her staff on Thursday and Friday mornings, while I work out, and the rest of the days, she joins me, watching me while she reads. Everything is easy, as life is supposed to be with the one you're meant to be with.

And sexually. *Christ.* I've taken her places she's always wanted to go, places she told me through her gowns and suits she was dying to try.

The boning in the skirt of the gown she made last year, that doubled as an ankle spreader, that's where we started. I forced her legs apart with her own spreader and whipped her thighs and breasts with the detachable leather whip from the very same skirt. I gave her what she wanted, and in

return, she bloomed for me. Wept for me. Came so hard for me. And when, still bound, I slid inside of her and made voracious, breath-taking love to her, I knew that not only was she fated to be mine but that without a doubt, my feelings were more than a flash in the pan. More than sex driving emotions.

I love her.

But we're not ready for those words, not yet. Perhaps it has something to do with the way I've seen her eyeing my mask. She doesn't pay attention to it in ways that make me feel like she'll press the issue—she respects the contract.

I do, however, fear that when midnight strikes on the last day of our contract, a requirement to have her sign again, to commit to me for longer, as more, will be the mask coming off.

At my desk, Magnus continues lecturing on the property I've already purchased, and my mind continues to wander, to the other nights this week. Where I forced her to watch me jerk off with a plug inside of her, then made her go to bed unsatisfied, only to wake her and edge her for hours until she was in tears and I'd missed my morning meeting.

We're nearing the end of our first thirty days, and I think I'll die if she actually goes when we hit sixty. I'll want to, that much I do know. But I try not to focus on that. Instead, I focus on what lies stretched ahead.

I tangle my fingers in the ends of her honey hair and yank gently, earning me the two biggest, bluest eyes staring up. "How would you like to visit two of the *Veil* rooms for lunch break today?"

She grins, and I have my answer.

I LEAD her through the garden, the sun hot against the mask. It's been ages since I've come out here, and when I really think about it, probably ten years. I toured them once they were built. I've occasionally viewed camera access to the rooms. But the desire to physically visit them has been gone, until now. Reading her expression, seeing her reaction—that's what I'm looking forward to. Living the *Veil* through her eyes.

We arrive at the first room nearest the mansion. "Which is this?" she asks, knowing the rooms are all themed, but not knowing much else. I

finger the rough stone of the door, remembering hand picking each element to create the perfect ambiance. This stone was flown in from Italy. "*The Throne*," I reply.

I set my palm against the door and push with effort, since it's much heavier than it looks. The hush that rolls out of the room is immediate, almost physical. I step in, and Ella steps in beside me. Her breath catches, and the little gasp in her throat makes me hard.

The room is circular. Stone floor, polished to a dull gleam. At the far end sits the throne itself. High-backed, dark wood, upholstered in black leather that has seen use but, like everything *Veil*, has been kept immaculate. Every single room is kept absolutely pristine. Every scene feels like the first, each Player a conqueror of the space—it's the quality they pay for.

"This is for people who already know what they are," I explain, keeping my voice low to avoid the echo. "Doms without a submissive. Subs without a Dominant. They come here because the lifestyle isn't theoretical for them. They want the structure. They want the weight of it, they crave living it. But they've yet to meet their partner, and all the meanwhile, their true self needs tending."

She walks a few paces in. I watch the way her gaze tracks the space—the podium, the kneeling cushions set at precise distances from the throne, the low tables meant for service. There are no toys on display. The intensity here is psychological first. A collar left on a velvet tray, a contract folder on the sideboard, cream paper, two pens aligned.

"Everything is contracted, even for the shortest of scenes," I tell her. "Limits, duration, titles, rules of address. You don't walk in and guess. You organize ahead of time, then come in and sign. Then you kneel, or you sit, and the scene begins. Temporary collaring is common. There can be training protocols or formal service." Her eyes shine as she takes it all in, and I've never been as proud of *Veil* as I am now. "Someone will spend an hour presenting a drink the correct way because that is the scene. Someone else will spend that same hour being corrected until the posture holds without thought."

Bumps appear on her bare forearms, and her nipples grow stiff beneath the simple slip dress. The reason I chose a closet of slip dresses. Pride floods my chest at her reaction, the way she loves the room without even sharing a single word.

She continues gazing, so I do the same.

“This was the first of six,” I explain, as we take in the multi-level platforms that rise along the curve of the wall. There are playing surfaces at the center with observation tiers behind and above, seating arranged by hierarchy—those who have earned the right to watch from closer, those who watch from the dark. The room is built so that every line of sight ends at the throne or at the person kneeling before it.

Ella’s fingers brush the edge of a cushion but she doesn’t pick it up.

“It’s quiet on purpose,” I say. “No music unless it’s requested in the contract. Observers can hear breathing, hear the scrape of a knee on stone, hear a title spoken the way it was ordered.”

I let her look. I don’t rush her. When she turns back to me her pupils are a little wider than they were outside. Part of that is the lack of sunlight, but part of that is this room, and what enjoying it means for both of us.

“Ready for the next?”

She nods.

We leave *The Throne* and I take her hand, pulling her up the property toward the next room. The garden takes her breath away, causing her to pause as she peers out at all of it. It is beautiful. It’s meant to bring steady ground to those leaving a room after a scene, to ground them to something peaceful as a gentle way to lull them back into reality.

Cobblestones underfoot, worn smooth, set in a gentle curve between beds that have been planted with intention, to create an old world vibe. Old oaks hold the perimeter, their canopies thick enough that the light comes down in pieces. Between them are Japanese maples, their leaves already starting to turn at the edges. Then the magnolias, followed by a line of hornbeam clipped into a living wall. Ivy climbs the stone of the building’s wall until the masonry almost disappears. It is privacy, but art, too, and I know she sees it. Ella simply blinks around at everything, in awe.

I point toward the sea of flowers. “Do you like these?” I ask, but when she sees them, her eyes light up, and I have my answer. We stare at the swatch of vibrant colors, a sweet scent carries through the air as a breeze comes through. My entire body tingles as I watch her curl her toes into the grass and pluck a purple flower from the bunch.

“They smell so good,” she hums quietly, awe lining her tone.

“White nicotiana for the evening scent. And the roses I chose because they’re the most beautiful in the world.” We continue walking as I explain

the choices I made so many years ago. “Foxgloves along the shadier edge,” I say, pointing at the bell shaped flowers. “Lavender along the path so that every step releases the scent. And further in, lilies, then jasmine.” She peers up at the jasmine lining the arch as we pass beneath, and despite the bite of discomfort in my feet at being out in the open, even on my property, I’m able to focus on her, and how much she loves this. “The pairing of beauty with the sweet floral scent sets the mood after scenes. For Observers and Players. It all serves a purpose beyond beauty.”

I walk a half-step behind her left shoulder, locked onto the way she takes it in—the way her hand lifts as if she might touch a bloom and then doesn’t.

“The buildings don’t have real windows on purpose,” I add as we near the second building, dummy windows coming into view. “From outside they look like buildings. Mere workspaces. But no one sees in, and no one sees out. Closed off. Private.”

The path splits and I guide her down the right fork. Another stone structure waits at the end of it, a single iron-bound door.

The Looking Glass.

I open it for her.

She takes in the walls of mirrors, floor to ceiling, unbroken except for the doors and the lighting rigs set flush into the ceiling. The room is a long rectangle with raised stages occupying the center—three of them, different heights, different surfaces. One is bare polished wood, one is padded and one is simply a low platform with rings set into the floor.

Seating wraps every side, arranged so that every seat has a clean line to every stage and to the mirrors behind the stages, which means every act is visible from every angle, including the ones the people on the stage cannot see without turning. Some chairs are open. Some are set back in shallow alcoves with one-way glass—to watch without being watched.

“Exhibition. Voyeurism. Performative play,” I say. “Public use, if that’s in the contract. Forced exhibitionism—again, contracted, negotiated, timed. Mirror play. People who want to be seen and people who want to see and people who want both at once. The mirrors work for the Players, and are part of the scenes.”

Ella stands just inside the threshold. Her reflection multiplies her and I stay slightly behind so I am in some of those reflections and not others.

“The seating hierarchy here is different from *The Throne*,” I add. “There it is about rank and earned proximity. Here it is about sight-lines and consent to be observed while observing. Some members never take the stage. They take the alcove seats and they stay for hours.”

She is quiet long enough that I can hear the ventilation in the room, a low even hum that slips beneath my skin and makes me hard and hot.

Ella looks at me in the nearest mirror, then turns so she is looking at me in the room. “It’s beautiful. They both are,” she says, and I have the strongest urge to take her right now. To lay her out in front of these mirrors and see endless versions of her taking me as I hold her throat and command her to lick me clean.

But I don’t do things in public, and these rooms, though private and on my property, are considered public to me. *Veil* members have 24/7 access. They are not safe for a scene with her. That and I don’t want anyone else to see her that way but me. She is mine.

“Let’s go back.”

We step out into the garden again, and the jasmine is stronger now as a breeze passes. Somewhere a fountain I have not pointed out yet is running, a thin thread of sound.

On the path that leads toward the main house, three members are heading the other way. They move with the unhurried purpose of people who already know which door they want. They turn left at the next fork, toward a building set further back in the trees, its stone darker, its door recessed.

Ella watches them, then looks up at me.

“What room is that?” she asks.

“*The Gilded Cage*.”

She waits.

“I’ll show you another day,” I explain, wanting to avoid the members, conversation, and face to face engagement. Urgency throbs in my chest, and sweat slides down my chest beneath Ella’s tailored suit, and my throat tightens, making it harder to breathe. I don’t let on to the impending anxiety, and instead take her hand, and guide her back with a harsh tug.

A moment later, I sigh when the main house comes into view through the oaks.

“Thank you, sir. For sharing with me.” She smiles.

Soon enough, if things go the way I hope, she'll own this club, too. But we have a month left, so I don't say that, and I don't even allow myself to focus on it. Instead I smile. "Lunch. I have something new for you to try today."

WHILE ELLA IS in the shower, I spend time in my closet, sorting through leather ball gags, silk ties, blindfolds, and toys. My plan is to show her pleasure and pain at once—the pleasure of what I do to her paired with the pain of what I don't allow her to have.

But when she steps out, already dressed in a sky-blue sweetheart necked nighty, one which I purchased online with the color of her eyes in mind, I can tell that she needs something else tonight.

She may say she wants me, physically, and if I tested her, I think I'd discover she does. But her eyes tell another story. Behind them lies stress and worry, and instead of commanding her to her knees on the kneeling pillow at the bedside, I collect her in my arms, and take a seat on the edge of the windowseat.

Outside, night is blooming, with only the faintest traces of the sun left behind in faded orange strips along the lawn, melting in through the trees. Leaves rustle while a couple heads to the end of the property, through the trees, both of them dressed in long black coats.

"I wonder which room they're going to," she says thoughtfully as she curls her fingers into the ends of my hair against my neck, nose pressed to my throat.

"*The Crucible*," I reply, knowing from a quick glance exactly which two members are out there. But right now, I don't care about that. I only care about the invisible weight that makes her shoulders slump. I pinch her chin the way that she likes, the way we both like, and tip her face to mine. The early evening settles over her skin in shades of purple, and she looks like a piece of art, something to be stitched into tapestry to be admired for the rest of time. "What's bothering you, my darling?"

She blinks up at me, surprise etched into lines between her brows as she frowns. "What do you mean?" She looks over, past the bed, to the pillow waiting for her knees. "I'm ready to play."

I shake my head and drag my knuckles along the apples of her cheeks. The mask feels like a thing between us, and for the briefest of moments, I wonder what she'd say if I took it off.

Would she still cling to me the way she does now? I don't know. I'm not ready for the answer.

"No," I shake my head, and twist a strand of damp blonde hair around my knuckle, giving it a gentle tug. "Tell me what's going on."

Her sigh has the weight of a thousand words. "I was just thinking about… the past."

"Tell me."

She licks her lips. "Well, all of the things I've sewn for Moreau, the things that got your attention. I've been making smaller, less refined versions of those types of garments since I was sixteen. Before I really knew what I wanted or why exactly I was drawn to those… elements."

I nod, but don't speak, urging her to continue as I tuck hair behind her ear.

"There was this amateur show once. It was like, in an underground club type of thing. And it was for lingerie, and that's what I made then. At that time, I thought what I liked had to be lingerie, that it was too bold for suits and gowns. So that's what I made." She drops her voice. "Kinky lingerie, with all the built-ins," she says, referring to the unique way she hides bindings and whips in her work.

"I bet it was beautiful."

She rolls her eyes. "It was unrefined. Messy. Rough edges with unrealistic design. But at sixteen, as a virgin who had never even held hands with someone, I had no clue how silly it was. It excited me, and it was sexy, and I thought… that's all there is to it."

"Many times that *is* all there is to it," I remind her. "Not for people like us, but for others."

"Right." She nods. "And I think it would have been fine but… someone who knew Vivian was there. A friend's daughter, I'm not sure, to this day, I still don't know just who told Vivian. But she told my father, who was really sick at the time. I mean, *just left the hospital days before* type of sick. He was weak, and getting better, but still… very weak. And instead of making life easy on him, at the time, I snuck out and entered this… show," she recounts, guilt forming darkness beneath her eyes.

“What happened?” These are the stories that Badd has yet to or can’t dig up, the things *she* has to share with me. I’m glad she is.

She shakes her head and looks up at me. “She shamed me for it. Told me I was a slut. Trash. And I begged her not to tell my father but she did. She told him and showed him and I felt like I’d let him down.” Another shake of her head which I stop with my hand to her chin, forcing her gaze to mine. “*The Throne* you showed me today, *The Looking Glass*. They just remind me that I am this person. I’ve wanted these things before I’ve known what they meant or who I was. And sometimes I just feel guilty, because he didn’t understand. He was ashamed.”

I shake my head. I didn’t know her father, and I wasn’t there under any of these circumstances, but I remind her one inevitable truth. “He could never have been ashamed of you. There is talent in every bone in your body, and every inch of your creations.”

She nods. “I tell myself that, too. I do. But sometimes I wonder if I was just normal…”

The thought dies, unfinished. I close the last inch and kiss her—slow, tenderly, like I can press the rest of the sentence back into her mouth. I want to heal her but I can’t if she’s still holding back. There’s more. I feel it in the sudden tightness of her body against mine, in the way her eyes keep dropping to her hands.

I don’t push.

I only hold her and remind her of what I already know.

“Honoring the person that you’re meant to be makes you strong, and Ella, you are absolutely perfect.”

She nods but I can see the words haven’t settled, haven’t spread through her and infected her with truth the way I’d hoped. But she looks up at me again with surprise. “How many have there been before me?”

She doesn’t have to say submissives for me to know.

“Only one.”

“No,” she says, shock widening the word as she presses off my chest and sits up. “But you’re… *you*.”

I take that as a compliment and say, “There has only been one.” Our eyes hold. “Alex. Her name was Alex, and she was ten years ago.”

“What happened?”

“As it turns out, she was after my wealth and her vow to submission and the lifestyle was an act.” I swallow the anxiety riding up my throat. “It

ended poorly.” I leave out the rest, because tonight is about making her feel better, not unburdening myself. “I’m sorry you lost your father so young, and I’m sorry that Vivian wedged herself between you two and tried to make your art seem small. Small people always want everyone to be even smaller than they are.” I kiss her forehead. “I’m sure your father was never ashamed and only ever proud, despite Vivian’s best efforts.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I leave the items for the scene where they are—for another time, and take Ella down for dinner. Afterward, we enjoy the tapestries of Abelard and Minon in the library, discussing art and everything she read in Tess’s old textbooks in the workroom. Ella holds my hand as I tell her about the artist, and all the ways in which I admired Abelard, despite the fact he was a disgraced member of his society.

And then we go to bed, and she falls asleep in my arms.

It’s hard for me to sleep, because I realize now that there is no denying her rightful place in my life. And yet, so much of me is still secret.

And I worry.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Three

ELLA

THOUGH I SLEPT WELL, I wake up feeling a bit groggy and down. I think of my crow, and Fred, as I lay in bed, curled into Cassian's warm body, blinking out the window into the estate, vast green lawns and pale blue skies.

A few times I've wondered what Vivian has thought, but once I start going down that road, I realize, it's pointless. If she's worried, it's about Moreau Boutique, not my well being. *Don't go to the well, there's no water there*. That's what Cassian tells me when he catches me staring out the window while I'm kneeled next to him, when I'm lost in thoughts about the past.

It's strange, actually being his submissive. So many times when I envisioned submissive acts in my mind while stuck at the sewing table at Moreau, I'd get turned on. The idea of being grabbed and used—it never failed to get me going. But when I'd think of obeying everyday tasks—*don't eat that, slow down your pace, hold your head this way, wear your hair like that*—I snickered. I rolled my eyes. Made fun of whoever could so easily hand over their brain and free will to simply exist that way, for someone else, the way someone else wanted.

I stroke my fingers through Cassian's chest hair as he stirs awake and I realize he was right with what he said the other night.

This *is* who I'm meant to be, and whether my father understood what I liked or not, I am who I am. And I've found freedom in shelving my

worries, handing over myself to someone who I know cares for me with white, albeit, kinky gloves. Who lets me live my wildest dreams everyday, creating designs then, in the same house, making them come to life.

I wish I would have had more time to make my father understand that I just hadn't found my footing in my designs and myself, and I wasn't trying to hurt him. I was only trying to explore.

But he's gone, and knowing that it is my fault nearly drowns me if I think about it too much. What's more is that I had the chance—it was right there, on the tip of my tongue, Cassian's dark eyes on me, waiting, wanting, asking to know. *What else? What else are you holding back, Ella?*

I could have told him about that night.

I should have.

I promised honesty, and I'm falling in love with him and who he is falling in love with?

A liar. A murderer.

"You're awake," he groans, and then his mouth is on mine—hazy, blissful, still half-asleep. I'm almost used to the nylon mask brushing my nose when we kiss.

Almost.

I wish I could know him. If he let me see his face, it would mean he trusts me. Beyond the contract. And if he trusts me beyond what we inked that night at the St. Regis, it would mean he wants me. Forever. For real.

The thought knots in my throat just as his hands slip under my nightgown, find my breasts, and squeeze hard. I gasp.

If he wanted me beyond the contract, he would show me his face.

Right?

"Ella," he moans, rolling me onto my side, grinding into my ass as he pinches my nipples. "Reach back and spread yourself open for me."

I'm wet. I want him. My mind just isn't there yet—body already begging while the rest of me is a beat behind.

I reach back anyway.

Cold metal snaps around my wrists, locking them so the only thing I can touch is myself. "Pull yourself apart, my wet little hole."

The words strip everything else away. What's left are simple commands: give. Obey. Be used.

His mouth finds my neck and I moan. Then the blunt head of him nudges against me and sinks in—spreading me, filling me, forcing me to

take every inch.

“Today, no work,” he groans, sliding in and out, the lobe of my ear between his teeth, my fingers tangling in the small patch of trimmed pubic hair on his groin. He pinches my nipple hard enough to make me arch back, and laughs into my ear as I cry out from the pain. “You like it, I can feel how wet you are for me, you little slut,” he growls, his words filthy, wrapping my spine like a vice, leaving me breathless and wanting.

But then he pulls back, emptying me, and a moment later he’s on my side of the bed, pajama pants pulled up to hide his erection as he brings a metal clamp down onto my nipple, and then one more to the other. “These are from one of your gowns. This is what you want, isn’t it?”

I nod without thinking, despite the vibrant pain radiating through my breasts and into my sternum, nearly blinding it’s so biting and sharp.

He stands, reaching for the phone on the nightstand. He makes a call, and David’s muffled voice is barely audible through the line. “No need to come by the estate today. Ella and I will be spending it in.”

Dark eyes narrow on me from behind the mask as he exchanges a few more words with David, then ends the call. “Now, today, my darling, is about acceptance.” Cassian’s masked face appears right next to mine as he dips down across the mattress on one knee. “I’m going to fuck the doubt out of you. I hope you’re ready.”

CASSIAN DRAGS me to the edge of the bed and fucks me a bit more, not letting either of us come, feathering teases and promises down my spine as he takes me from behind.

He uncuffs me so I can shower. When I walk back into the master suite, he’s waiting—black silk robe, matching mask—and a wooden X dominates the center of the room, leather-padded down its length, restraints waiting at either side.

He drags a mirror into place in front of it.

“A St. Andrew’s Cross,” he says. “Come here. Let me show you who you are. Let me erase the doubt, Ella.”

The leather cuffs close around my wrists with a resounding click. Cool air slides over my skin as Cassian steps back to look at his thing—to look at

me, strapped into this device, all his to play with.

He strips me of my towel, naked except for the thin black collar around my throat. The St. Andrew's Cross holds me open—arms stretched high and wide, ankles spread and locked, belly pressed to the padded X, breasts pushed around the arms, poking out my entire backside, and between my legs, is completely exposed for him to use. The position leaves nothing hidden, and yet, I don't feel exposed or vulnerable. Flush already climbs my chest, my thighs tremble, and I can already feel wetness on my thighs.

Across the room, the tall freestanding mirror faces my side, allowing me to see nearly all angles. Cassian dragged it out of my wardrobe and angled it himself. I don't miss the way he doesn't ever look at himself. A man so beautiful, you'd think he'd always be eyeing the mirror and yet, he never does.

"Eyes on yourself, Ella." His voice is low, almost predatorial, but in a way that has me yearning to be prey. "I want you to see what I see."

I lift my gaze. The woman in the mirror looks nothing like the version of me I was for ten years. Trapped away, forced to work, hungry and sad, making small talk with a crow and a garbage man. That woman kept her shoulders tight and her mouth closed, her desires and thoughts all to herself. She had to. *Nora* had to.

Ella is different. She is free, already breathing too fast, nipples tight, hair falling around her face like some wild woman in a tapestry, like Minon. He made me her, I am allowed to accept her because of him.

Cassian moves behind me in the reflection, shirtless, black pajama pants still on, slung low, a flogger hanging from one hand. Behind the mask, his eyes are on my body, his mind on a mission.

He is going to break me today. I feel it in the set of his shoulders, and in the taunting words he dusted over my naked body when he fucked me doggy style earlier. He's not going to hurt me for the sake of hurting me but instead, he's going to take me apart so he can put me back together as something I have been too afraid to be.

The first stroke of the flogger lands across my ass with a heavy, thudding kiss. I jerk against the cuffs. Heat blooms, then sinks deeper but he doesn't relent. The next falls across the other cheek, then higher, across the small of my back. The falls of the flogger are wide and soft at first—warming me in overlapping layers until my skin starts to sing.

"Keep your eyes open, slut," he says, adding "Look at yourself."

I do. In the mirror my mouth is open. Color is already rising on my ass, pink turning red. Cassian's eyes never leave my face in the glass.

"Look how beautiful you are when you are yourself."

The words land harder than the flogger, more impactful than any swat or clamp. I want to look away but I don't because he told me not to. And it really is that simple.

He works me in a rhythm I love—slow, methodical, covering every inch of my ass and the backs of my thighs. Each strike is a statement.

You are here.

You belong here.

You are this person.

You are perfect this way.

I try to keep worries on my mind at first, to keep my guard up. If I accept this, that I am this person as he says, as I know I am, then I become someone who won't be able to walk away at the end of sixty days. I need him, and yet, he breaks me all behind the confines of his mask. I try so hard to remember that but it doesn't last.

Sensation crowds out thoughts. The thud of the flogger becomes a pulse and my clit throbs in time with it. I hate how quickly my body gives in, how much I want this, despite the fears in my mind being so strong.

But not as strong as him, and I want him more than I want to honor the logical fears.

Cassian switches toys after what feels like forever but is really just minutes. Time is hard to track as I writhe in the cuffs against the cross and moan, moan "sir," moan his name, moan things I've never heard myself say.

I need you.

Please, more.

Help me, but don't stop.

Everything we're doing here has been negotiated, and I know I can stop it at any time. And when the single-tail uncoils from his palm, quiet like a whisper but screaming with foreboding, I can't take it anymore.

"Sir, more, please," I beg, needing the strikes, the strikes that set my mind free and put me into a place of total clarity and pleasure.

The first lick of the whip is a bright, singeing line across my right ass cheek. I cry out, short and sharp. In the mirror my eyes go wide as a thin welt rises almost immediately, paler at first, then flushing dark.

“Breathe, my slut,” he says. “And watch.”

I watch. I watch the next stripe land, and the next. Cassian is precise, and he never hits the same exact place twice in a row. He paints me in lines that make my reflection look marked, claimed, undone. The sting of the one-tail is much sharper than the flogger, a white-hot thread that fades into a deep, throbbing heat. My pussy clenches around nothing. I can feel how wet I am, dripping down my inner thigh.

“I need you, sir,” I beg, too many sensations all at once.

He is going hard. Harder than ever before, hard like he warned me that first night when we signed this contract. I know what he is doing. He is stripping the polite version of me off in layers, getting rid of the woman who feels shame for who she is, denying the one who never asks for too much. He wants her gone so the rest of me has room to stand. So his submissive can fully exist.

“Accept yourself for the perfect woman you are.”

I shake my head even as another stripe lands across the undercurve of my ass. “Cass—”

“I didn’t ask you to speak yet.” The whip cracks again, lower, kissing the place where ass meets my thighs. My knees try to buckle but the cuffs and the cross hold me up, spread open, accepting and willing. “Look at your face. Look at your body. That is not a woman who is broken. That is a woman who is born for this, who knows exactly what she wants.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. Not only from the pain but from the way he keeps saying it like it is simple. Like I *could* just decide to believe him.

Can I?

Minutes blur. My world narrows to the mirror, the sound of leather cutting air, the blooming fire across my backside and the tops of my thighs. He mixes the toys now—using the flogger to keep the heat deep, then the whip for sharp, biting reminders of who is in charge. Sweat slides down the valley of my spine and my arms ache from being held up so long. My nipples are so tight they hurt and every breath I take makes my breasts move, and in the mirror I see the way Cassian’s gaze drops to them, hungry and focused.

He steps in close enough that I feel the heat of his chest at my back without touching me. His mouth is at my ear.

“I won’t stop until you admit to me this is where you need to be.”

I want to. But I want to be kept. Forever.

The whip falls again. I moan, long and broken. In the mirror I look wrecked—lips parted, cheeks wet, thighs a map of pink and rising welts. I look like I belong to him. I look like I belong to this.

“Say it.”

I grit my teeth. Pride is a stupid, stubborn thing, a filter in my throat keeping the truth from rising up, from crawling out. *I am his. I am this.*

But I’m scared, too. *What if he doesn’t want me after this? What if this is just part of the scene? Can I survive life after this admission, if I lose him?*

He doesn’t raise his voice because he doesn’t have to. He just keeps going. Stroke after stroke, never cruel, never sloppy, each one placed like he is teaching my nervous system a new language—*submissive*.

Time stretches. My thighs shake. My cunt aches, empty and starved. I can hear how wet I am when I shift against the padded wood. But I’m not embarrassed, and it feels so good.

The large grandfather clock on the wall ticks, and I know then it’s been half an hour of this. And I know because my body tells me I have been at this edge—his edge—long enough. Something has to give.

The next stroke of the whip lands along my breasts and that’s it.

I break.

“Here—” The word rips out of me, raw. “I need to be here, sir. I need this. I need you to—God, Cassian, I need you to take me apart, sir. *Please*.”

He makes a sound behind me that is almost a growl, like an animal tumbling after its prey in a heated quarrel. The whip drops. I hear the shove of his pants, the rasp of his voice as he groans, fisting his erection. Then his hands work my cuffs to flip me around—it all happens so fast, he’s so skilled. My tailbone kisses the leather padding of the X. Then his hands are on my hips, gripping as he takes advantage of my wide, forced stance within the cross and ankle cuffs.

“Good girl.” His cock notches against me, rock hard and already slick from how ready I am. “Look at yourself while I fuck you. Don’t you dare close your eyes.”

He pushes in on one long, relentless stroke. I am so wet there is almost no resistance, but the stretch still knocks the air from my lungs. He’s so big, but fits me so well.

I realize when he changed my position, he angled us perfectly so we can watch. In the mirror, his hands frame the welts he put on my skin and I watch as his body disappears into mine.

He doesn't start slow. He slams into me, using the cross to hold me exactly where he pleases, every thrust jarring a fresh pulse of heat through the marks on my ass. The pain from his hits and the pleasure from his cock braid together until I can't tell them apart. My clit grinds against his groin and still I climb, fast and helpless, because he has been winding me up for half an hour and my body has been waiting for this exact moment. For his permission, for my release.

"That's it," he rasps. "Take it. Look how perfect you are like this. Open. *Honest.* Mine."

I come with a cry that scrapes my throat and burns my lungs. It hits so hard my vision whites at the edges. My cunt clamps down on him in waves. Cassian curses, drives deep, and follows me over the edge, hips snapping, cock pulsing as he fills me.

I feel every throb.

I watch it in the mirror, the way his head drops to my shoulder, the way my body shakes through it, the way we look locked together on the cross like we were built for this, for each other.

He stays inside me until the last aftershock fades. Then he eases out, careful of my pink, tender skin. His hands are already working the buckles. Wrists first, then ankles. The second I am free my knees give but he catches me like he anticipated it, one arm under my thighs, the other around my back, and lifts me against his chest.

I bury my face in his neck. I smell leather and skin and the faint traces of my own sweat.

He carries me toward the bed, where the sheets are already turned down. He lays me on my back and I hiss when the cool cotton sheets meet the heated stings along my ass. A moment later the mattress dips and I hear the cap of the lotion bottle.

