

I HAVE NO HOPE OF SURVIVING HIM

LOVING THE *Liar*

*If I ever give you this journal
remember the days they
you away from me. I
craved home to you
love to you.*

SILVER FALLS UNIVERSITY
BOOK ONE

LOLA KING

Loving The Liar

Sweetness & Deceit

Silver Falls University

Book 1

Lola King



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I can do it with a broken heart.
Taylor Swift

*This book is dedicated to all the people who survive themselves.
To everyone who, every morning, takes up arms to fight their self-destructive
thoughts.
You are so brave.
Keep going.*

To Jay,

*Because after growing together for 9 years and deciding our journeys were
parallel rather than intertwined, you still taught me something powerful
about myself.*

That I'm strong enough to do it with a broken heart.

I will forever cherish our friendship.

CONTENT WARNING

Hello, and thank you for picking up this book.
Before going in, please note this book is a dark romance for readers aged 18+ only.

If you've read my books before - please note that while this book doesn't have a 'shopping list' of TW, it is still dark as the topics touched upon are very real.

There is on-page descriptive self-harm, depression, body dysmorphia, and violence to oneself.

While my MMC is not as violent as my others, he is extremely manipulative, toxic, controlling, and psychologically abusive.

It's important for you to know your limits, and that what matters the most is your mental health and your wellbeing. Reading is fun, fiction is great, but you matter the most.

Please note the following possible triggers in no specific order:

On page self-harm

Dubcon

Depression

Manipulation

Toxic relationship

Murder

Violence

Mention of rape
Domestic abuse
Cheating (not between FMC and MMC)
Sexual assault

Kinks include:
Light humiliation and degradation
Light DDlg
Bondage

My books are *not* guides to BDSM. There is *no* real BDSM in this book.

This book is for people who want to dive into their fantasies safely, on the page. Please, be aware that the fantasy starts on the next page, and you are entering at your own risk—there will be no further warning and no safe word.

The only safe word/gesture at your disposal is to close the book.

Always play safely and consensually.

Lots of Love,
Lola

PLAYLIST

Taste of Metal - Henry Morris
Tired of California - Nessa Barrett
EMPTY - Chase Atlantic
Secrets - Omit, Ordell, Rick Jansen
Mr. Perfectly Fine - Taylor Swift
Monster - Shawn Mendes, Justin Bieber
Vicious - Tate McRae
Escapism. - RAYE, 070 Shake
Food Poisoning - Chri\$tian Gate\$
KILL MY X - Chri\$tian Gate\$
Noose - Nessa Barrett
TEETH - WesGhost, Diggy Graves
Dark Paradise, Lana Del Rey
.Goetia. - Peter Gundry
She Gets the Flowers - Beth McCarthy
The Vampire Masquerade - Peter Gundry
Too Late To Love You - Ex Habit
ALL I WANTED WAS U - Ex Habit, Omido
SPINE - WesGhost
Stupid - Tate McRae
All this time - Toby Mai
Bad idea right? - Olivia Rodrigo

MATCH MADE IN HELL - Dutch Melrose, benny mayne
Diet Mountain Dew - Lana Del Rey
Pacify Her - Melanie Martinez
So Good - Halsey
Shameless - Camila Cabello
Please Notice - Christian Leave
Guilty as Sin? - Taylor Swift
The Scientist - Coldplay
Say Don't Go - Taylor Swift
So High School - Taylor Swift
Old Money - Lana Del Rey
Wrong Direction - Hail Steinfeld
Forever Young - Henry Morris
Nightclubs in Heaven - Henry Morris
Lose You To Love Me - Selena Gomez
Pain - Nessa Barrett
I'll Make You Miss Me - Artemas
Daylight - David Kushner
Take Me To Church - Hozier
Way Down We Go - KALEO
Born To Die - Lana Del Rey
One Of The Girls - The Weeknd, JENNIE, Lily-Rose Depp
Work Song - Hozier
Slower - Tate McRae
Call My Name - GRAHAM, Henrik

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Prologue

Ella

Taste of Metal - Henry Morris

The bloodcurdling scream of someone being murdered is like nothing I've heard before.

During those long, horrifying seconds, only the sounds and smells stick with me.

The gasping of her emptying lungs. How she chokes on her blood with dire gurgling noises I will never forget.

Blood smells strong. So strong I can practically taste it in my mouth, dying along with her as crimson liquid spills from her lips. A cough and it splatters on my face.

The images don't stay. They're flashes of blurriness my brain already tries to erase. To protect me from.

She's on the ground. I know she is because I am too, kneeling next to her on the forest soil.

She's dying.

There's mud and blood in her black hair. That I notice. And her hands come to scratch her throat, her bloody lips. She's ripping into her skin, coughing over and over again.

She's dead before I get myself out of the haze.

I can already see the headlines.

College queen bee turns out to be a murderer.

Is this how I'll go down? For the murder of the woman who had become my ex's new girlfriend?

What was the point of becoming picture-perfect, of being the popular, flawless girl if my downfall all comes down to this? The murder of my enemy.

My left fist tightens around the note in my hand, hopelessness growing within me.

It's just a tiny, bloody, ripped piece of paper carrying simple words.

Victory belongs to the most persevering.

I love you

I miss you. Every day I wake up here, I look at her, and I miss you. Blue eyes shouldn't look so dark. Blue skies are my favorite, and they reflect in your eyes like a crisp spring morning. Blue is my favorite color.

Chapter One

Ella

tired of California - Nessa Barrett

Two months earlier...

In the future, I will look back at this call and realize it's what started my downfall. But tonight, as I watch my phone ring through blurry eyes, I know nothing of the mistake I'm about to make.

My four best friends and I sit in a circle around a fire pit, enjoying the last summer party before going back to college. The August air makes our skins sticky, and the slight breeze from the night is a relief on our hot bodies.

People party inside my friend Alex's house, but the five of us separated from the crowd and walked to the lake. It's glistening from the moon and the sky turning a royal blue, leaving the pitch-black of the night behind.

It's not always fun being popular. We're used to it, but as someone who's worked so hard for that status, it's exhausting. Especially when it's become my entire personality. People are in my face, watching my every move.

I look down at myself and the light blue bikini I'm wearing. I'm covering the bottoms with a sparkly beach skirt I tied around my waist. It's gorgeous, and everyone complimented me about it. None of them know I'm wearing a beach skirt to hide the scars on my upper thighs. None of them know that despite starving myself all day so I could look good in a bikini, I still felt my

stomach wasn't flat enough and that I needed something to hide it. I sucked it in all evening. So hard that I have cramps from doing so.

Perfect clothes. Perfect, humble *thank yous* and smiles. Perfect tits, perfectly toned body. Everything people see is perfect, perfect, perfect.

It's easier not to pretend with my friends. So, at the end-of-summer party, we always separate from the rest and hang out together so we can be our true selves.

I take another sip of whatever cocktail I made in my solo cup, licking my numb lips and tasting the sweetness. I'm not too sure what I'm drinking anymore, but the world is spinning in the best way, my brain cloudy from alcohol, joy, and love. The excitement of friendship flows through my veins as my friends laugh around me.

I'm smiling too, not sure what for.

I'm happy.

Or at least I was until my phone started ringing.

A five a.m. call probably means my ex is drunk—or maybe pretending to be. I'm not sure I want to hear a tirade about him regretting breaking up just so I can get my hopes up. Down the line, I know the truth. He'll stay with his girlfriend, and I'll regret letting him keep me close. A quick call every now and then means I'll continue hanging on. So toxic. So *us*.

It's been a while since I've gotten one of those. Since last Christmas. Eight months for something that used to be regular feels like a long time. And I had finally stopped longing for them like a stupid broken-hearted girl.

I was truly broken-hearted. The kind that rips you from the inside out. Every night it stops you from falling asleep, replaying moments of nostalgia, and every morning it drags you back to the abyss the second you're conscious. It twists inside you when you hear his name, and it stabs you to near-death when you think of him alone. And when you're bleeding and ready for it all to end, for a never-ending sleep, it keeps you alive just enough to suffer.

That kind of heartbreak.

I could barely maintain appearances.

So, of course, the calls didn't help me heal, they just kept that constant, craved toxicity going. Because that was what we were. Destructive. Suicidal. Meant to break.

But God, those calls felt so good. The tiniest hint of a drug to an addict that's been sober long enough to be proud but not long enough to be healed.

Just a little. It won't change anything.

It always did, kept me dependent.

My therapist told me to write my ex a letter whenever I felt it was necessary. A way to let things out. On paper, safely. Just make sure I never send them. I couldn't write letters, but I wrote a few sentences every morning. It relieved me to talk to him every day.

The last note I wrote was a week ago.

I think I'm over you. I'm sorry.

But I don't truly think I'm sorry about it.

Tonight, I'm ready to drunkenly shout, "*What the fuck? Chris is calling me.*" Rather than hide it from my friends.

But I know how the conversation will go.

Peach will throw her red hair behind her shoulder and send me a death stare. *Don't even think of answering it. He's calling because you posted a picture of you and Matias on your story earlier tonight.*

Matias and I aren't even a thing. We fuck from time to time because he's halfway decent at it, and I'm a way for social climbers to get to the top. Fuck the queen bee and become a subject in her court.

People love hanging out with me. And if I don't want to acknowledge them, they hang *around* me until I give them the time of day.

Ella Baker asked to borrow my pen! Wow. Tell your diary about it.

But back to my current problem—the phone ringing on my lap, and how it would be a bad idea to accept it.

My friend Wren—currently dragging Peach to the lake to throw her in the water—would look at the ringing phone, shrug, and shake his head. He wasn't the biggest fan of Chris when we dated. They're too similar. Quietly dominating. Perfect on the surface, monsters deep down. He never bought the gentleman act.

My sweet girl, Alex, would hesitate, feel bad for him, even though there's nothing to feel bad about. But in the end, she would put me first. She would give me a hug and discreetly take the phone away. I look at her, dancing by the fire in her hot pink bikini. Singing to Taylor Swift's "All Too Well," ten-minute version, like she's going through a heartbreak, when really, she's living her own fairy tale with the love of her life.

"Ignore him, tell him to fuck off, do whatever." I startle, looking up from where I'm sitting and over my shoulder. Achilles is smiling at me mischievously. "Either way, the guy isn't going to let you go. Trust me on

that.”

His usual deep voice is a rasp from the alcohol, and his gray eyes sparkle with the secrets he never shares with us.

I don’t ask what he knows that I don’t. We’ve always put Achilles on a pedestal. In high school, I was prom queen, and he was king. We never dated, never even slept together, but people liked to imagine we did because we would have been the perfect power couple. He wasn’t here during freshman and sophomore year, studying in France where his mom lives. His parents had a messy divorce, and he chose to go live with her. But he’s been back since the beginning of the summer, and he took his rightful place among us once again.

In private, Achilles is the leader in a group where we’re technically all equals, and yet don’t mind always giving him the last word. So much so that as soon as he returned to Stoneview, he told our old friend Chester to not even think of approaching us anymore since he’d been a complete dick to Alex.

I look out at the lake where Wren and Peach are now splashing water at each other. Tilting my head to the side, I squint my eyes. I don’t think she’s wearing the top of her bikini anymore.

The sun will be up soon. We’re all going to watch it rise above the lake like we’ve done every year before going back to school since we were kids.

A sense of independence washes over me. A new start.

Letting a smile spread on my lips, I answer my friend without looking at him.

“I guess the only thing that matters is that *I’m* over him.”

And before I can scare myself out of it, I pick up.

But I don’t let my ex talk.

“Chris,” I say with a newfound strength. “There is absolutely *nothing* you can do to get me back. I wouldn’t go back to you if you were my last option on earth. Even in an alternate reality where I’m on my deathbed, and the only way to keep myself alive would be to be yours again. I still wouldn’t. Goodbye. For good.”

I hang up and throw my phone on the pebbles covering the bank.

I’m officially free of Christopher Murray.

I love you

*I wouldn't go back to you if you were my last option on earth.
That broke my heart.
Now you have to put it back together.*

Chapter Two

Ella

Empty - Chase Atlantic

First day of junior year. For some, it would be another year closer to the reality of the outside world.

For us? The real world doesn't exist. There's rich. There's richer... and then there's us. The Stoneview kids.

We're raised in our billionaire district where no one cares how much your family earns because you wouldn't even be able to approach if your bank account didn't match ours. We are trust fund babies born with silver spoons in our mouths and diamonds around our necks. We grow up together, in our tightly knit circle of invincible peers. We attend Stoneview Prep from pre-school to senior year, and graduate with a special kind of honor: nepotism.

And then we move into the penthouses our parents arrange for us in Silver Falls—a decent-size city just over half an hour drive away from Stoneview—and that's where the real fun begins. Silver Falls University.

Don't get this wrong. We go to a more accessible city, where middle-class families can afford to live if they work hard. Where people from the nearby town can come to the mall and enjoy a day by the river. But SFU? It belongs to us.

Your average citizen can't study here. Not everyone has access. This is our luxurious estate away from home. Sometimes it's a good thing, and sometimes it makes you claustrophobic. Especially when everyone knows

who you are.

“Ella! Wait!”

Point proven.

I slow down on my walk to the library. My friends are waiting for me there, but I’m not joining them to study, though, just picking them up. Studying is for the people who didn’t make it to the top of the food chain or those who like it. There’s no higher power than me among the SFU undergrad, and I’m too dumb to achieve anything with my brains—my father’s words—so the library isn’t exactly my go-to spot.

I tilt my head to the side as a tall girl with blonde pixie hair approaches me with flyers in her hands.

Marie... Mandy... M.M...

“Mindy!” I finally say with a bright smile on my face. “How are you? How’s GLC?”

She blushes when stopping in front of me, putting a strand of hair behind her ear. “You remember my name.”

“Of course I remember your name, silly.” I tap her shoulder playfully. “What’s up?”

“Well, GLC is organizing a huge back-to-school life-size game of Clue, and I was wondering if maybe you could attend?”

She hands me a flyer.

Gameboard Lovers Club invites you to solve a crime!

I rack my brain to find a valid excuse not to attend when I spot the date. I’ve got nothing against Mindy and her club. I just would rather be with my friends. The mask has to come off at some point, and I can’t exhaust myself being the queen bee every single moment of every day.

“Aw, Mindy. I’m sorry. I’m going to the Save Lives Today fundraiser that evening. They’re doing a night of first aid training.”

Her shoulders depleting makes guilt pinch my stomach, and my hand comes to scratch my upper right thigh through the material of my skirt.

“I’m really sorry. I can’t be everywhere at once. But here, let me help.” I pull my phone out of my bag, stand closer to her, and put the flyers next to both our heads.

“Smile!” I say cheerily.

Snapping a picture of us, I put it on my social media story.

Come solve a murder with @SFU_GameboardLC this Thursday night!

lips emoji

“There you go.”

She looks down at me from her tall height to my short one. “Oh my god, Ella. Thank you so much. You’re the best.”

“No worries. I gotta go. Love you.”

I don’t even wait for her answer before striding through the hallway that leads to the library. The heels of my knee-high boots click against the marble floor as I enter, earning me a death stare from Mrs. Davis. As I walk past her counter, I send her a wink. That woman is too young to be so salty.

I know where my girls are sitting because no one would dare take the table we’ve declared as ours. Or theirs, I guess.

Jogging to them, I slap my hand on Alex’s book as I whisper excitedly, “I fucked Professor Reeves.”

Two pairs of eyes widen, both with shock, but one with proud mischief burning in her emerald gaze.

“Hell yes. He’s so hot,” Peach says, fanning her face dramatically.

“Oh my god, Ella.” The chastising comes from Alex, my shy, more of a rule-follower friend. “You could get in so much trouble for this.”

“I know —”

“Wait.” Peach puts her hand on mine. “Did you fuck him...or did he fuck you?”

“Peach,” Alex huffs. “Seriously?” She rubs her blonde hairline with the pad of her index finger a little too hard, bringing a pink tinge to her forehead. “This is so bad. Even for you, Ella. If this gets out...your popularity won’t save you. Reputation...*poof*.” She opens her hand in front of her face, mocking an explosion.

I roll my eyes, feigning nonchalance even though the only thing that makes me *me* is my popularity.

Tapping her fingers impatiently on the back of my hand, Peach insists. “Did you? Or did he?”

“If anyone finds out, he’ll get fired. You’ll get expelled. Imagine what your dad would say.”

My dad is the reason I ended up sleeping with my criminal justice professor for a grade that would save my spot in his class in my third year. If he hadn’t forced me to change my major from my passion to something I’ve never wanted to do in my life, I might not be in this situation right now. My dream was to get into Juilliard. I worked my ass off for it, attended Stoneview’s tough dance school, and put every single ounce of energy and

passion I had into it. But I didn't get in, and while my dad let me take dance for the first year at SFU, he deemed my dream too useless to keep going. Mid-year last year, he forced me to change major to something more *useful*. Goodbye dance, hello law.

"I know your little kinks," Peach says with an eyebrow wiggle. "I know the kind of sex you like to have. I bet *he* fucked you, and you ate up whatever praise he dished out. That man must have hit the spot for your daddy issues."

"*Peach.*" Alex's low hiss cuts through our friend's elation as I'm about to burst out laughing. "This is serious."

Peach pulls her hand back, tightens the high ponytail in which she gathered her deep red hair this morning, and tilts her head to the side.

"Was it hot? Was it good? Did he make you —"

A narrowed stare from Alex makes Peach pinch her lips, but her delight in my naughty venture is still very much present.

It wasn't the best sex of my life, but it was great. It felt better than asking my dad for a favor to keep me in the class he forced me to be in. Because not being in it isn't an option anymore if I don't want to suffer the consequences.

So, I weighed said options, and that one felt like a *choice*. It's not like Professor Clark Reeves is hard on the eyes. It's not like he doesn't have tons of college girls lining up during office hours, batting their eyelashes. We all wonder the same thing; how a man so young and handsome—who has become such a successful defense attorney, owns one of the most renowned practices on the East Coast, and works as a professor in the most elite college in the country—is *still* single. Or at least as far as we know. There's no wedding ring around his finger.

"I had sex with a successful, beautiful man, who has a hot body, an amazing brain, and could also change the grade of my last essay."

"That's what I'm talking about."

"I give up," Alex sighs, her focus going back to the laptop in front of her.

My two best friends have completely opposite personalities. My beautiful Alex, with her bright hazel eyes and her innocent face, is a good girl who's been through a lot and needs balance and rules. She finds comfort in a strong presence telling her what to do. Peach, my fiery little thing, is stubborn. She's an unbeatable force in a tiny body with a peachy ass that earned her said nickname. And if someone even thinks a little too hard about ordering her around...let's say I've seen her punch men twice her size. And every time, there's a glint of excitement in her green eyes. She gets a kick out of putting

men in their place. And we don't talk about the only one she *can't*.

I'm not Alex. She was a virgin when she met her current boyfriend and love of her life. She's settled with someone we didn't expect, but she's fallen head over heels and that won't change because despite the ups and downs they've had, she's happy and loyal. And he would never let her go anyway.

My situation is different. I have fun. I have regular fucks. I party. I made the most of my year as a freshman at Silver Falls University and partied my way through most of sophomore year. Believe me, the one percent know how to have a good time. We've been in our circle of billionaires since we were born with those silver spoons in our mouths. And we love to share our fucking spoons. But sometimes, I want the fun to turn into something serious, and it's hard when people see you as a trophy rather than a person.

I'm not a good girl, but I'm not completely *unhinged* like Peach. She has a death wish and will get into serious trouble one day. No, my personality is made-up of elements I have gathered to please and appease the general population.

My style makes me look like I'm beautiful, but not trying too hard. I'm pretty, but not threatening. I have opinions that I share only in the slightest in public to make sure I don't upset anyone. I'm a chameleon. When I meet someone, I spend precious time analyzing them to make sure I can adapt to what they want to see and hear. I'm popular because I made everyone believe I was their best friend. I remember names quickly, so they know I care. I learn one or two facts about them to follow up when I bump into them again.

Hi, Katie! So good to see you here. How are you? How's your dog after the surgery? It's a labrador, right?

And then...I stay right out of reach, so people know I'm not accessible to just anyone. I party, I take pictures, I go on vacations, I share my life with the world on social media, so they wish they were with me. They're envious, but they don't hate me because *she's so nice*.

Take Regina George but make her care for others around her. That's Ella Baker. You can't criticize a popular, pretty girl who also teaches kids ballet every Saturday morning for free. Who lets you know she put in a good word to the lacrosse player you have a crush on. Who lets you sit at her table with all her popular friends. You'd love to hate, but how can you hate if there's nothing to complain about?

Picture. Perfect.

It feels strange sometimes when I'm alone in my bed at night, exhausted

from not being myself. When I let the mask down and I'm just...me. Nothing special because everything is concocted for others. A puppet put away in her box after the show is over.

"Oh, Alex..." I pout. "It was just the one time, I promise. And it's kind of hot. Admit it."

Alex would have never slept with Reeves. She's too studious; she would have never failed an essay. Peach would have *fucked him*. She would have given him a good run for his money, shown him that if he took advantage of a student, she was going to get the good grade and dominate him in his office.

She wouldn't have let him bend her over his desk while he told her that if she took him like a good girl, she could get any grade she wanted. Peach would have ridden him on his chair while he corrected the grade. Might have even slapped him if he didn't adjust it right. And I bet he would have loved it.

I take a book out of my bag and put it next to my face.

The Fundamentals of Criminal Justice: An Introduction to the American Justice System. Written by none other than attorney Clark Reeves, Dr. in Criminal Justice.

The book has his picture on it. He's leaning against a desk in a suit, strong arms crossed over his chest.

"Don't we make a cute couple?"

Both my friends burst out laughing.

Criminal Law is not the only class my dad forced me to take to prepare for law school, but it's the only extra-curricular with a professor so full of himself and so renowned that every two weeks, the class is filtered, and anyone who hasn't proven themselves worthy of his teaching gets kicked out. Everyone wants to stay because it's a guaranteed entry into Silver Falls University of Law. The best in the country.

We all had to hand him our summer essay today so he could let us know in two weeks who would be staying. I know what my work is worth, so this morning I stopped by his office. It's important to take your fate into your own hands.

I cannot get kicked out. If I don't stick to the career path my family has chosen, much worse things than failing college will happen.

I drop my arms. "Let's admit it. I'm too stupid to even try his class. So I did the best I could."

There's one thing I wish didn't match my image. My brains. Because everyone expects the queen bee to be some stupid girl who only cares about

looks. And here I am...as dumb as one can get.

"You're not stupid," Alex corrects me right away. "This is not what you want to do. It's hard to work for a major you never wanted to study in the first place."

"You were doing a major you hated your first year, and you were still the best in your class," I mumble, playing with the corner of the page. "Dancing came naturally. I don't have to use my brain and it's better that way."

"You're a very hardworking dancer and you put yourself through intense training." Alex is sweet, but I don't think it's helping. "You've been forced to change your entire future since last year. Give yourself some time to adapt."

"Professor Reeves has a different perspective." My tone is bitter, but it's not aimed at her. It's aimed at the man who puts so much pressure on us and makes his students compete with each other like his class is some sort of prize.

I'm officially starting my third year, and I only transferred to his class in the middle of last year, but I have managed to make zero friends there because everyone hates each other so much. They're too focused on trying to get in Reeves's good graces to help each other out. So, I've been on my own trying to navigate this class. I'm not used to that. I'm used to people getting on their knees to assist me.

"So...is this going to be a bi-weekly thing, then?" Peach asks, humor tinting her questions.

A laugh escapes me. "You're such a fucking idiot."

"We can rotate if you want. I'll fuck him so you keep your spot. I'm willing to make the sacrifice."

I smile dumbly at my friend. "Will you punch him while you do so? I kind of hate him, but he *was* a good fuck."

"I will punch him *just* before he comes. Make it horrible for him."

"You're the best, Peach. A true friend."

She winks at me, ready to change topics as she grabs her phone and unlocks it. "Did you see what Hermes posted yesterday?" Her playful expression is tempting me to check the horrible app we all know so well.

The SFU app is our own unofficial university social media. People can report anonymously to whoever owns it, but only one person can post.

Hermes.

No one knows who that person is. Every single student at SFU has a blast sending Hermes each other's secrets. My friends and I always assumed they

were a freshman when we were sophomores because that's when the app started. So, now they must be a sophomore. But there's no way to know if we're right.

Their motto? *Your secrets are safe with me.*

Until they aren't.

Students send countless secrets daily, but only Hermes decides which are revealed. The optimum of rich kids' toxicity. They're bored to death and so they decide to ruin each other's lives.

Hermes spares no one, but they also specifically love my friends and me. We've been the talk of the SFU app countless times. Oftentimes, it's something stupid, but it's always true. If I know the secrets Hermes exposed about me are true, I know the ones they exposed about others are true, too. And if others know theirs are true...it's a vicious cycle.

"Please don't talk to me about that app," I groan, rubbing my temples with both hands. "I just told you something that could destroy me. If Hermes learns about it, I'm as good as dead."

"It's not about you. It's not about any of us." Peach licks her lips with excitement. "It's about Rose White."

My eyebrows shoot up. Hermes really isn't scared of anything. Rose is older than us, starting law school this year at SFU. She's one of my brother's best friends. They've known each other forever. And while Luke lives on the other side of the country, Rose is still around. Anyone with a pair of eyes knows she's one of the most beautiful women on the planet. Hell, Peach has been completely head over heels for her since high school. But Rose is trouble. Her past is more than turbulent, and I'm pretty sure men have killed for her. Now that she dates three people who I've heard are on the wrong side of possessive, I wouldn't want to mess with her. Apparently, Hermes doesn't mind.

"Do I even want to know what they wrote about her?" I ask Peach.

She shrugs. "It's not that exciting, but I thought you'd want to know." When she pauses for effect, I roll my eyes.

"Come on, spill."

"You know how every year Reeves chooses a second- or third-year law student to be his assistant?"

"No way," I gasp, already knowing where this is going.

"Yep. He didn't pick any of them this year and went straight for Rose White."

“But she’s a first-year.” My mouth twists. “Is he trying to fuck her?”

Peach shrugs. “I’m not sure. Everyone knows she’s a genius. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s had his eyes on her since she took criminal law as an undergrad, but who knows with the fucker. Could be both. Her brains probably turn him on just as much as her looks. All I know is Hermes called her *teacher’s pet*.”

“Oof,” Alex reacts with a wince. “She’s going to hate that. Hermes better hope Rose or her partners never find out who they are. She must be fuming.”

Peach turns to Alex, her eyes shining. “You should message her. Ask her if she saw it. Tell her your friend Peach is asking how she’s coping.”

“Peach, for the hundredth time, I am *not* introducing you to Rose. We’re at the same college; you’ll probably know her schedule by heart in a week. If you want to talk to her so badly, *do it*.”

“And risk her boyfriends putting me six feet under? No, thank you.”

I can’t help the laugh tumbling from my mouth. “You’re so dramatic.”

“Am I, though?” She eyes me and then Alex again. “Am I?”

“Not really,” Alex admits. She’s become a good friend of Rose since dating Xi because his brother, Lik, is one of Rose’s partners. If they ever get married, the two would be sisters-in-law, I guess. Or maybe it’s more complicated than that when there are four people in a relationship.

“See?” She lets out a big sigh. “I guess I’ll just keep admiring her from afar. Can we go home and drink? I’ve been holed up in this depressing library all day.”

She sure has, and I didn’t even sit down.

I happen to like our *depressing* library. Just because I don’t come here often doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the architecture. Silver Falls University rests on a hill, not far from the Silver Snake River, in our own little corner of the South Bank of Silver Falls. The red brick main building reminds me of an English castle, and the woods that surround our campus bring us a sense of privacy we’re used to as billionaires.

That little library Peach complains about was built in the 1880s. The entire place is full of history and kept most of its original built. They weren’t sitting at a lame pressboard table amid metal shelves and overhead lighting. We are at a mahogany table, sitting on beautifully carved chairs in a neo-Greco style room, surrounded by marble walls, gold columns, and nine tiers of some of the most beautiful collections of books in this country. The ambiance is unmatched.

But I agree, a drink at our shared house across campus sounds better.

“Tell the guys to meet at our place,” I tell Peach, and she and Alex immediately pack away their books.

Silver Falls University isn’t like any other. We have dorms, luxurious ones too, but most of the south side of the campus hosts private residences our families rent while we study here. They cost a lot. It doesn’t matter.

Money. Never. Matters.

We simply have too much of it.

Reputation, however? Priceless.

In our first year, Alex, Peach, and I stayed at the Xi Ep house, our sorority. But our second year, we moved into our own house. Alex lives back and forth between here and her boyfriend’s place, so most of the time it’s just me and Peach...and the guys. Because we were lucky enough to snatch a house right next to Wren and Achilles.

Really, when I take away the constant feeling of existential crisis since I changed majors...life here is everything I could have ever dreamed of. Especially now that I shut Chris down forever.

“I might text that guy from Alpha Kappa tonight,” I say as I straighten my uniform skirt.

Yes, because SFU loves to do things in their own way, and because the university is a continuation of their Stoneview preparatory school, undergraduate students have to wear the same boring uniform we all wore in high school. This stupid thing makes us look like teenagers next to the postgrads walking around campus.

“Is that the one who had a scar on his cheek?” Peach asks, getting up from the table.

I shake my head. “That was the guy from the sports bar.”

“Alpha Kappa was the guy who speaks Italian. I remember,” Alex says proudly.

“Can’t we give them real names?” Peach moans as we all start toward the doors. “What’s the guy’s full name? I can’t keep up.”

“Enzo. Don’t worry about his full name,” I say casually. “He’ll be gone soon.”

“What? Why?”

“Because Peach. He’s probably only seeing me while he waits to see if he gets onto the lacrosse team this year. He just needs a good reputation while he waits. Then he’ll leave.”

“Have you ever considered you might be a bad fuck?”

My mouth drops open.

“I’m kidding,” she laughs. “You’re not a bad fuck, Els. I’ve heard those guys in your bedroom. They’re loving your little submissive needs.”

“I’m so done with you tonight.” But I can’t help laughing as we make our way down the outside steps from the main entrance to the different paths that lead all over campus. She’s such an idiot.

“Matias,” Alex suggests quietly. “He wanted things to get serious.”

“Ugh, Matias randomly kissed me at that game in front of everyone like some stupid ownership gesture. I hate that.”

We were playing a parting lacrosse game against the state university and Matias is part of the team. At the end of it, he kissed me in front of everyone. He wanted to live some sort of fantasy about kissing the cheer captain on the field or something. I don’t know, but I ended up slapping him in the face once we were in private. Of course, Hermes outed me.

My friends both look at me like I’ve grown two heads.

“It makes sense,” I snap. “It makes sense to me.”

“You love your men obsessed,” Alex says. “How can *not liking* Matias’s ownership gestures make sense to you?”

“She only liked it when it was Chris,” Peach snorts.

“That’s not true!” My attempt at defending myself makes my cheeks redden.

Both my friends laugh at me as we enter the woods.

We make our way down the footpath that leads to the south of the campus through the forest. The sun has almost set, but SFU is a safe campus, mostly because it’s completely fenced off. 140 acres of gated private property built in the middle of Silver Falls Forest only for the students who can afford it.

“You’ll get an obsessed boyfriend soon enough,” Peach reassures me, putting an arm around my shoulders. “Probably too soon, since you should *never* have an obsessed boyfriend.”

“Soon enough? I haven’t had a boyfriend in five years. I think it’s about time it happens if you ask me. Maybe I should have just picked Matias. Should I just text him tonight rather than Alpha Kappa guy?” I sigh. “I’m just asking for someone who wants me so badly he’d do anything for me.”

Chris, my ex, was the closest who ever came to this. He was insanely obsessed with me, borderline controlling. I never had to wonder if he truly wanted me. I *know* he did. But someone else was more important to him than

me. Luke. My brother. His best friend.

Chris kept us a secret, and when the time came, he sacrificed us so he wouldn't have to lose his friendship with Luke. Five years later, I'm the one who still hasn't found anyone else.

"Els," Peach says sadly as her arm slides from around my shoulders so she can grab my hand. "What you're describing is not only toxic, which is what Chris got you used to, but it also doesn't really exist." Her smile twisted with apology makes me feel sick. "No man is going to burn the world down for you. That's why it's so important to love yourself wholly before you enter another relationship."

My exaggerated pout relaxes her a little bit. "Xi would burn the world down for Alex."

Alex rolls her eyes. "Xi is insane."

"Yeah," Peach confirms. "Alex lives in some weird world where the villain got hold of her and, somehow, she likes it. Plus, I have to reiterate this again, girls: *toxic*. You two are not supposed to be into this. I couldn't save Alex, but it's not too late to save you."

I laugh as I start walking again. "You're happy, aren't you, Alex?"

"I'm the happiest girl in the world," she giggles sweetly. "But I won't say it's perfect. Okay, Xi would definitely burn the world down for me. But he's *really* obsessed, Els."

"I want obsessed."

She shakes her head. "Unhealthily obsessed. It comes with its ups and downs, believe me."

Peach goes into a tirade again, hellbent on protecting me.

"Humans are inherently selfish. Even Prince Charming, who would treat a woman in the most perfect way, needs to have a part of his life that doesn't include being utterly consumed by his princess. Like, he can't plan his entire life around her, you know? I mean, I'd be worried if I were the princess. What I'm trying to say is your only relationship ever was with Chris. And he did *not* set a good example. So, maybe just take your time until you find the right guy."

I notice the black SUV parked in front of our house the second we come out of the woods. No one can drive these roads without security letting them in, so I have no doubt it's for one of us.

"Someone's parents sent them a ride," Peach mumbles. "Should we take bets?"

We don't need to take bets. And it's not because any of us recognizes someone in the car. It's our phones. The three beep at the same time, and our eyes widen as we look at each other. It's that special alert coming from the unofficial SFU app. We know without looking because it makes a specific sound. Like something whizzing through the air.

"This"—Peach points at the car—"plus this"—her eyes go down to the phone in her hand—"is not telling me anything good."

My stomach twists. I slept with a professor. What if someone saw us? What if Hermes spills? That car is probably my dad sending our chauffeur to bring me home so he can decimate me.

"There's only one way to know," Alex suggests quietly. She pulls her phone out of her pink handbag, and I slip mine out of my uniform jacket pocket.

"Oh my god," Peach gasps, reading on her own phone. "Els."

When my phone finally loads the post, my heart stops.

It's a picture of my parents' house with countless police, FBI, and SWAT cars in front of it.

So, the rumors were true. The Bakers did run a brothel from their own house.

Those sex parties you heard about? They weren't exactly legal, darlings.

Real question is, where was my invite?

Ella Baker, your secrets are safe with me.

Until they aren't.

#sexpartiesattheBakers #GerarldBakerwantstopayyouforsex

#DidEllahaveablast?

"Oh my god," I cry out. "What the— Oh my god. No, no, no."

My free hand flies to my forehead, pulling at my hairline in the process. Vision narrowing, my ears ring, but a flash to the right catches my attention. Another student just took a picture of us.

"Hey, asshole!" Peach shouts. "Delete that shit."

"Come, Ella." Alex wraps an arm around my waist as my knees nearly buckle.

At the same time as Peach's tiny form strides to the guy, I hear two people come out of a nearby house.

Thank fuck Wren and Achilles are here.

“Hey!” Wren calls out to Peach and the random student. Perks of living next to your male best friends. They will run to your rescue. “Give me your phone.” Jogging toward them, he takes Peach’s defense right away.

Achilles hurries to me and Alex.

“Ella,” he says in his deep voice. “Come, get in the car. You need to get out of here.”

He’s already opening the blacked-out SUV door for me and helping me in.

“I’ll come with you.” Alex is ready to jump in after me, but Achilles holds her back by the wrist.

“Bakers’ business. Leave it for now.”

He slams the door, and the car is in motion right after.

In situations like this, I’m grateful Achilles is the one in charge in our group. In my panic, I would have said yes to Alex coming with me in a heartbeat, but it would have been a mistake.

She cannot come to my house. She cannot see from the inside what the Bakers’ mansion hides. Because the whole university might know the truth now; my father runs luxurious, hedonistic sex parties from our house, and he pays people to work them.

But no one knows the rest.

Not even my best friends know I’m complicit.

Chapter Three

Ella

Secrets - Omido, Ordell, Rick Jansen

Rumors about weird parties at my house have swirled for years. But they were shut down time after time. Nothing was ever proven. It was more of a thing some journalists tried to make everyone believe rather than a police investigation.

But the truth was bound to come out at some point.

The women and men being used sexually at those parties were taken advantage of. Most of them were desperate for money, and my dad and his circle could offer a lot of it. Some of them I'm pretty sure didn't even have a choice, but I was never certain of that.

My job was simple. I welcomed them, guided them to the room where they could get ready, and advised them to do what they were told.

I was never allowed in the rooms where it happened. I never saw it with my own eyes.

But I participated.

I didn't know what I was taking part in when it started. My dad simply asked me to welcome people into our house and guide them to a room. Be kind, pleasant, and smile. That's it.

My dad is not someone you say no to. That word isn't in his vocabulary. He was never physically violent with me. I've seen him slap my brother Luke, but never more than that. No, the violence came from his soul. His

words were often worse than a punch to the face. He's decimated me and my brother's self-esteem, reminded us daily how stupid we were. He managed to strip us of any sense of trust in our own intelligence. To the point that we both had to retake a school year. I'm a year older than Peach and Alex because I was too stupid to pass *eighth grade* the first time around. Which, in turn, didn't help at home, proving my dad right.

A vicious cycle.

All I was ever good for was being a pretty face.

So when he said, "*All I ask is for you to open a door and smile. Do you think you're capable?*" I didn't question it. I just did it.

Until one day, one of the girls coming in asked me if she could leave before six a.m., and if she would still get all the money in that case.

It took me weeks to understand the extent of what he was doing. And when I confronted him about going to the police, he shrugged it off.

Welcome to the family business.

The only family business I had been aware of was the coffee chain empire he built from the ground up.

Go to the police, Ella. I'll make sure they know every single person around me who was involved. Including you.

He roped me in, and he blackmailed me into staying. That's the kind of man he is.

What I don't understand is how he got caught.

The heads of dominant families who live in Stoneview united a long time ago, creating the Silent Circle.

Rich men made themselves even more untouchable by uniting under a single entity and they're always protecting each other.

Which begs the question; who's powerful enough to turn my dad in to the authorities and have them actually *do something* about it?

There's no one in front of my house when I get there. I pull out my phone and look at Hermes's picture again. It was taken right by the gates, with what feels like an endless number of FBI cars parked as if my family are dangerous criminals.

They are.

But every family in Stoneview is. They're dangerous but not publicly violent. They prefer to leave the bloody stuff to the gangs and crooks they pay off to do their dirty business.

What strikes me, though, is the sun in the sky. The photo was taken

during the day, and it was evening when they posted it, meaning the police were at my house earlier. My parents waited the whole day to have me picked up and still haven't told me what's going on.

They're hiding things from me.

Of course they are. Let's leave Ella out of everything until the last minute because we know she'll have some sort of opinion. I'm easier to control when they keep me in the dark or blackmail me. Mainly, they didn't want me here with the cops around. Who knows what kind of things I could spill. Gerald Baker doesn't trust me, and I don't trust him.

What is going to happen to me if my father got arrested? Because I assume the police didn't leave this house empty-handed. What if my name is on anything? Will I get arrested too?

The second I pass the front door, Karl, our butler, runs to the back, telling me not to move. He comes back with my mother, who has tears running down her face and a handkerchief pressed to her cheek like a widow from a 1920s film.

"Ella," she sobs as I walk toward her.

My poor mother. The day she married my dad, she joined the Silent Circle as a wife. That turned her meek, useless, naïve. She is my living worst nightmare, but I don't blame her for it. She married into what she thought was stability. Then she got pregnant and stayed for her children. But ultimately, she is nothing without the Circle or my dad. I don't even want to think of what will happen to her if Gerald Baker goes away. I have a feeling the Shadows, the men of the Silent Circle, won't leave her be. It's not that easy.

Holding my phone in one hand, I open my arms to give her a hug, as if I'm the maternal figure in our relationship.

"It's going to be okay," I murmur, but before I get to hold her, she snatches my phone and gives it to Karl.

"No phones, Ella. You don't know who's listening," she snaps before her face twists with pain again. "Oh, Ella."

She grabs my hand, pulling me farther into our mansion. Beige and other neutral colors surround us, the walls only decorated with various paintings from the Baroque and Renaissance movements. It feels like a museum in here, with our family portrait towering over the entrance hall.

"It's okay, Mom," I repeat softly.

She shakes her head, and I notice the police tape on my dad's office door

as we walk past. They must have seized everything from that room.

“Ella...” She bursts into tears, a loud wail pouring out of her.

I take her in my arms the second we stand outside the large room we use as a living area. She’s too shaken to even step inside.

“Mom, he’ll be fine. Is he at the police station? Did he call Garcia-Diaz?” My dad’s status is like royalty. He doesn’t usually get in trouble, but should he, he’s got the best attorney in his corner.

She shakes her head. “Dad...” she tries again. I vaguely hear the door to the room behind her, but I’m too focused on her state to look up.

“Dad’s dead.”

That tears my gaze away from my crying mother and to my brother, Luke, who’s standing right there, his hand holding the now open door. The shock from hearing my dad is dead barely registers as my wide eyes jump to the man at Luke’s side.

Hands in the pockets of his dark gray pants, wavy caramel hair falling into his eyes, and beautiful features twisted in a sweet, unadulterated apologetic face; here stands my ex. Christopher Murray.

Chapter Four

Ella

Mr. Perfectly Fine - Taylor Swift

Ever the gentleman, Chris offers an arm to my mother, which she takes eagerly. He helps her to one of the sofas in the room. The red Louis XV antique sofas with hand-carved claw feet—arranged around the fireplace with a lion head above it—make it look like we live in the 18th century. And those stupid uncomfortable sofas cost about thirty grand each.

I feel like my heart hasn't taken another beat in minutes. My body is on fire, my thoughts spiraling.

He's Luke's best friend. That's why he's here.

That's why he's here.

That's. Why. He's. Here.

After helping my mom sit down, Chris joins my brother by the fireplace, and I stand there, watching shadows from the fire creeping up both their faces.

Luke is an exact copy of me. Or I of him, I guess. We have the signature Bakers' white-blond hair, blue eyes so pale they look painted with watercolors, and soft features that make me the definition of feminine and used to make him a little less masculine when he was a teen. He's all grown now. Twenty-five, currently shadowing the COO of Bakers Café in Los Angeles so he can take over my dad when...

My dad is dead.

My gaze drops to my mother, and her now awkward noises into her handkerchief bring something else into awareness. She's not crying anymore.

The room is completely silent. No one is really *crying*, no one is murmuring an *oh my god*, no one is wailing about how much they'll miss Gerald Baker. We all hated him. My mother is worried about herself, terrified about what the future means for her in the Silent Circle now that her husband is dead. What is her role? Who does she belong to? She is nothing but a woman, after all.

So am I.

My heart drops to my stomach, chest clenching as the silence in the room takes on an entirely new meaning.

"You're already here," I say to Luke.

"I hopped on the jet as soon as Mom called."

"What happened? Why did no one tell me anything?" I try my best to show the betrayal I feel, but my emotions stay stuck in my throat, and I know they come out weak. Like I don't care about any of this. My face is used to a programming of whatever I tell it, not *real* emotions.

A sob shakes my mom, but the question wasn't directed at her.

Luke is not a bad person. He's not the same as my dad, not the same as the greedy corporate bastards who work for him either. He's a good guy. He's my brother and we've always gotten along.

But he's hiding things from me. I can tell when he shuts himself off.

"Luke," I insist when his eyes dart to Chris. "What happened to him?"

His jaw tightens, and he shifts on his feet before settling again. "The cops showed up in the NYC office this morning, then LA. They raided his home office here last, but they didn't arrest him. When I arrived in the afternoon, he was dead. He..." He swallows thickly, his gaze dropping. This is probably the only sadness I'll see on his face regarding our dad's death. "He hung himself."

A vision of my dad's limp body hanging in his office makes me shudder.

What did he use?

Don't even think about it.

I nod, blinking away tears that I'm sure no one notices. God, I hated the man. Why does it even affect me?

"Let's not beat around the bush here," I croak, bringing a hand to my chest. "We all know about the Circle. We all know about Dad's parties. The death of the man who organized sex parties for the Silent Circle, and who

was about to be arrested, doesn't scream suicide to me."

"Ella," my mother gasps.

My eyes dart to Chris because he's the only one I'm not actually sure knows much about it. He very well could. His father is part of the Circle, but I don't know if that's something he shared with his son.

When his face stays impassive, his eyes on my mom, I understand none of this is new to him.

My fingers creep up my right upper thigh, scratching the skin through my skirt. Any external stimuli to help me not lose myself in my own mind. I don't want to panic.

"I've known for years, Mom. The fact that you ignore it is your problem, not mine." I dig my gaze into Luke's. "Dad didn't kill himself, and you know it."

"Dad is dead, and that's the only fact that matters."

His stern words make me take a retreating step. My brother is not a heartless man. What's happening to him?

"Luke..."

"We have bigger issues than how he died. You want to talk about the Circle, Els? How about the fact that we're not only *not* part of it now that dad is gone, but also that we owe them so much money, a trip to El Dorado wouldn't even begin to cover the sum."

"What do you mean it wouldn't cover the sum? We *are* the fucking El Dorado, Luke. Pay them and get rid of them."

"The police raided everything that belongs to Gerald Baker. Company, personal assets, *bank accounts*. All we have left is the house because he somehow put it in Mom's name."

He didn't do that for her. He was probably protecting himself.

I barely have time to register what he's saying, when my mom bursts into tears again. So that's why she's been crying so much.

"You're crying because we're broke?" I ask with all the disgust I can muster.

"We're not *broke* Ella," she hisses as she looks up. "We're indebted to the Circle! Your dad asked too many favors."

Never ask a Shadow for a favor. That's what Luke told me once. Because when you owe them something, they always come for it, and the price to pay is never worth the favor they granted.

"I don't understand. You can ask the Circle for any favor you want if

you're part of it. Dad was a board member. He —"

"Isn't anymore. Gerald Baker's debts to the Circle are going to his family, but not his..." he hesitates as he finds the word to use. "...membership."

Luke has always hated the Circle. He never took any step to be part of it despite my dad pushing him.

To be a fully pledged member, you must bring a woman in with you. Someone you're going to marry and who is accepted by the board members, initiated, and promised as yours. Because that means heirs, and heirs mean trusted people to join the Circle in the future.

Luke might have had some contacts in the Circle through my dad, but he always made a point to never introduce any of his girlfriends to them or my family. Stupid as it sounds to them, my brother believes in love, not just bringing a woman to a secret society as proof of your commitment.

"If you had done what you were told." My mom's accusing tone doesn't even sound like her. "If you'd joined when your dad asked you."

Luke runs a hand across his face. "If you'd shared the extent of his debt, I might have. But you didn't."

Heart beating harder, I walk up to my mom again. "How much?"

It's Luke who answers.

"Many men in the Circle were investors in Bakers Café. The company wasn't doing well, but it's going bankrupt as we speak. Dad's been milking those men for years." He shakes his head. "I don't even think there's a specific number at this point. We're talking —"

"We have to marry Ella in." My mother's voice covers the room in a blanket of ice.

My only reaction is a dumb snort.

Because she's joking.

She's joking, right?

"I am *not* marrying Ella into the Circle to pay for my idiotic father's debts," Luke hits back. The low threat in his tone should reassure me, but only one thing hits me.

"I'm not a cow up for auction." The current anxiety is my worst enemy. It makes my voice sound bland, even when I'm panicking on the inside. "That decision isn't up to any of you."

"We have no choice!" my mother shouts desperately. "They'll —"

"Celine, if I may." Chris's smooth voice cutting in seems to release some

of the tension in my mother's shoulders. He's been so silent I forgot he was here. "Discussions about the Circle and Gerald's debt might be something you want to have in private."

Oh, the asshole.

He's shutting me out of this.

I shake my head in disbelief, striding over to him and sizing him up. He doesn't move, barely even breathes. I'm so close I have to crane my neck back to look him in the eye. Chris is over six-four, and I barely reach five-three. My eyes usually line with his chest, but I'll be damned if I let my asshole of an ex kick me out of this conversation under the pretense of helping my family.

So, I meet his gaze when I say, "What are you even doing here? This is a family matter."

In my stress and confusion from the whole situation, I forget that I'm meant to pretend to have no problem with him in front of my brother. Luke doesn't know we dated because Chris never had the balls to tell him. He doesn't know his best friend broke my heart. He would think I have no reason to hate him.

"Ella," my brother huffs. "Don't be rude. Chris is doing us a favor right now. He's the only Shadow we know personally. Our only ally in the Circle."

My ex's jaw ticks as my brother drops that truth bomb on me, like he didn't want me to learn about it that way. Being a Shadow doesn't fit with Chris's image of being Mr. Sweet and Respectful. He loves that delusion he puts out into the world. Loves that the women who fawn over him and the men who want to be part of his circle think he's a great guy.

I'm under no illusion when it comes to him. I know who he really is. I know that underneath his gentlemanly behavior is a selfish, manipulative, and controlling asshole. But a Shadow? I didn't realize how bad it was.

"Who would have thought," I rasp, barely containing the disappointment twisting my stomach.

If Chris is a Shadow, he presented them with a future wife. I knew he was dating someone, but I never thought... I swallow back tears, blinking up at him. The worst is, I can see on his face that he feels bad for me. His mouth is set in a straight line, his eyebrows pinched in the slightest.

He knows this is breaking my heart all over again. I hate him for his fake pity, and to pretend none of this touches me, I plaster a mask of indifference on my face. He can join the group of people who will never know how I

really feel.

“Chris is right. Go to your room.”

I take a step back, shaking off the pain. “Go to my... What am I? Five? Don’t kick me out of here. I’m as much of an adult as you are.”

“No. You’re not. You’re a college student, whose biggest worry until this morning was being popular in college and that we made her drop dancing. Go to your room and let us handle this.”

“We’re talking about *marrying me* right now,” I snap. “Don’t do this to me, Luke.”

“We’re not marrying you,” he barks back, losing patience. “I didn’t work so fucking hard at protecting you to just hand you over. Go to your room, Ella. *Now*.”

Panting, he angrily points at the door.

“Well done.” I swallow thickly and struggle to hold back tears. “Dad’s been dead for a few hours and you’re already well on your way to replace him.”

The way I slam the door could have broken it. I hate all of them.

I love you

You're my first thought when I open my eyes, my last when I fall asleep, and the main character in every single one of my dreams.

Chapter Five

Chris

Monster - Shawn Mendes, Justing Bieber

“Christopher.”

My eyes reluctantly leave the door Ella just slammed to turn to the plea coming from Celine Baker.

“You have to marry her. You have to bring the Baker family back into the Circle.”

I feel my features twisting in a sorry face. This woman is desperate enough to marry her only daughter to a Shadow when she’s experienced exactly what it entails for most of her life. It says a lot about her or her predicament. Or both.

“Mom, that’s enough,” Luke snaps next to me. “For the last time, we are not involving Ella in this. She’s a fucking kid.”

She’s twenty-two, I don’t say. She’s his little sister, so he’s always seen her as a baby.

“And”—he gives me a quick tap on the shoulder—“no offense, Chris, but there is absolutely no chance in this fucking life I’m letting you anywhere near my sister. Ella, whenever she’s ready, and whenever she wants, can introduce a guy to this family who isn’t part of a secret society, and isn’t a man I’ve seen fuck countless women. Thank you very much.”

I’ve *fucked* your sister countless times already. *That* I definitely don’t say. All of Luke’s friends got the talk when Ella started high school. We were

in senior year.

Stay away from her unless she needs help. Don't touch her. Keep other guys away from her. And do not, under any circumstances, have sex with her.

We had been neighbors our entire lives already; he should have said something before I fell for her. And I fell hard way before high school.

"She deserves a chance at staying out of all this mess, okay?" my friend insists. "Give me some time, and I'll find a solution."

"Time?" Celine starts laughing hysterically. "The Circle killed your father today, Lucas. I don't think you understand time has already run out. We need to get back in, or we're dead. We need to choose her a husband."

"There is still a possibility he killed himself."

"You're so naïve."

"Celine." Cutting off their useless back-and-forth, I move toward the door Ella closed.

It's automatic for my lungs to inhale deeper when I stand where she was. I want to smell her. Her perfume of sweet vanilla with undertones of lavender feels like a bittersweet memory. The sweetness of the vanilla brings out who she really is, and the touch of lavender reminds me of spring. Like Persephone herself gave her the fragrance. It's her favorite season. She always says when she sees flowers on the trees, everything starts all over again.

I focus on Ella's mom again.

"You know the process to bring a potential wife into the Circle," I say calmly, trying to defuse the tension. "We can't just bring someone in, say 'I choose her,' and put a ring on her finger. It's more complicated than that."

"Not to mention, he's already bringing in Megan," Luke adds. "You know? His *actual* girlfriend."

A topic I don't like to touch upon, so I ignore it. "All we can do is bring a woman to the initiations. Whether she becomes a Hera or Aphrodite is not up to the person who brought her."

Luke's head turns to me. "What does that even mean?"

In my pocket, I play with a pearl I roll between the pad of my thumb and forefinger. It keeps me collected.

"When we want to become a full member and bring someone to marry, they have to go through initiations. It's a one-night event where..." I hesitate, knowing his own mother went through the process. It's best to keep it PG. "They go through some tasks, and by the end of the night, the Circle decides

if they're fit enough to be a Hera. The wife. If not, they become one of the Aphrodites."

"Aphrodites?"

"The mistresses." And that's putting it in a nice way.

Luke brings a hand to his face, massaging his temples with his thumb and middle finger.

"See, this is why I keep Els away from all this. This is fucked up. This whole process doesn't even make sense. If you bring Megan to be your wife, why can't she just be your fucking wife?"

"Because that's not how it works. Women are like a payment to get in. It doesn't mean Megan will be my Hera. Well, in my case, she probably will, because God knows the woman won't let anyone near me, but the rule is that you bring someone and then they have to fight to get to you," I explain, rolling the pearl again. "The potential wives we bring compete against some women who enter by themselves, hoping to become a Hera to a Shadow. But even the women who enter by themselves technically have to get an invitation by a Shadow. It just doesn't have to be a new Shadow. It can be an established one."

His hanging mouth and wide eyes are pretty much how I reacted the first time I was told this. Did it make sense to me? Absolutely not. Did I have a choice in it? Not really.

"You could bring both Megan and also get Ella an invitation." Despair is dulling Celine's usually bright blue eyes. She brings her handkerchief to her cheek. "Please, Christopher."

"That would be a terrible idea. The balance isn't fair. There are too many women for the number of Shadows. The Shadows are not good men. The whole process is rigged so they know they'll have a pool of mistresses once the initiations are over."

Luke turns an inquiring gaze toward me. "How do you even know Megan is going to become a Hera?"

I wave a hand, barely able to fake caring about her. "Megan is not only a legacy, but her dad is also a board member. She would never become an Aphrodite."

"Ella could get an invitation..."

"*Mom!*" Luke barks.

"We have to do something!"

I shake my head. "Those girls never stand a chance. She will most

certainly become an Aphrodite then. That's... Celine, you know that's not a good thing."

"Is it not? When a Shadow becomes a widower, they have to pick a wife from the pool of Aphrodites. This might not be ideal for her now, but it will be down the line. And it means the Bakers are in again."

"You would not be *in* by having a daughter as an Aphrodite." It's becoming harder and harder to argue calmly, but I respect this woman. Or at least I did until she started pushing her agenda on me. Ella's future is in my hands, not hers. And only I will decide how this is going to go down.

"We would be in enough that our debts would be wiped. That's all I want."

"It would be a nightmare for Ella. Once you initiate, you can't go back. You're either a Hera or an Aphrodite, but you don't get to be *normal* again. What if no one ever picks her to be a wife? She wouldn't be able to pull back. She'd be stuck as a mistress. Like I said, women who enter on their own still have to be vetted by someone to come to the initiations, and I won't be that person."

She stands up, walking slowly toward me, hope helping her stay balanced in her grief.

"You might not have a lot of power within the Circle right now, but I know you have enough to get my daughter an invitation to the initiations."

I open my mouth, but she cuts me off.

"Initiations are in two weeks. Think about it."

My mouth drops open. This woman has lost the plot. Shaking my head slightly, I put my hand on her shoulder to lessen the blow.