His palms are gentle now, so gentle it makes my throat tight. He works the lotion into every stripe, every welt, every place his toys left their marks, quiet reminders of who I belong to. The cream soothes the sting and when he speaks, his voice is quieter than earlier, softer, full of tenderness.

"I make you whole," he says, stroking lotion down the back of one thigh. "Not because you were empty. Because you were living as the

smallest version of yourself, not because of Vivian but because you thought what you wanted made you wrong. But I won't allow you to think that way. I will take you apart as many times as it takes. I will put you back together as the woman in that mirror. The one who stops apologizing for wanting this."

I try to answer but words don't come. My eyes are already heavy, and I know the crash is coming the way it always does after he works me that deep—body wrung out, mind quiet.

He keeps talking while he tends to me. Low praise, quiet adoration, the reminder that the breaking was never the point. Rebuilding is.

I drift with his hands still moving over my skin, with his voice wrapping around the last of my thoughts.

Giving myself over to who I really am makes me whole.

He makes me whole.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Four

CASSIAN

I DRAG the brush through her hair, my eyes focused on her sketchpad as she sits between my spread knees. Above her, on the edge of the bed, I can see every stroke she makes, and I've come to get hard at the noise of graphite on paper.

She's designing a suit, a rather kinky one, even for her. The pants have a chastity cage built into it, and the key ties to the button at the throat of the shirt, pressing against the chest of whoever wears it. I slip my fingers through the ends of her hair as I pass the comb through one more time, eyes caught on the way a bundle of lines appears as a cummerbund in a matter of moments. "Will this one be in the show?" I ask, placing the comb on the bed next to me as I switch to lotion.

Last week, our last big scene was intense, and I've been tending to her skin three times a day each day since. She's only got faint traces of my whip left behind, and I smooth cherry almond scented lotion into her flesh as she sighs.

"Maybe. If everything comes in time." Ella has been working with her employees in her studio on the estate more than I originally planned, but because she is preparing for the line's launch, I understand. A few nights I've even brought her dinner there and had to command her to stop and eat, first me, then her food.

"What are you waiting on?" I ask, knowing that if Cassian Blackwood puts his name on an order, I can have the world at my fingertips, for her, in

a matter of a day.

She twists, peering up at me with shining blue eyes. “The metal chastity cage.”

I smirk. “A suit I’ll never wear.”

She laughs. “No, that would be terrible. Like covering the *Mona Lisa* or locking up–” she pauses, tapping her pencil to her chin. I help her out.

“Your favorite thing and my greatest tool to motivate you.”

Her cheeks grow pink as she turns back to her paper, which I gently pull off her legs, along with her pencil, and set it on the bed next to me. “I have two surprises for you tonight.”

On the floor in front of me, she shifts so she faces me on her knees. The sight of her kneeling in anticipation will never not make my chest tight. I stroke my fingers along her cheek before I wrap my hand on her bicep. “Straighten.”

She does as I say, instinctively adding, “yes, sir,” as she perfects her kneeling posture, I get to my feet and allow her to do the same, with the help of my hand.

“The first surprise is something you want very much,” I tease, walking her out of the room and down the hall. Peering over the catwalk, David stands with his iPad, glancing up, waiting. Our eyes catch and he nods, telling me he’s cleared the property of all *Veil* members.

We tread down the stairs, and I lose my mind watching Ella’s ass sway in that silk slip dress, and I think of all the things I never thought were for me.

Becoming more than her dom, and being more to her than a dom and a husband, but the father of her children.

At the bottom of the stairs, since her feet are bare as written in our contract, David extends a hand so she doesn’t slip on the cool tile.

“Thank you,” she says politely, but immediately looks back at me, waiting for what’s next, not allowing a moment of small talk with another man to come between us. Even David. Good girl.

David, knowing just what I was going to ask, clicks the screen of his iPad with the button at the top, making it go dark. “Only two members, but they have already left the car port.” He touches his ear, where he wears a piece that connects him to security, Bretton and others. Badd outfitted us with the best. “Both parties have just left the back gate.”

I nod, feeling Ella’s curious gaze bore into me.

“I would say an hour,” I tell him, “and tell Bretton.” I need both of them for the second surprise I have in store.

David nods, then makes himself invisible, disappearing down the dark hallway toward the workroom. He checks on things on behalf of Ella, at my command, and he’ll likely spend the next hour there, keeping things on pace for the show.

She peers over her shoulder at him. “I feel bad I’m not there more. I mean, it’s my label, right? I should be in there, like, all day.”

I take her chin in a firm grasp. “No more adding senseless *likes* in your sentences,” I tell her, making her nod apologetically in my grip. “And you did everything at Moreau. You made every piece. For years. You have earned this, Ella. You deserve this, do you understand? You are not lazy. You are not uninvolved. You are in charge, because you have earned every moment away from that room.”

She’s slow to nod, which earns her swat against her cheek, making blonde hair fall over her face. I tug it back. “You deserve all of it, in the best ways. Tell me you know I’m right.”

Her nostrils flare and I can’t help but peer down at her lips, plush, pink, and parted. I want to kiss them right now, but I don’t want to derail my plans, or the schedule that I’m on.

“I understand.”

I reach down and slip my fingers into hers and continue walking, only she doesn’t. When I face her, I find blue eyes full of surprise. “You never hold my hand.” She lowers her voice though we’re alone. “Unless it’s after a scene.”

The part of me in denial about her contract expiring soon is holding her hand. The part of me that is in love with her and will do anything to have her in my life for the rest of time is holding her hand. I bring our hands to my lips, and press a kiss along the top of her hand. “I am a man of mysteries,” I say drily, smirking.

But I don’t miss the way her eyes move to my mask. How the smile she puts on is definitely one she puts on instead of feels. She walks, and we walk together toward the back doors that lead to the yard. “Yes, you are.”

SHE DOESN'T KNOW MUCH about the flowers in the garden, the kind I had planted between *The Eclipse* and *The Crucible*. The foliage evolves with every step, and when you're a new member at *Veil*, it renders you speechless. I hear that a lot. The way members love the lush surroundings near *The Eclipse*, but how they grow more sparse, changing into succulents and desert plants the nearer they draw to *The Crucible*. Symbolic, artistic, and another feature of the Blackwood Estate that I am quite proud of.

She runs her fingers over the petals of tiger jade, pink at the heart, but green around the edges, a bit fuzzy to the touch. I watch her, crouched, touching, feeling, smelling, soaking in the change of scenery as if she's never experienced things like this before.

But I know that she hasn't. Not in years at least.

Ella peers up at me, blonde hair tugged over her shoulder on one side. "It's so beautiful out here. I love how it changes to almost…. desert-like." She looks down at the row of moonglows that line the path up to the place shrouded by the large willow acacias. I bought them fully mature years ago, and hired specialty gardeners to service this area of the property, to handle them with the precise care they need.

"Thank you for showing me this much of the estate, sir." She rises, dusting her hands along her thighs as she returns to my side. "I don't know how you're not out here all the time."

"Club members are regulars in this area, Ella. And I do not put myself in places where others are."

She nods, almost apologetically. "That's right." She slips her hand into mine, long, thin fingers curling into my palm, taking away the bite of frustration that appeared a moment ago.

I'm not frustrated with her. Per usual, I'm frustrated with myself. That I can't roam this place and partake in what I've built because I hate myself too much. I touch the mask with my free hand, only for a moment, and carry on, toward the large, stone building behind the gorgeous, full-bodied desert acacias.

I tug some of the overhang back, exposing a twelve foot tall wooden door, with brass knocker. Matte black lanterns line the stone walls, set to low, creating the soft glow of a lit candle, and not much more. They're not even visible from the trail a few feet back. Outside, evening is closing in, the sky light enough for us to still have shadows a moment ago, but near

enough that beneath the cover of this tree and the building's overhang, I can't quite see all of her features.

The lines that form beneath her eyes when she's excited. I can't see those.

The crease in her forehead when she's expectant. It's too dark to make that out.

"I am getting to see another room?" she whispers, and I release her hand, laughing a little.

"David had everyone leave. It's just us. You don't have to whisper." I place both hands on the large door and shove, the stone floor grumbling as the door swings inward.

My hand finds the light switch, and I watch her from a few feet behind as she steps over the threshold into the space.

"This is *The Crucible*."

The name sits on a small plaque beside the door, nothing dramatic, just dark metal letters on black stone. She reads it once, then again, and I see the moment it lands. Her shoulders stay straight, but her breath changes. The room does that to people.

Black stone walls, cool and matte, rise around us and drink most of the light. What light there is comes from recessed fixtures set high and low, all of them under control, so a scene can be bright enough to see every mark or dim enough that only the gleam of metal remains. Polished steel rings, bars, and frames comprise what little there is and I watch as she looks at every single thing.

She doesn't rush. I like that about her. She takes in the room the way she takes time sketching, one design element at a time.

Her gaze finds the far wall first. Impact tools hang in careful rows: floggers with falls of leather and suede, single-tails coiled neat, canes of rattan and Delrin, paddles in wood and leather, a few toys I know give a lingering sting. She steps closer but I stay where I am and let her look.

"People who ask for this room," I say, voice low so it can't echo, "aren't looking for a little bite at the end of a scene. They come here because the pain is the point. Not the only point. But the thing that opens the rest."

She glances back at me as her throat bobs.

"Some of them need to give it," I continue. "They get something precise from landing a stroke exactly where they mean it, from watching the body answer, from holding the line between too much and just enough. Others

need to take it. They want the heat that builds and builds until thinking goes quiet. They want the moment after, when the body is loud and the mind is finally still. A lot of them want both, on different nights, with different people. This room is built for that exchange. Givers and receivers. Punishment that is asked for, measured, and watched."

She turns back to the wall and reaches out, not quite touching a heavy flogger, but wanting to. Her fingers hover. A small shiver runs through her spine. Maybe she's thinking about last week. Or maybe she's thinking about a scene we haven't had yet. Maybe she's dreaming, the way I am when I watch her.

"Everything in here follows protocol," I tell her. "On-site Monitors. Check-ins. Limits written down before anyone picks anything up. No one plays in *The Crucible*, or any other room, because they got carried away in a hallway. Members must book rooms. You state what you want. You stay inside the rules or you leave. That structure is part of what people get from it."

She moves on. To the left, a rack holds clamps of different weights and clamps—clover, tweezer, a few with chains that would pull if someone shifted the wrong way. She studies them longer than the floggers. I watch as color rises along her cheekbones and fuck, I'm getting hard just watching her.

"Those are for the ones who like a constant reminder," I say. "Impact comes and goes. A clamp stays. It reminds you, every time you breathe, that you agreed to this. Some people use that reminder to drop faster, to get the orgasm more quickly. Some use it to stay present. Either way, it's honest. Your mind and body don't get to pretend it isn't happening."

She swallows. I take one step closer, not crowding her, just closing the space enough that she can feel me there if she wants to.

The temperature station sits against the back wall: a small table with a controlled warmer, a metal bowl that can take ice, wax pots with lids, a few implements meant for heat and cold in sequence. She stops in front and I wonder if she's remembering that first time in my room together. The ice I put inside her. The heat I held to her.

"Heat and cold do different things, as you're aware," I say. "Wax can bloom and then tighten as it cools. And as you've experienced, ice can make the skin so sharp that the next warm touch feels like too much. People who like this station are usually chasing contrast. They want the body

confused in a good way. They want to be pulled from one sensation into the next before they can settle. It isn't always about pain. Sometimes it's about how close you can be made to *feel*."

She nods once, small. Her hand rests on the edge of the table. I watch her thumb stroke the metal without seeming to notice she's doing it. My chest grows tight, and if I look too long, my eyes will grow blurry, too. She's magnificent, and her reaction to this space is everything I've hoped for.

I force myself to look at the center of the room, the space given over to corporal punishment. In the middle is a padded bench with straps that can be used or left open, next to a St. Andrew's Cross, a frame that can hold someone standing, wrists high. Adjacent is a lower station meant for over-the-knee work if that's what a pair prefers. All of it black stone and polished steel, nothing ornate, everything built to last and to be easy to clean. She walks the length of the bench and I follow the line of her spine with my eyes.

"This is the part a lot of them come for," I tell her. "The old-fashioned kind. Counted strokes, or hits, whatever you like to call them. Hits for a given reason, to follow a plan, even if the reason or plan is only that they asked for it. Others need the ritual of it. The waiting. The sound. The way the body braces and then has to let go. Receivers—submissives—talk about the clarity after. Givers—dominants—talk about the responsibility, the focus it takes to stay exact when someone is shaking at your hand. Both sides can walk out of here quieter than they walked in. That's what they get. Not just the marks. The reset."

She stops at the head of the bench and rests both palms on the padding. For a second she is very still. Then she looks at me over her shoulder. Our eyes lock, and my brain slows to a hush. Despite the fact my heart is hurdling, that I'm obsessed with every inch of her, I maintain my steady gaze and unmoving frame.

I let her see that I am not unaffected. I have been watching her take this room apart with her eyes, watching her breathing change, watching the way she keeps coming back to certain pieces as if her body already knows which ones it would answer. Heat sits low in me, steady, not rushing.

I want her. I want the version of her that is standing in this room imagining herself in it. I also want the version that will walk out of here tonight and think about it later, when she is alone.

“We would enjoy this,” I tell her. I keep my voice even. “Not tonight. Not next week, unless you say so. Down the line.”

“With *Veil* members?” she asks, breaking her silence.

I shake my head. “Just the two of us. Booked, monitored, inside the rules. I would take my time with you in here. You would tell me what you can take and I would stay inside those lines and still make you feel every moment of it. You would get the quiet after and I would get the look on your face when you stop fighting the feeling and let it have you. I think we would both leave different than we arrived. In the best ways.” I close the space between us. “Each time is like that. Each scene gives us something different, makes us better. Together.”

She doesn’t look away. Her pupils are wide in the low light. Her chest rises and falls a little faster than it did at the door. The room is cool but sweat glistens along her collarbone, I see it now that I’m close.

I don’t touch her yet. I let the room do some of the work.

“You don’t have to decide anything right now,” I say. “You only have to notice what this place does to you. I already see it. The way you keep your hands on the things that scare you a little. The way you listen when I talk about what people come here to give and take. You like the idea of someone being careful and still not gentle. That isn’t a small thing to know about yourself. It isn’t a small thing to know about me, either.”

She lets out a breath that is almost a pant. Almost desperate.

“I would be careful with you,” I say. “But I would not be soft. Care and harshness, those two things can live in the same room. This room was built for exactly that.” *We were built exactly for that.*

She turns fully toward me then. The black stone and the steel and the waiting tools sit behind her like a romantic backdrop in a painting. I look at her face and see the fantasies she is creating behind her eyes, and they are turning her on the same way they are turning me on, slow and desperate.

When we leave, the door seals behind us with a quiet click. Outside, early evening feels brighter than it did yesterday. She walks a little closer to me than she did on the way in. I match her pace and I do not fill the silence. Sometimes words aren’t needed, and the truth is? Her body has already given me answers.

ONLY WHEN I'VE closed the back doors to the patio, and the cool AC is licking the heat of late afternoon off of our skin, does she finally speak. “Thank you so much, sir. I loved seeing it. I loved it.”

I stroke my hand through my hair as the door down the adjacent hallway clicks. “I knew you would.”

David appears, eyebrows lifted as he lowers a pair of black pumps to the ground, along with a rag. “I’ll wait outside with Bretton.”

I nod, and Ella turns back to me, brow furrowed.

I fall to a crouch and begin wiping her feet. “Your second surprise,” I tell her, then tap her ankles, one at a time, slipping her into the pumps.

Standing again, she’s still so much smaller than me, even in heels. I can’t resist placing a kiss on her lips, and groan when she leans into it, seeking more of me.

I pull back, knowing Marston Wellingham hasn’t a lot of time.

“David is taking you to the St. Regis,” I tell her, adding, “I chose a place you already knew to give you some comfort.”

She shakes her head. “What for?”

“To meet Mr. Marston Wellingham, who will be part of your show. He is responsible for bringing in buyers—brands,” I explain, “so that they can bid for your attention. You will then be able to choose who you want to work with, and where you want to see your designs.”

Her brows flatten and she stares at me without saying a word for what feels like a year but can only be a matter of seconds. “I know you consulted him about the workroom and about the plans for the show but… I’m actually going to meet him? He’s going to be part of *my* show?” I thought he was just consulting. This is something else entirely.

I nod. “Of course. He’s the best, and I want only the best for you. He knows everyone, he’s connected to–”

“Everyone. I know.” She shakes her head. “Cassian, I can’t believe you got Marston Wellingham to meet with me and be here in the flesh. I thought he was just a consult.”

I adjust my tie, which needs no adjusting. “He’s on your side, here to help you find the best place for your new line.”

She shakes her head in disbelief, and hatred courses through me violently at the shock in her eyes. “You earned him. Your work at Moreau caught his attention, Ella. I only paid him to help on the business side but this is all you. You deserve this.” I drag my thumb over her lips to force her

mouth closed. “Stand straight. Chin up. No more shock in your eyes. Confidence only.”

She obeys.

“I didn’t get Marston, you did.”

Her watery eyes test me in ways I’m not ready for, so I glance down at my watch and shake my head. “You need to go. David is going with you as my liaison, and Bretton will drive.” I kiss her cheek. “I’ll be right here when you get back. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

LUCIEN REFILLS HIS GLASS, and as much as I’d like another, I want to be clear-headed when she returns.

“I’m glad it’s going so well,” he says, as we stand at the foot of my newly acquired Abelard and Minon tapestry, which arrived not long after the car took Ella to her meeting. Lucien brought it over, and together, we hung it.

He flicks on the switch that turns on the recessed light in the ceiling, above the piece. “This one is probably my favorite,” he says, as we tip our heads to the side in unison, taking in a scarred-faced Abelard lying on his back, a chain in his hand with Minon straddling him, his every tug guiding her movement.

I wrinkle my nose. “I like it. But it is not my favorite.”

He scoffs. “Then why did you spend thirty grand on it?”

I cut my gaze toward him and it only takes him a moment before he tips his head back. “Ahh. Ella likes it.”

“She enjoys Abelard and Minon, yes. So I’m trying to purchase all of them, instead of being in a continual lease.”

My brother nods. “David said he was taking her to a meeting with Wellingham, about her show in a week.”

“Yes,” I say, feeling the guilt prick at my feet, inside my socks and shoes.

He says nothing, but it is filled with so much that I have to turn to him. “What?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t say anything.”

“And that never happens. So tell me, please, what that silence meant.”

He glares at me with eyes that look just like my own. Today his ponytail is gone, and his hair is down, dusting his shoulders, a little wavy. “You should have gone.”

I look back at the tapestry hanging in the light, at the detailed stitching around Abelard’s bottle of booze that rests beneath the bed, next to the bedpan.

“I can’t do that, you know that.”

He hums. “You could.”

“And who would I say I am to Wellingham? Her handler? Her masked business manager?”

Lucien strokes a hand over his chin. “You could just be you.”

“Without the ball, the mask is strange. I’d be a rumor. A weird rumor. I’d rather be a mystery than a rumor.”

He sips from his glass and pops his lips. “You could take the mask off.”

I snort. “No.”

Lucien sets his now-empty glass down and looks at me. “You just said, the mask is strange. So take it off. Be yourself. Let the world decide, let Ella decide. You’re worth more than hiding your whole life.”

“It’s easy for you to say, you have a perfect face. Everyone stares at you because they’re in love with you. Women and men both. You don’t know what it’s like to be whispered about, to be stared at, to be the butt of a joke. To be called a wax figure that sat next to a fireplace too long.”

Lucien never looks away, not even once. And he doesn’t stall with his words either. “How long do you think you can go on with her not wanting to see you?”

I don’t answer.

“You’re agoraphobic, but we can get you through that. The more you go out, the easier it will get.” He steps closer, bracing a strong hand on my shoulder in a way that makes my throat tight. “And whatever else is going on up there, we can get you through it. Therapists, that’s what they do. But I think it’s time.”

I roll my neck until it pops and don’t take my eyes off of the desperately hungry Minon, riding her dominant. “Ella will be home soon. I think you should go.”

His hand slides off my shoulder. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, for that meeting we have on Zoom with the Swedish building inspector.”

I nod but don’t look back as he goes, then eventually, closes the door behind him.

The anxiety attack I had when I went to Moreau comes rushing back. Was it really about the people and being in public, or was it just as much about Alex and what happened?

I haven't thought about Alex in so much time now, and with that, what happened. But when I reach behind my head and finger the silk ties of the mask, and close my eyes, and imagine it falling to my feet, air nipping my skin, the world seeing me—the tightness in my chest comes back.

When I think of stepping onto the front steps of this house with my face bare, I can hardly get a breath through my nose.

But Bretton has seen me.

He didn’t even stare, not really.

I open my eyes, and envision the freedom that would come with one quick tug, but then I see Ella. Her eyes. Her expression. The way she’d recess from me, a soft, “oh” on her lips as she realizes I am not the Cassian Blackwood she thought I was.

I drop my hands to my side, just as the door opens, and David ushers Ella inside. He looks at me over the top of her head as she makes her way to me, and I nod, letting him free for the night. He locks the door behind him.

She crushes into me, arms around me, flanking me with “thank you, sir,” and “I owe you so big.”

Eventually, we step apart, and I take her chin in my hand. “It went well, then?”

Her smile isn’t ear to ear, though I felt her gratitude in her hug, and I heard it in her many thanks. Still, *something is amiss.*

She nods. “He was delightful. He’s going to get my line everywhere–but only the best everywheres, you know?”

I nod. “I do know.”

Still, her happiness doesn’t quite make it to her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

Her answer is so fast I know it’s a lie. “Nothing.”

I take her chin, and warn her. “Do not lie.”

She bites her bottom lip and steps back, making my hand fall back to my side. “I’m feeling really excited and happy that I am going to have a full-on career, that my visions are coming to life, that I don’t have to kill myself to do it, and that pretty soon, the world will know about my work.”

She nods, blonde hair catching the chandelier light, making her look more angelic than she already does. “I’m happy about that.”

An invisible, heavy *but* hangs between us.

“Ella.” My tone is all warning.

“But I’m sad and kind of upset, too,” she admits, her voice unwavering, even though I can tell the words are difficult to speak.

“Why?” My heart is racing like I already know the answer, but I want desperately for it not to be.

“Because you weren’t there.”

She steps up to me again. “You did this for me—you made this happen,” she says, urgency and panic suddenly strangling every syllable of every word. My spine is alight with fire and fear.

“You did this for yourself with your talent.”

She shakes her head. “You saved me. You brought me here, and you gave me all this. And… we’re an us, aren’t we? Contract or no contract, Cassian and Ella, we are something, right? I’m not crazy?”

“You are anything but crazy.” I nod my head. “We are an us.”

She steps closer, chest heaving, the strap of the slip dress falling off her shoulder but she doesn’t make a move to grab it. Instead, she brings her hands to the lapel of my coat and grabs me, blue eyes wide. “Let me see you, Cassian.”

An explosion sounds off somewhere inside me, leaving my eardrums with a quiet ringing. “Mask or not, Ella, I would not have attended that meeting. I do not leave the estate.”

Her nostrils flare, but her grip doesn’t soften. “I think it’s not about leaving here. I think it’s about that mask. Covering yourself. Hiding. The house is just a bigger mask.” She rocks to her toes and tries to press her lips to mine but I pull back. “Let me see you, Cassian. Let me in. Let me see who I’m falling for, please.”

Lucien’s talk from earlier rolls through my foggy brain as my hands tense at my sides. I step back, my face burning beneath the mask, my heart racing.

“I asked—no,” I correct myself, “I *demanded* you not press this one thing, Ella. Do you remember? Do you remember both times we went through the contract, what I said about this?”

She doesn’t nod. She doesn’t blink.

She falls to a kneeling position, and stares up at me, tears rolling down her pink cheeks. “Please, Cassian. Please, sir. Please. Show me yourself. Trust me. Trust me fully, the way I trust you.”

I’m so angry, my body is rattling. My vision is blurred at the edges and my entire body is coated in an immediate sheen of sweat. I want to tear off my clothes and scream at her for doing this, for making me hurt her by denying her, for putting me in this position.

But as I stare at her, I realize that I can’t. I can’t let her down. I can’t tell her no. But equally, I can’t take off the mask. I’ve built my life for ten years around covering what’s left of my face, and it works. Everything has worked. Look at all I have. Businesses, connections, an estate, *Veil*, the ability to make my family and staff very financially comfortable.

That happened while I wore this mask.

I want to say yes, I want to break for her the way she so pliably and willingly breaks for me in our scenes but I can’t. And I find myself doing something I’ve never done.

Bartering. Begging. Pleading.

I lift her off her knees by her hands and press her face to my chest, stroking my fingers through her hair. “I can’t give you that. But please, let me make it up to you. Let me try to make this up to you.” She pulls back, and her cries are silent but no less painful.

“I’m sorry, Ella, it’s the one thing I can’t do.”

She tips her head to the side and for a moment, we just stare at each other before she finally says, “I’m going up to my room for the night and going to bed.”

I watch every step she takes until she’s gone.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Five

ELLA

"PLEASE."

His voice is so thin, and I've missed him so much in the last twelve hours, I find myself racing to the door, pulling it open, in nothing but my robe and messy hair. I hardly slept, if I slept at all.

The role reversal, him begging for me, I hate it. I hate being in this situation. I just want more of him, and I know I promised I wouldn't cross this line. I know I signed my name to a contract giving my word that I wouldn't press him on this.

I feel so bad, pulled at both ends, one side of me angry and pained that he won't show himself to me, won't let me see who Cassian Blackwood truly is, and the other part of me is pulled to my promise, to giving him exactly what he wants and needs.

I stare up at him, and find that he looks much like I do, pained and exhausted, with dark pools of pain beneath his eyes, mussed dark hair and a jaw coated in stubble. He's even still in low-slung satin pants, still wearing the nylon mask he sleeps in. Even when I'm not with him, he sleeps in it, and I feel that's important to file away, even in the moment. "Hi."

His voice is gravelly and rough, and tears through my insides like a cruel swell tearing up a calm shore. "Hi."

"I want you to have a wonderful day, to visit the work room and do as you please." His eyes search mine, and I almost feel too weak to look at him. Like I might give in right here, right now. But I hold strong, knowing

that with everything that I'm giving, it's only fair to want to receive something, too. And I want to see his face.

"I've arranged for Connie to be here shortly. For brunch to be set up in the rose garden. And Bretton will take her back before afternoon. The two of you will have all morning together."

My grandma. Oh my god. My arms burn, because I want nothing more than to reach for him, to whisper my gratitude and let everything else go. To tell him I see how much he's trying, that this is huge and means so much. That it's okay now.

"Thank you," I offer instead, voice wobbly. "That is so kind. I cannot wait to see her. It's been weeks."

He nods. "I know. And I know you appreciate it."

I want to see your face. I want you to trust me. I can't help but think of those things on loop, so I stay quiet, and thank him again. "Thank you, sir."

He nods. "And later, tonight, I want to take you to *The Seraglio*."

"*The Seraglio*?" I repeat, unsure of what we're talking about.

He nods. "One of the *Obsidian Veil* rooms you've yet to see. We will go together, to an active scene, among *Veil* members."

I stare into his eyes, understanding exactly what this is. This is his compromise. He won't show me his face, he won't let me see who he really is, which I agreed to. But he will join a room full of people—something he hasn't done in years—for me. It's a step toward me, a step toward giving me more of him, and I recognize that.

"I want to see you, Cassian," I whisper, hating the way I'm pushing something I so clearly agreed to not push. But that was before I fell in love. I didn't know how bad I'd want and need all of him, because as much as I expected pain and pleasure, I didn't expect love.

"A scene. Around *Veil* members. Tonight." His voice drops an octave. "I'm trying, Ella. *Please*."

I know he's never been to a *Veil* scene, he's told me that much, and I realize that this is a big deal for him. He told me about how he had a panic attack at Moreau, the first place he went after staying in the estate for ten years. Leaving, even for a *Veil* room, could cause the same reaction. But he's willing to put that at risk for me.

He's trying.

And maybe since he and I made such a big leap by signing a contract as virtual strangers that the rest of us consists of baby steps? Maybe we've

made our big leap, and now, I need patience?

I don't know, but I don't want to turn him down. I'm dying to attend an active *Veil* room, and watch a scene, and to do it with him? My body is already humming.

"Okay."

His entire body softens with relief.

"Thank you, sir."

He smiles, partially. "Breakfast is on the way up, as well as your dress for tonight." He smiles. "It's one of your own, I've waited a year to see you in it. I can't wait."

IT WAS a wonderful day with my grandma in the garden. We ate French toast and sipped a little bit of sparkling cider, she showed me pictures of her new (upgraded) suite at Shady Grove, we strolled the garden and I even clipped her a bouquet to take back. She said she'd never seen me so happy, and I explained to her, as best as I could, how things came to be between me and Cassian. That he liked my designs, found me, and helped me get out of the bind with Vivian. It was a wonderful visit with the woman that means the most to me, and before she left, we scheduled for Bretton to get her next week, at the same time. I know Cassian won't mind.

The rest of the afternoon was spent roaming the mansion halls, lying in my bed scrolling fashion sites and napping, here and there. As much as I dreamed of these leisurely days when I was holed away in Moreau, it now feels strange. Not to have a wide open schedule but… to be without Cassian.

But we're minutes away from attending the scene at *The Seraglio*, and I've tabled my frustration of last night because I'm dying to see a *Veil* scene. I'm very excited, to say the least. Though part of my *excitement* is this dress.

My dress.

I stand in front of the long mirror and smooth the skirt with both hands, a little in awe that I made this dress. I thought up every single detail, ordered the fabrics, and stitched every seam.

From the outside the dress is simple enough to pass as expensive in a room full of snotty people, which was the point when creating pieces for Moreau. Vivian liked classic, with high necks and tight bodices, floor length skirts, everything fancy and traditional. This one is no different on the outside.

Black silk crepe, column-cut, high at the throat on a fine seam, sleeveless, the skirt falling straight to mid-calf with a slit that only shows when I walk. No ornament on the bodice, no obvious hardware to make wealthy women wrinkle their nose and accuse me, like Mrs. Dalton, of watching too much *Moulin Rouge*. It looks like discipline and money. It looks like I belong among the people I made these for.

Underneath, it is a different garment. Meant for the opposite of Moreau clientele entirely.

I built a second skin into the lining. The bust is a structured silk shelf, boned lightly, and sewn to the inner cups are two slim clamps on short, hidden chains. They are already on me. The pads are lined in suede so the clamps don’t rub or show, but the bite is real, stinging and nagging, as intended. Every breath I take reminds me they are there. If I roll my shoulders, the chains shift and the pressure changes, giving me a private pain only I can feel. I altered them myself before I stepped into the dress. I chose the tightness. *That is the point.*

Lower, a narrow satin harness is tacked into the waist seam, soft enough that it does not print through the crepe. It sits under my navel and splits, a discreet loop that can hold a plug if I want one, or lie empty and still make me aware of the space it frames. Tonight the loop is occupied with a plug gifted to me by Cassian, sent to my room with the dress. The base of the plug is flat and covered in the same silk as the lining, so nothing shows—he must’ve had the women downstairs do that. I feel the fullness when I stand, when I sit, when I take a step and the slit opens.

But there’s more.

A shallow pocket rests just above the pubic bone, stitched between lining and fashion fabric, sized for a slim remote vibrator. The remote is in my clutch. The toy is already nestled against me, switched off, warm from my skin. Cassian had it sent up with the plug, knowing full well I’d want to make use of my own design.

He was right, because *he knows me.*

Along the inner thighs I sewed two bands of elastic silk that kiss the skin with every stride, a mere whiff of restraint without a single visible strap. I made this over three nights at my table, with the lamp close to my face and my mouth dry from concentration. I talked to my crow, who came and went the entire three days.

I feel amazing in it. Not only beautiful but bold, claimed, and somehow the one doing the claiming, too. My nipples ache in a clean, bright line. The plug keeps me standing taller and I have to remind myself to breathe through the rush of it.

I look at my face in the glass. The color of roses from Cassian's garden sits high on my cheeks. The most beautiful roses in the world, right in my backyard. My mouth looks softer as I take myself in, wearing a beautiful gown, *my* creation, with so many naughty secrets beneath.

I can't believe this is me, that this is my life.

He may not show me his face, but he's given me this. All of this. I need to remember that.

When he comes into my room a moment later, after a gentle knock, Cassian groans at the sight of me, sinking strong fingers into my waist, dragging his lips up my throat. "Fuck, my darling. You look gorgeous. I'm jealous that others will see you like this. So sexy." He licks up my throat and my skin pebbles, my pussy growing wet. "How does it feel? Like you wanted?"

I nod, taking in the sight of us in the mirror. We look so good together. "Yes," I manage, already filled with such need that I could fall to my knees for him right here and right now. But I want to see *The Seraglio*. And I want him to show me that he can give a little for me, too. Even if it's hard.

"You look so beautiful," he says, "the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on."

He passes me a mask that matches my dress. "So I don't stand out. They made it in your work room."

I'm sorry I pressed you is right there on my lips, and even though I know I should apologize, something stops me. I did agree to it, that's true, but that was before I had all these feelings.

And I'm afraid if I apologize, he'll never give me more. Maybe that's girl logic. Maybe that's just years of inexperience giving way to true confusion. I don't know. I know what I want, but I don't know how to get it, so instead of making things worse, I stay quiet.

I put on the mask, and he ties it, smoothing his fingers down the nape of my neck, giving my collar a tug. My eyes fall closed when he runs a finger beneath the soft leather, and presses his lips to my ear, whispering, "*my slut*," before he releases me.

My entire body is on fire for him already, but he guides us down, through the house and out the garden, quiet between us but not uncomfortably so. My heart is hammering, and maybe his is, too. But I've never felt so nervous and alive all at once. We escape impending night as we arrive at the all stucco, Spanish-style room, set nearest his mansion, sitting across the property from *The Throne*. The double doors prevent sound from leaking out, but I feel the low hum of people inside.

"Are you ready?" I ask him quietly, squeezing his hand for assurance. He only grunts as he pushes open the door.

I feel his hand settle at the nape of my neck the moment we step into *The Seraglio*, warm and buzzing, four fingers curved against my skin with his thumb resting just under the edge of my hairline. He holds it there, owning me, guiding me, and the steady weight of it keeps my pulse hammering high in my throat.

The room opens wide, wider than expected from the outside, with low ceilings, providing an immediate sense of intimacy. Silk drapes in garnet, ivory, and gold hang from the ceiling in soft columns, pooling on the floor. Low couches and stacked cushions cover most of the space, velvet and washed linen, deep enough that a body can be arranged and kept there for a long time. The lights are warm and indirect. Nothing here is meant to startle, or cause sharp reactions. Everything is warm, and meant to keep you.

A few couples stand around, in nice gowns and suits, but no masks. I worry for a moment they'll stare at us, since we're masked, but they do no more than glance and smile before returning to their own hushed conversations. I shouldn't think they'll take note of us, though, because I don't register their faces.

I'm not here for them.

Cassian bends so his mouth is near my ear.

"*The Seraglio*," he says. "For *Veil* members who seek harem play."

I peer up with curiosity in my eyes.

"One person is the focus and the other scene members give sustained attention. This room is about worship and sharing. Hands and mouths and

cocks are used to keep that one person devoured and pleased until they are finished. The Player at the center of the focus leaves the scene feeling well used but still wanted. It is not a scramble for access. Like everything else at *Veil*, it is arranged."

He looks away and I look where he looks. Between the couches sit low tables with long trays. I take them in slowly because he is giving me time, and because his hand on my neck makes it hard to look away from anything for long.

The first tray holds toys strewn across dark silk. Glass dildos in clear and smoke, some slim, some thick enough that my body clenches just from looking at them, the bases heavy so they will stay if someone wants to be both seated *and* filled.

Silicone cocks in several lengths and girths, a few with pronounced heads, one with a slight curve, one dual-density that would give under pressure and then push back. A wand vibrator with a charged base and two head attachments, one broad and one focused. A smaller bullet on a silk cord. Anal plugs in graduated sizes, the smallest seemingly quite small, the largest flared and substantial, stems set with smooth metal discs that would catch the light if someone were on their knees. A string of anal beads in increasing size, the last bead large enough to make a person work for it. I clench just taking them in. Soft leather cuffs lined in fleece, more decorative than intense it seems, meant to hold wrists to a couch frame or to another person's hand.

Then there are nipple clamps with silk pads and a linking chain. A feather tickler that looks almost innocent until I imagine it used after rounds and rounds of intensity, knowing how something soft and simple can be severe in wild scenes. A slender steel sounding rod rests alone on a folded cloth, cleaned and waiting. Cock rings in leather and silicone, one that looks like it could vibrate, with a small battery attached. A harness with an empty O-ring, sized for a woman or a man who wants to fuck with a toy attached. Everything is clean, oiled where it should be oiled, and placed with precision and care.

The second tray is lubes, more than I have ever seen in one place. Thick water-based gel in a pump bottle, the kind that stays and does not get sticky at once—I know because Cassian has this in my room for me, and I used it when inserting the plug tonight. Next to it, a thinner hybrid in a glass vial with a dropper. Silicone lube in a black bottle for toys that need it and for

longer work. A warming formula that heats on contact. A cooling gel beside it—I didn't know these things even existed. Flavored options in small tins: vanilla, salted caramel, something marked simply as *ripe*. *I wonder what that is?* A numbing blend set apart with a warning card—*CONTAINS CAPSACIN*. A sensitizing serum in a dropper bottle. A jar of rich oil for massage that is marked as condom-safe. Packets of extra-thick lube for anal—my skin heats. A small bowl of coconut oil that has already been emptied a great deal. Cloths, gloves, and a sealed box of condoms sit at the end of the tray like party favors.

His fingers tighten once at my neck when a *Veil* member passes close to us. The man is bearded and in his forties, and he joins others already seated along the far couches. There are an equal number of women to the men, which I find interesting. I peer back up at Cassian, to find him observing me as I take in this place he's created for people like us, for people who want more.

His eyes are dark, strands of umber hair falling from the styled coif over the edge of his mask.

Last night I asked to see his face. He said no. This is the compromise he offered instead. I remind myself that he has never sat in this room while it held club members, and he's certainly never done it with his submissive. I feel the cost of his compromise in the way his hand stays exactly where it is on my neck, in the extra second he takes before he guides me to a couch nearby, close enough to see the scene unfold and far enough not to be in the working space. Far enough away to be invisible to the other members.

We sit. Still, his hand remains on the back of my neck. I am wet from that alone, from the possession of it, from the fact that he will not let go even while he does something that frays him. *Maybe I ground him?* That thought makes me so hot.

I reach out, and rest my palm on his thigh. When a laugh carries from the other side of the drapes, his muscle jumps beneath my hand. I stroke once, slowly, from mid-thigh toward his knee and back, and feel him let a breath out through his nose. I do it again when two more *Veil* members take their places near the center couch. I do it because I can feel the effort in him, feel how hard this gift is to give, and because touching him like this is the only way I have right now to say *I know*. To say *thank you*. To say *I've got you.*

I ask myself, while I watch the room settle, if this is love. *Is love sitting in a place that brings you discomfort because the person you want asked you to keep one door closed? Is love a compromise like this?*

I tell myself he can trust me and still keep his face for himself. I tell myself I do not need his face uncovered to know him. To feel that he trusts me. To feel that he loves me back.

I *almost* believe it.

His thumb moves against my neck and heat slithers down my spine, landing between my legs. I'm already so wet. So ready for him, and whatever he has in store for me tonight.

I follow his gaze to the scene ahead.

The center couch is prepared. A woman is led in wearing only a thin gold chain at her waist, and she's so calm it's almost disarming. I look around, and everyone else is calm too, and I wonder, how many of these scenes do you have to watch to be able to be so calm? The woman looks at the four men who wait for her, then she nods. They are various ages, spanning 20s to 40s, their bodies are bare, cocks already hard, already oiled at the chest and the base of the cock so that hands will slide easily along themselves, and maybe one another. A Monitor sets a dark glass on the table beside the couch and retreats behind the curtains.

I watch. I can't do anything but watch now.

All the hairs on my neck rise, and bumps scatter up my arms and down my legs. The clamps on my nipples make me ache, but I can't look away. I can hardly breathe. I want to see this *whatever this is going to be* so badly.

She starts on her knees on the cushions. The first man stands in front of her. She takes him into her mouth with no hurry, lips sealed, one hand at the base of him, working him until his breathing changes. His hand settles in her dark, textured hair. He loses his fingers in it in a way that makes me entranced. She pulls off his cock, shining and pink, and turns to the second man.

To him, she does the same, taking him deep, then shallow, then deep again, her tongue only visible when she draws back. The third man she takes farther, enough that her throat works and her eyes water, beautiful tears shining a path down her pink cheeks. She stays there until he groans and has to step back a fraction. Her mouth feels good, her mouth is making him feel too good, maybe. My heart races.

The fourth she licks first, base to head, then swallows him down and holds, breathing through her nose, nostrils flaring as my clit pulses. She holds and holds until the Monitor at the edge of the space pokes their head out, gives a quiet mark of time, warning her maybe that she needs to breathe. I don't know. I still don't quite understand all the working parts.

At just a handful of minutes into the scene, she has taken all four men in her mouth, and they look at her like she is God. Not their God, but God herself. My mouth goes dry as I clench around the plug, starved and hooked.

Her lips are dark and wet. She looks proud of herself. And somehow, I'm proud of her, too. Cassian's fingers tighten around the back of my neck, edging me with his quiet power.

They move her onto her back on the couch. Silk is folded beneath her hips. One man coats his cock from the thick water-based lube bottle and presses himself into her vagina in one slow thrust. She takes him with a moan that echoes in my brain, changing me, for the better. He fucks her in long strokes while the others touch her—a mouth sucking on her nipple, two thick fingers rubbing her clit in a dizzying circle, more fingers curled into her mouth so she has something to suck. The man fucking her does not rush his ending. He fucks her in a rhythmic cadence that has me clenching, and when he's taken it as far as he can, he pulls out, and she holds the glass cup for him. His back arches, his eyes snap shut, chest flexing as his cock jerks in his hand, pulsing out white streams into the cup, his cum thick and pale against the dark glass. She looks at what he gave her and her mouth curves. My heart races.

The second man lubes up and takes his turn in. He is faster, shallower at first, then deeper when she lifts her hips from the silk to meet him. A third man puts his cock back in her mouth at the same time, so she's filled at both ends. When the second man finishes, he too orgasms into the cup. She watches it join the first and her cheeks fill with color, a pure smile curving her lips.

The sounds alone. Raw grunts. Her soft whimpers. Oiled, excited skin kissing skin. The low awe of the onlookers.

I am *so* wet.

The third man puts her on her side, one of her legs held open by another pair of hands, but I don't look to see who. I watch with bated breath as he uses the hybrid lube on his cock before dipping into her, the sound of it wet

and shameless. My belly flips, and I grip Cassian's thigh as I watch. She comes once while he is inside her, body pulling tight, nipples hard, stomach flexed, soft moans echoing through the space, but they don’t stop. He lasts through her orgasm and then pulls free and he, too, releases into the cup. She is shaking but still hungrily reaching for the last man.

The fourth coats himself and takes her from behind while she is held up on her knees and elbows. A wand is set to her clit on a low setting and left there. She comes again, louder. My skin hums. He fucks her through it and through the oversensitive minutes after, and when he finishes he holds the cup himself so she can see it leave him and land with the rest.

Four orgasms in the glass.

She takes the cup in both hands when they are done and looks down into it, like a gift she earned. She is gleaming with sweat and lube and the attention of four men who have not once made her feel passed around, but instead, revered, cherished, doted on. She has been the point of this evening —the sole focus.

The woman smiles at the cup, then at them, and the scene is called by the Monitor.

I cannot look away from her face. I am in awe of the focus, of the patience, of how thoroughly she was used and still is looked at as God. My own body is tight and wet and restless. Cassian’s hand has never left my neck. When I finally turn my head, I find him already watching me, not the scene.

I stroke his thigh again, higher this time. He is hard under his slacks, but I can’t ignore the tight set of his shoulders, and the fact that he is still anxious. I lean into the hold he has on me and try to impart that I am here.

He takes me out the way we came. The night air on the estate path is cool after the heat of that room. His hand slides from my neck to the small of my back and stays there until we reach the main house. Inside, he locks the door and only then does he take his hand away, and only long enough to lift me into his arms, against his chest, and carry me three flights up to his room.

His erection nudges me the entire time, and I’m scared I’ll come so fast, he looks so handsome, and that was so hot. “Thank you, thank you so much, sir,” I murmur, knowing what it took. Knowing that I enjoyed that far more than him, because he balanced his stress with his pleasure.

We arrive at his room and he kicks the door shut with his foot then slowly, we undress together, with care, piece by piece, with him unclamping my nipples, and sucking each into his mouth, easing the sting with his warm tongue. He pulls my naked body to his, running his palm over the places the dress made pink, and reaches back, circling the plug with his finger. “Leave it in.”

I nod, glad he said that. “Yes, sir.”

He carries me to the bed and lays me down on cool sheets. This is not *The Seraglio.* There are no trays and no other men. Moonlight pours in over us, shadowing the side of his face that isn’t covered by the mask. His cologne makes my chest tight, and his weight, his bare chest, the familiar smell of his skin, and the hard line of him against my hip—my heart starts to race, I want him so much. His shoulder torques as he reaches down between us, opening me with his fingers first, slowly, checking how wet the night has made me.

“You liked it,” he whispers, playing with the mess between my lips. I don’t even have to nod, because he knows what he feels. And I can’t lie to him. He strokes my clit a moment, making me moan, then notches himself at my opening, sinking inside with a patience that makes my eyes sting. I want him so bad and he’s going so painfully slow.

Once he’s in, he strokes out and back in slowly, cautiously… *tenderly*. Through the masks, our eyes are locked, and something feels so different tonight.

He’s never, ever just laid me down and made love to me. He’s never touched me so tenderly, and slid inside me with such controlled desperation.

This isn’t a scene.

This is the *us* I talked about before. We both know it.

“Stay with me,” he murmurs against my temple, voice hoarse as my eyes fill with unexpected tears. “I want you. I want to fill you with my cum until it takes. I want you swollen with what I put inside you, Ella. I want to breed you, do you understand? Do you know how much I want you?” His cock swells, stretching me deliciously as I hook my ankles at his back. He strokes in and out, and I feel like I could die. “I want my child in you. I want to keep you in this bed and give you more and more until you can’t walk.”

His admissions and his deep, even strokes make my head spin. The way he fucks me, not pounding, just seating himself fully on every stroke,

claiming me slowly, quietly. I hold his shoulders and I take it. I tell him “yes.” I moan “yes.” I tell him I want that too.

I moan and beg for more.

He groans like the words land in his spine and he fucks me a little harder, still sweet. When I come on his cock, my orgasm is long and shaking instead of vibrant and explosive, and he holds me through it. He keeps talking, voice low, telling me how his dreams are filled with coming inside me, about leaving his cum deep in my belly, about making me take it until there is no question what we are doing.

He finishes inside me with his forehead partially against mine, the masks between us, and he stays in me after, pulsing, breathing hard. Cassian doesn’t pull away for a long time, then finally he reaches for the cloth on the side table and takes care of me while he is still softening in my body. There is something so intimate about feeling him grow soft, while he’s still so tender with me, naked in his arms.

He wipes my mouth, my throat, the insides of my thighs where I am messy, then his own chest where sweat glistens in his hair. He checks my neck where his hand lived all night. He asks if anything hurts after he gently tugs the plug from my body. I tell him no. With one palm on my belly as if the talk of babies has already changed the map of me, he slides out, and presses the towel between my legs, crouched over me, naked and beautiful in the moonlight.

I reach behind my head and untie my mask, tossing it aside, but he doesn’t do the same. He strokes long fingers over my belly, and stares at me.

I lie there with his seed in me and his hand heavy and kind, and I think again about his face, about the door he will not open, about the room he walked into anyway because I asked for something he couldn’t give. Eventually he lies next to me, and I stroke his thigh under the sheet, the same slow path I used when he was anxious, and he makes a sound that is only for me. A sound that makes my chest hurt.

The house is quiet. The mansion is empty but for us.

What we did in this bed is ours. I close my eyes and keep my hand where it is, and I let the compromise be enough for tonight.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Six

CASSIAN

"FUCK, FINALLY," Lucien sighs, getting up from the chair across from my desk. At my side, knees pressed to the ground because she lost her pillow privileges, Ella sketches and pays no attention to Lucien, and the meeting we just had. *Good girl.* "This guy is a real stickler, man. I wouldn't use him again."

I shake my head. "They care about who is investing in them, Lucien. Who is building businesses in their home country. It's not a bad thing." I stack the papers, slide them into the folder, and pass them to him. "But you'll have to fly out. Be there while the second inspection is done."

He nods. "I figured." He peers over at Ella, which causes me to snap to gather his focus. "Sorry," he whispers, "It's just…"

"What?" I straighten my tie, and tip my head to the side. I love my brother but I want him to get out so I can have Ella crawl to me and suck my cock. Today has been one hell of a day where international property purchases are concerned.

"Can Amalia join me?" he asks, and I realize now why he was whispering. And that realization settles uncomfortably.

"Are you two in need of a getaway?" A few weeks ago they just had a unifying scene. They'd found their stride. But now he's whispering like he's not sure he wants Ella to hear, which means something may be amiss.

He sighs. "We're just—I'm struggling to come to terms with some stuff, and I may have said some things I didn't mean. Or," he scratches beneath

his ponytail. “Maybe I did mean them but I don’t know.” He sighs, letting his hand fall to his side, still clutching the folder. “Yes, we could use a getaway.”

I nod. “Of course she can join. Just make sure everything is set for the purchase, as agreed upon. Don’t let him change any of the conditions.”

Lucien nods, then outstretches a hand, and we shake. “Will do. Thanks.” He peers at Ella but only for a moment before looking at me. “Maybe you’ll consider what I said.”

My skin flares with heat. “I just said you can take your girlfriend on your work trip. Don’t push me.”

He winces, then turns and leaves, chatting with David quietly for a moment before popping his head back in. “Should I keep going, you know, with that other stuff?”

I nod, and he does, too. Moving across the room and closing the door, leaving me, finally, alone with her, alone in the house. I twist the lock, and rest my back to the wood, staring at Ella next to my desk, still dutifully sketching, knees bright red against the wool rug.

After her shower this morning, she asked me what my intentions were with anal. She explained she’d been tending to herself, making sure she’s clean and ready, but for weeks I’ve left her hanging, but for the plug the other night.

Asking got her punished with a trip to the St. Andrew’s Cross, some forced oral, and begging. Lots of begging for forgiveness that she isn’t the patient slut I told her she needs to be.

She also lost her kneeling pillow for the day.

I loosen my tie, and shrug out of the jacket she made me before she even knew me, and let it fall to the floor with a quiet thud. At lunch today, I ignored her verbally, all while stroking my hand between her legs while she ate. I’ve been edging her, ignoring her, torturing her, and it’s all about to come to a head.

“Ella. Look at me.”

She looks up, blonde hair down around her face the way we contracted, the way I like, the way her stepmother never let her wear it. “Put your sketches aside.”

She bites her bottom lip. “The show is a few days away.”

I tip my head to the side and huff out my irritation. “Everything is on track. You know this. Now obey me, and set it aside. Now, Ella.”

She does, but slowly, and that slowness has need coiling at the base of my spine, crawling slowly through my limbs like a slow spreading fire. “Get on your hands and knees.”

My little slut obeys quickly this time, falling forward, catching herself on her palms. She peers up at me as I nod. “Now, crawl.”

There’s probably ten feet between us, but it’s going to be a starved, erotic ten feet once she’s at my feet.

One palm outstretches as she starts to crawl, and I reach into my slacks to give my hard cock a tug. I love the sight of her crawling for me, to me. It’s beautiful. She looks so good being so vulnerable. “Tell me how you’re feeling.”

She puts another palm out, moving her opposite knee slightly, taking her time. “Good,” she breathes, peering up to caution a glance at me, before dropping her gaze to her hands. “I like obeying you. I like doing things that make me feel…”

“Slutty?” I supply, now stroking myself over my slacks as she nods fervently.

“Yes, slutty.”

“Does being my slut turn you on?”

She crawls forward a few more paces, and nods. “Yes.”

“Does obeying me make you wet?” My voice is much lower than I intend, but my arousal is burning in my throat. Her hips shift beneath the slip dress, red knees making their way toward me, hungry hands gripping the floor, knuckles white.

“Yes.”

I swallow hard, and the sound of it echoes between us as she continues to come to me on her hands and knees.

“So right now, you’re my wet, crawling, slut, is that right?”

She wastes no time answering, breathlessly at that. “Yes, yes,” she moans.

She arrives at my feet, and I have to take a moment to exhale, to regain my control. She makes me want to lose all control, but that’s not who I am. That’s not who I promised her. I clear my throat. “On your knees.”

Dutifully, she rocks to her knees and two pebbled nipples and two big blue eyes stare up at me.

“Touch yourself.”

“Where?” she asks.

I narrow my eyes. “You want me to play with your ass so much, warm it up for me. Trace it out, touch it. Let me see your face while you do, you filthy slut.”

She lifts her dress, pinching it in her teeth, then with both hands, reaches behind herself. I can’t see, but it’s evident she uses one hand to pull herself open, and the other to tease her tight little hole.

Her lashes fall against her cheeks as her eyes close, pink spreading up her neck and along her face.

“You love it, don’t you?”

She nods, and I can’t wait a second longer. “Don’t come, and keep touching yourself, but open your mouth. I need to use you. I’ve had a hard day, Ella, and I need your slutty mouth.”

I reach into the leg of my pants, the pair David purchased from Moreau on my behalf six years ago. An Ella Moreau original, really, though I didn’t know at the time. I pull out the silk stashed there, my cock weeping as I watch her touch herself because I said so, and tie the silk around her eyes because she designed these pants to belong to a man like me.

She was looking to belong to a person like me.

Her pink tongue is all I can focus on as a struggle to not get her golden hair tied up in the knot. Drool pools there, waiting, so hungry for my cock that she’s actually got saliva slipping down her chin.

I stroke myself again once she’s blindfolded, and press two fingers into her mouth, down her throat just a little, watching her gag and struggle.

She does it so well.

“You wanted to be blindfolded. That’s why you placed this strip of satin in the lining. You’ve been a slut all along, waiting for someone to bring it out of you. Isn’t that right?”

She nods, and I pull my fingers out, pressing them into my own mouth to taste hers. “Yes, sir,” she pants, her hands still working voraciously behind her back.

When I tug my zipper down, she lets out a breathy gasp, a needy quiet plea, like just the sound of me being out but not in her is torture. A tease. Edging.

I drag the slippery cap of my cockhead along her bottom lip, and watch her open wider, pink lips parted so beautifully, waiting with patience.

“I haven’t taken it, but it’s always been mine. Isn’t that right, slut? That tight ass of yours has always belonged to me?”

I plunge inside, finding her mouth hot and wet around me when words rip from my chest.

The thoughts that have been tangled in my mind, the words lodged in my throat. I'd planned to let this moment ruin me quietly, but watching her obedience and beauty. I can't hold back.

Inside my chest is a live wire. Heat doesn't stay where her mouth works me—it flies up behind my sternum, bright and sharp, dropping sparks that keep finding new places to land, new places to illuminate with hope and heat. I can feel my pulse in my throat.

"Fuck—" It comes out broken. I can't take my eyes off of her. Can't. "Do you know how long I wanted this? How many years I was starving for *you*."

She takes me deeper while she hums, biceps torquing as she touches herself back there, for the first time, for me. My hips jerk before I can stop them. My voice sounds like a wrecked ship in chaotic seas.

"I wanted you like this in moments that didn't exist yet. I wanted the version of my life that only showed up at two in the morning. Then I'd swallow it and go back to sleep. But now you're—"

I lose track of the sentence. Ella makes it true with her mouth, wet and relentless, and I can't tell if I'm dying or finally remembering how to use my lungs when I finally gasp.

"You're here. Fuck, you're here and you're mine," I grit out. "And I'm never letting you leave."

I smooth my hand through her hair on top of her head, gentle for a moment, then tug with a force that makes her whine, freeing the blindfold. Her dress has been covering her body since I commanded her to let me have her mouth, and now, in this frenzied state, her mouth isn't enough. Her covered body is too much of a tease.

"Crawl," I tell her. "Crawl to my room."

Spit coating her chin, Ella looks up at me, questioning, likely wondering who is in the house, who will see, who will bear witness to this degrading act of making her crawl for me.

But if she hesitates, she does it too quickly for me to catch. She falls onto her hands and I tuck my cock away before opening the door, and I follow behind, watching what's mine as she crawls to my room.

I ORDER her to wash up in the bathroom while I get the room ready, starting by unburdening my pockets onto the granite table near the closet. I take out my phone and see that Lucien has called. Twice.

Whatever it is, probably questions about upgrading he and Amara's tickets to business class, it can wait.

I gather what I need from the closet—the essentials—and slip out, placing the toy against the wall. Positioning the mirror to rest against the table, which will be behind us, I set the lube down and get to work on the buttons on my shirt.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and for a fleeting second, I smirk at the idea of taking the mask off. Of showing Ella who I am. What has happened to me? Of letting her in, giving her what she wants—something that could heal us both. But the moment is fleeting as the bathroom door clicks open, and Ella appears, completely nude, as instructed.

"Hands and knees, my darling," I gently remind her, and she does as I say, dropping to her already reddened knees and tired palms. "Crawl there, and start sucking." I point to the human-like dildo suctioned to the wall—the wall of my bedroom that I had specifically made in polished tile to look like the textured drywall. Silicone suctions best to tile and glass. And I'd always planned to have this kind of life, where my wife sucks a cock on the wall because she acted out, and must pay the price of her disobedience.

Unzipping my pants, I reach inside and pull out my already aching cock, fisting it. She peers at me in the mirror as she approaches, and slides her lips around the toy waiting for her.

Positioning myself behind her, I pump lube from the bottle and smear it up my shaft, Ella's eyes watching in the mirror as she gags on the thick toy. I fall to my knees. "You wanted your ass to be filled so bad, you disobeyed me," I say quietly, my voice causing bumps to erupt over her bare back, down the length of her spine. Our eyes lock in the reflection, and I don't break the scene but do remind her, since this is also new territory. "Remember your words, Ella. If you need to slow down, or stop." She sucks the cock deeper, gagging more aggressively. "Nod, slut, if you know your words."

She nods, and I place the head of my cock at her hole, taking a breath to steady myself before I look down to see it.

Puckered, tiny, her asshole blinks up at me, uncharted territory, virgin, *tight.* I place my other hand at the small of her back and press down, putting pressure on her as she sucks, eyes still on me.