Images of the kind of initiations Ella would have to go through almost make me weak at the knees.

"I'm sorry, Celine. This goes against everything I stand for. And I could never do that to my best friend's sister. What I will do, though, is mention Luke to the board. If I convince them he'll bring someone, they might let him get initiated."

I can practically see the hope shattering in the depths of her eyes. She has no faith in Luke getting in. But when I hear the sigh of relief from my friend, I know I did the right thing. After all, I need him to believe I have his sister's best interest in mind.

Ella Baker will be mine again.

But only on my terms.

Chapter Six

Ella

vicious - Tare McRaw

First class of criminal law of the year. The mere fact of being in here brings a glacial feeling to my bones, but today, I get to add another worry to my list.

The fact that my father died yesterday, and my family is indebted to the Silent Circle.

Since they all wanted to treat me like a child and kick me out of the room, I acted like one and listened behind closed doors. I heard everything. The initiations, my mother's pleas. How adamant she is to marry me into the Circle to save this family. And Chris's refusal to bring me to the initiations.

How much did my dad owe his investors?

How bankrupt are we, truly?

What are the real consequences?

They won't kill all of us... Or else who's going to pay?

Most of the men in the Silent Circle are millionaires, some billionaires. Is it really about the money? Or is it about teaching us a lesson?

I only have one thing to hold on to. That Luke will get an invite to the initiations and become a Shadow. Then it'll all be fixed.

The choking feeling mixes with another stress that's been brewing in my chest. Chris is in Stoneview. How long is he staying for? He's in his second year of law school; I'm sure he has better things to do than staying here to

support my family. He might be Luke's best friend, but he's got a life.

He has to go back to Yale. I *need* him to leave.

I hear whispers behind me as I sit down in the third row. I'm used to whispers about me, but not that strange feeling that I'm about to catch them bitching.

"It's good she's in this class. She can learn how to get her family out of prison," one of the voices murmurs.

The other one giggles before they add, "Are you sure? She's not the brightest tool in the box. I think she'll be kicked out of this class at the next selection."

I snap my head around, narrowing my eyes on the two bitches.

"My dad died. Could you give me a minute to mourn before I have to deal with you two?"

Their faces fall. It seems they didn't know. This is the real secret about ruling, isn't it? Never do it by fear. Take them by the guts. Twist their feelings. If being sweet doesn't work, pity will do for now.

"Oh my god, Ella. I'm so sorry, I had no idea." The one who initiated the conversation blushes.

"For fuck's sake," I snort. "Aren't you the president of Take Care, Be Well?"

Her face turns a new shade of red. That's the wellbeing club associated with the mental health services on campus. "You're a pathetic hypocrite, and you don't deserve your position."

"Please, don't tell them," she blurts out. "I'm sorry."

I roll my eyes and face forward again. I'm not going to tell her club anything, but she can spend the next few days wondering if I will.

It's too early, but I'm already dying to mention to Luke that I want to change major again. I wonder if my dad's death will give me that option. Initially, it was my brother's idea to put me in law. The second he told that to my father, my fate was sealed. But unlike my dad, Luke didn't do it to hurt me or control me. He did it because he was too scared I'd have no future and end up as a Shadow's wife. He wanted me to have some sort of independence from the Circle, so I would be protected and never have to rely on them. That's why he's so desperate to find a solution that doesn't include marrying me into the society.

My stomach is painfully clenched by the time Professor Reeves enters the small room.

This is not a big college amphitheater welcoming any student who wants to attend his class. This is elite education by a sought-after professional who teaches two classes a week to the smartest undergrads who know they want to get into law school. I *must* stay in his class until the end of undergrad if I ever want to achieve the right score on my LSATs.

There are over fifty of us right now, but it's highly possible there will only be forty or less in two weeks. And I've got to be part of them no matter what.

I can't believe sex only bought me two weeks.

"Welcome back," he says flatly as he walks to the front of the class. "It's nice to see a few of you made it to another year with me. Congratulations."

His eyes scan the class, and the second he sees me, the corner of his mouth tips up. Worse, when he sees the girl three spots away from me, that same smile comes back. I snap my head to the side, catching her blushing as she puts her hair behind her ears.

Holy shit. Holy fucking... I'm not the only one. What an asshole.

Putting his bag on the desk, he pulls out some documents he printed and holds the stack in his hand before walking to the front and leaning back against it.

"Before we start, I'd like to introduce you to this year's assistants. Yes, *assistants*. You heard that right. While I usually hire one person from second or third year of law school, you'd do yourself a favor learning now that if you're the best, it pays. This first year has worked hard, and she deserves her spot on my team. My second assistant is a second-year transfer, and he's been highly recommended by his professors at Yale. I'm pleased to introduce you to Rose White and Christopher Murray."

For a second, the reality of the situation doesn't even register. Because fate can't be that cruel...right?

But then I turn around at the same time as the other students because, just like them, I hadn't noticed the two people standing at the back by the door. My heart is beating so hard it could break my rib cage. I feel the blood draining from my face as they walk past me, only to stop when they're by Reeves. I have to blink multiple times. I'm in such shock I can barely feel my limbs.

He transferred to SFU.

"As you know, my assistants don't spend much time in my undergraduate classes; however, since I have double the staff this year, you are welcome to

contact either of them to help with your work. One will always be present during my office hours and both are more than capable to help you.” He keeps talking about them being in today’s class since it’s his first class of the year...something else...I don’t know.

I want to run away. I need to leave this room because I can barely breathe in it. But I can’t leave Reeves’s class. I would never be allowed to come back. I don’t even think my legs would hold me anyway.

I keep my eyes glued to my notebook for his whole speech while he talks about the first case he wants us to look at. I write words I barely register. I don’t think anything I take down has meaning. My writing is shaky, my hand trembling. I’m scared I’ll faint any second now. But under no circumstance can I look up at Chris.

That’s until I feel his presence right by me. And I can’t avoid it anymore. I know it’s him distributing the printed document and putting one on my desk because I smell his delicious cologne too close to me.

Sweet orange and cedar wood.

Shit. Shit.

He smells so good.

One of my hands is so tightly closed into a fist, I’m unsure I’ll ever be able to open it again. This is too much.

I think I’m near hyperventilation when I look up, my face feeling numb and my pulse thundering in my ears.

He acknowledges me so simply. Nothing on his face or in his eyes. While he’s walking to the next student and the paper is set on my desk, his hand lingers until his fingertips almost hold on to it before releasing. Then he drops his arm back by his side like nothing happened.

Of course, nothing happened to the outside eye. And yet mine are stuck where his fingers just were, my heart threatening to explode.

Such a terrifying reaction to a delicate gesture.

I feel his eyes on me during the rest of the class. Nothing of what Reeves says absorbs, and I’ve probably read the sentence I’m looking at about ten times by the time I feel a strong presence stop in front of my desk, unmoving.

“Miss Baker.”

My head snaps up at Reeves’s stern voice. That’s when I realize everyone else is gone.

“Class has ended.”

Behind Reeves, standing by his desk, both Rose and Chris are looking at

me. Rose's head is tilted to the side, confused. I look back at Reeves before I can analyze what Chris's pinched eyebrows mean. I don't want to know. I don't want to know *anything*.

A zap of electricity runs down my spine, and I stand up, packing my stuff in a split second. "I'm so sorry. I was —"

He cocks an eyebrow. "Not writing down homework, that's for sure. Did you hear what I want you to do with the case study I gave you?"

The case study. That must have been what was on the printouts. The heat creeping up my chest burns all the way to the tops of my ears. Not only am I getting told off, but in front of his assistants. Both of whom I've known since I was a kid. Worse. In front of *Chris*.

"I seem to remember you knowing *perfectly well* how much a spot in my class costs." My eyes widen before I can keep my facial expression under control. I feel like my cheeks are on fire.

Did he really just bring this up...here? In front of people?

"I do," I rasp. My god, my throat is so dry. "I —"

"You can stop by my office during my hours. I'll run you past what you missed."

I hold my bag to my chest, still stuck behind my table, feeling cornered. "I-I can ask another student."

He chuckles condescendingly. "Are you that naïve, Miss Baker? Don't you know popularity is worth nothing in this class? Who will help you?"

I *gulp*. Loudly too. I just made myself look even more stupid by not acknowledging students in his class are competing against each other.

He reaches inside his jacket and throws a business card on my desk. "Office hours are on there. Off you go."

As if I didn't know them.

I snatch it from the table, avoiding looking at Rose and Chris as I hurry out of the room. I've barely exited and closed the door when it opens again.

"Ella."

I don't need to turn around to know Chris is the one calling me. I would recognize his voice if it was a whisper in a crowd of people shouting. I know the sweet, deep vowels. I've shivered at the calm but stern consonants before. This man imposes respect through single words. My name in his spiced whiskey voice used to melt me to my core, turn me into a puddle at his feet.

Today, I don't even turn around.

"Ella," he calls a little louder. As if the only reason I'm not stopping is

because I *must* not have heard him.

Fuck him. Fuck Reeves. Fuck all of them.

I hurry through the hallway of the humanities building, mixing with other students before he can catch up with me. I throw a look behind me before turning right into another hallway instead of exiting. If he really wants to talk, he'll go outside, thinking that's where I'm heading. As the crowd thins out, and I pass a heavy oak door into another part of the building. The hallway here is empty, my steps resonating against the stone polished by countless years of students walking here.

There's always an indescribable eeriness that comes over me when I walk the hallways of SFU, especially since the stained glass windows don't let much light through. The stone walls are covered in paintings portraying scenes from Greek mythology.

The beheading of Medusa by Perseus. The punishment of Prometheus by Zeus.

Some of the paintings can barely be seen, casted in shadows from the lack of light. It always feels like someone is hiding somewhere, forgotten souls waiting to be noticed by passersby.

With a shiver running down my spine, I pull out my phone, calling Peach right away.

"Don't tell me you've already been kicked out of Reeves's class?" she laughs as she picks up. She's the only one of us who doesn't have any morning classes on Tuesdays.

"Peach." I have to force my voice out of my throat. My ears are still ringing from what just happened, and I can barely catch my breath. "You will never guess who transferred to SFU."

I haven't even had time to catch them up about Chris being back. This is going to come as a shock. I slept at home yesterday and went straight to class this morning. All I did was text them about my dad. They tried to convince me to not go to classes, but the mere idea of staying alone with my thoughts terrifies me.

I turn right into another hallway again, trying to circle the building from the inside so I can go back to the exit. My burgundy uniform skirt bounces against my ass with every quick step.

"What? Who?" she asks, sounding half-worried, half-excited.

"Ch—" I bump so hard into someone, I drop my phone, barely registering as it clatters on the floor.

Stumbling back from the hit, I catch myself on the wall. The giant in front of me bends down, picks it up, and the second Peach's voice says *hello?* on the other side, he hangs up on her.

"Chris."

A delicate smile pulls at his lips, and he hands me back my phone. Our fingers touch when I grab it, and I could swear he electrifies me.

"Are you running away from me? I'm not sure I love that." The deep timber of his voice is graced with a tint of mockery.

I fucking hate it.

I cock an eyebrow at him, feeling some strength finally coming back. Crossing my arms over my chest to give me a semblance of protection, I look up at him, unimpressed.

"Of course I'm running away from you. The ex I hate just showed up to my class. I need a minute to process that I'm going to be seeing a lot more assholes than I anticipated this year."

He shakes his head, chuckling, as if I'm some cute puppy yapping at his feet.

"Not a lot more. Just me."

I lean forward, making sure he's catching my words. "You count for about four assholes."

"What about Matias? Kissing you in front of the whole of SFU when you told him you didn't want to be official? How many assholes does he account for?"

"You know what? At best, you're way too interested in a college that isn't yours. At worst, you're a guy stalking your ex. Either way, you're not my problem."

His eyebrows pull together, not liking what I just said.

"If I may correct your perspective," he says in a low voice. "That's my college now. And the ex? She's mine too. So I don't see any problem in knowing what I know."

He's not even touching me, but the sentence alone keeps me from moving. Like he's got a hand around my waist and is keeping me tightly against him. He's not. I could walk away. I don't.

"Chris." My voice is strained as I attempt to talk myself out of this. "You broke us up. *Five years ago*. You have a girlfriend."

The second I mention Megan, his on-and-off girlfriend since he started college, I watch him tense.

“What do you want from me?” I huff.

He licks his lips and, for a second, I think he’s going to say something crazy.

His eyes say *I want you back*.

The heat of his body as he inches closer tells me *I’ll do anything for you to be mine again*.

And the way the fingers of his hand twitch says *name it and it’s done*.

But his words are different.

“The printout Reeves gave you in class is a case transcript. He wants you all to write a detailed essay explaining why it went to criminal court rather than civil court. That’s the homework you didn’t write down. It’ll count toward class selection in two weeks, along with the summer essay.”

Taking a step toward me, he puts his hands in the pockets of his brown pants, making sure he doesn’t touch me. He stands straight, not leaning closer, his eyes looking above my head and past me.

It doesn’t matter where he looks, whether he touches me or not. My body is already on fire from feeling his heat so close. From smelling his warm, reassuring scent. How can someone I know to be so controlling have such a comforting effect on me?

His voice is low and tempting when he says, “No need to go to his office now. We fully studied that case in my first year of law school. If you need any help, just call.”

And then he steps back, turning his back to me.

He’s almost gone by the time I catch my breath.

“Why are you here?”

He looks over his shoulder, his face suddenly falling with a sadness I don’t understand.

“You’d know if you’d talked to me when I called.” He shrugs, but it looks fake and forced because he’s not indifferent about this. “That night...I just needed to talk to someone who understands me.”

I can barely believe the disappointment in his voice as he walks away. How can he leave me like this? For dead, hardly breathing.

I need answers, and he knows what he’s doing by withholding them from me.

He’s keeping me close.

I love you

*If you spare a smile today. If you send it my way...I'll drink it
up and lock it in a box full of hope.
Maybe you shouldn't.*

Chapter Seven

Ella

Escapism - RAYE, 070 Shake

“Come on, Els. Let me take you on a date.”

I down the shot Enzo just poured me, feeling the need to replace my destructive thoughts with tequila. My dad isn't even buried and I'm at my sorority house, partying on the first big night out of the year.

I should be ashamed of myself. But I hated him, and this feels like a celebration of my freedom. It's hard to think about Gerald Baker's death when most of my anxiety comes from the Circle's threat hanging over our heads.

“I don't know.” I hiss from the burn in my throat before biting the lime he feeds me.

He pulls it away and presses his wet thumb to my lips. Licking him with the tip of my tongue, his dark gaze stays on mine even when I pull away.

But my eyes can't help finding the man at the other end of the kitchen. Chris is with Rose and a couple of other people I don't know.

I hate the way he laughs so politely, tapping the shoulder of the girl with them in a reassuring way when she blushes from whatever he said. I hear Rose say something rude to whoever bumped into her while walking into the kitchen, and Chris sends her a warning look.

“Rose, for the love of God, don't get in trouble tonight.”

Christopher Murray, ever the peacemaker of their group. The appeasing

figure. The reasonable one. What a load of bullshit.

“How many times are you gonna make me beg?”

My eyes come back to the man in front of me. Enzo’s family is European. Italian, to be precise. And fuck if he keeps those sexy clichés alive. I like him because he’s not from Stoneview. He didn’t go to Stoneview Prep like most of us. He’s a breath of fresh air.

“Maybe a couple more times. You just look so cute doing it.” I look up at him and place my hands on the kitchen counter behind me.

He laughs heartedly, putting a hand on my hip. “I kind of like the way you play, Ella.”

I try my best to keep my focus on this conversation...

Impossible, I’m too busy looking at the other group again. Chris is pouring a drink in everyone’s cup because he’s nice like that.

“Gentleman,” the girl giggles. “Serving yourself last. Are you ever not perfect?”

He chuckles awkwardly, probably hating the comment he receives so often. “I’m far from perfect.”

Finally, something true coming out of his mouth.

At the same time as he holds conversation with the people I don’t know, he watches for Rose from the corner of his eye. The second she asks someone for a cigarette, he grabs her by the back of the t-shirt—still nodding at what the guy is telling him, not even breaking eye-contact—and drags her back toward himself. Like a mom used to multitasking when she takes care of her wild kids, he holds her still while he finishes talking, and then turns to her.

“You told Rachel you would try to stop smoking.” I know Rachel is Rose’s fiancée. “And you asked me to not let you smoke. So what do you think you’re doing?”

With an eye roll, she takes another sip of her drink. “Sorry, Dad.”

“Rose,” he says in warning. “Don’t call me that.”

She laughs to herself, knowing exactly what she just did and how to rile him up. Being called Dad by your best friend when you’ve got a daddy kink isn’t hot to Chris. And I know first-hand what his kinks are.

“Ella.”

I startle, going back to Enzo.

“Damn, *bella*, what does a man have to do to keep your attention?” He looks behind him, seeing Chris. “Ah, you prefer the perfect gentlemen type of guys?”

“No,” I snort. “Please, anything but that.”

“Good. Because I’m anything but that.” An easy smile spreads on his face. “Kiss me.”

I lick my lips, enjoying the aftertaste of tequila, the remnants of salt, and the sourness of the lime. He lowers his head, and I push on my toes, but he suddenly freezes, then pulls back.

“What the —”

“I’m so sorry,” a smooth voice apologizes. One I know too well. “I tripped.”

Chris’s solo cup now looks half-full, the other half on Enzo’s blue t-shirt. He appears truly apologetic, his handsome face the picture of innocence. But I’m not impressed, and I know what he’s doing.

“Don’t worry, man,” Enzo says. “It’s all good.” He turns back to me, but Chris puts a hand on his shoulder.

“No, let me get you a towel or something. We need to dry this.”

“I don’t ca —”

“Ella,” he cuts him off. “You know this place. Could you give me a hand towel, please?”

I feel my jaw clenching. The fucker really has a plan, doesn’t he?

“Sure,” I mumble.

I’m forced to step away and round the gigantic island to reach the other side of the kitchen, Chris following closely.

I open a cabinet, looking up at the shelf with the hand towels. Reaching high, I try to grab one, only to realize I’m falling short. I don’t live here anymore, so I forgot how high these damn shelves were.

Chris’s body shifts, and then he’s pressed against mine, a hand on my hip and the other reaching over me.

I freeze, my hand still in the air.

“Listen to me,” he rasps in my ear. “I’m not exactly enjoying seeing you let some frat boy hit on you. I’m going to kindly ask you to be a good girl and stay away from other guys. But I’m asking *kindly* only once. If I have to say it again, I won’t be so nice.”

“Go to hell,” I hiss under my breath. “And stay there.”

“Seeing other men was a thing for when I was away, Sweets. I’m back now, and I don’t want to have to play mean.”

My pulse accelerates, my lower stomach tensing as he presses harder behind me.

“How does Megan feel about this? Is it a Shadow thing to have a girlfriend and still hit on your ex?”

He chuckles. “It is actually. But it’s different for us. I’ll only be like this until my ex becomes my girlfriend again.”

I don’t like the way my heart and my body react to this, and I need to cut this shit short *right now*.

“I’m not yours anymore, Chris. Now step back before someone realizes you’re acting like a crazy man.”

“You’re wrong. You are mine, no matter what. The status of ex or girlfriend doesn’t change anything about that.”

He grabs the towel, steps back, and lets me turn around, but he still blocks me from walking away.

“So,” he says, like he’s about to repeat something extremely simple that I was just too thick to understand. “Stay away from other guys. It’s not so hard, is it?”

“How about you stay away from me, asshole.”

His eyebrows rise as a small smile tips the corner of his mouth. “Stay away from you? Don’t be silly, Ella. That’s a ridiculous concept. And watch your language. You know I hate when you curse.”

And with that, he finally turns to the side so I’m not cornered anymore.

Fuming, I stride back to Enzo, plant my hands on his cheeks, and kiss him with enough force it makes him stumble.

How’s that for staying away from other guys?

My eyes flick to Chris the second we separate, and I don’t enjoy the knowing smile he’s wearing. Like I’m so predictable. But I do love the way I see his hand clench into a fist. He’s mad, and there’s nothing he can do about it in front of everyone.

“Why do older men love our parties? Don’t postgrads have their own? This is Xi Ep not...not...I don’t know...some place where people can just waltz in.” Peach’s words are slurred as she crashes down next to me on the sofa.

Enzo went to get us more drinks, but he must have bumped into other lacrosse players and decided to stay with them because he never came back. Instead, I’m with my two best friends.

“Did that guy just take a picture of you?” Alex gasps.

I ignore both of them, my eyes glued to Hermes’s post on my phone. It’s a picture of Chris and me in the hallway of the humanities building three days

ago. It was taken exactly when he was close to me, and from an angle where you can't see that we weren't actually touching.

Ella Baker...do I hear wedding bells?

If you went to Stoneview Prep...you know who he is. And if you didn't attend Stoneview Prep...what are you even doing at SFU?

Christopher Murray is back, my babes. Our beautiful, perfect mix between a classic gentleman and a sexy protector transferred to SFU!

Was it because he missed his ex? Because we all know how much she missed him. (Five years single...ouch.)

I heard Chris is someone else's now. But does it look that way to you?

Chris & Ella, your secrets are safe with me.

Until they aren't.

#Chris&Ellasittinginatree #FutureMrs.Murray?

#Raiseyourhandifyoudon'tcareaboutMeganMcLean

"What a fucking asshole," I curse. This is the kind of time I'm glad Luke doesn't go to SFU. Only the students have access to the app, and I wouldn't want him to see this post. Only a handful of people knew Chris and I were dating in high school, but when college started, rumors grew, and I guess now it's a known thing around here. With Luke being in LA, it never mattered, but he's around now, and I don't want to add anything to his plate.

If someone caught Chris and I talking in what I thought was an empty hallway, there will certainly be pictures of him cornering me in the kitchen tonight. And then who is going to look like the girl who doesn't care that he has a girlfriend?

Peach wraps an arm around my shoulders. "Oh, come on, Els. Forget about Hermes for one night, please. We'll burn down their house tomorrow."

"How?" Alex hiccups. "We don't know who they are."

Peach looks at both of us, hooded green eyes glinting from all the alcohol she drank. "I don't have a plan right now, but I'm sure I'll have one by tomorrow." Her eyes catch someone in the crowd. "Alex," she sing-songs. "You're in trouble. T.R.O.U.B.L.E," she cheers like we're cheerleading on the lacrosse pitch. "Trouble!"

We all turn to look at Alex's boyfriend walking toward us, as grumpy as ever, his dark eyes focused on the only woman who matters in this room.

God, I would die, go to hell, make a deal with the devil, and come back to have a man look at me that way. The only thing ever written on his face is how desperate he is to have Alex near him.

“He wasn’t supposed to be here,” Alex mumbles, then turns to me. “And Ella, that guy keeps taking pictures of us,” she insists.

Xi stops in front of our field of vision, blocking the crowd. Blocking the freshmen girls who were trying to reach us and start advertising themselves as to why they should be friends with us. The guys who were looking from afar who were counting our drinks to time exactly when to come hit on us.

But it’s hard to take Alex’s rugged boyfriend seriously while he holds a shaking bunny in one arm, his massive hand covering the animal’s large ears, as if to protect him from the loud party music.

My friend smiles beautifully at him, her eyes practically turning heart shaped. She jumps into a standing position, giggling to herself.

“Oh, baby. I missed you. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he grumbles.

Xi leans forward, his lips pursing for a kiss, but she ignores him, grabbing her pet and giving it a smooch as she scratches its fur.

Yeah...she wasn’t talking to her boyfriend.

Xi narrows his eyes at her, his jaw ticking. Alex is already turning back to us when he grabs her by the back of the neck, twists her around, and presses his lips against hers in a deep kiss that makes Peach and I exchange a wide-eyed look. Holy shit...this is not PG.

“Forget to kiss me hello one more time,” he growls. “I’m dying to teach you a lesson about that.”

She mumbles an apology, cheeks turning an unimaginable shade of red. Scratching her throat, she brings back the topic to the animal in her arms.

“Why did you bring Jean-Paul Sartre? He’s scared of the noise, Xi.”

“Cupcake,” he huffs. “I tried to call you about a hundred times. He won’t eat. And if you come back tonight and see he didn’t touch his food, you’re going to throw a tantrum. I didn’t know what to do...so I brought him here.”

Sighing, her hazel eyes soften as she speaks to her beloved bunny. “You miss your mama, don’t you?” She looks at Peach and me again. “I have to go, girls. We’ve got parenting to do.”

“Kill me.” Peach puts two fingers in her mouth, pretending to puke. “You two are my worst nightmare.”

“You’re just jealous of our beautiful family,” Xi snorts.

“I bet you shit pink now that she’s taken over your life, Xi!” Peach shouts at their retreating backs.

I burst into a laugh as they disappear in the crowd, and as I watch them, I notice it. The Christopher Murray effect. A flock of men and women surround him as he slowly sips on a drink. He’s been back for a few days and is already winning hearts like he never left. A charming smile here, a gentle tap on the shoulder there. He nods, interested when people talk to him. A genuine frown breaks his brow when someone shares a deep story. That’s how he makes everyone feel. Welcome, at ease, *safe*. I know what it’s like because I fell for it too. The handsome face, the caring gestures. No one knows what truly hides behind the façade, and it almost makes me feel lonely.

Our eyes cross over a girl’s shoulder, and my heart swells when he smiles at me. The slightly chipped front tooth doesn’t fit his image, but it’s his imperfections that make him even more human. Relatable. Chris has a way of making someone feel exceptional. He looks at you across a room, a smile lifting his lips aimed in your direction, and suddenly everyone else disappears. He has no special talent and yet owns the gaze of an artist. Through his eyes, everyone can feel beautiful.

A flash catches my attention, snapping me from his gaze, and I finally see him. That guy taking pictures of us.

I focus my attention on him, double-checking I’m not making this up, and fury spikes through my veins as I realize his phone is quite literally pointed at my face and unmoving.

He’s filming.

“Motherfucker,” I bite out, shooting into a standing position.

Peach is being hit on by some random guy and is too drunk to notice me leaving. But the fucking paparazzi-wannabe sees me approaching and stops recording before turning around and slipping away.

I follow him through the mass of sweaty bodies dancing and drinking. I know he’s from here because he belongs in this crowd. Everyone is dressed like they were coming to some sort of Hollywood celebrities’ party tonight, but it’s just how we do things in SFU and that guy *fits*.

I don’t lose him, sticking a few steps behind until he reaches the backyard.

“Hey, asshole!” I call out. He continues to ignore me until he’s to the side of the house, between the Xi Ep exterior wall and the wall to the next house.

It's tight as an alley here, and he stops at the end, spinning around to face me.

"I didn't catch anything interesting," he says. "You can stop following me."

"What's your name? Were you looking for something to send to Hermes?" I take a step toward him, my high heels crunching the gravel. "Or maybe you're Hermes, taking videos for your precious account." Another step, and I point an accusing finger. "I swear if you don't leave me the fuck alone, I will make your life so miserable at SFU, you'll be a college drop-out before next week."

I snatch his phone from him and throw it to the ground before stepping on it with my stiletto. A relief crashes over me at the destroyed screen.

"Shit, that's totally something we can send to Hermes." I whip around, finding another man behind me.

He's filming me, and no doubt has been recording the whole scene. Including my threats.

Fuck.

"Queen Bee threatens innocent student to protect her reputation," the first guy laughs, making me look at him again, nostrils flaring.

"I didn't threaten you to protect my reputation. You had nothing on me. I defended myself because you were harassing me."

His friend gets closer, a dark-haired guy, bigger and more imposing than the skinny, inoffensive man I followed to a dark alley.

"From what my phone saw, it looks like you were scared he was going to spill secrets and threatened to make him drop out."

"I didn't —"

"It's exactly what she did," the skinny one insists. They're clearly friends and had planned this whole thing.

"Are you two serious?" I spit, crossing my arms over my chest in a worthless attempt to make myself look tougher. "You think you can threaten me with some stupid video? Do you have any idea who the fuck you're dealing with?"

The skinny guy shrugs, tilting his head to the side as they both close in on me, cornering me against the wall of the Xi Ep house.

"Looks to me like we're dealing with a girl who'd do anything to keep her reputation intact."

"Anything?" the other asks. "Now that sounds interesting." He brings his hand to my cheek, tracing a finger down to my neck, my collarbone. "Can

she do it quietly?”

“Fuck off.” I slap his hand away, and the other uses my gesture to grab my wrist and bring my hand to his groin. The asshole is hard.

“How about we fuck you before we fuck off?”

My heart drops to my stomach. “I guess we could film that too,” the brunet mocks. “And if you say anything, we’ll release the video to everyone.”

“Or I could film myself kicking your ass and see how the whole campus reacts instead?” The calm warning makes them both jump away from me to reveal the owner of the smooth voice. A wave of relief washes over me, making my knees buckle. I briefly close my eyes, allowing my body to accept my ex is here to make things better.

Chris stands with his hands in his pockets, but it doesn’t take an imposing stance or hostile gestures for him to look intimidating. His height does the job perfectly fine, and his gentle demeanor is often scarier than growled threats.

When both guys don’t find any excuses for their actions, standing mute and meek in front of my ex, Chris speaks for them again.

“I think you were leaving.”

They both nod, turning around to leave.

“Uh, uh,” he calls them back like two misbehaved pets. “Not without apologizing to the lady, of course.”

He taps his foot impatiently on the ground, and that’s all it takes for them to turn to me, babbling pathetic apologies. They eye Chris again, waiting for him to give them a subtle nod before they go to leave.

“One last thing.”

They freeze. Two preys playing dead as they’re about to be caught by a predator. Then they both look over their shoulders.

“Your phone,” he tells the one with dark hair.

The guy hands it to him, and Chris takes it carefully.

I’m the only one who feels something switch within him. A fury that comes right before he surprises them by throwing the phone with all his strength against the wall. The violence is disturbing, pieces of plastic, glass, and metal flying everywhere and making me jolt.

Chris turns back to them, taking one slow but purposeful step.

“Bother her again.”

It’s a strange, whispered order that makes the two friends glance at each other with wide eyes.

“Do it,” Chris insists. “Let me watch you bother her again.”

They both shake their heads, only the skinny one finding the courage to say. “W-we don’t want to.”

Chris nods, pretending to be half-impressed. “I want you to remember how you’re feeling right now. The next time you see Ella, think about that fear running through you. Whenever you’re in the same room as her, breathe the same air, whenever she crosses your mind, I want you to dig into your memory and remember this very night. And I want you to know that if she mentions either of you to me, you’ll both end up in a state where you’ll be alive and well enough to remember your mistake, but with a wish for death so great you’ll be begging your own mothers to end your lives.” He tsks. “Poor mothers.”

He dusts off the white shirt he’s wearing, adjusts the collar, and rolls his shoulders. “Sound good?”

They both nod so many times I wonder if their heads are about to unscrew from their shoulders.

“I prefer words.”

“Yes,” they reply in unison. “Crystal clear,” the skinny one adds.

“Good. Good. I’m glad we had this discussion. You may leave.”

I’ve never seen anyone run so fast.

Chris finally turns to me, and I only now realize I’m still keeping myself flat against the wall.

“Are you okay, Sweets?”

“Don’t call me that.” It comes out as a reflex. *Sweets* was the stupid girl he dated. But I have to admit that my words don’t have much punch with the predicament I’m in.

I hate Chris. I really do. But I couldn’t be more grateful for his intervention tonight.

Stepping closer, he places a hand above my head on the wall and looks down at me.

As a breathy “thank you” leaves my lips from his proximity, I want to slap myself.

“You don’t have to thank me. You know I would never let anything happen to you.”

His face is close enough that I could kiss him with the slightest lift of my chin. And for a moment that isn’t brief enough to my liking, I want to. His warm body against mine is familiar, the protection he’s always cast over me is reassuring. The danger that hides within him excites me to no end.

I blink up at him, feeling a need I can barely control surging through my veins.

“You want to kiss me, don’t you?”

I find it hard to swallow past my dry throat. “Not even in your dreams do I want to kiss you.” It’s hard to sound condescending with the electricity crackling between us, making me weak at the knees.

“You know I want a second chance, Sweets. It would be so easy to just give in.”

“And you know I’m over you. There’s nothing to give into.”

He chuckles, his forehead now practically touching mine as I crane my neck.

“It’s going to be very, *very* hard to resist me now that I’m back. I know all the buttons I need to press to make you melt.”

Even as my stomach swoops traitorously, I narrow my gaze at him. “Try your fucking worst.”

My knee to his crotch is the only way I find to get out of this situation without throwing myself at him.

I can’t be weak around Chris. He’ll jump on the occasion to make me his. And being his isn’t safe for me.

Chapter Eight

Ella

Food Poisoning - Chri\$tian Gate\$

I don't hear from Chris for almost two weeks. My dad's funeral was packed with people I had never heard of before, and Chris stayed far back, respecting the time me and my family needed. He wasn't assisting in the last criminal law classes I attended either. Rose was.

Luke is in Stoneview, staying with my mom, but I don't know what they're doing regarding the Circle. My brother barely picks up my calls. I'm being left out of everything, back at SFU, and dealing with the constant weight of people talking about the parties my dad hosted.

How do you remain Miss Popular when your world is crumbling? People have found something they can't relate to anymore. Something they can hate me for. And if not me, my family.

I'm walking through the long cafeteria, weaving between the tables to make my way to my friends, when someone pulls at the shirt of my uniform.

I turn around, dying to scream at her not to *touch* me. Haven't people ever learned of personal space? Instead of doing what I want, I offer a welcoming smile.

I don't know her, but when the whole college knows you, it doesn't matter.

"You don't know me, my name's Cassie. I write for the Silver Students Post. The campus newspaper."

“Right,” I say sweetly. “Cassie! You wrote an article about the dangers of fraternity parties. I thought it had amazing insight.”

Thank God I sometimes check the campus newspaper.

Unimpressed by my memory, she nods once sternly and continues. “I wanted to talk to you, ask what you have to say about your dad?”

I can only blink at her. “I’m sorry?”

“Your family house is a brothel. Don’t you have something to say about that? Did you know?”

How am I supposed to respond to that? Did I know? Yes. Am I going to say that to anyone? Absolutely not. I might as well cut the tree to make the stake they would burn me at. Who would hear me when I say I didn’t have a choice in it? That if I never went to the police and ruined people’s lives, it was to protect my own.

I look around, making sure no one is listening.

“Are you...” I hold myself taller, attempting to keep my pride intact, or at least pretend to. “Are you writing an article about my family?”

As I ask this, a shadow behind her catches my attention. Chris is walking from the entrance of the cafeteria and toward us, a scowl on his face. The same kind he wears when I’m upset and he’s about to fix it, no matter how he has to.

His presence only makes me want to crawl into the safe space of his arms. I want to hide and let him handle it. Pretending to be strong is draining, and the beginning of this year is already wearing me out. What I would give to just rest and reset.

Catching my gaze, Cassie turns around, then back at me. “That’s Chris Murray, isn’t it? Your ex? Did he come back for you? Doesn’t he have a girlfriend?”

My gaze widens. “What? No...he —”

“No, he doesn’t have a girlfriend? No, he’s not your ex? No, he didn’t come back for you? Could you be more specific?”

Feeling cornered, my eyes drop, and that’s when I notice the little mic she’s holding. The kind that connects to phones, like people use on social media.

“Are you recording our conversation?” Gasping, I take a step back, and I almost trip on the heels I’m wearing. “What’s wrong with you?”

Chris is right behind Cassie now. “Of course I came back for her. Why else?”

Cassie jumps. I don't think she realized he was walking specifically to us. "That's not true," I correct quickly. "She's recording, you idiot," I snap at him.

"Then let the record show Ella Baker will be mine again by the end of the year. Because when you meet a woman like her, believe me, you don't let her go twice."

My lower stomach tightens in that delicious way only Chris is capable of making me feel. I'll hate myself later for it. Right now, I'm too busy hating Cassie. Especially when she keeps the charade going.

"Your girlfriend is Megan McLean, is that right?" she asks Chris.

He shrugs, a charming smile spreading on his face. "You sound like you love to stir trouble, Cassie. You should run to Megan and tell her everything I said. Let her listen to it. Better yet, send the whole recording to Hermes."

Eyes widening, I wonder if he's become suicidal in the last two weeks.

"Maybe I will," she answers, clearly testing him.

Nodding, he rolls his lips inwardly. "Of course, then you'd have to deal with Megan's wrath." He tsks. "You should see what she does to people who humiliate her."

His eyes quickly scan the distance between us and everyone else eating at their tables, and he must judge they can't hear us for him to say something he would *hate* for anyone to hear.

He even lowers his voice just in case. It turns raw, dangerous.

"And you should see what *I* do to people who threaten Ella."

My mouth drops open, and it takes me a few seconds to rein in my reaction.

"Chris," I whisper. I shake my head when his furious eyes meet mine, and they magically soften, making my heart skip a beat.

Oh. I'm in trouble.

A dark voice resonates by my side, sending a wave of reassurance through my body.

"Ella is too nice to tell journalist wannabes to go fuck themselves," Achilles purrs with disdain. "But here's my piece of advice—make sure your little mic is recording. In our world, journalists who dig too deep disappear. Are you sure that's the path you want to take?"

I think that's enough threats for Cassie in one day. Her lower lip is trembling when she steps to the side, turns around, and practically jogs out of the cafeteria.

“Murray.” Achilles nods a hello.

“Duval.”

“Cassie’s gone. Want to put those sharp teeth away and go back to your day?”

Their exchange sounds like it’s not the first time they’ve had one and that bothers me. They were never friends before.

Chris doesn’t move. His right hand goes into the pocket of his slacks and fidgets with something in there. Achilles huffs like he’s dealt with this too many times before, even though it’s never happened.

“I’ll be taking care of your little Ella, Murray.” He puts a hand at the small of my back. “Now I beg of you to go back to your day so I can go back to my lunch.”

“You’ll be taking care of her without your hand on her, though. Correct?”

Achilles’s hand drops like I’m on fire. “That goes without saying.”

Chris seems to approve, and he gives me a beautiful, genuine smile. “Have a good day, Sweets.”

“*Stop* calling me Sweets.”

He pauses, bites his lower lip, and looks me right in the eye when he says, “Whatever you want, Sweets.”

The second he’s out of earshot, I turn to Achilles. “*I’ll be taking care of your little Ella?* What was that about?”

“I told him what he wanted to hear,” he says nonchalantly as we walk to the table where the rest of our friends are.

“You don’t take care of me, Achilles,” I hiss. “And I’m not *his*.”

“You are little, though.”

He doesn’t give a shit that I’m annoyed with him for talking about me to my ex like I’m a Victorian woman who needs a ward. I don’t even get to answer his stupid remark because Peach is already catching up.

“That girl is a nuisance,” she says as we sit down at our table.

“Don’t worry, Els,” Alex adds. “The whole college hates her.”

I look at her, smiling. “So no one will care if I kill her?” I whisper.

Alex laughs, only cut off by Peach.

“Oh, thank god,” she sighs from across the lunch table. “Hermes just posted something.”

My phone is on silent in my bag because I’m too scared of the kinds of things I could receive.

“Explain to me why that’s a good thing?” Alex asks as she and Achilles

pull out their phones. I don't. I can't take bad news right now.

"Because Els won't be the latest topic anymore," she answers like it's so obvious.

"Poor Camila," Alex sighs. "Those were private pictures."

"Take this as a lesson, girls," Achilles chuckles. "Don't send intimate pictures to your boyfriends. There's always a chance the guy will betray you. Even if you trust him."

"Uh, fuck you?" Peach defends, her teeth snapping a piece of carrot from the stick she was playing with a second ago. "How about: guys, don't betray our trust and privacy by sharing intimate pictures we send you because we trust you? You bastards are always the ones begging for them."

Achilles is sitting next to me, with Peach right on the other side of the table. He leans over, that chilling smirk he does so well spreading on his face. "For someone who knows we're all bastards, why don't you be more careful? Some men really don't have the best intentions, Peach."

"Yeah, men like you," she snorts. "Amanda Carter was *crying* when she left your house yesterday morning. I was having coffee on the porch when the poor girl slammed your front door. Do you know what she said?"

"I don't care," Achilles answers casually.

But Peach insists. "She said, *your best friend is fucked up. Don't let him near any other girls.*"

"Who says she was talking about me? Maybe she was talking about Wren."

Peach opens her mouth, closing it right away, then again. "Uh..."

I'm almost sure her and Wren secretly fuck from time to time when he manages to convince her. But she loves to deny anything ever happens between them because she's a badass who holds her ground and Wren is known for being seriously dominant in everything he does. Sports, friendship, studies...sex.

Achilles is a sadistic fuck who enjoys torturing us. *Playfully*. Especially Peach because she's so strong-headed. So whenever he can, he'll try to bring up her and Wren. Or worse, like now, make her jealous.

She turns toward Wren sitting next to her, and he shakes his head. "She was talking about him."

Shrugging, her features harden. "I don't care either way."

She does. She cares a lot. She just doesn't admit it. Not even to herself.

When she turns back to my side of the table, her eyes light up as she

looks behind me. “Ella, your brother gets hotter every time I see him.”

“My brother?” I turn around, and there is Luke walking the length of the college dining hall, heading straight toward us.

When I look back at my friends, Wren has a hand tangled in Peach’s hair, forcing her to look down at her plate. “Focus on your food,” he growls.

She only fights him for a second before grabbing another carrot, cheeks flushed like the shy girl she *isn’t*. Only Wren has that effect on her.

Luke stops by our table, hands in the pockets of his suit, bright blond hair brushed back.

He nods at my friends, not sparing a word to them before putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Els, I’ve been calling you. Come, we need to talk.”

I guess lunch isn’t going to be an option today. It doesn’t matter; I can’t keep anything in my stomach anyway.

Grabbing my bag, I follow him out without looking back.

“Sorry,” I say as I check my phone. I’ve got seven miscalls from him. “My phone was on silent.”

“Don’t worry.” We walk out together, and I follow him to the visitor’s parking lot.

“How did you even get in?” I ask.

“Chris put me down as a visitor.”

I feel weird hearing that name from his mouth when I’m already looking around and wondering where he went.

He guides me to his car, and it’s only once we’re both sitting inside with the doors closed that he finally says what he came for.

“I didn’t get invited to the initiations.”

My heart drops.

Thump thump.

My ears buzz, and I feel like I’m falling backward even though I’m seated. I grip the seat with both hands. Anxiety spills through my veins, freezing my limbs.

I take a minute. Maybe more. I lick my lips, attempting to form my words.

“What does that mean?”

I don’t look at him, but I hear him take a deep breath, hesitating before he finally says, “I don’t know.”

“Is the Circle coming after us? Did you talk to them? Are you okay?”

Hurt?”

“Chris said he put my name forward, and after debating, they refused to invite me. He doesn’t know which board members refused, but we do know someone, or some people, don’t want me there.”

“What about —”

“No,” he cuts me off right away. “You’re not going to the initiations. And I knew you were going to offer. That’s why I waited to tell you. They start tomorrow night, and it’s too late to get invited.”

The entire world falls apart around me. What are we going to do?

“Listen,” Luke says in his attempt at a reassuring voice. “Chris is going to get initiated tomorrow. After that...after that, I’m sure we’ll have more options.”

I’m going to be sick. Apparently, denial is a new thing my brother is trying out.

“We’re not safe, Luke.”

“I will always keep you safe. Nothing will happen to you.”

“I don’t care about me!” I snap. “I care about you and mom.”

I wish I could crawl into his brain and untangle his thoughts. This is too painful to witness.

“Go to class and go home. That’s all I’m asking for today, okay?”

“So, we’re taking it one day at a time? What’s the plan? Wake up every morning and check that none of us got murdered in the night?”

“Murdering us doesn’t teach us a lesson.”

“Then how does it work?” I push him.

“How about you stay out of it and let me handle it?”

“I can’t! You’re not *handling* anything!”

“Ella,” he seethes. And that’s when I look at him. It’s happening. They’re turning my sweet brother into a desperate man. Desperate men are dangerous. “Just because I keep you out of shit doesn’t mean I have no idea what I’m doing. They contacted me, okay? I’m talking to them. We just haven’t come to an agreement yet. But, for the last time, I’m asking you to stay out of it and let me deal with them.”

“Fine.” We stay silent for a minute or so and, thinking it’s a good way to change topic, I say, “I think I’ll go back to dancing now that dad isn’t here to stop me.”

“Els,” he huffs. “Not now.”

“But why?”

Scratching his throat, he runs his hand through his hair. More bad news is coming.

“We received a letter from SFU yesterday. Your fees hadn’t been paid.”

“Oh, come on,” I groan. My hand drops to my right thigh, and I press against the cut I have under my skirt. “The frozen accounts, I assume?”

He nods.

“What are we going to do? Do I have...to leave college?”

My brother looks away, a hand running through his hair. “Chris covered them.”

“What?” I choke on my own breath as I push the word out.

No, I know Chris. This doesn’t feel right. The man is pretending to my brother that he’s doing our family a favor, taking care of his sister, while hiding the fact that he used to love to control everything about me.

“I’ll pay him back every single cent, Els. For now, he’s covering this semester and your house too. But we’re not going to play around and change your classes again when we couldn’t pay your fees yesterday. Please, just go to class, study hard, and take college seriously. You need to go for a stable career now more than ever. You don’t have anything else to fall back on anymore.”

He lets his head fall against the seat, and I take his hand.

“Okay,” I say softly. “I understand. I’ll work hard, and I’ll make sure to stay in Reeves’s class. It’s almost a guarantee into SFU law school.”

He turns to me with a sad smile. He looks exhausted, heavy eye bags darkening the skin under his eyes.

“I’ll fix this.” Something dulls the blue in his gaze as he talks.

“I don’t like that all responsibilities have fallen on you. You’re in the same situation as me.”

A ball of sadness swells in my throat as he messes with my hair, shaking his head like I’m making a big deal out of nothing.

“I’m your big brother, Els. It feels right to do anything to keep you safe. You just keep out of trouble, okay?”

I nod, sniffing like an idiot.

“Luke?”

“Mhm?” he says, his eyes back on the windscreen. Probably looking at the red-brick castle we can see from the parking lot.

“Why did Chris transfer to SFU?”

“Him and Megan are moving back to Stoneview,” he mumbles, lost in his

own thoughts.

I try not to sound irritated, desperate, *fucking hopeless* at the turn of events.

“Okay, but why? I know SFU has the best law school, but Yale is a close second.”

My brother finally looks back at me. “Didn’t I tell you? His dad is ill.”

Despite myself, my eyes round, and what Chris said hits me in the face.

That night...I just needed to talk to someone who understands me.

Guilt thickens my blood. “Ill...like, really ill?”

My brother’s mouth twists. “Yeah, like at the hospital with a breathing machine kind of ill. It’s bad, Els. Chris came back to take care of his mom and sister. He got a house in Silver Falls so he can be close to them and college.”

He called that night because he needed me. He needed to talk to me about his dad. To someone he trusts.

Feeling the sudden need to get out of this suffocating car, I nod at my brother.

“Oh, alright. That’s unfortunate.” I struggle to swallow, but keep a straight face.

“That’s one way to put it.”

“No. Yeah. It’s horrible. Please, wish him my best.”

I grab my bag, putting it on my lap. I gather my stuff, and as I zip my bag, I notice the case study Reeves gave me an extension for. My dad’s death was a good enough excuse for him, so he extended it to today.

“Shit!” I hiss as I look at the time. 2:57 p.m. His office hours end in three minutes. “Fuck. I have to run.”

Jumping out of the car, I sprint to the humanities building. The walk would be five minutes, and I don’t even know if I’ll make it by running.

I burst through the building doors, slowing to a fast walk before entering the hallway leading to the professors’ offices. Reeves thinks so highly of himself that he requested an office split into two rooms. He uses the first one as a reception room. I try the door at 3:01, praying for at least him or his assistant to still be here.

But what I pray the hardest for is for that assistant to be Rose.

Please let it not be Chris. Please let it not be Chris.

As I walk into the reception, Chris lifts his head from his desk.

I stop in my tracks, my heart squeezing in my chest. I wonder if the day

will come when I don't feel *anything* when I see this man's eyes roaming over my body, or the way they light up when they see me. Maybe I'll die wondering.

"Hi, Ella."

That's it. In a deep, soothing voice that welcomes me to follow it. Are my instincts broken? Is that why I want to sit on his lap and hug him? Is that why I want his strong hands on me?

What happened to your dad?

I almost expect an answer to my thought when he starts talking.

"Are you here to see Professor Reeves? His office hours are over, but he's finishing with someone else. He might be able to get you in if he's not in a hurry to leave."

I want to ask why he's acting all normal when he moved back to Stoneview because his dad is ill. How he can talk so calmly when I wasn't there for him when he needed me?

"I have to..." I catch the papers on his desk, and I take a step forward, reading the notes he's writing in red. "Are those the case studies from my class?"

He doesn't even look up, simply nodding.

"Will you be grading mine too?"

Sitting back in his chair, he brings his red pen to his full lips. A little smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. The one that says *I know things you don't*. The empathy I felt a second ago is gone. I'm now tempted to punch him. Make that front, slightly chipped tooth even worse. I hate when he looks at me like he's got something over me. Even if he does.

"Maybe. It depends on what Reeves wants to do. He might want to grade it himself to be quicker. That way, you can get your feedback at the same time as everyone else." He glances back at the door to the professor's office. "Do you want me to have a look before you hand it in?"

His soft voice makes me feel like I'm wrapped in comfort. Warmth spreads from my belly to my chest, my body loving the way he wants to help.

I nod, keeping silent. But I don't move, so he's the one who has to get up from his seat, round his desk, and look through my bag while I stand still. My arms hang limply by my sides as he leans back against his desk. His long legs extend in front of him, to my left. A hair's breadth away from my naked legs. Red pen pressed against his lips again, his eyebrows pinch as he focuses. Could he look sexier if he tried? I don't think so.

I shake my head, trying to focus.

“You helping me with this doesn’t mean I’ll ‘be yours by the end of the year,’” I explain, quoting his words from earlier.

“Oh, I know, Sweets. ‘Not even if I was your last option on earth,’ right?” His eyes don’t even raise from the paper.

I guess if I get to throw his words back at him, he gets to do the same.

“That’s right.”

He keeps reading. “Thankfully, I don’t need your authorization to make you mine.”

“You might not need my authorization to *try*, but you need my willingness to achieve it.”

He finally looks up. “Do I? Well, I can be very persuasive.”

“Not persuasive enough.”

He chuckles, enjoying this way too much. He spreads his legs open, one on either side of me, and before I know it, he’s grabbing my uniform tie, pulling me until I’m right between his thighs. My paper gets crunched in the same grip, and my eyes widen with panic.

He drags his red pen along my inner thigh, from my knee until it’s against my underwear.

I try to pull away, speechless, but a gasp leaves me when he presses the end of the pen against my clit. Not the writing side. The thicker side that feels torturously good as it sparks electricity through my stomach, all the way to my nipples.

I open my mouth to say something, to stop him, but he presses harder, and I clamp it back shut to stop a moan from escaping. Seeing my reaction, he pulls on my tie until I’m flush against him. I put my hand on his chest, my eyes almost rolling to the back of my head when I feel the hard, unrelenting muscles.

“Not persuasive enough, huh?”

Oh my god. What kind of game is he playing?

His eyes take in my teeth biting on my lower lip, my heavy-hooded eyes, and what I’m assuming must be a flush on my cheeks.

It’s hot in this room, and it’s making me do crazy things. Like rolling my hips forward to feel more of the pen through my damp underwear.

“Poor little Ella,” he purrs. “Isn’t it so hard to fight what you really want?”

Taking pity on me, he lets go, and I stumble back, feeling a resonating

aftermath between my legs. He doesn't even look bothered, while he just tilted my world on its axis in less than five minutes.

He reads some more of my essay like nothing happened and shakes his head. "Do you have your laptop?"

He adds something else about the case, but I'm struggling to listen as a strand of his caramel hair makes him blink, falling in his eye and bothering him. It's practically *begging me* to run my hand through the silky waves.

"Ella?"

"What?" I drag my eyes away from his hair, licking my lips as I do so.

His mouth twists slightly, knowing exactly the state he just put me in. "You missed a lot of points."

I feel the blood drain from my face. "What? No, I spent hours on this." My hand goes to my chest, scratching at the skin showing under the open buttons of my uniform. "I don't get it. I did a lot of research, and I had Reeves's book open the whole time I worked on this."

"His book is terrible," Chris snorts, but then he catches the way I'm scratching my skin and his face drops. "Don't scratch, Sweets. Give me your laptop. I can change some stuff for you."

Somehow, my brain decides not to pick up on the fact that he calls me *Sweets* the second he goes into protective mode. Chris has so many flaws, but I can say with certainty he's the person who always took care of me. He's protective. Overprotective. But more often than not, it feels really good. And he knows how I feel about being stupid. How ashamed I am of it, even though he disagrees.

He grabs my laptop out of my bag, sitting back behind his desk.

"You don't have to help me." I attempt to sound like I know what I'm doing and what I want, but the fear of failing Reeves's class is eating me from the inside. I don't want to go through what I did last time to keep my spot.

"It's just a case study you'll look at again once you start law school. It's not going to define the rest of your career."

"I know, but..."

He looks up, stern eyes locking on my chest. "I told you to stop scratching, Ella."

His domineering voice makes me stop right away, his authority spreading through my veins. This feels too much like the *us* from before. Him taking care of me and telling me what to do. Me...being helpless to his decisions

and yet finding comfort in them.

My eyes stay glued to Reeves's door for the few minutes Chris edits my essay. The second he prints it and gives it back to me, the door opens, and my heart nearly explodes from fear. I startle, but there's nothing to see here anymore, and Chris is already back to grading the copies on his desk.

"Miss Baker, please come in."

My gaze crosses with the other student as she walks out, and I practically choke on oxygen.

It's Megan.

Straight black hair to her shoulders, sharp eyebrows, she's studying me like I'm part of the next case we have to write an essay on. Her long legs and slim figure make her look like a runway model, and when I walk past her, I realize I barely reach her head.

With my heart racing, Reeves closes the door behind him and invites me to sit. Once he's behind his desk, he extends his arm, and I give him the essay.

"Why are you handing this to me fifteen minutes after your deadline when I've already given you an extension?"

"I-I was here," I explain. "You were busy."

"You weren't here at 3 p.m. when my office closes."

I already feel my hand going down to my thigh, even though I'm too distracted by anxiety to feel whether I'm scratching or not.

"I'm sorry," I rasp. "My family has been going through a lot, and my brother came today to —"

"Yes, I know. Your dad's suicide. The bankruptcy." How the hell does he know about the bankruptcy? "But I can't be lenient with you forever, can I? That's not how real life works."

"No, of course," I say numbly, feeling myself getting smaller in the chair. Maybe if my body keeps shrinking, I'll disappear within the leather.

Reeves huffs, shaking his head as he stands up. He walks around his desk, but the purpose in his steps makes me freeze on the spot. Putting a hand on the arm of the chair, he brushes a blonde strand behind my ear, making my stomach contort painfully.

I stare ahead at my paper on his desk. If I don't look at him, don't move, don't make a single noise, he might forget about me. If I don't exist, nothing can happen to me.

"Ella." No more Miss Baker. That barrier of protection is gone too. "Look

at me.” His hand grips my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “I’m an understanding man. I empathize with your situation, but I need a little effort from you too. I need to see that you want to be in this class.”

His thumb starts caressing my lower lip, pulling it down slightly. My eyes catch his other hand going to his belt, and that’s when I notice the signet ring on his pinky. My dad had this exact same ring. It’s a golden ring with a mountain—or I guess it’s a mount since it’s supposed to represent Mount Olympus—engraved on it. My dad had lightning engraved on it too, but Reeves has nothing else. The Silent Circle bases a lot of its rituals around Greek mythology, and I have no doubt that this ring means Reeves is part of it.

It would make sense. He’s barely thirty. Too young to have obtained the reputation he has on his own. The firm, being a renowned professor, the elite clients. He had help. The kind the Circle can provide. And now I know why he’s so aware of what goes on with my family.

“Don’t freeze on me. You did the same thing last time, trying to disappear when everything around you becomes too real.”

I can’t move my head, held too tightly in his bruising grip. My eyes are my only escape, and stay down, stuck on his belt as he undoes it. I can’t hear his next question as my heart beats loudly in my ears. The ringing makes me dizzy, and I let the first words that come to my mind burst out of my mouth:

“Do you have a wife, Professor Reeves?”