“You are tight. No man has been where I am going, and you’ve never been where I’m about to take you,” I explain, stifling a groan as I trace her hole with my finger, spreading lube from my palm onto her. I get another pump, and press one finger inside, nearly spilling as she clenches all around me. “It’s going to hurt, and then, my little hole, it will feel so fucking good,” I promise, letting my cock rest against the globe of her ass as I reach down and use my other hand to feel of her bare pussy.

Soaked. So soaked that she hears my fingers move through her sticky arousal, even through her slurps. Sweat beads on her spine now, and the hair around her forehead grows a dark blonde color, damp from effort, from the heat between us.

“Are you ready?” I ask her, stroking myself with her arousal while still spreading lube on her hole.

She nods, not giving the cock a break. I smirk at her in the mirror. “You’re thinking of the woman at *The Seraglio*, aren’t you?” I place my head at her hole and slowly start pushing in, so slow that she whines and I groan, still managing to get my words out despite how blinding this moment is. She’s so tight. She feels like heaven.

“Slut. You loved that scene. You loved the way she took all those men. But you are mine, Ella. You will take me and only me.” I nod to the toy she sucks on. “That is a replica of me, because I won’t even have you suck the shape of another man.”

Another throaty whine comes from her chest, the reflection of her pink tits swaying as she bobs on the cock, spit on the floor beneath her, it’s too good. I need more.

I breach the tightest part of her ass, getting my cockhead inside. She gasps, the pain likely burning, deep and new. I give her more, another inch or so, I can’t know for sure. I can’t look down.

If I look down and discover the sight of my cock disappearing into her ass, it’ll be over.

I place my hands on her hips, and curl my fingers deep into her soft, cherry-scented flesh. I move my hips, feeding her more, withdrawing then giving it back, over and over. “Yes, look at you, taking it so well. Good girl, Ella.”

She moans, tears leaking down her eyes as she squeezes them shut. I stop, holding myself what feels to be partway, letting her tiny little hole adjust, letting her narrow canal grow comfortable around me.

“Cas—sir,” she corrects, taking her mouth off the toy to eye my reflection. I tear open my shirt, buttons flying, chest heaving. “More,” she finally says, eyes roaming the freshly exposed skin of my chest, the way sweat clings to strands of wild hair.

I grip her hips once more, feeding her another few inches before I’m finally fully seated, her muscles tightening and warring around me. “Sir, please, faster,” she moans, and I can’t help it. I’m torn between not wanting to listen to her—she obeys me, after all—and needing to fuck her tight warmth more urgently than I’ve ever needed anything.

“Suck that cock, you slut, and take what I give you,” I growl, pulling out but the head, leaving just a bit of me inside of her. She moans and tries to sink back on me, but I don’t let her. I press one hand into the base of her skull, and she accepts more of the toy, greedily, earning more of me in her ass.

I thrust forward, and her whines are absorbed by the cock in her mouth. Her eyes water, and I know I’m pushing her to her limits. I know the pain and pleasure is starting to fuse now, becoming one big thing she needs more of, that she can’t deny.

More and more, I slide in and out, slow at first but the tighter she clenches, the more my brain scrambles, the more my balls ache to unload.

I slip one hand around the place we join, and over her pussy, rubbing her clit. It only takes a few rubs and she’s unraveling, right before my eyes, rocking back on my hand and cock, while trying to keep the toy in her mouth.

“Perfect little slut,” I groan, my voice thin and hoarse. Her hole tightens and her pussy gives in, her orgasm slamming into her like a brick wall. The cock falls from her mouth, spit threading between her lips and the floor as cries out she’s coming, as she screams my name.

“Oh my god, I’m coming, yes, yes, *yes*, sir, I’m coming!”

My vision goes dark for a moment. The world falls out from beneath me. My cock pulses without warning, violent bursts of desire spilling from me in unstoppable waves. I come so hard I nearly fall over her back, forcing myself to stay straight, to stay strong. I look down finally, watching my

cock jerk inside of her as her hole milks the last of my orgasm from me in tight little pulses.

Nearby, I grab the towel, and press it into her as I pull myself out. She's exhausted, and wants to crumble, I can see it in the way her eyes beg me to lie down. To fall into a puddle of sweat and desire right there on the floor by the closet.

I gather her in my arms, pants bound around my thighs, and carry her into the restroom. I draw her a bath after I take her to the toilet room and close the door. When she comes out, I help her inside and stroke her sweaty hair off her face.

"How do you feel? Can I bring you a pain reliever?"

She smiles. "That would be nice." She blows a bubble from her palm into my direction, the swish of her bathwater making me too a little drowsy. "This feels nice. I feel nice."

I kiss her head. "You were wonderful. I'll give you a massage when you're done." I get to my feet, thinking of Lucien's missed calls when I tell her, "I'll be back in ten to collect you, my darling."

I close the door behind me, and leave my pants half open, the scene of sex still on display as I snatch my phone and see I've missed two more calls. Quickly, I step into my closet and call my brother.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he growls, but I don't panic because he doesn't sound winded, and he didn't show up at the estate. So it can't be a horrible emergency.

"Home, with Ella. What? What's going on?"

The pause is what gets me. A pause of fear or preservation, I can't decide, but the pause he takes makes my stomach lurch.

"Badd got a break in one of their undercovers. A cop. They're still working on him," he says, and I can't help but envision Ronan Badd, forearms coated in ink, long hair pulled behind him in a neat braid, beating some sideways cop senseless. Because I know what *working on him* means. "Do you want what he has so far, or do you want to wait, you know, in case there's more?"

So far and *more* are not words I was prepared to hear. Not just now, after such a good night with Ella, but ever.

I lick my lips, still tasting her there, remembering the night her virginity streaked my cock as I close my eyes. Remembering the way she was ready

to sign at the St. Regis, but waited, knowing she had to secure safety for her Grandma Connie.

I had Badd continue to look into Ella's life, because so much about her was missing due to Vivian. But after Alex, certainty was not a thing I could go without. Clarity, facts. Even if her life truly was just a boring childhood and bland teenage years before the workroom, still, I had to know. Knowing was a must. Knowledge, every stone unturned, all of it became a must. And it's been weeks since Badd's been digging.

Weeks of silence often meant that there was nothing to be discovered, and I'd grown comfortable thinking that very thing.

I thought Vivian had simply hid Ella because Vivian is a selfish monster. But now, there's more.

There's something.

"What?" My heart is already racing.

"Ella's father was in a coma when he died," Lucien starts, and I nearly roll my eyes.

"I already know this, Lucien. She told me. And that's not a secret. It's a matter of public record. In fact, *you* know this."

More silence.

He's aware that I know he knows this. So this isn't *the* news, and I realize that as a lump forms in my chest, square between my ribs. "But you know that. And that's not the news," I sigh. "Continue."

"There was an accident.."

I don't say anything, and now my silence speaks volumes, so my brother continues.

"A car accident," he says slowly, as if bracing me for what's to come. "Ella was at the wheel when it happened." His swallow makes my stomach drop. "She caused the accident that put him in a coma, and he died subsequently. That's what the cop is saying, so far."

She was driving the car that killed her father. Ella.

I grip the doorframe as my world spins, the back of my neck growing fiery hot. Sickness curls my veins and my bottom lip tingles. Suddenly, my chest is tight and it's hard to breathe.

"If you're having an anxiety attack, just breathe, okay?"

I nod, though he can't see me, but fight for more, fight to poke a hole in this, to prove he's wrong. "If that's true, why was she never jailed?" I've seen her police record. It's bare, because on paper, she barely exists.

“I don’t know. Ronan gained access to Vivian’s safe deposit box and found the photos of Ella at the wheel. He’s tracked down the cop that signed off on the report, and he said it’s all true. But… Ronan is still working him over, and he says there’s more coming, Cassian. Don’t do anything just yet. Ronan says we’re at the tip of the iceberg on this fucking mess.”

I can’t talk. I can’t do anything but slump against the doorframe as my palms sweat. “I gotta go.”

What more could there be? Ella lied to me. She lied. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

And the fact that she was behind the wheel and potentially caused her father to lose his life isn’t what’s circling my mind. Youth breeds foolish, often life-changing mistakes. Of course she couldn’t have meant for that tragedy. It’s not the accident.

It’s that she didn’t tell me.

She lied to me, after all I ever asked for was her honesty.

She lied, just like Alex.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Seven

ELLA

"HE HAD an early conference call with Lucien," David explains, feeling the weight of my pinched gaze following him around the dining room.

When I woke up this morning, I was surprised to find that Cassian had showered and gone to his office, and closed the door. When I found his wet towel, I thought maybe he'd worked out and was getting breakfast ready for us. But when I tiptoed into the hall and saw the closed door and heard his and Lucien's booming voices commingling with accented ones, I knew he was at work.

Without me.

I run my fingers over my sore, pink kneecaps beneath the cloth on the table, and watch David pour me another cup of coffee. It's my second cup, but my body won't settle. Nerves. Anxiety. Racing thoughts.

Is he mad at me? Why would he leave me and not even say goodbye this morning? I lick my lips and push a grape around my plate with the tines of my fork. *Maybe this is part of a game, a future scene?* But that doesn't feel right. *Maybe the meeting is secret and me kneeling at his side wouldn't be appropriate?*

But the meetings I've heard so far have been that way. Everything millionaires do requires the utmost discretion. I've assumed it. And I'd never share anything about Cassian or his business with anyone. Ever. As if I have anyone to share with, still. I wouldn't.

I'd never do anything to break his trust.

David makes his way to the door and I want to stop him and ask him what's going on, if anything. Or am I gaslighting myself and today is different than the other days, yes, but no, nothing is wrong? But I'm not supposed to engage with David. I'm not supposed to engage with anyone in the house. Not under our contract. Not first, at least.

So I let him go, and the soft click of the door makes my stomach drop.

After I run a comb through my hair and put on a navy blue slip dress—one of the very many that line my closet—I decide it best to wait for Cassian in the hall, to be as close to him as possible. I could go to the workroom but this isn't my approved time and with the way I'm feeling this morning, I really don't want to break any rules, even one as harmless as working in the wrong timeframe. With my sketchpad, I kneel next to his office door and start drawing the runway for the event at the end of the week.

A woman with a feather duster in her apron and a vacuum in one hand passes by, I know because I only glance up at her, just once.

She sees me here, kneeling, waiting, quiet, not talking.

Does she know I'm his submissive? Does she know I exist under his rules because it's what gives me the most gratification?

What do I look like to her?

A woman on her knees, waiting for a man.

I wait for the feeling to wiggle its way in. The embarrassment, and the shame. All the things I felt when Vivian would discover one of the pearl thongs I'd sewn into a gown, or when she found the nipple clamps in a bodice lining once.

No more weird stuff. That's what she said. *Enough with the weird stuff.*

And shame would slither through me like a snake with no end. Hot. Sneaky. Ugly. The same shame I felt that night, those years ago.

I never would have been there and needed to escape if I didn't have these needs. These feelings. These desires.

I wait, but the feeling never comes. The stinging warmth in my cheeks, the heated swarm of ants along the back of my neck. The shame doesn't come, and I'm not embarrassed to be kneeling in wait for Cassian.

It's the first time I've organically felt okay being me. And yet, when I think of my father, I think the way I am is what ended him. No matter what, I'll never be okay with that, so how can I be okay with myself?

The door opens, saving me from the harrowing road of thoughts my mind was just stumbling down, and I look up to see Lucien slipping out. He doesn't acknowledge me but when he's at the staircase he turns and says, "thanks for the bump to business. I'll text you when we land."

I follow his gaze to the doorway, where my masked man stands, muscular frame eating up the space, hardly allowing sunshine to filter past him. He glowers down at me for a moment before he drops his hand.

A peace offering?

I let the pad fall to the ground and I take his hand, my heart fluttering when his strong grip pulls me to my bare feet. He kisses me, on the cheek, not the lips, and pulls my body into his.

"Thank you, sir," I whisper against his chest as I blink madly, trying to keep the tears at bay. He doesn't ask why I'm thanking him because he knows. He knows that his kiss, this hug—it's saving me from a spiral of thoughts and fears.

He always knows.

"I have something to show you," he says, stroking his fingers through the top of my hair. "A surprise for you."

We pull apart, and I rock to my toes to push a dark strand of hair from his face, off his mask. He pulls back a little, and I can't help but react, my brow pinching, stealing my hand back. "What?" I drop my voice to a hush because while Lucien is gone, I know the mansion is not empty. "What's going on with you today?"

He stares at me. The time feels like years but can't be more than a few seconds, but his gaze is so intense, I hardly breathe. His lips part, and I want to catch all the words that tumble out, find a way to solve them and make them okay, and pass them back with a hug and a kiss.

But he never says anything.

Instead, he tugs our linked hands. "Come on. It's in your workroom."

We travel down three flights of stairs in silence, only right now, it feels stifled. Uncomfortable. Like the quiet is clawing at my throat. Grandma would always tell me that when I find the one, the best piece of advice she could give is never leave anything unsaid. I think of her, and the visit we had last week, the one that Cassian facilitated. He went out of his way to do that for me, just like everything else he's done. I peer up at the back of his head, wishing I could read his mind based on the way his shoulders are set or the pace of his stride, but I can't.

We arrive on the bottom level, down the dark hall leading to the workroom. He presses my birthday into the keypad with a soft touch, and the doors whir open.

Inside, the drafting tables sit in their usual places, the show's creations spread over them in the order in which they will go down the runway. Notes are pinned to them, with the name of the model, which shoes will go, how her hair should be styled. I wrote all those notes two days ago.

I'm pretty much ready for the show, but for final run-of-show details, like actual lighting and seat placement at the event. Marston said he'd get those details ironed out with me at the event, night of.

Cassian leads me to the back wall, lined with industrial sewing machines, where women have sat for the last three weeks making hundreds of my gowns. Replicas. I have a line now.

I almost can't even believe it.

He walks me past the mannequins where we test designs, the dress forms where we hang garments for final touches, and brings me to the window that overlooks the city, the furthest side of his estate. I can't see any *Veil* rooms from here, only the city in a blur of trees and winding streets, like seeing Manhattan through a kaleidoscope of beauty. I can't actually see it, but it's there, distorted by nature and space. It's better this way, really, blurring out the angry street people and bustle of business.

He pulls open the metal drawer on the drafting table nearby and retrieves a package, small, wrapped in tissue, with a velvet navy bow tied neatly around it. His hand leaves mine as he presents it to me.

"The final detail."

I blink up at him, half mask, half sinewy tanned skin, all handsome, every inch of him a man that I love. My eyes already burn, because Cassian doesn't do things small. Everything is thoughtful.

I pull the ribbon and the tissue opens, and in my hand is a pile of garment tags, waiting to be stitched into my work.

DESIGNED BY ELLA.

"When you start delivering your line to different retailers and designers, you'll no doubt get another label. But this, this one is the most important. No matter where your work goes, whoever wears it knows that it was you that created it." His nostrils flare. "They'll know they're in an original."

I blink down at the white labels, running the pad of my thumb over the black stitching.

“The girls know to get here an hour early tomorrow, to sew them into the gowns. That was going to be a surprise but…” Cassian surprises me by tucking hair behind my ear, running the back of his knuckles down my cheek, then throat. “I wanted to show you today how much I care about you.”

I lick my lips and blink up at him, eyes dipping to the exposed skin beneath the eye hole of the mask. I can’t see the skin because it’s shadowed, but he notices the way my gaze wanders, and collects my chin with his thumb and forefinger.

“You do know I care about you, right Ella?”

Ella.

Not my darling. Not my little hole. Not my slut.

Ella. The name he uses when he’s teasing, teaching, or… serious.

My tongue feels two sizes too big, and my lips stick together when I try to talk.

“I care about you. I would do anything for you.” He drops his hand. “In case you didn’t know that.”

I place the bundle of labels on the table next to him, brushing into his chest as I do. “I know you do.” I try to swallow, but it’s so hard, and my heartbeat feels almost painful in my eardrums. “I care about you, too.”

“Honesty from you, and *you*. Those are the only two things I asked for. Would you agree?”

I nod. “I would.” I have given myself in ways I never knew I could, and pushed myself in ways I had no idea were possible. Because he asked me. Because he wanted that for me, for him, and for the us we are building.

“Is everything okay today, sir?” I ask, refusing to use Cassian formally again. He is my sir, and whatever is going on with him today, whether it’s the way the contract date is closing in on us or simply a busy work schedule, all I want to do is pull him back to the place where we are us. Where I am his and he is mine, where he is my sir, and I am his thing. Where we thrive.

“Do you like this work space? Is it better than Moreau?” he asks, bypassing my question. Maybe it is just the fact that the contract date is nearing? Maybe even with all his millions, he’s afraid I will want to leave when the contract is up. Only, I have every intention of asking him if I can stay, not just for another sixty-day cycle, but for longer.

For more.

I talked with my grandma about that when she visited. I asked her how she knew my grandpa was the one.

“There wasn’t a big gesture, but then again, he didn’t have much money. It was more like, when I was with him, the rest of the world seemed to grow quiet, and I realized, that’s what it’s like to feel at home. He felt like home. And that’s how I knew. I’d never felt home until him.”

Maybe she knew that’s how I felt about Cassian. She definitely knew after she said that, when I got teary-eyed and nearly hugged her to death.

I look up at Cassian while feeding my fingers through his hands. He grips me back, thank goodness. “This is the best workspace ever, better than anything I could have dreamed up myself. It’s perfect, and I’ll never be able to say thank you enough.” I edge closer, and press to my toes, bringing my mouth to his. He waits for my kiss, so I guide my mouth toward his, slipping my tongue inside. “Thank you, sir,” I whisper between licks of my tongue along his. I kiss his lips and pull back, and he keeps my hands in his.

His eyes sweep mine, and I want to press him, ask him again what’s wrong, find out what’s on his mind. If he brings up the contract, I’ll reassure him, but then again, I don’t want to press too much.

I’ve already gone against his wishes and asked to see his face, asked him to let me in.

He nods to the door. “Come on. I’m having a working lunch with David about a problematic *Veil* member. I’d like you by my side.”

We leave the space, and I stay at his heels while he closes up, and once we’re in the office, I see a table has been rolled in, plates covered in silver domes, three chairs aligned. David knew that Cassian was going to bring me, so maybe everything is okay.

He pulls my chair out, and I take a seat, and though he ignores me the entirety of the lunch, he keeps his hand on my inner thigh, pinky over my panties, stroking gently, the entire time.

They talk, and I think about the work room. The labels. The resources and money he’s given me. My grandmother. Everything he’s done.

I don’t know what’s going on in his beautiful brain today, but as he and David draw a conclusion about this Adam character, I realize that this is more than submission and dominance.

I’m in love with him.

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Eight

CASSIAN

AFTER HEARING that he can never go back to flying coach because business class is “lit”, I end my call with Lucien and head to the gym on the second floor, where Ella meets me.

Sometimes after lunch I’ll run on the treadmill and lift weights, and she’ll sit perched atop the teakwood bench near the towels and watch. Sometimes she’ll sketch. Other times she’ll lie across the bench and nap.

I love having her near. In the mansion is one thing, but feet away, where I can lay eyes on her, bring her hair beneath my nose and smell her, taste her lips, tease her whenever I want—there’s nothing better.

She’s inside already, knees curled to her chest, a thoughtful expression on her face as she stares out the window at the fog rolling in over the lake. When you don’t leave your property, man-made bodies of water are essential. I have two. This one, which centers the property, is the larger of the two, lined with lavender and lilies on one side, and a bench and lawn on the other.

My instinct is to slide my hand over her shoulder, dip at the waist and find her mouth with mine, and lick away all her worries. Kiss them from her, swallow them down, so she’s got nothing on her mind.

But that side of me is locked away until after we renegotiate our contract, until after we’re more. The controlled side is all she gets for now.

And with the lie sitting between us wherever we go, control is much easier than before.

I keep thinking she'll come clean. I'll coax it out of her. Enough safety and she'll let down that remaining wall and let me in. Tell me the truth, the way I've been begging her from the start.

"My darling," I greet, slipping my hand beneath the strap of her dress, fingers grazing the globe of her breast. She twists, gazing up at me with foggy eyes.

"I didn't hear you come in."

I stare down at her eyes, pools of blue, so much angst, so much unease. I don't know what's on her mind. I know she's stressed about my change in state. I've felt it in the way she's not pressed me on a single boundary, she's been so obedient, so proper, even in areas that she usually likes to push. Like ignoring me when I ask her to pass the coffee at breakfast, or pretending she can't feel my hand around the back of her neck while she sits next to my desk on her knees.

Little games we play, little ways to keep us testing the boundaries of our roles. Foreplay, all day, that's what I call it.

But yesterday and today, she's been nothing but *yes, sir* and *no, sir.*

She needs to feel reassured, but to do that, I need her to let go. To tell me what happened before I have to tell her that I already know, before the lie ruins us. And it will, it will sit between us like something dead, rotting away more and more each day, festering, gathering energy, taking up space, smelling, turning us away from one another, consuming us both until we're dead, too.

That's how lies work.

They ruin everything.

In a moment, I decide to skip the workout. I reach in my pocket, eyes still set on hers, and phone David. "Check security, let me know if any *Veil* members are on-site."

Her pupils widen.

"No," I reply to David, "in general." I hold while he finds out, and a moment later gives me just the news I was expecting. "Perfect. Temporarily change the gate code so no members can enter. Send an email to everyone letting them know the club will be closed for an extra cleaning for the next two hours. And David, no one on staff is to leave the main house until that timeframe is over."

I end the call and slip my phone back into my pocket. "I want to take you to *The Gilded Cage*."

She looks around the room at the weights, the clock on the wall, then back to me. “Now?”

I shake my head. “I wasn’t asking. I was telling you. And yes, we’re going now.” I reach for her wrist and yank her off the bench to her feet, which earns me a throaty little gasp.

I TAKE her through the house and out the garden around *The Throne* until we find the path again, passing *The Looking Glass* and the sea of lavender and lilies by the lake. Eventually, following the cobblestone, we arrive at a metal building with a tin roof, surrounded by lush lawns with what I know is a bench out back. *The Gilded Cage*. One of my personal favorite rooms, if not very favorite. Sconce light runs along gilt frames and sheet metal paneling, but daytime still peers through the trees around us. My hand sits at the small of her back, guiding and controlling. She is already quieter than she was upstairs, and I really do think this is what she needs right now.

I stop her in front of the large metal door, the one that looks just like the siding.

“Look at me.”

She does. I study her pupils, the color in her cheeks, the way her shoulders have already begun to settle into the shape I prefer—sloped, soft and accepting.

“You remember how this works. You speak if you need to. You tap if you can’t. Green keeps us in scene, and anything else ends it.” I take her chin and squeeze. “This will be intense, so if you aren’t in the headspace, tell me now.”

“Green,” she says.

I unlock *The Gilded Cage.*

The door is heavier than it looks and the shiny metal catches the sunlight when it swings open. The room does not smell like a sex dungeon, but instead, warmed leather, cedar, metal polish, and silk that has been laundered and starched. Low light. No music. Even music holds time, in the duration of words, the cadence of the chorus. The quiet is intentional. People come here to be taken out of time.

I let her walk in first so I can watch her take it in.

The Gilded Cage is captivity by choice. The cornices are gold leafed, the hooks in the beams are brass and shaped like ivy, strong enough to hold a body for hours. Silk ropes hang in coiled hanks the color of champagne and dried roses, each one finished with a polished metal ring so the hardware never looks industrial. Cedar chests sit beneath the far mock-windows, lids carved, latches ornate. Inside them more rope, more silk, the things that should not hang in the open air, to see upon entry.

Restraint furniture is scattered about like art pieces.

The St. Andrew's Cross stands against the inner wall, dark walnut inlaid with thin veins of gold. Wrist and ankle cuffs are already mounted, lined in silk the same pale gold as the ropes. On it, a padded waist belt with a collar ring at the apex. It is built for display as much as for suffering, which Ella is quite aware of.

Beside it, a low bondage bench on claw feet, oxblood leather, restraint points at every corner with a slight decline along the spine so whoever lies on it *presents* themselves without being asked.

On the wall, there is a kneeling stock with a silk-lined yoke and ankle cups. An elevated frame I had commissioned from a California company called *Debauchery*—part bench, part cage, part altar. And the cage itself: tall enough to kneel in, bars spaced for a hand to reach through, a lock that looks like jewelry but truly functions, a silk cushion on the floor because even captivity here at *Veil* is meant to look expensive.

I take her to the wall of leather first.

"Impact," I tell her. I do not rush moving through the inventory. She should hear what the room contains before tonight's scene, it's only fair.

"Floggers first. Suede falls on some. Elk hide for a heavier bloom that sits in the muscle versus on top of the flesh. Buffalo for the sound as much as the strike." I finger the soft leather and bring my lips to her ear. "It lands like a door closing." I stand straight as her chest grows red, nipples hard. "A looped flogger. A dragon-tail if someone wants marks right away and only temporary play. Crops." I lift one, let her see the braided shaft and the folded leather slapper at the tip. "Dressage whip. Longer. Hits harder when you flick at the wrist instead of swinging with the arm," I explain, taking off the whip to mime the motion, before replacing it. "A tawse with two tails," I tell her as I point. "A thick strap. A studded paddle we rarely take down unless it is specifically requested by comfortable submissives."

"Comfortable?" her voice is hoarse and it makes me hard.

“Broken in. Familiar with the other toys. Familiar and adjusted to pain,” I explain, and watch as she faces the toys again.

“Canes in the separate rack—rattan, leather,” I recite, picking up a leather cane and letting her run her finger tips over it.

I sink the crop back onto its hook and move her to the glass case.

Steel.

“Cuffs with hardware and silk-wrapped interiors. A collapsible spreader–” I pause, because she’s sewn these into her gowns under the guise of boning. She smirks, her cheeks pink.

“Clover clamps on a fine chain—those stay. Alligator clamps for when clover clamps are not enough. A pinwheel. Steel plugs, polished, graduated. A slender hook with a silk tether, used for anal play mostly, but only if you know what you’re doing.” She sucks in a sharp breath, but I continue. “Shackles. A short chain leash. A ring gag. Everything that locks, locks cleanly. Everything that touches skin has been thought about.”

I watch her reflection in the glass. She is breathing through her mouth, little puffs of air that turn the glass white for a moment.

“People come to this room to be bound for hours,” I say. I stand behind her now, close enough that she feels the heat of me without the comfort of a full embrace. “Displayed, left waiting, used, immobilized until the waiting itself becomes the point. Some of them never get touched and some of them get touched the entire time. The way the room is decorated and designed is a reminder.” My heart is suddenly pounding. “A reminder that though you may be kept, you are to be worshipped, because you are in control of it all, really.”

Her pulse jumps under my fingers when I take her wrist. Does she know that’s how I feel about her—that she is my thing to worship, who runs my heart and mind? That I want to keep her, but make her my queen? Whip her, but lick the tender flesh after? Degrade her, but remind her with my lips to her ear that I live and breathe for her?

Does she know?

I undress her without hurry. Not stripping for an audience but unwrapping her, a prized possession, my prized possession. When she is bare I turn her to face the walnut and gold and lift her arms.

I snap the silk-lined cuffs close around her wrists. I check their fit with two fingers under each. “Okay?”

She nods, and then it’s ankles next, spread just wide enough that she has to work to keep her balance, silk against bone, buckles catching the light. The waist strap cinches across her belly—tight but not dangerous, just like her bodices.

I add the metal collar and run a short chain from it to the ring at the apex so she cannot drop her chin and hide her face. Then I take the silk scarf from the chest, fold it, and ready it.

“Open.”

She opens. I tie it behind her head, snug, and set the steel ring over it so her mouth stays the shape I want. Her breath hits my knuckles, hot and uneven. I wipe a smear of saliva from the corner of her lip with my thumb and show it to her before I put my thumb in my own mouth.

“Color.”

Around the gag she tries, “Green.”

I kiss the place just beneath her eye, where the skin is thin, and then I take my cock out.

I do not give it to her all at once. I paint her lower lip with it first, watch the silk darken, watch her try to chase. Then I feed her. Slow. Deep enough that her eyes water. I hold the back of her head against the wood and use her mouth the way this room was built to be used—claiming, unhurried, attentive. When she starts to work for it, when her throat opens on a swallowed sound, I pull out.

The wand is already in my pocket. I turn it on low and press the head to her clit.

She jerks in the cuffs but the chain at her throat holds her tight. I count off the seconds as I edge her. The vibration is a blunt, filthy pressure, not a tease dressed as kindness but pure torture with how near she already is. How much she likes the restraints. How much she wants my cock. I put my cock back in her mouth and fuck her throat, sweat slithering from beneath my mask, down my face, plunging relentlessly in and out until her jaw trembles.

I repeat the cycle.

Mouth. Then the wand, a little higher, a little meaner, until her hips try to lift off the wood and there is nowhere for them to go. I turn off the wand and return to her mouth, a cycle that has her on the edge, cheeks so flush she looks like the cherries she smells like. Saliva runs along the steel ring and down her chin and her blue eyes grow fuzzy, the coiled need inside her

wiping away her ability to think. I keep her there on the edge until the sounds she makes around the gag are raw and wet and furious, until her thighs shake and the silk at her wrists shines from sweat.

"Good," I murmur. "You wait so beautifully, my little slut."

I drop to a crouch. I drag what is left of the silk aside—there is almost nothing left to drag—and I look at her. Flushed. Open. Gleaming. I put two fingers through her and find her soaked, then I stand, notch myself against her, and push into her pussy in one long stroke.

The room hears it.