He freezes, and I look up at his face to find him cocking an eyebrow at me. “Do you see a wedding ring, Miss Baker?”

He’s annoyed. He doesn’t feel so free to do whatever he wants now.

“No. But I do see the Silent Circle signet ring, and I’m assuming that to be a full member, you had to get married.”

When his eyes narrow, clearly trying to figure out where I’m going with this, a wave of strength comes over me.

“Aren’t Shadows only allowed to cheat on their wives with the Circle’s mistresses? Or I guess with people you all paid to attend my dad’s parties?” I ask sternly. “I seem to remember it’s so that no woman from outside the Circle has anything to blackmail you with. It would put a Shadow in a weak position. But please, correct me if I’m wrong.”

He releases my jaw in a violent gesture, pushing my head to the side so hard I can’t stop a pained cry from escaping. And this proves I’m right. The fucker has a wife; he just doesn’t wear a ring so he can seduce his students in

peace.

I stand up quickly, grabbing my bag, and face him with whatever courage I have in me. “I am *not* an Aphrodite, Professor Reeves. You’d do well to remember that.”

He walks back behind his desk. “No.” Smiling at me, he picks up my paper. “Just a whore who doesn’t mind sleeping with her professor to stay in his class.”

He hands me the paper from across the desk. “You can leave this with my assistant. He’ll grade it. I won’t be giving you extra points this time. You’ll be keeping your spot—or not—based on your skills and intelligence.” He chuckles condescendingly. “So, I don’t expect to see you again after this week.”

I snatch the paper from him. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

My jaw feels bruised as I walk out of the office, closing the door behind me, ready to give my essay back to Chris. But instead of finding him at his desk, Megan is sitting on his chair, typing on her phone.

“Uh...” I hesitate. “Is Chris around? Professor Reeves told me to give this to one of his assistants.”

She looks up at me, her smile looking as hypocritical as they come. “Oh, you can give that to me.” Extending her arm, she expects me to hand it to her.

I hesitate, staying too far for her to grab my paper. “Isn’t Rose White meant to be the other assistant?” I ask.

She looks offended, her arm falling back down. “Technically, it was going to be between her and I. I find it really surprising that he took a first year.”

I guess that’s her answer then.

“I think he just didn’t want to take two transfer students as his assistants. It would have been weird,” she justifies, lost in her own thoughts and not caring one bit about what I’m here for.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to give this to you.”

She stands, dragging on the heavy silence when she refuses to tell me where Chris is.

Closing the short distance between us, she points at my jaw. This girl is so tall I have to crane my neck back to keep a semblance of equal footing. Towering over me, she presses her finger against my skin. I flinch and take a step back. She did it on purpose. Pushed exactly where my skin must be red or bruising from Reeves’s grip.

“The only way to succeed is through hard work, not by using what’s between your legs. I wouldn’t be that kind of girl if I were you, Ella.”

I feel my eyes round before I can control my expression. “Nothing happened in there,” I snap back.

At that same moment, the door leading to the hallway opens, and both Chris and Rose walk in, arms full of printed documents. They stop, taking in the scene for a second before Rose breaks the awkwardness by putting the papers down and walking toward me.

“Els, how are you?”

She takes me in a tight hug, keeping me against her chest, as if trying to give me some of her strength. She can spare some since she’s got so much. Rose is a badass who’s been through hell and back. When I was little, she and her twin were taken in by Chris’s family and became his foster siblings. I grew up with her, Jake, Chris, and Luke being my protectors. I guess Chris took it a step further.

“How are you holding up?” Rose asks in her raspy voice. “I haven’t seen you at all since we started again.”

I nod at her, muttering a quick *I’m alright*. I’m not about to get into it in front of that girl. When I pull away, Chris still hasn’t taken a step toward us, but Megan has moved right beside him.

“What are you still doing here?” he asks her, as she attempts to wrap her arm around his. He steps to the side, not even pretending he’s not trying to avoid her grip as he puts his documents on his desk. “I told you I’d meet you at home.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard his voice so bothered. Chris is the king of keeping up appearances. He’ll always put in the effort to make everyone feel comfortable. I don’t recognize the grim behavior.

She offers him a frozen smile and tilts her head to the side. “I had time. I thought we could go home together.” When she looks at me, her smile widens. “Ella is here.” She points it out like it’s not obvious, clearly trying to bring the conversation to me.

Chris barely stops a huff, running a hand behind his neck. I know this telltale. He’s angry or anxious. Maybe both.

“Ella,” he says in that warm voice I love. My name sounds magical on his lips, yet when he keeps going, it drops a few degrees. “You remember Megan, right?”

His eyes dig into mine, and it feels like our bodies are the only ones in the

room. How can he make everyone disappear with a simple look? How can he make his *girlfriend* so unimportant by the simple way he said my name?

This is so *wrong*.

“I remember,” I rasp, completely enchanted by whatever adoration he’s still managing to express without a single word.

I only met Megan once, and it’s blurry. A New Year’s Eve dinner Chris had organized at his house. I was so drugged up on diazepam that night that the second I started drinking champagne, I knew I wouldn’t remember anything. I shouldn’t have taken my meds and drank at the same time, but I was so anxious to see Chris that I didn’t care.

The reason I really know what she looks like is from stalking her socials when they started dating.

Rose must sense the way every single one of my muscles tense because she puts a hand at the small of my back, rubbing soothing circles. And thankfully, she tries to get me out of the situation.

“Well, it’s been great. Can we leave now?” she says, deadpan, not enjoying a single second of this. “Actually, I was going to meet Luke for dinner. Do you want to come, Els? I can drive you back to campus afterward.”

I want to answer, but I’m frozen on the spot, stuck under the glacial stare of Megan’s dark blue eyes. Why is she so scary?

The moment is cut off by Chris’s sudden stride toward me. He stops right before he bumps into me. Bringing his hand to my chest, he wraps his finger around mine and pulls my hand away.

“Stop scratching.” The order brings goosebumps all the way down my arms, making me fall under his spell.

I hadn’t even realized I was doing it, but now that he says it, I can feel the pain I’ve caused myself. His eyes hover around my jaw, his eyebrows drawing together in the most delicate way.

“What happened?”

Before I can even realize he’s talking about the mark on my jaw, Megan is right next to him, looking at me as she answers for me, and breaking through the obsessive tension between me and her boyfriend.

“I think some girls are ready to do anything to stay in Professor Reeves’s class.”

Chris’s entire demeanor switches. His stare hardens, his muscles tense. He suddenly appears taller, wider.

I have to open and close my mouth a few times before any sound comes out. Even then, I sound like an idiot.

“I-I didn’t... I don’t...”

The worst thing that could happen right now is everyone in this room thinking I’m a slut who sleeps with her professor regularly.

Okay, I did it once. But I was out of my depth.

He looks down at the paper I’m holding. “Is that for me?”

I nod, giving it to him.

“Go home, Ella.” And with that, he turns around, allowing Megan to take his hand and drag him out of the room.

The second they’re gone, I feel my lungs expand again.

“Oh my god.” It takes all of me to keep a steady voice and not gasp oxygen like I need to. “She’s terrifying.”

Rose turns to me. “That’s Megan for you. She’s top of her class in ‘Being a Bitch 101.’”

“She doesn’t even *try* to pretend to be nice,” I add.

“God, no. She doesn’t care what people think of her.”

We walk out together, but the second we split ways, the feeling of my body destroying itself from the inside comes back. I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder at a very young age, but I somehow manage to live with it if I take my medication and keep a calm rhythm of life. Since Chris transferred to SFU...nothing feels calm anymore.

No, I have a feeling it’s only the beginning of a whole new nightmare.

And I know I’m right when I get to my front door. My mom is there, standing on the porch and knocking.

“Mom,” I call out. “Sorry I wasn’t h —”

My heart drops to my stomach as she turns around, a gasp cutting through the distance between us.

“Mom. Oh my god. Mom, what happened?” I run the last few steps that separate us and put an arm around her shoulders, guiding her to the chairs we have on the porch. Her face is bruised, lips swollen, a black eye.

And the second her body touches the seat, she winces.

I freeze.

I don’t have the strength to ask what happened again. I kneel in front of her, not daring to touch her. She stays silent for long minutes. So long I wonder if she’ll ever talk again.

When she does, I wish she never had.

“I tried to pay our debts.” This isn’t my mother talking. It’s a ghost who took hold of her soul.

My trembling hands come to my face. I hide in my palms for a few seconds while I process what she doesn’t say. She tried to pay our debts *with her body*.

Her empty eyes are on mine when I drop my hands to hold hers.

“Mom—”

“I’m not a young woman they can have fun with for hours on end anymore, Ella.”

My stomach churns. This is disgusting. Those men are monsters.

“I am worth nothing to them,” she whispers. Almost like she’s ashamed. “My body is worth nothing.”

But it doesn’t mean they didn’t use her anyway.

“Why did you go?” I don’t realize tears are running down my face until my raw voice wakes the feelings in my body. “Mom, why?”

Her fingers tighten around mine. “I had to try to protect you and your brother, didn’t I? It’s the least I could do.”

I shake my head, refusing her selfless act. One that made no difference.

“Luke didn’t get in,” she says. “And I didn’t help.”

Her unspoken words are louder than the ones she pronounced. Her imploration is silent, yet unmistakable.

It’s my turn.

But like the coward I am, I find excuses. My mother just let someone—or some people—assault her, and I still try to back out of this.

“The initiations are tomorrow. I-I don’t have an invite.”

Pulling her hand away, she stands up so quickly I fall on my ass. She doesn’t help me up. She walks around me and down the two stairs of our porch.

And in a cold, distinct voice, she says, “Then get one.”

Chapter Nine

Chris

KILL MY X - Chri\$tian Gate\$

There's a buzzing in my ears. That's usually what happens when Megan talks to me, but this evening, I'm zoning her out because I'm still processing what I saw in that office.

A red mark on the left side of her chin. Like someone gripped her too harshly. Someone who wasn't me.

"Chris..."

Ella's pale skin reddens so beautifully. Bruises are gorgeous against her porcelain perfection.

But only if I'm the one who inflicts them.

"Chris!"

My eye twitches when her voice gets through to me, my grip tightening on the steering wheel of my car.

"The light," Megan huffs. "It's green."

I press the accelerator, still unable to get the image of Reeves's hands on Ella's body out of my mind.

I take a deep breath through my nose, making sure I'm calm when I speak.

"Do you think it's true?"

"What is?" Megan mutters, eyes on her phone.

"Reeves. Does he sleep with his students?"

From the corner of my eye, I see her putting her phone away and relaxing against her seat.

“Yes. We’ve been at this college for two weeks and I’ve already heard the rumors. I don’t know how you haven’t.” She pauses, leaving me hanging before she adds, “But what you really want to know is if he slept with Ella.”

I swallow my anger, clenching my jaw as she puts her hand on my thigh. She brings it higher until she’s close enough she could touch my dick through my pants.

She makes me feel sick. The only feelings she gets out of me anymore are anger and nausea.

“Isn’t it?” she insists.

I slow down, stopping at a red light. The second we’re not in danger of crashing the car, she brings her other hand to my cheek, pulling until I’m looking at her.

“I’m not about to tell you whether Reeves fucked your little Ella. Do you know why?” I could grind my teeth to dust trying to not snap her neck. “Because you shouldn’t care. You shouldn’t even think about her. The only girl on your mind should be me.”

Her cold hand wraps around my jaw. “Never forget I have you by the balls.” And with that, she cups my balls through my pants. “I can send the Circle to finish your dad at any time. So keep your eyes on me, your thoughts about me, and your entire fucking focus on *me*.”

I don’t move a single inch as I respond with practiced patience. “You can only blackmail someone into staying with you for so long.”

“Don’t worry, it seems if I change tactics every year or so, I get to keep you. Light is green.” She lets me go.

I press the gas pedal, crushing fury between gritted teeth and swallowing it. Everything will come in due time.

I drop her at the house we’re currently renting in Silver Falls, not far from campus, but when I don’t get out of the car, she refuses to close her door.

“Where are you going?” she asks, her ugly obsession showing its head again.

“I’m having dinner with my family. Can you close the door now?”

Her upper lip curls as her hand tightens on the door. “Without me? What, you don’t even invite me to dinners anymore?”

“We only invite people who don’t blackmail their way into our family.” My smirk doesn’t seem to make her happy.

Her face falls, eyes hardening, and here she is. The true harpy who comes out when she doesn't get what she wants. "Invite me."

"You can't be serious," I scoff. "I'm just having dinner with my mom and sister."

She brings her phone out, typing quickly on it before she shows me. She wrote a message in the conversation with her dad but hasn't sent it yet.

Chris and I are over.

"Megan," I warn her in a low voice, stomach churning.

"Invite me, Chris. Or my dad will have no reason to protect yours anymore."

My hand tightens on the steering wheel, and I can barely form the words in my mouth as I spit them at her. "Would you like to come to dinner with my family?"

She locks her phone, a bright smile lighting up her face like the crazy woman she is. "No, thank you. I have a lot of work to do. Give me a kiss before you leave."

How could I forget everything is just a mind game to her.

Since she doesn't move, I step out of my car, walking over to her side. I slightly lean down to give her a brief kiss on the lips. She tries to grab the back of my head to make it last, but I pull away too quickly.

"Don't wait up," I growl before slamming the door she was holding open and walking over to my side again.

"Chris!" Juliette exclaims the second I walk into the kitchen of my family home. She jumps off the stool she was sitting on, running into my arms.

"Hey, trouble." I sigh with relief as I lift her up and let her wrap her entire body around me. "Damn, you're getting heavier."

"Or are you getting weaker?" she giggles as she drops back on the floor, pressing my biceps. "Hm, definitely getting weaker."

I chuckle, messing with her blonde hair. Juliette looks nothing like me because we're not blood related. My parents adopted her after she was freed from a human trafficker. From a criminal organization, to be precise. She was nine then. She's thirteen now.

She was held with the same people who stole two years of Rose's life. When she brought Juliette to us, begging us not to send her back to the same broken system Rose had been through as a child, my parents adopted her. I think that's when my dad started resenting the Circle. He used to protect the

men who went to the parties Gerald Baker held, but the minute we started taking care of Juliette, he grew a conscience.

Becoming a better man almost cost him his life, and he now lies in a hospital bed, too sick to even breathe on his own. Sometimes, the Circle has ways to punish a traitor that are more painful than death.

“Mom’s making chili,” Juliette sing-songs as she dances her way back to the kitchen island where her homework is spread out.

Every time she’s happy about something, my chest warms. The mere fact that she now has a favorite dish is a huge change from when she first started living here. She was taken at such a young age that she knew nothing of her own taste. All she knew was survival.

My mom turns around from the stove to hug me tightly. In the last couple of weeks, she’s lost weight and gained eye bags, and her smile has been replaced by a constant frown of despair. She’s much smaller than me, and I can rest my head on top of hers as she buries herself in my chest.

“Chris.” I can barely hear her broken voice.

“Hey, Mom,” I murmur against her hair. “How are you feeling?”

Shaking her head against me, she refuses to answer. She doesn’t want to tell me she’s barely holding on, but she also doesn’t want to lie.

“I got a C in math!” Juliette calls from behind me as if announcing the best grade ever.

My mom laughs softly before turning back to the stove. We grew up with the kind of money that means we have staff around the house. But my mom always insisted that if my dad and her weren’t traveling, we would all eat her homemade food together as a family.

I grab some chips from the open bag on the kitchen counter and sit opposite Juliette. “I’m sorry, are we expected to celebrate that?” I say mockingly.

“Hey! It’s better than a C-minus. I’m getting better.”

I square my shoulders, tilting my chin up. “I was almost valedictorian. We’re not even competing in the same category.”

“*Almost* being the key word.” She giggles to herself, and I throw a chip at her.

“Mom! Chris is acting like a child.”

When I stick out my tongue, she bursts into her weird, cackly laugh before throwing the chip back at me.

My mom isn’t very chatty while we eat, but as soon as Juliette goes

upstairs to get ready for bed, she asks what she's been dying to.

"How's Megan?" Her eyes stay focused on the plates she's rinsing and passing to me as I put them in the dishwasher.

I huff, running a hand behind my tense neck and messing the hair at the back of my head. "How's Dad?" I counter, then grab the next plate.

Her voice thins when she tries to answer. "He's still hooked to the breathing machine, but he's stable."

"Then Megan's great. Lovely."

"But she's not lovely," my mom whispers. "She's horrible to you. I know she is."

I put the last plate away and turn to her. Putting my hands on her cheeks, I force her to look up at me.

"As long as Dad is fine, I'm fine. I promise you."

She looks down, and her eyes are full of tears when she looks back up. She's so pale. A ghost stuck with us mortals. She's suffering deep down in her soul.

"I saw what she did, Chris. Last week when you came for dinner. She slapped you when you were sitting in the car before coming in. What she did, it's...it's abusive."

I roll my eyes, letting go of her so she doesn't feel how cold my hands get when I talk about the woman I'm stuck with.

"Abusive? Mom, have you seen me? I'm twice her size. Do you really think I care about a little slap? I barely felt it."

"It's the principle." Her voice raises, her eyebrows pinching above the eyes we share. Not quite brown, not quite hazel, a perfect amber.

Your whiskey eyes get me drunk on you. That's what Ella used to say.

I turn around, finishing clearing up the table. "I didn't come here for relationship advice. Please."

"Two people who love each other shouldn't hit each other. This is wrong, Chris."

I snort, but keep my back to her. "We don't love each other. She has a trophy, and my dad stays alive. I think I'm winning here, really."

Her hand wraps around my biceps, forcing me to turn around. "Please. Leave her. I can't live like this. I can barely hold together with your dad in that state. I can't handle knowing my son is in an abusive relationship."

Pausing, I take in her empty eyes and graying hair. I'm annoyed, but it won't do any good to get mad at her.

“Listen,” I sigh. “I do what Megan says, and Dad doesn’t get worse. It’s not that bad of a deal. She can’t hurt me. She’s annoying as hell, and most of the time, I want to bash her head against a wall, but this is temporary. By tomorrow night, I’ll be a full member of the Circle, and her power over us will diminish.”

“And then you’re stuck with her for life. Don’t you think I know how the Circle works?”

I shake my head. “I won’t be with her for life. Just be patient and trust me.”

She nods, but she mentions it again when we watch a movie together. And then again when I put her to bed and tell her I’ll be watching another movie downstairs in case she needs me. Nothing will convince her that I’m fine, and that’s only natural. She’s a mother; she knows when her child is suffering.

I rub my hand over my face, letting my head fall on the back of the sofa. Every time I close my eyes, baby blues and blonde hair flash in front of me.

My biggest regret in life is leaving Ella, and I’m paying today for the coward I was in high school. One woman. That’s all it takes for my heart to lose itself in an uneven symphony of beats. One word from her lips, and I’m ready to get on my knees for her. She’s the only person who truly knows me. She knows the façade of kind acts aren’t forced. I do have a side of me that is careful, caring, protective. But Ella has also met the other side. The side that comes out when I need to feel her close to me. That wants her all to myself. That would forgo reason just to keep her safe.

I have renowned patience for everything, but step out of line when it comes to Ella, and I’m not responsible for my actions.

I blink at the ceiling. I could spend hours thinking of her, on my own, with no other distraction. The only thing missing is her physically next to me.

Maybe if I’d had the balls to talk to Luke in high school and tell him Ella and I were dating, none of this would have happened. I wouldn’t have met Megan. Wouldn’t have fallen for her misunderstood-girl act.

But then I would have had no one to help me when the Circle went for my dad.

I huff for the hundredth time tonight, my thoughts going round and round. And in the end, there’s always one thing I come back to.

Ella Baker. My beautiful obsession. The one who still thinks I’ll allow her to move on from me. I might be stuck with a manipulative woman, but

once I'm done with her, Ella will be mine. Even if it takes unconventional convincing.

Chapter Ten

Ella

Noose - Nessa Barrett

I let the music control my limbs. My eyeline stays up, my neck straight and extended, core engaged.

Pirouette. Pirouette. I hear my old teacher repeating sternly in my head.

I pause, flat into fifth, demi-pointe relevé, and I go again, my head spinning quickly to keep my eyes leveled on the mirror covering the entire wall of the rehearsing room.

Quality over quantity, Ella. Ms. Barry's voice was so tough and yet elegant.

God, I miss when doing pirouettes was all I had to worry about.

I stop, push my shoulders down, and open my chest until my shoulder blades are touching at the back. And again.

Engage your core.

One. Two. Three. Fou—I lose balance.

“Come on,” I grunt. I know when I feel right, I can do seven on Pointe. It should be even easier since I’m currently in flats.

Pirouette. Three. Again. Pirouette. Four. Again. Pirouette, two...

“Fuck!” I scream over the classical music.

I let myself fall to the floor, sitting cross-legged. Anxiety is eating me, making me heavy, and I can’t engage my core when I already feel so sick and

tense.

All I can see is the state of my mom last night. All I can hear is the death in her voice. And all I can feel is the guilt that I still haven't done my part to try to get us back in the Circle. It tastes disgusting at the back of my throat.

My hand drops to my right thigh, and I pull at my light pink ballet tights. Throwing my head back, I swallow tears, jaw clenched, and add another layer of thick pain to my heart.

I haven't talked to my friends about any of this. They're my support system, all of them, but this is too dangerous to share. What if I get them in trouble too?

It hurts. Everything hurts. In everyday situations, my brain has no way of differentiating whether what I worry about is a life-or-death situation or not, and I feel stupid for it, always questioning if I'm making too big of a deal out of nothing.

This is worse. I think it's truly life or death.

I feel the same way as if I were being chased by someone. I'm panting, body heavy, throat tight. My muscles are knotted, and I'm not sure if I'm in this rehearsing room or running through the forest, away from a pack of wolves.

When I look back down at my body, out of breath and with a need to gulp air, I've torn through my tights and scratched at my skin.

Pink marks have raised, the thin first layer of skin breaking. So I scratch again until tiny dots of blood appear. A twisted craving overwhelms me. Every time I hurt and see realistic proof of it, I want more.

Here is the evidence of how you feel inside. It's real.

So I scratch again, violently, until there's skin under my nails, blood thickening on my thigh, and waves of pain matching the aching in my heart. It relaxes my chest, allowing me to breathe. It feels good.

It feels so good I want more. In a frenzy, I get up and run to my bag. Suddenly, I'm unaware of everything around me. The classical music is loud, the pace quick, and I search through my bag like a crazed woman until I feel a little plastic box.

I'm sick, almost licking my lips at the idea of the pain that I'm going to feel. Pain is good. Pain makes you forget. I dig farther into my bag and pull out the antiseptic spray. I wouldn't want to get an infection.

Sitting on the floor, I make a bigger hole in my tights, uncaring of where I am or who could walk in. I just want to feel something physical to match the

darkness inside me. I spray my thigh where I scratched myself, relishing the stinging sensation, and open the plastic box.

I want to laugh with excitement as I pick up the wrapped blade. I peel open the wax paper and pinch the single-edge razor blade by the dull side. The mere act of holding it makes me feel slightly better. But when I press it against my thigh, I almost groan from relief.

I don't slice. I don't move. I don't mean to hurt myself, just to feel release. So, all I do is press the cutting edge to my skin until I feel that weird sensation of it splitting. Our bodies are soft, and yet the second my skin opens, I feel a crack through my being. Like the anxiety breaks before it liquifies and creates a red line across my skin.

That's all I do. I press delicately. If I'm not actively slitting, it's not bad, right? It's not... I'm not harming myself that way. Just relaxing.

I lie down on the floor when I'm done, savoring the fact that I'm finally able to take full breaths.

I'm ready to take on the day.

I finally stand up and do the same routine I do every morning after I've danced. I shower in the locker room, stick a band-aid on my razor cut, slip on my uniform, and do my makeup. Usually, I put on mascara and a tinted lip balm.

Today, I add some dramatic eyeliner on my upper eyelid. Then red lipstick and some blush on my cheeks. I undo a couple of extra buttons on my uniform and twist the waistline of my skirt until it's a little too short, but not so short that anyone would see my scars. No one ever sees them because I do them high enough that they're always hidden, even by my cheer skirt. But I know they're there. They make me feel alive.

I plaster a beautiful smile on my face, ready to rule my kingdom. Ready to face even the subjects who think they can take me down after what came out about my family.

I am Ella Baker, the queen of Silver Falls University. And today, I have one thing in mind.

Doing anything it takes to protect my family.

So, when I walk into Professor Reeves's class, I give him my biggest, sluttiest smile.

Because that man is going to give me an invitation to the initiations before the end of the day.

Chapter Eleven

Ella

TEETH - WesGhost, Diggy Graves

I t's not Reeves who catches my smile. His head is down, reading something on his desk. Chris, however, is talking to a girl at the front of the room, and I feel like a magnet. Because the second I enter, his eyes are on me.

I stop for a second, unsure what to do as he lets his gaze roam over my body. His eyebrows pinch in disapproval, making me want to run to him and explain myself. I want to bow my head and ask if what I'm doing is okay, because that's what my subconscious loves. His authorization to do something, his acceptance of my behavior.

I fight my instinct and walk to the front row, sitting in a middle desk where Reeves will have a perfect view of me. He's still not looking up, but he will have to at some point.

"Isn't he so perfect?"

I startle, turning to the girl sitting right next to me. I don't even know her name, that's how rarely anyone talks to each other in this class.

"Sorry?"

"Christopher Murray. He's been helping so many of us. Professor Reeves is going to struggle to kick us out of his class this term."

I forget to even ask her for her name, my brain too busy focusing on Chris again as I openly stare at him. It doesn't stop her from talking some

more.

“He took time to reassure me about my essay when I handed it last week. I asked if he could look at it before, maybe give me a few tips, but he said he’d be grading them so he couldn’t. Still, the kind words meant a lot. He’s so nice.”

He didn’t only give me kind words. He gave me more than the tips this girl asked for and didn’t get. He *rewrote* parts of mine because he knows I need to stay in this class.

“Megan McLean is so lucky.”

Pouring a bucket of ice on me would have felt warmer. I used to feel so special in Chris’s eyes. I used to know, despite our relationship being secret, that I was the one he belonged to. Now, it’s Megan.

Chris politely smiles at the student he’s talking to, tapping her upper arm to tell her the conversation is over as he excuses himself. He walks to my desk, standing in my view of Reeves, and presses a hand on the wood. The other girl is focused on reading her notes now, and he doesn’t give her an ounce of attention. No, it’s all on me.

“Ella,” he says in nothing but a professional tone, although the level of it means only I can hear him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I smile politely. “Waiting for class to start?”

Chuckling casually, he drums his fingers on my desk. “Is there a reason you’re dressed so”—he looks at my body, picking his words carefully—“differently today.”

“I’m wearing SFU’s undergrad uniform,” I laugh softly. “It’s the same one every day.”

He doesn’t like my sarcasm. His fingers pause their movements, his palm lightly slapping the desk.

“Are you dying to get punished?” he says, lowering his voice even more, all semblance of politeness falling away. This is the side none of those girls see. When the smile drops, and the possession kicks in.

“If you want to touch someone so badly, why don’t you touch your girlfriend? Or is it fiancée now? Aren’t you going to be married soon?”

After what he did yesterday in Reeves’s office, I think I’m allowed to bring up Megan whenever he gets too close.

“Alright, everyone.” Reeves’s voice cuts through our conversation, and Chris takes a step back, heading to his desk. “I’m giving back your graded essays today. If you got less than a B, I’m politely asking you to leave. You

don't have what it takes."

My hands are sweating, gaze dropping to my desk as I wait. Because I'm at the front, I'm one of the first ones to get my paper back.

"Miss Baker," Reeves says, his eyes sticking to my open shirt for a few seconds too long. His face is blank when he adds, "I'm not sure if my assistant is more lenient than I am, or if you were less disappointing than usual. I'll be the one grading your next essay."

Ouch.

But it's hard to care about what he says when he places the paper before me, and I look at the red circled *B*.

My eyes fly to Chris. This is thanks to him.

His gaze is on me too, still translating his unhappiness about my clothes, but I'm not bowing to his will. I have one problem to solve at a time, and my current issues with him are not at the top of my priorities. Keeping out of trouble with the Silent Circle is.

Reeves splits the class in two today. We're studying the same case, but the half with him is studying the defense, and the half with Chris the prosecution. To my luck, I end up with Reeves. It also means I witness all the girls fluttering their eyes at Chris, smiling brightly every time he teaches them something nicely, or every time he slips them a kind word. He's not flirting. He doesn't try to seduce them; he's just naturally a magnet for people who need care.

On my side, I'm almost ashamed of how obviously I flirt with Reeves. I would be if things weren't so dire. And when he puts a hand on the small of my back while he looks over my shoulder at the notes I wrote down, I know I'm doing the right thing.

I need that invitation at all costs, and he's the only Shadow I know apart from Chris. And Chris will never let me in. He's already refused my mom. Not only that, but historically, I know him to put my brother before me.

When the class finishes, I take my time to pack my bag. I look at my phone as students exit in silence. Chris lingers too. He talks with Reeves about his next assignment, about what the professor needs from him. But when he runs out of excuses to stay, and Reeves notices I'm still here, he asks Chris to go back to the office to prepare for Monday's class.

My ex massages the back of his neck, walking past me on his way out. He doesn't say anything to me. He doesn't even *glance at me*.

I do my best to brush off the sting and look back at Reeves, placating an

innocent smile on my face.

“Miss Baker,” he says, leaning back against his desk and crossing his arms over his chest. His white button-down is well-fitted, and his defined muscles show under the material. “I’m sure there’s something I can do for you.”

I get up on shaky legs, making sure my skirt is short enough but still hiding my band-aid and the scars around it.

He smiles knowingly by the time I’m close to him—close enough that I could push my breasts against his torso if I took too big of a breath.

“Wasn’t a B enough?” he asks in a serious voice.

“More than enough, Professor.”

“Then what could you possibly be debasing yourself for?”

The words hurt, but I swallow the shame, putting my pride to the side for this. I put a hand on his chest, my heart skipping from the fear of this blowing up in my face.

“You know my family’s situation with the Circle.”

The second I mention the secret society he’s part of, his eyes flick behind me, probably double-checking that no one is within earshot.

“I do.”

For someone who tried to get me to give him a blowjob in his office, he’s making this unnecessarily hard for me. Or maybe that’s exactly his goal.

“Professor Reeves,” I huff. “I need an invitation to the initiations. My brother was refused one, and we have to make it up to the Silent Circle one way or another.”

I’ve barely finished asking my question when that disgustingly smug smirk spreads on his handsome face. His blue eyes sparkle with excitement, and he stands taller.

“An invitation?” he chuckles. “Ella, those are very hard to get even for a member. We need a reason to bring a woman to initiations.”

“Please. My family correcting their mistakes to the Circle is reason enough. I’m willing to do anything to put this issue to rest.”

His smile drops. Cocking an eyebrow, a shadow of danger crosses his features.

“Willingness to do anything is a very risky thing to say to a member of the Silent Circle. I would be very careful about the kind of favor you ask a Shadow.” He brings his thumb to my lower lip, pulling it down before leaving it completely alone. “We wouldn’t want you to get out of your depth

here again, would we?”

I shake my head slightly. “I mean it. Get me an invitation and I will —”

“There is absolutely nothing you can do to convince me to get you invited, Ella. Because if I do, I’ll have all I want from you anyway. You’re probably the least likely candidate to get a husband at the initiations. No one will want to take on the debt your family owes. You’ll end up being an Aphrodite, and I’ll have access to your body whenever I want. There isn’t anything you can offer I wouldn’t already have.”

He puts his hands on his desk behind him, leaning back. “So, really, your future depends on how kind I’m feeling.” He shrugs. “And I’m not feeling too kind today.”

My heart drops. “W-what?”

“You heard me. You should have thought twice before acting like a prude in my office. We both know what you really are.”

“No. No, please.” I act on instinct, dropping to my knees as my hands fly to his belt. “I’ll make it right. I’m not a prude. I was scared.”

He fists both my wrists with strong hands. “No. You simply didn’t need anything from me. Now you do, and here you are, back on your knees. I said I wouldn’t get you an invitation, Miss Baker. Save yourself the humiliation and go to your next class.”

Shell-shocked, I can’t move when he lets go of my arms and steps around me. Even once he’s left the room, I struggle to get back into a standing position.

As I exit, it’s hard to swallow past my tight throat. The shock and fear push me back into a state of blankness. If I can’t feel anything, I can’t feel anxiety. I’m a ghost haunting the hallways of the Humanities building, slithering among other students. How could he say no? He was my last option.

My brain is foggy, my mind empty. So much that I don’t notice someone is following me until a body starts walking close enough to me that our arms touch.

I recognize the presence all too well, and when Chris puts a hand on my lower back, a shiver runs down my spine from the simple yet possessive gesture.

“Let’s do it the easy way, Sweets.” As I’m about to stop walking, he nudges me with his hand, forcing me to keep going.

I can already feel the eyes of the other students on me. Their questions are

loud. They know my ex is back. They know he has a girlfriend. I shouldn't be talking to him in public.

He can feel my uneasiness, adding, "You answer my questions in the time it takes for you to walk to your next class, and I play nice." My wild eyes snap up to him, but he taps my lower back. "Eyes ahead. We're just having a conversation."

Something is seething beneath his too-calm tone, and I know I'm in more trouble than I can handle.

"How long has it been going on, you and Reeves?" he asks in a voice only for my ears. Someone he knows walks past us, and he nods, smiling at him like he's not in the midst of terrorizing me.

I shake my head, unsure of what to say. So, I say nothing.

"Was the first time before I transferred? Or is it more recent, like when you came to hand in the essay yesterday? Did he fuck you while I was right outside?"

"When Megan was right outside, you mean?"

I keep my eyes ahead of me, like he said, so I can't gauge his reaction. But the barely hidden fury in his voice tells me a lot.

"Oh, Sweets. I really do prefer it when we get along, but right now, I'm dying to drag you into the nearest room and bend you over a desk. I'll rip those nice lace panties you put on for Reeves and shove them in your mouth so no one hears you scream when I kick your legs open and slap your tight little cunt over and over again."

I feel myself blanch at the same time as something liquifies in my lower belly. Can anyone see my embarrassing reaction? The exact panties he mentioned dampen as we keep walking, and the small friction from the steps I take makes me want to run. I want to feel *more*.

I look up at him, but he's still looking ahead, guiding us through the hallway. I have to keep him away from me so my conscience can stay clean. I won't get involved with Chris while he's with Megan. I can't be that girl. I will *never* be that girl. So I hit him, and I hit hard.

"Your obsession with me is turning into desperation, Chris," I try to say in an even voice. "In fact, I'd call it pathetic."

A smile spreads on my face when his hand leaves my lower back, thinking I've won this round. It drops right away when I see why. Megan is waiting outside a door, looking down at her phone.

We're far enough that he can still talk as we get closer. He won't get his

answer about me and Reeves, and it brings a sense of satisfaction to know he can't get anything he wants whenever he wants.

"I need you to understand something, Ella." He doesn't even slow his pace, and with each step, he takes a greater risk of Megan hearing him. Still, he adds, "My obsession with you might be pathetic, but it's deadly serious. So watch what you do, or who knows how I'll react?"

"Make sure no one hears you when you say that," I taunt him. "We wouldn't want them knowing your gentle façade hides a fucking monster."

He stops in front of Megan, and she finally looks up, noticing us. Before acknowledging her, he finishes his conversation with me. "Ella, how's Enzo, by the way? I heard about his knee." He tsks as he shakes his head. "Such a shame."

My heart stops entirely, blood draining from my face. In the two weeks Chris behaved and stayed away from me, I went for a coffee with Enzo. That night, he was attacked when he walked back from practice. Did Chris just insinuate that... No.

Megan tilts her head to the side, not even saying hello. "Who's Enzo?"

She's asking me, but I'm too shellshocked to answer anything, my mouth dry and my brain unable to string a sentence together.

"Some guy Ella dated for a bit," Chris answers casually.

"What happened to him?" she insists. Not out of kindness, but pure bitchy curiosity.

"He...he got attacked on his way back from a late practice," I rasp. "Bat to the knee." I don't even feel like I'm present anymore.

Megan hisses, rearing her head back. "Ouch. That sounds personal."

Chris leans against the wall, making sure he's too far back for Megan to see the slight smile curving his mouth. "It does, doesn't it?"

"Are you guys still together?"

Does the woman ever mind her own business? She's worse than Hermes.

I shake my head as pieces fall into place. "We only had one date, and he didn't contact me again after his incident."

And that small smile turns into a full smirk as Chris crosses his strong arms over his chest. Look at those muscles. The damage they could do if they were swinging a bat with full strength... I feel sick.

"Aw, Ella. I'm so sorry." Megan puts a hand on my arm in a fake reassuring gesture. But her fingers are as cold as her eyes.

"It's all for the best," Chris says with a slight shrug. "Ella is

very...selective. Some people she wouldn't date if they were her last option on earth."

My dark gaze goes to his mocking one as Megan laughs. "Damn. You're a tough one to please, aren't you?"

I scratch my throat, feeling myself losing composure. "Right," I agree numbly. "Anyway...class." I point behind me with my thumb, completely unaware of where I am in the building.

That's the only goodbye they get from me.

And I skip class. I feel too sick to even be in the same building as Chris.

A bat to the knee. My imagination flashes images of Enzo walking home alone. The shadow I had seen until now when I thought about it fades into Chris.

He's insane.

Completely, utterly...

Obsessed?

* * *

Alex is at the house she shares with Xi tonight, and when Peach texts me begging me to go to our sorority's party with her, I simply answer that I think I've got a stomach bug.

I don't. I spent the whole day letting my anxiety get the best of me. I threw up so many times I've lost count. I lie in bed, checking my university emails, and my heart falls as I see something from campus security.

Dear Students,

We regret to inform you of recent accidents and unfortunate attacks on campus. Your safety is our top priority, and we are enhancing security measures to prevent further incidents.

While we are working to make our campus safer, we advise you to follow these safety guidelines:

Travel in groups, especially at night.

Stay in well-lit areas.

Report suspicious activity to campus security.

Use campus escort services during late hours.

In case of an emergency, dial 911.

*We have increased patrols and are working with local law enforcement.
If you need assistance, contact the University Security Office.
Thank you for your cooperation.*

I know of the attack on Enzo, but I go on my search engine right away, typing ‘accident at SFU campus.’

The picture of a car that crashed into a tree comes up.

Two students from Silver Falls University in urgent care, following DUI crash after sorority party.

I scroll down and look at the pictures. It’s the two guys who harassed me at the party. I never realized that had happened.

“Holy...fuck,” I whisper to myself.

My thoughts keep oscillating from the Silent Circle, the invitation I didn’t get, to Chris’s violence, to tie up everything in a nice bow when I think of Megan.

Chris is not a perfect, peace-and-love type of man, but he doesn’t often use violence as an answer. He’s been in fights, but it was reluctantly, for the people around him. Mainly, his foster siblings. Jake had a tendency to get into trouble. Rose had an ego that was dangerous for everyone.

When it comes to me, though...I know he’s different. I saw it again at the party with those two guys. Something triggers him, and the Chris everyone knows disappears within a blink.

He once punched my Halloween ball date. The guy had been a little too touchy, and I couldn’t take Chris to the ball since we were hiding from Luke. That’s what everyone knows of it, but later on, he cornered him too. Threatened him, his family, said things I had never imagined would come out of his mouth. And he didn’t even know I could hear.

A bat to the knee.

That’s too far.

I startle when someone knocks on our front door. I’m in bed, but I kept my bedroom door open to hear what’s going on in the house. Being alone as the night is about to fall when the Silent Circle could be planning anything against my family isn’t exactly the most reassuring situation.

I press pause on the recorded Bluebeard ballet I had put on in the background and strain my ear to make sure I didn’t imagine anything. The knock resonates again, and I huff, getting out of bed hesitantly.

Can’t a girl scroll on her phone, fear for her life, and watch ballet in

peace?

I jog down, messy bun bobbing on the top of my head.

“Hello?” I call from behind, before slightly pushing the curtain that hides the squares of windows by the door.

“Delivery for Ella Baker.” a flat voice calls back. I catch a man holding a golden box in his hand. There’s a black silk bow wrapped around it and a gold envelope that has my name in cursive.

Ugh. Couldn’t he have gotten the wrong house?

“Just leave it on the porch,” I say. And I wait until he’s gone to wrench the door open, grab the box, and slam it back, my heart racing.

With quick steps, I walk to our kitchen and put it all on the counter.

I know this kind of box. They usually hold beautiful designer dresses. But I haven’t had anything made.

I slide my thumb in the envelope, ripping it open to find a card. My heartbeat accelerates as I pull it out with a trembling hand.

Ella Baker,

*After careful consideration, I have decided to personally invite you to the
Dionysian Mysteries.*

*Under my command, you are to present yourself at the structure designed by
Daedalus.*

*You will drink Circe’s wine and turn into who you truly are.
Find a husband, and you will become the patron goddess of lawful marriage.
Get caught by a god, and you will serve us as a goddess of lust.
The festival starts at sundown. You may not be late.*

*Yours,
Hades.*

Hades? Who the hell is Hades? Could it be a nickname they use? Is that what Reeves is called within the Silent Circle?

I undo the silk bow and open the box to find exactly what I expected. A dress. But it’s not a designer dress. It’s a simple Greek-mythology style white dress. And as I pull it out to see its ankle-length, I also notice how see-through it is.

I got what I wanted.

Tonight, I will be initiated into the Silent Circle.

Tonight, I get to save my family.

Chapter Twelve

Ella

Dark Paradise - Lana Del Rey

Who knew you needed so much knowledge to become a whore for rich men?

I'm not really someone who loves studying and my knowledge of Greek mythology is rather limited. So, the first thing I did was google *Daedalus*. And I found out I was looking for a maze. Daedalus's labyrinth. It wasn't hard for me to know where I had to be. There's a country club on the outskirts of Stoneview that my parents used to go to. As a kid, I couldn't join them, but my mom always brought me back the individual chocolates they give with tea or coffee when you eat at the restaurant. It had a maze on the wrapper.

I barely make it before sundown, advancing in my dress toward the grand white doors of the property. It's built like a Greek temple. Tall, thick Doric columns stand behind me as someone opens the door.

I expected an empty grand entrance hall, statues of Greek gods and goddesses, paintings of Greek mythology scenes from Homer's poems. And there's all of that. Except it's not empty at all. There are probably around thirty or so women, their chatter and excitement buzzing in my ears. All wearing the exact same dress as me. They're so focused on their conversations, giggling about their expectations, that barely any of them notice my presence.

I step farther inside, the door closing behind me, and tap on the shoulder of the first girl I see.

“Hi.” I smile tentatively, still unsure why there are so many of us. “Is this...” I look down at the invite I’m holding, noticing all of us have the same one. “...where the Dionysian Mysteries take place?”

She claps her hands, almost jumping on the spot. “At least that’s the spot we all figured out! I’m sure we’re in the right place, but we’ll know once it’s completely nighttime. You barely made it. Who invited you?”

“Uh, Hades, and you?” I show her my invite, and she takes it, giving me hers.

I look down and read the exact same words that were on mine, except hers is signed *Perseus*.

“Hades?” she reads. “Who’s that, your boyfriend?”

I shake my head. “No, I...just someone kind enough to get me here.”

“Kind,” she snorts. “You mean someone who wants to fuck you on demand? Same, girl. But I don’t mind if it means I get myself that favor from the Shadows. I’m kind of desperate. I’m Ana, by the way.”

I open my mouth to talk, but a voice resonates behind me. “Ella.”

Ana is already moving on, talking to someone else as I turn around. I look up at Megan, who’s also wearing the same dress. Of course, hers makes her look like she’s about to pose for *Vogue*.

“You got an invite,” she says matter-of-factly. As if this isn’t the most obvious point. She snatches the invite from my hands and reads it.

“Of course.” She gives it back to me, cocking an eyebrow as her eyes roam over my body. “You’re not going to get in like this.”

I look down at my dress. “I’m wearing the same thing as you.”

“No, you’re not.”

And that’s when I realize she’s not wearing any underwear. No bra. No panties. Nothing. And with the sheerness of the dress, I can see *everything*.

“Look around you, Ella. You’re not in the sandbox anymore. You’re with the big players now.”

I notice what I hadn’t a minute ago. All the other women here aren’t wearing anything under their dresses either.

“You still have about two minutes to take these off,” she says, pointing at my bra, then my panties, both which can be seen clearly under my dress. “Bathroom is that door over there right next to the painting of Medusa.”

Pulling my shoulders back, I act like this isn’t a problem for me. It can’t

be.

"I'll be back," I say with a calm I certainly don't feel.

I stride to the bathroom, feeling my heart pounds against my ribcage as I rid myself of my underwear. This place is no joke, and I hadn't realized the lack of dignity was going to start so soon.

I walk back out, right on time to follow the others, as we are being moved into another room. When we pass the door, a man in a suit is asking for the invitations, taking them from us. I don't recognize him from anywhere, but I catch the signet ring on his pinky.

I'm in the right place.

Megan finds me again when we enter the second room. She walks beside me as we're all guided through double doors into a backyard. Well, if you can call what looks like acres of land a 'backyard.'

"Take off your shoes," she whispers to me as we step outside. "They won't want you to wear them."

I do so and notice the girls who didn't know are almost told off when ordered to do so. Then they're placed at the back of the crowd.

"Thanks," I murmur to Megan as we both settle toward the front.

Why is she helping me suddenly? I prefer when she's horrible.

"You seem to know things a lot of the other girls don't," I tell her.

She nods, looking ahead of her as we keep walking through lush grass, following two men guiding us.

"You always have an advantage when you already know people within the Circle. The other girls are randoms trying to be initiated into a society they don't understand. You and I are different. Our families are part of it."

I look down at the grass that is starting to feel damp as the night blankets over us and the temperatures drop.

"I don't know if I'm so different. My dad —"

"He was still a member," she cuts me off. "And I brought you to the front. You have better chances."

"What is it we have to do exactly?"

I've been so focused on the grass, my own feet, my fear, that I didn't look ahead of me. It's only when Megan points out the giant entrance to a hedge maze that reality sinks in.

"What the hell?" I knew they wanted us to find the place that had a maze, but I didn't realize we would be walking barefoot through it.

I look back to see the main building a little too small in the distance to my

liking. We're far out, the edge of Stoneview forest to our left and the eerie maze looking like an entrance to Hell.

Unable to control my fear, my mind goes to the only person who's always protected me.

"Where's Chris?"

Megan cocks an eyebrow at me, and I can hardly feel guilty. I'm too scared. I need him.

"Are you looking for my boyfriend?" she asks, completely unimpressed. I am, and there's nothing I can do about it now.

"It's just...he's just...the only person here I know."

"He's at the center of the maze," she explains calmly. "Waiting for me."

Her eyes hold mine for a few seconds, driving the knife a little deeper with her stern look.

"Ladies. Good evening."

My head snaps back to the front. Eugene Duval is standing at the entrance of the maze. That's Achilles's dad. I would be glad he cut through my awkward conversation if he wasn't looking so terrifying. Like a ringmaster ready to put on the show of his life.

"I am so incredibly honored to welcome you to the yearly initiation into our community. Within our circle, my name is Zeus, and I'm the president. There is no higher authority than me."

He smiles, so proud of his status. Achilles's dad has always given me weird vibes, but then, so did my dad, and I learned that all those men couldn't be trusted. But I never thought he was the president of the Silent Circle.

"Tonight, some of you will become Heras, and some of you Aphrodites. That depends not only on your fierceness to go for what you truly want, but also who you truly are. What is for certain, is that your lives are about to change."

He extends a hand, presenting the entrance of the maze. "In less than a minute, you will all be given a chalice filled with Circe's poison, which will help reveal who you really are. Then you will enter Daedalus's labyrinth. In the center, the bachelors who are being initiated into the circle tonight await their wives, their Hera. Be the first to reach one and you will become his. You will become a goddess highly respected in the Circle. You will carry our children and ensure our legacy."

His gaze travels over all of us, darkening as flames of excitement dance in his pupils. "But don't forget that five minutes after you enter the labyrinth,

the Shadows who are already members will come chasing after you, and if one catches you before you find a husband, and brings you to the center of the maze, you will become no less of a goddess, but a servant to our needs. Aphrodites live to feed the lust of men, and you shall submit to the choice your heart made. Your bodies will be ours, and we will forever cherish them.”

He pauses, looking like he’s already analyzing our reactions so he can find the woman he’ll go after. I find it insane to say we would have to submit to the choice our heart made when we’re basically running for our lives and forced to submit if we’re caught.

My knees weaken as a line of men dressed in suits advances toward us. They all have the Silent Circle signet ring, each holding a chalice in their hand.

Eugene Duval approaches me, but at the last second, he turns to Megan, offering her the drink. I look around, wondering who around here is her family. Is it a dad? A brother? Both? She seems to have so much advantage over everyone else.

Megan doesn’t hesitate to drink the liquid offered to her. Her lips are a deep, burgundy red when Eugene walks away, and she looks at me with a smile on her face.

“Here he comes,” she tells me. “The man who invited you.”

I follow her gaze to Professor Reeves, approaching me like a hunter on prey.

“You’re here,” he says blankly.

I don’t reply anything, simply take the chalice he offers me.

“I think I’ll be running after you tonight, Ella. After all, if you’re here, you know what you’re getting yourself into, right?” My stomach clenches as a slow smile spreads on his lips, and he nods at my cup. “Drink up.”

It tastes like bitter red wine, and I gag as I down the whole thing. Looking at Megan, she has a hazy smile on her face, and panic takes over me.

“Wait,” I hesitate. “Did they... Are there drugs in this?”

She nods, laughing softly. “Have fun.”

“Ladies, on your marks.” Eugene’s voice brings my attention back to the entrance of the maze. “Ready...”

A buzz resonates around me, all the women starting to feel the effect of whatever they drugged us with.

“Let the Dionysian Mysteries *begin!*”

Chapter Thirteen

Ella

.Goetia. - Peter Guidry

A shot resonates in the air, and I'm swept by the wave of women running toward the entrance of the maze. The night is black, and there are speakers playing ominous music. Some sort of gothic, haunting tune.

I have to keep running, pushed by the crowd until the second or third turn I take. After that, everyone spreads out, going the route they think best, some running faster than others. I've lost Megan, though I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing. I take a left turn and jump back in fear, a sharp scream escaping me.

There's a statue of a half-man half-bull in front of me. The Minotaur that hides in Daedalus's labyrinth, stuck in here for eternity. And that's when it hits me. The drugs. Because I could swear statues don't move. I don't think his creepy hooves are supposed to make the ground tremble or his nose is meant to let out a dangerous grunt.

The whole world tilts as I take steps back and go a different way, turning another corner and catching my breath by trying to lean on the hedge nearest to me. But I don't get a minute of rest. The music lowers for a second, and Eugene's voice resonates all around.

"Shadows. You may hunt."

My heart drops, but my feet are slow when I try to start moving again. I stumble from one hedge to the other, scratching my arms and ripping my

dress as the ground ripples beneath me.

I don't feel like myself anymore. The leaves on the walls of the maze change colors as the wind rustles them, and every time I turn a corner, I fear someone is going to jump at me.

"Fuck," I groan as I fall face-to-face with the Minotaur for the fourth time.

I'm terrified. That beast is following me everywhere, and as I turn another corner, I bump into someone.

Is he real?

"Ella Baker."

I don't recognize him, but he goes to grab me, and I scream as I step back. Turning around, I sprint, not caring where I'm going.

Each step I take feels like I'm flying, the maze never ending. I'm barefoot, but I can't even feel the rough ground under my feet any longer.

I finally think I'm going somewhere when I notice some flowers in my path that weren't there before. I'm sure this is a new corridor.

But someone else is running after me now. He's taller than the other one, blond when the other had dark hair. This fear is intense, almost paralyzing. For someone who constantly feels like everyday life is a life-or-death situation, this is becoming too much. My chest is tight, heartbeat painful, and I make a decision here and now that I didn't even think of when I came to this place.

When I walked into the country club, I knew I would become an Aphrodite. I didn't care as long as it meant my family would be safe. But as I lose the third man who tries to hunt me tonight to make me a whore for the Silent Circle, I realize I can't do it. A flash of my mother's state yesterday almost makes me lose my balance. That is what they'll do to me if I become an Aphrodite. So, I must become a Hera.

I must find Chris before Megan does. Fuck the consequences. I'll think about those later.

A woman screams near me, and I wipe sweat off my forehead as I run toward the sound. I'm too late when I find her. She's face down on the floor, her white dress flipped over her hips, and her eyes squint shut as the same man who was running after me enters her in one violent thrust. She grunts, clawing at the floor. I'm frozen in place as I watch him take her like an animal in the dirt. He presses against the back of her head, pushing her harder against the ground, and her groans of pain turn into something new.

My eyes widen, mouth dropping open. She's moaning. The man turns his head to the side, watching me with a smirk as he thrusts into her over and over again.

"Don't be jealous," he pants. "You're next."

His eyes flick behind me, and I move just in time to avoid a hand going for me.

"Ella," a voice sing-songs as I break into yet another sprint. "Imagine all the good grades you'll get once I can fuck you whenever I want."

I whimper when my foot catches on a root, and I go crashing to the ground. I try to catch myself on my hands, but the force still has my cheek pressed to the earth. I taste dirt in my mouth, and it mixes with the bitterness of whatever they had us drink earlier. There's the copper tang of blood too. I must have bitten my tongue or cheek, but I can't feel any pain. The adrenaline is rushing too harshly through my veins for me to notice my body.

I only need a split second to take a breath and open my eyes. In my position, I can see through the roots of the hedge. It's almost pitch black in the labyrinth, so the lit-up area I'm seeing is like an oasis in the middle of the desert. I can see feet wearing expensive, polished shoes. Oxfords and Monkstraps. Those are the shoes of the rich men who are waiting for women to throw themselves into their arms.

I'm so close.

The hope sends a new wave of strength through me, but as soon as I try to get up, a hand grabs my ankle.

"No!" I shriek as Professor Reeves drags me through the dirt.

I kick behind me and hear a grunt. I'm only free long enough to flip and crawl backward.

"You've been caught, Ella. Surrender."

I shake my head, feeling crazy as dirty blonde locks slap against my face. "I'm not caught if you haven't brought me to the center."

He laughs softly, wiping the blood from his lip as he slowly advances toward me. Red and yellow auras shine around his head from the drugs I've taken, and I can't focus. His face distorts the closer he gets, and I could swear he's growing horns like the Minotaur that was following me earlier.

I squint my eyes for a split second, and he's multiple steps closer. "Please," I whimper as I crawl back.

"Are you scared?" he asks in the sweetest voice I've ever heard from him. Nodding, I pinch my lips to not let out a pathetic sob.

“Good. That’s going to be your life from now on. At the mercy of men you should absolutely be scared of.”

My chest trembles as he lowers himself, grabbing two fistfuls of my dress between my boobs and ripping it in one gesture. The crack resonates through my body, and the right sleeve falls down my shoulder, revealing one of my breasts.

“S-stop,” I panic.

He shakes his head. “Not a word you get to use anymore.”

My body takes over, short-circuiting my brain so it can defend itself. Before I know it, I’ve grabbed a handful of dirt, and I’m throwing it in his face.

He grunts, standing up and stumbling back as his hands come to wipe his eyes. I don’t wait for him to be done. I stand up and go in the direction I saw the light. When I’m not sure where to go anymore, I drop to the floor and look under the hedges again. It takes me what feels like forever to run through the maze and find my destination, but when I do, the weight of the world falls off my shoulders.

There are around fifteen men standing there, some of them already with a woman in their arms, some of them talking, laughing and drinking from chalices as they wait. They’re the new Shadows with their Heras. Some men already have a roughed-up Aphrodite by their side, and I’m assuming they’re the old Shadows who caught someone tonight, ruining their chances to become a wife. Later tonight, they’ll go back to their own wives, happy to know they added mistresses to the Circle.

I want to scream from the unfairness of the situation. They’ve been having a wonderful time while the women were running for their lives, chased by whatever hallucinations their minds created. Some of them didn’t make it to the center, probably still being raped by Shadows in the darkness of the maze.

I’m in the last run, the path I’m on leading straight to the group of men. They’re in the light, and I’m in pitch-black, so I doubt any of them can see me. I take a minute to look for Chris. He’s here somewhere. I just hope Megan is not in his arms.

When I find him standing slightly to the side, chatting quietly with another man, a chalice in his hand, my heart explodes in my chest.