I fuck her like that, deep and steady, hardware whispering every time her body tries to move and cannot. The cross holds her in a shape made for being taken, made to be helpless for me. I set a hand on the chain at her throat, not pulling, just reminding, and I watch her stomach jump each time I bottom out. When I am close enough to be cruel about it, I pull out, step up onto the footplate, and put my cock back in her mouth.

"Lick," I tell her. The word is quiet, echoing, making it feel worse than a shout. "You made this mess, now clean it."

She does. She always does, my good slut, my perfect girl. I watch her taste herself on my cock, watch her throat work, and the precise filthy satisfaction of it lands low in my spine. I let her have all of it—base, shaft, the wet of her own cunt—until I decide she has had enough for one pass.

Then I go back to her pussy.

Followed again by her mouth.

Over and over.

I fuck her until her knees would have given out if the cuffs allowed it. I pull out and make her lick herself off me while the wand waits in my other hand like a second mouth. I put the wand on her clit between strokes and take it away before she can fall. I use her throat until her tears are abundant and then I am back inside her cunt, slower now, grinding, making her feel every inch she is not allowed to close around.

She is shaking when I finally unclip her from the cross.

I do not take the gag out. I do not uncuff her wrists. I gather her against my chest and carry her three steps to the piece I had made for this room and have never used.

The Gilded Cage centerpiece.

Part bench. Part cage. A low structure of gold-leafed iron and padded leather, built so a body can be displayed and used and left. I set her

kneeling, because she looks so beautiful doing it, and she's so good at it.

The padded bar rests against her ribs. I lock her wrists behind her back in a reverse prayer—silk inside the cuffs, steel outside, a short bar between them so she can't even wring her hands. Ankle stocks spread her knees wide and hold them there, the way my hands would. A second collar clips to the frame so her spine stays long and her throat stays presented to me. I can't help but eye the leather collar she made, the one she wears daily to symbolize us. Swallowing against her lie that rests center in my chest since I've come to know it, I add a thin steel spreader between her thighs, then a leather belt around her hips with a small ring at the front.

I seat the wand there.

It hums against her clit, strapped down so she cannot escape the pressure even if she wants to, even if she bucks, even if she begs with her eyes. The device makes a pretty prisoner of her, and god is she beautiful like this. "You could be bound for hours, if I chose. Immobilized." I stroke myself and watch her eyes, watch for cues that she is nearing any limits, but only find desperation and need staring back at me. "Blink twice if you'd like to proceed, my slut."

Two immediate blinks. Just what I'd hoped. I am so proud of her, how far she's come since the pearls that night brought her to tears. And yet there is it again in my mind.

The lie.

Moving, I stand behind her and look at what I have made.

The lie makes me urgent, and I take her hips and push back into her, making her moan around the metal and silk. "That's right. You have to take it, because I want to give it," I growl, biting the back of her soft earlobe.

I fuck her in time with the timed iterations of the wand, then fuck her against it, then in long grinding strokes that force the head of the vibrator to stay exactly where it will unravel her if I don't stop. Her muffled sounds climb the walls but die against the silk. The chain at her collar ticks against the frame and sweat beads down my throat, and my face beneath the mask is coated.

I reach around and press two fingers to her mouth beside the ring, just to feel the heat of her breath, to feel her. Fuck, I'm so in love with her, the lie hurts more than what Alex did to my face.

"You don't get to hold it," I say into the sweat at the nape of her neck. "Not in here. Come. Come now, slut, now," I growl, overcome with

emotion, overcome with the need to feel her tense and clench around me, to make her putty in my grasp.

Ella breaks.

It is not pretty or quiet. Her whole body tries to fold and the frame doesn't allow her to budge—that’s what it was built for, but this, this is what she was built for.

She comes hard, pulse after pulse, a helpless clench all around my cock that travels into my own control and steals it, the same way her designs stole me, my heart. I come inside of her, aching and deep while I keep the wand on through it and I continue fucking her through it, every shuddering moment. The second wave hits her like a punishment she asked for, that she deserves, and the sound she makes behind the gag dies into nothing—just air, just shaking, just the wet helpless rhythm of a body that has nothing left to give.

Then my beautiful slut goes quiet.

Not empty but quiet, the certain hush that comes after the nervous system has been wrung out and laid flat. *Subspace*, I know this silence. I have put her in it on purpose, and I feel the shift in myself as soon as I recognize it in her.

The wild desperation drains from my hands.

I shut the wand off. I unlock her slowly, piece by piece, and I kiss the marks as I find them. The silk-damp insides of her wrists. The faint memory of metal left at her throat. The red where the spreader held her. The tremor in her thighs when the stocks open. I take the ring off first, then the scarf, and I wipe her mouth with my own shirt.

Ella does not speak. She only breathes, small and even, against my shoulder when I lift her.

I wrap her in one of the silk throws from the cedar chest. Champagne-colored, like her beautiful hair. Hair that I tangle my fingers in as I soothe her. I carry her out of *The Gilded Cage*, and head back down the cobblestone, evening warm at our backs. Birds chirp. The water in the lake moves with the breeze. A cricket calls for his mate. But her breathing is the only thing I’m really listening to. In and out, slow and steady, I carry her past *The Looking Glass*, curving around it, relieved when I see *The Throne* and know we’re close to the house.

Outside air on my face and her hair against my mouth, the crunch of my property beneath my shoes that I never even took off because I was so eager

to get her here. To this place where she exists now, willing to tell me anything, will be open, because she is so spent. So grateful.

I push into the main house, dark and quieter than outside. My room is at the end of the third floor, and hers is just down the hall. I know what I must do, and make my way up the stairs, quietly passing another new tapestry of Abelard and Minon that was just hung today.

Once there, I nudge the door open with my foot and make the few paces inside, then lay her down on white sheets and pull the throw over her hips. I sit on the edge of the mattress with my palm on her sternum so I can feel her come all the way back into her body.

I smooth her hair off her forehead. She's so beautiful, it seems hard to believe she's even real. I find a bottle on the nightstand and wet a cloth, cleaning her gently, slowly.

Between her thighs.

The corners of her mouth.

The line of her throat where the collar sat.

I press my mouth to the inside of her wrist where the cuff has left its ghost.

Her voice, when it comes, is hoarse and small. "What's going on with you?"

Not a question about the scene. A question about me. About us. She's felt the shift. Of course she did. I went from using her to worshiping the places I used, and she is too sharp not to notice the difference between appetite and something that looks, dangerously, like care.

I look at her in the dark. That I have been holding her story in my mouth for too long and it has started to taste like blood. That I put her in gold and silk tonight because I needed her held still while I decided what I was allowed to feel, what I could do with this situation she has put me in. None of them, though, would be the whole truth.

"Are you okay? After the scene? Do you feel okay?" Her well-being takes precedence. *Even over the lie.*

She nods, and reaches for me, gripping my wrist. "I'm fine, sir. But what's going on with you?" She licks her dry, cracked lips, sore from the way I used her mouth earlier, no doubt. "With us," she clarifies.

My voice is raw and hoarse, not from strain but from emotion. From pain. "I could understand anything," I say, "if I am given the chance."

From my pocket, my phone rings.

I pull it out, finding Lucien's name on the screen. He never calls for social reasons because he's here all the time, and I can't help but think of the last time he called, the news he had.. I answer with a quiet word and listen to the two he gives me in return.

"I'm going to meet my brother," I tell her. I kiss her hairline, then I stand.

The door opens. Hall light cuts across the bed in a hard gold bar, and I watch her see the room—the dark wood, the books, the chair that is not mine, the fact that this is not my room but… hers.

Her eyes find mine.

"Why am I in here?"

"Maybe you'll be better in here tonight."

I close the door on the rest of it before I can say anything I will not be able to take back.

Lucien is already in my office when I make my way there, rebuttoning my shirt and fixing my hair. I swipe my hand beneath the mask to rid myself of sweat.

He sits with two glasses, half full of amber liquid. The city is a black sheet beyond the windows.

"Badd Security broke the cop from that night," he says, sparing the preamble. "The one on the scene. I don't want to know how. I only want you to know it may cost us an office in California. It's a big break." He drinks. "He lied before, corroborating his report from that night. There's more to it. Much more."

I sit. I do not reach for the glass. I can still smell silk and her skin on my hands.

"He's the one who found Ella in the driver's seat," Lucien continues. He watches my face the way he has since we were boys, looking for the crack. "Turns out he was having an affair with Vivian."

The room goes very still in my head. *The Gilded Cage*, the chain, the quiet girl in my house—all of it recedes to a precise, cold point. I have to force my body not to tremble, for anxiety to not claw through me and take hold.

"So it may not be true," I say.

"Exactly. Or… there may be more to it. We won't know until—"

"Bring him in," I say. "Now."

I look at the dark window. I think about gilt cuffs and a story that has been sitting wrong in my mouth for months. I think about chance, and understanding, and the difference between a room built for captivity and a house I carried her into without asking her first.

Lucien is already standing. He sets his glass down untouched.

“Already on it.”

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CHAPTER
Twenty-Nine

ELLA

I DON'T WANT to wear the slip dress. I don't want to wear my hair down. And I most certainly do not feel comfortable in the leather collar today.

No.

I want to slouch around in pajamas. I want to put my hair up. And I want to rip off this foolish collar and leave it at my feet as I storm the hell out of this room.

Out of this mansion.

I pick up my phone—the one Cassian got me the day I arrived, because of course I couldn't keep my old one, what with Vivian being able to track me on it. I call my grandma, and even though I have no intention of burdening her with whatever is going on, I still need to hear her voice.

I need to hear the voice of someone who loves me.

Unconditionally.

Cassian says he cares. Says he'd do anything.

But he left me in my room and it's been two days of coolness. He eats with me at breakfast. I kneel at his side all day. When I go to the workroom to check on the show preparation, he takes his swim or goes to the gym, breaking our routine of allowing me to be there. To be in his presence. To watch.

That was something we've both enjoyed for weeks.

I pace the vanity in the spare room as the phone rings, and a relieving moment later, I'm met with my grandma's soft voice.

"Eleanora?" I can hear her smile.

Tears sting my eyes from the sentimentality of hearing her voice, from remembering the other day when she was here and I hugged her. I stroked my fingers through her soft hair and smelled her familiar scent of lavender and fabric softener. Heard the softness in her voice when we talked about love, and life.

"Grandma," I breathe. And though I had called just to feel good from hearing her, I can't help but spill—the tenderness in the way she says my name making it impossible to hold back. "Something's gone wrong between me and Cassian and… I don't know what to do. I don't know what's going on," I sob, shaking my head as I sink into the chair in the corner of the room, catching my forehead in my palm.

She didn't get to formally meet Cassian that day, and now I'm not sure if that was because he didn't want to meet someone he knew wouldn't be in his life, or what. "He's an eccentric man, you said."

I sniffle, thinking of the mask. Of the fact that he hasn't left here in years—except to find me at Moreau. I think of his words, the sincerity in all of his confessions about doing anything for me. For us.

And yet, I've never felt so lost.

"Things were going good, and then he asked me to sleep in the other room. And when I asked what was wrong, he just said that he could understand anything if only he were given the chance."

Silence fills in the line, though I can hear the quiet commotion of the nursing home in the background. Grandma keeps her door open, because she likes people to stop in. She loves visitors.

My arms burn to hold her.

"Oh," she finally says. "Well I'm not sure what to make of that."

I shake my head, and peer out my window at the sea of cactus plants and succulents that border the southern side of the estate. "I don't either."

"A good old fashioned talk may do the trick," she says with tenderness in her voice. "Have you tried asking him what's wrong, again?"

I chew my bottom lip as I watch a man in khaki pants and blue dress shirt, arm linked with a woman in cargo pants and a crop top, make their way on the gravel path, around one of the *Veil* rooms, then inside. Even at noon on a Thursday, *Veil* has members in and out.

What Cassian has created is remarkable, and I'm in awe of him. Always.

"I haven't." I twirl a piece of hair around my finger and let it go, nervous, and unsure.

"You should," she says, "before the show. Get things cleared up before your big night so you can enjoy it. You deserve that."

I sigh. "Are you sure you don't want to come to the show?"

When she was here the other day, I explained my work to her as best I could. I showed her the sketch book, and images taken in the workroom from Marston. I even showed her Marston's binder for the show, and all of his plans. I was nervous she'd judge me, but there wasn't a way to share the show and keep a secret. And if I'd never kept my secret from my dad, maybe he'd be here.

But she held no judgement. In fact, she giggled, and told me that she knows more about the adult world than I'd be comfortable knowing.

"Oh honey, you know I'm asleep by a quarter to nine, and your show doesn't even start until then." Her smile is audible through the receiver. "Go talk to Cassian. He's a good man. Whatever it is, you can work it out."

After a few more good lucks and well wishes, we end the call and I decide to take grandma's advice. And I decide to not defy Cassian along the way.

I put on my slip dress and comb my hair, leaving it down, and leave my collar on. After all, taking it off would only make things worse, and it would void what we've established in the contract. I don't want to void the contract. I didn't mean to press him. He could have held me to that, and torn up the contract right then, but he didn't.

Thank God.

"COME IN," Cassian answers when I knock gently against his office door. I step inside, finding him there, already working. He looks up at me, then glances at the gold watch glittering on his wrist. "Time for breakfast already?"

No *good morning, my darling.*

No *how did you sleep my little slut.*

Nothing.

“Why are you punishing me? Is it because I asked you to take off the mask?” The questions tear out of my throat, hot and potent, unstoppable, carving a solid place between us as his gaze jerks to mine.

Cassian gets to his feet but still says nothing as I close the door behind me, and move halfway to his desk, stopping.

“I’m sorry I did that. I know that what I did was against what I agreed to and I’m sorry, I really am. I only just… I don’t know. I realized how deep I was falling and I just became desperate for more of you. To feel like you trusted me the way I trust you.” I hold my hands at my spine, behind my back, and keep my chin up. “I’m sorry I asked to see your face, sir. I only asked because… I want all of you.”

I edge forward one more barefooted step.

“I’m sorry I asked but please don’t shut me out, sir. Please. It’s killing me. I’m going crazy without you treating me like normal.”

Another moment of silence before he sits in his chair, and calls me to his lap with a sturdy pat to his thigh. My heart races with excitement, because for two days he’s barely acknowledged me sketching at his side. I run to him, and sink into his lap, and he pulls my hands around his neck. The heat of his face and scent of the polished mask send warmth down my spine, the familiarity of him is something I’ve grown comfortable with, hooked on, even.

“I’ve shared with you that my last submissive tricked me. That she pretended to be someone that she was not. Right?”

My brows fall flat. I didn’t expect this. Cassian has never wanted to talk about Alex or his past, and I thought I’d always live in mystery where she was concerned. My throat is hoarse when I say, “right.”

“There were signs all along, in hind sight, but I wanted it so much—the dynamic, a partner, a future—that I overlooked them.” He strokes hair over my shoulder and presses his lips there, stubble grating, making my body go hot. “She resisted in scenes, fought, argued, didn’t like much of what she said she did.” He kisses my shoulder again. “Not like you, Ella. You like it here, don’t you?”

I nod and find my voice weak. “I love it here.” *I love you*, I don’t say.

He nods, rocking us gently in the office chair for a moment. He’s growing stiff beneath me, and my entire body is ready for him. To be

thrown across this desk and pulled apart, to be teased and pinched—whatever he wants.

But he ignores his erection, so I do, too.

“Part of the reason I created *Veil* was so that there would be no more Alex situations.”

I play with the dark hair at the back of his neck. “What does that mean?”

“No more liars.”

I’m afraid to ask why he’s all of the sudden sharing, why he’s opening up to me at a time when he seems further away than ever, despite the fact I’m squarely in his lap, fingers splayed against his neck. Scared of asking the wrong thing, scared of making him close up again, I roll my lips together and peer into his soulful dark eyes, hedging, “What happened with Alex?”

Cassian takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger, familiar and hot, but he still feels so faraway as he kisses me. It’s the first real kiss in a few days, and it makes my eyes mist. “She lied to me. And lies are destructive and cataclysmic to love, do you know that?”

I nod but then David knocks at the door but doesn’t wait to be told to come in, and simply enters, a packet of papers in his hand. “Cassian, Marston is here for Ella.” He looks my way. “It’s time to run through the show. Are you ready?”

Shit. I forgot that it was today. But of course it’s today, the show is tomorrow night. This opportunity was given to me and I’m twisted in knots trying to understand what’s going on with Cassian. I nod, looking over at David, whose face gives nothing away if he is aware of what’s going on. Not wanting to leave him while he’s sharing, while we could be edging nearer to whatever is going on in his beautiful mind, I do what I have to do. I smile, and say, “Yeah, I’m ready.”

He nods. “Great. Meet you in the library as soon as possible.”

He closes the door and Cassian slips me off his lap, a bit jarring, and stands, moving past me toward the door. “I’ll have breakfast brought into the library.”

I grab his wrist and stop him. Cassian allows me to stop him. “I don’t care about breakfast.”

The moment is so charged, and I’m so confused. “I’m sorry I asked you to take it off.” *Was me promising not to ask then still asking him the big lie*

he's referring to? "I didn't mean to lie when I gave you my word that I wouldn't ask about the mask." I never thought I'd fall in love and obsession.

I truly didn't think I'd break that rule.

I reach for his hand but he doesn't let me take it. It's only a few feet, but it feels like mountains between us. Years, lifetimes. Panic sears my senses and my heart flops behind my ribs, making me suck in a breath. Something is wrong, and I don't know how to fix it, but I hate this. I hate it. Cassian moves to the door and pulls it open.

"I'm very sorry," I repeat, feeling desperate, feeling helpless, overwhelmed and confused. I don't want to keep going like this, but I don't know what to do, and in a panic, I find myself impulsively saying everything I thought when I was upstairs in my room, alone.

"You tell me how important it is to always tell you how I'm feeling, to always share," I blurt out, causing Cassian to stop, his hand gripping the door knob, knuckles white from how tightly he holds it. He doesn't face me, but pauses, and I run with it.

"But something is going on with you and you're not communicating with me, Cassian. I've been telling you how I feel, anytime you ask, sharing with you my mental status during subspace, checking in, doing everything you've asked of me!"

I don't mean to raise my voice. I know I'm not allowed. But this silence out of nowhere, this space out of nowhere, I can't stand it. Especially with the end of the contract only twenty-four hours away. "I thought we'd be renegotiating the contract, talking about what's on the horizon, but you're further away than ever, and I don't know what to do. I don't know how much to endlessly give before you give some, too."

Cassian turns, his eyelids hooded, dark eyes set sharply against me. He keeps his hand on the knob, and the other falls to a fist at his side. I'm not scared of him physically, but right now, the way he's looking at me has my heart full of fear.

He punches at his chest, thick lines of strain appearing in his throat, beneath the crisp white collar of his shirt. "I have been doing what I said I would. I have given you everything I said I would. Do not talk to me like I'm the one who has fallen short on their word!" he snaps, causing me to wince back, even falter a step, my hands splaying out behind me against his cluttered desk.

Cassian’s arm drops when David pushes the door open. I don’t know what he heard, if anything, but he looks between us just once before his focus settles on his boss. David won’t even look at me.

“Marston Wellingham is waiting in the library for you, Miss Moreau. He only has the next three hours to run through the show before tomorrow.”

Cassian adjusts the knotted tie at his throat before smoothing a hand through the side of his hair. His dark eyes lift from his shoes and come to mine. “Go meet with Marston. We will talk later.”

My nostrils flare as heat and pain fill my eyes. “Will we?” I ask, but it’s rhetorical and he knows it. David steps into the hall, waiting for me, and I make my way to the door, stopping in front of Cassian.

I drop to my knees at his feet and wrap my hands around his calves, looking up at him, trying to show him that no matter what is going on, I’m here. I’m wearing the collar. I’m here for him, for us.

Finally, he looks down at me. “I’ll have breakfast sent to the library so you do not go without.”

I get to my feet and walk past him with my head down, afraid to look into his eyes. “Thank you, sir.”

I find David in the hall, head down, pretending he wasn’t just listening to us because what else can he do? He sits in on the rehearsal with myself, Marston, and the two assistants hired by Cassian to help the show go off without a hitch. We Zoom the photographers to go over final details, double check that all of the final cut gowns are measured and fitted to the model who will be wearing them, run through music and lighting, and at the end, Marston shares the guest list.

As promised, Cassian sends in food and coffee, then later, snacks and champagne. We eat and plan, and in various moments of the morning I find myself staring at the DESIGNED BY ELLA tag that is pinned to the top of one of the design binders, in complete shock that my dreams have come true.

Almost all of them.

All because of Cassian.

“You couldn’t possibly convince Mr. Blackwood to join us?” Marston presses toward the end of the session, as he gathers up his things. “For a good luck drink?”

David clears his throat. “He’s in meetings all day. Property acquisition overseas. You understand.”

Marston shrugs, and then gives me a hug. “It’s going to be a great success.” He pats my forearm. “You will be a great success. I promise you.”

I smile. “I feel ready.”

He nods his head as he shakes my hand. “The Phantom Line will change couture forever.”

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CHAPTER

Thirty

CASSIAN

THE SERAGLIO IS NOT MEANT for this.

Silk hangs from the ceiling in heavy, wine-colored panels. The room is meant for so much more than its purpose now.

Ella's scent is in my skin, making it hard to think. I can still feel the ghost of her pulse under my mouth. She thinks I'm upset she asked me to take off the mask, she thinks—the doors slam open hard enough to make the hanging lamps sway, and I'm forced to shelve my thoughts for a greater good.

Lucien comes in first, ponytail jerked tight at his nape, one fist knotted in the collar of a man who does not belong on this estate. It took nearly three days to get him, but we finally have him, thanks to Badd Brothers, and, well, my own brother.

The cop's wrists are bound in front of him with a zip tie that has already cut a thin red line into the skin and his face is the color of wet paper.

David follows them at a precise three paces, blond hair immaculate, mouth a thin line of disapproval. My assistant has opinions about kidnapping, and I normally would too, but for Ella, I'm okay with it. And David knows that I'm doing all of this, no matter how unethical or brutal it gets, for her.

"Borrowed him from Ronan Badd," Lucien says of the brother in charge at Badd Brothers Security. He shoves the cop forward. The man stumbles, catches himself on the edge of the low table, and looks up at me.

He flinches.

“Sit,” I say.

He sits. Not because he wants to. Because Lucien’s hand is still on his shoulder, and Lucien does not ask twice, shoving him down into the metal folding chair waiting for him.

I remain standing. He stares at the mask guarding half of my face, likely wondering, as everyone does. But this isn’t about me or my face for once. It’s about him, that night, and what he knows.

“You’re here because of Vivian Moreau.”

“I don’t know—”

Lucien slaps the back of his head, open-handed, making the former cop lurch forward.

“Don’t be stupid and deny it. We know.”

The man swallows. His eyes flick to the door, to David, to the room full of mystery and sin. There is no help coming, and he knows it. I watch the knowledge settle into him like a stone dropped in water, his eyes veering around the empty, secluded space. He probably thinks it’s a torture room. Non-kinksters have some imaginations on them.

“Vivian Moreau. You had an affair with her,” I say. “Start there.”

He stares at the floor.

I take one step closer. The silk of my sleeve that Ella sewed two years ago swishes. She lied to me about this night, and still has yet to come clean. Ella is just… not the type. I have to understand this. I have to know what happened.

I do not raise my voice. “You had an affair with her. You signed the report the night of the accident, and you will tell me every word about that night, or Lucien will start breaking things that do not grow back. I think we both know I am a rich man and have the means to make things, or people, go away.”

The cop’s throat works. When he speaks, it comes out raw. “We dated. Before she married Win. After, too. On and off. It wasn’t—God. It wasn’t supposed to be anything.” He laughs once, ugly. “She used to joke about getting rid of him. Then he got sick and when a few years passed and he managed to pull through, she joked that he needed a nudge.”

“Lovely,” Lucien deadpans. “You really pick ‘em well, don’t you?”

“Continue.”

“She said if he was gone she’d be the sole owner of the house, of the boutique, of every stock holding in his name. But I thought she was rich already, you know? The shop does good. Or it did back then.” He shrugs, wincing as the zip tie pinches his already tender flesh. “I don’t know. I thought she was just… talking. People talk. Who actually does that?”

“I’m beginning to think that she did,” I say. “But that’s why you’re here.”

He just stares at me, years of stress forming crow’s feet and dark circles around his eyes. “What did she do now?”

The fact that he’s asking that sends a chill through my spine. I’ve been punishing Ella for not telling me that she drove the car the night her father went into a coma, one he never woke from. I’ve had Badd digging into Vivian for weeks, unrelenting. After Alex, I told myself to never be disillusioned by love. And yet, another part of me seriously had doubts that Ella did that. Youth brings mistakes, that’s something I can’t deny. It’s surely possible she lacked judgment in an emotional, booze-filled moment. Absolutely.

And yet, knowing who Vivian is, or at the very least, building the very unsavory profile on her, I have had serious doubts.

The truth—even if ugly—can be understood. People make mistakes. Redemption is necessary. It’s not about what she may have done.

It’s about the fact she didn’t tell me. There have been so many opportunities. So many tangled feet, fingers interlaced, late night conversations. So much growth beyond what was written out in the contract.

Still. She hasn’t said a word.

It’s the lie that damages us, not the truth.

Lucien peers at me, and snaps me from my thoughts.

“Tell us what happened the night you wrote that report about the accident. The one where Ella was driving.”

“Ella?” he looks between me and my brother, then casts a quick glance at David, seeking a savior, but he is his only savior. Once he tells us everything he knows, he can be free.

“Eleanora,” I amend.

“Nora,” he says. “My god. She goes by Ella now?” He looks down at his worn boots, and shakes his head a little, a small smile curving his lips. “She started over. Good for her.”

“That night. You wrote a report saying Ella was behind the wheel, that she was impaired. Then that report was buried.” I nod. “Leave nothing out.”

He sighs, and Lucien finally settles into a seat next to mine. His words echo in *The Seraglio*. “One night Viv calls. Late. She’s crying. Says there’s been an accident. She needs me. Just me, no partner.” He pauses. “No body cam.” He shifts in the metal chair and it squeals, making my insides jump a little. I try to see it all in my mind, Vivian crying. Ella slumped behind the wheel, steam and smoke lifting from a crunched vehicle, a silver haired man unconscious in the backseat. “I should have hung up.” His hands flex against the zip tie. “I didn’t.”

I wait.

“I found them off the county road. Tree through the passenger side. Her husband is in the passenger seat, out cold. Nora—Ella,” he corrects, “—is behind the wheel. Also out cold. Blood everywhere, but I noticed right away that the patterns don’t match. Impact pattern’s wrong. If the kid had been driving, the blood wouldn’t be where it was. The steering column. The angle. I know scenes. I’d worked scenes for years.” He looks up at me, and for the first time he uses the spine in him. “I asked Vivian if she’d been the one driving.”

“And.” My heart is racing. I think of Ella, and the way she was being treated, how she lived before I found her. Years and years of guilt and mistreatment, with this night held over her head, I have no doubt. I know how people operate, and I’ve known many Vivians in different forms.

“I told her if she wanted my help she had to tell me the truth,” he admits, voice made hoarse by guilt.

Lucien shifts his weight and his folding chair complains. The cop continues, faster now, as if speed might make it less true.

“Ella had been downtown. Some club. Fashion thing. She was modeling her own work— in Vivian’s words—kinky wear. One of the father’s friends saw her and called him. The old man wasn’t well. Heart. Lungs. The cancer was everywhere, and I don’t even know if they told Ella that he was terminal. She knew he was sick but I don’t know if she knew how bad.” He pauses, skin growing sallow as he remembers. Ella has shared the memory of this night with me, though I wasn’t aware she didn’t share it with me entirely. Not until now. “Didn’t matter how bad he felt. When he got the call about Nor—*Ella*—being somewhere seedy, he went anyway. Vivian went with him. They pulled the girl out of the club. She was drunk. She got

behind the wheel of the car and said she'd drive off if they didn't let her explain. They argued. Vivian and the father, in the street, over the roof of the car. Ella eventually just passed out. Then he did too, in the passenger seat. The whole thing, the emotions, his poor health, he just—folded."

The Seraglio is very quiet. I can hear David breathing through his nose.

"That's when Vivian moved her," the cop says. "Moved Ella into the back seat. Got behind the wheel herself. Drove. Hit the tree on the passenger side on purpose. She wanted to move along his death, that part she didn't admit that night but…" he splays his fingers out within the confines of the zip tie. "She'd already said as much time and time again, so I made that connection." He pauses, and I see this version so much more clearly than the original.

I see Vivian masterminding this more easily than I see Ella driving her father while drunk. "When I got there, she told me the plan. She assumed I'd be on board. She took a ton of photos with her digital camera, one she'd taken with her to the club, likely to get photos of Ella to use against her. She always hated her husband's daughter. Always. Felt he took her side, you know, the usual second wife bullshit."

Ella wasn't driving. She didn't cause the accident and subsequent coma. Though as I hear it, it seems as if Winfield succumbed to the cancer, the accident just the final nudge into giving into the exhaustion.

Lucien's foot stops bobbing. David sucks in a breath.

"Then we moved Ella back to the backseat, for when the paramedics came. She couldn't have Ella actually get arrested and charged, because then she couldn't hold it over her, you know? She gave me, as the responding officer, a report of what happened, and I tested her blood alcohol, business as usual. Viv was sober, so it was ruled a normal accident. But she made me promise I'd never let the real report out. She told me after her husband died, she'd share the stock liquidation with me if I wrote a second report. One just for her." He blinks at me. "The one I'm assuming your guys found."