I made it.

He can’t see me, but I’m ready to run into the arms of the man who’s

always protected me no matter what. I don't care that this isn't what he planned. I don't even care if he pushes me away, telling me he wants Megan. If I get to him before she does, he's mine. Consequences be damned.

I put one foot in front of the other, ready to go, when a feminine voice calls out for me.

"Ella!"

My mistake is turning around when I should have run to the man who could have saved me. She backhands me so hard I fall to the ground, blood spilling from my mouth. There must have been a ring on her finger.

When I look up at Megan standing right above me, my vision is hazy.

"I have a question for you," she snarls, crouching next to me. "Did you enjoy fucking Chris last Christmas?" She's smiling, but it looks terrifying.

I can't answer. The shock from her revelation, the pain in my mouth, the fear gripping me, the drugs. It's all too much.

But she doesn't expect me to and keeps going. "Do you know how many times he tried to leave me for you? How many times his excuse for a breakup was that *he still had feelings for someone else*. And yet I still managed to keep him."

Nearly hyperventilating, terror bubbles up my throat. Chris isn't far. He can't see me, but he could hear me.

I take a deep breath, ready to scream for my life.

"Chr—" Megan's hand slaps on my mouth so hard I choke on my own breath.

"Shut the fuck up," she hisses. "I'm not playing some dumb high school game here, Ella. I'm playing to win. And my prize is him."

She lowers herself slightly to look me right in the eye. "If you act like a slut, sleeping with men who are taken, you might as well become one. Aphrodites get all the attention, darling. Isn't that what you wanted?"

I try to shake my head, tears gathering in my eyes. He wasn't taken. They had broken up.

"I think I'll quite enjoy seeing you get caught by some perv twice your age and become a whore for him."

Tears of anguish spill down my cheeks, a sob tightening my chest. This woman doesn't care. I can see it deep in her eyes. She won't let anything get in the way of what she wants. Or who she wants.

She looks behind her, and a laugh bursts out of her mouth. "Well. He's not twice your age, but he'll do. I heard he's pretty sadistic."

She finally lets go of me, standing up. “She’s all yours, Professor Reeves.”

She doesn’t even run to the center of the labyrinth, seeming to glide above the ground like a real goddess of chaos.

I cry out when Reeves grabs me by the hair, forcing me to stand up. Holding on to my dress, I desperately try to protect it from falling off my upper body.

“You’re hurting me,” I whimper as he drags me with him to where the crowd is gathered. “P-please, Professor Reeves...”

“That’s how you’ll learn,” he purrs. “You were the only girl I wanted to hunt tonight, Ella. Starting tomorrow, you’ll belong to the whole Circle, but whichever Aphrodite we catch is ours for the night.”

My teeth clatter from how hard I’m trembling. He yanks harder on my hair as he lines up with the other Shadows who hunted tonight, and right across from us, I see the men and women being initiated as couples standing hand in hand.

My body freezes when I see Chris and Megan holding hands. He still hasn’t seen me, and I’m desperate for reassurance. That somehow this is going to get better.

Lips trembling, I try to force a sound past my throat. “Chris.”

My rasp barely lifts above the buzzing of everyone’s voices. Reeves is still holding me tightly by the hair, but he’s talking with another man. He didn’t even hear me, so I doubt anyone else did.

And yet I see Chris’s back straighten, and he pulls away from Megan. She’s talking in his direction, but he ignores her, looking around until his eyes find mine. I believe with all I have that he’s going to get me out of this. If not for me, then because he loves my brother. He knows I’m not someone who thinks twice before putting myself in danger, especially for the people I love. He’ll know I made a mistake. That I need out.

Everything around me disappears as his gaze crosses with my teary eyes.

Help me. Help me. Help me.

His face falls when he sees the way Reeves is manhandling me, and in a split second, he’s already trying to make his way to me.

That’s until Megan’s hold tightens, and he stops dead in his tracks. His desperate gaze doesn’t leave mine, and I don’t know what exactly she says to him, but it’s enough for him to stay where he is.

My professor chuckles behind me. He follows my gaze to Chris and taps

my cheek condescendingly. “Don’t look for help where there’s none. Murray has no power when he’s around his girlfriend. With a family as powerful as hers, it’s easy for her to keep control of him.”

His words are only confirmed by the way Chris’s eyes now avoid mine. There’s nothing left of the man who would do anything to keep me safe. He looks as helpless as I am.

Chapter Fourteen

Ella

She Gets the Flowers - Beth McCarthy

The Heras get to shower privately when we're brought back to the part of the country club they call the temple. It's a separate mansion where only the members of the Silent Circle are allowed to enter, and where they've explained all Aphrodites must come if they're called by a Shadow.

A million questions run through my head. How often are they allowed to call me for services? Am I meant to just drop everything? Is it limited to this space, or are they allowed to jump me anywhere they want? Is my life completely over?

The men lead the Aphrodites underground, into a room with what looks like ancient Greece baths. Columns surround a giant pool of white marble where some women are already bathing naked with Shadows.

"You should stop crying, Ella. Tears turn me on." I startle when Reeves wipes tears off my cheeks. I thought I had stopped, but I'm in such shock I can barely feel my body anymore.

I don't even fight him when he undresses me. "The good news is, once you're clean, you get to ask Zeus for a favor. Now that you're part of the Circle, your one favor from us is free. It's something the common people will never get."

There's a fountain on the other side that barely mutes the moans I hear. I don't want to look at where they're coming from.

I sniffle as he turns me around to face the marble steps that lead into the water.

“Clean yourself. I’ll be waiting outside to take you to Zeus. Once your favor is granted, you’re mine for the night.”

Reeves nudges me, and I step down into the water. I don’t know what makes me obey. The shock, the fear, the fact that I tell myself to just take one thing at a time.

The pearl necklace technique. Something my therapist had mentioned a long time ago. Pretend you’re making a necklace out of pearls. Take each at a time, slide them on the string, and before you know it, you’ll have a whole pearl necklace. I stopped seeing that woman at some point through high school, but the mechanism stayed.

The next pearl is to clean the dirt, sweat, and blood from the hunt. I think the drugs are wearing off and every cut is making itself known on my body. Mainly, the corner of my mouth feels bruised from when Megan backhanded me. I can’t believe I let that bitch win.

The exact same type of dresses we were wearing earlier are hanging on hooks right by the door. I grab one, struggling to keep it on now that I’m wet from the bath. It sticks to my skin, becoming even more see-through than it’s meant to be.

As soon as I walk out, a hand wraps around my wrist, pulling me to the side and slamming me against the stonewall of the damp underground. I wince when my head hits the stone, feeling dizzy for a second.

“Ella,” Chris growls in a low voice. Yet at the same time, he places his hand between the wall and the back of my head, caressing and soothing the ache in familiar gesture that calms me slightly. “You shouldn’t be here. Shouldn’t have come to the initiations, shouldn’t have gotten caught, shouldn’t have ever set foot in this place.”

He doesn’t say it in a protective way. He says it like I’m doomed. Like there was something holding him back before, and that magic veil is gone.

His other hand comes to wipe the tears falling down my cheeks. I hiss when he grazes what I’m sure shows exactly where Megan hit me.

I wonder if he even sees it because he doesn’t say anything at first. He reaches for the inside pocket of his suit jacket. All black tonight, matching the other Shadows. When he pulls out some pills, I plaster myself tighter against the wall.

“Take these. Then you can tell me who gave you that bruise at the corner

of your mouth.”

The undertone of a threat toward whoever put that bruise on me is discreet, but it’s there. Only an elegant man like Chris can warn of future violence with a soft order.

He’s not asking. He’s not the kind of person who bursts into a room and screams *who did this to you?*

He simply tells you that you’re going to admit to him who hurt you.

“Megan knows. What you and I did last Christmas. She hates me. Rightly so.”

I hope that answers the question.

He acknowledges what I say with a nod. “She hates everyone. She’s very possessive.” Pushing that topic to the side, he carries on. “I hate when you make me repeat myself.” So, instead of doing so, he just offers me the pills again.

I know he won’t forget it’s her. I might even have gotten her in trouble. But right now, I don’t care. She fucking *hit me*.

The weight of tonight makes me feel heavy, exhausted. I take a deep breath, my eyes fluttering shut as I attempt to keep my calm.

“I want to go home.”

“There’s no going home once you initiate, and you know that.”

His hand wraps painfully around my jaw, prying it open, and he pushes the two pills in my mouth. “What did I say about making me repeat myself? These will help with the pain.”

I dry-swallow them, practically choking, and once he makes sure they’re gone, and that he deems me taken care of, his demeanor switches, his grip tightening.

I try to shake my head, but there’s no escaping once his possession shows.

“Caught by Reeves? Did you plan that?”

My eyes widen, heart stopping. “Are you insane?” I hiss. It’s not very powerful with my limited freedom.

“I’m not, but he is. And if you don’t spill whatever has been going on between you and him, you will be alone here, Ella. I will turn my need to protect you into dust and blow it into the wind. Believe me.”

I take a staggered breath, unable to imagine what a life without Chris being my protector could be like.

“Once,” I rasp.

I feel the growl that rumbles low in his chest all the way to his fingertips as they tighten around my jaw.

"I was desperate," I squeak.

He takes a deep breath, lets go of me completely, and closes his eyes. He's trying to calm himself. I know him, know what he's doing. He asked. I answered. And even if he hates said answer, he doesn't want to punish me for doing what I was told.

"Look me in the eyes, Ella."

I hadn't even realized my gaze had dropped submissively. I dig my eyes into his, barely able to carry the weight of the tension between us.

"Never. Again. Is that clear?" And the threatening tone is enough to make me want to never disappoint him again.

"He said I was his for the night," I rasp. "Because he caught me."

"You let me take care of that."

"And all the other times? I'm an Aphrodite now. He has access to me anytime he wants. So do all the other Shadows."

"Ella." He stops my spiraling with a firm tone. "The way it's always worked between us is that you do what you're told, and I deal with everything else. So, confirm for me. No Reeves again. Ever. Clear?"

I nod.

"Give me words."

"Y-yes. Never again."

"Good girl."

I don't like the satisfaction that reflects in his eyes. It's not the same kind as when I do what I'm told. It's deeper, like a mastermind seeing the dominoes fall into place.

I open my mouth to ask what the hell is it he did, and how did I unwillingly participate, when a voice resonates behind Chris. One that has my nausea returning.

"Having fun with my Aphrodite, Christopher?"

How thick is the thread of patience Chris is holding on to? Because I have a feeling it's about to snap. He drops a soft kiss at the top of my head, like regaining strength, and turns around.

"Aphrodites belong to everyone," he answers our professor. "And this specific one belongs to me."

"Not tonight. I caught her."

Chris takes a threatening step toward Reeves. He's much taller than him,

but I still have yet to find one person taller than Chris.

“Yesterday. Tonight. Tomorrow. In ten years. She’s mine.” My heart liquifies, melted by the dangerous heat in his voice. “Don’t test that. You don’t want to play with a man who would blow the world to pieces for her.” His voice lowers to a grave baritone. “Because, tell me, if I’m willing to destroy myself for her, what makes you think I won’t destroy someone as insignificant as you?”

There’s a long, tense pause before Reeves says. “It’s time to take her to Zeus.”

“Sure. I’ll come with you.”

Reeves’s face hardens, hate and disappointment turning him bitter. But he doesn’t protest.

While the Aphrodite’s quarters are underground, Eugene Duval’s private office is on the second floor.

My hair is still wet from the bath when we enter, dripping onto the hardwood floor in the elegant room.

Chris and Reeves both sit on the armchairs available in front of a desk, and Duval is in his own chair. I’m left standing, looking at Chris for clarity.

He only offers me a reassuring gaze. Not even a smile.

“Down, Ella,” the president orders without sparing me a look as he makes himself comfortable, unbuttoning his jacket.

I tighten my arms around my chest, glancing around the room, hesitant to talk. “There are no more chairs.”

He finally gives me attention, eyebrows drawn together as if confused why I still haven’t done what I’m told. “Aphrodites don’t sit on chairs in the temple. They kneel on the floor like the good little sex slaves they are. Now, down. Before the end of time, if you don’t mind.”

So much for calling us goddesses before the initiations. Quickly changed to sex slaves. Not that I imagined anything else.

My head snaps back to Chris, my mouth opening just as he cuts me off. “On your knees.”

An arrow to the heart would have been less painful. I thought he was helping me. My heartbeat doubles, but an order coming from my ex has a different effect than one coming from Duval, and I’m lowering before I can fight some more.

I’m between the two seats where Chris and Reeves are sitting, and I find myself leaning toward the man I used to be in love with.

Duval cocks an eyebrow at Chris. "Shouldn't you be with your Hera? The ring ceremony starts in ten minutes."

"Then I guess we have ten minutes," Chris answers. "Let's get to it."

He casually and confidently brings a hand to the back of my head, caressing my hair possessively.

"I want to go home," I rasp, half between an order and a plea.

"You may not talk unless I ask you an open question, Ella. Do you understand?"

There's already an anger rising inside me, but Chris pulls at my hair when he feels me tense, so I nod.

"Did you get an invite to the initiations?"

Since it's not an open question, I nod again.

"And you were not forced to drink Circe's poison, were you?"

I shake my head.

"You entered the maze at your own will, you knew the rules, you let yourself get caught by a Shadow."

When I hesitate for too long, Reeves is the one who talks. "She did."

My lower lip trembles, the weight of the situation heavy on my shoulders. Only Chris's hand is keeping me afloat.

"Then you are ours," Duval concludes. "Your body belongs to the Circle, and there is no way out. If you received an invitation, it's because the board knew you were aware of the rules."

He huffs, giving me what I'm sure he aims to be a reassuring grin, but that makes me want to crawl into a hole.

"I know your family's situation, Ella. Your brother refused our offer to marry you to a Shadow countless times. But here you are of your own volition. You have a favor. I'll hear it, grant it, and send you back to the initiations. From then on, you'll follow the rules or be punished."

Unable to take any more of this, I climb to my feet, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"Your society killed my dad," I hiss. "Just because he had become a threat. And now you expect my family to get on their knees and beg you for a favor when you put us in this situation in the first place. After what you did to my mom? You're disgusting."

His eyebrows raise, a surprise I hadn't expected settling on his face.

"You seem to be mistaken. The Circle didn't kill Gerald Baker. He was a beloved board member. A friend. As for your mother, she came willingly."

We never promised anything in return.” His smile is chilling, making my stomach churn.

“Oh, *please*. The second you saw the police had gone to my father’s house, that they were going to arrest him for the parties, you decided to act. Dad was unable to keep your filthy parties a secret, and you eliminated him. Let him take the fall.”

Legs trembling, I turn around, walking in a circle, unable to believe that I’ve fallen low enough to defend my asshole of a father.

“Ella.” Duval’s stern voice makes me freeze, and I turn to him. “The Shadow who betrayed your father was removed from the Circle and punished accordingly. His death had nothing to do with us. It was an unfortunate suicide that means his debt went to your family, but we didn’t kill him.”

And somehow, in the seriousness of his tone, I hear the truth. Because he has no scruple admitting he abused my mother just for the sake of it.

The Silent Circle didn’t kill my father.

But I know. I *know* deep down that he didn’t kill himself.

“Cut this short, Ella. Get on your knees, beg us for your favor, and the three of us can go back to the initiations.”

Chris slowly stands up too. He walks to me until he’s right behind me and can talk in my ear.

“Do it, Sweets.” He kisses the side of my neck, sliding a hand underneath the V of my dress from behind me. Grabbing a handful of my breast, he pulls me closer to him. “Get on your knees and beg the Circle.”

Any image of my savior is shattered to pieces as he starts pinching my nipple. And any pride I held on to dissipates when I feel a zap of electricity traveling all the way to my clit.

“Help me,” I beg in a whisper.

“I am helping you. Now beg.”

He nudges the back of my knee with his own, and I fall to the floor.

Looking up at Duval with eyes full of tears, I give up on my freedom and ask for exactly what I came for.

“Please,” I rasp. “Will you settle my family’s debt?”

“Of course I will, sweet Ella,” he chuckles. “I’ll gather the richest Shadows and take care of the bankruptcy. We will buy the company, take over, and pay back the men who invested. Consider it done.”

That’s it? All of this for him to talk about it like it’s as easy as getting some money out at an ATM.

He cuts my naïve thoughts short by reminding me of how I got there.

“And in exchange, we get a brand-new Aphrodite.” He opens a drawer and places a golden necklace on his desk. It has a small seashell dangling from the chain. “Welcome to the Silent Circle. The Bakers are officially back in.”

Reeves is the one who locks the necklace around my neck, pretending not to be scared of Chris’s death stare, but I feel the way his fingers tremble.

The second we exit the office, I notice the two men leaning on the opposite wall. Not any men. It’s Wren and Achilles.

One arm flies to cover my breasts, and my other hand falls flat in front of my mound.

“Oh my god,” I gasp.

I retreat into Chris, my back hitting his chest. The fear of my best friends seeing me like this is only beaten by the heartbreak of seeing them here. Did they initiate?

“Go with them, Sweets. I need to talk to Reeves.”

I shake my head, unable to get over the embarrassment. “I can’t.”

Chris’s hand in my hair pulls my head back until I can see him above me. “You can and you will. Listen to them as you would a Shadow here. Listen to them as if they were me. They’ll take you down to the ballroom and you’ll wait there for the end of the initiations.”

He releases me, nudging me toward them. I’m too mortified to even look them in the eyes, and I might walk forward surrounded by my two best friends, but I’m looking back at my ex now whispering with Professor Reeves.

“Don’t worry, Ella. You’re not the first Aphrodite we’ve seen,” Achilles admits, completely unbothered.

How do they even know?

Neither of them stops walking as Wren reads my mind, touching the pendant around my neck. He doesn’t say anything, not one to waste words when he knows them unnecessary.

“Are you Shadows?” I still find myself unable to believe my best friends have been so close to the Circle and I didn’t even know about it.

They both shake their heads. “Not yet,” Achilles explains. “But sometimes promising Shadows are allowed to attend the initiations. We didn’t do anything tonight.”

“Why?” I rasp. “If you know what they do, why are you here?”

They eye each other as we stop in front of two wooden double doors. I can hear some waltz music being played. It must be the ballroom.

When they decide to keep their answer from me, I flip. “At least don’t do everything you’re told when you should be protecting your best friend, you pathetic sheep.”

“We’re not doing what we’re told by the Circle,” Wren says low. “We shouldn’t be in this part of the temple, but we came the second Chris texted us so we could make sure no one bothers you while he finishes his initiations.”

“We’re looking after you, Els,” Achilles adds. “Doing what we’re told would be to bring you to the Aphrodites’ altar. Where all the new girls get fucked by whoever. In the Heras’ ballroom”—he points at the two doors—“you kneel and watch the ring ceremony.” He shrugs, turning on his heels. “But I guess if you’d rather go over there...”

“No!” I snap. “Don’t be a dick, Achilles.”

He chuckles. “Come on. It’s not that hard to watch a few guys put a necklace around their future wives’ necks and the women a signet ring on the Shadows’ fingers.”

My gaze drops. “Will Chris be doing it with Megan, then?”

“Yes,” he whispers, as if scared to hurt me. It’s unlike him. He runs a hand through his black hair. “It’ll be okay. I told you before, the man won’t let you go. No matter what.”

I take a step toward my friend, letting my hate for another man hit him. “I wish he fucking would.”

He nods, not really caring about my tantrum since it doesn’t concern him.

“We can’t go in there with you,” he explains. “But one last thing.” His gaze goes to Wren and back to me. “Peach and Alex? Not a fucking word. Clear?”

My jaw ticks from the pressure of wanting to hurl insults. “I’ll do what I want.”

“I love you, Els. You’re my best friend.” With a huff, his mouth twists. “I don’t want to make your time at the temple a living hell. So zip that mouth.”

My jaw drops open as he opens the door. One head gesture, and I go in.

I do what I’m told. If it avoids me being at the Aphrodites’ altar, I’ll kneel and torture myself. I’m on the edge of the dance floor. And for what feels like hours, I have to hold back tears as I watch the ceremony.

Megan putting a signet ring around Chris’s pinky.

Chris putting a necklace around Megan's neck as they promise the Silent Circle they will get married right after they finish their studies. I guess they're engaged now.

This is my worst nightmare.

They dance together among the other couples. The Heras got to dress in beautiful gowns while I look up at them from our submissive positions.

And even though Chris's gaze keeps coming back to me, I don't want it. It's hungry, hot, and it reminds me of the truth: he's a Shadow now.

Maybe being fucked by countless strangers would have felt better.

I watch, and I watch, and I watch.

My hate for my ex grows stronger.

And I break my own heart all over again.

Chapter Fifteen

Ella

Too Late To Love You - Ex Habit

I thought it would finally be over. Tonight, I was drugged, hunted, hit, made to kneel and beg for my family's safety.

Isn't it enough? Apparently not. Because as the new Aphrodites are led toward the exit, a woman comes to get me. She says her name is Carla, and that I've been required to stay for the rest of the night.

And that I am to be blindfolded.

"I don't understand," I tell her as we walk down a long hallway. She's moving so fast I'm practically jogging to keep up with her. "Why blindfolded?"

The marble floor is cold against my feet. They still haven't given us our shoes back.

"There's nothing to understand," she tells me matter-of-factly. "If the Shadow wants you blindfolded, you will be."

"Did he...did he tell you that? Who is it?"

"Yes. I was instructed on how he wanted you. And I don't know who it is. I was given instructions by Zeus."

When my eyes widen with terror, she adds. "It's not him. He doesn't fuck young Aphrodites."

"So who could it be?"

She shrugs. "Usually, I wouldn't know. On a night like this? I'm going to

assume it's the Shadow who caught you."

My stomach drops. *Reeves.*

She stops in front of a door and takes out a key to unlock it. "Come on in."

My knees almost buckle as I follow her inside.

"W-wait," I panic. "This is— Are you sure it's the right room?"

"All Aphrodites' rooms are the same. Get undressed."

Spinning on the spot, I take in the apparatus on the wall. Chris showed me a darker, delicious side of sex, but he never used any of these on me. It was more our kinky dynamic that we shared. Not...not *that*. Not chains. Not paddles. Not crops. Not...

"That's a cage," I gasp, noticing the small kennel-like enclosure on the floor next to the bed. It's got padlocks.

I take a step back toward the door.

"Don't worry." Her back is to me as she opens a closet on the other side of the room. "He doesn't want to use that." She gets what she needs and turns to me. "Only these."

Only a ball gag.

Only a huge dildo. This thing is never going to get inside of me.

Only restraints and a long bar. What's that bar?

"Carla," I hesitate and take another step back.

Turning around, she catches me slowly retreating.

"Oh no, please. Don't do this to me. We'll both be punished if I can't get you ready for him. And it won't be the fun kind. If Zeus learns about me failing an order from a Shadow, I'll be in serious trouble."

My heartbeat doubles. How can they do this to us? And why the fuck did I ever come here?

"You need to get undressed," Carla implores, her voice less assured than it was until now. "And you need to let me get you ready for him. Please."

The fear in her eyes doesn't help mine. But I can't risk our safety. Especially when I know I'll still end up on this bed, and I'll make it worse for the both of us.

I get rid of my clothes quickly, hoping if I'm fast, it won't traumatize me as much.

If the rest of the night could go fast. Please...please go in the blink of an eye.

"Do you need any help putting these on?"

Arms crossed over my breasts to give me a semblance of dignity, I pad over to her side of the room. She points at some of the leather binds.

"I..." Why is it always so hard to talk with a knotted throat? I hate the vulnerability it displays. "I don't really know how any of these work."

Nodding, she taps my shoulder. "It's okay. I'll help you." She sighs. "I've been an Aphrodite for five years, Ella. I promise you it's been more pleasure than anything else. But I did it willingly. You —"

"Me too. I just...I wasn't sure what to expect."

Rolling her lips inwardly, she nods again. "If you say so. We'll start with the thigh straps." She grabs two leather straps. "Just put one leg through each loop. I'll tighten them for you."

With trembling hands, I do so. Pulling the first one all the way to my thigh. Her eyes catch my scars, and I lick my dry lips. "Can I...can I be on my front? So he doesn't see them?"

She knows what I mean and smiles softly. "He didn't specify, so we'll put you on your front. But it's a more vulnerable position, just so you're aware. He might move you too."

"I don't care." As long as it's a chance Reeves doesn't see scars that clearly look like self-harm, then I'll do it.

She tightens each strap around my upper thighs, and I look at the cuffs dangling from them.

"Those are for your wrists. It'll keep them tied by your sides. That way, you can't reach your mouth." And her eyes dart to the ball gag.

My stomach twists and the pain there also reminds me I haven't eaten anything today. At least it means I have nothing to puke.

"We'll do the hands last. Get on your front on the bed. Middle is best."

I execute, and she delicately spreads my legs. "I'm going to lock the spreader-bar. It stops you from closing your legs."

I can't reply. I have to bite my lower lip to not let out a desperate whimper.

"You're doing great, Ella. Everything will be okay. Do you want to put the gag on yourself?"

I shake my head. I can't be an active participant. It hurts too much.

She does it. I struggle to open my mouth as wide as needed. It's so much bigger than the gag I own. I haven't even used mine since the last time Chris used it on me.

My jaw is already aching by the time she buckles it. Why such a big one?

I'm choking on it.

I whimper when she puts a hand between my shoulder blades. "You're okay. Just breathe."

Easy to say, harder to do.

My staggered breaths make me panic some more.

"Slowly. Here you go. Well done. I'm going to cuff your wrists now."

Tears well in my eyes, helplessness taking over.

"Please." The word can't even form in my throat, the ball in my mouth too big.

"They have rules," she explains as she wraps leather around each of my wrists. "They can't hurt anyone beyond repair. They can't kill you."

Is that meant to reassure me?

I test the cuffs. My hands are stuck by my thighs, and I had to adjust slightly. With my ass higher, I can't lie completely flat anymore.

"You're doing really well. I know the first time is scary. You're very brave."

I don't think I can take her praise anymore. One of her hands is resting on my ass, and she caresses me.

"You're already wet," she murmurs. "You know you're going to be okay."

It's only now that she points it out that I notice the dampness between my thighs and the tingling coursing through my clit.

Shame is added to fear. This is a nightmare.

"Last thing."

It's not just a blindfold. It's not just a cloth that she ties behind my head.

It's some sort of black plastic tape that doesn't stick to my skin or my hair, but somehow sticks to itself.

"It's bondage tape," she explains as she wraps it around my head, covering my eyes. "It'll save you some pain when we take it off. I've had duct tape in my hair, and I swear you'll be grateful it's not."

She goes quiet as she keeps wrapping it over and over again. It becomes a thick band over my eyes as complete darkness engulfs me.

"He must care for you," she admits. "He chose the softest restraint. He clearly doesn't want to hurt you."

As if. Reeves is the worst asshole I know. He's going to have a great time making my life hell.

I hear the telltale of scissors cutting through plastic, and suddenly, her

hands aren't on me anymore.

A sob gets stuck in my throat, making my chest tremble against the mattress.

"All done. Take a minute to calm down, and I'll call him in."

I shake my head as a cry escapes me. I try to beg, but nothing intelligible comes out.

She puts a hand on my back, stroking me until my body stops trembling. As she caresses down to my ass, a delicate touch strokes my pussy, making me freeze.

"Everything will be okay. You will enjoy this. I promise you. I react the same as you do."

She stands up. "I'm leaving now. He'll come whenever he wants. It might not be right away, so don't panic. It also happens that some men ask Aphrodites to get ready for them and then don't have time to show up. If I get a message stating to release you, I'll come back."

I hear the door, some shuffling, and then it shuts with a resounding click.

For a few minutes, I struggle on the bed. I resist my bonds and drag my head against the pillow to attempt to remove the blindfold. I wriggle in panic because I know that he's going to put that dildo inside me, and somehow, I end up making myself hornier.

What the hell is wrong with me?

When I finally calm down, I'm dying to rub my thighs together, but the spreader bar stops me from doing so.

I moan, pressing my hips forward and attempting to hump against the sheets. I need stimulation. Anything.

I freeze when I hear something. I think it was a step. Maybe a few. With the loss of my sight, I'm hyper aware of sounds and the sensations on my skin. The leather is tight and warm. The plastic on my eyes is almost suffocating.

A hand touches my lower back, and I startle, a whimper escaping me. When did he come in? I didn't hear the door. It must have been when Carla left. He walked in as she walked out...meaning he's been watching me desperately try to feel something against my clit for long minutes.

Burning shame creeps up my face, and I can imagine the blush covering my body.

He doesn't say anything. He simply moves his hand to my ass cheek, lower to the back of my thigh, then the other. Rubbing my skin, he massages

the muscles, and every time it brings a bigger wave of need crashing over me.

I moan when he puts a hand on each of my ass cheeks and spreads them. It doesn't touch me where I want, but the movement reverberates all the way to my clit. Then he strokes the apex of my thighs, closer and closer to my lips. He still hasn't touched my pussy when he retreats. I feel a small shift and jerk when a wet finger traces the stretched lips of my mouth.

It's slick with my arousal, and I know the point he's making. I'm wet all the way to my inner thighs. He easily points out something else by spreading the spit spilling down my open mouth. My right cheek is flat against the pillow. I hate and love the way he traces his thumb all the way to the stain I must be making on the material.

Leaving my face, he focuses on my pussy again. A slight tap on my ass shows me I've been humping the bed aimlessly. I hadn't even realized. My breathing picks up when he spreads my lower lips, and pleasure explodes through my body as he pushes two fingers inside me. There's nothing stopping my desperate moan.

I feel like I've been gifted water after days in the desert, and some weird gratefulness courses through me. This is fucked.

His praise is silent, in the form of a hand caressing my hair. As he pushes farther inside me, I push back. I almost hear a "*bad girl*" when he pulls my hair, and I understand the message right away, keeping as still as I can.

First rule I learn tonight: don't seek pleasure he's not willing to give.

He releases my hair, stroking my head as he keeps finger-fucking me slowly. I'm whimpering behind the gag, desperate to move with him.

He keeps at the same pace, refusing to touch my clit, and doesn't change a single thing. All I get are those two fingers fucking me. In and out. Slowly. The despair and pleasure are becoming best friends, and I freeze with shock as an orgasm rolls through my body.

I refuse to move, too scared to lose the pleasure. He drags it out languidly, and I choke on my own moans.

When his fingers retreat, I feel like a part of myself leaves with him. Probably my sanity. And when he pushes inside me again, this time with three fingers, I lose my mind completely.

The pleasure is overwhelming, and the slight pain that comes with it keeps me right on the edge of reality. I can't lose myself in pleasure with the way he holds me back. He's still slow, still careful not to hurt me to the point that I wouldn't enjoy this. And I try not to move, even as my limbs threaten

to tremble. Because that last thing I would want is for him to stop. Suddenly, he pulls out, slaps my pussy, a sound of wetness resonating through the room, and then he pushes back in. Then he goes again, leisurely fucking me until I'm on the edge of another orgasm.

He doesn't let me come this time. He gives me a short pause. I feel him shifting around, and when he comes back, he sits on the bed. The mattress dips where he is, and all I want is to get closer. My mind is drunk on lust, and I need him to touch me.

As his fingers come back, I could swear he spreads me wider...like maybe there are four this time. This is getting too confusing. All I know is that the pleasure burns in me like a flame, coating my skin in sweat, making my heartbeat double. The stretch is getting delicious, and I want more.

He gives me more.

He gives me exactly what I saw earlier.

When the head of the dildo presses to my entrance, I jerk and shriek behind the gag. This is bigger than his fingers. Even if he prepared me the best he could, there's nothing he could have done for something as thick as this.

He pushes in slowly. Despite my wetness, I think he lubed it up, and I'm thankful for that when he retreats and pushes a little farther.

I don't think I can do this. I can't.

I shake my head, the pain overcoming the pleasure.

All it takes is his hand on my head, his thumb caressing my temple, and for him to pull out and back in. This time, I feel it, the safety, and I relax around the object. It takes me a while to take it all in, but once he bottoms out, he stops moving.

I have no idea how long we stay like this, one hand in my hair, one holding the dildo deep inside me.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't move. He doesn't even feel real.

I moan, clenching around the dildo. If I could, I would beg him with all I have.

He gives me a slap on the ass before holding the sex toy again. I don't understand what he means the first time, but when he does it again, I move. And when he doesn't punish me for that, I get it.

He wants me to fuck myself. To show him that I'm not only enjoying this, but that I am a willing participant. And since nothing in this room feels like reality, I do it.

I struggle to go a little more on my knees, my cheek still flat on the pillow, to give myself more space. And just like he silently ordered, I start to move back and forth while he keeps the toy in place. I fuck myself. It's not only the girth that drives me insane. It's not only the depth, and it's not even the way it makes me feel like I can't breathe through the pleasure.

It's his low growl that has me falling apart. I explode around the thickness, feeling myself tightening again, and pressing against the mattress. But in one violent movement, he pulls my hips back, pushing it deeper, and he slaps my ass.

I do it again. I push back against it. I exhaust myself giving him what he wants and drowning myself in desire.

He makes me do it again, and again, and again, until I'm so spent, tears are collecting behind the tape and likely slipping down my face. My body gives up, and I collapse flat on the bed, my figure only slightly bent because my wrists are tied to my thighs.

"Please," I sob behind the gag. I don't know if he can hear it. "No more." They're just muffled words, but it's clear I can't take it anymore.

Finally, he pulls it out. I'm a sweating, shaking mess, and I feel like the pleasure has rendered me completely dumb. My brain can hardly function, so I lie there, feeling my pussy clench around nothing, and hoping this is over. Not because it's been painful. But because it was overwhelmingly good.

It's not over. I feel something press against my entrance, and I understand too quickly that it's not the toy this time. It's him.

The tip pushes inside me, and the pleasure comes back tenfold. This time, he doesn't let me fuck myself on him, he grips my hips painfully and thrusts inside me with a delicious violence. I cry out from behind the gag, not understanding how I can already feel another orgasm building. He feels better than the toy. So in control of his own body as he hits the perfect spot over and over again. The way I tighten around him when I reach my orgasm is probably what gets him over the edge. He pulls out, and a second later, I'm feeling his thick, hot cum on my lower back.

I whimper when two hands touch the back of my head. He unbuckles the gag, and my jaw feels like it'll dislocate when he gets it out from behind my teeth. Something presses against my mouth, and I recoil before understanding it's a bottle of water. I'm only now realizing how dehydrated I am. In my position, I slightly choke on it, but it doesn't matter. I need it. He pulls the bottle away, and the next thing I know, he's pushing something inside my

mouth.

Is that a pill? *Am I being drugged again?*

But then the sweetness hits. It's candy. I roll my tongue around it, feeling its shape. It's a love heart. The sugar is helping with the shaking. I suckle on it as I feel him move some more. He undoes the spreader bar, but not the thigh straps or the tape around my head. He massages my neck, my shoulders, my ass cheeks. I struggle to relax at first, my muscles too tight. But after a minute I'm forced to give in, my body relaxing even though my mind is still racing.

And then he walks away.

The next thing I know, Carla is back.

"It's over," she says softly as she undoes the cuffs around my wrists. "Here, let me get started on the tape."

After two turns, I take over. I want this off my eyes *now*, and she's being too careful. I practically rip it off.

"Is he gone?" I rasp.

"He is."

"So what he—he fucks me and then he leaves? He doesn't talk to me? He doesn't..."

"Doesn't what?"

Take care of me. Spend the night with me.

I'm so used to Chris's brand of torture that I expect to be put back together after someone breaks me down. It's not the case here. I'm just an Aphrodite. I'm used and discarded.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

My pussy feels raw, and I wonder if I'll even be able to sit down properly once the adrenaline has settled, but I shake my head. "No."

"Was it nice?" She winks as she helps me off the bed and wraps me in a silk robe.

I want to lie. I want to shake my head and scream that I was abused and hated every single second of it. Instead, I go for the truth. "It was amazing."

But that simple fact doesn't make me *feel* amazing. I'm too scared about Chris learning about this. Anxiety is ripping me to pieces. I promised him I would not let another man touch me, and I broke that promise the same evening. And while I'm aware this was entirely not my fault...I don't want to know what his reaction will be.

I love you

When I think of the men you let touch you, I can't calm my heartbeat. I can barely control the fury burning in my veins. No one will get near you again. 'I wouldn't go back to you if you were my last option on earth.' You're lying. You'll come back to me because that's what I want.

I always get what I want.

Chapter Sixteen

Chris

ALL I WANTED WAS U - Ex Habit - Omido

She walks into the kitchen like everything is fine. The sun is out, coffee is ready, and she'll share breakfast with the man she loves. Life is beautiful.

It's only *slightly* unfortunate that he doesn't love her back. That he doesn't want to be in this relationship. That blackmailing only works to make him more and more vengeful every day.

Megan yawns, her perfectly straight black hair brushing the top of her shoulders as she stretches. It's weird that she always looks perfect. Robotic.

Ella's hair is so messy that when I used to sneak into her bedroom at night, I would spend ten minutes come morning, untangling everything before she would then straighten it herself.

"Thanks for coffee," Megan murmurs as she pours herself a cup.

I nod, even though she can't see me. "Will you pour me another?"

I buy her the most expensive beans that we grind in a barista coffee machine. She drinks it in a silk nightdress from a shop that only sells one item of everything they create, in a house where the rent costs more than a semester of tuition fees at SFU. We're that kind of rich. We have a bank account where the far-left numbers never change.

My friends always say I'm stuck up. From a young age, I set up a routine I stuck to because I needed it. I wake up at 5:00 a.m. I read. I exercise. I have

my coffee by 6:30 in clothes I've ironed that same morning, and I leave before 7:30 so I can sit somewhere and read a book or a play before the day starts.

Why I was ever popular in high school is as good a question as any. Maybe because of Luke, Jake, and Rose. Maybe because I balanced the group of unhinged friends with some quietness and gentleness. After all, I'm incredibly good at hiding the side of me that doesn't fit my image.

So, I guess "stuck up" was a good term for my friends to use. Boring. When I started dating Megan, I liked that we had that in common. But then I realized something else.

Everything that has to do with Megan cannot be less than perfect. It's terrifying. She obsesses over the smallest things that might make her feel like she doesn't have control over the situation.

A manipulator must always have control over everything.

That's why she touches my hair right after she settles my cup on the table. She rearranges it the way she likes it as if we're in some sort of TV reality and are being watched at all times.

She leans forward for a kiss, and that's when I reach for the back of her neck. I stand from my chair, forcing her to bend over the table, and slam her back down the second she tries to fight me.

Taking my cup of coffee, I balance it precariously over her head. The liquid is steaming, threatening to burn through anything in its way.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, Christopher?" she shrieks. "Let me go!"

A wild animal dying to escape the zoo it's being kept in. That's what I am. That's the rage that's spilling over.

"Listen to me," I hiss above her. "Because I won't warn you twice."

She's desperate to escape when I tilt the cup a little bit more, whimpering from fear.

"If you ever hurt her again, I will destroy you. I can't kill you. I can't leave, and I can't hurt you beyond repair. But I *will* make your life a living hell, do you understand?"

"I'll end your dad." The venom in her voice freezes my blood, but I don't release her.

It's right here, the madness that bubbles when it comes to Ella. Protecting her and defending her is more important than breathing.

"Remember one thing, Megan. If you unleash the Circle on my dad, you

will have nothing to hold over my head anymore. And do you know what's dangerous? A man who has nothing to lose. So choose how often you use that threat. I'm staying with you. I initiated you into the Circle. Your hand is the one I hold on campus. You did it, *babe*. You have all the girls thinking you're the one I chose, all the smoke and mirrors you wanted. Now *leave. Ella. Alone.*"

To make sure she understands how serious I am, I pour burning coffee right next to her head. She screams even though it didn't touch her.

I know this is stupid, but sometimes when it comes to Ella, I act stupid. The only advantage I have over her right now is that I took her by surprise. But once the fear and shock have passed, she'll remember there's not only my dad she can threaten. There's Mom and Juliette. She understood very quickly how close I am to my family and how much I love them. That I moved back here so I could support both of them.

Megan's controlling behavior won't end after this, but at least she'll know that sometimes there are repercussions.

I wasn't planning on letting her go so soon, but the front door ringing doesn't give me much of a choice.

We both freeze, my eyes going toward the kitchen door.

"Clean up," I order as I finally let her go.

Please, let it not be anyone from her family. Daddy's little girl will throw me under the bus on any occasion.

Stopping by the entrance hall mirror, I rake my fingers through my hair, making myself look presentable. I brush down the sleeves of my light-blue button-up and take a calming breath. That woman and her family will be the end of me.

But it's not Megan's dad standing behind the door. It's another man who is ready to annihilate me.

"Luke." If he was observant, he'd notice my short inhale and the way I almost choke on air from seeing him here.

He looks too angry to discern anything.

"We need to talk."

He pushes in, and I let him.

"I know what you're thinking, and I'll fix it," I lie as I follow him inside my own house.

We almost bump into Megan as she walks out of the kitchen, and my best friend doesn't even acknowledge her, going straight through the hallway and

into the large living room where we usually hang out.

“What am I thinking?” he growls, as he finally turns around to face me. “What will you fix?”

“Ella—”

“Was meant to be protected from this.”

I need to pause for a second. Calm means control. Control means power.

“Luke,” I say evenly. “I don’t know how she got an invite to the initiations. All I know is that she was there.”

Turning away from me, he pulls at his hair. Ella does the same thing when she’s angry. And when he starts walking around the room, it’s further proof of that.

“Do you know how many times the Circle offered me to marry her in? How many times I refused? What, for her to end up as a fucking wh —”

“Don’t.” It’s a complicated thing to make it look like I’m not even more pissed off than he is when he’s about to call his sister a whore.

Call your sister whatever you want.

But don’t call my girl a whore.

He catches himself, realizing what was about to come out of his mouth.

“What am I supposed to do?” he rasps.

I won’t lie. Guilt tightens my chest when I think of what I’m about to put Ella through, but excitement’s teeth bite into my soul. She’s in the Circle now. There’s nothing Luke can do about it. And I can play with her however I want.

I fight to keep steady on my feet. “You have my word that I won’t let anything bad happen to her.”

“Like I had your word the Circle wouldn’t get their hands on her? What’s your plan now?”

He’s pacing again, looking like he wants to kick something. I would let him if Megan wasn’t so insane. If there’s something out of place, she’ll take it out on the house personnel.

“I didn’t have the power I have now. But I’m initiated. I’m a Shadow,” I explain. “I’ll make sure no one touches her.”

And for once, I’m not lying. No one will touch her. Except me. I’ll be touching her. I’ll be keeping her so busy no one else will get a chance to even approach her.

He’s almost panting when he finally stops, looking at me.

“I’m sure Megan loves the idea of you defending Ella. Her jealousy must

take it well.”

I can’t help it. The second her name is mentioned when it’s unnecessary, my heart hardens. I’m an empathetic man, but not for her. I feel nothing but contempt when it comes to that woman. It’s so obvious who my heart belongs to that I could never feel anything more than contempt for my current fiancée.

“Megan doesn’t matter.” And before I know it, the words have escaped my mouth. “I wish I was marrying Ella, believe me —”

The silence swallows the air in the room. Luke doesn’t react well to shock. He needs time to process things. And I’m not used to fucking up. Yet I keep doing so when it comes to Ella.

Eyes narrowed into slits, he tilts his head to the side. “What did you just say?”

I chuckle, pretending this is no big deal. If I have to gaslight my best friend, I will. And it’s probably the most innocent thing I’ll do to get her back.

“I meant, if I’m forced to marry someone to enter the Circle, and if it had been a way to save Ella from this current situation, I would have done it.”

“You told my mom you wouldn’t. Keep it that way.”

“Of course. But when I said that, it was because we were trying to stop Ella from initiating altogether. The situation is different now. And if one of the solutions would be to marry her, and Megan wasn’t part of the picture, I would. All I mean is, I’ll always help in any way I can.”

“Absolutely fucking not. You wouldn’t marry her even considering the new situation. Because I wouldn’t *let you*.”

It’s rare to see such coldness coming from Luke, but it’s not surprising when it comes to Ella. She means everything to him. In a family where no love is being passed around, they held on to each other like their lives depended on it.

“Luke, this is ridiculous. You’re telling me if there was no other option to save your sister, you wouldn’t let her marry me to save herself? Your family?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. My warning still stands. None of you fucking touch her. Last option or not.”

I can’t help but notice he’s the second Baker to tell me this. And it’s starting to hurt my feelings. In fact, *hurt my feelings* is a rather small thing to say when someone tries to snuff out the hope I have to get Ella back. Rip my

heart out of my chest would be more accurate.

“I understand.” I didn’t know a simple lie could feel like chewing glass. “If you don’t mind, I have to leave for class. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

I never wanted to feel distant from my best friend. I never wanted to manipulate him. All I ever wanted was to love his sister in peace.

No one is letting me love her in fucking peace.

* * *

It’s unfortunate that Ella will forever be paying for something she has no control over. She can’t control how much I need her to breathe, and she can’t control that I’ve always been too much of a coward to tell her brother. My mood was already horrible when I walked into Reeves’s undergrad class on this nightmare of a Monday, and the only person who can ever make me feel better is her. Problem is, I don’t believe she wants to.

When I have to witness her leaning against a desk with her ex—or whatever she names this one since I’m the one who always gets called the ex—so close to her he’s probably breathing the exact air that comes out of her lungs, I know my beautiful girl isn’t going to like my reaction.

Matias Roberts is some random jock-like lacrosse player who kissed her in front of everyone when he tried to make things official.

I know a few other things about him.

He’s twenty-one years old, broke his wrist when he was seven, has two younger sisters, got two concussions from lacrosse since he started college, majors in biology...and apparently walks into classes he doesn’t attend before they start. Just so he can talk to a woman who doesn’t belong to him.

Interesting, since I thought she was done with him. But that’s her problem. She’s too forgiving.

“Christopher,” a voice calls out right behind me. “Hey.”

Unfortunately, today I can’t pretend I’m even interested in talking to someone else, so I ignore them. There’s a woman I need to warn against flirting with other men. Especially men she slept with before. Consequences could be dire. I make my way to the desk Ella is leaning against while she talks to Matias, a satisfying rage simmering in my blood. I told her no other men. How many times can I say things calmly before it’s time to teach her a

real lesson?

Should I cut off his hand for the simple fact that he just wrapped his fingers around her biceps to squeeze twice? What kind of reassurance does she need that I couldn't give her? None. I can give her anything she wants.

I take my time walking, trying to catch some of the conversation as I approach.

"I can try to talk to her, Els," he tells her, sounding like he's trying to be reassuring. "She can't do this to you."

"She can, and she did."

It's easy to recognize when Ella is a split second from dropping the mask. Her sentences shorten, and her smile almost trembles from her muscles straining.

"You were captain," Matias adds. "It's so unfair."

"Class is about to start," I say evenly, but inside my pocket, I'm playing with the pearl I always keep on me. It keeps me steady.

Matias barely gives me a glance before going back to his conversation, but Ella isn't listening to him anymore. Her eyes are stuck on me.

"You should go." Intriguing me, her voice gets quieter. She scratches her throat when she realizes. "Reeves will be here any minute now."

He reluctantly steps back. "I'll see you at the Xi Ep party tonight, right?"

"I hope so." She smiles at him...and I hate it.

I watch him roll his shoulders back as he strides away, attempting to stand taller. It's hard to stand any taller than me.

"Funny that the other guy you were dating got his kneecap shattered, and this one isn't even scared to flirt with you in public."

She crosses her arms over her chest in that *I'm the ruler of this school* way she does so well. Cute. When she acts childish, I like to pull a strand of her hair like a schoolboy with a crush. But I can't today with everyone around us. Megan might have only been here for a few weeks, but she's got eyes everywhere. Unlike Ella, she's the kind to reign over a place with terror.

"We're not going there today, Chris. You don't get to pick who I date."

"I absolutely do. You don't date anyone."

Throwing her blonde hair over her shoulder, she shakes her head. "Delusional much?"

I get closer to her, too close for the public eye. Tapping the desk she's leaning on, I nod to myself.

"What the hell are you doing?"

“Checking how sturdy your desk is since I’m going to sit you down and fuck you on it the second this lesson is over. Make sure you keep that in mind during the whole class.”

Her mouth drops open, and I take my time observing the blush creeping up her face. How beautiful. A work of art.

I’d love to keep playing along. To go back and forth and let her pretend I don’t make absolutely any decision I want when it comes to her. But I notice her mascara has run slightly, and the tip of her nose is red.

“You cried. What’s wrong?” It’s more than I can handle. I’m not controlling my body when my hand caresses her cheek. The one that doesn’t still bear the mark of Megan’s hit.

“Are you insane?” she hisses and looks around us. “Step back.”

I only listen because it would hurt her more if I didn’t.

“Tell me what happened. Is it because of yesterday?”

My hand twitches to touch her again. I can’t breathe when she’s unwell. It eats me from the inside, crawls up my neck. I worry.

“I don’t want to talk about yesterday,” she snaps. “I want to lock it in a box, put it at the back of my head, and never touch it again. You all disgust me.”

Fair. The Silent Circle isn’t exactly a gentleman’s club.

“I understand the reasons why, but it’s not exactly healthy to —”

“Tell me it was you.”

I can feel my eyebrows lift so high I might have to catch them.

“Me?”

“In that room, after the initiations. It felt like the way *you* would...play. But I don’t know. He didn’t...” Her gaze darts to the side, and her cheeks blush as she hesitates to talk.

“He didn’t what?” I ask softly.

“Smell like you. Fuck, I’m stupid. My mind’s a mess after yesterday, and I don’t know what I’m saying anymore.”

My heart races, hope feeding my ever-growing infatuation.

“Are you upset because you wish I were the Shadow who kept you at the temple last night? Wondering if I’m mad about that since you know I told you not to let anyone else touch you?”

Her eyes narrow. “No,” she hisses. “You’re my ex, and I fucking hate you.”

She really has an inability to lie to me, and it’s kind of cute. It suits her.

Squaring her shoulders, she juts her chin. “Yesterday, and all it entails, is not going to hurt me because I decided so. Powerful men abusing women? Kinda used to that.”

“So what is it?”

Does she really think I’m going to let this go and not get to the bottom of why she was crying? I’ll dig to the center of the earth if I have to. Because what if someone hurt her?

“I got kicked off the cheer team. They elected a new captain and voted me out entirely.” She says it in a rush, like she wants to give me what I want and get it over with.

For a second. I have to pinch my lips not to smile. The woman was chased through a maze, but she decided that wouldn’t get to her. Cheerleading, however, is making her eyes shine with tears.

She went through a lot yesterday. And I have no doubt she’s currently projecting her anxiety onto something smaller than the reality of her situation. And even if she wasn’t, I don’t care. It’s important to her, so it’s important to me.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she grits out. “What’s cheerleading?”

“I’m not —”

“Being captain of that team is the only thing I’ve ever achieved. It’s the only thing I worked hard for and that actually led me somewhere.” Her voice breaks when she adds, “And now it’s gone.”

I hate that she feels that way about herself. She’s so beautiful, smart, and talented. I would give anything for her to see herself the way I do. But she never listens when I try to change her mind about herself.

“What happened? Why did they vote you out?”

“Don’t you follow Hermes on the SFU app?” she sneers. “They posted about me again. Said I knew about my dad’s parties. Apparently, I’m not a good image for the team.”

Something twists in my stomach.

I do have that stupid, toxic account. How was I meant to keep an eye on her while I was away otherwise?

“Do you want me to talk to the new cheer captain? I’ll tell her she’s making a mistake. I can be very convincing.”

A short laugh bursts out of her. “Could you not act like a dad about to defend his kid from the high school bullies? It’s weird.”

“I act like a man who cares. I know you didn’t have a lot of that growing

up, but it's not as uncommon as you think. And you're allowed to let it happen."

Her eyes narrow, but she's a queen who's had to deal with people throwing jabs at her more often than not. "Find someone else to feed your pathological need to *care*."

She must notice the way I lick my lips. I didn't even realize I was doing it until her eyes dropped to my mouth.

"But, Sweets. My pathological need to care goes hand in hand with your daddy issues."

With an eye roll, she doesn't deny it. "Fuck off."

"I will in just a second. I have one last question."

She cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Are you already wet imagining being fucked on this desk? Be a good girl and don't make a spot on the chair, will you?"

This time, she completely ignores me, but there's not much she can hide from a man who's learned everything about her.

Like the way she shifts her hips the second she sits down. Or the way her eyes don't come up to meet mine anymore. She focuses on taking her notebook out of her bag, her tablet, and Reeves's terrible book about criminal law. That man is the biggest fraud to walk this college. He was born into the Circle, initiated the second he turned eighteen, and has been demanding favor after favor since then. It'll come back to bite him in the ass.

I believe it already did when I threatened to tell the board he sleeps with students unless he left Ella to me after the initiations.

I'm the one who covers his lesson today. He was called by the Circle to work on the case of a Shadow who got too handsy with one of his housemaids. Those men have access to a pool of Aphrodites, and they still manage to put their filthy hands on unwilling women.

Like the parties Gerald Baker would organize. He wasn't only a pervert who paid younger people to be his and his friends' sex toys. He also roped his innocent daughter into it and threatened to take her down with him if she went to the police. Him and I talked extensively about this when I told him to leave her alone. He didn't listen, unfortunately.

Unfortunately for him.

Everyone is surprised when I start the class. I can only work on a case I studied in first year. I don't have the knowledge or experience to do much else, but most of these guys won't pass their LSATs anyway.

Watching Ella squirm every time I walk a little too close to her table is a thrill that makes me giddy. If I'm close enough to smell her perfume of vanilla and lavender, then I'm close enough to make her feel how much I want her.

She knows what I smell like too. I could sigh lovingly remembering that. *He didn't smell like you.*

They all have to hand in an essay today. I stand in front of my desk as they form a line, piling them up on the old furniture. When Ella hands hers over, I grab it right away, pretending to read some of it. I don't even lift my eyes when I say, "Ella, could you hold back." There's no justifying myself. She does what I say because she doesn't have a choice in front of everyone. An authority figure asks to talk about her essay. She listens.

But the second they're all gone, and the door closes, she doesn't have to behave anymore.

She sprints for the door without looking back. The tiny thing has nothing on me, though. I catch her before she reaches it, but for the sake of it, I fist her hair from behind, and push her until she's against the door.

"So close," I rasp in her ear. "We have to be quick, Sweets. Next class arrives in ten minutes."

Chapter Seventeen

Ella

SPINE - WesGhost

“Let go,” I pant. It’s not from the short run.
My breaths are ragged because of the man who needs minimum effort to turn me on. They were only a few words, but they kept me shifting on the spot for an entire hour.

My order—or plea—doesn’t even register with him.

He’s got a grip on my hip, and with the hand in my hair, he’s holding my face against the door. It’s not violent, but it’s firm, nonetheless. He’s not hurting me, just making me feel who’s in control.

“Chris.” I struggle in vain, but I don’t stop. “If you care about me like you keep saying, let go. I know you. You like me safe. I don’t feel safe right now.”

His presence is intense behind me. It’s impossible not to feel vulnerable when a man his size holds you against your will.

“Don’t be so naïve, Sweets. You know there’s more to it.” Pressing his lips against the top of my head, he inhales me before straightening again. “There’s nothing better than putting you back together after *I* break you.”

“Please,” I squeak. The mix of lust and fear is not a convenient cocktail. If the next class is so soon, we could get caught. My reputation is already getting worse every day. This will be social suicide. “Please, not here.”

“We’re slowly getting somewhere, aren’t we?” God, even the voice of his

monster is so soft. It's deeper, more dangerous, but the violence is undeniably *elegant*. "We went from you not wanting me to touch you, to you not wanting me to touch you in this room. A little more and you'll be screaming my name."

I hate when he does that. When he points out the way he pushes through my defenses.

It's impossible to shake my head. "Please. This is wrong. I can't be that girl. I'm begging you."

"You're right. Isn't it so wrong that I'm going to use any occasion of Megan turning her back to run to you and make you come on my dick? To drag you with me down the spiral of infidelity?"

"You can't do that —"

It's so quick there's absolutely nothing I can do about it. He flips up my uniform skirt and slaps my ass cheeks. One after the other.

"I can do anything I want, Ella. You're an Aphrodite."

My stomach drops. "Is that how you see me now?"

"I see you as the woman who told me I'd never have her again, and who's going to eat her words. Now keep quiet while I make you feel good. It's my favorite pastime."

I open my mouth. Maybe to insult him, maybe to scream. I'm not sure and neither is he, so he doesn't take a risk and slams his hand over my mouth.

"Do you know what I want to do to you when you don't listen? Punish you. Would ramming my cock down your throat until you're too sore to call for help do the trick?"

Heart slamming against my chest, I whimper behind his hand as I attempt to shake my head in his grip. Here he is, the demon that hides underneath. The man no one ever sees.

"There is not a place in this world where you're going to escape me, Ella. Do you understand?"

He delicately puts his hand between my legs as he kicks them apart with his foot. When he pushes my panties to the side, my mind goes blank.

"Because I can not only use you as a whore at the temple, but I can also make you my dirty little secret on campus. We'll hide it well, don't worry. We wouldn't want Megan to find out. And we both know your reputation means everything to you."

Inhaling sharply through my nose, I don't even know how to react. So I stay still and stop forcing back against him.

Sensing my compliance, he pulls his hand away from my mouth, calmly putting it between my shoulders, his other still cupping my pussy. He won't let me turn around.

"You're going to play along. Aren't you, Sweets?" Two fingers spread wetness from my entrance to my clit, and when he presses against the nub, my mouth falls open. "We're going to be discreet, don't worry. She won't catch us."

"I can't do this— *Oh fuck.*" He pushes a finger inside me, cutting my thoughts short.

"Can you see your desk from here?" he asks, moving his finger in and out at a teasing pace.

I nod, but that makes him tighten his grip on my hair.

"Come on. You know the drill. Give me words."

"Y-yes," I pant.

"Sweets," he scolds, but it's gentle. "Yes, what?"

"Please," I moan. "Oh my god, please, don't. I'm so scared someone will come in."

I feel my entrance stretch when he adds a second finger. "Why does that make you so wet?"

My heartbeat is pounding so hard I'm afraid it's going to knock against the old wooden door. What if someone catches us?

He moves torturously slow, my wetness practically leaking out of me, and my eyes flutter shut as he talks in my ear.

"Who takes care of you, Sweets? Who makes you wet? Who keeps you safe? Who will fight through everything for you?"

"Fuck...fuck..." I pant. "You do..." I hate myself for admitting that, but it feels so good and reassuring that a sense of relief washes over me as it resonates. "You do, Daddy."

"That's right, baby. Now, let's try again. Do you see your desk?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl," he purrs, fucking me a little faster with his fingers. "I'm a man of my word. So I'm going to let you go, and you're going to let me fuck you on your desk like I promised, won't you?"

"Oh God, yes...yes."

"Atta girl. But because you tried to make this hard on us, I'll just remind you of your place, okay?"

He slows down, easing out more pleasure I'm desperate to hold on to. But

then his hands leave me completely, and I release a whimper. I'm the one keeping myself flat against the door now, and my brain liquifies when he says. "Crawl to your desk."

How can a man make you moan without touching you?

He helps me turn around to face him. There's something reassuring about seeing his amber eyes again. They warm me from the inside out, make me feel loved when he treats me like a toy.

I'm safe with him, aren't I?

His hand slips under my skirt and he lowers my sodden panties until they're around my knees.

"Before I have to repeat myself, baby. Come on."

I'm not safe. My heart isn't safe. My reputation isn't safe. My life *isn't safe*. But the illusion of safety works for me.

I drop to my knees like a suppliant before their god. I comply like the sex slave the Silent Circle wants to make me. But none of them can make me do the things Christopher Murray can.

No one will ever get the worship I have toward him. When my mind forgets, my body doesn't. And when I refuse to accept it, he makes sure I remember why everything is better when he's around.

Flipping my skirt up, he exposes me.

The fear of someone coming in?

The shame of being the other woman?

The threat of my life blowing up to pieces?

It's all worth it when I crawl to my desk and feel his gaze glued to my pussy.

"Ella," he sighs, almost like he tried to resist and gave up. "How in the world do you expect me to stay away from you?"

The need in his voice somehow makes me more desperate for him. This shouldn't be so rewarding. With the underwear around my knees, it's harder to move, but he's patient, following me closely, stopping when I stop.

He helps me up and hoists me onto the desk before fisting my panties. Dragging them down my legs, he puts his free hand at the back of my head. His eyes drink me in, liquid poison filling him up.

"Open."

I do. And I let him shove my wet panties in my mouth.

"We can't have anyone waiting outside hearing you come on my dick."

Checking his watch, he grunts, undoing his belt. "I don't like rushing, but

I don't want anyone to see you like this. So beautiful and needy. That's only for me, isn't it?"

I nod like the wanton woman he made me, already trembling when he grabs my hips.

He pulls me to the edge of the table and lines himself with me.

My eyes widen when I feel the tip of his dick against my entrance.

"*Condom*," I try to say, which I can't, of course.

I go to take the panties out of my mouth, but he grabs one hand, and then the other, in one tight grip. He pulls me closer with the hold on my hip, my joint hands against my chest...and pushes inside me.

This man is stupid big. The kind I couldn't have imagined before I met him. And I haven't slept with him in almost a year.

I squeeze my eyes shut, shaking my head as I feel myself stretch. He's barely in and I'm already struggling to breathe through the tightness.

"Chris!" My mumbled complaint doesn't mean anything to him.

"You wouldn't be trying to tell me what to do, right? You do know this pussy belongs to me. You know I fuck it however I want."

When he pushes deeper, my whole body tenses.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are when you struggle to take me?"

My slickness welcomes him, but it doesn't change the fact that my body and his shouldn't ever mix. It feels unnatural, and it adds to the ache still present from yesterday.

"Take a deep breath through your nose, Sweets."

It's a weak breath, but it starts to help.

"Atta girl, and another one. There you go —"

He thrusts deeply, making me shriek behind the gag. I release my breath, my lungs shaking, and he drops his forehead on mine.

"Look at you, taking Daddy so well. Why would you try to withhold this from us?"

He's unmoving inside me, giving my body time to adjust. I think I might need forever. Pulling back slightly, he pushes back in. He does it again and again, a little quicker every time, drawing more wetness from me as moans break free from my throat. And the second he hears them, he stops holding back.

His thrusts push the desk forward while I drown in pleasure, and I don't even startle when it hits the wall. My eyes roll to the back of my head as he

starts rolling his hips.

“Put your arms around my neck. Don’t try to take the panties out.”

Releasing my wrists, he presses his thumb against my clit, and I wrap my arms around him. He strokes me slowly, his voice strained when he says, “We’re running out of time. If you don’t come, I’m going to sneak into your room tonight and eat you until your roommates hear how sorry I am to have left you wanting.”

I feel myself squeezing and pulsing around him as I barrel toward ecstasy, my moans growing louder and getting stuck in my mouth.

I want to scream his name and hold him. To feel him even closer than he is right now. As my body trembles from the explosion of pleasure, he pounds harder, strokes my clit more firmly, and at the last second, he pulls the panties out. He comes inside me with a low grunt.

I’m shaking from the strength of my orgasm that mixed with the fear of getting caught.

His lips are about to crash against mine and panic takes over me. Letting go of him, I fall back against the wall, and he misses my mouth.

Eyes narrowing just slightly, his hands wrap around my small waist. Sometimes I think, if he didn’t hold himself back, he could break me in half with those powerful hands. Sometimes...I think I want him to.

“You just denied me your lips,” he observes almost coldly.

“Somehow a kiss feels worse than meaningless sex,” I rasp. He pulls out of me, the feeling of emptiness making my heart ache. “It feels like cheating a second time.”

He cages my face between two strong hands on my cheeks. Does a bird locked in a cage even see the bars? Or does it suddenly realize it can’t fly away anymore? I can never tell when exactly Chris takes control over me. When he starts imprisoning my mind. I just know it’s too late when I understand.

“Do you think it’s meaningless sex when I fuck you, Sweets?” One of his hands comes to play with the seashell pendant in the hollow of my neck. The one that says I’m an Aphrodite for the Silent Circle.

I struggle to swallow. Butterflies erupt in my stomach no matter how much I try to lapidate them with reality.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s nothing. We’re nothing. And this will be the first and last time it happens while you’ve got a fucking girlfriend. Fuck. A fucking *fiancée*.”

“Language.” Apparently he’s more worried about my cursing than his fiancée.

He pulls something out of his pocket, but it’s too small for me to see. Hooking his fingers on my lower teeth, he drags a groan out of me as he pries my mouth open and puts whatever he’s holding on my tongue.

My taste buds tingle as the sweetness makes me salivate.

A love heart candy.

Still not letting go of my mouth, he lowers his lips to my ear. “I wasn’t wearing cologne yesterday.” My eyes flutter shut as my heart stutters. “Now that you know it’s not the first time, believe me when I tell you it’s not the last.”

He finally lets go of me, leaving me panting from shock.

Zippering up his dress pants, he stuffs my panties in the pocket. And then he takes his time helping me off the desk, combing his fingers through my hair and ensuring I look decent.

“We’re everything,” he finally says. “We’re all that matters. And when things get out of control, I want you to remember that.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ella

Stupid - Tate McRae

“Els?” a voice calls out as I hear the front door downstairs. “Are you home?”

I hear Alex running up the stairs and finally knocking on my bedroom door.

“Are you in here?”

I groan from under the covers, reluctantly grabbing my sleeping shorts and putting them on to hide the new cuts I made before I tell her to come in.

“Hey, pretty,” she says softly. “How are you?”

I turn around in bed, burying my face in my pillows as she comes to sit next to me. Her gentle soul can be felt all around the room and in the way she delicately puts her hand on the covers and pulls them down. And still, I don’t feel safe.

“Did you not go to class this afternoon?” she asks.

I couldn’t when Chris kept my underwear and his cum was leaking out of me. I couldn’t when I bumped into Megan who is now unsurprisingly Maria’s new best friend. The new captain of the cheer team, who replaced me. Not when everyone on campus is looking at me like I’m the devil.

I don’t say any of this to Alex. I can’t even face her.

I know her and Peach must have seen Hermes’s post. I haven’t been able to stop crying all afternoon. After I got dropped from the team by *text*, after

sleeping with Chris, I just couldn't be around anyone anymore. And to make it all worse, I had a call from Luke to say how disappointed he was in me to have gone to the initiations. As if I didn't do it to save us all. Apparently, at least I made mom proud.

"Els," she calls so lightly it feels like the stroke of a feather. "You're my best friend, you know that, right? A little rumor won't ever make me change my mind about that."

My voice is stuck in my throat. I can't answer anything.

"The truth won't either," she adds.

She knows it's not a rumor. God, it makes me feel sick.

"I love you. I know what it's like to have the weight of an untouchable man on your shoulders. Even when that man is supposed to love you and care for you." She sighs, probably remembering her own dad. "Dads are meant to protect you. Yours, mine...they didn't. Bad men get what they deserve."

My head pops up from the shock at her words. I wipe the tears that started to spill again. Did sweet Alex Delacroix really just say that?

"Was it true?" she asks. "What Hermes published?"

I nod, another sob pushing past my tight throat. "I'm sorry. That I did it. And that I didn't tell you or Peach."

With a shake of her head, she puts a strand of my blonde hair behind my ear. She wipes a tear too. "You were scared."

"I didn't know what I was doing at first. And when I found out, he said he would take me down with him." I burst into tears from the shame and guilt that have been clinging onto me for years. "And now he's gone, and I somehow feel bad for him?"

"Why do you feel bad?" I feel like I'm with a therapist, but it still helps.

"Because I'm happy that he's dead."

Pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes, I try to calm myself. It's only when Alex takes me in her arms that one of the tight bands wrapped around my lungs snaps.

Downstairs, the opening of the front door sounds again.

"Ella. Baker!" Peach screams from downstairs.

Another set of feet run up the stairs, and then my fiery friend bursts into my room. She doesn't bother knocking like Alex.

I'm the only one who sees her since Alex's head is resting on my shoulder, facing the window rather than the door.

"You're not having a hug session without me. Tell me I'm dreaming."

She drops her bag on the floor, jumping into bed with us and making us shriek as she forces herself between us.

“Ella, please tell me you weren’t in some dark place in your mind,” she implores. “Tell me you didn’t think we’d ever see you differently.”

“Peach, you’re choking her,” Alex scolds.

“Maybe I should. For ignoring our texts all day.”

“Can’t. Breathe,” I wheeze.

She finally lets go of me, poking the side of my head. “Are you okay in there? I was worried to death. If I hadn’t been stuck in a four-hour biology mock exam, I would have called the cops. Search and rescue. The president.”

My gaze drops to my lap. “I was scared of facing you. Both of you.”

“Maybe Peach a little more,” Alex laughs softly.

“Maybe.” Lips quirking, a chuckle escapes me.

Peach gives us each a middle finger, sending us into a laughing fit.

“So, your dad roped you in to organize illegal sex parties. I’m sure that surprised absolutely *no one* from Stoneview?” She shrugs. “We know you’re not some perv, Els.” Her glinting green eyes search mine. “I’m sorry that he put you through this,” she says in a calmer tone.

I nod and swallow past the lump in my throat. “I’m sorry I never told you. It was easier to ignore if I kept it to myself.”

Alex gives me a look full of empathy. “Don’t apologize to us. You never have to apologize to us.”

Peach huffs, leaving us another few seconds of silent love before revealing, “I’ve got tequila. And there are two losers downstairs who followed me home. They said they’re our neighbors. I don’t know. Weird guys.”

My heart squeezes thinking Wren and Achilles are here. They didn’t do anything wrong yesterday, but they’re not good people. I’m not sure it’s safe to have them around the house anymore. Especially if the girls don’t know who they’re facing.

“Let’s go get drunk,” Peach concludes. “We need it.”

My face falls the second we’re downstairs and turn right into the living area. Chris is sitting on one of the three sofas we have arranged in a U-shape around the coffee table. Achilles is sitting on another, and Wren on the third.

“What the fuck?” Peach mumbles. “Did we just walk into a Godfather meeting? When did you get in here?” she aims at Chris.

“When I opened the door,” Achilles answers casually.

“It’s our house, Achilles. You don’t just let strangers in,” she bites back.

“Strangers? We’re friends.”

“Oh yeah, since when? I don’t remember you ever braiding each other’s hair. You couldn’t fucking stand him in high school.”

Chris chuckles, his gaze briefly leaving me to dart to Achilles. Of course, Peach has no idea that the three of them are part—or almost part—of a secret society that keeps them close.

“Enemies-to-lovers. Ever heard of it?” our supposedly best friend replies, his haughtiness getting annoying.

“Achilles,” Wren scolds. He’s trying to act like the voice of reason, when we all know he’s only stepping in because Peach is the current target.

“Go calm down your woman, Wren. She’s getting on my nerves.”

“Seriously?” I step in. But Wren is already standing up, huffing as if Peach is a piece of work, not Achilles.

“*Not your woman.*” She takes a step back. “I will punch you, Wren,” she hisses.

Yeah, I don’t think that matters. He’s already grabbing her by the back of the neck, dragging her out of the room. Neither me nor Alex interrupts them because we know Peach doesn’t want us to. We stay out of everything that includes Wren. I think she’s too confused herself for us to get involved.

“You three are straight-up assholes,” I announce through gritted teeth.

“One of you is already getting taught a lesson,” Chris purrs. “Do you want to be next?”

“You—”

“Okay, can we take it down a notch, please?” Alex finally says, her tone calming me down with just a few words. “We’re all friends here. There’s no need to act that way toward each other.” She pauses, to give us all a second, then softly adds, “Hi, Chris. It’s nice to have you back in Stoneview.”

She says *Stoneview* despite currently being in Silver Falls because we’re all Stoneview kids, and that’s just how we refer to our base.

He politely returns her sentiment, asking about her, but his gaze won’t leave me.

Unable to take the whiskey swirling in his mischievous eyes, I look down at my shorts, my eyes fixating on where my skin itches. I’m dying to dig my nails in the flesh. I want to scratch so badly I feel my nerves tingling.

When I get out of my own thoughts, I look up to the rest of the group. And while Alex and Achilles are now sitting on the same sofa, talking about

the Xi Ep party tonight, I find Chris still staring at me. And once Wren and Peach come back, sharing a sofa too, I'm the only one left standing. They've got everything needed to make margaritas, and Peach slides to the floor between Wren's legs, starting to cut some limes.

"Whatever, Els. The assholes aren't going anywhere." She blows on a strand of red hair that's escaped her ponytail. "Just take a seat and get drunk."

I look around the room, knowing I don't have much of a choice as to where I should sit.

"I'm only going to sit next to you because it's the last option," I tell Chris. "Don't get any ideas."

He pinches his lips, clearly stopping himself from smiling. "I would never."

I wish I could say I feel awkward as I sit down on the sofa and he wraps an arm around my waist to pull me closer to him. But I don't. No, all I feel are butterflies erupting in my stomach as I keep my eyes on Peach's hands while she pours alcohol in a shaker.

I startle when Chris murmurs in my ear. "Feel free to follow Peach's example and kneel between my legs, Sweets."

"Fuck you," I whisper-hiss.

His soft laugh tickles my neck, making me shiver with pleasure. Sweet orange and cedar wood surrounds me, and I almost feel dizzy from it. "Don't say fuck you to me. And if you don't want to kneel here, that's okay. I can always make you at the temple."

A band tightens around my lower belly, and I squirm on the soft cushion. I seriously need to stop my body from reacting to him. I'm just not sure how to do that.

Thankfully, I have a best friend who catches our exchange, and her annoyed voice brings me back to reality.

"Ella Marjorie Baker, you better not be sleeping with your ex."

That's a good wake-up call. I try to push Chris's hand away, but he doesn't let me. Of course he doesn't. That gigantic hand tightens its grip on my side, making me feel like he could crush me as he delicately pulls me closer. It's always slow and steady when an anaconda swallows you.

"At least she's sleeping with someone," Wren mocks, pulling at Peach's ponytail from behind. "How's celibacy?"

"*Unwanted* celibacy," she snaps. "I don't know why everyone's put me on some sort of blacklist." Looking over her shoulder, she narrows her eyes

at him. "But don't you worry, I'll get to the bottom of it." She mixes everything in the shaker. "Maybe at the Xi Ep party tonight. Who's ready to pregame?"

I throw my head back, the mention of our sorority already stressing me out.

"I should probably avoid parties until the cheer team stops trying to rally everyone against me."

"So, you're never partying again?" Alex chuckles.

"I'm still part of the team, and I'll make it stop," Peach interjects. "Who cares about the mean cheerleaders when you have such a nice one by your side?"

"You're the only one who defended me. Fuck, if you hadn't texted me about the new group chat they created to vote me out, I would have showed up to practice and been humiliated in front of everyone. I don't want to see those bitches."

Chris's hand discreetly slips under my top and moves up my back, to my ribs, then over to the side, sending goosebumps down my arms. His fingertips graze my nipple when he leans over again. "Language."

God, I hate when he does this to me. Just because he's a pretend saint who rarely curses doesn't mean I have to stop cursing like a sailor. It's my way of expressing myself, for fuck's sake. But Chris's girlfriend doesn't curse. She does everything she's told, and she acts like the perfect woman because that's the image he likes to portray to the world.

Fuck him. I'm not Chris Murray's girlfriend.

Peach puts a margarita in front of Alex, and then one in front of me. "We'll just party here, then. We can watch those horribly boring holiday movies you love. Oh! Do you want to kick out the boys and bake something together? Oh, oh! Please make chocolate chip cookies."

"You're not kicking us out if Ella is baking cookies," Achilles grumbles. "And if there are cookies, they'll be double chocolate."

"Shut up, caveman. We do what we want." She smiles devilishly at him. "Maybe we'll kick you out *and* make double chocolate."

"Wren is right. You need to get fucked. Your asshole personality is getting worse."

We all laugh at that. Well, apart from Peach. And when I hear Chris's rare but oh-so-delicious, gravelly laugh...my entire being melts.

For a second, this feels like it should be. Me in his arms, laughing with

friends. Then I remember Megan. And the need to anger him takes over.

Grabbing the drink Peach gave me, I down it and slam it back on the table. “*Fuck*. That’s good.”

I stand up fast, making sure Chris can’t hold me back, and stride out of the room, to the other side of the entrance hall where the kitchen is. And as I do that, I shout, “I’ll make both *fucking cookies*.” And I flip Chris off, just because I know he hates it.

“Uh, is she alright?” I hear Alex ask, but I don’t reply.

I can’t hear the rest of the conversation as I start focusing on baking. I preheat the oven, grab a bowl from the cabinet and ingredients from the fridge.

I’m opening the oven, ready to slide the tray of dough balls I just rolled inside, when I feel a presence behind me. I finish, set up the timer on the oven, and I’m about to turn around when two hands grab my hips, forcefully pushing me against the counter.

I try to turn around, but he grips my hair, bending me over until my cheek is on the marble countertop.

“Let me go, fucking asshole.”

“Ella,” Chris growls in my ear. “I have a secret to let you in on.” He pushes his hips forward, making sure the counter painfully digs into mine and that I feel his hard-on against my ass. “Act like a lady, get treated like one. Act like a brat, get fucked like one.”

He kicks my feet apart and makes sure to stay so I can’t close them. His fingers wrap around my forearm, slide down to my wrist, and then to my hand, leaving a trail of fiery need everywhere they touch. He delicately plays with my middle finger.

“Was it this one?”

“Seriously?” I mock him, yet I’m unable to stop the fear hardening my stomach. “Are you going to play the mob boss and cut my finger off for flipping you the bird?”

“Answer my question, Sweets.”

“Yes. Happy?”

“I will be when I make you regret acting like a little brat in front of all your friends.”

With his other hand, he pulls my loose shorts and panties to the side, then forcefully moves my hand between my legs, holding specifically on to my middle finger.

“You’re dreaming,” I groan, pushing against him with my hips to try to dislodge him.

When my wriggling doesn’t work, the panic settles in. “Chris...don’t. Everyone is across the hall.”

My voice has dropped to a whisper. We don’t have doors between the kitchen, the entrance hall, and the living room. Only large, doorless frames that separate the three different parts of the first floor.

“Stop.”

Still holding my clothes to the side with one hand, he makes me test my entrance with one finger.

“I’ll only stop if I think you’re not enjoying yourself. Your very wet pussy is telling me you’re enjoying yourself.” The rumbling vowels as he speaks low so no one hears stupidly doubles my wetness.

“I’m not.” I try to be curt, but I gasp when he circles my entrance with my own finger. “Anyone could come in. Anyone could *hear*.”

“You better be very quiet, then. *Whisper* ‘sorry, Daddy, for being such a bratty girl.’”

I try to shake my head against the counter, but that’s not an option, so I force the word out of my mouth. “No —”

“Ah ah.” He pushes the tip of my middle finger inside my wetness, forcing my mouth to drop open. “Try again, baby. Don’t worry, we can take this nice and slow until you learn your lesson.”

No, we can’t. And he knows that. Any of my friends could walk into the kitchen.

As he pushes farther in, I feel myself contract around my finger. Fuck, we’re barely two knuckles in, and I’m already losing my mind.

“Sweets,” he growls behind me, pressing himself tighter against my ass. “Say sorry and I’ll have mercy on you.”

The awkward way in which he’s the one controlling my finger, the fact that it can’t fully be pushed in, and that it’s *only* one finger, is driving me crazy one thrust at a time. It’s torturously not enough.

Chris feels the exact moment I try to push against our joined hands. He uses it against me, forcing my finger out of me and holding it out of reach.

“Oh, baby, look at how impatient you are. Be a good girl for me so I can give you what you need.”

I wish I could say I think twice about it. I don’t. It slips out of my mouth naturally.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” I whisper desperately.

“What for?”

“For being a brat.”

“There she is. It wasn’t so hard, was it?”

When he slides inside me again, I have to bite down on my lip to not let out a moan. It’s not just my middle finger. He’s using both my middle and ring fingers, and the pleasure it triggers makes me shiver.

“Are you going to swear at me again?” he asks softly, forcing me to thrust my fingers.

“I w-won’t, Daddy,” I moan as quietly as I can. “Please, I need to come.”

“You do, don’t you?”

My whimper is the only answer I manage to give him. He pushes my fingers deeper, and I’m the one who curls them to reach the magic spot.

“Wait,” he commands, like giving an order to a dog he’s training. I’m trembling from need, nearly panting, so close to the edge.

“Little brats who can’t behave get tighter rules. From now on, you will only come on my fingers, my dick, or my tongue, is that clear? Enjoy the feeling of your fingers deep inside your cunt, Sweets, because you’re not allowed to make yourself come anymore. I own you, and I own your orgasms.”

Pulling my fingers out of my pussy, he slaps my clit, sending another overwhelming sensation through my body that has my knees wobbling.

“Is that clear?” he growls. At the same time, he releases my hand, and I feel him undo his pants behind me.

“Yes, Daddy,” I rasp, my head swimming from pure lust.

I’m not too sure what I’m agreeing too. I just know the tip of his dick is pressing against my entrance and I can’t think straight anymore.

“That’s my girl.” He pushes in harshly, my body stretching around his thick cock.

“Oh God,” I whimper. “Slow down, please.”

Pulling back, he rubs my lower back. “Deep breaths. You know you can take me.”

I exhale a trembling breath, and a groan of pleasure escapes him as he sinks deeper. “There you go, doing so good for me.”

He pulls back and pushes in deeper again. In a few strokes, he’s bottoming out inside me.

Stilling his movements, he brings his hand to my sweaty forehead and

pushes strands of hair away.

“I’m going to make you come on my dick, Sweets. Do you need me to gag you so no one hears you?” He punctuates his question with a short thrust that makes me whimper.

I squeeze my eyes, shame choking me. And I nod.

“Words.” Another slow roll of his hips while he’s deep inside me.

“Yes,” I moan. “Please, Daddy. Gag me.”

“My pleasure, baby.”

He takes hold of the dish cloth hanging from the oven handle, twists it a few times, and murmurs softly. “Open.”

I do, letting him put the material in my mouth. I think he’s going to tie both ends behind my head, but instead he grips them with one hand and pulls back, like holding reins.

I squeak when my head lifts toward him, and he thrusts harshly inside me. He uses the cloth as a lever, pulling a little harder every time he thrusts in and making me choke on it. Each thrust is a step farther down to a hell that feels heavenly, each moan that I swallow back is the kind of shame I’ll never be able to wash off. He’s making me see stars before he even starts shifting so that he grazes against my G-spot. He hits it repeatedly, driving me completely insane.

I can’t even breathe anymore when I convulse around his cock, my wetness dripping down the apex of my thighs, and he releases in a restrained grunt, making sure to try to be *discreet* about it.

He’s still inside me when the oven timer beeps, startling me.

“Perfect timing,” he purrs as he pulls out, taking the cloth out of my mouth and throwing it over his shoulder.

I feel his thick cum slipping, and he pushes my panties back in place. “Don’t touch.”

“Chris,” I complain, but the slap on my ass makes me clamp my mouth shut.

Gently holding my waist, he turns me around and lifts me onto the counter. He moves around the kitchen, filling a glass of water and giving it to me. I’m still on cloud nine, completely unaware what is reality and what is my post-orgasm high as he stops the timer, takes hold of the cloth again and folds it, using it to pull the tray of cookies out of the oven.

He leaves them for a minute, turning to me as he takes something out of his pocket. I put the glass to the side, grateful for the hydration, but I don’t

know what to say to him, so I keep my eyes on my thighs.

I hear a plastic wrap being fiddled with, and a second later, he's gently gripping my chin and pushing a love heart into my mouth.

I let it rest on my tongue, loving the sweetness.

"Why do you keep giving me these?" I ask quietly.

"Because I know you," he snorts. "You forget to eat. That's when you don't skip meals on purpose to keep your preferred body shape for ballet. You don't take good care of yourself, and I don't want you to faint or go into shock after I fuck you the way I do. A bit of sugar only does you good."

My heart skips a beat.

Shit. I hate that I love the way he takes care of me.

Our eyes meet as I look up. I feel dizzy from the powerful trance he's able to keep me in. He leans down, ready to kiss me. But I pull away.

"Ella," he growls, gripping my chin tighter. "Stop this."

I get out of his grip by grabbing his forearm and pushing him off me. He lets me. I'm not sure why.

"I don't want you to kiss me."

"Why?"

"Because it makes me feel like you love me." It's a barely audible sentence, but I know he doesn't miss it.

Gripping both my thighs, he settles between my legs. "Do you really think I would put myself at so much risk if I didn't love you? Do you think I would have challenged an established Shadow the night of initiations? Risk my deal with Megan? Don't act ignorant just because you think it'll help you out of this. There is no way out."

My wide eyes can't leave his face, and he only realizes something is off after a few seconds of silence.

"What?"

"What deal?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "What are you talking about?"

"What deal with Megan?"

He takes a step back, running a hand at the back of his neck. "I said my *relationship* with Megan."

Feeling like a crazy woman, I shake my head. No, I know what he said. "You said your *deal*."

"You heard wrong." That's all he deigns me as he steps to the side, taking a plate out of a cabinet and a spatula out of the drawer.

“Chris, don’t lie to me.”

“I said *relationship*,” he grits out as he scoops one cookie after the other, putting them on the plate.

“Why are you lying?” I insist. “What risk are you taking by breaking a deal with her? And what kind of deal is it?”

“Ella,” he says sternly. “You’re getting on my nerves.”

When he’s done with the cookies, he pulls his phone out of his pocket. “I have to go.”

This time, he pulls a small box out of his other pocket. He stands in front of me again and places it on the counter beside my thigh.

“This is what I came for initially. It’s for you. I’m sorry you feel like you can’t go to that party since you’re not part of the cheer team. I hope you know in my eyes you have better skills than every single girl on that team combined.”

Taking a cookie from the plate, he bites into it and his eyes flutter shut. “You really do make the best chocolate chip cookies. I love them.” He winks at me. “I’m having a party at my Stoneview house tonight. You’re more than welcome to come if you don’t feel welcome at an SFU party.”

“You?” I snort. “Mister Boring is having a party at his house? You used to only have those for your birthday.”

His eyebrow quirks before his lips do the same. “Well, technically Jake and Rose are organizing me a party. But today is September 15th, Sweets.”

Fuck. It’s his birthday.

“I’m so sorry I —”

“You can make it up to me by coming to my party. Wear that beautiful silk blue skirt you own and a white top. And that pale pink gloss with it. It looks gorgeous on you.”

My heart drops, memories of my high school relationship with him twisting my stomach.

“You don’t tell me what to wear anymore. That...that was the old us.”

He smiles knowingly. “It’s us. Period. I tell you what to do, and you listen like a good girl because you love the way I praise you when you do.”

“But—”

“I want every guy at my birthday to wish they could fuck you. And then I’ll take pleasure knowing I’m the only one who gets to sink his cock in that beautiful pussy of yours.”

“You’re an ass —”

“Watch your mouth or I’ll wash it with my cum before I leave.”

I smirk. “I thought you had to go. Aren’t you in a rush?”

“I’ll always make time for my beautiful slut.” His hand softly tangles in my hair, and he tilts my head to the side, dropping a kiss on my cheek. “Please, come,” he whispers in my ear.

Still in a daze, I watch him walk out of the kitchen. I won’t be going to his party, that’s a certainty, but I feel like a dick for not realizing it was his birthday.

I don’t touch the box he gave me until I hear the front door closing.

It’s a sky-blue velvet jewelry box, and when I open it, my mouth drops open. There’s a single string in there, and multiple little pearls. A necklace I have to make myself.

I grab the note, putting the box to the side.

One at a time, Sweets.

God, I hate that man so much it feels a lot like love.

I love you

It feels so good to be jealous and possessive over you. Like a drug I can't get enough of. Why should I feel anything but pride in knowing I'm utterly obsessed with one woman? Why should I feel regretful or ashamed that I want to destroy any other man who gets near you?

Chapter Nineteen

Chris

All this time - Toby Mai

I park in front of one of the Xi Ep house on sorority row. It's not far at all from the residences where Ella lives. Many people are probably waiting at my house in Stoneview, but I have something to settle before celebrating my twenty-fourth year. I grab the documents I brought with me and make my way to their front door. The second a girl opens, she shakes her head.

"You can't get in. Xi Ep girls only until the party starts."

"Could you tell Maria Delgado someone's here to see her?" I say with a smile.

She hesitates, shifting from one foot to another. She can probably feel her friend is in trouble but can't reconcile that with my warm smile and golden boy look.

"I tend to get what I want," I add as an explanation. "You don't want to get in the way of that."

She closes the door on me, and a minute later, Maria is the one who opens it.

"Christopher," she smiles brightly. "This is a nice surprise. I thought you weren't coming to our party tonight."

"I'm not."

My curt answer takes her by surprise. Like most people I've spoken with on campus, she's used to a nicer version of me.

I hand her the documents I'm holding.

"I wanted you to know the dean and your cheer coach have been made aware of the drug tests you falsified in the summer to stay on the team."

Her face falls, shock rendering her speechless.

"You should pack your bags," I say as I look behind her into the hallway of the house.

"Wait, wait," she babbles, coming out and closing the door behind her. "Don't do this. What do you want?"

I shake my head because she clearly didn't get it. "I don't want anything. It's done. You're being expelled from SFU."

I'm not about to tell her I'm getting her expelled because she hurt the woman I love. It might have been just about kicking Ella off of the team for her. But to Ella, it's a hit to her confidence, a stain on the list of things she thought she could achieve. And that can't happen on my watch.

"How the fuck do you know about my drug test?" she hisses, going for anger rather than bargaining this time.

Tilting my head to the side, I observe the way she's trying to process this: a hand rubbing her forehead, the one holding the papers crushing them, eyebrows pinched.

"Ah, well. I know a lot of people who can give me information. And they were kind enough to give me information about you."

Her eyes drop to my hand, and she takes a step closer when she sees the signet ring on my finger.

"We're on the same side, Chris. My uncle, he's trying to find me someone I could date so I can get initiated next year."

Her anxious chatter is annoying, but I let her have it. I understand her fear. I, too, get extremely anxious when I think of losing something I love. Like Ella, for example.

"We're not on the same side, Maria. See, my side always wins. And I have no idea whatever initiation you're talking about."

She grabs me by my shirt, trying to pull me to her but only managing to bring herself closer instead. "I know some men in the Circle. I could ask for a favor?"

I shrug her off calmly. "Again, I have no idea what you're talking about. But if I did know, I would advise you to keep your mouth shut. Knowledge is power, and that is probably why those men you talk about keep people like you ignorant."

Tears run down her face as she looks up at me. “Please...I don’t...I don’t want to be expelled.”

“It’s too late for that. You’ll get an email and an appointment with the dean before end of day tomorrow.”

I don’t enjoy her sobs as I walk back to my car, but she should have been careful who she hurt with her actions. Who knows, maybe after a while, people will get the hint. Stay away from Ella Baker. Don’t hurt her. Don’t upset her. Don’t make her feel uncomfortable in any way, shape, or form.

If there isn’t a smile on her face, I want to know why. If there’s a tear on her cheek, I want to know who. And if there’s a name tattooed on her heart, it has to be mine.

All I want right now is to touch Ella, make her feel how much she belongs to me.

One day, she’ll learn everything I did for her to end up in my arms. The good, the bad. She’ll see the regret I had to live with after I ended things with her. Mainly, she’ll understand there isn’t any other ending to her story than the one where I’m her happily ever after.

Even if she disagrees.

* * *

My house is full of way too many people I don’t know when I arrive. With my mom away for work, Juliette went to sleep at a friend’s house. There was absolutely no way I was going to celebrate my birthday at the house I share with Megan. That place haunts me with the person she really is behind closed doors. I can’t stand being there. So, my best friends insisted on organizing me a party in my family home.

I should have known not to trust my them for a small party.

“Here he is!” a hoarse voice shouts over the music as I cross the door. “The birthday boy.”

Jake takes me in a hug, shoving a tumbler of whiskey in my hand. “You missed the champagne.”

Luke is right after him, giving me another tumbler. “Drink, brother.”

“The last time we got too drunk on whiskey, we all woke up with a wonky tattoo.”

“Hey, don’t criticize my tattooing skills.” The last voice belongs to Rose.

I've been seeing a lot more of her than the others since we're both assistants to Reeves.

"You three want to get me drunk when you're already fucked," I scold playfully. "Who's going to take care of you?"

They pause for a second, looking at each other. "It's fine," Luke slurs. "We're fine."

I roll my eyes, down a glass of whiskey, and take one sip of the other one. "I'll watch what I drink."

"No," Jake groans. "Please, don't be a dad tonight. We just want you to relax."

"You've been so fucking tense lately," Rose adds. "He's been so fucking tense," she repeats to our friends.

"Probably because his psycho of a girlfriend doesn't let him take two steps in any direction without asking where he's going," Luke chuckles.

"Who with?" Rose insists. "How long? What's their social security number?"

They all burst out laughing, and I struggle to join them. If only it was funny.

"Where is she, by the way?" I ask, glancing past them and at the crowd of people dancing in my living room.

They stop, sharing a telling look.

"Oh." Rose squints her eyes as she looks around, nodding to herself. "Yeah, we forgot to invite her."

"Guys, come on." I run a hand over the back of my neck as I pull out my phone.

I've already got a missed call from her. I know she must have prepared something for my birthday, and it would be suicidal to not go home. I should have told her myself about this party, but it was *technically* meant to be organized by my friends, and I know that deep down...I didn't want Megan here.

Rose snatches my phone, gives it to her twin, Jake, and him and Luke are off right away, disappearing in the crowd.

"You *forgot* to invite her, huh?"

"You know how it is," she chuckles. "Our parties are private."

We both eye the number of people in my house.

"I don't know how they got here," she says drunkenly, taking another sip.

"Stop drinking. You're drunk enough as is."

She pulls the glass away from her lips and replaces it with something else.

Cigarette hanging from her lips, long black hair in a serious mess, and eyes bright with mischief, she smiles at me.

“A party without Megan will be like the good old days. Don’t tell me you don’t miss it. People partying upstairs, us four in your basement doing our own thing. Ella somewhere in the house, wondering at what point you’re going to take her to a room and —”

“Rose. Don’t.” I automatically double-check Luke is far enough from us he wouldn’t hear us.

“What? Is she not here yet?”

“She’s not going to come, and you know it.”

“But did you invite her?”

I huff. “Of course I did.”

“Not Megan, though. You didn’t think of telling *her* we were organizing you a party.”

Refusing to admit she’s right, I change the topic and snatch the cigarette from between her lips. “I thought you told your fiancée you’d stopped smoking.”

“I have.” She scratches her throat, looks away as she starts picking at her hair, and then back at me. “Don’t tell Rachel.”

I roll my eyes. “Is she here?”

“Jake and I agreed not to bring our partners so we could focus on you tonight.”

“I don’t know if I feel like having fun,” I admit.

I know I can be honest with her; she’ll figure it out if I’m not anyway.

“Why?”

“You know why,” I tell her, but she insists on dragging it out of me.

“Spell it out for me.”

I look down at my shoes, back at her midnight eyes, and huff. “Because Ella isn’t by my side.”

“Oh, Christopher. You are so fucked.”

She takes me by the hand and drags me to the door right next to the kitchen, the one that leads to the basement where we used to hang out. Everything is still there from our high school days, the sofas, the TV, the coffee table. God knows why we would have parties when we knew we would end up down here. It’s our little den, our bubble where we can be

comfortably ourselves.

* * *

I don't know what time it is when I decide to go back up. The party is still going strong, but if I'm not having fun downstairs with my best friends, I know I won't be having any fun up here. Everything seems so pointless when Ella isn't around. My only goal is to get her back, and it's been driving me so intensely that everything else in life falls flat.

Some girl stumbles into me, and I catch her before she falls to the floor.

"Careful," I say softly as I grab her drink from her hand before she can cause more damage. "I think you've had enough of that."

For fuck's sake. I think I can hear it, the way my friends tell me I act like a dad. I sound so boring.

"Sorry," the girl groans, pushing red hair away from her face.

My lips part when I realize who it is. "Peach."

"Christopher Murray," she slurs. "Are you following us or something?"

"You're at my house."

"Am I now?" She looks around dramatically. "Oh, wait. This is totally your house."

I hold her in place by the shoulders, leaning down so I can look into her eyes. "Who's *us*? Is Ella here?"

"Of course she is. She said it was someone's birthday but didn't want to go. I convinced her, though. The girl needed a night out. She's had enough bad news for a lifetime, don't you think? Anyway. We decided to party in the game room. Maybe I should go check on her."

It's like a shot of adrenaline. Now that I know she's here, the colors in the room are sharper, the music louder. Everything falls into place, and I'm ready to celebrate my birthday.

"Why don't you go get yourself a glass of water? I'll check on Ella."

I practically run up the stairs, heading for the game room on the second floor and pushing the door open. It's not like they're having an orgy in here. Really, they're just a bunch of friends acting like idiots. But Ella doesn't get to act like an idiot around other men.

She should know better than that.

I walk into the room, and none of them hear me when I calmly say,

“Ella.”

Except her. Because that’s how well I trained her when we dated.

What I didn’t take into account is that she’s more drunk than I’ve ever seen her.

“Uh oh, guys.” She giggles to herself as she calls her other friends. “The real daddy is here.”

Chapter Twenty

Ella

Bad idea right? - Olivia Rodrigo

“Leave. Seriously, Ella. I’ll fucking kick you out myself.”
Luke’s hard eyes clash with mine. I’m not going anywhere.
“I’m here with my friends. It’s mostly SFU people. Don’t tell me to leave.”

He’s still furious at me for initiating into the Silent Circle.

“Our house is ten minutes down the road. Go home,” he insists.

I feel like a child being told off. Like I did when we were in high school and he wouldn’t want me to be at his friends’ parties. More often than not, Chris would be the one to tell my brother nothing bad would happen to me and he’d keep an eye on me. And since he’s always been the voice of reason in their group, Luke would accept. Little did he know, Chris had a very specific way of taking care of me.

“I don’t want to go home,” I hiss. “I don’t want to see Mom.”

I haven’t spoken with my mom since the day of initiations. Ignoring her is easier than accepting what she made me do.

“She went to France with a “friend” to forget about this whole situation. I’m surprised you don’t know. You both seemed so close since you planned how to get initiated behind my back because you didn’t trust me to find a solution for us.”

“She came to me,” I snap. “She didn’t go to you all beaten up, she didn’t

order you to sacrifice yourself to fix this situation as if you were nothing but a disposable asset.” Disgust rolls over me. I had done my best not to think about my mom knowingly sending me to a place where she knew women suffered to the hands of cruel men. I didn’t want to acknowledge it. And Luke is forcing me to do that.

“My own mother threw me to the wolves, Luke. And instead of trying to make me feel better, my brother told me he was disappointed in me. As if I didn’t do this to protect our family in the first place.”

His jaw clenches a few times, frustration pouring out of him, and he avoids my gaze for as long as he can. But just like he can only ignore the truth for so long, he ends up looking me in the eyes again.

“I’m so sorry, Els,” he rasps, something constricting his throat. “That Mom was so selfish, and that I was so cruel. I would have done anything to save you, and knowing that you two did this without my knowledge is an excuse I tell myself. You didn’t know, Luke. That’s why you couldn’t help. I’m your big brother, and I wasn’t able to protect you, but we both know it’s not because you initiated behind my back. It’s because I’m useless. You have no idea how much my heart breaks every day.”

He pulls at his blond hair, downing the drink he’s holding.

“I’m haunted by images of what they could be doing to you. I’m sick. I can’t take it.”

I blink tears away at the same time as I watch him swallow them. And I decide that we don’t both have to suffer from this. And there’s no way I won’t keep hurting, so why make him hurt too?

Lies will save my brother, and they flow past my lips easily.

“They don’t do anything to me, Luke. They didn’t, and I doubt they will.”

Painful flashes crash into my being like waves against a shore during a storm.

Reeves tearing my dress open.

“Do you think I don’t see the bruise at the corner of your mouth? I’m not stupid, Ella.”

Megan slapping me so hard I fall to the ground.

I smile at my brother.

“I got hit by a branch while I was initiating. They make you run through a maze. Annoying, but that’s it.” I shrug. “They make a big deal out of all of this, but it’s just an overrated membership club.”

Kneeling for Eugene Deuval. The sickening fear. Begging them to spare

my family.

I see the hope brightening his eyes. He's starting to believe me.

"Honestly, they talk about Aphrodites and all, but there are so many of us that no one is interested in me."

The Aphrodite room. The ballgag. The restraints. The way my brother's best friend used me like a whore and made me believe it wasn't him.

I chuckle and shake my head. "They're just old men with too much money and they're all talk. This is dumb." And seeing the way his shoulders relax, I conclude with the lie of all lies. "Plus, I'm allowed to say no. If anyone wants to spend time with me, I can refuse and that's it. So, like I said. Nothing will happen to me."

The human brain is fascinating. Even if our subconscious knows the truth, our conscious will latch onto anything to keep us at peace. Luke could ask why I'm so angry with our mom if I'm safe. He could think of all the information he has on the Circle. He could draw smarter conclusions than the bullshit I'm feeding him.

But instead, his eyebrows fall, he takes a step forward, and he puts a hand on my shoulder. "Is that true?"

I can carry the pain for the both of us.

"It's true, Luke. I promise you."

Not knowing how much longer I can pretend, I take his drink and down it.

"I'm going to go hang out with my friends now, if you don't mind. And let lose a little, will you? You're so boring when you're stressed."

I slam the glass of the shot I just took on the desk to forget the conversation I had with my brother at the beginning of the night. I'm so drunk I can barely see straight. I didn't want to go to Chris's party. But then we tried to go to the Xi Ep party, and the girls didn't let me in. I got kicked out of my sorority, and when I got here my own brother tried to kick me out. So I decided to get drunk. Don't-really-control-myself, stupid kind of state. I showed the game room to my best friends, and we decided to get absolutely wasted in here.

Henry, some post-grad I met tonight, keeps hitting on me, and I'm not stopping him. I'm having too much fun, and I just want to feel something for anyone else but Chris. And if that feeling is slight interest, low-dopamine kind of excitement...I guess that'll do. So when he slaps my ass during a song, I bend over the desk and giggle, "Harder, Daddy!"

"Ella."

Heart dropping, I straighten up like a rod. How the hell did Chris know we were here?

My drunken self seems to feel suicidal tonight, so I widen my eyes and look at the others.

“Uh oh, guys. The real daddy is here.”

He looks angry. Really angry. Going-to-punish-me angry. I know how to recognize it because he becomes calmer than usual. Quieter. That’s before the storm comes in.

The words just escaped, but I don’t think that’s what annoyed him. He was already fuming before I even opened my mouth. My head buzzes as I think of what he caught me doing. The kind of punishment he could inflict...

“Oh, shit.” Peach bursts out laughing as she appears from behind Chris. “I *knew* she called him daddy.”

“I don’t!” I fight back, cheeks heating from the way my best friend is calling me out.

“Ella,” Chris says again. “I’m taking you home. Let’s go.”

“What?” I laugh. “I’m not going with you. I’m having fun with my friends.”

Henry helps stabilize me when I do an exaggerated twirl. “See? I’m dancing. I’m not allowed to try to make it a career anymore, so this will have to do.”

His eyes are stuck on Henry’s arm around my waist, and I suddenly feel uncomfortable with him touching me. In my state, I almost admit out loud that what I feel uncomfortable about is that the person touching me *isn’t* Chris.

It’s easy to know I shouldn’t be with him, that we don’t stand a chance. But it’s harder to put it into place when his body calls out to mine. When his strong words order me to do something.

And why am I so hot? Oh, I know. Must be Chris’s presence.

“You’re looking gorgeous, Christopher,” I say through a giggle. “But watch yourself. Your possessive behavior is showing.”

A silence falls on us all as he takes a slow, calculated step toward Henry and me.

He’s incredibly composed when he talks to my new postgrad friend, his voice as even as always. “You’re going to stop touching her now.”

Henry’s arm falls off me so fast it’s ridiculous. I roll my eyes dramatically even as I can feel my body being pulled to Chris’s by an

invisible string.

I know this pull. I know this string. It's deep red, like passion. It's electrifying to the touch, like love. And it's as unbreakable as a diamond.

Chris puts his hands in the pockets of his pants, looking Henry up and down. He shakes his head, tutting him like he's scolding a child, though I know for a fact they're the exact same age.

"That's not how you spank a woman, Henry. You won't mind if I take her with me and show her exactly how it's done, do you?"

Before I can react, he's got a hold of my wrist, gently pulling me toward him. I don't even resist, but Henry is decent enough to try to defend me. He grabs my other wrist, stopping Chris in his movement toward the bedroom door, and I end up pulled at both sides.

"Uh..." I hesitate, the room now spinning. What the hell is happening?

"She'll go if she wants to go. Right, Ella?" Henry asks.

I nod dumbly, but no words come out. Is it the alcohol making it so hard to talk?

I'm pretty sure there are real bullets shooting out of Chris's eyes with the way Henry shrinks beside me. But he still doesn't let go.

"Pew pew," I whisper, wondering if one of those bullets will hit me. Then I burst out laughing.

"Is this guy even safe?" Henry calls out to the rest of the room. "Ella's drunk."

Peach looks at me with wide, questioning eyes, too drunk to react. She knows I'm not in immediate danger. She knows it's *just* Chris. He would never hurt me.

"I—" I hesitate.

"Henry." Achilles's deep voice makes the room sound like it's swallowing the music we were hearing a moment ago. Oh, wait. He turned it off. "Let go, man. She's not yours to defend." He nods toward Chris. "But she's definitely his to take."

Henry drops my arm like it's a burning iron. That's the effect men like Chris and Achilles have on people. They can be so fucking scary by doing so little. You don't need for a wolf to howl to know you should fear it.

Achilles's words register and my eyes snap to his.

"His to take?" I gasp as Chris pulls me away. "*His to take?* I am not a friend you can just whore out, Achilles!" I scream in drunken anger, my words barely forming past my lips.

I don't know what Achilles says. Only that Peach shouts at him to shut the fuck up and that he's an asshole. I don't hear the rest. Chris is already closing the door.

"Are you two on drugs? I'm not yours to take," I hiss, stopping on the spot and forcing him to stop too.

He won't drag me away like a caveman. He doesn't want to hurt my wrist. He wouldn't put me upside down over his shoulder because it might make me sick, and he wouldn't hold me by the hair because that's reserved for the bedroom.

I know how Chris thinks. He doesn't want to damage me, doesn't want to make me feel unsafe or embarrassed. He's too protective over me, even when it comes to his own violence.

"Looks like we're stuck, Mr. Murray, the wolf." I wiggle my eyebrows. "Ah-oooooh."

He runs a hand against his forehead. "Did you just howl at me?" With a huff, he releases my wrist. "We're leaving."

"To go to the wolf's den," I say as seriously as I can before laughing at my own hilarious joke.

"Ella. Don't make this hard on yourself."

I cross my arms over my chest, shaking my head until the world around me becomes blurry.

"You're too drunk to function. This party isn't safe for you anymore."

I snort loudly. It's anything but sexy. "That's not why you want me to leave."

"It's not all of it, but it's true," he admits.

"Why, then? Why are you going to leave your own birthday party?" I tilt my chin up, pretending we're both in positions of power when I know we're nowhere near equals here.

"You know why."

I shrug. "Talk to me like I'm an idiot. You love to do that."

He smiles like I'm just some cute little girl having a tantrum, but I take a step back as he approaches. Not quickly enough. He puts a hand on my waist, drags me closer to him, and talks into my ear.

"You let another man spank you. Worse, you called him a name you know should only be used for me. Now, I'm going to take you home, take care of you, let you sober up, and when I deem you better, I will punish you for what you did."

I can feel my nipples hardening against his body, and excitement zaps all the way to my lower stomach, a band tightening there. This isn't good. It isn't good at all.

But it feels like the best thing ever.

He pulls away slightly, looking down into my eyes and putting a strand of hair behind my ear. The corner of his mouth tips up. "It's going to be brutal, and every minute you're making me stay at this stupid birthday party is another minute of torture for you."

Taking a full step back this time, he gives me space to walk toward the stairs.

It's my decision whether we stay or leave. My decision if I want to spend the rest of the night having fun here with my friends. As long as I can bear the consequences.

I squirm on the spot for another minute, hesitating. I can't go down this road with him. Not again. But how am I meant to resist him when he looks at me with that soft smile, with a glint in his eyes that calls out to the deepest parts of me.

I glance at the game room door that would lead me back to my friends, and then back at the stairs. The bass music from the first floor is so loud it makes the walls tremble.

Chris puts his right hand in his pocket, and brings the left up, looking at the expensive watch on his wrist.

"That's two minutes already." He shakes his head. "Who knew you'd become such a brat over the years." The way he's looking straight at me makes me realize how drunk I am. His form is blending with the hallway wall he's leaning on. My hearing might be fuzzy, but I can hear my own voice talking so clearly in my head.

Don't go with him, Ella. One step toward him and you'll fall down the slippery slope.

"By brother—"

"Left."

I lick my lips, and he doesn't miss it.

"Sweets," he says in his softened way, making sure he keeps the space between us. "Why don't you stop thinking so hard and do exactly what you want?"

And that really gets me. Because what I really want is to fuck my ex.

When I take a wobbly, drunken step toward the stairs, avoiding looking in

his eyes—avoiding looking at him entirely—we both know that I only have myself to blame for the mistake. Tomorrow, I'll hurt from how stupid I am, for making the wrong decisions. Tonight? I'm just going to do exactly what I want.

He follows my steps. His hand on my lower back as we both walk down is so light I can barely feel it. For a second, I even wonder if I'm imagining it.

But when he leans toward my ear, I know I'm not making anything up.

"That's my good girl," he says with incomparable pride.

This is a mistake, isn't it?

I don't get to think about it too much. The second we walk outside, I'm hit with more proof of my intoxication. I put a hand out, desperate to hold on to something, as the street feels like it's spinning.

Chris doesn't miss it. He never does. He always knows when I need something, and he makes sure to be the one to provide it. It's so dangerous. So addictive.

"Come here." Wrapping an arm around my shoulders, he stabilizes me. "My car isn't far."

"She was last seen being led out of a party by a postgrad two years her elder. I can already see the article they'll write when they find my dead body."

He chuckles next to me, and I lean closer to him, using him as a crutch. I'm unstable and push into him so hard I can feel his muscles contracting as he stops both of us from crashing to the ground.

"Why would they find a dead body? No one is planning on killing you."

"No," I mutter to myself. "You do so much worse."

He hums in agreement. "Well, you did make me wait four minutes while perfectly aware a punishment awaited."

Once we're stopped by his car, he opens the passenger door for me and helps me in. "Let's hope you can live with the consequences."

Chapter Twenty-One

Chris

MATCH MADE IN HELL - Dutch Melrose, benny Mayne

She drops her keys the second she tries to take them out of her bra. Then bending down, she accidentally shows me her white lace panties. I'm so focused on them, I almost miss the way she tilts forward, about to crash into her front door from drunken unbalance. At the last second, I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling hard until she crashes against my chest.

"If the ground would just stop moving," she slurs. "Stupid ground."

I move her until we're facing each other and sit her on one of the three Adirondack chairs on the porch. "Stay."

Picking up the keys and opening the door for both of us, I walk to her again. "Come on."

Instead of helping her up, I grab her by the waist and under the knees. I straighten up, carrying her in my arms and through the door.

"Did the ground stop moving for you?"

"Of course it did," I answer in all seriousness.

"Ugh, everything just bends to your will, doesn't it?"

"It does. Put your arms around my neck." She does so without questioning me because everything bends to my will. Even her.

Not wanting her to wiggle and fall out of my arms while I go up the stairs, I hold her tighter as I walk up each step.

"Which one is your—" I stop as I spot a door with a dancer painted on it.

It's beautiful, almost abstract, yet you can easily recognize the shape of a ballerina.

Ella is a gorgeous ballerina. Breathtaking. She's as good as a professional in many types of dances, but in ballet? She's flawless. She used to attend Ms. Barry Dance School in Stoneview. It's practically impossible to get in, but she did. Because she's perfect and deserved it. I watched every single one of her performances. Sometimes with Luke because he would invite me. Sometimes from the back so it wouldn't look strange to her brother that I showed up at every show.

"Who painted your door?" I ask, the satisfying obsession simmering in my veins.

"This"—she slams her hand on the door as we walk past it and into her room—"is something that probably costs tens of thousands."

I set her delicately on the bed, and she lies down, her legs dangling off by the knees. She looks up at the ceiling like there's something on there she can't quite see, but I think she's just lost in her thoughts.