It is. Though I had no clue it was a dummy report. Until now.

"I wrote that Ella was driving, but made Vivian promise she'd never leak it. I'd lose my job, you know. And go to jail. And she had those photos, from Ella behind the wheel. The report, the photos—she had her, and she knew it." His voice cracks. "I don't know why I didn't just walk away." He snorts. "Fuck that. I do know why. I needed the money, and I thought the

girl would eventually run away, and Vivian's box of lies wouldn't matter." He sighs, and the real truth comes free. "I owed a bookie and without the stock liquidation she promised, I had to leave. So I did."

"Winfield, the father," I say, because I don't care about his story, and why he ruined an innocent sixteen-year-old's life. I only care about showing her the truth now, and in order to do that, I need this man to get back to the reason why he's here.

"Coma. A week. Then he was gone. Pretty sure it was just the cancer, though. Ella woke up with scratches, confused, bruised. And Vivian was sitting next to the bed." He closes his eyes. "Vivian asked her if she remembered getting behind the wheel. Ella said yes. Of course she said yes. She had. And Vivian said, *I covered for you*. Made her think she pretended she drove, and that's when she had me come in and corroborate it all. Vivian told her she owed her the rest of her life for not letting her get arrested. For not letting her go to prison. But I'm guessing she didn't tell her about the stock or the properties. The money."

"What about them?" I question.

"Turns out, it was all in Ella's name, locked in a trust she can't touch until she's twenty-six. Then everything is freely hers. All Vivian had was a life insurance policy." His eyes grow red. "The girl thinks she killed her father. She thinks her stepmother saved her. That's the story."

I taste metal at the back of my tongue.

"What happened to you and Vivian after?"

"Like I said, I quit my job and left. I was partly afraid someone would get a hold of the phony report. Afraid of what Vivian would do the next time she needed something. I was sick over everything, sick and scared."

"And your fear of being killed by a bookie since Vivian never came into the money she thought she would," I remind him, because I'm sure that's the true reason he left.

He nods. "That, too. I went to California first, and I've been a little everywhere since." He looks at Lucien. "I was in Sweden because I met someone, and I was trying to restart, finally. I'm sober now, and quit gambling." He stops then starts again, quieter. "I figured Ella ran away. I never saw her in the news or papers, and I hoped she ran. I still hope she ran."

He doesn't know she is in my house, wearing my robe, sleeping in a bed I put her in because the world outside this estate has been trying to eat her

since she was old enough to be useful to a woman like Vivian Moreau.

He doesn't know I have had my mouth on her. He doesn't know I have been trying, clumsily, viciously, to give her back a life that was stolen in the dark on a county road by a foolish, arrogant, monster of a stepmother.

Lucien looks at me, waiting.

"Get him off my property," I say. "If he speaks of this house, of this room, of her name, you will not bring him back in one piece. Tell Ronan Badd I want the photos and police report, and the entire contents of this fucking safe deposit box. Now."

David's jaw flexes. "Alright, Cassian."

Lucien and David haul the cop to his feet. He tries to look at me once more but looks away, either from the discomfort of my mask, or his guilt, or both. Lucien's ponytail swings as he drags him out, David pulling the doors closed behind them.

I stand in the sudden emptiness of *The Seraglio* and listen to my own pulse.

Ella.

She has been walking around thinking she killed the man she loved most, and that it all happened the night she debuted her kinky designs. No wonder why she never ran from Vivian. She has been paying a debt that was never hers.

She lied to me. That can't be denied. I'm still battling that lie, with each step I take across the sandy path, through the estate, toward the mansion. But even with her lie, she deserves this truth more than anything I can give her.

INSIDE, I find her in the library, perched before a tapestry of Abelard and Minon. My favorite tapestry. An ache rumbles through my chest as I take her in, cross-legged, eyes rimmed red, simple slip dress that I chose pooled around her thighs as she sits.

"Ella," I say, trying not to startle her. My voice comes out lower than I intend. She doesn't move. "Look at me."

She looks, and my heart thumps at her beauty. She is by far the most beautiful woman I've ever known.

My mask feels heavier than it did an hour ago. I have spent years hiding what was done to my face and she has spent years hiding what she thinks she did. I am about to take that from her, and I do not know if she will still let me touch her when I am finished.

“Sit down,” I tell her, pulling out a chair. I sit on one across from her, and she gets to her feet, then sits anxiously at the edge of the chair.

“I want to talk to you,” I say, “about the night your father fell into the coma which he never woke from.”

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CHAPTER

Thirty-One

ELLA

THE LIBRARY suddenly smells like cedar and the last of his whiskey—like him. My sir. The man who has saved my life.

Rain needles the glass behind him. We sit in the half-dark, the lamp on the desk near the tapestry throwing gold across his hands and the sharp line of his jaw.

He just looks at me—or at the shape of me—and I feel it the way I always do, a heat that starts low and works its way through my limbs, searing my throat, making me unsteady with need.

"I want to talk to you," he says. "about the night your father fell into the coma which he never woke from."

The words land so unexpectedly. I don't know what I thought he was going to say, but that wasn't it. My pulse does something violent in my wrists. I shake my head, confused.

"What?" Waking up in the hospital bed, starchy sheets scratching my legs, Vivian's thin lips in a frown as she leans over me. It all comes rushing back. I place my hand on my belly and press, but the pain doesn't go away. "I don't… I don't know…" I don't finish, but he picks up.

"Yes, you do." His voice is quiet. That is always worse. "Badd has never stopped working to uncover your past. Everyone has a footprint to discover somewhere. Yours was simply better hidden than most."

I shift in my seat because staying still feels like giving in, and even though all I want to do around him is give in, right now, it feels wrong. Like

a betrayal to myself. The silk of my dress whispers against my thighs as I shift. “Cassian—”

“I met Vivian’s affair partner.” He says it like it’s nothing, and yet, I had no idea Vivian ever had an affair. “The police officer who was on scene the night of the accident,” he clarifies.

“She was sleeping with someone else? A police officer?” I saw him once in the hospital hallway, but never at the scene. I wasn’t awake. I didn’t know he was there. The beautiful room full of books and tapestries that I adore—all of it grows wobbly as it tilts. Rain assaults the windows, symbolic for the moment.

He turns his head a few degrees, and a heavy breath leaves him. “You didn’t know.” It’s not a question, but I still shake my head to agree, adding, “no, I had no idea.”

The hospital bed. Vivian’s sacrifice to save me. The news of my father passing one day before I woke. We’d both been in a coma for a week but he didn’t make it and I, the one who caused it all, did. That entire horrible day rushes back, making my legs weak. Thank God I’m sitting. My eyes fill with tears, anger and grief clawing up my throat in hot, undeniable knots. I look up at Cassian, mask picking up the lamp light. “Why are you doing this? Why are you pulling my life apart behind my back?” The questions tumble out of me, unfiltered and raw.

His fingers curl over the ornate wood of the arm rest. Rain hammers the glass, and a few minutes ago, it wasn’t even raining. It’s wild how fast things can change. “Alex surprised me in a way that changed me forever,” he says, his mouth a hard line in the lamplight. Comparing me to her, something I don’t deserve. But it’s not about me. That much is clear. It’s about him, and what happened to him, and all the things I don’t know. “I am simply protecting myself. Had I pursued a complete profile on Alex like I have been with you, I may be in a different situation.”

Alex. He says her name again, the name I am not allowed to ask about, I just have to wait for bits and pieces, be grateful when he gives them, and never, ever ask for more.

Can’t upset the masked millionaire, after all. Anger courses through me. At him, but really, at myself. For allowing myself to believe I could move past the past. For letting myself think I actually deserved better, that I deserved him.

His words echo in my mind. *I am simply protecting myself.* Something in my chest cracks open. *He thinks I could hurt him the way Alex did? That I would?*

"You know I would never do anything to hurt you." My voice shakes and I let it, I let him see what this is doing to me, because it's so wildly painful and offensive for him to think I would be capable of anything but loving him. No matter what he dug up in my past. "You know I don't care about your money. I care about you. And us."

His head snaps up. For a second the shadow slips and I catch the flash of his masked eye, dark and furious and hurt in a way that steals the air from my lungs.

"You have hurt me." It is almost a snarl. "You *lied* to me."

"I didn't lie." I didn't tell him. I worried he'd find out. I worried about this very thing. But still, I did not lie. I didn't.

I protected myself. He should know all about that.

"Not telling the truth when I am here, begging for it—" He cuts himself off, then starts again, each word precise, punishing. "That, to me, is a lie, Ella."

The sound of my name in that voice does what it always does. Heat. Shame. The memory of his hand on the back of my neck at *The Seraglio*, of weeks of kneeling at his side, of the sharp, bright way I come apart for him every time we play.

Tears come without permission. I swipe at them and they keep coming.

"I was ashamed." It is a whisper and then it isn't. "I didn't want to relive my shame, okay? That's why I didn't tell you that I drove the car that night." I shake my head, angry and humiliated. "You're a smart man, Cassian. You really couldn't piece that together? That I might be horribly, awfully, cruelly ashamed of myself? And yet you had to push. Push and dig, and then shut me out. Shut me out and not even tell me why you shut me out." Snot heats my nose and tears nearly blind me. "You talk about communication, and you're the one playing games." I lean forward, chest heaving. "I protected myself, the way you protect yourself and ask me to never question."

The mask. We both know I'm talking about the mask.

He goes still. When he speaks again the anger has changed shape, and he gives me a side of him I don't know. I haven't met yet. A side I don't know how to read.

“You have nothing to be ashamed about.” He says it like a verdict, like he’s decided how I should feel and that’s that. “And had you told me what happened months ago, I could have gotten to the bottom of things sooner. Alleviated your stress and heartache sooner.”

A sound comes out of me that is almost a laugh, but it’s mostly an exhausted sob. He thinks he can save me from this. But he can’t.

“I killed him.” The words rip from the most shameful, hidden place inside me. “I can’t bring him back. My need for these clothes, these things in my brain—” I tug at the mandated slip dress like the silk itself proves I’m guilty of being bad. “I couldn’t resist that night. He was trying to guide me and protect me and I got behind the wheel and I killed him. How could you possibly alleviate my stress around that?” I hate him for making me relive this. *Why couldn’t he have left it alone?* Can’t he see that not telling him wasn’t a lie, but a means of moving on?

Silence is so loud. Then there’s the soft sound of rain. The lamp humming. My heart in my eardrums.

Cassian turns to the small marble table between our chairs, where an open laptop waits. One he must’ve brought in with him, but my back was turned and I didn’t see.

And I didn’t notice until now, because he is all I see. He is the only thing I’ve seen for weeks, and I wish he saw that.

He wakes the screen. I already know I don’t want to see whatever he has. I watch anyway because he wants me to, and I am a fool for Cassian Blackwood. Even though I don’t even know what he looks like, or maybe even who he really is.

Footage starts. A room I am slow to recognize but do in fact recognize.

The Seraglio.

Cassian in a chair, the familiar shape of his shoulders and the tie at the back of his head—his mask—give him away. Lucien is beside him, ponytail giving him away, and David next to him, body language rigid. Across from them, a man in a cheap jacket, older, with hands zip-tied in front of him.

I hear my own heartbeat.

The officer talks. At first I only catch pieces—Vivian’s name, the jokes about offing my father, the money she’d get once he was gone. Then that night. I can’t stop listening, I hear every admission, every word that frees me and breaks me.

The seedy fashion show, and she and my father coming to get me. My drunken arguments to be heard and understood. Me passing out. My father losing consciousness. His illness—he was terminal. *I didn't know that. He didn't want me to know, he didn't want me to worry.*

He keeps talking, changing my life with every potent word.

Vivian crashing, moving me, taking the photos, and this man helping her get away with it.

Cassian's voice on the recording is very calm. Lucien does not speak. The officer looks at his hands and says it again, quieter: "The girl thinks she killed her father. She thinks her stepmother saved her. That's the story."

The footage stops. Cassian looks at me, and I see he's stopped the computer, thick fingers waiting atop the mouse pad.

I will not look at him. If I look at him I will come apart in a way I cannot put back. My face is wet. My hands are shaking so hard I have to press them between my thighs.

I get to my feet.

"How dare you." My voice is low as my mind spins, and the back of my neck grows hot. Cassian gets to his feet, too. "How dare you dig around in my life like that, all while spanking me for trying to protect myself in front of the man I love!"

I get in his face. Close enough that I can see only slightly around the eye hole of the mask, close enough to feel the heat coming off him, close enough that if I leaned I would have his mouth.

But I don't want to kiss him. Not right now. Maybe not ever again. I am burning and I am ice and I am so angry I don't know what to do.

"The man who refuses to show me his face." My voice breaks and I force it back together. "Who refuses to tell me what happened to make him this way." I laugh, but there is no humor, and his lips part, but he says nothing, waiting, taking my words, taking what I hurl at him. "Accuse me of lying? Not sharing? Then ignore me for days, make me worry, make me stress, then come in here and show me what you've been doing behind my back all along, *without* my permission, I might add. And I'm supposed to, what? Thank you? Thank you for rewriting my past? Then fall to my knees and apologize I never told you?"

His breath hits my cheek but his hands stay at his sides. I suddenly want them on me and I want them nowhere near me, at the same time. I hate how confused I am, how angry he's made me. And yet…

I didn’t kill my father.

I didn’t kill him.

I shake my head. A tear slips into the corner of my mouth. Salty, bitter.

“Thank you for this,” I say, giving him the appreciation he truly does deserve. Because he has freed me, in a way I thought I’d never be free. “Thank you for the truth, Cassian.” I swallow. It hurts. Everything hurts. “But you are a hypocrite.”

I wait for him to stop me. He is a man who stops me. He is a man who puts a hand on the back of my neck and tells me to breathe. He is a man who has had me on my knees in this room and calls it devotion.

But he does not touch me, he does not stop me and that is how I know how badly I have cut him. Or how badly we’ve hurt each other, I don’t know the difference anymore. He thinks I lied. I don’t see it that way. But still, he’s been holding a piece of himself above my head this whole time and wants to punish me for the same thing.

I turn.

The hallway off of the library—the place we first walked together at the ball all those months ago—it’s much longer than it has ever been. The memory of him whisking me into that library and making me feel good, holding me, wiping my tears away—it hardly exists anymore.

My bare feet make no sound on the runner. Behind me I hear the faint click of the laptop closing, then nothing.

He doesn’t follow me.

Maybe he always intended to turn me out tomorrow night, at midnight, when the contract ends. Maybe the lie was something he knew about all along, and meant to use against me to free himself of me. Maybe I was just for fun.

Maybe I had it all wrong.

I reach my room on the third floor and shut the door and put my back against it. I slide down until I am on the floor with my knees drawn up and the truth sitting in my lap like something alive.

I did not kill him.

For years I have built a religion out of the other version—my hunger, his sacrifice, my creations making me feel guilty that I couldn’t stop when he died. Hating myself for it being a part of me, even after what it took. Take all of that away and there is only a girl who fell asleep in a car and an

evil, awful woman. A woman who cares more about money than her husband, than a sixteen-year-old girl.

And Cassian. Who went looking because Alex taught him that love is a room with a false floor. Whose security company found the cop, who found a safety deposit box with my freedom inside.

The man who watched me break a hundred times over—including tonight—and still will not give me his face.

I press my forehead to my knees. I can still feel him—the height of his strong body looming over me, the way my body leaned toward his even while I told him he was a hypocrite.

Heat lingers between my legs, traitorous, useless. I hate him for it. I want him to open this door and put his hands on me and make the wanting mean something other than damage.

But the door stays closed because it has to.

Rain keeps pattering against the windows, the world keeps spinning. Somewhere in the house a clock marks another minute of this new life, the one in which I am not a murderer and he is still a man in shadow, and we are both, for tonight, alone.

I stay on the floor until the shaking slows. I do not go back down the hall. I do not knock on his door.

I pull on pants and a sweatshirt from the drawers I never touch, and unclip the collar I made years ago. I lay it out against the comforter, and stare at it in the dark.

I know what it means to take it off.

I know what I’m doing.

The darkness makes me brave. And my mind is made up.

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CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

CASSIAN

"I'M GIVING HER SPACE, time to process," I tell my brother, who looks at me like I grew three heads. I didn't sleep at all last night, and when Lucien showed up this morning with flowers to wish Ella good luck, I broke down. Recited verbatim every word of our argument.

I thought she'd be relieved to learn the truth. That she didn't kill her father. And I think she was. She had to be. Of course she was. But she was so angry with me. I've never seen her look that way.

"She has a point, though, man. You were punishing her for not telling you about the accident but you never told her everything that happened with Alex."

And I refused to show her my face.

"My affairs are my affairs! She agreed to those terms when she signed the contract," I remind him, heat circling the collar of my shirt.

David slips into my office, and presses his back to the door, holding the knob. "Marston is on his way to start show set-up. The models are arriving in an hour. Photographers are already there. They're just waiting for directions from Ella."

Lucien raises his hands, and David waits while I argue with my brother about something that is none of his business but God I need to argue. I need to do something other than pace and wonder what the hell is going on.

"She agreed to it, sure, but she didn't agree to you turning her life on its head, man. You did that with Badd." His eyes hold mine. "It was good

news, but maybe she wasn't ready to relive that part of her life. I mean, when she asked you to take off the mask, you didn't immediately tell her what happened with Alex. How is that any different?" He steps closer to me and braces a hand on my shoulder, steadying me. "Only you forced her to face it all."

"It was good news," I repeat, weakly, foolishly. "She didn't do the thing she was being punished for her whole life."

Lucien nods. "But you didn't give her a chance to tell you about it."

"It wasn't even true!" I argue.

"She didn't know that. All she knew is that she had done something awful, that she was deeply ashamed of. And she fell in love with someone, and didn't want him to know just yet."

I shake my head. "What if she never told me?"

Lucien doesn't move his hand on my shoulder. "I think she would have told you. I don't know when, but I think she would have. You didn't give her time."

David clears his throat.

I stroke a hand through my hair, the mask hot against my skin, panic building in my chest, a tight knot of angst and misery. Did I play this all wrong? "I'll go get her and tell her it's time."

David nods. "Bretton is waiting. And I'm going to go with her."

"Good," I agree mindlessly, still wondering if I'm the bad guy. I look at my brother, whose gaze is waiting for me. "It felt to me like she lied. And lies have ruined everything in the past."

He nods. "I know. But you have to let go of the past. For Ella, but for yourself, too."

I slide my hand over the lapel of the coat Ella made, take a breath to shirk the anxiety, if only for a minute, and head out, to her room.

I think Lucien is right.

I think I let the past cloud the future.

I think Ella is right.

I think I fucked up.

I fucked up.

David doesn't follow me to the fork in the hall that leads to our bedrooms. He stays near the office, waiting, giving me privacy to humble myself and fall to my knees like the fucking fool I've been.

I gave her space last night when I should have been begging for fucking forgiveness. How could I make it about me? How could I not have seen why she protected herself?

I am familiar with shame. I know the symptoms of self-loathing.

How could I do what I did?

I knock, and my heart leaps into the base of my throat, heavy, burdensome. No movement. She's ignoring me. Probably sitting in the center of her bed, arms folded, beautiful lips curved downward in displeasure. She's angry with me. She has every right.

I catch my forehead in my hand, nudging the mask which slides against my skin reminding me of all of my mistakes. Of hiding while forcing her to show herself.

I held her to the contract, but I didn't hold up my end. I was supposed to tend to her every need, understand what is best and make those calls, not force her into something because of a past trauma I can't get over.

I'm ready to tell her that, ready to reverse our roles and fall to my knees for her.

She just needs to let me in.

I knock again, this time with more force, which jars the door free—it wasn't completely shut.

The door swings open, mid-morning sunlight caught by the drapes, making the room glow but not overly bright. Shadowy, cool, and empty.

My eyes land on the center of the bed.

Her collar.

The contract, which I'd hoped to extend tonight, to give her more, to have us become more than dom and sub, is now broken. She owes me nothing, that was the rule. If she took it off, it meant we were done, no questions asked.

No. No, no. no.

I rush inside and tug open the drawers, finding everything intact. Her new phone, the one I got her when she moved in, sits on the nightstand. Picking up the collar, I trace the handsewn edges, and lift it to my nose, taking in the scent of her skin, the cherry perfume, the smell of her shampoo.

She's gone.

I run down the hall, sweating, madness making my throat tight, and fling open the door to the closet in my room. Her small bag, the one she

brought with her weeks ago, sits there, untouched.

Her things are all here, and as much as I don't want to believe it, she's gone.

Doom blooms in my chest, and beneath my suit, my body breaks out into sweat, thick and sheeting. My lungs grow fuzzy, my vision blurry, and I make my way back toward the office, slowly, grabbing at the wall, knocking off framed photos of the world's most beautiful rose as I go. David comes into my eyeline just in time to keep me up with his hands.

Lucien is there now, too, and a moment later, I'm in my office chair, a bottle of water shoved into my open palm.

I stare at the pillow on the ground next to my desk and listen to them talk.

"She left? How did you not see that?" David says to Lucien, irritation in his tone.

"I was a little preoccupied with getting the cop that Ronan kidnapped off the property. Do you not ever check the security cameras?"

I don't hear David's response. I just think of Ella. How awful Vivian treated her, how much she was punished. Tonight is her show. The night she's earned and deserves. And I hurt her so much that she left before she could have it.

I look up, between them, and lick my lips. I'm not proud, but I am desperate for her. "Look up her location." I get out my phone and fumble with it until Lucien comes to my side and calmly takes it.

"What do you mean? Does she have her phone on her?"

I shake my head, sweat making the mask slippery against the scarred flesh. "No. But… when she came here, and I had her blood work done—I had a subdermal microchip implanted."

Lucien doesn't judge me when he asks, "does she know?"

I shake my head. "No."

He passes my phone to David, who knows what to do, despite that he didn't know I did this either. A moment later, while Lucien stares at me, surprised to see this side of me, David looks up.

"She's two hours away. At Shady Grove."

I shake my head. "I can't make it there and bring her back in time for the show to be in order. There's not enough time." I look between the men I trust most. "You two have to go to her, and I'll go take care of the show."

Lucien’s forehead ripples with confusion. “You’re going to leave?” he lowers his voice. “Remember what happened last time.”

“There is no other choice.”

David’s voice is so quiet I almost miss him over my storming pulse. “The event, Cassian. Do you remember…it’s televised? You won’t just be out but you’ll be on TV.”

“People will find out who you are. Marston, hell, he’ll tell everyone.”

I shake my head. I am desperate for Ella. Desperate for her now more than ever. I have to show her that she is more important than the past, that I know I fucked up. “Then let everyone know. As long as she knows why I’m doing it.”

I get to my feet but don’t get far before my little brother is pulling me into a tight, back-slapping hug. “I love you,” he says, holding me.

“I love you, too,” I tell him.

“You’re going to be okay. She’s going to come back to you. It’s going to be okay,” he says, and pulls back, giving me a reassuring nod. I don’t tell him how much I needed that, because he knows.

David hands me my phone, and then the three of us head downstairs in silence, and out the front doors.

Bretton nods. “Mr. Blackwood. Am I driving you again today?”

I exhale, nervous, chest full of flames, limbs wobbly. “Yes. Take me to the Greenpoint Gallery, please.”

“We’ll need a second car to take us to Shady Grove,” David tells him, but my brother scoffs, digging into his pocket until he finds keys. Clicking, his car, parked in front of Bretton’s town car, startles with a honk.

“Come on, live a little David. You can be a town car guy when you’re with him, but when you’re with me, you’re a front seat passenger in the G-Class.”

David drops his hand on my forearm, stopping me as Bretton pulls the door open for me. “For what it’s worth, I think this is the right move. For a lot of reasons.”

I take his hand off my arm, but instead shake it. “Thank you. And please, bring her back. Do whatever you have to but please, for Christ’s sake, bring her back.”

Lucien nods. “You worry about Greenpoint, we’ll get your girl.”

We go our separate ways, and for the first time in years, I worry less about leaving my house and more about the woman who I want to come

back to.

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CHAPTER
Thirty-Three

ELLA

MY GRANDMA'S room at Shady Grove still smells like chai tea and her special lemon cookies, the ones we ate when I arrived in tears. I'm standing at the small sink in the kitchenette in her room with my hands in cooling water when her room door is tapped on, already open.

Lucien and David step inside, David smiling cautiously at my grandmother, like he knows he's intruding. Lucien's eyes are already on me, his ponytail dark against the collar of a black coat he's wearing, unbuttoned, like he came here in a rush. I glance at David, his blonde hair tussled, and decide they did rush over here. I don't even know how they found me but then again, where else would I go?

"Hello, Connie," David greets, outstretching his hand to her. She stays in her recliner, but smiles, taking his hand.

"Hello."

"I'm David, I work for Cassian Blackwood, I'm his assistant."

Grandma smiles, gracious. "Nice to meet you, David. I've heard a lot about your boss."

Lucien follows suit, and outstretches a hand to my grandma. "Hi Connie, I'm Cassian's brother, Lucien."

She smiles, eyes soft. "Younger or older?"

"Younger," he says, and without missing a beat, he splits his glance between us. "We came here to talk to your granddaughter." He smooths his hands over the flyaways in his ponytail as David moves toward the TV set

that rests on a small table at the back of the room. He looks at my grandma, who has an old episode of Jeopardy playing.

“May I?” he asks kindly, fingers already on the buttons.

She shrugs. “Sure. I never remember the answers anyway, even on a rerun I’ve seen a thousand times.”

“Ella.” Lucien says my name, and I look over at him, finding a serious expression on his face. “I want to talk to you but before that, you need to see this.”

The television flares to life over the table, *Reader’s Digests* piled in around the screen. “I know my show is going on right now. I purposely did not put it on, I didn’t want to see—” My words falter the moment I look at the screen, and see him.

Cassian. On stage, hip to hip with Marston, cupping papers to his mouth as he nudges a model on. She’s wearing my midnight-blue velvet gown, the one with hidden boning and subtle silver chain details along the bodice that only reveal their meaning up close, when the dress is being stripped off the wearer. Along her neck is the matching collar, made of Chantilly lace and velvet. On her arms? Silver gloves, to the elbow. Gloves that, when turned inside out, can have the fingers zipped together, making your hands unusable mitts.

Standing under hot white lights in a venue full of people, full of people there to see my work, Cassian is there. He’s wearing a black suit I have made, cut close to a body I have mapped with my mouth. The mask is on and it is him. I would know the set of those shoulders in a blackout. I would know that chest, those dark eyes, those strong hands—I’d know them anywhere.

“He’s there,” I repeat aloud, as the room fills with silence. “He went, and he’s running the show?” I’m asking but I have my answer right in front of me, clear as day, bright as the sky on a flat screen color TV.

“He wanted it to go perfectly, so you can get as many deals as possible.”

I shake my head. I don’t know what to think, but Lucien doesn’t give me time to.

“You’re the most important thing to him. He knows he fucked up. He wants to make it right, Ella. Let him make it right.”

On screen, Marston Wellingham is doing what Marston does: smiling with his whole expensive face, gesturing at the runway like he invented runways and fashions shows.

Models move in a slow, lethal current. My models. My silhouettes. My work. The Phantom Line, walking.

The audience does not murmur. They learn. Assistants take notes. People whisper. Eyes are full of awe. Shoulders are set. I have their attention.

Lucien holds my phone out. The screen is a storm of notifications. Marston's thread sits on top, stacked.

> They want it.
>
> All of them.
>
> Bergdorf. Dover Street. Saks.
>
> Ella. Are you seeing this?

My thumb hovers. I don't open anything else. I look at Lucien instead, and my voice comes out wrecked, because I can't believe Cassian left the house for me. For something so big. Around so many people.

"He hates crowds. He hates the public. He hates leaving the estate." I can't believe this.

Lucien's mouth flattens. Something almost like gentleness moves through his face. "He loves you, though."

David points at one of the dresses and makes small talk with my grandma, as Lucien turns his body toward mine, shoving his hands in his jean pockets, keeping his voice low. "You remember the other time. Moreau Boutique, trying to find you. He walked out of that house for six hours and paid for it for six days, he was so anxious. That was for you too." He tips his chin at the television. "Not only did he leave the estate, but he's running the show for you. As himself."

On screen, a model in the finale coat—the one with the hidden hood, the one I sketched at Cassian's side while he was on the phone brokering a lease for one of his restaurants downtown—pauses at the end of the runway, and the applause explodes.

Cassian steps forward, past Marston, and comes to the end of the runway, looking literally like a million dollars in his pressed suit and matching mask, dark hair swept back like a prince. I watch his hand curl once at his side, smoothing down the leg of his pants for just a moment, a slight tell that he's anxious. He lifts the microphone to his mouth, and

speaks, and the room at Shady Grove goes so quiet I can hear Connie's clock in the hall.

"Everyone here," he says, and the mic catches the low scrape of his deep voice, his throat working. He's probably so anxious, sweating beneath that suit. "These designs are all by Ella Moreau, the owner and designer of Moreau Boutique, and the creator of newly launched dark luxury couture, The Phantom Line."

The credit is all mine, and I can hardly breathe. My eyes sting with tears of surprise and awe, shock and gratitude, excitement and--- I look at Lucien. "I don't own Moreau."

Lucien turns fully to me now. David takes a lemon cookie from the plate grandma offers him, his blonde hair neat, suit still city-sharp, and nods in delight upon first bite.

"You do," Lucien says. "You always owned it. Cassian had nothing to do with that. And you need to talk to him. Please."