Standing between her legs, I place a flat hand on her cheek. "Who painted it?" I insist, trying to stay patient.

"Xi. We wanted to put a personal touch to our doors and Alex asked him to paint for us."

At least I don't have to worry about another man being near her. Xi is too taken by Alexandra to even notice her friends.

"He's so fucking good, isn't he?" she insists.

"Language, Sweets," I tell her calmly, my other hand playing with the hem of her silk skirt. It's a light blue that resembles her eyes. I love it. And the mere fact that she wore it because I told her to makes me painfully hard.

She's mastered how to look perfect to the outside eye and forgot that everything that makes her so perfect is the little things she never thinks of. The ones she does subconsciously. People don't notice them; they're too taken by the general appearance and confidence of the popular girl. But I notice. I've always noticed.

The way her pale eyes blink repeatedly when she's processing something. When I manage to get her out of her own head, she giggles so beautifully and carelessly. And when someone says something she dislikes but she doesn't want to contradict them, she scrunches nose in the cutest way imaginable.

Then, there's the secret shame from her dad instilling in her that she was stupid. She blushes when she has to do math, and curses under her breath

when she's trying to focus.

There's only one thing she trusts herself with. Dance. She bites her inner lip when she can't get a move correctly. Everything she eats and every minute exercising are to keep her body trim for ballet. But people don't know because they're too focused on the image she forces on them rather than who she really is.

And I only care about who she really is. Mine. Because the main thing Ella has always done subconsciously is love me. It came naturally, even when she shouldn't have, and even when she doesn't want to. It's always there, and I know it because I feel it. Even when she promises she hates me.

She doesn't fight me as I move my hand to her shirt and drag it up in the slightest. I just want to feel her smooth skin against mine. She's too lost talking to herself about Xi's talent to notice.

"I'm telling you," she keeps going. "I could undo this door and sell it for a lot of money. His exhibitions always sell out."

I rub circles with my thumb across her hip. "Lift your arms," I order softly.

She throws them above her head, hitting the mattress dramatically. I want to praise her for listening so well, the need to do it making my blood rush to my dick. But I don't, because then she might stop.

I pull her shirt above her head, ridding her of the material stopping me from enjoying her, and throw it across the room.

Suddenly, she slams a hand on the bed. "I know!" She shoots into a sitting position, making me retreat back to standing tall between her legs.

"I'm going to sell my bedroom door so I can pay for college."

She could not have sounded more like a Stoneview kid who never had to worry about money than she just did.

I run a hand across my mouth, trying to keep myself from laughing.

"What?" she snaps. "You don't think I can do it?"

"I'm already paying your fees. Why are you worrying about that?"

Narrowing her eyes at me, she ignores the fact that I'm now unzipping her skirt at the side.

"You, sir"—she drunkenly points an accusing finger at me—"are paying because you want something to hold over me. My brother might be blind to who you really are, but I'm not."

I shake my head, tutting her. "Your brother knows me better than anyone else, and he knows I'm doing this to help."

“You’re doing this so you can make me do whatever you want and threaten me with not paying next semester. Aha! You all think I’m so dumb. But I’m not.”

I’ve lost count of how many times in my life I explicitly told her she wasn’t dumb. But when something is instilled in you, you know no other way.

“Firstly, you’re not dumb. And if you don’t stop calling yourself that, I’m going to start punishing you to make you understand.”

I put a hand behind her neck and push her with the other as I force her to lie back down. She’s too gone to even think of stopping me.

“Secondly, that sounds like a wonderful plan I have. Please, tell me more about all the things I’ll make you do. And while you think about it, don’t forget I also pay for your room in this house. I’ll probably have to pay when they make you replace the door for painting it, too. That’s a lot you owe me.”

Grabbing the hem of her skirt, I pull the material down, over her hips, across her legs, and toss it aside too. I put a knee between her thighs on the bed and look down at the beautiful goddess below me. Her white bra cups her tits perfectly, the lace so delicate her hard nipples are visible underneath, practically poking through it. Her stomach is taut, two lines visible on the sides from all the core exercising she does.

She’s short, but apart from that, she looks exactly like how one would stereotypically picture a ballerina. Defined muscles on a tight, elegant body.

It takes all of me not to lick my lips, not to growl with need and rip her underwear off. It’s tempting me, that line of silk right above her mound, her skin moving underneath it as she breathes.

I catch a small scar on her upper thigh, and when I run my thumb over, she freezes. I feel a few others I can’t quite see in the darkness of her room.

“What happened?”

“I got too drunk and tried to go through a bush. I got caught on branches.”

“Is that true, Sweets?”

“Are you going to stop paying my fees if I lie?” she snorts.

I lean over her, cupping her jaw and placing my thumb on her lower lip. Pressing my other hand beside her head, I hold myself above her. Her small gasp is torture to my dick as it gets harder by the second.

I should stop touching her. Every small gesture is a step closer to losing it. An addict. That’s what I am.

I’ll take her home. That’s it.

I'll just touch the silk of her skirt.

I'll just rid her of her clothes so she can sleep comfortably.

Even the fear of Megan learning about this doesn't stop me. I have no loyalty to her and her idea of a relationship I don't want to be in. But that woman could ruin my life. She could have my dad killed. Me fucking Ella yesterday at the temple, and twice today, already was three times too many risks.

In this moment, with my ex's soft body under me, I start registering the usual anxiety I get when I'm around Megan. It's the feeling that it's gone, and I can breathe properly for once.

Ella is my safe place. She's my guardian angel. Her mere presence makes me feel invincible. Her existence makes me want to throw my life to the flames for her.

"Ella." As much as I speak with a soft voice, it's turning into a rasp under the pressure of the need inside me. "I don't need to hold something over your head to make you do exactly what I want."

She parts her lips to talk, so I push my thumb between them, loving the way she clamps her teeth shut and bites my first knuckle to stop me from going any farther. Now that she has to keep her mouth closed, I take my time to talk.

"I paid your fees because I don't want you and Luke to end up in any trouble. I paid because I care about you, and I always will, no matter what goes on between us. But if you really don't believe me, I can stop. Then I'll still bend you to my will. I'll still show you you're desperate to be a good girl for me. Just to make a point that I wasn't paying to keep control over you."

Looking away, she bites harder on my thumb, yet she's still not trying to get away from me.

"I already have all the control I need, Sweets. You're the only one who believes I ever lost it. You're the only one who doesn't want to accept I own every single molecule in your body. You can tell me to leave you alone all you want; you know I won't. And I know you'll let me get closer if I push. That's the kind of toxic we are. That's how we fit together."

I try my best not to roll my hips and press my hard-on into her core. I know she's wet; I don't even need to look. She's writhing under me. Her hips move slightly even while she tries to stop herself. But I need to keep still so she knows this isn't about fucking her. This is about *owning* her. Worse, it's about showing one can't survive without the other.

I give her a few seconds to swallow my words before I whisper. "Look me in the eyes and let go of my thumb."

Her eyes flick to mine, full of lust that she can't hide because of the alcohol flowing through her veins. Eyelids heavy, she blinks once before releasing me.

"There's my good girl."

I pull away, standing again before wrapping both hands around her waist and helping her up. Giving her a kiss at the top of her head, I hold for a few seconds and enjoying feeling her so close. "Now, let's get you showered and sobered up."

She doesn't fight me. Not when I walk her to the ensuite bathroom or help her in the shower. She's quiet, removing her bra and panties herself. The only thing she's wearing is the Aphrodite necklace. I hate that seashell around her neck. She should be a Hera. *My hera*, wearing a lotus flower for me.

She lets me take the loofah from her hands and wash her. Whistling a song, she giggles when I tickle her washing her stomach, and pushes her wet body against me when I rub between her legs. She's facing the shower wall, her back to me. Sliding an arm behind her and around my neck, she forces me to lean down.

Forbidden shouldn't feel so good. How am I meant to resist it?

I kiss her cheek from behind, letting her wet my clothes.

"If you're going to fuck me, fuck me," she rasps.

"While you're drunk off your face?" I press the loofah against her clit. "So you don't remember it tomorrow?" Pushing my hips forward, I let her feel how hard she makes me. "So you have an excuse and say it was a drunken mistake?"

I bite her jaw carefully, sucking on her wet, soapy skin. "No. When I fuck you again, you'll be sober, aware of your decisions. You'll be begging for my cock like a desperate little slut. You do it so well. I wouldn't want to miss out on it."

"Ugh." She pulls away from me, whirling around and snatching the loofah from my hand. "Fuck off."

I step back, feeling my eyebrows drawing together. Lifting my hand to her cheek, I give her a small slap. Nothing violent or that would hurt. A touch I know she'll consider a warning. "Language."

Deciding she's well enough to finish on her own, I walk out of the

bathroom. When she reappears in the bedroom—only wearing a bathrobe—I’ve got a bottle of water, a slice of toasted rye bread, and two painkillers set up on her bedside table.

“Seriously? You won’t fuck me, but you’ll feed me?”

“I don’t want you to be hungover tomorrow. Is that a crime?”

She pads to me, tightening the belt around her waist. I could wrap my fingers around it, tug her closer as I undo it. I could push her face down on the bed and sink my dick into her until she’s crying my name.

But she’s drunk.

“I’m not drunk anymore.” It’s like she can hear my thoughts. She rolls her eyes, and since her body is trying to prove her wrong, she stumbles on her feet, stopping right in front of me.

I cock an eyebrow at her as she gathers herself. “I’m not *that* drunk anymore.”

“Do you think it’s safe for you to drink that much at parties? People get out of control. Anything could have happened to you.”

“I was with my friends.”

“Henry isn’t your friend.”

She smiles widely, putting a hand on my chest. “My, my. Look at your ugly jealousy coming back to the surface.”

I look down as she undoes the top button of my white shirt. “Are you worried he and I had sex?” The second button goes too. “What if we did?”

She lowers to the third one, but I wrap my hand around her wrist. Maybe with more violence than I should. But it’s getting too hard to restrain myself. “Then I’ll send him a well-done card with a little note inside. *A for effort. You didn’t make her come, but don’t worry, no one can. I ruined her for other men.*”

Her face falls. “You didn’t ruin me.”

“No? Did Matias make you come? What about Enzo? You guys had sex, right?”

She takes a step back. “Since you shattered his knee...no. And how do you know all that? Are you stalking me or something?” Wiggling her eyebrows she adds, “*Hot.*”

“Who said I was the one to attack him? And I don’t need to stalk you,” I chuckle. “All I had to do was look at that stupid Hermes account. It’s all on there.” Grabbing her robe, I pull her back. “You still need to eat and drink.”

I force her to sit on the bed, and she attempts to lie back down, but I hold

her by the robe.

"I'm not hungry," she giggles. "I want sex. If you won't give it to me, send someone else in."

She's lucky I don't let images of other guys being in this room take over my mind. Lucky I have better control over my urges than some of those boys she fucks from time to time. I take the bread, putting it in front of her lips. She barely licks it with the tip of her tongue. "Don't like it."

"You love rye bread. Eat."

"I want to eat the protein bar only sold at the vending machine at Ms. Barry's school. They're so good. I haven't had them in forever. Yum. Oh! I could go to Ms. Barry's and get some of those for the kids I teach on Saturdays. They'd love them too, I bet."

"I can't take you to Ms. Barry's school right now. So you're going to eat this."

"No."

She presses her lips together, shaking her head dramatically and sending drops of water onto her pillows and comforter from her wet hair.

"Ella." My stern voice stops her right away. "You know how I feel about brats." I wrap my hand around her jaw, preventing her from even trying to shake her head again. "Tell me how I feel about them."

She licks her lips, and I watch her throat work as she swallows.

"You...you don't like brats." As she squirms, her thighs press together. I can see it from the opening in her robe. "You think they're attention seekers desperate to be punished." The alcohol is making her recite my exact thoughts like a well-learned lesson. And it is. I spent a lot of time drilling that specific lesson into her brain. I'm glad she didn't forget.

"That's right, and do you want to be punished?"

"No," she rasps.

"I only deal with good girls who rarely make mistakes, and you already used your quota of brattiness for the day."

I feel her try to nod against my hand, so I let go of her face. "Now open your mouth and eat."

She does. She eats and drinks everything I give her. She takes the painkillers too. She's going to hate herself tomorrow for listening to me and letting me take care of her.

"Atta girl. Go brush your teeth, and then I'll get you into bed."

"Ooh," she taunts me as she walks to the bathroom. Turning around, she

winks at me. “Get me into bed, huh? Okay, Daddy.”

I groan the second she disappears. She’s making this so hard on me.

I hear the water running, and then her head reappears by the door, toothbrush in her mouth. She wiggles her eyebrows, and it takes all of me not to run to her and grab her into a mint-flavored ravenous kiss.

When she finally comes back, I notice she loosened the belt around her waist, and part of the robe is falling off her shoulder.

“I’m ready,” she purrs.

“For sleep,” I add.

“Sure.” Hurrying toward the bed, she crawls into it. “*Sleep.*” Then she all but crashes into the pillows. “Fuck me hard, Christopher Murray.” She buries herself deeper into the mattress, and a few seconds later, I watch her breathing slow as she falls asleep.

I smile to myself and arrange the covers over her. Kicking off my shoes, I lie down next to her with my hands behind my head and turn off the light.

A few minutes later, I feel Ella twist and turn next to me until I hear.

“I feel sick.”

I shoot up into a sitting position. Heart racing from worry, I turn the light back on. “Can you walk to the bathroom? Do you need me to carry you?”

She turns toward me, putting a hand on my chest. “Sick from lack of sex.” And she bursts out laughing as I shake my head.

“Go back to sleep, Sweets.”

I try to keep my eyes on the ceiling as I lie back down, but the second she turns to her side, her back to me, and shifts until her ass is against me, I can’t help it. My gaze flicks to the right, and I force myself to hold back a groan when I notice she’s pushed the covers down, the plush bathrobe all the way to her mid thighs, and I’m only a couple of inches away from seeing her naked form underneath.

“Goodnight,” she says knowingly.

I hit my head against the pillow and bite my lower lip.

“This behavior will only make your punishment worse.”

She sucks in a breath but doesn’t say anything. I don’t think she realizes how much I’m looking forward to it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ella

Diet Mountain Dew - Lana Del Rey

My eyes snap open, anxiety already running thickly through my veins. I feel weird, hungover, and I know I did something wrong. I'm just not sure what yet.

"Pretty girl is awake."

The voice tears a surprised gasp out of me as I turn to my left. Chris stands by the side of my bed with a towel around his waist and uses another to dry his dripping hair.

Fucking...fuck, God help me. This man is a work of art. His abs are prominent, even more distinct by the slight tan of his skin. He doesn't need to flex his defined arms to make them bulge, the muscles hard from his strict exercising routine.

He takes care of himself, of his body, of everything. He's harsh on himself, harsher than he is with everyone else, and that results in a flawless physique. The only thing that sticks out like a sore thumb is the wonky tattoo of a Jack Daniels bottle on his forearm. It's tiny, thick, so ugly. A drunken mistake on a night in, drinking with his best friends at his house. I was there, taking care of the four of them while they were getting blackout drunk. Chris, Luke, Jake, and Rose. Rose tattooed that bottle on the four of them.

He fucked me that night when they all went to bed. He snuck into the guest room I was sleeping in, and I had to put my own hand on my mouth

while he thrust into me. His inhibitions were gone. He barely cared if anyone heard us. I should have let someone catch us that night. Maybe we would still be together.

Shit. No. I can't go down this road again. I can't break my own heart by thinking of how things could have happened.

I tear myself out of my own head and look up at him.

"Tell me we didn't..."

"Again, you mean?"

"Yes. Again," I huff.

The corner of his mouth tips up. "Not yet, Sweets. Get on your front."

My heart drops to my stomach, a zap of electricity flickering down my spine and ordering me to give in.

Absolutely. Not.

Thank God for the voice of reason.

"Are you insane? Get out of my room. What are you even doing here? What time is it?"

"It's 6 a.m., and I brought you back after you drank too much."

I rack my brain, desperate for memories to hold on to. I remember him showing up in the game room. I remember shouting that the real daddy was here, and I cringe. How much more stupid can I get?

I look around the room, down at the robe that's barely clinging to my body. Tightening it around me, another memory flashes of Chris feeding me while I was sitting on the side of the bed. My hair is damp. I must have showered too. Unless...

"Did you..." I swallow thickly. "Did you shower me?"

My eyes flick down to his Adonis belt leading to the obvious hard-on under the towel. I try to look away, but somehow my eyes keep going back to it, and it liquifies my insides.

"Only until you tried to get me to fuck you. I had to step away so you wouldn't assault me."

"Shut the fuck up."

He cocks an eyebrow, carefully getting closer. I'm frozen on the spot, helpless as I watch him bring a hand to the back of my head. Gripping my hair, he twists until I'm wincing, having full control of my movements. He keeps me from going anywhere, from fighting. That fact alone has my pussy tingling. My nipples start aching, and I subconsciously push them forward.

"I'm going to say this for the third time. So heed my warning when I say,

watch. Your. Language.” He twists harder. “I don’t like foul words coming out of your mouth.”

With my neck strained, I struggle to gulp the air I suck in. I’ve never understood why, so I decide to finally take that leap and ask.

“Why?”

“Because that’s how your dad talked to you. All violence and insults. I hate it. That’s not an appropriate way to communicate with someone you love. I don’t want you to bring it into our relationship, our marriage, our family.”

“Marriage?” I choke. “F-family? Are you alright?”

“Uh-huh. Perfectly fine, thank you.”

His other hand parts my robe, and he taps the inside of my right thigh. They part on instinct, and the first thing I do when I realize is close my legs again. Or at least I try to, but I’m too late, his hand already cupping my pussy. He doesn’t part my lips, doesn’t try to push inside me. A simple power move to tell me he could do whatever he wants.

“What did I tell you when I came to pick you up yesterday?”

“I-I don’t remember,” I pant, lost as to whether I should completely let go or scream for help.

He shakes his head, disappointed. “Try harder. That I was going to bring you home, and then?”

Our conversation at his house comes back, tasting like acid at the back of my throat. My eyes must be wide because he notices the second I remember.

“Go on.”

“That you were going to take care of me,” I rasp.

“Check. What else?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Let me sober up.”

“Check. Anything else?”

I try to shake my head, but he tightens his grip. “Don’t lie.”

“Punish me,” I hiss from the pain.

He hums his agreement, and the sound rumbles through his chest. “You shouldn’t have let me into your room, Sweets. Look at you now, already dripping on my fingers when I’ve barely touched you. Eager for my cock when you still have a punishment to go through.”

“I was drunk,” I whimper.

“And I refused to give you what you wanted when you couldn’t think straight. But it’s sober you who’s wetting my fingers, pussy already begging

for me.”

He lowers himself, purring in my ear. “Now get on your stomach, feet on the floor, and present your beautiful ass to me.”

My heart beats harder, dancing along the bones that keep it caged. I look at him as he releases me, and my conscious mind even convinces itself I’m going to walk away. I’m going to run to Peach’s room and scream at her to get Chris out of the house.

By the time the whole scenario unfolds in my head, I’m lying on my stomach, bending over the edge of the bed, my toes pushing against the plush carpeted floor.

“Push up higher.”

It’s the mix of dominance and gentleness that gets me. I try to convince myself it’s the reason I do exactly as he says.

“Good girl. Put your hands by your head.” And I do that too, squirming with excitement.

“I’m going to spank you. You’re going to stay still and take it, and when I’m done, you’re going to apologize for letting Henry touch you. Because bad little girls apologize once they’ve learned their lesson. Is that clear?”

I lick my lips. “Y-yes,” I squeak.

“No more ‘Daddy’? You were so quick to use it yesterday. Don’t worry, I’ll get it out of you.”

The first slap lands, startling me. The second warms my skin. The third stings.

He keeps going, taking my breath away from the strength in his hits, making me wince and spreading prickling pain throughout my entire body. When he pauses to give me time to breathe, he presses his hand on my upturned pussy.

“Spread, baby.”

I whimper when I do, feeling the stickiness of my arousal and the heat going up my chest to my ears.

“Such a wet girl. So ready for me to sink my cock into you.”

“Chris...this isn’t...this isn’t right.”

He pulls his hand away and slaps me on the pussy.

“Fuck!” I cry out, knowing perfectly it sounds more like a moan. The pleasure makes my legs shake, and I can’t take my next breath.

“Language.” This time, he slaps the skin where my ass meets my thigh, and I shriek. “How many times did I tell you to watch your mouth, huh?”

He spans me in the exact same spot. "Answer me."

"F-four. Please, it hurts."

"I'm pretty sure that's the point."

I suck in a breath when his fingers spread my nether lips. "Chris..."

He chuckles mockingly. "Address me properly and it might get better for you."

"Please."

The next slap is harsher, almost making me jump, and yet I can feel the way my pleasure keeps pooling between my legs. He's too good at playing with my body. But the way it renders me helpless is what feels the best.

I cry out when he slaps my pussy again, gentler. I can't take the mix of pain and pleasure anymore, and out of nowhere, I'm pushing up again, completely on my toes. I'm silently begging him to give me more, hoping he sinks his fingers into my wet heat.

"Stay still."

He shifts behind me, and a second later, a phone unlocks. "Your passcode is the date we broke up. Is that how much you need to remind yourself that you hate me?"

"I do hate you," I grit out between clenched teeth.

That date is seared in my brain like a brand on cattle. I can hardly breathe when I think of the day he broke up with me. Peach made me put it as my passcode so I wouldn't text him when I was at my lowest.

It worked. It hurt, but it worked.

"It didn't take Henry long before exchanging numbers with you, I see. Were you planning on texting him today?"

When I don't answer, he pinches my pussy lips together, making me cry out with need. "Answer me when I ask you a question."

"No! Yes...I don't know. Please..."

"Your pleas are useless until you address me properly." Letting go, he spans me hard on one ass cheek, then the other.

I need him to stop, or to keep going, to end the suffering but make it worse. I don't know anymore.

My hands fist the sheets by my head, and I can't stop the words from spilling from my lips.

"More..."

He slaps my pussy. "Do you get to make demands?"

I shake my head, but I still beg. I don't get to make demands, but I can't

help them, especially when he taps my clit softly this time.

“No...please, harder.”

“Harder, what?” The heat in his voice is melting me.

“Don’t make me say it, please.”

He taps my clit again. It feels like a feather stroking my skin compared to what I need.

“Please, harder. Harder...”

“You’re almost there, baby. Say it for me.”

“Harder, Daddy!” I cry out. “Please...*please*, harder.”

He slaps me hard, making my whole body tremble as a moan escapes me. He does it again, and again, until I’m shaking with the need to come, rubbing my upper body against the bed to feel friction against my rock-hard nipples.

“Did you hear that, Henry? That’s how she’s meant to sound when you spank her.”

My entire body freezes.

What?

I try to get up, but a hand grips the back of my neck, pushing me back down. Something lands on the mattress, right next to my head, and my eyes bulge when I see my screen showing a phone call. The name *Postgrad Henry* is in white letters against the black background from when drunk me saved it yesterday.

He called him. He *fucking* called him. And he’s on speaker too.

“Chris—aah.” My own moan cuts me off when he pushes two fingers inside me. “Shit,” I pant.

“Tell Henry what you call me, Sweets.”

He fucks me harder, his fingers pushing into my wetness and rendering me speechless for a second, but when he slows down, I give him exactly what he wants.

“Daddy,” I whimper. “Please...”

“Good girl. Now let him hear how you come on my fingers.”

He accelerates again, curling his fingers inside me, and detonating an explosion of pleasure. I try to bury my head in the mattress with the last of my resolve, but a hand pulls at my hair, and Chris’s calm voice reaches through the haze.

“I said *let him hear*.”

His fingers disappear, quickly replaced by the tip of his dick at my entrance.

“Fucking asshole.” That’s all we hear from Henry, but still, he doesn’t hang up.

“I hate you,” I say numbly, throwing my hand behind me to attempt to slap him.

A split second later, the ex I loathe so much enters me in one long stroke, rendering me speechless as my mouth drops open in shock.

Grabbing my wrist, he pins it to my back.

“Say that again,” he growls.

“I h-ha—” He cuts me off with a thrust.

“Try again, Sweets. Scream how much you hate me. Henry didn’t hear you.”

I cry out when he pushes harder into me. “Too big...” I choke on my words.

“And yet look at your greedy cunt taking me so well.”

I melt on the spot. Chris, the perfect gentleman in public, saves crude words for the bedroom, and it gets to me in the best and worst way.

He pulls out, moving me until my whole body is on the edge of the bed, and I’m lying on my side, facing him.

My wetness coats his hard dick, and he slaps my cheek that’s not pressed against the bed. “Open.”

He pushes in the second my lips part. I don’t know if I was taking a breath or opening for him. I don’t want to know.

“Can you taste your hate, Sweets?”

He pushes deeper, and my heart races when he presses his hand against my cheek, holding me still.

When my gag reflex kicks in, he strokes my cheek. “A little more,” he growls. Deeper...deeper, and before I know, I can’t breathe.

Panic zaps through me, making me wriggle in his hold.

He pulls out, letting me choke on a breath, and pushes back in, groaning when I caress the underside of his cock with my tongue.

Chris’s eyes dart to the phone next to my head. I can hear the lust in his voice when he talks to Henry. “Ella has something to tell you.”

He puts the phone by my mouth, but there’s nothing I can do except whimper from the need to breathe, so he pulls the phone back to himself.

“My bad. She can’t speak with my dick down her throat, but I think she meant to say she doesn’t want to see you again. Whatever little thing you think you’d start, it’s over.”

Hanging up on Henry, he throws the phone on the bed and stares down at me.

"I'm glad we got this out of the way." With a soft smile, he thrusts inside my mouth.

He picks up the pace, throwing his head back as I wrap my lips tighter around him, not thinking what the hell pushed me to do that. Rolling his hips, he pulls halfway out, then explodes on my tongue.

I try to move my head, but he holds me in place, looking down at me. Standing tall, he caresses my cheekbone with his thumb. "Swallow."

My half attempt at pulling away from him only earns me another thrust deep down my throat. So, I swallow him and the shame. He makes it difficult on purpose, staying in my mouth while I do what he tells me.

His eyes flutter shut, more pleasure taking over him. He moves his hand on my face, collecting the drop that spilled from my lips and is currently tracing its way down my cheek and toward the mattress. Pulling his dick out, he pushes his cum back into my mouth, and tears prickle at my eyes.

Why does he enjoy dragging out embarrassment? What kind of sick thrill does it bring him? The same humiliating kind it brings me?

I curl my tongue around his thumb, and he smirks. "I like you no matter what, but I enjoy you so much better when you behave like a good girl."

I take a breath, soaking in what barely sounds like praise. Is that how desperate I am to have anyone say something good about me?

"Now say 'sorry, Daddy' for letting Henry touch you."

"Sorry, Daddy," I rasp.

"You're forgiven, my perfect girl."

Everything is falling apart around me. Chris is pushing away the men who get anywhere near me. I'm a whore for the Silent Circle, my reputation in shambles, I got kicked off the cheer team and out of my sorority. My family are pariahs.

Chris's words...they feel good.

Am I so broken I'll lap up *anything* this man offers?

He finally steps back. Helping me sit up, he doesn't say anything when I push him away.

"Leave me alone," I hiss.

He gives me space when I slap his hand. The one trying to wipe the tears falling down my face.

And thankfully he stays quiet. Without a word, he puts his clothes on,

runs a hand through his hair, and takes the empty glass from my bedside table.

“No!” I panic when he leaves the room. I rearrange the bathrobe, rushing to cover myself and practically cut off my breath as I tighten the belt around my waist. “Don’t go to the kitchen. Alex wakes up really early. She’s probably down there.”

His eyebrows pull together slightly in that stupidly cute way when he’s confused. “Why is that a problem?”

“She’ll think we had sex or something, idiot.”

He pinches his lips together, but that’s not enough to hide his mocking smile, so he runs a hand against his mouth before he collects himself. “We did have sex...or *something*.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I stride on shaky legs before snatching the glass from him with my left hand and pointing at my window with the right.

“Window. Out. Now.”

He lets out a sharp laugh. “I’m out of love hearts, and you need sugar. I wanted to get you a glass of orange juice. I’m not going anywhere until I’ve done that. Then we can discuss my exit.”

“No.” I shake my head because my words rarely stick to his brain. “No aftercare. I don’t want this from you. I’m not giving you any more from me.”

He takes his time mulling over what I said. Reaching for a lock of my messy blonde hair, he rolls it around his index finger and tugs slightly.

“Don’t deny me.”

A calm order. A soft threat.

And since he doesn’t want to hear me, as usual, I have to slap him with a truth bomb I can barely acknowledge myself.

“Chris, I told you to leave me alone. What we did yesterday...today.” I gulp, bringing a hand to my chest. “That was wrong. So wrong. Megan...”

Like a soldier ready for war, his face tenses. As if confronted with the name of the enemy. I recognize the effect it has on him. I used to feel the same when someone talked about my father.

“You seem to forget you’re an Aphrodite, Ella. Megan a Hera. And I’m a Shadow. I get to use you, and Megan gets to shut up.”

My heartbeat doubles from the brutality of his statement. He reminded me of my place in our hierarchy with a few words. “That doesn’t mean it’s right to...” It feels wrong on my tongue, and I can’t manage to say it.

“To cheat? I can take that blame easily, without any remorse.”

I can't hide my surprise. This doesn't sound like him. Cheating is the last thing I would expect a man like Chris to do.

"Does that have anything to do with the *deal* you have with her?"

He pauses, looks deep into my eyes, and his features soften. "It would do you good to forget about what you think you heard, Sweets. In fact, I'd go as far as saying it would keep you safe."

I startle when his phone rings, the sound cutting through the tension in the room.

Chris lets go of me, a low growl rumbling in his chest as he takes his phone out of his pocket. My lungs feel like they're swallowing water when I catch the name on the screen.

Megan.

He keeps his eyes on me, not even bothering greeting her as he picks up. Her voice is like a hissing snake. It's not loud, but I hear it so clearly even though the phone isn't on speaker. She's furious, spitting poison through her fangs.

"You had a birthday party and didn't invite me? And then you didn't fucking come home?"

"Sounds like what happened."

I can't seem to associate Chris's current tone with the man I know. His voice is empty like his soul is completely separated from the conversation.

"Where are you, Chris?"

"Out."

"I could strangle you when you talk to me like that. You better be home by the time breakfast is ready. And don't ever do this to me again. Know your fucking place."

My eyes widen, a fear I don't understand thickening my blood, making my heart work twice as hard to pump energy through my body.

He hangs up, his empty eyes still on me. He looks pale, and he's fisting his phone so tightly I wonder if it'll snap in half under his strength.

"Are you..." I hesitate. "Okay?" *Fuck. Why do I care?*

Slowly stepping toward me, he leans down and drops a soft kiss on my forehead. "I'll see you soon, Sweets. Who knows, maybe at the temple, where I can have you all to myself and no one can bother me."

The split second of understanding for his current situation runs out, and I feel my face harden. "I'm not the same girl from high school, and we're not dating. You have my body. That's it."

He cocks an eyebrow, not believing the words that spurt out of my mouth. "Excuse me?"

I square my shoulders and tighten the robe again around my body. "You said it yourself, I'm an Aphrodite. You get to use me whenever you want. Sure." I narrow my eyes at him. "But you will never have me the way you did back then. I don't know this man you've become. And I don't want him in my life, least of all to give him my heart."

A statue of a mythological god has more life than Chris at this moment. His body stills, his face so frozen I wonder if it might crack into a state of fury.

He doesn't move, and his words are a low threat as he answers.

"I will make you regret every single word you dared put in that sentence, Ella. I don't want to escalate this to a level you can't take. But you know I will if I have to." He doesn't even touch me, only staying a hair's breadth away from me.

"You might want to pretend you've moved on, but I know what I want, Sweets. I want you. I want us. Megan?" He chuckles like he doesn't have a problem in the world. "She's just one little battle in the war I'm waging to get back to you. And the best things are worth fighting for."

"And my brother?" I rasp. "And the Circle? And my *opinion*? You want something I'm not willing to give."

He drops another light kiss on my cheek. The kind that makes me shiver. That makes me want to press harder against him. Drop to my knees. Worship him.

"One step at a time. But trust me, the least of my worries is what you're willing to give. I'll just take." Tilting his head so he can talk in my ear, he adds, "You will go to bed one night, and it will be me you sleep next to. You will wake up, and it'll be my cock deep inside you. You will live, because I'm the one who allows oxygen into your lungs."

He shifts, grazing my lips with his, and I don't dare move an inch. I'm incapable of taking a step back.

"And my hand will be so far inside your chest, your heart won't beat without feeling my grip around it."

I love you

*You built a world without me and left me with no choice but
to destroy it. We'll build another one.*

I promise.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ella

Pacify Her - Melanie Martinez

Rain has officially replaced the chilly yet beautiful early September days. October is here, and SFU is turning gorgeous shades of brown, maroon, and deep green from the evergreens at the edge of the campus. I prefer spring, when everything grows again. The start of something new. But fall matches my mood.

I shiver under my trench coat, tightening my grip around my umbrella as I come out of the woods. Alex and Peach both started earlier than me, and I didn't want to hang out where everyone else is this morning. Pretending to be perfect when everyone thinks you are is doable. Pretending to be unaffected when everyone knows you're a fraud is soul breaking. We'll have lunch together, I'll go to my classes, and I'll go home.

Someone bumps into my shoulder the second I walk inside the castle. Apart from the main double-gated entrance, all the other ways to get in are tight, old wooden doors that creak whenever someone opens them, and there are a group of men on the other side who don't seem to understand they'll only fit one at a time.

I push through, trying to get past them, when the one who hit my shoulder speaks.

"Oh, shit, I accidentally hit Ella Baker."

Turning to look at them, I try to keep an impassive face, but before I can

see what he means, another one jumps in.

“Please, don’t get us killed.” He trembles dramatically as if he’s seen a ghost.

I cock an eyebrow at him, shaking my head and wondering if he’s an idiot. I’m pretty sure he is. “What the hell are you talking about?”

They all burst out laughing, exiting the building in a mess of SFU uniforms, so proud of themselves for a joke I don’t even understand.

I don’t even reach the east quad through the labyrinth of dark hallways, when I get some other comments. Something about not getting too close to me. They’re so blatantly talking about me that I feel like one the ghosts haunting the place.

What the hell is happening?

Everyone’s eyes are on me. So much so it feels like even the statue of the SFU founder standing in the middle of the east quad is whispering about me. If the things I can hear are anything to go by, I don’t want to hear what anyone is murmuring as I walk past.

As soon as I can breathe again, I pull out my phone, walking under the rain through the quad to join Peach and Alex at our meeting point. I have a notification from the SFU App.

Hermes.

Fuck.

I step into a hallway again, polished stone leading to the communal room where I’m supposed to meet my friends. I enter the room, and I’m about to unlock my phone when a hand snatches it from me. Looking up, my heart races. Peach’s angry eyes match Alex’s worried ones. A familiar duo of reactions when something bad has happened.

“What is it?” I panic in a whisper.

“We know it’s not true, Els,” Alex reassures me.

“Only look at it if you’re ready,” Peach adds.

Glancing around, I feel all eyes on me. Not the way I used to. There’s no admiration, no envy, only a mix of mockery and revulsion.

“Give it back, please,” I tell Peach.

She does. And when I open the SFU App, I know that for the first time Hermes has lied about me. But it doesn’t matter whether it’s the truth or not. Everyone believes what this account says.

“I don’t understand,” I rasp. “Why? Why would Hermes say this?”

My eyes are stuck on a montage picture of me, Enzo, and Matias.

Ella Baker...black widow?

It's official, two men Ella Baker dated have had something happen in mysterious circumstances. Remember how Enzo got attacked after practice? Well, now Matias Roberts was beaten up to within an inch of his life. Coma, they say.

And guess what they have in common? One name. Ella Baker. Is this what happens if you date her...or when you leave her?

I wonder who she hires to do the dirty job.

Pray for Matias...

#howtomakeamurderer #blackwidow #EllaBakerisbitter

The world suddenly moves in slow motion. Everyone walking past me looks sluggish, and their insults reach my ears with a delay. I blink, waves of hotness rendering me speechless.

"I didn't —"

We're surrounded by the exact same faces I see every day. The same souls who wanted to be me less than a month ago.

Ella Baker...black widow.

"It's not true," I mumble, my gaze going back to the girls. My lips are numb when I try to talk again, my pulse ringing in my ears. "It's not...I didn't..."

"We know, Els," Peach says calmly. "Don't listen to the fucking idiots around you."

Is this place always this full? There are less than nine thousand students at this university. Are they all in this damn room?

My body seizes, and I don't control the way my hand goes to my chest. I loosen my tie, undoing the first two buttons of my uniform shirt before I press my nails to my skin, scratching three red lines.

Alex's eyes widen. "Ella," she pleads. "Don't do that. It's going to be okay."

With my vision narrowing, I pretend it's easy to take a new breath. There's only one person who has the power to make me stop. The same person who I keep telling to leave me alone.

"I'm fine," I lie. And I think I scratch some more, but I'm too numb to feel it. "Honestly. Who cares what this stupid app says?"

Where is he? I want to see him. I want to look into his eyes and for him to tell me that he'll protect me from everything. I want to hear his beautifully

gracious voice telling me that we don't care what people think of me as long as I know I'm perfect.

I am. I'm perfect in his eyes. My beauty becomes radiant, my personality addictive, and my flaws cute. That's how Chris sees me.

"I just...I..." Taking a breath through my nose, I exhale through my mouth. I make my voice even when I try again. "I just remembered I left my charger in the rehearsal room. I'm going to go get it before my next class."

I take a step back, bumping into someone. "Sorry," I mumble.

"Promise you won't get me killed, Ella," the guy snorts before continuing to his seat.

"Els," Peach says. "We'll come with you. Don't be alone."

"Hermes is unleashing on you," Alex admits. "We're barely past the first month of the year, and they've already posted three times about you. It's not fair and you're allowed to be upset."

"Hermes can suck my dick," Peach adds. "Let's skip classes and go to Stoneview Lake. We can spend the day there with the guys."

I shake my head. "Girls, I'm fine."

I sound like I'm gaslighting my best friends into thinking they're worrying for no reason. But in this room full of people who hate me, surrounded by everyone but the person I want, I feel lonelier than ever.

"I'll get my charger and go to class. I'll see you tonight."

I don't dare run through the hallways despite my feet trying to push me forward. Having any sort of reaction would prove them right. I have to stay passive, pretend this doesn't affect me. And I'm doing a great job until I see a couple walking my way.

She looks beautiful by his side. She's this tall, skinny, perfect-in-every-way woman. Her makeup is delicate and blends with her features. Megan's eyes don't even scan the area. She's looking right ahead. The tinted light filtering through the stained-glass windows makes her look like a queen walking through her court. Or an enemy walking through mine.

Chris holds her hand, not a sign of reluctance in sight, and when she says something in his ear, he even laughs a little. But as he gets closer, something catches my attention. His lower lip is split and swollen.

My face falls as I freeze on the spot. They keep walking my way, and Megan throws me a glance, pride shining in her dark blue eyes.

"Chris," I call the second they're close enough. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't stop. He doesn't flinch. He doesn't even look at me. But since

Megan does, I talk to her instead, walking with them even though I struggle to keep up with their long strides.

“What happened to him?” I ask, blurting out my questions with a worry I can’t control. “Did he get in a fight? Did someone hit him?”

Megan stops, and that’s the only reason Chris does too. She looks at me from top to bottom, back up, and laughs at me with condescension.

“Should we be worried, Ella?” she asks with an arrogance I’m dying to slap off her face. “I heard you’re dangerous to date.” She leans forward, hovering closer. “And I have a feeling if you’re going to go black widow on your exes, Chris might be in trouble.”

My mouth drops open for the two seconds it takes me to collect myself. I want to scream that he isn’t my ex. That he is mine. He’s always been mine. And I might hate him. I might not want to cede to his madness, but he is still *mine*. In a way she could never understand or have with him.

“I’m allowed to ask my friend if he’s okay,” I tell Megan, my voice betraying how much I hate her.

I’ll never forget how she threw me to the wolves in that maze.

A disgustingly smug smile spreads on her lips as she tilts her head to the side. “Your friend? Isn’t he your brother’s friend? Ella, sweetie, you’re just the little girl who thought her childish fantasies would come true because he gave you a speck of attention. Don’t be so silly.”

The fact that I’m wearing a uniform and they’re walking around in their elegant clothes accentuates her insult.

I hear some laughter, and I feel myself blush when I realize we’ve caught the attention of a few bystanders.

“Chris,” I croak. The plea in my desperate voice is so ridiculous I’m ashamed of myself.

Where’s the power I used to have over the people around us? And why does Megan now hold it so tightly in her grip?

He can’t ignore a whole conversation, but when he finally jumps in, I wish he’d never opened his mouth.

“Ella.” The unyielding way in which he says my name makes me want to drop my gaze, bow my head, *listen*. “Worry about your studies, will you? That’s what your brother asked of you. And when I don’t give you attention, it’s because I don’t want to. Don’t desperately ask for it, it’s very unbecoming.”

He wraps an arm around Megan’s waist, mumbling a quick “come on”

before they move again. She doesn't forget to slip a few words in my ear before she leaves.

"I'll forgive the misstep because you're a dumb thing who doesn't get it. But let me make things clear for you: Aphrodites get used at the temple. They don't get to fuck a Shadow whenever they want. Don't let me catch you anywhere near him unless you've been called to whore yourself out where you know belong."

I'm left standing in the middle of the hallway, barely able to breathe. A mix of heartbreak and visceral fear keeps me frozen to the spot. And then the flight instinct kicks in.

As I push people out of my way, I'm not hearing the jabs thrown in my direction anymore. Fuck holding my head high. Nothing is as important as fleeing this awful building.

I sprint down the pathways leading to the other buildings. My feet slap against the wet ground, and I'm soaked when I finally reach the Arts and Performance department. I fly through the doors of the old building and straight to the locker rooms of the dance section.

I need my safe space. I need the place where every thought goes away and only my body stays alive. Striding toward my locker, I'm already starting to undo my tie and shirt, but my breath freezes in my lungs when I get there.

"No," I choke. I drop to my knees in front of all my stuff on the floor.

Lockers are reserved for the dance students, but even after I had to drop out, I was respected enough that everyone in the class insisted I keep mine. Not anymore.

They took out all my belongings and left them on the floor with a note.

No perts or murderers allowed here.

Why would anyone do this? They have no proof of anything. Those people used to be my friends. We danced and cried and celebrated together. They left all my tutus, dance shoes, and leotards here with no consideration for them whatsoever.

A ball tightens my throat, and I swallow past it a few times before tears gather in my eyes.

Why?

Why is Hermes unleashing on me?

I take hold of my pointe shoes, bringing them to my chest. Everything is

falling apart. The death of my dad created a whirlwind of consequences I wasn't ready to face. Even in the afterlife, that man manages to ruin me. And now Chris being back has become a push-and-pull of emotions I can't handle.

What happened between the moment he decided he would make me his and today?

What goes on in his head when he hurts me? Does he get a kick out of breaking my heart?

I tremble mid-breath, something hitting me in the gut. Sometimes, the body knows before the brain reacts, and this is it. That feeling deep inside me that Chris did something wrong, and I'm paying for the consequences.

Wiping tears that are attempting to roll down my cheeks, I take out my phone to look at the post again.

Hermes wants people to believe I'm the only thing Enzo and Matias had in common. But there's something else. Yes, they both dated me, and that means they both did something my ex can't stand.

Heart racing, I gather my dance clothes and shove them in my bag. There's no more space for my shoes so I keep hold of my pointe shoes by the ribbons and rush down the hallways.

I walk into Reeves's office, and Chris is sitting at his assistant's desk. His face falls when he sees me, and he's about to say something, but I cut him off right away.

"Did you hurt Matias?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chris

So Good - Halsey

Looking down at the papers on my desk, I rub the back of my neck. Then I twist it to the sides, trying to crack away the tension in my muscles and vertebrae.

It doesn't work.

I attempt to focus my gaze on the words, but they blur from the headache I'm still sporting. Huffing, I angrily open my drawer to find the bottle of Tylenol in there and pop two pills.

I can do this. Sort through the five cases Rose proposed for Reeves's next class, finish my own research for my business strategy and business negotiations class, and not think of Ella.

Don't think about the way her eyes were shining with tears when I didn't defend her from Megan's spiteful behavior. Don't think about the sound of her steps as she ran away after I said the most malicious words I've ever said to her. She probably went to the dance studio. It's always been her safe space.

Please, stop thinking about that visceral need I have to go find her and let her know that it broke my heart as much as hers to act that way toward her. That I did it for her own good.

Everything terrible I do is for her own good. She just can't see it yet. She doesn't understand that what I'm putting her through is to help her understand that I'm the one she needs. I'm the one who will protect her from

the terrible things that scare and hurt her. And while this very specific behavior wasn't planned, it was still necessary.

Don't think of Ella.

Just for today. Or at least for this afternoon. One hour?

I eye the book of Shakespeare sonnets I took with me this morning to read before classes.

So are you to my thoughts as food to life,

Or as sweet-season'd showers are to the ground.

I can't even forget her for a whole minute. Even when I force my mind to do so, my gut twists, and I almost hyperventilate from wanting to think of her again. It's more than a need. It's an urgency. A hunger I can't control.

The sound of the office door makes me look up, and I freeze from the vision of the woman I'm dying to keep out of my head. Well, this isn't helping, is it?

My heart breaks into a sprint, enhancing the desperation to get up and take her into my arms.

I'm about to ask her how she's feeling, when she speaks.

"Did you hurt Matias?"

My eyes automatically dart to Reeves's door, not wanting him to hear us. She's panting, probably ran here, but her angry eyes stay on me.

She eyes the bruise at the corner of my mouth, the swollen skin. I unconsciously lick my lip, tasting the copper tang of the fresh cut.

"Did he fight back? Is that how you got that?" As if Matias could have hurt me.

When I notice the pointe shoes in her hand and the redness in her eyes, I ignore her question.

"Was there a problem at the studio?" I ask.

"Nothing you would care about," she barks back. "Now answer me. Because people think I hire someone to hurt my exes or the people I date, and we both know I don't. I'll tell everyone it was you."

I'm up before I know it. I'm rounding my desk and striding toward her subconsciously, and I'm standing tall in front of her wide-eyed form before I can control it.

My hand flies to her face, wrapping around her jaw and pulling until her neck is taut, her teeth gritting, glare locked on me.

"What will you say, Sweets? That your ex beat up two people because they flirted with you? I'm the one who seems like he's moved on from an

outside perspective. How credible will you look?”

Her fingers wrap around my wrist. “Why are you ruining my life?” she snarls, but it’s breathy and full of hopelessness.

“I protected you from two people who didn’t have your best interest at heart.”

It takes a lot of my self-control to not put her over my knees and spank the shit out of her for her attitude. It’s Ella Baker I’m talking about. She gives what she gets, and only I take what I want out of her.

“Don’t give me this bullshit when you won’t even tell me why you suddenly have a bruised face. When you wouldn’t even *look at me* earlier.”

I pull hard enough it forces her to get on her toes. She trips over her feet, having to press her hands against my chest to hold herself up. As if I would ever let her fall.

“Listen to me,” I say softly. It’s the opposite of my violent touch. “I own you. The things I have to do to protect you don’t change that.”

“You own me? But who fucking owns *you*?” she hisses. “I think we both know that answer. Does Megan know how you got that bruise on your face?”

She threw a phone at my face.

She hurt my dad.

She said you were next.

I shake my head, blinking away the image of me admitting everything to Ella. How could I be so stupid to threaten Megan and pretend her threat of hurting my dad could only be used so many times? Of course she would find other people to threaten. Of course she would choose Ella.

“Megan is an obligation to me. I don’t care what she believes or who she thinks she owns. But I care about your wellbeing. And those two were bad news for you.”

I let her shove me away. She rubs her hands over her face, all the way to her hairline, and pulls at her roots. “You’re ruining my life,” she howls.

My eyes dart to Reeves’s office once again. I don’t want him to hear us.

“I was trying to protect you,” I admit, grabbing her by the wrists so she can’t start roaming around the room like she does when she’s anxious. “I warned you. No other men. You know how Matias felt about you.”

“He’s in a *coma*, Chris. Oh my god,” she panics, eyes widening. “You’re insane.”

She tries to pull away, but I’m not planning on letting her go. I’m never planning on letting her go.

“I could get arrested after what Hermes said about me!”

“Don’t shout.” I eye the door to Reeves’s office, thinking she might catch onto my concern. “Nothing would ever happen to you. Hermes is a speculating account. You have the Circle behind you.”

She knows that’s not true. The Circle grants one wish to Aphrodites. No more. No less. But I need to slyly make her see the truth.

And it works, because the blood drains from her face.

“I have nothing!” she gasps. It’s hitting her. “I have no one to help. This could be the end of me.”

I let it settle for one more second before dropping the words that will get her closer to me.

“You have me.”

She stops struggling, and I finally notice it. The desperation for reassurance in her baby-blue eyes. The need to know someone will have her back through everything.

She’s getting there. To that spot where I want her. It’s slow, but it’s steady, and every single move I’ve made until now is helping the pieces fall into place.

“I can’t trust you.” She points at the bruise on my face. “You’re a liar. Your biggest strength is manipulating people.” Her chest trembles when she breathes. “You’ll use me. And then you’ll let me down. You’ve done it before.”

Those exact thoughts are the reason I’m forced to act cunningly toward her. She doesn’t trust me. I have to force her to. She’ll never know I’ll catch her no matter what if she doesn’t jump. She needs a push.

“I will protect you,” I tell her. “I will care for you like the queen you are, and I will never let anyone hurt you. All you have to do in return is be mine and wait patiently for me to get myself out of my situation with Megan.”

She closes her eyes, takes a trembling breath, and reopens them. “Maria Delgado left SFU. Just like that, she asked to transfer to another college.”

Pride bubbles in my chest.

“Did you get your spot back as cheer captain?”

“It was you too,” she sighs and shakes her head. “What did you do to her?”

“She’s all fine. Did you get your spot back?” I insist.

“I did,” she says unsteadily. “I don’t know for how long since the team hates me, but I did.”

I feel a smile spreading on my face, but she looks at me with complete terror in her eyes.

“Stop interfering with my life.”

“Never. You deserved that spot.”

The door to Reeves’s office opens, and I take a long step back, letting go of her.

“Miss Baker,” his voice snaps angrily. “Here to hand in your essay early, maybe?”

She shakes her head, pulling her blonde hair behind her ears. “I was just leaving.”

I’m forced to stand still when she does so, and all I can do is watch her leave with a dire need to run after her.

Because Megan has eyes everywhere. And Reeves is always too happy to help my dear fiancée.

The second the door closes, Reeves smirks at me. “That looks painful.” A curt nod toward me lets me know he’s talking about my mouth. “Your future wife is violently possessive of you, isn’t she?” When I don’t answer, he insists. “What was it? Did she learn you slept with Ella outside of the temple?”

“So you’re the one who told her,” I say simply.

“A nice student of mine saw you in my classroom. She was so desperate to get in my good books, she informed me right away. And I was rather desperate to get back at you for threatening me during initiations. I lost my prize for the night because of you.”

We stay a couple of feet apart, neither of us moving or raising our voices, yet the conversation feels like a duel.

“All I did was remind you that if the Circle learns about you sleeping with students, you’ll become more trouble than you’re worth to them.”

“That was a threat so I would forfeit Ella for the night. You got what you wanted, and now so did I. We’re even.”

He shrugs like this is nothing. Like the result wasn’t a jealous, controlling woman screaming at me, threatening me, throwing her phone in my face, and hurting my family.

Like the result wasn’t threats toward the woman I love.

“I could still tell them,” I warn, my voice lowering.

“I don’t think so. Megan and I have been sharing information since you can’t be trusted. We wouldn’t want Ella to know your little secrets.” He

smirks. “It would be terribly unfortunate.”

Swallowing back frustration, I acknowledge his words with a nod, and that’s all he needs. I’ve lost my advantage over him, but I shouldn’t care. The most important thing is Ella staying clueless. I can’t have her where I want her if she has a choice in it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ella

Shameless - Camilla Cabello

I look down at the text I received this afternoon. It's been a million times, but the closer it gets to 8 p.m., the more I look at it.

Unknown: Aphrodite, you are required to attend the annual Shadows business weekend at the temple. You will be picked up on Saturday night at 8:30 p.m. and brought home on Sunday night. You may not refuse. Zeus

It's the first time I've been called upon as an Aphrodite since being initiated a couple of weeks ago. And the days I spent trying to ignore that I am part of the Silent Circle are now officially over. A lot of things went through my mind while I was waiting at home.

How many Aphrodites were asked to come?

Who will I have to serve?

Does Chris know? He was adamant he never wanted to see me with another Shadow, but he knows perfectly well I don't have a choice.

Zeus doesn't play with young Aphrodites, but if he's the one who invited me for the weekend, does it mean I'll be spending it with him? Or is it a general invite?

My head is swimming when there's a knock on my door.

"Ella Baker?"

I run down the stairs, an overnight bag on my shoulder and wearing a pair

of jeans with a cami top. There was no indication as to what to wear or what to pack, so I did my best.

“Hi,” I say to the middle-aged man with a chauffeur’s hat on his head.

He indicates the blacked-out SUV parked in front of my house, and I follow him until he opens the door and lets me in.

I freeze as I climb inside, taking in the handsome man in a tuxedo in the backseat.

“Come,” Chris says calmly. “We need to talk before we get there.”

I clench my jaw, not wanting to talk to him. The last conversation we had was a few days ago, and he admitted he had hurt the men I dated, interfered with my life, and shamelessly said he wouldn’t stop even if the blame was put on me.

“How are you, Sweets?”

Settling in my seat, I look out the window on my side and ignore him. My body is already buzzing having this man around, but unlike when he brought me home drunk, I’m logical enough to know engaging with him isn’t a good idea.

“Is that a pout?” he chuckles. “If you’re trying to look angry, you’re going to have to try a little harder because this cuteness isn’t really doing it.”

I do my best to harden my face, narrowing my eyes into slits when I turn to him. Still, I remain silent.

“I was going to be nice,” he sighs. “I wanted to run you past how the business weekend works, ask how you feel. But if you’re going to be a brat who doesn’t want to talk, I guess I can play that game too.”

I take in the black tuxedo he’s wearing. A black waistcoat, a black shirt, and a black bow tie. I’ve noticed he wears all black when he goes to Circle’s events. Like he wants to fit the darkness of the place. But his handsome face doesn’t match the wickedness of the Silent Circle. His beautiful eyes shine just a little too brightly, and the curls of his hair falling into his eyes make him just a touch too innocent.

Chris hides his depravity down deep, made it his. His brand of evil. Nothing can compete with that.

Worried I’ll get lost in the amber of his eyes, I look away again. He doesn’t deserve my attention, no matter how much I want to give in.

He sees me as an Aphrodite, thinks of me as someone he can use no matter what. I don’t have to actively participate in this insanity.

“Ella.”

I startle, emerging from my own head.

“If you want to stay silent for the next twenty-four hours, I can make that happen. But I’d suggest you play nice when I’m the only one who is going to protect you at the temple.”

He almost gets me to talk. Not because he tells me to, but because I’m dying to point out that the only reason he’ll be protecting me there is so he can have me to himself. So he can be the one to break me.

I decide to not say anything, since according to the tightness in his jaw, that’s what bothers him the most. Giving him the silent treatment feels rather good.

“Alright,” he finally murmurs. “You can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

My head snaps to his side, not liking the second half of his sentence. I’m already too late.

His strong hand wraps around my upper arm, pulling me until he can circle an arm around my waist and pull me on his lap.

“Since you don’t want to talk,” he growls in my ear. “Daddy has to teach you a lesson.”

Sudden fear mixes with a strange lust. This is the part of me that’s always betraying my brain. The one he’s got a hold of.

It’s happening too fast for me to catch what he’s now holding in his hand, but when I feel something push at my mouth, panic overtakes me.

“No!” I scream, throwing my head to the side.

With his other hand, he grips my hair, holding my head exactly where he needs it.

“Chris—”

“Uh-uh. We concluded you’d be silent for the rest of the weekend.”

Hard rubber pushes past my teeth. It’s not a ball gag, it’s something more invasive. It feels phallic, like the tip of a dick.

“Open wide, Sweets.”

“Chris, please,” I murmur against the rubber.

“Shh. Open.”

He pushes more violently, and it breaches the barrier of my lips, my teeth. I whimper when it invades my mouth, pressing against my tongue.

“Do you like my new gag?” I feel him buckle it behind my head, and for a second, I’m afraid it’ll go so deep I’ll be sick.

My hands automatically go to my mouth, trying to take it out. When I follow the straps to the back of my head, he takes hold of both my wrists,

pinning them to my lower stomach with one hand.

“Calm down,” he says softly. “It’s a dildo gag. It’s a step up from the ball gag we used in the past. It’ll be hard, but you can try to swallow around it.”

Shaking my head, I try my best to breathe through my nose. *Please* is at the tip of my tongue, but it’s impossible to say.

“I think this will be a good lesson for you, Sweets. If you want to stay silent, I’ll keep you silent.”

A whimper gets past me, my frantic breathing now matching the tightness in my lower stomach.

He hooks my legs across his knees and spreads his thighs to keep me open.

“Now.” He pats my pussy through my jeans, making me jolt from the zap of pleasure. “About the next twenty-four hours.”

I shift on his lap, the presence of the small dildo in my mouth driving me insane. I don’t like having my mouth full like this, not being able to talk or take it out. But the helplessness he’s putting me through is awakening the pleasure that always comes with this treatment.

“Every year, the Shadows host what they call a business weekend after initiations. They have the new Shadows at the temple to confirm the role they’ll take on within the Circle. We’ve already been told those things before initiating, but it’s an occasion to make it official and meet with some people within the Circle who have similar roles.”

He presses his palm between my legs, making me moan around the gag.

“In a minute, I’m going to test how wet this is making you, and I bet my life your panties will be soaked.”

I shake my head, but I don’t think he cares about my denial.

“Most Shadows will be doing a little bit of business, and a lot of pleasure. And that’s when the Aphrodites come in. Heras aren’t invited, and only the Aphrodites people have asked for will be present. Your name was voted quite a few times.”

He slaps my pussy through my jeans again. I inhale sharply through my nose, squeezing my eyes shut as I go through more delicious torture.

“Until this week, you haven’t been called as an Aphrodite because the Circle thinks I’ve been using you. That text you received tonight, that’s what all Aphrodites get from a Shadow when they’re being called upon. And every time Zeus offered Aphrodites, I said I wanted you. Said it before anyone else. And I pretended to send you that text. Every. Single. Time.”

Is he telling me the reason I haven't been used by anyone at the temple is because he was protecting me from them?

"Remember what we agreed, Ella?" His now stern voice makes me squirm on his lap. God, I love it when I can feel the way I belong to him deep in my bones. "No other men. It's not a suggestion. It's not advice to keep things peaceful between us. My word is law, and there will be hell to pay for disobeying."

His palm presses through my jeans again, and instead of fighting against his obsessive behavior, I moan around the gag. "I would never hurt you. You're my everything. You're my heaven in this goddamned broken world. But I will hurt anyone you let near you, do you understand? I won't kill them. I'd much rather they suffer for a long, torturous time."

With a huff, he pulls his hand away from my burning core. "But I'll admit, I would be rather annoyed if I ended up in prison because you disobeyed and let someone else than me touch you. So, be a good girl and keep in mind: No. Other. Men."

He kisses my cheek, then my jaw, probably feeling the leather of the gag with his lips. Burying his face in my neck, he talks against my skin and brings goosebumps scattering down my arms.

"There was a bid for you this weekend."

My breathing accelerates, my chest trembling as he bites the skin beneath my ear.

"I swear the amount of money Shadows play with within the Circle is on a whole other level."

He chuckles. "Good thing I would spend all the gold in the world on you."

I want to scream, cry, thank him, tell him how much his behavior is detestable and yet kiss him for protecting me.

"You're mine this weekend, Sweets. There was no pretending to send the text this time. I asked Zeus to have you and paid the price. Now you're all"—he bites my skin again, making me whimper around the gag—"mine."

I'm nearly bursting into tears when we enter the temple. He didn't take off the gag. I tried to do it myself countless times in the car, but he promised a punishment, and this is it. He didn't have to tie my hands behind my back for me to stop trying. The simple threat of making me kneel naked and gagged with a dildo deep inside me in front of all the other Shadows was enough.

So I blink back my watery eyes as he walks me through the entrance hall, keeping my gaze on the floor to ignore all the ones zeroed in on me. Chris walks assuredly, standing tall and proud to have won his prize for the weekend. Their gazes burn through my clothes, making me feel more naked than ever. The only reassurance I have is my ex's hand at the small of my back, keeping me at the pace he wishes, yet bringing me a warmth that stops me from trembling.

He takes me straight to the lower level, to an Aphrodite's room, and locks the door behind him.

"Would you like me to take the gag off?" he asks softly, guiding me to an armchair in the room.

He helps me sit as I nod, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

"Are you desperate?"

I nod harder.

He puts his hands on the arms of the chair, his giant form leaning down right above my face. I'm craning my neck to meet his eyes.

"Do you understand what happens when you give me the silent treatment?"

I nod repeatedly, whimpering around the dildo. It's so hard to swallow I can feel spit gathering at the corners of my mouth.

"Good. I'm glad you're learning. You'll keep it in until I'm done with you."

A sob makes my chest quiver, the need to cry out for mercy rendering me hopeless. I've never wanted to be able to say *please* so badly in my life.

His evil smirk makes my heart skip a beat. It's always so terrifying and exciting to be alone with him.

He undoes my jeans, pulling them down to my knees. "I'm going to meet with the other Shadows. The business part of the weekend is rather boring, but needed nonetheless."

Turning his back to me, he walks to one of the shelves where all the toys are kept and comes back to me with something so small it fits in his closed fist.

"You've soaked the lace of your panties, Sweets. I can't say I'm disappointed with the effect I have on you."

He fists my thong, pulling it up to my belly button and dragging the material tightly between my pussy lips. I squeal behind the gag, throwing my head back as a mix of pain and pleasure lights my body on fire.

“Look at me. Right now.”

I force my head up, looking him in the eye.

“Good girl. I want to see the despair in your eyes when I don’t give you the release you crave so badly. I want to see the fight between hate and lust. It’s quite beautiful to see the way you torture yourself.”

I’m panting when he lowers the lace to my thighs. He finally shows me what he’s been holding. A vibrating egg that he runs against my slit, gathering wetness with it. He puts it in his mouth, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

“Ella,” he growls as he pulls it out. “That was a delicious reminder of why I call you *Sweets*.”

He presses the egg against my entrance, slowly pushing it inside me. I can feel he’s making sure he’s not hurting me. With a toy, it’s harder for him to judge how tight I am, and I know his focus is always my pleasure. But I’m so wet it slides in easily, disappearing within me and making me moan, my eyes fluttering shut. Only the small string attached to it is left, and he pulls at it a few times, driving me insane.

“Beautiful,” he rasps. “My God, you’re absolutely gorgeous.”

His next step is to put back my panties and jeans in place, so I’m completely dressed again. He cuffs my hands to the arms of the chair, and then my thighs apart so I can’t close my legs.

Straightening, he presses on the remote he’s holding, bringing the toy to life and me in the process. It’s on such a low setting I barely feel it, but it’s enough to know it’s there, turning me on even more.

“The first time I had you in an Aphrodite’s room, I made you come until you couldn’t stay awake anymore. This time, you’ll be teased, edged, and denied an orgasm until I get the chance to fuck you. And then you’ll come so hard on my dick you’ll remember why there’s no need for any other man.”

He kisses my forehead softly, caresses my cheek, and his bright eyes take me in again. “It truly is torture to leave you here. I won’t be able to focus up there knowing my pretty girl is needy and waiting for me.”

Then he locks the door behind him when he leaves, and the true torture begins. The vibrations become my only focus, so slow and light, but so delicious. They’re constant, keeping a rhythm that makes me squirm.

I have no idea how long it lasts, but I’m sweating when the door opens again, desperate for any sort of stimulation that would bring me closer to the edge.

He stands in front of me, a growl resonating deep in his chest. “You’re really taking the *business* out of this business weekend, Sweets.”

My whimper makes his eyes flutter shut. He brings his hand to his tux pants, fisting his hard dick. “Everyone upstairs wants to know what I’m doing with you down here. I won’t tell them. This is for me alone, isn’t it?”

I nod like a crazy woman, pushing my chest forward in a plea to get him to touch me. He shows me a pair of scissors, and I’m quick to press myself against the seat again, now shaking my head.

“You know I would never hurt you, baby,” he murmurs, cutting through the top I’m wearing. He rids me of it, leaving me bare.

My nipples are hard as rocks, and he throws the scissors to the side to rub them with his thumbs. He kneels on the floor between my spread legs and starts licking my hard nubs one after the other before grazing them with his teeth. When he bites them lightly, I push harder against his mouth. I’m breathing feverishly, knowing if he continues like this, and mixed with the light vibration inside me, I could come.

Fuck...I could come from him biting my nipples. But he stops, stands up, and wipes the drool dripping at the corner of my mouth before spreading it on both my tits.

“I want to fuck you until you can’t breathe,” he growls, almost like a threat.

But instead, he pulls away, turns off the lights, and leaves the room.

With no more light, the only thing I’m able to focus on is the vibrations, once again, the pleasure just out of reach, the torture I can’t sustain anymore.

I’m pretty sure I’m crying when he comes back what feels like hours later.

“Ella.” He walks to me again. “My beautiful slut, don’t cry.” As he wipes my tears, I whimper, my head attempting to follow his hand when he pulls away. “I know, baby. I know it’s hard to be so desperate for cock.”

I groan, throwing my head back as this time he cuts my jeans and panties off me. “What a soaking mess.”

He brings two knuckles to my clit, and I jolt from pleasure when his skin grazes me.

“I wish you could see how gorgeous you are.”

It’s a good thing I’m wearing the gag, or I would be making an even bigger fool of myself by begging him with all I have to fuck me.

Sitting naked, I can feel the way my wetness is soaking the chair, making

me the exact slut he describes me as.

“It’s almost over up there,” he says calmly, caressing my sweaty hairline. “You’re so close to getting your reward, Sweets. You’re so strong. Holding on for hours for me.”

The confirmation that it’s been hours is worse than not knowing. Now that I understand time again, I’m even more miserable.

I try to say please around the toy in my mouth, but my jaw aches. I would be scared of permanent damage if I wasn’t so turned on.

He kisses my neck this time, clearly hungrier for me.

“I’m going to be fucking this desperate pussy very soon, baby.”

And he’s gone.

The door opens again quicker than I thought, and I could cry from happiness. But something is different. The shadow in the doorway is smaller, the steps toward me not as calm as Chris’s confident demeanor. They’re hurried, from someone who can’t control their excitement. Nothing like the man who owns my body.

“Fucking hell.”

And those words. They’re not only not his voice, but they’re also not words he would use. They don’t have the adoration his descriptions of me do.

When I can finally see a face in front of me, I can’t say I recognize it. He’s a Shadow, but I have no idea who. Just another man who thinks the rules don’t apply to him.

“Aren’t you a desperate fucking whore?” he snickers. “Look at how fucking wet you are. I understand now why he wouldn’t say anything to us upstairs. I would keep this to myself too.”

But I’m not desperate anymore. Not with him around. Not with his dull eyes on me that are nothing like Chris’s. Not with his dirty words that are like a bucket of ice water on my entire body. I feel a shiver of disgust running through me, the egg suddenly hurting despite its low setting.

I’m pressing myself against the chair when his disgusting hands touch my boobs, shaking my head no. A scream gets lodged in my throat, impossible to get it out with the gag.

It barely lasts a few seconds before a colossal presence appears behind him. Chris is so much taller I can see his furious face as he stands behind the man.

It’s almost delicate. All I see are the man’s eyes widening, a strange scream of shock and pain leaving him. His hands leave my body, and he falls

to the floor on his side.

“A pity that some men don’t know how to keep their hands to themselves, isn’t it?” Chris says to him.

The man is blinking with shock, unsure what’s happening to him, but his face twists with pain. And that’s when I see the same scissors Chris used to cut my clothes lodged in his lower back. My heart stops, muscles tightening to the point of pain. Did he just...

“Are you okay, Sweets?” he asks me like I’m his only focus. The egg inside me stops, but Chris’s hand on my chin ignites the fire within me again.

He just stabbed a man. Come back down to earth.

But I can’t, not when he sees my need flaring. I can see that he notices. His grip is tighter, a low growl leaving him.

“Oh, baby. You’re incorrigible.”

He grazes my nipple, making my eyes flutter shut. “Does it turn you on to see me hurt someone for you?”

I shake my head, but the truth shows when I press my tits harder against him. He pulls out the egg, and I moan loudly.

“Only desperate for me,” he says assuredly. “My slut. My girl. Mine.”

When he finally releases me from the gag, a moan of relief leaves me. My mouth feels like cotton from being held in the same position for so long. He pulls down his pants and boxers, releasing his hard dick with a groan. Then he undoes the cuffs around my thighs, pulls my ass to the edge of the chair, and wraps my legs around his waist.

“Open your mouth. Show me the mess I made of you. That’s it, baby. Show me your tongue. What a pretty, perfect slut.”

I’m sticking out my tongue so far it hurts, but I’m ready to do anything for him to fuck me, to own me, to put me in my fucking place.

He presses the tip of his dick against my entrance, and the pleasure of that only makes me throw my head back. It earns me a slap. Nothing painful, a reminder to follow orders.

“Back in position. Tongue out. Now.”

The stern order at the same time as he pushes in slowly makes me execute. I put out my tongue, and his smirk melts my sanity.

He grips my chin, holding me in place, and spits on my tongue.

“Swallow.”

And as I do, he pushes all the way inside me, making me whimper from the overwhelming relief as he fills me.

“Whose slut are you, Ella?”

“Yours, Daddy,” I moan.

“Who do you belong to?”

“Y-you,” I pant, feeling my orgasm coming at me like a fast train.

“What an obedient little desperate thing you are,” he growls against my neck, biting my skin.

With a hand on the back of the chair and one grabbing my face—pushing so hard on my cheeks it makes me pout—he forces my head to the side so I’m looking at the Shadow on the floor. He’s groaning from pain, barely conscious.

“Look at what I do to the men who touch you. Forget the fucking act I put on for everyone. That’s the man I become for you,” he says in my ear, his breath a hot caress. “T10 to L1 spinal cord segment. A great place to stab someone.” He thrusts into me hard, and I scream from pleasure. “Not dead.” *Thrust*. I moan. “Legs paralyzed forever.” *Thrust*. Fuck. I’m going to come. “I want him to remember the day he touched my girl and what happened to him. I want *you* to know what happens to people who try to hurt the person I care the most for.”

He pauses, for a second, just to force me to face him.

“Look at me. Look me in the eye. Atta whore. You’re gorgeous.”

When he thrusts into me again, it’s without mercy. And he’s barely holding himself back as he orders, “Come.”

I explode like a thousand fireworks, twisting all the ways I can to feel him deeper inside me. Blinding euphoria swallows me whole, darkening the room, and everything disappears apart from his beautiful eyes on mine. He’s quick to follow me, releasing the desire he’s been holding the whole time he was torturing me.

I’m too lost in a state of bliss to realize I’m letting my ex rope me back in. I’m too taken by our hearts beating in sync to understand this is a mistake. A big mistake.

No one should feel so strongly about a man who just stabbed someone for touching them.

But this is what Chris and I have always been. Artificially sane separately, completely unhinged together.

And God, it feels so good to have that again.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ella

Please Notice - Christian Leave

We return to Silver Falls before the end of the business weekend. Of course, when they had to retrieve a paralyzed man from the Aphrodite's room we were in, we had to leave. Chris was informed Zeus would be in contact with him, and I wasn't told anything. Chris asked for us to be dropped at his Stoneview house, and he's now driving his own car.

I've been silent, refusing to put words to the insane moment we shared, but I'm forced to talk when the anxiety becomes too much.

"Are you going to get in trouble?"

"Don't worry about me getting in trouble. I can handle the Circle. And you won't get in trouble either."

I didn't ask about me, but he can probably sense my stress. I've got enough shit to deal with. I don't need to add the Circle thinking I was involved in a crime.

"You missed the entrance to the highway," I point out, as I watch him drive past it.

"I know."

"Chris," I insist. "Where are we going?"

"To a place where it can be just the two of us. I want to rest my mind." His eyes dart to mine before they go back to the road. "Don't you?"

I nod, and even though he's not looking at me, I know he can feel it.

"Plus, your stomach is rumbling, and I know what you need right now."

I automatically wrap my arms around my stomach. My reflex is to hiss that he doesn't know what I need. But he sounds exhausted, and so am I. For someone who finds comfort in being in control, I know making decisions for me is going back to a safe spot.

So I don't take it away from him.

"Okay," I simply say.

I feel his sigh of relief all the way to my bones. It's been tiring having to fight him every step of the way. Maybe we can just forget about everything for tonight.

He parks in front of a beautiful building I recognize immediately.

"Ms. Barry Dance School," I murmur. "Talk about a place to rest my mind."

"It's just before five a.m.," he says. "She won't be here until six, as far as I know."

"That's right, but the place is locked."

He turns to me, cocking an eyebrow. "You used to sneak in here at night. Don't tell me you don't know a way in."

I don't even bother to hide the shock on my face. He's used to it by now. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Your passion was dancing. My passion was you."

"You're a creep," I chuckle.

"If only I was *just* a creep. Come on."

He gets out, opening my door before I get a chance to, and helps me out of his car.

And I decide to share my little secret with him. I show him the stone wall I used to climb, and he does it in a swift, easy movement. I take him to the basement door hidden on the side of the building behind a hedge that hasn't been trimmed since probably before Ms. Barry was born, and I lead him through the door I unlocked from the inside years ago. No one ever checked it, and it stayed that way for me to sneak in whenever I needed.

We walk up to the main area, and the first thing he does is go to the vending machine there. He pulls out his card and taps the card-reader on there, then presses a number, and a protein bar falls. Then another. Another...

"Chris?"

"You love these," he says casually. He remembers everything.

“I do, but...” I tilt my head to the side, watching him repeat the process over and over again, until he ends up with fifteen of them in his arms and walks back to me with a grin on his face. “Seriously, what are you doing?”

“So you can bring them to the kids you teach on Saturdays. Is fifteen enough?”

I blink up at him, my heart swelling. “Uh...yeah. Yeah, it’s enough.”

“Let’s go to a rehearsal room. Lead the way.”

I do. I take him to my favorite one that has a single window with a view of Stoneview Forest. It’s the only rehearsal room with a window. Once we’ve closed the door, he sits on the floor and drops the bars. He takes one, rips it open, and offers it to me.

“Come. You’re hungry.”

I am. So I don’t fight it. I sit down and eat in silence with him.

“This,” he rasps as he swallows. “This is the best thing ever.”

“I told you they were delicious.” I chew slowly on the sticky chocolate protein bar. “I tried to order them online, but I can’t find them anywhere. Only in this vending machine.”

“I’m not talking about the protein bars, Sweets. I’m talking about spending time with you, doing something simple without anyone stopping us.”

I swallow thickly, and my heart skips a beat when he wipes the corner of my mouth with his thumb. He brings his finger to his lips and licks the chocolate off it.

“I missed you,” he admits, his gaze still on mine. “For five years, I missed you, and it came with the regret of breaking up. I missed you when I came back to Stoneview and could see the way you avoided me, trying to protect your heart from me. I thought being back and being in your presence would help, but I’ve missed you because you were right. I have your body but not your heart.”

Said heart begs to differ from how crazily it’s beating.

He nods to himself, and his hand falls to his lap. “Do you remember our first kiss?”

We’re sitting cross-legged in front of each other, and it looks almost ridiculous for such a huge man to sit like this. I observe his face. He’s got eye bags, and for the first time I notice the way everything in him seems tense. He looks older, tired, stressed.

“I’m not sure talking about our first kiss will help, Chris.”

He ignores my advice, his beautiful whiskey eyes shining with nostalgia.

“It was my eighteenth birthday. I found you in the bathroom at my house party, I walked in, and I locked the door. I approached you and I told you that I only —”

“—make mistakes when you think they’re worth it,” I cut him off. “I remember that night like it was yesterday.”

“Fuck, Ella,” he huffs, running a hand at the back of his neck. “I knew you would be the biggest mistake of my life.”

When my eyes widen from shock, he adds, “Not because of your brother. Not because of the consequences of dating you.” He licks his lips, his eyes on mine. “I knew you would be a mistake because you would never give me my heart back if I offered it to you. And look at what you did. You stole it, you kept it to yourself. You became the only person it could beat for.”

This vulnerable side of him is the hardest to resist. Harder than lust and memories of us. Because it’s him *now* telling me the things I’ve been longing to hear.

He takes a deep breath, his gaze roaming over my face and stopping on my eyes. “Now you don’t want me. You hate me. You think I’m a coward. Now you swear you won’t give me a second chance, and look at me...I still don’t want my heart back. Because I know its rightful place is in the palm of your hand.”

There’s nothing but the sound of my staggered breathing. He leans closer, but I put a hand on his cheek to stop him.

“Ella,” he rasps. “You know I’ve always had two sides of me. I’m sorry about the person that comes out when I can’t have you. It’s dangerous. But it doesn’t mean I don’t care. It doesn’t mean I wouldn’t do absolutely anything for you.”

My heart beats painfully, oscillating between giving in and knowing I could regret it more than anything I ever have.

I push the curls away from his forehead, and our lips hover close when I speak.

“It isn’t about the two sides of you, Chris. I’ve known about that since I’ve known you, and I accepted it when we were together. But I can’t erase the last five years. I can’t forget the heartbreak and the sadness. That you chose Luke over me. And that you left. Those things don’t just go away, and especially not when you come back with a girlfriend. I don’t know who you are anymore, and I might not understand your relationship—or deal—with

Megan, but what I know is that man you are for the Circle isn't the man I loved."

His eyes won't leave mine, and I could swear I see the very definition of regret in them. It feels like an eternity before he opens up some more.

"The man I've become from the pressure and the suffering isn't who I want to be. I want to be the person I was with you. Just like I know you're not the whiny queen bee you're showing to everyone. I know the real Ella. The empathetic girl, who cares about the people around her. The one who has feelings and doesn't care whether her reputation is intact or not. My Ella is so beautiful inside and out it radiates on the rainiest days. I know who you are, and you know who I am. The masks we put on to survive shouldn't fool the ones who truly love us. And I truly l —"

"Don't say it."

He nods. "I understand why you don't want to hear it, but it doesn't make it any less true."

"Chris," I rasp, barely breathing. I know this is going to hurt, but I can't keep it to myself. "I don't want to know the man I gave my all to and who abandoned me *loves me*. Because if you truly did, you wouldn't be with her."

This is what makes him pull away. The hurt in his eyes breaks me, but I can't deny the truth. He's already doing that.

"One of us has to be realistic," I admit painfully. "This is beautiful, honest, but it's bittersweet. Once it's over, you'll go back to her, and I'll be alone again. We can enjoy it while it lasts, but it won't last forever."

Turning away, he scratches his throat, and I don't have to see his face or his thoughts to know this is hard. I feel it too. The pull between us feels like it will never go away, never die. It's so strong it feels inevitable, yet it's not the reality of our situation. And that hurts like nothing else.

He runs a hand across his face and looks at me again. "Dance for me."

"Dance?"

Showing me the way his face lights up when he talks about me, he smiles. "We're in a dance studio, aren't we? Please."

He's beautiful, vulnerable, exactly the man I know he is for me. So I smile in return, unable to hold back how content I truly am with him. "Okay."

I stand up, stretching my arms, and then my legs. "Pick a song. And you'll have to excuse that I'm dressed in jeans and sneakers."

He pulls out his phone, stands up, and plugs it into the speakers. "Lucky me, your talent doesn't depend on your clothes."

Going to the bar, I use it to stretch my spine and legs again. I startle when the first note of “The Scientist” by Coldplay resonate in the room. My heart squeezes, but I don’t look at him. It would be too hard to look at him. Instead, I dance.

I go through whatever my body tells me. I become an instrument for the song. I straighten my spine, roll back my shoulders. I hold my head high and do a grand jeté across the room. I almost forget where I am and start pirouetting. The same movements I couldn’t do a few weeks ago become as easy as breathing. I twirl, losing myself in the music and losing count of how many I do until two hands grab my waist, pull me closer, and lift me off the floor.

He lifts me so high, the tips of my fingers barely graze his shoulders, and he holds me tightly against him as he slowly brings me down.

I know where this ends, but still, I let him touch me, heart beating crazily in anticipation. My stomach drags against his chest as every single sensation creates a burning need inside me. His strong arms don’t struggle for one second, taking all my weight until I’m right above his face, and in the next second, our mouths are nearly brushing.

Neither of us speaks. He waits. Our eyes searching the other’s. Breaths mingling. The seconds elongate into a magical moment...and I’m the first to break.

My lips crash against his, and I hear him moan. Probably with a mix of surprise and joy. He holds me tighter, fingertips digging into my skin as he turns the kiss ravenous.

This man missed me, and there’s no other way he could have shown it. This kiss is more than the lust we’ve shared until now. This kiss is more than owning me, or my body. This kiss...is the second chance he so desperately talks about, the proof that I didn’t mishear when he said Megan and him had a deal. One I don’t understand, but that surely doesn’t involve the things he and I share.

His tongue dances with mine, creating waves of butterflies within me, and I forget why I even refused him something so beautiful until now.

I never want it to stop, but I do pull away to catch a breath. Instead, I catch pure happiness in his eyes as he slowly lets my feet touch the floor.

“Ella,” he rasps. His gaze bounces between my eyes, and his eyebrows pinch. “I’m so sorry for the things I will do to get you back.”

“What?”

“Please, forgive me for them. But after this kiss...I’ve never been more sure that you and I are meant to be, and that it doesn’t matter what I have to put us through to achieve that.”

I swallow thickly, something pushing at my chest. A mix of hope that he will do anything it takes so we end up together, and of fear. Because I know it will probably destroy me.

And I think I want him to destroy me.

With my heart sinking, I take a step back. “We should head back.”

“To reality,” he says with a hoarse voice.

“To reality,” I confirm.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ella

Guilty As Sin - Taylor Swift

“I noticed something about Hermes,” Peach whispers as she looks up from her book.

We’re sitting in the grand library, and I don’t usually study here. I spent more time sleeping with random guys between the aisles than anything else, but I seriously need to focus on the next essay for Reeves. I have a headache and feel I’m coming down with a cold, but I have to push through.

“Do I want to know?” I mumble, scrolling down an article on my laptop.

“Yes. Because I think it’s about you.”

I look behind my screen and at my friend. “What hasn’t been about me when it comes to this stupid account lately?”

I notice she wasn’t actually reading, but rather on her phone, which is between the pages of her book. Typical Peach. She grabs it and shows me a few different posts. “Look.”

With a huff, I force myself to relive the latest posts. The FBI at my house, Hermes revealing I knew about the parties, and the one about Maria and Matias.

I can’t help a sneeze, my whole body shivering from a chill coming from deep within my bones. I mumble a quick sorry to our librarian.

“Any reason I’m re-traumatizing myself?” I ask Peach.

“You don’t notice something missing?”

I shrug, not loving that she wants to get into this.

“They stopped putting ‘your secrets are safe with me until they aren’t,’” she explains.

I look again, scrolling through the page. The one about my dad being arrested had the signoff, but the two after that, the ones that truly ruined my reputation, don’t have the typical Hermes signature.

“So? They forgot.”

She shakes her head, rolling her lips inwardly. “I don’t think so. Something is different. They never post about the same person so many times. The writing is different, and there’s no signature. And they usually post the truth. We both know you didn’t hurt Enzo and Matias. Or asked anyone to hurt them.”

Perking up, I look at the screen again. “What are you thinking?”

“I think it’s not the same person it used to be.”

“How?” My surprised gasp gets me a *shh* from Mrs. Davis, and I offer her an apologetic smile.

Peach rolls her eyes before focusing on me again.

“We can’t know for sure, but I think someone else has taken over the Hermes account. Someone who hates you.”

Her eyes widen, pointedly looking behind me, and I turn around to see what she’s hinting at. Megan, Chris, and some other students are sitting at a table not far from us. It will never get easier seeing her with him, and I struggle to swallow the jealousy. After our moment at the studio, I’ve never felt more like I should be the one sitting by his side and studying with him.

“Megan?” I bring my attention back to Peach. “What, she somehow knows who Hermes is and convinced them to take over the account?”

“Or she hacked it?”

“But then Hermes would have said something about it.”

“Would they?” she insists. “If they did, they would not only take the risk of being found, but also reveal they have a weakness. I think the real Hermes hasn’t posted anything in a while.”

I feel my eyebrows pinching, running through the possibilities in my mind. “Would Megan even know how to hack an account?”

“What do you know about that woman? She transferred this year and is somehow everywhere, knows everyone, is already top of her class. The bitch could work for NASA for all we know.”

I snort. “That comes with being Chris’s girlfriend, Peach. He might have

gone away for undergrad, but he's always been a Stoneview god." Going back to my article, I mumble, "It doesn't matter. Whether it's the original Hermes or her...I'm fucked either way. The whole college hates me."

"I don't hate you. Alex, and Wren, and Achilles don't hate you."

I smile softly at her, but my gaze drops, the feeling of everything slipping through my fingers and being unable to do anything about it so strong that I'm helpless despite her words. "I love you." And to stop the pity party, I stand up. "I'm going to get a few books and then we should head home. I feel really unwell."

Another sneeze escapes me, and I bow my head to avoid Mrs. Davis.

I walk for almost five minutes before I finally find the back aisle where I know my books are. And of course, it's at the kind of height people like me can't even reach in their wildest dreams. I jump a few times, but I don't manage to grab it. Looking around, I notice the rolling ladder attached to the shelves.

Here's to hoping heeled cowboy boots and a rolling ladder don't make for a deadly combination. I pull it to where I need, grab the wooden bars, and make my way up. I'm too focused on looking for the exact two books I need to notice the presence behind me.

"Any other man seeing this view would have ended up worse than dead. You're lucky I'm the one who followed you here."

I jolt, my fingers gripping the ladder harder. Looking down at Chris, I see his eyes stuck under my skirt, a smirk spreading on his gorgeous lips.

"Don't follow me when you're supposed to be with your girlfriend," I huff out. "And don't look up my skirt." I press a hand just under my ass to keep the material close to my skin as I take a step down.

He moves closer. "Nothing I haven't seen before, Sweets."

I freeze. He stepped too close, and I can't keep going unless I want my ass to sit on his face.

"What are you doing?" I hiss. "Get out of the way."

His hands reach up, strong fingers wrapping around my upper thighs, under my skirt. "Don't you ever tell me to get out of the way when your ass is involved."

"Chris, I'm not joking. We're in a library."

"Never stopped you before."

Looking over my shoulder, I narrow my eyes at him. "Why do you know so much about the things that have gone on when you *weren't* a student

here?”

“Because I kept tabs on you. Bite me.” He illustrates his words by pushing my skirt up and biting the curve of my ass, the sting littering my body in goosebumps.

“Get off me.” I take one hand off the ladder to try to push him away, barely reaching his head. “I’m serious.”

“Keep it down,” he orders in a low voice. Grabbing my waist, he flips me around.

I yelp, struggling to find my footing on the step again. He keeps hold of me until I’m steady and looks above my head.

“Hold on to the bar.”

“Are you insane?”

“When Daddy talks, you listen, Ella.”

“Oh, *fuck. You.*”

He pulls my body, and the fear of falling makes my hands reflexively grip the bar above my head.

“So you do know how to listen.”

Now that I’m stable, he releases my waist to slide his hands under my skirt again.

“Do you know how many of my messages you ignored this week?”

“That’s what this is about?” I try to keep some strength in my voice, naively thinking I still have a way out of this.

He messaged me a few times since our kiss, but I didn’t reply. The moment we shared hurt as much as it healed us, and I needed this week to process everything.

“Chris, I know we kissed, but it doesn’t change anything about the situation we’re in. You’re with Megan. I’m an Aphrodite. Reality didn’t bend for us, and we shouldn’t be messaging behind your fiancée’s back. That’s why I didn’t answer.”

For a second, I see him think hard about what I just said, and I think I’ve gotten through to him. But my hopes die when he lowers my panties.

“*Stop.*” I glance down the aisle, my stomach twisting with a mix of excitement and mortification.

He holds me in place as he pulls one foot out and then the other.

“Yet another day you’re going to go home without your pretty panties. Did you wear lace for me?”

“Your delusion is driving you mad,” I grit out between clenched teeth.

I'm not sure if I'm more frustrated at him for what he's doing, or myself for getting wet from it.

"It was five, by the way. The number of messages you ignored." He pulls my phone out of my uniform jacket, and I watch with wide eyes as he sets a timer. "So I'll be spending exactly five minutes tasting your gorgeous pussy. I don't care if someone comes, and I don't care if *you* come. As you so rightly mentioned, you're an Aphrodite. So, I'll take my fill and leave."

Pleasure pools uncomfortably, and the second he notices me squeezing my thighs together, he grabs the underside of both, lifts me, and drops them on his shoulders.

I gasp. The only thing now holding me up is the fact that I'm still gripping the bar above my head and his hands on my ass.

"I hate you," I whisper-hiss, panic and anticipation making me ache for him.

"Say that again in five minutes."

Then he's burying his face between my legs, his tongue probing between my lower lips and rolling around my clit.

My arms tense, hands gripping harder as I strain under his assault.

"Chris," I moan. "S-stop."

I would have been surprised if he listened. I said it more to rid myself of guilt than anything else.

He keeps a consistent rhythm, pushing harder, and I have no choice but to stay exactly where I am or crash to the floor with him. My chest trembles as the pleasure spreads thickly through my veins and spikes of sharp need make me push back against him.

I'm not suffering through the ordeal; I'm complicit to the delight he's forcing upon me.

Time disappears, and I throw my head back, forgetting to hate myself in the process of his teeth nibbling at my clit before he licks it better with a flat tongue. I forget where we are, that I'm letting my ex eat me in the aisle of our college library, that anyone could see me in this state.

I forget my own existence as he brings more wetness from my entrance to my needy nub, and I wrap my legs around his neck. I don't even know how he breathes from how tightly I keep him against me. I never want this to end, and I get closer and closer to the edge with every passing second.

My entire body freezes in surprise when the alarm from my phone rings. He stops it right away so we don't get in trouble.

And he pulls back from me.

"No, no, no," I pant. "W-wait."

"Wait? I said five minutes, Sweets."

"I know, but..."

"But you want Daddy to make you come, don't you? You want me to soothe the ache and take care of you?"

I nod, licking my lips. "Yes, Daddy," I whisper.

"My poor slut. Always so desperate for me."

He slowly unwraps my legs, puts my feet back on the step, and grabs me by the waist. "Let go."

I release the ladder, and he carries me down, setting me on the floor. My legs tremble for a few seconds, my head swimming from the feeling of my pleasure still hanging above nothingness.

"Wobbly, are we?" he chuckles as he holds me a little longer.

I nod, my brain barely registering that I'm agreeing with a man I usually categorically refuse to agree with.

He leans forward, dropping a kiss just under my ear. "You feel warm."

Numbly, I nod again, not sure what I'm agreeing to. All I know is I *need* to go home and do something about the pulsating need he left in me.

He straightens quickly, puts a hand on my forehead, and his face falls into a serious scowl. "You feel too warm. You have a fever."

I shake my head. "Seriously, at this point, you're worse than a dad. It's just a little cold."

"Go home and get some rest. Now."

"I was going to go home anyway. I'm not doing it because you're telling me to." I feel like that's something that needed to be said.

He smiles softly. "Fine. As long as you go home."

My phone vibrates in his hand, and he looks down with no scruple.

"Privacy, Christopher," I groan. "Can I have some?"

"No. And you know that, so don't bother asking again." As his eyes move across my screen, his face falls.

"What?"

"Don't go." It's a stern order I don't understand.

"Don't go where?" I snatch my phone from his hand and look down.

Unknown: Aphrodite, your presence is required at the temple tonight. A car will pick you up at 8:30 p.m. You may not be late.
Yours, Prometheus.

A rock solidifies in my stomach, and I look back up at Chris.

“Don’t go,” he repeats.

“The whole point is that I have no *choice*.”

“I don’t care. Go home and ignore that text.”

I lift a hand to my chest, fingernails digging into my skin. Always observant, he automatically takes hold of my wrist and brings my hand back down.

“Don’t scratch. It’ll be okay. I’ll make it okay. You’re ill and you can’t go. I’ll make sure they know that.”

I blink at the phone, hardly hearing his words. “Who is Prometheus?”

He pauses when my eyes dart up. Looking to the end of the aisle of books, then back at me, he says, “Megan’s dad.”

I love you

*In a perfect world, my love for you would be easy.
At least in this world, it's worth it.*

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ella

Say Don't Go - Taylor Swift

I readjust myself in bed, trying to get comfortable under the covers. The rain batters at my window, heavy cords blurring the forest by our house. Alex went to Xi's, and Peach got a call from her dads to go home for the night. It's not so bad since I can't hold a conversation with this horrible headache, and I'm still trying to finish that essay.

With my laptop on my lap, my heavy eyes read over the few words I've written, but I can't focus. And it's not just because I feel like death. Something is crawling inside my stomach. An anxiety that makes me check my phone every two minutes to see if I have a text from the Circle. It's almost 8:30 p.m., and I don't know what to do.

I'm not meant to have a choice. If a Shadow calls, I have to present myself at the temple. And they're going to be sending a car. It's not something I can avoid, is it?

Swallowing the fear, I close my laptop and decide to accept the truth. I initiated into this society. I became an Aphrodite. The consequences come with what I had to do to keep Mom and Luke safe. Throwing the covers to the side, I force myself to go to my closet and pick a comfortable black dress. I wear simple underwear too. I don't want Megan's dad to think I made an effort to be pretty for him.

Prometheus. I wonder what his real name is. I had never heard of this

man before, and I have no idea when he became a member of the Circle. All I know is he wants to see me tonight, and I have no choice but to go.

When I check myself in the mirror, my blue eyes are shining. Not from excitement, but rather the kind of unshed tears of someone with a fever. And that's exactly how I feel and look. My eye bags are prominent, and I barely have the energy to lift my arm as I brush my hair. There's no amount of makeup that will cover the defeated look of my dull skin. So I don't even try. The last thing my eyes stay stuck on is the Aphrodite necklace I wear. That small seashell that means Prometheus gets to call me to the temple.

I look out of the landing window before I go down. It's 8:29 p.m. and there's no car, but I'm sure they'll be right on time. So, I walk down the stairs with a dejected sigh and a renewed fear that makes my spine feel like a steel rod. Is this really my life?

The walk to the door feels surreal, like I'm walking on cotton and the rest of the house is zooming around me. I'm doing it again, aren't I? I'm dissociating. When I open my front door, I look up at the dark gray clouds in the night sky, stopping the moon from shining through. But I've barely stepped one foot outside when a shadow comes from around the corner, pushing me back in and slamming the door. The shock brings me back to reality, and I'm about to scream, when a hand slams against my mouth, pressing me into the wall.

"Didn't I tell you not to go?" he scolds in a hissed whisper.

Chris's voice slows down my heartbeat, my body recognizing I'm not in real danger. I try to shake my head to be able to answer, but he doesn't budge.

"Do you think I'm going to let Gabriel McLean put his hands on you? Don't be naïve."

I wait for his grip to relax, but it doesn't. Only a few seconds later, there's the sound of steps thudding on wet ground and a knock on the door. Chris brings his finger to his lips, telling me to stay quiet. It's not like there's much I can do anyway. I keep my eyes on his, observing the drops of rain dripping from the strands of caramel hair on his forehead. His lashes look longer when wet, bringing a new softness to his features. There isn't an iota of evil on his handsome face. It's probably what's made it so easy to keep up the appearance of Mr. Perfect Gentleman. Everything in him screams kindness. And even with the knowledge of who he really is, I find myself getting lost in his eyes.

I jolt when there's another knock on the door. We don't move, stuck in the darkness, no lights on, in a limbo of my warm body against his cold one. His wet clothes against my skin tell me he's been waiting outside my house for a long time, checking what I would do. He was ready to catch me if I went, ready to stop me.

I just want to know if it's out of jealousy or protection.

Or both.

My eyes widen when a dark voice outside calls my name.

"Ella Baker? Are you home?"

My breathing accelerates through my nose, body stiffening from fear. Only my chest rises and falls erratically, forcing my breasts to press against Chris's soaked black button-down. He brings his free hand to my chest, caressing the lines of angry red skin from the hours I spent scratching it. Carefully grazing the pad of his thumb over them, he keeps my eyes captured in his whiskey ones.

"Ella, this is John from the Stoneview Community Foundation."

That's the name the Silent Circle hides under. A fake charity most of them use as a tax deduction to then have the money circle back to themselves.

"If you're in here, I'd like to remind you that tonight's event is compulsory for members of the foundation."

I squeeze my eyes shut, the fear of disobeying making me jerk in Chris's hold. I have to go. I can't risk this. I push against him, my hands holding his forearm to try to get his hand off my mouth. But he holds me back effortlessly, pinning me harder against the wall. I whimper against his palm, and he puts his lips on my forehead, whispering discreetly.

"Stay."

And just like that, I hear retreating steps, and all that's left making noise outside is the rain hitting our porch.

His grip relaxes, and he slides his hand to my cheek. "For heaven's sake, Ella. You're burning up."

"I'm okay," I croak. A lie, but I need to convince myself.

I sense a tension growing inside him, and he takes a step back, clearly trying to contain himself. "You know how I feel when you're unwell and don't take care of yourself," he growls.

"I'm a big girl, and I don't need you to take care of me for a stupid cold."

"Did you take any medicine?"

"I—"

“Were you in bed resting?”

“I was until —”

“Did you eat? Are you drinking enough water?”

“Not yet, but —”

“Go to the living room. Right now. And don’t make this worse on yourself. I’m angry enough as it is.”

I open my mouth one last time, but I know this is a lost cause. When Chris wants to take care of something, there’s no fighting it. And I’m too tired to try.

Like my body wants to tell him he’s right, I sneeze as I make my way to the living room, and I’m a shivering mess by the time he brings me a blanket and tea. I eye him up, unsure what to do, but he cuts it short for me.

“Don’t even think of refusing me anything. You were going to go to the temple when I explicitly told you not to. The only reason you’re not being punished right now is because your body can’t take it. Be obedient, Sweets, because I don’t want to have to tally up by tomorrow.”

I silently take the tea from him, sipping on it while he arranges the blanket on my knees. He leaves and comes back with a glass of water and some pills.

“For your fever.”

Setting the tea aside, I switch it for the medicine and water, and then put that on the table too.

“I don’t want to fight tonight,” I admit in a rasp. My throat feels swollen and hurts, and my eyelids are heavy. I just want to rest.

He kneels on the rug in front of me and delicately puts a hand on my thigh. “We only have issues when you refuse to accept the inevitable, Sweets.”

I shake my head slowly, a huff leaving me. “There is no inevitable. I don’t want to go back to being under your thumb. I was your secret in high school, and that is exactly what’s happening again. You just added who you’re hiding me from.”

“But this time, I know I’m going to have you in the end. And don’t tell me I’m delusional again, because you know I’ll take it all up a notch. The next step in persuading you could be too much for you to handle.”

I take a deep breath, some kind of distress making my muscles ache on top of the fever. I don’t want to ask, but I have to. Chris is so good at putting up that innocent front that I have to dig to discover what he’s truly capable

of.

“What will happen if you do everything you can to have me, and I still refuse?”

“That won’t happen, Sweets.” He caresses my cheek, then my hair. “You won’t have to worry about choosing. By the time I’ve freed myself of Megan, there’ll be no choice at all for you.”

I swallow thickly, my chest tightening. “You scare me when you say things like that.”

“Good. Hold on to that feeling tonight while I take care of you. You tend to forget how far I would go to have you, and it makes you act naively. Just because I can’t be on your case all the time doesn’t mean the plan changes.”

He digs his amber eyes into mine, a small smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. Like a man at complete peace with his choice. “The plan never changes.”

“I don’t want to know whether taking care of me is part of your grand plan to ruin me and make me yours.” I close my eyes on a long blink and open them again. “Not tonight. Just give me you. The you I know. My Chris.” I hesitate before adding, “Please.”

His eyes bounce between mine, his face falling into a visage of adoration.

“I want to give you all of me and more, Ella. Anything you want from me, you can have.”

I nod, closing my eyes as a smile settles on my lips. Those words feel too perfect to add anything to them.

I sense him standing up, and he gives me a soft kiss on the forehead. “I’m going to make you chicken noodle soup.” My eyes open again and land on his pocket as he keeps talking. He’s fidgeting with something in there. “Do you have everything I need for that?”

I nod. “I do, but I’d rather eat loaded fries than soup.”

I smile brightly at him as I look up just in time to watch his eyebrows raise.

“You? You’d rather eat loaded fries? You used to have a go at me when I tried to make you eat anything other than a salad.”

Through a wave of sadness, I shrug. “I don’t dance or cheer anymore. Counting calories was mainly for ballet.”

He pulls out his phone, and I watch him open the delivery app.

“We’ll order whatever you want, Sweets. Twice your bodyweight in fries, for all I care. But don’t think you won’t dance again. The second I have full

ownership of you, you're dropping law and going back to dance."

I feel my face twist at his words. "Don't talk about me like I'm some toy you're going to have full ownership over."

"You're not a toy," he says, and I know there's more, so I cock an eyebrow. "You're *my* toy."

Sitting down next to me, he slides a hand under the blanket to caress my thigh. "My sex toy I get to play with whenever I want." His hand goes up, making me squirm. "My little doll I get to dress however I like." Higher. "My puppet on a string who does whatever I please."

He cups my pussy under the dress I'm wearing, making me tremble with need. I can't remember at what point I'm meant to push him away. Am I too late already?

"Isn't that right?" he purrs in my ear. His thumb grazes my clit over my panties, and I bite my lip to stop any sound from escaping my mouth. But my eyes flutter shut, and I nod to answer his question.

"My good girl."

His hand disappears, and I whimper as my eyes fly open.

"You're ill, Sweets. You need rest."

And it's true. My body is at the end of what it can take. So I let him pull me until my head is resting on his lap. I let him order us food and pick all my favorite toppings on the loaded fries. And when he opens his streaming app and turns on my TV, a stupid *stupid* smile sticks to my face.

"Which crappy holiday romance is it going to be?" he asks, caressing my hair. "They've got *Valentine's Day*, *New Year's Eve*, *Holidate*, *Love Actually*?"

My heart melts and spreads warmth through all my limbs. There's nothing like a man who knows you. Someone who knows the little things you like. Like my weird obsession with holiday romance movies. And yet, I want more. So I push him just so I can get that silly satisfaction.

"You know my favorite," I murmur.

He doesn't even look down at me, nodding to himself. "*Valentine's Day* it is."

Chris hates these kinds of movies. He's worse than a boring old man. He reads plays and poems. His favorite place is the library. He enjoys Shakespeare's sonnets because, apparently, they make sense to him. He reads about history, Greek mythology, religions. He takes care of everything around him, no matter the level of importance. Hell, the only videos he

watches online are live trials of current court cases.

I'm a mess who only puts in effort when it comes to her passion or to feed a lie to keep my reputation intact. I scroll on socials for hours on end, worry about my appearance more than my brains. I not only watch stupid romance films, but the same ones over and over again.

But watching them next to him while he rests his arm on my side and hip is different. Watching them while he feeds me loaded fries and makes me another hot tea feels like I'm losing myself again. Letting him take care of me at my lowest makes me feel safe and scared at the same time. No one will ever care like he does, and my heart is in trouble for it.

I fall asleep before the end of the movie and only wake up as he's putting me to bed. And I think I fall asleep again, but my hand to my chest wakes me up. Because anxiety never sleeps.

When I hear myself whimper, Chris is on me right away, his strong fingers fisting my wrist and pulling my nails away from my skin.

"What is it?" he whispers, turning on the lamp next to my bed.

"I-I don't know," I croak. My voice is barely audible when I add, "I'm scared."

He lies down next to me, and we face each other. "Talk to me, baby. What are you scared of?"

My thoughts clear, and I focus on the feeling inside me. It's never easy to pinpoint, especially recently. But tonight, something prevails over the rest.

"I didn't go to the temple," I murmur. "What if they punish me?"

His silence tells me I'm not wrong to worry. "Oh my god," I gasp, sitting up.

"I'll talk to them," he assures me, his voice calm. "I'll tell them you were ill. Or that I had you for the night."

"Amazing," I snarl. "*Sorry I couldn't come, another man was using me.*" I pull at my roots, letting my head fall to my knees as I hug them to my chest. "Fuck."

I feel him shift, and his voice sounds somewhere else in the room when he talks. "It's two a.m., Sweets. Now is not the time to think about this."

He comes back and caresses my head, so I look up. He's holding the box of pearls and string he gifted me. Taking the string out, he knots one end, and pushes the other through a needle.

"Chris...what are you doing?"

Is he really planning on making a necklace at 2 a.m.? Apparently, yes,

because he takes a pearl and gives it to me.

“Give it a task.”

“A task?”

He nods. “What’s the next step?”

“To go back to sleep, I guess.”

“Be more specific,” he says.

I huff, running a hand through my hair. “To lay back down.”

“Okay. Put it on.” He offers me the needle linked to the string, and I put it through the pearl. Then he looks at the mattress pointedly, and I lay down.

“This is stupid.”

“It works for you, and you know it. If something helps, then it isn’t stupid.” He passes me another pearl. “Again.”

I roll my eyes, but I do it anyway. “To close my eyes.” And I put it through again.

I look right at him when I do so, and that’s when I realize he’s topless.

God have mercy on me. This man fell from heaven and somehow chose to stay on earth for me. His olive skin glows in the yellow light, and with the way it hits his beautiful eyes, they are a mix of amber, brown, and dark green that shouldn’t even exist. My eyes roam from his Adonis belt, up his defined abs, strong arms, wide shoulders. They stop at his sharp jaw.

The corner of his mouth tips knowingly. “Why are your eyes still open, Sweets?”

I giggle. “Because you’re beautiful to look at, and I don’t want to miss one second of it. Do you have any idea how hard it is to resist you?”

His mouth presses into a line, and I can see it’s because he’s stopping himself from smiling brightly. He doesn’t manage, though. My admission has his gorgeous shy smile curving his mouth in the most beautiful, authentic way.

“I think it’s the fever talking,” he whispers.

And when tiny pink spots come to the surface of his cheeks, I burst into a laugh.

“How can someone who looks like you still be so shy about compliments?”

He buries his warm face in my neck. “Stop,” he groans.

With his soft curls tickling my cheek, I shift to drop a kiss on his forehead. “All the girls in high school were at your feet. All the girls in this college talk about you. *Oh my god, Chris Murray is back in town...* They’re

all fawning over you, and you get shy on me because I tell you you're beautiful?"

He finally rises again, wrapping a strong hand around my jaw and pouting my mouth. "Go to sleep, woman."

And when he lets me go, I don't even think of what woke me up. All I think about is that the next task is to fall asleep next to the man who makes my heart do very reckless things.

He's not here when I wake up. But there's something next to me in bed. The necklace we started yesterday and a printed copy of the essay I have to hand in to Professor Reeves. The essay I hadn't finished but that is now completed.

I stretch and grab the note he left.

*Sweets,
I took a task off your list so you could rest a little more
today. Don't forget to hand this in before 5p.m.
One pearl at a time.
C.*

I fall back against the mattress and curl onto my side to smell the pillow where he rested.

My heart accelerates, my limbs numbing as a wave of giddiness slams into me.

Sweet orange and cedar tree.

The smell of love and trouble.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ella

So High School - Taylor Swift

I feel light as I walk into the dance studio with three tote bags on my shoulders and ten plastic tiaras in my hands.

It's Saturday morning, and those days are for the kids. I've been teaching that class for three years. Since my locker got emptied by the dance students, I received no formal email saying I wasn't allowed the space anymore, and I love teaching these kids, so I'm not going to stop now. I teach for free, and while no one has any issue affording it in the area, some kids come all the way from the North Shore so they can attend a free ballet lesson. And over there, that means a lot.

I'm thirty minutes early, as always. I take the time to set up the piles of tutus, shoes, leotards, pink scarves, and tiaras. Some of them can't afford any of this, so I always bring enough for everyone. That way, they don't feel embarrassed to ask. They can all take whatever they want and keep it. I bring more each time.

I sit down with my back to the mirror and the door to my left and check the time. It's 10 a.m. and the kids are usually early to take their time putting everything on and chatting among themselves. I anxiously do a butterfly stretch, my hand itching to go to my thigh and scratch through my tights.

I take a deep breath, suddenly wishing I'd taken the necklace Chris and I started on Thursday night. Slowly releasing my breath, I decide to go check

my phone to see if any of the parents replied to my earlier message. I always remind everyone of the class early in the morning to tell them I'm excited to see them.

Today it turns out I have many responses.

Ivy won't be coming to class anymore.

Ella, we will not be sending Stella to be taught by someone who could potentially be dangerous.

Dear Ella, while we don't want to believe the rumors that have been going around, we also would never want to put Fabian at risk. We think you're a good kid...but she won't attend your class anymore.

Tears spring in my eyes as I read on. Everyone canceled. Even the four girls who come all the way from the North Shore. Their parents live on the side of town known for its high-rate crimes, but they're worried about *me*?

A sob bursts past my lips. Chris is the one who hurt Enzo and Matias, and Hermes—or Megan I'm sure—is the one who put it on me. Together, they managed to take the one last thing that kept a smile on my face. Fury burning through my veins, I angrily text the man who decided to make my life a living hell out of pure selfishness.

Ella: You ruin everything

I send him the screenshots of all the parents canceling.

Standing up, I look through my bag, ready to slash through my skin and make the pain visceral. I want to feel it all physically and release the gripping tension inside me.

I'm fisting the plastic box of blades in my bag when the door opens, and a little girl runs in.

"We are late because Daddy did not want me to run fast!" she squeals. "But I can run fast. So fast!"

I drop the box in my bag and my bag to the floor, and quickly wipe my tears as I turn around. She stops short of bumping into my legs and looks up with a bright smile.

Sporting two pigtails at different heights, a bright blue top with a heart made of gems on it, and a large bright pink tutu over multicolored tights, I can already tell she wanted to dress herself this morning. She even has pink lip gloss on. It's all over her mouth and even on her cheeks.

“My name is Celia,” she articulates perfectly.

“Hi Celia, I’m Ella.”

“And that’s my sister Olivia. *My* sister. And that’s my daddy. His name is Daddy.”

I look up to find a tall man holding another girl in his arms. She’s identical to the one now pulling at my blue chiffon ballet skirt, except she looks much calmer. Contrary to her twin, her black hair is in a perfect bun on top of her head, and she’s wearing white tights and a pale-yellow leotard.

Her dad tries to put her down, but she grabs his neck, and he’s forced to straighten up again. He’s got dirty blonde hair in a small bun at the back of his head, midnight eyes the same as his daughters’, and a terrifying blank look on his face.

As he approaches, Celia turns to him. “Daddy, say sorry to the lady.”

He walks slowly, like a hunter observing his prey, and I gulp as I try my best to stay in place. The only reason I don’t run away is because Celia is still pulling at my skirt.

“Daddy, I want this skirt.”

Finally reaching us, he puts a hand on top of Celia’s head. I crane my neck to look into his empty eyes and force a welcoming smile on my face.

“Anything you want, honey.”

How is it possible to talk to your own child with no emotion in your voice?

His eyes stay on me, and he finally introduces himself. “Hi, I’m Nate White. And this is Celia and Olivia.”

Nate White.

It takes all of me to keep a straight face.

“You...must be Jake and Rose’s brother,” I say quietly.

He nods. “You know the twins?”

“They’re my brother’s best friends. Luke Baker,” I explain.

“Right.” For a second, he looks like he’s storing this information in a special file, and according to the look in his eyes, it’s probably a file named *people I could threaten*.

But then he keeps going as if nothing happened.

“Lia and Livie have been wanting to try your class. Apparently, the girls from preschool won’t stop talking about it.”

“Stella says there are tiaras!” Celia jumps on the spot, pulling harder on my skirt. “The tiaras. Where are the tiaras?”

“Let go, Lia,” her dad scolds softly. “You’re going to tear up her skirt.”

“It’s okay,” I say politely. Mainly because this man terrifies me. “The tiaras are over there.” I point at the pile on the other side of the room.