The footage he played on the laptop. The cop. The man who slept with Vivian and helped her with her lies, all of her cruel deceptions. I vaguely remember hearing something about Moreau and my father's assets being mine. In a trust. Did I hear that right? Right now, I don't even care about any of that.

I face Lucien. "I want to go back to the estate and see him." I look at my grandmother's cat clock on the wall, tail wagging with each click of the second hand.

"We should get there when he does."

I turn to grandma, but she's already out of her chair and coming in for a hug, David holding the plate of lemon cookies against his bicep. "Go. And no one stays inside for years without a good reason. A little slack both ways could do you both some good," she offers, and I give her a tight hug, promising to call her tomorrow, to let her know how everything goes.

Then, David and Lucien both say goodbye, and we find ourselves rushing to the car like we don't still have at least two hours to drive. Still, I'd fly back now if I could.

THE CAR IS quiet as Lucien drives, with David sitting beside me in the backseat. In true David fashion, he does not fill the silence, which I think might be the kindest thing he's ever done. I don't want to talk right now. I can't turn my mind off.

He showed up for me.

He left his house for me.

Fields peel away, the sky whips by, the road blurs, and in a matter of time, the estate rises out of the trees and my heart picks up. Bretton's town car isn't out front, though it could be in the motor court out back already. I don't know if I'm wishing for him to be home already, or wishing for a little more time.

I don't know what to say, or where to start.

Inside, Cassian isn't home, which I'm told after David checks the motor court. They sit in chairs in the foyer as I pace until the marble should have a groove with my name on it.

My phone keeps lighting up. Marston is full of good news.

> Standing ovation.

> They asked for you by name.

> You're a staple in fashion, kid.

I read that last one twice. Then the front doors open, and I forget how to hold a phone.

Bretton has Cassian by the elbow. Cassian is not walking so much as being delivered. The mask is still on. His coat is open. His breathing is all wrong—too high, too fast, the kind that doesn't reach the bottom of the lungs. I know that sound. I have fallen asleep to the aftermath of that sound. I have counted him down from it in the dark with my palm on his sternum once before. Cassian has had a few anxiety attacks at night, when I'm with him. But we didn't speak of them in the day. Almost like they didn't happen.

"Mr. Bl—" Bretton starts.

Cassian's hand flexes, useless. A fine tremor runs from his wrist up into his shoulder, I can see it from here. I can see the sweat at his temple where the edge of the mask meets skin. I can see the way his other hand keeps searching for a wall that isn't close enough.

David and Lucien move at the same time, easing Cassian from the driver into the chair Lucien just occupied. Bretton looks at me like he's handing over a bomb, praying I know how to diffuse it. Lucien positions his brother, and David gently adjusts Cassian's mask so that it is perfectly in place, and then, after looking at me, the three of them leave us. The door shuts, leaving just the two of us.

"Cassian."

He flinches at his own name, then at the sound of it in my mouth. I kneel at his feet and place my hands on his knees, finding his body warm beneath the suit. "Take off your coat," I urge, and his shoulders work obediently, shrugging out of it. I can see that being in public has reached inside his rib cage and started rearranging him completely.

His neck is pink but the side of his face I can see it sheet-white, pale. His skin is damp, and his breathing isn't quite even. I reach past his knees to his chest, and work open the buttons, letting cool air find his clammy skin.

I take his hands, and weave them with mine, over his knees. His fingers are ice. I hold them tightly in mine and a moment later, bring them against my throat so he can feel a pulse, to feel me, to feel life. To maybe ground him.

"Look at me," I command softly, tenderly, as we hold my throat for a moment before I move our joined hands back to his knees. "Sir, please, look at me."

His eyes drag to mine. Behind the mask they are wide, glossy, anxiety left over in his blown pupils. I get up, into his lap, and loop one hand around his neck then slip the other under his shirt, against his chest, over his thudding heart. I breathe in, slow enough that he has to notice. I breathe out against his collarbone. Again and again. His forehead drops to mine with a sound I will hear for the rest of my life—half groan, half surrender. My heart opens so wide, my body aches for him.

"Thank you," I whisper into the heat between us. "Thank you for making sure the launch happened. I should have been there, I shouldn't have thrown it all away in a heated moment. I shouldn't have ran. You saved me once, and you continue to save me." I dust my lips against his, kissing him softly, trying to make him feel my gratitude. "I'm sorry you had to do that alone. I'm sorry I ran, I'm sorry—"

“Stop.” Finally, he returns to some form of himself and grabs me at the back of my neck, dragging me toward him until our lips crush together. The full-body clench, the shudder that starts in his thighs and climbs—the anxiety falls away from his body as our tongues twist, and we apologize to each other with our mouths.

When he can speak, his voice is wrecked, hoarse, and yet, still makes my insides hot. “I understand why you lied.”

My eyes burn. I don’t pull back, letting him talk to me while stealing licks inside my mouth, pressing kisses to my jaw and throat.

“Alex pretended she wanted what I wanted in order to gain access to me, my estate, the mansion—everything. And she and her real lover staged a break-in. She’d given them the security codes and access points, and played along like we were both victims.

Until I was tied up. That’s when she started telling the men where to find things—money, bank codes, all of it. It was then I realized she never loved me. She never even liked me. She just wanted everything I had, and was willing to use my weakness to get it.”

I can’t believe that happened to him. How could someone do that to anyone? How could she live with him and make love to him and pretend, and then betray him? Tears push past my lashes and streak my cheeks, and his heartbeat intensifies between us, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, still clearly chasing away his anxiety.

“If it makes you anxious, please take a break,” I whisper up to him, feeling the shift in his body, even in the chair.

He swallows, and I trace the lump in his throat with my thumb, then carve out a path to his lips with mine, kissing him everywhere, even over the mask.

A moment later, he grabs my hands with his, stopping my doting so that he can continue. “I got out of the restraints because they did a poor job. And I fought back. I wrestled with one of them—her lover, it turned out. The other one split at the very first sign of struggle. But we bumped into things, hit one another, broke things. We broke a painting, glass went everywhere.”

I’m trying to envision Cassian wrestling with a man in all black, his face covered, glass everywhere, Alex standing by in a heartless panic. Worried only for herself. I hate it. It makes me feel sick.

He brings my hand to his mask, and my heart free falls into my stomach, intensity and foreboding sending an electric shock through my

veins. “She used a piece of the glass, and struck me, deep, and hard, and they left me for dead.”

“Cassian, oh my god,” I gasp, the words coming out a little garbled as my crying intensifies.

“She was wise enough to wrap her hand in a towel first, so she only hurt me.” His voice lowers as he presses his hand to mine, on top of the mask. “She took half of my face, and my entire heart. None of it was real. She wasn’t a submissive, she was never pregnant, she never wanted me.”

I press my face into his chest as he shudders, and with my hands wrapped tightly around the back of his neck, I hold him as he works himself through what seems to be the tail end of his anxiety. He’s warm and damp beneath his shirt, but after a moment of stroking his jaw and palm, his body softens beneath mine.

“Thank you for sharing with me.” I think of the night I first met him, how I joked about the mask, the strangeness of it all. I wince at my words, at the way I pressed him to take it off, and assumed it was trust. Now I know, it had nothing to do with trust. He is hiding what Alex left behind.

He sits up, and slides me off his lap abruptly, leaving me a little disoriented as he takes my palm and kisses it. He stares up at me from his seat. “It’s not about what she physically did. It’s about the fact she lied to me. And when I thought you had lied, I just… lost sight of things. I didn’t stop to think about it from your side. It was unfair of me,” he says quietly, each word laced with tenderness as he strokes his hand down my palm. He dusts a thumb along the curve of my arm. “I found you tonight because I put a tracker in you when the nurse took your blood. It was wrong without your consent, I admit, and I’m sorry. But the thought of not knowing where you were if something were to have happened to you, it made me crazy. My love for you has made me crazy, and I’m sorry for everything.”

I touch my arm where he touched me. There is a real part of me that doesn’t like that he did that, and that he didn’t tell me until now. But another part of me that realizes that he’s only ever meant to make my life better, that everything he’s done has been the best way in which he knows how to love. “It’s okay,” I tell him, ready to shed all of our mistakes. “And I’m so sorry I pushed—I just, I thought you keeping the mask on was because you didn’t trust me. And I wanted you to trust me, because I wanted you to keep me,” I admit, wet eyes lifting to his. “I still do.”

“I always wanted you. Before I even got to know you, I wanted you so bad, irrationally. But then you came here, and you bloomed, you let me in, and every day, every meal, every kiss, every scene, I fell more madly in love with you, Ella.” He shakes his head. “I am so madly in love with you.”

Sobs sneak out of me, though I want to look beautiful, not red nosed and swollen, I can’t help it. “I love you, too. And I’m sorry I took off the collar. I was hurt and,” I shake my head, the truth falling from my lips, “I didn’t understand.”

He shakes his head. “You thought you killed him, and I thought she killed me, but we were both wrong. And thank God we were, because now we have each other.” His lips find mine, his familiar warmth easing my bones. The brush of his tongue along mine, his deep moans, the way he grows hard and grinds into me, wrapping possessive arms around me, I feel at home. I feel like I belong here, with him. To be his.

“I left the estate,” he says. “I said your name into a microphone. I stood there as myself because the only thing worse than them looking at me was you thinking I wouldn’t. You thinking my secret was worth more than you. You never coming back to me.”

I don’t respond to that, because he reaches behind his head, and my breath catches as he fumbles with the tie on the mask. I watch his hand lift, carrying a black satin tie, and then draws the mask from his face. Slowly, he lifts it away, his last defense finally gone.

What’s underneath is not a monster. It’s Cassian. The mouth I learned in the dark. The jaw I already knew by taste. The man I love.

Scar tissue pales along one cheekbone, taut and lightning-bright, dragging down into his jaw. Raised in places, silk-smooth in others. A landscape I have never seen and already want my mouth on.

The sound I make isn’t pity—it’s hunger, it’s a relief so sharp it that it aches.

His eyes are wet. He lets me see that too. Unmasked, shaking, still proud—as if the bravest thing he has done tonight isn’t the runway. It’s this. Giving me the face he thinks will send me running.

I don’t run.

I lift both hands and cradle him like something precious. My thumbs trace the smooth places, then along the ridges. He flinches before he surrenders, leaning into my touch, a broken sound catching in his throat when I follow the scar with my mouth.

I kiss the damaged cheek first, slowly and openly. I'm both adoring and greedy at once, because god, I've wanted this—him, completely. I kiss the taut skin near his eye, the pale markings leading to his jaw, then the corner of his mouth. I kiss him, trying to take away the pain of every night he survived without me, every day he thought he had to hide behind the mask. I kiss him all over, growing frantic, frenzied almost. I want all of him, I've never wanted all of him more. I want him inside me, everywhere, under my palms, pressed to my throat, I want him to fall apart this time, because he deserves it.

"You're the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on," I whisper. "Do you hear me? I love this face. I love what it means that you showed me."

His tears slip into the kiss I drag back to his mouth. Salt and heat and the raw reality of what he's shared with me. He kisses me like a man who has been waiting his whole life to be looked at, so I look and kiss, and keep the cycle going. I pour my love into him with teeth and breath and the desperate press of my body, so there is no room left for the lie that he is anything less than wanted, anything less than handsome and perfect and *mine*.

When we break, he rests his mouth at my temple.

"Stay," he whispers. "I've already had a contract made up, before all this."

"I'm not going anywhere, sir." I press my hand over his heart again. "It's almost midnight. I want to sign tonight, so tonight can mark the start of our new lives, each of us, together."

He could have stayed a myth behind the gates. He could have let me go. He didn't have to chase me. But he came home shaking, and he took the mask off anyway.

He lifts me up the way he always does, cradling me against his chest. I stare up at him, because I can't stop looking at his handsome face. I push hair off his forehead, gleaming at him, heart racing, lower half needy already. "God," I breathe, as he carries me to the library. "You're so fucking hot."

He laughs, dipping his mouth to mine to kiss me. And then he lowers me to his lap as he sits. Where the laptop with evidence once rested is now a contract, rolled and tied with blue velvet ribbon, two golden pens waiting.

"I hope you like the changes I made," he says, but I can't seem to take my eyes off of him.

Read it to me?” I bring my lips to his ear. “Read it to me then fuck me, sir. Please.”

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CHAPTER
Thirty-Four

CASSIAN

AFTER A QUICK STOP OFF in my office, Ella and I are exactly where we need to be: in the library. Where we began, the night of my Midnight Masquerade. Inside my pocket is a box I've had in my safe for seventy days. I ordered this ring after the night I made her come on this very couch.

She sits down, but not before I've locked the doors.

The hunger for my body is rolling off of her in palpable ways, and I wouldn't be a good dominant if I simply gave in.

As much as I want to.

As much as I want to tear off my clothes and devour her all while telling her how absolutely obsessed with her I am—her heart, the way she tenderly kissed my face after I'd been painfully ashamed of it for years, the way she apologized, how she didn't punish me when I deserved it, and how beautifully she's bloomed into the honest and purest version of herself in the last two months—I am so fucking obsessed.

But control is the element that renders her weak, and her submission to my control is what drives me fucking wild.

She sits on the edge of the Victorian fainting lounge, the moonlight painting her in golden hues among the darkness.

I slip the velvet bow from the paper, and clear my throat.

"I just want to say," she says softly, interrupting before I've begun. "I'm sorry we didn't meet sooner. I'm sorry that for all these years you thought

you had to hide. I'm sorry that I couldn't show you back then how handsome you are, and how loved you are."

A lump rises along my Adam's apple, and I pause the reading of the new contract to go to her, and press a kiss on her knuckles. "I only wish I would have discovered you all those years ago, too, my darling. We could have both been saved from some hard years."

She strokes her fingers through her golden hair. "But it makes the reward that much sweeter." With her foot, she guides the pad over my cock, finding me stiff, making me groan. I catch her ankle and force her foot away.

"My darling," I warn softly. "Don't think punishment is off the table because of how special tonight is." I fold at the waist and press my forehead into hers. "I can adore you, and we can have a momentous night, and I will still make sure your tight little hole pays the ultimate price."

She swallows, a slight flare in her nostrils. "Yes, sir."

I return to the contract, but am immediately stopped again, this time by the feeling in my chest. With the contract smoothed between my hands, I peer up at her, still not used to a completely unclouded field of vision, either.

I know the feeling. It's peace. I'm finally at home, at peace. I could leave. I don't feel trapped. Sure, anxiety might claw it's way up my throat and out my eyes for a while as I adjust to being an open individual again but Ella is mine. Just how I'd wanted. And actually having her now is far more fulfilling than I even expected.

I feel whole.

The air kisses my skin. My face isn't hidden. My insecurities haven't disappeared. I don't know how soon I'll be hanging mirrors and throwing mask-free parties. But Ella sees me. She knows me.

And she loves me.

And that has allowed me to feel so goddamn good.

"Thank you," I tell her, my voice much thinner, each word a little more frayed than I'd hoped. I always want to be strong and impenetrable as her dominant, as her partner—and soon as her husband. But tonight is edged with softness, and tonight, I can't ignore it. "You make me feel so good, Ella. You've brought me back to life."

She moves to stand but I shake my head. "No. I just… wanted to tell you."

She smiles, and I begin to read, unable to stop myself from glancing between her and the contract about a thousand times, fighting an impish grin.

“This contract is entered into by and between CASSIAN BLACKWOOD (hereinafter “Cassian,” “the Dominant,” or “Husband”) and ELEANORA MOREAU (hereinafter “Ella,” “the Submissive,” or “Wife”).”

My eyes lift from the black ink, Times New Roman I think. It’s what my lawyer likes. And I’m only allowing myself to think about fonts because as my gaze lands on her, she’s quiet, blinking at me with beautiful blue eyes.

I drop my voice to a whisper. “Marry me. We can decide on a date within the year. And then everything I have is equally yours. And Moreau stays solely yours. I will fund any venture you seek. I will back The Phantom Line to the fullest. You will own half of Blackwood Enterprises. You will co-run and co-own *Obsidian Veil*. You will make active choices for the club and the members, you will be active in my businesses as time goes on, and your ownership in my stock will be a share that matters, nothing trivial.”

She swallows, long fingers moving delicately across her collarbone as she listens. The gentle movement makes me want to strike her there, to see her flesh turn pink so that I may be the man to soothe after. To take care of her.

“I want to take care of you in every single way. For the rest of our lives. And this,” I motion to the chain on my suit pants, the one that doubles as wrist restraints. “This dynamic, we keep it up in all ways until we move to the sundown portion of our lives, when we have children. Which I hope is soon. Now, get naked.”

“It’s almost midnight. I really want to sign the new one before the old expires, and I want to pretend I never broke it.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know why that means something to me, but it does. I guess you’re the first person I’ve kept a promise to and I want to honor that.” She gathers the hem of her dress in her hands, exposing the lower half of her body. The center of her panties are dark, drenched, and I know now that she feels just the way that I do.

Ready.

“But,” she says, “I want to read it.” She motions for me to pass it to her.

I get on my knees after I hand her the papers, and pull off her tiny thong, tossing it aside. She strokes her free hand over the side of my face I've only just shown her, and her acceptance threatens to crack my chest wide open. "You want to marry me. You want to have babies," she breathes, the words unsteady, full of disbelief.

I kiss the inside of her knee, and then up her thigh. "Of course I do, Ella."

"And you are going to share your entire estate with me?" She shakes her head. "Cassian. That's–"

"A must," I continue, carving kisses up her leg until I can feel the wet heat of her cunt against my face, radiating, drawing me nearer. "You read, and I'll eat. But whatever you do, Ella, do not come."

From the table, I hand off a pen. "Stop me when you want to sign, and we'll sign together."

She's already got the top of her dress pulled down, pert nipples on display, flush sweeping her chest. "What does sundown mean?" she breathes, fanning herself with the contract as I sweep my tongue through her, stopping on the blooming bundle of nerves that I love to tease so much.

"Section five, my darling," I reply as I nuzzle into her, pride flooding my body at the way she gets wet for me, the real me. The one not hiding behind a mask.

I lose myself in feasting on her, pages turning above my head. "So when we have children–which you've already thought about," she continues, breathless, already close to the edge. I can tell by the way her thighs start to fight me, tightening, hungry and desperate.

"Yes, I've been thinking about putting my child in you since the first night you were here." I lift up and kiss her knee, reaching across her torso to capture one perfect breast in my palm. I run the side of my thumb over the stiff, dark tip, my cock leaking as I do. "I imagined my children feeding from your body. I imagined the way you would reach between your legs as you gave birth, how you'd catch her and pull her to your chest, and the way your eyes would sparkle up at me as we'd, together, take in what we made."

Her bottom lip wobbles, and I get back to kissing the inside of her knee, and up her thigh.

"Cassian," she whimpers.

"Keep reading, my darling." I glance at the watch on my wrist. "Just a few minutes until midnight." I understand the ritual of signing before

midnight, despite the fact we both broke the original contract in multiple ways. I also want to move past it, to move past the people we were only a few days ago. When we both still had secrets.

“I can’t believe I owned Moreau this whole time,” she moans as my tongue carves out beautiful little eights on her clit, wide and pink. I slip a finger inside of her, then another, and curl them both as I suck her clit into my mouth. “Cassian!”

“I get to make you my wife. I get to have the honor of being the only man who has ever kissed you here, fucked you here,” I admit, kissing her thigh as I stroke my fingers in and out of her, teasing her, coaxing her to the very edge. “The only man to bury my cum deep inside of you and make you a mother, make you a mother to my children, our children.”

“Cassian, I’m—”

I withdraw my fingers, not letting her come, not yet. I peer over her dress and find her blue eyes laser focused on mine. “I want to sign.”

She spreads the papers on the tiny part of the fainting couch not taken up by her body, and signs her name over the line that holds the words “ELLA MOREAU BLACKWOOD, NEE ELEANORA MOREAU, THE SUBMISSIVE, THE WIFE.”

I take the pen, and scrawl my name on my line. CASSIAN DOMINIC BLACKWOOD, THE DOMINANT, THE HUSBAND.”

“Next week,” she murmurs, gently tossing the signed papers to the side. “I want to marry you next week. In the rose garden. With my grandma.”

I would marry her right now with my tongue lodged deep in her pussy if she said she wanted it. “Perfect. The sooner the better.”

“And I want Fred there. And his wife.”

I lift my head, jealousy worming through my veins. “Who the fuck is Fred?”

She smirks, reaching out to stroke fingers through my hair, off of my forehead. She smoothes a palm down my cheek. “The man who brought me to the ball that night. My… only friend.”

Fred. Ah. I remember now. “Of course.”

I’m about to finish her off when she stops me again. “Cass—what about Vivian?”

I narrow my eyes and scowl. I love that she has a big heart, but I won’t allow that monster near her ever again. “Never.”

She shakes her head. “No, I mean, what happens to her? Now that I know she basically imprisoned me and lied to me and—” she rolls her lips together, eyes locked on mine, hopeful that I have an answer, hopeful that I can figure things out for her.

I will.

“Whatever you want.” I kiss the inside of her knee and smooth my hands up her legs, keeping them open and waiting. “We could turn her in. Or we could figure something else out.” Another kiss to the inside of her knee. “But right now, we’ve signed. You are my wife to be. You are mine. You are all that matters, and right now, all I want to do is make you come.”

I lick her a few more times, then get to my feet, and unzip my slacks. I slide my fingers in the side of her hair, soft and cherry scented, and drag her open, waiting mouth to me. “Suck.”

“I need to come,” she whines, right before I plunge inside her warm mouth, her pink lips suctioning, cheeks hollowing. I tuck her hair behind her ear and wrap my palm around her neck, guiding her down and up, her watery blue eyes holding mine the entire time.

“Don’t you feel good sucking my cock, my little slut?” I ask her, forcing her to nod, mouth full of me. “Isn’t it empowering knowing that you make me feel as good as I make you feel?”

Another nod.

“Mmm,” I groan. “And no one has ever sucked my cock the way you have. No one. And nothing feels as good as your pussy, and your tight little ass. Did you know that, Ella?” I stroke my thumb along the hollow of her cheek as she slurps, the cap of my head nudging the back of her throat.

“No one takes me as deep, and makes me feel as worshipped as you do. You are my fucking queen, did you know that? Everything I have is yours. You are my life now.”

She moans and whines, and reaches between her legs, desperately seeking friction, but I won’t let her. I pull back, and spit threads between her mouth and the couch as she blinks up at me, needy, starved.

I reach down and lift her up, then hold her in my arms as she sinks down on my cock. I lick the moan from her lips with a wet kiss, and her hands go to my face, touching me, tenderly, hungrily, hands everywhere.

Using my arms, I bounce her on me as we stand. “I’m gonna come inside you like this, and when I let you down, you’re going to feel me

dripping down your thighs. It's going to feel good, feeling what you earned sticky and hot on your skin. Aren't you excited, my sweet little slut?"

She buries her face in my neck with a moan, and the feeling of her hands on my face as she pulls back up and stares into my eyes is so intense. Urgency coils in my belly, and my balls grow familiarly tight.

"Come on my cock," I coax. I need her to come. I need to feel her spasming, drinking me down. "Come on, Ella, you know you want it."

I let one hand slide beneath her dress, and around the globe of her ass. I poke the tight hole waiting for me, for my tongue, for my cock, and she squirms in my arms, eyes snapping shut. "You want me there next, don't you, slut?" I ask, dragging my lips along her chin.

She breaks as my name falls off her lips, echoing around the library. "Cassian! Cass, yes, *oh yes*!"

I press her head against my chest and hold her tightly, and stop moving as I sink the last inch of myself inside, and let go. Each throb, a hot pulse of desire leaves me and enters her, connecting us as she spasms around me. "God," I groan, coming so hard I nearly see stars. "You feel like heaven."

After I've given her every drop and she's let me feel every residual twitch and throb, I lower her back to the couch and take off my shirt, pressing it between her legs. Our eyes catch in the moonlight.

"I can't wait to marry you," she whispers. "My handsome prince."

I wink at her, and slip my fingers back inside of her, feeling my hot cum there. "My slutty, beautiful, wife."

"Almost wife."

"Almost wife." It can't come soon enough.

I carry her up to our room, and the moment I lower her to the bed, she begs me to shower with her. "You have no reason to say no," she says, pulling off her slip dress, letting it become a mess on the floor. I love the red marks on her thighs from where I held her open, and then from where I gripped her and made her bounce on my cock.

"Except that I love to deny you, only to make you wait, and punish you before I finally give in," I remind her, swatting her bare ass, the slap stinging the room. She reaches back, rubbing where I gave her a swat.

"We can start on our new goals," she says, slipping off the bed, treading toward the ensuite bathroom. She pauses in the doorway, bare body eating up all the moonlight. She reminds me so much of Minon, and right then I know I'll secure every tapestry I can find, so we can enjoy them together.

I kick off my shoes and shuck down my slacks, glancing back at them to see the MOREAU BOUTIQUE tag looking up at me. “I can’t wait for my closet to be only Designed by Ella,” I say, shoving my boxers down, pulling my shirt off over my head. She watches my cock as it swings, as I make my way toward her, palms practically itching with need.

“Hands up,” I tell her, grinding into her from behind as she pins her own hands above her head in the doorframe. I drag my lips along her neck and press them to the back of her ear. “I love how obedient you are.”

She tips her head back just an inch, searching for my lips, but I deny her.

“You really didn’t skim the contract, despite the fact I was licking you at your most favorite place.” I collect her hair and move it, so that I can kiss the back of her neck, then swat her naked ass. She jumps.

“I read it.” Her voice is so breathy, I can tell she wants to play. “And I’m ready to go wherever you want to take me, sir.”

I move around her, commanding her to stay, then turn on the large shower stall and watch as it slowly fills with steam. I step inside, and call to her. “Now, slut. Crawl to me. Crawl to my cock.”

Her cheeks are so pink, by the time she inches her way across the gleaming tile floor and climbs into the large, open air shower, my cock is standing on end, every vein full, throbbing, a bead of precum at the open slit. “Get to your feet,” I tell her, really fighting myself internally. She loves being my submissive, and I love commanding, watching, guiding. But I love her too, so fucking much. It’s undeniable that simply lifting her into my arms and pressing her against this shower wall and fucking her senseless would be amazing.

I do, however, have other plans.

I always do, after all.

“Touch yourself, show me how much you need me again.” I stroke my cock, hard and anxious in my palm. Water cascades down our backs from the dual heads, and steam swims between us. She looks fucking gorgeous while she’s wet, blonde hair made dark, pieces clinging to her tits, stuck to the side of her face. Her mouth parts, the mouth that kisses me and loves me and takes me, and I grip myself *hard* to gain control.

Her hand falls between her legs as her shoulder blades sink against the tile. “I want you inside me again so bad, sir,” she whispers, competing with the spray of hot water, with the fervent beating of my obsessed heart.

“Who will I be very soon?” I spit on her feet as I stroke my cock. “Tell me what you’ll call me at the end of next week.”

Despite the water pouring over us, I can still hear the slosh of her fingers moving between her swollen lips, over her blooming clit. “Husband,” she moans, tipping her chin up as she leans into the way she feels, moaning, the soft sound trapped in the steam with us, wrapping my cock.

I spit on her feet again. “And you’ll be what?”

She moans, rubbing faster. “Your slutty wife.”

Fuck. Perfect response.

“Cass, sir,” she moans, and as much as I want to spank her for using my name, part of me likes it. It sounds so good, and finally I actually feel like Cassian Blackwood. I feel like a strong, successful man. I feel like, because of Ella, I am who I am meant to be, and therefore, her using my name feels good. “I need to come,” she whines, then, “please, sir,” she begs.

“Hold your pussy open,” I tell her, stepping closer, thick rivulets of water beading on my nose, dripping from my elbows.

I brace one hand on the shower wall beside her, and continue to stroke myself with the other, but slow the motion considerably, only for a moment. “Let’s see how bad you want to come.”

She pulls herself apart, and I let my body relax—just enough. My stream starts, strong and thick, pelting her clit as a shower rains down around us. Ella yelps when my piss connects, and she peers down as the faint yellow stream splashes against her clit, traces of it against her fingers that hold herself open.

I move, making the tiniest of circles, the stream a perfect pressure. She tips her head back, caught between the overwhelming heat and force against her swollen little clit, and wanting to watch it happen.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs, a slight tremble building in her legs.

I continue pissing right where it feels the best, knowing full well that the temperature is teasing, and the pressure is fucking perfect. I can see it in the way her mouth falls open, silent cries falling from her lips. Her eyes snap shut and then– “oh, oh, oh!”

She slams her legs together and I drop my cock, shutting down the last of it as I collect her in my arms and drag us under one head of spray, together.

I stroke my hand down her back, the hot water making her skin red. She reaches for my shoulders, trying to hold on, but the heat and orgasm—and maybe shock—has made her weak. I help her to the floor, and turn off one of the shower heads, and drop to my knees behind her.

Shampooing up my hands, I tend to her hair and take my time, dropping my hands to her shoulders here and there while I wash her. “How are you feeling?”

She tips her head back, one eye squeezed shut to hide from random suds. “That was so hot.” She twists, half her torso facing me as I pull the retractable head off the wall and chase her hair, rinsing the shampoo free. “I thought you just meant spit.” She smiles, wiggling her brows as soap floods the drain. “I could have come to your warm spit on my skin, I think.”

I reach back, replacing the shower head before pumping conditioner into my palms, tending only to the ends of her hair. “I don’t need ideas, my darling. Don’t forget who you’re talking to.”

She laughs, and outstretches her legs, curling her toes leisurely as I tend to her. “That was kinky.”

“You’re kinky, my darling,” I remind her, because sometimes I think she still hasn’t let herself believe it. “You’re perfect.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t believe I am sometimes. I always felt so… bad, you know? Like why am I so messed up? Why can’t I just want missionary in a bed with sweet kisses?”

My hands brace on her shoulders. “Because you’re fun. And while missionary in bed with sweet kisses has its place, people like you and I have room for much more.”

We fall into comfortable silence after I rinse her hair and pull her to her feet, taking my time to suds up her body and nip at her breasts and ass while I do. She strokes her fingers through my hair, and asks me about David and Lucien, somewhat unexpectedly.

“They wanted you to make it work with me, didn’t they?”

I nod, nudging a washcloth between her legs. “Yes. And they wanted me to show you, much sooner than I did.”

Ella catches my wrist, and turns the washcloth on me, nudging it through the hair on my chest. “I’m sorry I pushed you. But I’m glad the road led us here.”

We rinse, and find ourselves in the center of our bed, talking until the light that pours through the windows has gone from purple to orange. When

it’s time to get up for the day, that’s when we finally fall asleep. She worries that the workroom will need her, that we should explain to David why I’m not in the office—she worries, in general, until I remind her that now she never has to worry about anything ever again.

Except, of course, being mine.

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CHAPTER
Thirty-Five

ELLA

"I THINK her first order of business as a co-owner of *Veil* is to handle Adam, officially," David announces as he blots the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

Lucien leans over, cupping a hand to Amalia's ear as he whispers something. She nods, and a moment later winces. "Oh, him?"

Lucien nods. "Yup."

"I think I heard something about this guy," I start, spreading butter across a thick slab of fresh sourdough bread. "A while ago."

Cassian leans over, speaking low, making my skin tingle. "When you should have only been kneeling, and not listening?"

I nod. "Yeah. Then."

He winks and sinks back to his side, but not without leaving his strong hand on my inner thigh. All it takes is feeling him under the table while he chats harmlessly with his brother—and I'm a little breathless, already starting to imagine all of the fun things we'll do back in the hotel room later.

He brought two suitcases of kinky shit on this trip, and God do I love my husband.

"Okay," Cassian says, finally responding to David. "Let's give her the problem of Adam."

"Sounds biblical," Duke says, and David hands him a sweet smirk that makes me smile, too.

We came to Italy for Cass and my honeymoon, but we didn't want to come alone, because I spent much of my life alone and so did Cass. So we invited David and Lucien, and Lucien of course wanted to bring his partner Amalia, who has, in a matter of a few days, grown to be one of my best friends. David, on the other hand, stumbled into the library one evening after one too many brandies, and asked if he too could bring someone.

He didn't want to say who, and at one point, I truly think Cassian thought it may be a club member that he disliked, or even a woman that Lucien dated in the past.

Finally, David admitted that it was a club member, but a club member that Cassian and Lucien both knew and liked.

Duke Ellis. Owner of Ellis Import and Exports. He, I learned from Cassian, has been a *Veil* member since its inception, never a Player, never a Monitor, always an Observer. According to ledgers, he'd been to all of the rooms, many times. No one quite knew exactly what his *thing* was, but *Veil* wasn't a place that pressed. *Veil* did background checks and verified you weren't a train wreck of gossip and deception in your real life but they never, under any circumstances, made you clearly state your thing.

Things are far, wide, broad and diverse. Having to write them in a box or on a line was and is not what *Veil* is about.

I didn't know that David was a natural submissive, and had been in a relationship of that dynamic in the past. In the last three weeks of being a newlywed, I've been teaching Cassian the core truth of being a husband: you have to tell me stuff. Even stuff that seems irrelevant.

Like, *hey, my assistant David? He's submissive, like you.*

Oh, and he's gay.

I was surprised to learn of both of these things while Cassian seemed most surprised to learn that he was seeing Duke Ellis.

I'd asked him why, but when I first met Duke Ellis the morning of our private flight to Italy, I completely understood.

David has a size kink, clearly.

Duke Ellis is a wall of a man. I don't just mean in height but muscle. So much muscle. Muscle in places I didn't think there could be. David isn't a small man either. He's six foot one, and he works out. Cassian says David uses his home gym.

But Duke Ellis is the size of two men.

And he puts his hand on the back of David’s neck in a way that makes *me* hot.

“The only thing biblical about Adam is his name,” David assures, winking up at Duke, who still rests his hand on David's neck as the two of them finish their wine.

Lucien asks, “may I?”

Cassian nods.

David does, too. “Please. Spare me from having to talk about this man one more time in my life.”

Duke’s eyebrows furrow. He and I are the only ones who don’t know about this guy. Even Amalia, likely due to her time in the *Veil* rooms, knows who he is.

“He’s a dominant. He likes pain.” Lucien volleys his head. “Erm, let me be more clear here. He loves inflicting pain, he loves watching his partner take that pain.”

“So,” I hedge, biting into the bread, then chewing through a bite before speaking again. Talking with my mouth full, after all, earns me a spanking. “He’s a sadist.”

“It started that way. And his partner—who he’s been with for years, might I add—seemed to be into it. She seemed… like she enjoyed it.”

“So she’s a masochist,” I continue, still familiarizing myself with everything. I’m new, after all.

Lucien nods. Amalia smiles, tucking a shining piece of dark hair behind her ear, a diamond stud shining on her lobe. “She’s a really nice woman, Cate. I like her a lot. But… I feel bad for her.”

“If she likes it,” I hedge, puzzled. “Why do you feel bad?”

“We think she started to hate it because of him. The kink, the club, all of it,” Lucien says, draping his arm over the back of Amalia’s chair as a waiter approaches silently, refilling our wine glasses. The night sky behind us is a beautiful array of oranges, smeared against the gauzy backdrop of clear blue, with the soundtrack of water rippling against soft, white sand. I think I’m in love with Italy as much as I’m in love with Cassian.

“Because she genuinely loved *Veil*, and she used to look at Adam like he was her whole world. But he has been unraveling for years. Skipping core steps. Pushing past safe words. We had the Monitors stop several of his scenes, and put him on restriction more than once. But he did our mandated

therapy, and Cate pleaded for them to be allowed back," Cassian fills in, earning a nod from his brother.

"But we're at an impasse now. We have to make a decision because… he hurt Cate in a scene, and she didn't just leave *Veil* but she left him. Cass's lawyer told us a few weeks ago."

"He's not safe." It seems simple. "If he went overboard and didn't respect her rules or the club rules, why would you guys even hesitate kicking him out?" I sip my wine and look at the way Cassian and Lucien share a glance. "What? What am I missing?"

Cassian smiles, the soft pink of his face hardly noticeable in the fading sunlight. I love his face. I love everything about it. He tilts his body toward mine, pushing hair behind my ear. "If we turn him out, what do you think he would do? Seek help and reform himself? After losing everything he loves?"

I don't understand. He leans into me. "This is the man you've heard us discussing before. It's been a problem for quite some time. But I have a plan."

"They want to rehabilitate him," Amalia says, half joking, half serious.

"Really?"

Cassian sighs. "Adam wasn't always this… beast. He was a normal, kinky, fun guy. A great partner. A safe dominant. Only, in the last few years he's changed and instead of tossing him out in the rain, we want to… help him get better so that he doesn't hurt harder, and more often."

I take it all in, the plan to help someone who seems to deserve no kindness. Then again, I like being a part of a club that helps people—first enjoy themselves in a way they maybe never could and secondly, allows people to come back from mistakes.

"How would you rehabilitate him?" Lucien asks. "Co-owner." He smiles, and I smile back still kind of in disbelief that Cassian gave me half of his world.

I trace the rim of my wine glass before I take a sip, considering the question.

"Did he hurt his partner, physically?" Duke asks quietly, almost like he's afraid of the answer.

"Yes," Cassian answers, "but the truth is, the damage was far more emotional than the physical." I cut my husband a questioning glance. "He left her tied up in *The Crucible*, locked the safety doors, and didn't allow

anyone in to free her. Her wrists and ankles were… in pretty bad shape. She was dehydrated and… he also blindfolded her so she had no sense of the day or night. It was three days, I might add. Monitors had to break the door to get her free and to get him out."

"Complete asshole if you ask me," Amalia hums.

Lucien bobs his head, his hair down around his shoulders tonight. "Yep."

I sip my wine. "Why not force him into a contract wherein he must become a submissive and endure the role to specification or else he will be turned out of *Veil* and charges will be pressed?"

Cassian blinks at me, a slow smirk creeping up his lips. "That was my very suggestion as well. Months ago." He smiles. "A taste of his own medicine."

Lucien rolls his eyes.

"An eye for an eye leaves everyone blind," David says.

"But hold on now," Duke cuts in. "Make him understand that role and why what he did was so hurtful, and do it within the confines of the club where he can have mental health access and have it actually be safe." His brows lift. "I don't think that's a bad idea."

"Then he can stay in *Veil*, and present himself as reformed to Cate, that is, if she wants him back," I explain.

"He wants her back," Cassian sighs. "He wants us to help him get her back."

The waiter returns, and slides plates of Tiramisu along the merlot-colored table cloth, speaking in Italian to Cassian, who thanks him.

We begin to dig in, and Cassian leans over, rubbing his knuckles down my arm as he whispers, "I like your plan. You're a good co-owner."

I lean over and nibble the edge of his ear. "To think, we had the same plan."

He reaches between my thighs under the table and rests his hand on my pussy, keeping it there while the table enjoys dessert, the rest of our wine and some espresso, too.

Tomorrow is our last day in Italy, where the six of us will be touring the place Cassian bought for Blackwood Designs—my new European clothing line, the overseas distributor of The Phantom Line. He's taking me to shop and pick out new fabrics, and before we go, we're going by a curators to see an Abelard and Minon piece that has never been brought to the US.

Until tomorrow, when we take it home, because Cassian bought it for us.

The last thing we'll snag before we head back is new blood-colored silk to wrap the banisters with at the Midnight Masquerade next year. Now that we're throwing it together, we've decided to make it a theme.

The Phantom of the Opera.

"TELL ME WHO YOU BELONG TO!" Cassian's broad chest heaves in the light of the fire. He snaps the leather whip and it leaves a scorching trail against my skin. I wiggle against the restraints on my wrists and ankles—restraints that I sewed into the suit he wore to dinner.

My own kink, used against me.

I fucking love it.

"You, sir," I moan as he snaps the leather against my nipple, making my breast throb, ache for his hand to knead the sting away.

Another snap of the leather, this time over my groin, against my swollen lips. "Try again, you little whore." He strokes himself with his free hand and whips me again, but I can't take my eyes off the veiny thing he pumps, and the way his balls hang, so full and heavy.

God, I really am a slut for him.

"My husband!" I moan, the vibrator he tucked inside me now making me lose my mind. "I belong to my husband!"

He trails around me, out of my sight, and the toy tucked deep in my body takes me to a place I'm not ready to go, a place I have no permission being.

"Cass, I'm close, I'm so close, sir," I moan, not wanting to get in trouble for coming, not wanting to come, but the way he teases my obedience and ownership out of me as he touches himself, it's too much. "Please, sir, I need to come. I'm gonna come."

The whip falls to the ground with a thud, and from the stone hearth, the fire cracks and pops. Cassian's finger hooks the loop at my feet and I open my eyes to see his naked, sweaty body crouched at my feet, setting my legs free. He rises, and slaps my thigh, leaving my hands restrained above me.

“Hook your legs around my waist, my beautiful, slutty, wife,” he growls, bending to suck my breast onto his tongue, leaving a bite around my areola.

I do as he says, and nearly come as he fishes a hand between us, and yanks the toy out of me, tossing it behind him on the bed. He hooks two fingers inside of me, playing with the mess, groaning as his cock slides against my belly.

“My wet, messy little wife,” he growls before crushing his mouth to mine, kissing me hard, both of us panting, on the edge. He pulls back. “Open.”

I open my mouth and he spits inside just as he notches his cock at my opening, and thrusts in, one stroke, all the way, so deep.

“Oh!” I moan, accepting him, clenching around him, immediately unspooling on his cock as I swallow down his warm saliva. Mint and booze, the saltiness of me—he tastes like everything I need and want.

He thrusts, his grunts and groans making me wild as I come hard, stomach clenching, pussy tightening in unabashed waves. “There you go, coming so easily for your husband, just like a good slut,” he groans.

A moment later, his teeth are sunk into my shoulder as his cock swells and throbs, unleashing so much thick heat inside me that it immediately starts to trail down my thighs. He grunts and throbs, and I love the way he feels and sounds when he’s finishing inside me, especially now that I’m birth control free. Every time feels like a maybe.

A moment later he reaches up and frees my hands, which fall easily around his neck. I drape my face on his shoulder as he carries us to bed, and rolls me back, tucking a towel beneath my tailbone, and between my legs. He kisses me, promising to tend to my skin with lotion after he showers me.

“But for now, my beautiful wife, rest. Rest and make us a baby.”

WE TRAVEL HOME FROM ITALY, and begin the ritual of Sunday dinners. Lucien, Amalia, David, Duke, Fred, Sharon, and Grandma Connie all come. It becomes a day that both Cassian and I look so forward to, after years of feeling isolated.

On the sixth week of Sunday dinners, Lucien proposes to Amalia.

On the seventh week, Fred and Sharon bring their daughter.

And on the eighth week, Cassian and I announce that we brought back a gift from Italy, and it's going to be coming in a matter of months.

And on the ninth week I have come to the conclusion that Vivian should be turned in. I toyed with the idea of having her work here, for me. To force her to work and use the cop's confession tape as leverage over her.

But having a life growing inside me has made me soft. I don't think I can do that. So I let the legal system take care of her, and by the time I give birth to Liam Cassian Blackwood, Vivian is behind bars. For the rest of her natural life.

And no part of my life now needs to be about Vivian. My energy is best served on this new life I have, this precious, wonderful world I now live in. A scene with Vivian where I tear her apart and watch her wither isn't for me, because I'm not stuck in the past. She is where she needs to be, and that's that.

Fern and Tess are on their own, but are offered work at The Phantom Line. They don't take it, but the line in the water will always remain. I do have a heart, after all.

The Phantom Line has made Ella Blackwood a household name, and nothing has proven to pair better with a household name than a handsome, revealed millionaire.

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The Blackwood Contract

A Private Contract of Marriage, Partnership, and Power Exchange
Executed in confidence by the parties named herein
to govern their union in love, enterprise, and surrendered trust.

SECTION I — PARTIES AND STYLE OF NAME

1.1. This Contract is entered into by and between CASSIAN BLACKWOOD (hereinafter "Cassian," "the Dominant," or "Husband") and ELEANORA MOREAU (hereinafter "Ella," "the Submissive," or "Wife").

1.2. Upon the solemnization of their marriage, Eleanora Moreau will be known in all personal, social, and legal capacities as ELLA MOREAU BLACKWOOD. She will retain Moreau as a middle name in honor of her father Winfield Moreau, and take Blackwood as her married surname in honor of her husband Cassian Blackwood.

1.3. The parties may, in private and in scene, employ honorifics as follows, unless otherwise agreed in the moment: Cassian may be addressed as Sir or Husband; Ella may be addressed as Ella, Mrs. Blackwood, or such endearment as the Dominant elects, provided it is never used to diminish her nor is it a term on her limits list, either soft or hard.

SECTION II — RECITALS

2.1. That they have chosen one another with open eyes: he, a man who has built an empire and learned to live behind a ruined face but who now chooses to be open and share himself with his wife and the world; she, a woman who has been limited in life and resources but now has everything and will not deny herself anything any longer.

2.2. That love, in their particular case, is not the absence of power but its deliberate and cherished arrangement. Cassian's role as dominant does not give him more power over Ella—they are equals in all facets.

2.3. That the Dominant's authority is a gift the Submissive continues to give, and that gift may be examined, renewed, or withdrawn according to the terms of this contract.

2.4. That neither party will ever use the language of ownership to excuse cruelty, pain, or neglect.

2.5. That they intend to be married, to be monogamous, to be partners in business, and to live a Dominant and Submissive structure at all times, subject only to the Sundown Dynamic described herein when children enter their home.

SECTION III — PROPERTY, ENTERPRISES, AND FINANCE

Blackwood Enterprises

3.1. Upon marriage, Ella Moreau Blackwood will receive a partial ownership interest in all business and financial holdings of Blackwood Enterprises, including present concerns and those hereafter acquired under that name or its successors. The precise percentage, class of shares, and voting rights will be set forth in a companion shareholders' or partnership instrument, but will in no event be so slight as to render her interest ceremonial.

3.2. Ella will have the right to inspect books, attend meetings of consequence, and be informed, in good faith and in timely fashion, of any material change to the fortunes of Blackwood Enterprises.

Obsidian Veil

3.3. Ella Moreau Blackwood will become co-owner of the private establishment known as Obsidian Veil, the sex club presently owned by Cassian Blackwood. Co-ownership will include an equal voice in matters of membership standards, house rules, safety protocol, and the moral character of the house. Day-to-day management may remain with such persons as the parties jointly appoint, but neither party may sell, encumber, or fundamentally alter the nature of Obsidian Veil without the written consent of the other.

Moreau Boutique

3.4. Ella Blackwood retains sole and exclusive ownership of Moreau Boutique and all marks, inventory, leases, and goodwill associated therewith. She may expand, contract, sell, rebrand, or shutter the boutique as she alone sees fit. Cassian will neither claim an interest in it nor interfere with her decisions concerning it, save that he may offer counsel when asked.

The Phantom Line

3.5. Cassian Blackwood and Ella Blackwood will co-own The Phantom Line. Day-to-day operations and large-scale operations will rest with Ella Blackwood, or with such persons as she sees fit to appoint. Cassian's role will be that of partner, financier, and counsel—not of overseer.

3.6. Cassian Blackwood will always finance any and all endeavors put forth or suggested by Ella Blackwood in connection with The Phantom Line, Moreau Boutique, or such new ventures as she may reasonably propose during the life of this Contract. "Finance" includes, without limitation, capital, lines of credit, introductions, and the use of the Blackwood name where she wishes it used.

General Financial Duties

3.7. The parties will maintain transparency regarding personal and shared accounts. Neither will conceal material debt, law suits, or assets from the other.

3.8. Gifts between the parties, including jewelry, property, and tokens of the dynamic (collar, ring, or otherwise), are given freely and are not consideration for sexual access, rule or obedience.

SECTION IV — MARRIAGE, MONOGAMY, AND THE LIFE OF THE HOUSE

4.1. The parties agree to a monogamous marriage. Neither will take another lover, nor offer nor accept sexual contact outside the marriage, nor cultivate a romantic attachment that would divide the fidelity owed under this Contract. Membership, ownership, or presence at Obsidian Veil will never be construed as license to stray from monogamy.

4.2. The date of the marriage is negotiable and will be fixed by mutual written addendum. Until that date, the spirit of this Contract governs their conduct as if the vows were already spoken.

4.3. The parties will live in a shared household. Decisions of consequence regarding residence, staff, and the public face of the marriage will be made as one. The Dominant may set certain protocols of the house (dress, address, evening ritual) consistent with Article V and he may not isolate Ella from friends, family, or her own work.

4.4. The parties agree to run The Midnight Masquerade together annually. Planning, guest list, theme, and the safety of all who attend will be a joint labor.

4.5. Cassian is permitted to wear a mask on the night of The Midnight Masquerade, and on that night only, as a matter of participation in the evening’s theme. He agrees, from the execution of this Contract forward, to no longer hide his injured face from Ella. In their home, in their bed, and in the ordinary hours of their marriage, she will have his face as it is. No addendums may be made to this portion.

SECTION V — THE DYNAMIC

Structure

5.1. Cassian and Ella Blackwood agree to continue the Dominant and Submissive structure of their relationship at all times. Authority, protocol, and the erotic architecture of their marriage are not a weekend amusement.

5.2. The Dominant's authority encompasses protocol, sexual direction within negotiated limits, domestic ritual, and the keeping of Ella's body. It does not encompass her conscience, her friendships, her businesses as reserved in Article III, or her right to revoke consent.

5.3. The Submissive agrees to offer obedience, attentiveness, and grace in the keeping of protocol, and to speak at once when obedience would require her to betray her safety, her stated limits, or the truth of her feelings.

The Sundown Dynamic

5.4. Only when children are introduced to their family will Cassian and Ella retreat into the Sundown Dynamic, defined as follows:

(a) By day, and in all hours when a child is present or reasonably likely to enter a room, the Dominant and Submissive roles remain pervasive in private understanding—in glance, in the weight of a hand at the small of the back, in the quiet authority of the house—but will not be spoken, staged, or sexually enacted.

(b) Protocol visible to a child will be indistinguishable from ordinary marital engagement.

(c) The roles will be truly experienced and enacted in scene play at night, behind closed doors, after the children are asleep or otherwise in trusted care.

(d) The parties will review the Sundown Dynamic not less than once each year after the birth or adoption of a child, and sooner if either feels the arrangement is starving the marriage or confusing the household.

5.5. The arrival of children does not dissolve the Contract. It refines it.

Transparency of Feeling

5.6. Ella and Cassian both agree to be transparent with their feelings at all times. Neither will weaponize silence. Neither will perform scenes when they are not fine. Jealousy, fear, tenderness, resentment, hunger, and grief are to be named, confronted, and discussed.

5.7. The Submissive, Ella Blackwood, agrees to keep her Dominant, Cassian, apprised of her comfort levels at all times—before a scene, during a scene, and in the ordinary weather of the day. Comfort includes physical sensation, emotional weather, and any change in limit or desire.

5.8. The Dominant agrees to receive such notice without punishment. An honest accounting of comfort is obedience, not defiance.

5.9. The parties will keep a standing weekly conversation, unhurried and without scene, for the sole purpose of speaking about the state of the marriage, the dynamic, and the heart.

SECTION VI — SAFETY, CONSENT, AND THE LANGUAGE OF STOPPING

6.1. Consent is ongoing. Either party may pause or end a scene at any time.

6.2. The parties adopt the following safeword system, which will be honored instantly and without debate in the moment:

(a) GREEN — continue; all is well; more is welcome.
(b) YELLOW — slow, check, adjust; the Submissive is approaching an edge or requires a change.
(c) RED — stop. The scene ends. Aftercare begins.

6.3. A safeword, a clear “stop,” a tap-out, or any genuine sign of medical or emotional distress will have the same force as RED. The Dominant who fails to honor a stop has broken this Contract in its most essential particular.

6.4. If speech is impaired by gag, tears, or intensity, the Submissive will have a non-verbal signal agreed in advance (a dropped object, a double tap, a distinct blink pattern, etc). The Dominant is responsible for watching for it.

6.5. Aftercare is not optional. After any scene of consequence, Cassian will remain present, will see to water, warmth, cleanliness, and quiet, and will not leave Ella alone with the drop of her own body. The form of aftercare may vary; the fact of it may not.

6.6. The parties will maintain honest disclosure regarding sexual health, medications that affect sensation or mood, and any injury or condition that would make a proposed act unwise. They will seek appropriate medical care without shame.

SECTION VII — THE EROTIC TERMS

General

7.1. Sexual life within the marriage favors intimacy first and carnal desires second. The Dominant directs and the Submissive yields within the limits set out here and in any written addendum.

7.2. No act listed as an exploration is required on any particular night. Desire is invited; it is not conscripted. Soft and hard limits will always be obeyed by the Dominant.

Explorations the Dominant Wishes to Pursue

7.3. Provided they are not later named as limits by Ella, Cassian would like to explore the following. These are not commands. They are a detailed map of his hunger for his wife, offered for her consideration and, if she wishes, her consent:

Body fluid play.
Further toy exploration play.
Vaginal stretching.
Vaginal and anal use at the same time.
Long-term scenes (scenes whose protocol, restriction, or erotic condition extends across. hours or days).

7.4. Any exploration will be preceded by conversation: intention, tools, duration, aftercare, and the precise meaning of YELLOW and RED for that act. First attempts will be conservative.

7.5. Ella may, at any time, convert an exploration into a soft limit or a hard limit. She will say so plainly. Cassian will write the change into an addendum.

Limits

7.6. The following are standing hard limits unless expressly revised in a signed addendum: any act involving a third person; any recording or photograph of a scene without prior written consent for that instance; any humiliation that targets Ella’s intellect, her work, her family name, or her worthiness to be loved; any mark intended to be visible at a child’s eyeline once children exist; any play that involves breath in a manner the parties have not separately and specifically negotiated; and any act undertaken while either party is impaired beyond the capacity to safeword.

7.7. Soft limits—acts that may be approached with caution, extra negotiation, and an easy YELLOW—will be kept in a private list maintained by both parties and reviewed not less than quarterly.

Conception and Birth Control

7.8. Cassian Blackwood asks, and Ella Moreau Blackwood by her signature considers, a limit upon Ella’s continued use of birth control, with the shared intention to begin trying to conceive within one year of the marriage date.

7.9. The marriage date being negotiable, the one-year period will run from the date the marriage is in fact fortified, unless the parties agree otherwise in writing.

7.10. This Article is a statement of shared hope, not a warrant over Ella’s body. Timing of discontinuation of contraception, the method of trying, and all medical decisions concerning pregnancy, fertility treatment, and the continuation or ending of a pregnancy remain Ella’s to make with her physicians. Cassian may want a child with her but he may not commandeer the wanting.

7.11. Should conception prove difficult, or should either party’s readiness change, they will return to the weekly conversation required by Section 5.9 before either assumes the other’s heart.

SECTION VIII — PROTOCOL, CORRECTION, AND CARE

8.1. Correction, when and where it is warranted, will be proportionate, private, and finished. It will never be administered in anger, in front of staff, or in front of a child/ren. Correction ends with reconnection.

8.2. The Dominant is responsible for the Submissive's well-being in the dynamic: sleep, food, the temperature of a room in which she has been told to wait, the state of any implement before it touches her. Neglect dressed as protocol is a breach.

8.3. Ella is not required to perform protocol when ill, grieving, or in the immediate aftermath of a professional crisis. She will say that she is off-protocol. He will always believe her.

SECTION IX — CONFIDENCE AND THE WORLD

9.1. The existence of this Contract, its sexual terms, and the particular architecture of their dynamic will remain private, except as the parties jointly elect to disclose, or as required by law or medical necessity.

9.2. Obsidian Veil and The Midnight Masquerade are public enough in their own fashion. What happens between Cassian and Ella after the door closes is not content for the house.

9.3. Neither party will use the other's secrets—of business, of the body, of the injured face, of the surrendered hours—as leverage in a quarrel.

SECTION X — TERM, REVIEW, AND RELEASE

10.1. This Contract commences upon signature and continues through courtship, marriage, and the life of the marriage, unless ended as provided herein.

10.2. The parties will formally review this Contract on each anniversary of its signing, and upon the birth or adoption of a child, and upon any material change in health.

10.3. Either party may request a renegotiation at any time. A request for renegotiation is not a rejection of the marriage.

10.4. The relational and power-exchange provisions may be suspended or ended by either party upon clear spoken or written notice. Ending the dynamic does not, of itself, end the marriage; ending the marriage does not entitle either party to retain power over the other's body.

10.5. The commercial provisions of Article III will survive according to the companion legal instruments, or, absent those, according to principles of fairness and the intent that Ella leave no union poorer in name or in fact than she entered it.

10.6. If either party breaches a core duty—fidelity, the honoring of a safeword, the unveiling of the face, financial concealment, or the duty of transparency—the other may treat the Contract as broken and seek such personal and legal remedies as honor and the civil law allow.

SECTION XI — CLOSING

11.1. The parties acknowledge that they have read this Contract in full, that they have had opportunity to amend it, and that they sign it neither in passion or fear, but in the ordinary courage of two people who intend to keep what they promise, to keep their word to one another for life.

11.2. They ask no witness but each other, and they later choose lawyers to validate the business and financial pages of this contract.

CASSIAN BLACKWOOD
The Dominant, Husband

_____

Date:

_____

ELLA MOREAU BLACKWOOD
nee Eleanora Moreau
The Submissive, Wife

_____

Date:

_____

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Acknowledgments

To my husband, for everything.

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About the Author



Daisy Jane is an indie author writing contemporary romance with kink. In her stories you'll find small towns, ordinary people and extraordinary sex lives.

Daisy enjoys reading, finding new ways to eat peanut butter, black coffee, funk music and cool cover bands, Yosemite, 90s movies and true crime.

She lives in California with her husband of nineteen years, their two daughters and three cats.

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The Wild One / a reverse age gap romance / MF / Book 1

The Brazen One / a grumpy/sunshine romance / MF / Book 2

The Only One / a femdom romance / MF / Book 3

Men of Paradise (3 Books)

Where Violets Bloom / a stalker romance / MF / Book 1

Stray / a femdom romance / MF / Book 2

With Force / a CNC romance / MF / Book 3

Oakcreek

I'll Do Anything / a bully femdom romance / MF / Book1

After the Storm / an alpha MM romance / MM / Book 2

Standalones:

Big Daddy / dual POV / MF / age gap / best friend's dad

Undeniable / dual POV / MF / age gap / mom's ex

Raleigh Two / a taboo MFM romance / MFM

The Man I Know / a married couple romance / MF

The Other Brother / dual POV / MF

The Corner House / single POV / MFMM, MFM, MFM with an HEA

Hot Girl Summer / a taboo step sibling romance / MF

Release / a taboo MMF, MM, MF romance

Novellas:

Cherry Pie / very taboo why choose / MFMM

Sweet Clementine / why choose / MFMM

Peaches & Cream / step mom/sons why choose / MFMM

Candy Cane / why choose / MFMMM

The Sleepover / MF age gap

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