She shrieks, taking off into a sprint. “Come, Livie! I found the tiaras.”

As if coming out of a dream, Olivia perks up, jumping out of Nate’s arms and running to her sister.

“Erm,” I hesitate, looking around us. God, I’m terrified. This man has a reputation. And it’s not a good one. “The girls can keep the tiaras if they want, but as you can see, the class isn’t happening today.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me, straightening up, and I take a step back out of pure survival.

“Why?” he asks blankly.

I take a trembling breath, twisting my hands together in front of me. “I don’t have enough students.” Only half a lie. He doesn’t need to know *why* I don’t have enough. “The studio is in demand, and it can only be given for classes if there are at least ten students, and...well, right now, I have two.”

His brow furrows as if he can’t comprehend why I have to respect the rules.

“Listen. Olivia has very specific tastes. She only does what *she* wants.”

I glance at the two little girls. Olivia is quietly putting a tiara on her head, while her eccentric sister has now added three on top of each other.

“She has been wanting to learn ballet, but she throws a fit every time we enter a studio. Do you have any idea how many times I had to redo her bun this morning? If there’s one thing out of place, she breaks down. And look at her here. Not throwing a fit.”

“I understand —”

“And Celia...I just need someone to drain her of her energy.”

“Look, I understand. Believe me, I want nothing but to teach your little girls ballet. But someone from the administration office is going to walk in here within the next fifteen minutes to check that I’m following the rules, and that the studio is used for a purpose. With two students, they’re going to kick us out and put whoever is on the waitlist in here instead of us.”

I could die on the spot as his eyes narrow into slits. “Where are the other kids?”

“They didn’t come,” I whisper.

“And why is that?”

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath, and gather all the courage I can

muster. At least after I tell the truth, he'll leave. He won't want to leave his daughters with me.

"The parents think I'm a threat to their kids," I admit in one breath.

"A threat?" he chuckles mockingly. "You look like a tiny barbie. What kind of threat could you possibly pose to children? I'm pretty sure they're dangerous to you."

I guess he's not wrong.

"It's a long story," I say. "But the short version is that I can't teach your girls. I'm sorry. The class isn't happening." When I extend my hand toward the door, he doesn't move.

I eye the girls as he takes a slow step closer to me. He's not going to hurt me in front of them, is he?

"Ella. I want you to understand one thing. If my girls don't get this dance lesson for the promised one hour, the only threat in this room will be me."

The door to the studio slams open and another woman I don't know enters with a bright smile on her face. She has half blonde and half black hair, and she's looking around like she's in some sort of museum.

"This place is better than Hogwarts!" she exclaims excitedly.

My heart is beating harshly against my chest, my eyes going back to the man who decided to bully me into giving a dance lesson to his daughters.

"You look scared," she says. "She looks scared," she then tells Nate. "Did you threaten the dance teacher?" Then back at me, she softens her voice. "Did he hurt you?"

I shake my head, then talk back to Nate. "Is she your daughter, too?"

"Her?" he chokes. "She's a parasite."

The new incomer bursts into a laugh, the thick chains around her neck shaking with her chest. "Oh my god, this is too funny. No. Hi, I'm Nyx. I asked to tag along because visiting Silver Falls University was basically one of my dreams. What a place."

"Right." I nod. "Erm, well, I have to go. I do apologize."

"No one is going anywhere," Nate says, as if it's completely normal to keep me hostage in my own dance studio.

"Is the lesson not happening?" Nyx asks.

"Oh, it is."

"I can't," I repeat for the hundredth time. It sounds like a plea.

"For heaven's sake," he says in an irritated tone. "You're lucky my wife wasn't the one bringing the girls here. She would have eaten you whole. Poor

thing.” He doesn’t sound sorry.

Nyx nods. “She’s so much worse than him.”

“Mommy makes people cry. They cry very hard.”

I jolt at the little voice and the hands pulling on my skirt again.

“Can we dance? Livie wants to dance. I don’t like to dance. I like to count like Mommy. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten! I stay to dance because Livie doesn’t want to be alone.”

I have not heard Olivia’s voice once since they’ve arrived, but it looks like Celia talks for her.

I’m suffocating, cornered by two bodies much taller than me and a kid still pulling on my clothes. This is overwhelming, triggering every ounce of anxiety inside me.

“I-I —”

“How about we let the nice teacher breathe,” a voice rings out behind Nate and Nyx.

My body relaxes knowing Chris is in the room. This is all his fault, yet his mere presence allows me to breathe.

His tall body has a few inches on Nate, and both he and Nyx step away from me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask quietly.

His gaze stays on Nate as he answers. “I was with Achilles when I received your text. He explained you couldn’t do lessons if you don’t have ten students.” He shrugs. “So I rallied a team of dancers.” Turning to me, he winks discreetly.

I look at the door and notice Achilles there, a deep scowl on his face. “You owe me, Murray.”

“Oh my god, you’re Achilles Duval,” Nyx gasps like a fangirl.

He cocks an eyebrow at her. “Do I know you?”

She shakes her head. “God, no,” she giggles. “But you...you play the violin, right? Everyone talks about you in my class at North Shore Community College. You’re a musical genius.”

He snorts, ignoring her and walking to the back of the class. “Are we dancing or what?”

Nyx’s mouth drops, and she turns to me. “Sorry,” I say for him. “He’s a dick.”

She waves it off. “Never meet your idols, right?”

I know Achilles has a reputation for being one of the best violin players

in the state, but I had no idea he had *actual* fans outside of SFU.

“Are you okay?” An arm wraps around my waist, and Chris brings me closer to him. “Did he hurt you?”

“Everyone keeps asking that,” I chuckle. “I’m alive and well.”

He lets out a disgruntled noise. “You and him alone in a room? Never again.”

“I won’t say no to that.” Rolling my lips, I look around the room. “So where’s the rest of my students?”

“Uncle Jake! Auntie Ozy!” My attention catches on Rose and her twin entering the room in workout clothes.

Celia runs to them, jumping into Jake’s arms before jumping into Rose’s. Olivia is next, running to her uncle. It’s weird seeing two people I grew up with and who used to cause chaos at our high school now holding their nieces. The little girls look exactly like Rose. Black hair I’m assuming they get from Nate’s wife, and midnight eyes that run in the White family.

“You brought Rose and Jake?” I laugh, looking at Chris again.

“Hey, we needed ten people.”

A minute later, Jake’s fiancée, Jamie Williams, rushes into the room. “Sorry,” she says hastily. “I had to run from the med school building.”

“Chris.” I hide my face in my hands. “This is ridiculous.”

He wraps two hands around my waist, forcing me to face him. “Please, let me do this. The last thing I want is for you to lose the one thing you love. I know you want to teach, and I bet those girls want their lesson. Plus, maybe I want to learn ballet. You don’t know.”

I look around, counting. Chris, Jake, Jamie, Rose, Celia, Olivia, Nyx, Achilles.

“Even if I consider Nate a student, we’re still one short.”

Olivia pulls at her sister’s sleeve, but Celia shakes her head. “No, Livie. Mommy is busy today.” She puts a finger on her mouth. “I know! Uncle Caden can learn ballet too!”

I look at Nate, and his phone is already out. “This is my worst nightmare,” he deadpans. But it doesn’t stop him from texting Uncle Caden, I guess.

And said uncle comes so fast I wonder if he was waiting outside all along.

“You better be fucking joking,” Caden growls as he enters the room.

“Daddy, Uncle Caden said a bad word. It’s a bad word,” Celia says. “Don’t listen to him, Livie.”

“Which one of you troublemakers begged your dad for a dance lesson that wasn’t meant to exist in the first place?”

Celia points at Olivia, and the other girl’s eyes widen before she points back at her sister.

“Ten of us,” Chris exclaims, clapping his hands together. He kisses the top of my head. “You’re up, teacher.”

I look around the room of adults and the two kids.

Nate crosses his arms over the shirt of his suit. “Try to tell me you can’t do your lesson now.”

That earns him the darkest look I’ve ever seen from my ex. “If you have a problem with her, you take it up with me.” He smiles, pretending to be having a polite conversation as he lowers his voice. “Your girls are young. Let’s not take their dad away from them so soon.” Tapping Nate’s shoulder, he settles against the bar at the back of the room.

My mouth drops open, eyes widening, but Nate chuckles to himself. He turns to his own sister instead, Rose. “That friend of yours has always been on my shit list.”

She shrugs. “You’re on his too, don’t you worry.”

“Erm...I guess this is happening, then. Let’s warm up.”

“Wait!” Celia screams. “The tiaras.” She starts running around the room, giving everyone a tiara.

Rose and Jake burst out laughing the second Nate puts his on his head. And I can’t help the smile spreading on my face when Chris does the same. He grins brightly and nods toward me.

I take a few more seconds to drag strength from him and turn on the music.

Olivia runs to the front of the room to stand right in front of me. Her face is hard to read, but her movements are eager when I throw my arms in the air to start stretching to “Espresso” by Sabrina Carpenter.

A few minutes later, the door opens, and I dart my eyes to the admin officer whose mouth drops open. He counts all of us and shrugs, writing down the number on a clipboard before leaving.

Technically, they could all stop dancing now, but I’m having too much fun to let them know. Watching grown men with tattoos or the old kings of my high school wearing tiaras and doing demi pliés with two little girls is bringing a smile to my face. They’re all focusing hard when I put Disney songs on and start showing them more positions at the bar, and before I know

it, my phone rings, signaling the end of the session.

Olivia quietly jogs to me and hugs my legs before looking up at me, grinning with all her teeth.

“Daddy,” Celia calls sternly. “Livie said she wants to come back. We have to come back next week, Daddy.”

I don’t think Livie *actually* said anything. But I’m wondering if these twins communicate telepathically.

Nate throws the tiara in the pile, grabs Celia’s hand, and walks to me.

“You wanted the lesson,” I say. “You got the lesson.”

Olivia jumps in his open arm, and he narrows his eyes at me. “We’ll see you next week.”

His face doesn’t portray his words, but his real thoughts will just have to stay a mystery.

Everyone leaves, Achilles making sure to tell me how much he hated the whole hour, and before I know, it’s just Chris and me.

He approaches me slowly, probably assuming I’m still mad at him. When he’s finally right in front of me, and I’m craning my neck to look up into his eyes, he puts a hand on my cheek.

“I’m sorry that I ruin everything,” he says quietly. Digging his eyes into mine, I watch waves of truth swirling in the whiskey color. “You are so beautiful when you dance, Ella. You’re yourself, not that fake image you try to portray to everyone. Anyone watching you dance can read your pain and your happiness. I never wanted to put that in jeopardy.”

I take a trembling breath. “You fixed it,” I croak. “Thank you for bringing everyone here. I wouldn’t have been able to give those two little girls the lesson they wanted if not for you.”

“I’ll keep fixing everything, believe me. And if I have to drag eight adults to this lesson every Saturday I will. I’ll get Mom and Juliette on it too.”

I can’t help but giggle and his hand turns into a hold on my jaw.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

It’s always strange when he announces what he’s about to do, but I know it’s to give me a chance to pull away. Some things he can’t stand taking. He needs me to give them willingly.

And I do. Purely because I want to so badly.

When his lips touch mine, I let my stomach do cartwheels. I accept the feelings that burn through my veins and open my mouth to welcome him. The way he strokes my tongue is sensually possessive, and I hear myself sigh

into his mouth. He takes his time, his hand grabbing my ass to pull me up on my toes.

It's gripping, ravenous, entrancing.

It's everything I love about this man.

This is going to lead nowhere, isn't it? One of us will get hurt. We're going to get found out.

It's going to be a terrible, tragic ending.

But do I stop kissing him? Do I push him away as his tongue strokes mine and our hearts beat in unison?

Absolutely not.

Chapter Thirty

Ella

Old Money - Lana Del Rey

He had to leave.

We were kissing, and he pushed me against the mirror. He slid his hand under my chiffon skirt and pulled my tights down. And when he pushed two fingers inside me, his phone rang. It was the hospital.

And now here I am, hours later, standing at the reception with flowers in my hand because Thomas Murray's state has deteriorated. I'm an idiot for doing this. I didn't follow him when he left, but I'm here to check up on him. I'm an idiot for so many reasons.

What if Chris wants to be alone with his family? What if Megan is here?

Being here shows I care on a whole new level. Mainly, it shows Chris has made progress in getting me back. I hate that...but it's also the truth.

"Family only," the receptionist tells me. "Are you family?"

I pinch my lower lip and nod. When she still doesn't give me his room number, I say. "Future daughter-in-law."

A disgusting lie that tastes kind of nice.

She looks down at her laptop and says, "His son gave us a list of names. What's yours?"

Should I lie again? It would be taking it too far to impersonate Megan. And what if she's seen Megan before? What the hell did I just get myself into?

“Ella Baker,” I croak. Let’s get this over with.

Her eyes go from left to right, and she nods. “Room 294.”

My mouth drops open, and I’m about to double-check if I’m on the list, but stop myself short. I’ll just go.

He’s alone in the room, sitting by the bed, facing his father. Even though he’s unconscious, Chris is reading to him. One hand holding the book, one resting on his dad’s forearm, I can hear his deep voice even from behind the door, looking through the small window like a creep.

I take a deep breath, both my hands gripping the vase with the flowers and the *get well soon* card.

One pearl at a time, Ella.

I knock, wait for him to call me in, and push the door open.

He looks up from the book, his eyebrows rising and his face freezing. That’s shock, if I’ve ever seen it.

He doesn’t say anything, suffering a rare case of speechlessness. So, for once, I take the wheel.

“I’m on the list,” I whisper, barely containing the disbelief in my voice.

His gaze drops to his book. It’s a play. *The Trojan Women* by Euripides. It’s not like him to not look me in the eye when he talks, but I don’t get the pleasure of seeing his amber gaze.

“Does it make me desperate to have put you on that list the second I came back to Stoneview? Every night, I hoped you’d come.”

The undertone in his voice plays a lovesick melancholy, and it pulls at that red thread that links our hearts.

He’s here every night...alone?

“Hurting the two men I dated makes you desperate.” I huff, settling the vase down on the table before kneeling between his legs. “Wanting someone you trust by your side when you’re going through something makes you human.”

He finally looks at me, and his big arms awkwardly wrap around my body. Pulling me up, he sits me on his lap as he puts the book on his dad’s bed.

“I needed you here so badly,” he murmurs in my ear. “No one can make me feel the way you do. Nothing is as safe as your embrace.”

Isn’t it strange that such a strong man feels safe holding my small frame? Isn’t it heartbreaking that a person who is always in control finds balance within a woman who never figured life out? Every day I feel like I’m

crawling through existence with no idea where I'm going. I have weights attached to my ankles, heavy stones in my chest. But right now, being with Chris, able to offer comfort, I feel like I'm fulfilling a purpose I never knew. It's existential, yet light as a feather. It's as natural as waking up every morning.

He's always taken care of me. I think just for tonight, I can be here for him.

"How is he?" I ask, my head resting on his shoulder.

"His..." He scratches his throat, and I feel his heart accelerating against my chest. "His...um...his brain activity is deteriorating."

I hug him tighter, both arms around his shoulders as he holds me closer to him.

"They're worried he'll be..." His voice is barely audible now. "Brain dead soon."

"Chris," I croak. "Knowing you, you've probably been the one holding your family together, taking care of your mom and Juliette... I'm so sorry you've been going through this alone."

Pulling back, he puts a hand on my cheek. "I haven't been alone. I harassed you for weeks and look at you now. You're here."

I know he's trying to lighten up the mood, so I won't tell him that I'm here, but that I disagree with how he proceeded to achieve that. That I might put aside my anger toward him for one night, but that the facts stay the same. I am not his, and he is not mine.

I lack words to express what we're truly going through, so I smile and keep the joke going. "Don't take this as an encouragement to make my life a living hell."

"I would never."

Something catches my eye. There are scratches on his neck. Four angry lines that look like they were done on purpose. I graze them with the tips of my fingers.

"What is this?"

He turns away, thinking it'll help to avoid my gaze, but all it does is give me a better view of his neck, and I can see it goes under his shirt. There are more scratches there. They're vicious.

"Oh my god, Chris." I stand up, pulling the collar out of the way. "What the hell?"

My heart drops as soon as my brain catches up, and I let go of him, taking

a few steps back.

“You slept with her.” His eyes flutter closed, then open again. He’s shaking his head, but I keep going. “You left in a rush because the hospital called, but you still had time to have her hands all over your body?”

“Ella, I would never do that to you. Believe me, I don’t sleep with Megan.”

“Then what are those?” He expects me to believe this bullshit as if he’s never lied to me before.

“She tried to come visit my dad, but she’s not on the list.”

“She’s not on the...” My words hang in the air.

She’s not on the list.

He stands up, looking exhausted, like he doesn’t want to fight or justify himself, but at the same time, there’s a weight that needs to fall off his shoulders.

“She was being rude to the staff, trying to get past nurses to come to the room. So I went out, walked her outside, and asked her to leave, to wait for me at home. I didn’t touch her. I didn’t sleep with her. I don’t care about her. She’s an angry, vicious woman, and the last thing I want to do when I’m with you is talk about her.”

He’s somehow managed to corner me against the wall while he was talking, and I glance at the welts again. He avoided my question.

“What are they?” I ask again.

Because if those aren’t from sex, but they’re from Megan, then what? She angrily maimed him like a lion? It’s not like Chris is at risk to be hurt by anyone, really. He’s too big to fear people, let alone a skinny girl like Megan. It’s not like she’s abusing him...

My skin starts to tingle, needles piercing through my hands and feet as my stomach hardens. I see a flash of the bruise he had on his face a week ago. The way he acted exactly like she wanted then. I replay the scenes of him stiffening next to his fiancée who he hates so much. The way he always talks about her. *Manipulative. Dangerous.* He says he’ll get rid of her. Their *deal* he denies? And that phone call where she told him to *know his place*.

“Chris,” I push out through a dry throat. I’ve never experienced this.

If it was one of my girlfriends, I would hug her, ask her what was happening. I would soothe her and bring up the subject of abuse and to leave a man who hurts her.

But Chris...he’s so tall and strong. He’s a protector. He cares. How do

you ask a man who seems invincible if the woman he's supposed to marry abuses him?

It seems absurd.

And yet I know. I know it deep down in my soul. I feel it in my gut. I see it with my own eyes when I look at his neck.

I want to protect his ego. I want to laugh it off and pretend I never saw this.

But I did. And I know what it is.

"Does she...hit you?"

He's the one who waves it off. "Don't be silly. Have you seen me? What do you think she'll do?"

"This." I point at the red lines. They look painful and deep. He bled.

"Ella, I'm twice her size."

He still hasn't said no.

"The point isn't whether it truly hurts you or not. The point isn't her size. The point is, she *tries*. She acts on her anger and hurts you."

"She can't hurt me. I would crush her."

"But you don't," I insist. "Because she uses your own kindness against you. She knows you won't hurt her, and she takes advantage of it." I run my palm up my forehead, grabbing my roots.

"Chris." It takes all of me not to whisper my next words, but one of us has to name it. "This is domestic abuse."

"Don't," he snorts. Stepping back, he bites his fist, turning his head away from me. When he looks back at me, he's furious. "How many times did I have to spell out abuse to you when it came to your dad? You never believed me."

"He never —"

"Hit you. I know your excuses by heart. He made a mess out of you." He presses his index finger against the side of my head. "He fucked with your brain until you thought so little of yourself you believe *I* was a good option for you."

His words brings a chill down my spine, forcing me to plaster myself against the wall.

"He made you a vulnerable teenager to men like me, and I took advantage of it like the bastard I am. And look at you now. You're still hung up on me, malleable like a little doll made of clay. A casualty from every move I make. See *that's* being a victim of abuse. I let Megan hit me...so what? Down the

line, she'll get what she deserves, and I can say that with deadly certainty."

I only realize my chest is shaking when he stops talking. My throat is closed from an invisible grip, but I push through because I have to. I have to make him see how far his denial goes.

"My dad." I lick my trembling lips. "My dad isn't the topic," I croak. "He's gone. Dead. He can't hurt me anymore."

"Ah yes." He nods dramatically, using my perspicacity as sarcasm. "And why do you think that is, my sweet Ella? Someone had to get rid of him."

He freezes. His words might have had me confused, but his reaction to his slip-up clears it immediately.

I'm in a room with a murderer.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ella

Wrong Direction - Hailee Seinfeld

I gulp, my eyes widening to the point they might bulge out of my head. I can't feel my legs, and I slide to the side one inch at a time, slowly trying to get myself out of this situation before he can notice.

His hand slams against the wall right next to my head, and I jolt, my eyes squeezing shut.

"You didn't," I rasp. "You didn't kill my dad."

"Your naivety is taking over again," he says in a low voice. "Your dad was a nuisance at best, an abuser in reality. I warned him countless times that the closer I became to being a Shadow, the more he was at risk of losing his pathetic life if he didn't start changing his behavior toward you."

I shrink, refusing to look at him as I search for a way out. "Luke...you wouldn't do this to Luke."

"Luke helped me, Ella."

My pulse thunders as I reach for my phone in my pocket, panic overtaking me. My own brother wouldn't do this to our family. I'm searching for his number before Chris snatches the object from my hands.

"He knew."

"Let me go," I pant. "I want to go home."

"You need to listen."

"Please," I whimper. But my refusal to look at him earns me a deadly grip

on my jaw until the back of my head hits the wall and I have no choice but to face him.

“Your dad is the reason we’re in this hospital room. He’s the reason I’m stuck with Megan, and he’s the reason you were abused and roped into those sex parties. Your brother agreed with me. And now he’s gone.”

I knew it. I knew my father hadn’t killed himself...but I could have never imagined this.

“I bet my life my brother didn’t agree until you manipulated him into it.”

I try to shake my head, but his frustration shows in a tighter grip. He pulls out his wallet and takes something out, putting it in front of my eyes.

It’s a card I know too well. A Christmas card that my father had me distribute to some members of the Circle last Christmas. Almost a year ago.

My father was a board member, and every year, he was in charge of sending members the confirmation that they were invited to be part of the Circle for another year. No membership is for life; everyone must keep proving their use or they’re at risk of being kicked out. Unfortunately, being ‘kicked out’ often means worse than they think. You better be useful once you’re in, or your life is in question.

The card had a simple message, and Chris shows it to me.

“Remember this?”

I nod so slightly I wonder if he sees it.

“You took this from my bedroom,” I rasp. My throat is so dry. Every attempt to swallow makes me want to be sick.

“I did.”

Regret still tastes bitter from letting him into my bed last Christmas. So bitter it burns a hole through my stomach.

“Read it, Ella.”

I don’t read it out loud. But I do read it.

*Merry Christmas to you
Relish a new order
A new year awaits if you wish to stay.*

Looking back up at him, I observe the quiet fury burning in the amber of his eyes. A fire that wants nothing but to destroy everything. He does nothing about it. He simply says:

“This wasn’t some random Christmas card or your usual invite to stay in

the Circle. It was a call to murder.”

“What—”

“Look at the first and last letter of each line.”

Suddenly hating the way he talks to me like a teacher to a struggling student, I throw him a glare before focusing on the card again, this time on the first and last letter of each line.

M. U. R. R. A. Y.

It takes me a second to swallow the news. My wide eyes dart to the bed next to us, and this time I feel like I’m in way over my head. What could Thomas Murray have possibly done to betray the Circle?

Reading the surprise on my face, he explains, “He refused to protect the men who participated in your father’s parties anymore.” He doesn’t even look away when he adds, “Including your father.”

I wrap my arms around myself, my body stiffening as my brain overworks. “Was your dad’s place within the Circle to protect the members from the police?”

Chris’s dad is a defense attorney for high-profile cases. He works with celebrities, didn’t use you be in Stoneview much, but he definitely had contacts in high places within the police.

“It was, yes. And he told him to stop those parties, but your dad refused. So he said he would stop looking out for him.”

“So, he’s the reason the police were looking into my dad. He didn’t want to protect him anymore. Rightly so.”

“Yes. And when the time came, the Circle pinned it all on your family.”

He relaxes his grip, but he doesn’t let go, sensing my urge to run away is still present.

“Ella, I broke up with Megan last Christmas. I didn’t lie. When I came to your house, I was not with her anymore. I saw the card on your desk, and I understood right away. The Shadows were going to kill my dad for not wanting to do his job within the Circle.”

And I remember Eugene Duval telling me the man who had gotten my dad in trouble had been punished accordingly.

I feel his behavior shift, his shoulders dropping. “Megan’s family is incredibly influential in the Circle. Enough that they could save someone’s life should they decide to. I messaged her, and I asked for her help.”

His grip turns to a flat hand on my cheek, and I don’t think he’s trying to stop me from running anymore. He’s seeking comfort.

“She said she’d help me. That she’d talk to her family and save my dad. That’s why I went back to her.”

“What happened?” A part of me feels horrible for him, even though I hate that part with a passion. “She said she’d help you, but clearly the Circle went for your dad anyway.”

Taking a step back, he sucks in a long breath. I can’t stand the defeat in his eyes, and he can’t stand me seeing it because he drops his gaze. “She helped me for a while...but this...” His gaze darts to the hospital bed. “This is how she punishes me.”

My eyebrows shoot up to my forehead.

“P-punishes you?” I hesitate.

He looks me in the eye again, digging so far into my soul I don’t trust myself not to melt right on the spot.

“Every time I do something she doesn’t like, my dad suffers.”

“She set the Circle on your dad?”

“He ended up here in the first place because she stopped telling them to leave us alone. It was August, the day before I tried to call you. I told her I wanted to leave her, and he ended up here in a coma. Poisoned. A couple of weeks ago, Reeves told her about us sleeping together. The doctor *accidentally* gave him the wrong dose of medicine. And today...I don’t know. I’m thinking she heard about me being at your dance lesson.”

“Oh my god,” I gasp, feeling like I might be sick. “Who...who does that?”

“Ella...”

“We’re doomed. You knew we were doomed all along. You’re stuck with her because if she doesn’t threaten your dad, she’ll threaten your mom or Juliette! It’ll never stop. You have to protect your family. You...you.” I can’t even say it. “You murdered my dad.”

Everything becomes too much. I’m overstimulated by every single sound that comes out of his mouth and the feeling of his skin on mine. I don’t recognize those reactions to him, and it brings a new wave of unwellness barreling through me.

“Listen to me —”

“Let me go. I’ll scream, staff will come. Let me go, Chris.”

“Please, I need you to have faith in me. I’m going to get away from her.”

“You spent weeks trying to get me back, knowing that we would never *ever* be together again. Wake the *fuck* up! You’re going to marry her because

you don't have a choice. You belong to her."

He gets closer to me, if that's even possible. His lips are a hairbreadth away from mine.

"An *arranged wedding* doesn't count, Ella. Do you think I touch her like I touch you? Do you think I even touch her *at all*? Do you think my heart aches when I'm away from her? That I'd ever do anything to salvage my relationship with her?"

He does something I would have never expected from him. Chris. My Chris. The almighty man who lives for control...falls to his knees.

"Do you think I would get on my knees for her and *beg* her to trust me?"

My heart is beating so fast, I feel dizzy. The room is reeling, and I can't focus my eyes on anything else but the man in front of me.

I struggle to take in a breath, my lungs tightening. "I'm scared of you," I admit in a barely audible voice. "Of the things you make me feel."

"Don't be." He buries himself against my stomach. "The things you feel can only be a fraction of my love for you." As he presses his ear against my ribs, I understand what he's doing. Listening to my heartbeat.

"When your heartbeat picks up, mine is already racing." He looks up at me, pressing a hand against my chest. "When your lungs feel tight from the overwhelming love between us, mine are crushed."

The light reflects the passion in his gaze, and I feel the urgent need to fall to my knees.

"When your mind begs you to let go and let it happen, mine is already far down the rabbit hole. You will never love me like I love you, Ella. It hurts, and it gives me false hope. It drives me insane and pulls me back every time. You *can't* possibly ever feel the same way. But I'll take anything you give to me." He takes in a shaky breath. "*Anything*, please."

But that would be insane. Because *anything* is impossible. He's stuck with her and I... I will always be the dirty secret. Or his dad could die.

So I break our hearts for both our sakes. There is no need to hope for the unattainable. Chris's manipulation and lies to have me will never stop. And Megan's schemes won't either. She wants him. She has proven countless times that she will do anything to have him. Hell, she's destroying me by pretending to be Hermes and attacking me through the account.

I'm the one who has to put an end to this madness.

With tears burning the backs of my eyes, I push him away by the shoulders, refusing to look away from the heartbreak translating on his

beautiful face. He falls back, sitting on the floor. The man, who was once as strong as the wall of Troy, now crumbles like a house of cards.

And I walk away.

He doesn't follow.

He doesn't say anything.

I can only breathe again once I'm outside the hospital, but I'm moving on autopilot. If I don't stop, I'll crumble. In my daze, I bump shoulders with someone, mumbling a sorry before their voice makes a chill run down my spine.

"Always where he is, aren't you?"

My head turns to stare at Megan with so many emotions going through my mind I can't even find one word to express them.

"So..." She takes a threatening step toward me, and now that I know so much, I wonder how much I should fear her. "You're on the list."

"I am."

It feels strangely good to stand my ground in front of her. And I'm not doing it because I will fight with her over Chris. I lost that fight a long time ago. I'm doing it because she's an abuser, and she hurt someone I...love.

"You know he'll never leave me, Ella. You're only hurting yourself by hanging on." She talks the same way an older sister would. Like she's giving me advice on a toxic man she's trying to protect me from.

"And you know forcing someone to stay with you doesn't really mean they're yours. You can't blackmail someone into loving you."

She snorts, rolling her eyes like it's a chore to talk to someone as clueless as me.

"It's funny coming from the girl who has no idea how badly she's being manipulated. The only reason Chris managed to keep you wrapped around his finger is because everything hurting you comes from him."

"Excuse me?" Now I sound *really* dumb.

Smirking, she crosses her arms over her chest. "You have no idea half of the things he's done to keep you within reach. You should *thank me* for keeping him. I'm saving you a lifetime of toxicity, trust me."

"And *you* have no idea what you're talking about," I hiss, even as my stomach churns in warning. "You're a pathetic, abusive bitch who met him once he was already heartbroken from our breakup. You took advantage of him and the Circle threatening his family. You know *nothing* of the man he truly is. Whoever you brought back with you from Yale is not him. You don't

know him.”

“God, I almost feel bad for you. You’re so naïve. Do you really believe your problems started when he came back? They started when you let him into your life. If you think the way *I* act is insane, start asking yourself about the things he did. It didn’t start this year.”

She leans down to look directly into my eyes. “His stupid, *pointless* obsession with keeping you close started well before you even went to SFU. Don’t believe me? Let’s see, do you think you never got into Juilliard because you weren’t good enough? Or because someone who could ask the Circle for a favor had your application denied? Someone who wanted you in a college where they knew people, where they could keep an eye on you. Where they could be close to you every time they came back to Stoneview? That shit didn’t start with me. He was *always* a psycho obsessed with you.”

My eyes bounce between hers, looking for something. A lie. The truth. I don’t know what I want. Frustration grows within me, and I shove her back.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I snarl. “Stay the hell away from me.”

I don’t want to run and show her she’s won, but I walk faster than I ever have.

I can’t breathe, thinking of the things she said. Chris would never do this. Yes, he’s been acting irrational since transferring to SFU. And that’s not something I’m willing to forget so soon. But he didn’t...he didn’t plan my whole life behind my back. He would never. But then again...he just admitted to killing my father.

I walk for a while, not wanting to wait for a taxi right where Megan can reach me. It’s a small lane through the forest. I need the silence, the fresh air of the evening. I need to feel the pieces of my heart shattering and scattering into the wind. I must never forget that every time I let Chris close, the pain crushes me to dust.

Night has fallen, only a line of dark blue lingering on the horizon. It’s only when I can get out of my own head that I look for my phone to order a taxi and freeze.

Chris still has it.

Fuck.

Turning around, I know I have to walk back to the hospital, but it’s too hard to move after what happened. I can’t go looking for him.

I’m stuck, hesitating on the spot until a blacked-out SUV drives toward me, stopping right where I am. I step off the road, walking backward toward

the forest as two men get out. A terror like no other grips me. I know this isn't good. That eerie feeling that has been following me for weeks is back.

"Aphrodite," one says. "You failed to commit to your duties."

I put a shaky hand in front of me. "Don't come closer."

"Your presence is required at the temple, and you will suffer the adequate punishment from the Shadows."

"Wait." I step back as one of them approaches with a syringe. "Wait, please. Help!"

He's too quick. A prick at my neck and the forest is blurry a few seconds later. And then everything disappears.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chris

Forever Young - Henry Morris

I undo the top button of my black shirt and pull at the sleeves of my suit jacket. The last place I want to be tonight is the temple, but Eugene Duval called and said I had a meeting with him. He didn't sound happy. Tough. I'm not too happy either. Ella ran away, trying to throw whatever remnants of love she had for me in my face.

It's not the fact that she doesn't want me that angers me. It's not even that she doesn't have faith in me. I can fix that. I *can* not give her a choice. I do what I want with her.

But what really gets to me is that she wants to make me believe she can live without me. It's the delusion that she can move on. She can't. She never will because I won't let her. She underestimates my obsession, and she puts people in danger with that mindset. She puts herself in danger. Because the further she tries to run, the tighter her leash becomes. And the harder she tries to escape, the more creative I have to get to make her see I am her only option if she wants to live a peaceful life.

She'll tire before I do, I can guarantee that.

I huff as I enter the temple, nodding to the butler opening the door for me. In my right pocket, I play with a pearl, rolling it between the pad of my thumb and forefinger. In my left, I have Ella's phone. I'm mad at her that she left without it. I can't contact her, and I can't make sure she's safe. She'll be

punished for that. I'm going to call on her as an Aphrodite, lock her in a room with me, and show her what happens when she makes me worry.

Going up the grand staircase, I ignore my phone buzzing in my suit jacket. It's Megan. I know it's her because only she calls ten times in a row. She pushes and pushes until my mind breaks and all I want is to see her dead body on the floor, staring vacantly at the ceiling.

With a nod at the security guard outside of Duval's office, he opens the door for me.

"Christopher."

Eugene Duval is charming for his age. A fifty-something with broad shoulders, salt-and-pepper hair, and the same glacial gray gaze he gave his son, Achilles. As the president of the Silent Circle, he earned the name Zeus. Nothing here happens without his knowledge or approval. Nothing *anywhere* happens without his knowledge. I can only assume why I'm here, and I don't think I'm wrong in thinking I'm about to get a serious telling off.

I don't really care.

The Circle tried to kill my father. I had to use Megan's family's influence to stop them. I have no loyalty to them. I'm here because it's an advantage, not because I have any affinity with them. I'm only one man; I can't take down the Circle, but I can surely use it for my own interest.

"Eugene," I say in greeting. I pinch the legs of my pants as I sit down and rest my ankle on my knee. "What can I do for you?"

He relaxes in his seat, putting the pen he was holding on his desk, and smiles patiently.

"It really isn't my favorite thing to bring in a Shadow to remind them of the rules, but sadly, as your leader, it's something I sometimes have to do." He pauses, as if giving me a second to start getting scared.

When I give him nothing, he continues.

"I like to think of the Circle as a safe place for all of you. Somewhere you can ask for favors, fulfill dark fantasies, find a family." With a sigh, he shakes his head. "But we all have a mission here. We all have to make ourselves useful. Mostly, we all need to know our place. Isn't that right?"

Keeping a calm demeanor, I join my hands, resting them on my stomach. "Naturally."

"I'm glad we agree. And you know why we have you in the Circle, don't you?"

"I do."

His eye twitches when I don't give him an exposé about the role I will have to assume here the second I graduate. If he knows it, why should I spell it out for him?

"Let me reiterate it," he says condescendingly. "You are not death, Christopher. You are our liar. We use you to manipulate, lure, and strategize. We have you because you're cunning, not because you're a murderer. You're going to graduate, pass the bar, and be a damn successful lawyer. We have full faith in you, and we will make it happen for you."

"Would you like a thank you card?"

His face hardens. "No, but you will give us the work you owe us. You are going to be a ruthless worker. You'll take care of merging companies, of ravaging through takeovers, and you will excel at it."

Can't. Wait.

That's the price you pay as a Shadow, isn't it? An easy life, anything you want, a pass for everything. But you have to fulfill whatever they have in store for you. Make yourself useful or die. I already knew what they wanted from me. I have the mind of a schemer and the behavior of a saint. People trust me, and it makes it too easy to exploit them. The Circle needs someone like me.

"Thank you for the reminder." I uncross my legs and dust off my jacket. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Now that we are on the same page, I would like to encourage you to remember that we accept missteps, we accept the need to avenge from time to time, but we do *not* accept a Shadow going on a killing rampage if it puts the Circle at risk."

I'm quick to reply because, like he said, I'll be a *damn successful lawyer*. "I did not kill anyone."

"Look, I let it go with the Shadow you hurt because you technically couldn't be punished."

It was a nightmare to get out of trouble with Duval after paralyzing a man's legs at the business weekend. The way I had to play with the laws within the Circle was more complicated than I thought. But after all, I'm training to be a lawyer, and the rules are the rules. I had paid for the weekend with Ella, and all is allowed but murder if a Shadow disrespects another. It wasn't exactly *justified* to them, but in the end, I was in the right.

"But now I learned from your Hera that you were the one who hurt those boys on the SFU campus."

“Huh.” I play with the pearl in my pocket, trying to refrain from threatening Megan’s life in front of Zeus. The bitch is trying to get me punished. “Still. I didn’t kill them.”

“Hurting them beyond the ability of living normally will be considered as bad as murder. Worse even, because they can *speak*. You’re putting the Circle at risk by doing that.”

“Do you know what puts the Circle at risk? Letting idiotic student accounts like Hermes talk about Shadows, Heras, or Aphrodites. That thing needs to be shut down before they reveal secrets we won’t be able to hide.”

“I know, and we’re looking into it. But your case is not up for argument. If one more person gets hurt because of your infatuation for an Aphrodite, you’ll meet the man we’re about to initiate as our reaper.”

He smiles knowingly. “See, *he’s* being recruited as our judicious executioner. Discreet, clean, without remorse. You have that thing about yourself that makes you terrible at that, Christopher. *Feelings*.”

He says the last word with so much disgust even I believe it’s a bad thing to have for a second.

“So, no more. Alright?”

That condescending tone could be the reason I show him exactly how good of a reaper I could be.

But thankfully, I’m smarter than that. I’m someone who knows the best prizes are worth waiting for. Someone who understood a long time ago that victory is for the cunning, not the violent.

So, I nod. I stay calm. I keep my composure.

“Good. Very good. And talking about infatuation with an Aphrodite. I’m sure you’d like to know Ella Baker is at the altar. She’s about to be punished for not showing up when called.”

Shock renders me speechless for a few seconds. A couple of hours ago, she was with me at the hospital, running away as if I would ever let her, and now she’s here? That means the bastards got to her while I was busy with my dad.

“She was ill.”

“Or so you said. I know that’s what you told Gabriel.” He cocks an eyebrow at me. “But her purpose is to show up when called. It’s up to us to decide if she can be used or not.” He checks his watch. “It’s about to start, and I know you won’t want to miss it.”

I don’t move for a second, trying to give myself time to calm down so

I'm not vulnerable. I fail.

"Who is punishing her?"

"Well, Gabriel McLean was meant to, but his daughter insisted she wanted to be present. She called us earlier to tell us it was a good time to go get Ella. Gabriel won't be there so that Megan can." He shrugs. "Apparently, they don't want to both be in the same room while watching someone being fucked as a punishment. Now it'll be me."

There isn't a universe where I let anyone touch Ella. Not in this temple and not outside.

"Let me punish her."

"Christopher," he chuckles. "You're going to go easy on her."

I shake my head slowly. "I won't. You have my word."

Hesitating, he rubs his index finger against his chin.

"I won't go easy on her. Let me prove myself to you," I insist.

"She better not enjoy herself."

I lean forward, knowing I need to close this right now or never. "If she does, it's because of the little slut she is. Not because of me."

He slaps a hand on his desk as he cackles a laugh. "This is your chance to prove me wrong. Show me how a Shadow punishes an Aphrodite."

My breath gets stuck in my chest the second I enter the room. They put her in a cage.

She looks hazy, her eyes struggling to stay open as she sits in there, her fingers hooked to the crate walls on either side of her. She's wearing that stupid dress they make all the Aphrodites wear here. And it's completely see-through, so I know she's not wearing anything underneath.

There's no altar per se, it's just what we call the place. It's more like a sex dungeon than anything else, where Shadows can come play with their Aphrodites and have an audience. Anyone who wants privacy can go to the Aphrodites' rooms. The altar is used for public punishments. There's no true need to ever punish the women here, but it all comes down to the Shadows' egos and the power they believe they hold. And Gabriel McLean's ego got pulverized when Ella didn't show up.

I shift between people, making my way to the woman who is meant to be my Hera. She's in a corner, sneering at Ella. Megan tenses when I stand next to her, but she keeps collected.

"So, that's why you kept calling me," I mumble.

“I was desperate to invite you to the punishment,” she answers proudly. “Do you know why my dad called on her?” she taunts, her gaze still on Ella. Not expecting an answer, she adds, “Because you decided to cheat on me with her in the library. Your sweet Ella is being punished because of you. Don’t forget that.”

I’m not surprised she knows. We were in a public space, after all, and I disappeared from our table for a while.

“Yes, Daddy always punishes the people who hurt you, doesn’t he? Do you know why she didn’t meet with your dad?” This time she looks at me, narrowing her dark blue gaze. I smile, showing her I can be as condescending as she is. “Because she was with me. And now I’m the one who gets to punish her. I hope you enjoy the show.”

“What?” she hisses as her eyes widen.

I push past her to make my way to the middle of the room, Megan close on my heels.

“Hera,” Eugene calls. “You will stay at the back and not make a sound. Wives are not allowed to participate in activities with the Aphrodites unless specified by their Shadows. You can watch, but you can’t touch.”

“I—” she tries, caught off guard for once in her life.

“Step back,” the leader orders sternly.

She throws a deadly look at me, then Ella, but she goes back to where she’s meant to stand.

I take my time walking to where Ella is being held. She seems a little more alive than she was a minute ago, which is a problem now that she’s aware of where she is. My shoes click on the stone surface of the room, and I stand right in front of her cage. She can’t stand up. She can’t even lie down. All she can do is kneel and look at me with those beautiful baby blues full of tears. And it’s already getting me hard.

Crouching in front of her, I hook my fingers on the front of the crate, making sure I’m all she can see.

“I don’t care about why they put you here. You are being punished for running away from me earlier. You are being punished because you don’t want to stick it in your stubborn little mind that I’m the only person who will have you.” A tear rolls down her cheek, and I can’t help but smirk. “You will keep your eyes on the floor, or on me. You will obey without question. And under absolutely no circumstances will you come before I allow you. Is that clear?”

She nods, but her face scrunches. “Please, get me out of this place.”

I shake my head. “First, I’ll punish you. Then I’ll get you out.” I speak more softly when I add, “Stay focused on me. Pretend they’re not here.”

I stand up, unlock the crate, and open it. Snapping my fingers, I make sure everyone can hear me when I say, “Crawl out.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ella

Nightclubs in Heaven - Henry Morris

My head is swimming, heart beating fast. Whatever they put in me has my whole body feeling strange. They could have asked me to get in the car with them. They could have sent me a message saying that I had to come and explain myself for not showing up.

But they wanted me scared.

And I am. The split moment of relief when Chris entered the room was crushed to nothingness once he approached the cage. He isn't here to help me. He's here to help himself.

I'm trembling as I crawl out, keeping my eyes to the floor. I refuse to look at him. The things Megan told me earlier are still rolling around in my head, making me question who the man in front of me really is. I don't know if I want to find out.

"Kneel," Chris orders. It's not in the calm way he usually speaks to me. There's a tension in his voice that tells me he's barely holding himself back.

He truly wants to punish me, and that's what scares me the most.

It takes me too long to kneel, and I feel a line of fire spreading at the back of my thighs. I hiss, looking back to see Chris holding a black cane. The dress I'm wearing didn't soften the blow whatsoever, and I struggle to hear him through the ringing in my ears.

"Kneel," he repeats in the exact same tone.

I rest my ass on my upturned feet, but keep my gaze on the floor.

Ignore him. Ignore the man you have so many conflicted feelings for. Ignore that you're about to be punished by someone who might or might not have been planning to keep you vulnerable since you graduated high school.

Eugene Duval is somewhere to my left when he talks. "Shadows, Heras. It's good to see some of you were able to show up tonight to witness the punishment of one of our Aphrodites at her altar."

As he continues, I see the end of the cane coming toward me from the corner of my eye. Chris slides it across my collarbone and pushes one sleeve of the dress off my shoulder, then the second. The loose material means that the dress falls all the way to my waist, uncovering my breasts. As a reflex, my hands come to cover them, but Chris is quick, smacking one hand with the cane and forcing me to drop my hands instantly.

I bite my lower lip to keep the pain inside, but I'm shaking as Duval keeps talking.

"As we all know, Aphrodites have decided to dedicate their lives to our pleasures. They must be available at all times and come to the temple when called."

Chris keeps close to me, circling me like a lion ready to devour his prey. I tense every time I feel a shift in the air, thinking the cane is coming to torture me again. But he only uses it to tap my skin softly and make me move.

One tap to the small of my back makes me straighten my spine. One to my shoulders makes me pull them back. There's the click of his shoes on the floor, and they come into view in front of me. Right by my knees. A tap of the cane to my inner thigh and I spread my legs apart.

"Unfortunately, this Aphrodite didn't follow the simple rules that we have set up for the women in her position. And at the temple, breaking the rules is punishable. Ella." My name on Duval's lips makes me squeeze my eyes shut. I feel sick. "You will be punished, and refusing to present yourself to a Shadow will never happen again."

I jolt when Chris grabs the hair at the back of my head, pulling me into a standing position. The movement leaves the dress at my ankles, and he forces me to step out. I catch the crowd by accident, and my throat tightens, tears springing to my eyes. In the back of my head, the only thing I can think about is that they might be able to see my scar despite the low light, and it lays down another layer of vulnerability on my soul. I attempt to cover whatever is left of my dignity, but Chris is quick to bring the cane to the side of my

thigh, making me shriek.

I can't do this. I can't let them all see me naked... What is he even planning on doing exactly?

"Chris," I whimper as he forces me to turn around and face the cage rather than the small audience.

He bends me over it, my boobs crushed by the metal crate. Leaning over me, he brings his mouth to my ear.

"Be quiet." It's a simple order, but I hear it this time. The hidden softness in his voice that shows he is not completely detached from this.

"I'm scared," I whisper, the weight of terror heavier than his own body on mine.

He doesn't say anything, but his hand caressing my lower back is a reassurance I'll hold on to.

Straightening, he walks around. With my cheek pressed against the grille, I can only see one side of the room, and I wonder if he chose the empty wall with no one standing there on purpose. He wants me to forget there are other people. But it's impossible when I hear Duval again.

"Christopher," he chuckles, clearly enjoying the show. "You're going to traumatize the girl." Nothing in his tone says he disagrees with that.

Chris stays completely silent as I feel his presence near me again. He's holding cuffs in his hands, and my eyes widen as he takes one of my wrists and wraps the leather around it.

Something swirls inside me. A fight between lust and reason. It's strangely calming to see his strong hands handling the cuffs, his fingers sliding along the leather and tightening the buckle. The material is warm against my skin, tightening to a point that feels almost dangerous. It's probably a worse threat to my sanity than my being, and when he grazes his fingertips on my inner wrist reassuringly, goosebumps trail all the way up my arm.

But then he hooks the cuff to the crate with a metal ring, and my stomach drops.

He's going to tie me to this, and he's going to fuck me in front of these people. And I will take the punishment because I've been left with no choice.

The idea freezes my skin and yet makes my lower belly tighten with need. He said I wasn't allowed to come, and I wanted to throw back in his face that he couldn't make me if he tried his hardest. As he cuffs my other wrist to the crate, I don't know how I feel anymore.

He repeats the same process with my thighs. Leather wrapped around them, he spreads my legs to the edge of the metal and locks them there. I'm now bent over, spread open, and locked to the cage. And behind me is an audience who has a perfect view of my ass and pussy on display.

There's no caressing my lower back this time. No reassurance. No care, and I wonder if it's because he doesn't want to get caught doing it. He only brings his mouth to my ear and whispers, "I will never let you service another Shadow at the temple, just like I would never have let another man punish you today. No one hurts you but me, Sweets. I'm just sorry it has to be in front of others. Remember the real reason you're being punished is because you still need to learn that you're mine and mine entirely. Let this be a lesson."

I'm almost suffocating when he steps away. I hear the swish of the cane through the air, and the next second, a searing band of pain explodes at the backs of my thighs. I cry out, my legs attempting to close and my wrists pulling aimlessly on my restraints. Barely giving me any time to catch my breath, he repeats the process, landing the cane in a line slightly below the previous one. I don't have the strength to hold a scream back. And on the third one, I'm wailing from the unbearable pain.

How can you do this to me? my rational brain screams. This man claims he loves me.

Another hit, and the backs of my thighs burn and throb in agony, but the rest of my body isn't trembling anymore.

This is pure torture, fire spreading beneath my skin and pleasure starting to tickle my lower belly. I can't do this. If I don't die from the pain, I'll die from humiliation.

He stops after the fourth one, and it's when his warm hand traces the welts that I feel myself fall apart. His hand disappears, and the next thing I feel is a tap on my pussy. It's light, but he repeats it again. And again...and again. An incessant rhythm of light pressure on sensitive skin, but with enough heaviness that it resonates to my clit.

A heavy breath leaves me, and I feel myself trying to shift, my hips going back and forth, and before I know it, I'm pushing my ass out, attempting to meet the taps. I need more strength, more precision. I need him to touch my clit, or I might melt from need.

He doesn't. The aim isn't my pleasure, it's to torture me. And when I whimper, ready to beg for more, he stops.

The pain comes back. He hits my ass this time. Once, twice. I push so hard against the crate to escape that I'm worried I'll have the permanent mark on my skin. The only reason it doesn't move is because it's bolted to the floor. When my screams become desperate, he stops again. I'm sweating, shaking from the pain, but it's not over. He's back on my pussy, tapping, brutalizing me with softness.

I'm so close I can almost taste it, that ecstasy that will bring me over the edge. I just need him to touch me in the exact spot —

I cry out when he stops this time, the sudden need to let tears fall so strong, I have to bite my lip to hold back. I expect the pain to come back, but it all stops. His hand lands on the back of my neck, putting pressure there before dragging it along my spine, all the way to my lower back, caressing my cheeks, and settling between my legs, three flat fingers tapping against my soaking entrance.

My erratic breathing should worry me, but I'm too focused on the visceral desire emanating from my core.

"What is it you so desperately want, Aphrodite?" he says behind me. His low, hypnotic voice turns me into a mess of emotions.

I whimper, squirming when I hear the zipper of his pants. His fingers caress my entrance again, and I push against them, desperate to feel him inside me.

"What is the only thing you should be begging a Shadow for?"

Don't say it. Don't...

His taps my clit, and my thoughts are pulverized.

"To be fucked," I moan. "Please...I need you inside me."

"I'm glad you know your place in this temple."

Bending over me, he's only speaking to me when he adds, "I'm glad you know who you belong to."

He presses against my entrance, and the second his tip breaches inside me, a sob bursts past my mouth as my breath freezes.

He feels so good I could come instantly. The pressure of him pushing inside me, of feeling myself stretch around his girth, is like nothing else. I'm so eager to have him fuck me, I push back. He straightens up and holds my hips, stopping me from getting what I need. I nearly cry.

Then he starts thrusting slowly inside me once more, giving me a moment of relief, and the second he feels me getting close, he's pulling back.

"No coming," he reminds me. "Or the cane will feel like I was playing

nice.” The words bring real tears to my eyes.

He waits a few seconds before pushing back in, slowly, intently.

“Oh God,” I cry out. “Please.”

He fucks me with one purpose: driving me insane. And every time I get too close to coming, he pulls out or sits still inside me, forcing me to squeeze around him.

I become so desperate I’m shaking from the inside out, begging for him to end the suffering.

“Please, please, please,” I pant.

His thrusts accelerate, pushing so deep inside it feels like he’s pressing against my lungs. I can’t breathe, I can’t move, but I can feel every sensation and emotion he chooses. The despair, the fullness, the tingling, the helplessness.

He stops, buried to the hilt inside me, and with a husky voice, he murmurs, “Come.”

He’s not even moving when I convulse around him. And he only starts again when I’m trembling and whimpering from ecstasy. He fucks me ruthlessly, pressing my body against the metal and making me scream as he releases inside me.

It’s only when he pulls out and I hear him talk to the rest of the room that I remember we have an audience.

“I think she learned the only thing she’s good for,” he says simply.

The shame engulfs me, pulling me under, and those tears I’ve held back finally roll down my cheeks. For a second there, he made me forget what this really was.

But I’m glad he said something. And it’s a good thing he stays cold and walks out of the room with everyone else without even helping me out the restraints. It’s a wake-up call that he doesn’t take care of me and that instead another Aphrodite comes to help me out.

Because all of this is a reminder that I can’t trust this man. And Megan’s words become clearer. After all, if I can’t trust him, why should I believe any good intention he had toward me wasn’t some sort of manipulation to get me wherever he wants me to be? Megan could be right. Christopher Murray has had a plan for me for a long time, and I’m the stupid girl who played right into his hand.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ella

Lose You To Love Me - Selena Gomez

I walk through the main hallway on the first floor of the temple. I'm back in my regular clothes, looking as if nothing has happened to me. Only I can feel it. The bruise on my neck from when they stabbed me with a needle, the pain at the backs of my thighs, the feeling of Chris inside me. But I walk with my head high, going to the room where the men have drinks and chat together. They have the most expensive whiskeys, dress in the finest clothes, but still can't find it in themselves to treat women like anything more than whatever they can use them for. A wife. A whore.

I don't even really know what I'm going to do. My brain feels like cotton, and everything is blurry. I just want to go in there and insult them, hit them, claw at their faces until they understand the physical sensation of how they're making me feel inside.

I'm about to burst into the room, when someone comes out. Black hair to his neck, eyes as glacial as his father's, Achilles doesn't hide his surprise when he sees me, his eyebrows crunching together.

"Were you about to walk into the Shadows' library?"

"I was," I answer sternly.

"Ella, you're not allowed." He looks around, making sure no one sees us, and wraps an arm around my shoulders. "You should go home. Let me get a chauffeur to drive you back to your house."

“You’re in the library and you’re not even a full member yet.”

“My dad is Zeus. I get away with a lot of things I shouldn’t.”

I don’t move when he nudges me toward the front door.

“I’m not leaving. Where’s Chris?”

“In there.” He nods toward the room behind him. “Trying to hold himself back from killing all the men who are congratulating him for what he did. Let him play the part. He’ll meet you at your house later.”

I’m not falling for that shit again of Chris *pretending* he’s playing a part to the Circle when he hurts me. This is who he is.

When he tries to walk me to the door again, I get out of his hold.

“Were you in that room? The altar?” I ask, practically panting from anger. If he was, I’ll never be able to look at him again. I don’t even think I’ll be able to be friends with him anymore.

“Of course not,” he says right away. “The first thing I did when I heard about it was drive here to convince my dad to let you go. I still thought I had a chance to stop this when he came back up from the altar. I was...too late.”

I take in what he says, but I don’t know what he expects from me. A trophy for attempting to not let his dad and other Shadows abuse me in a torture room?

“Do you even know what he did to me in there?” I rasp, swallowing harshly as my eyes water once again.

“Els...” he hesitates, his gaze darting toward the door. “You know I don’t care about defending Murray, but I promise you, he did this because you would have been punished either way. Better from someone you trust.”

“I don’t *trust* him,” I hiss. “I don’t trust any of you anymore!”

“Stop shouting,” he growls.

“Where can I find the Heras?”

“What could you possibly want to find them for? You’re not even allowed to roam the temple without a Shadow by your side. Go home and stop getting yourself in trouble.”

“I’m going to get the truth out of Megan.”

“That woman is the last person you should listen to.”

“Where can I find the Heras, Achilles?”

“Come on, Els. You were in enough trouble —”

“Where.” My nostrils flare as I look up at him, and whatever he sees on my face has him talking.

He huffs, running a hand through his hair. “Third floor. It’s a room called

the knitting room. Blue doors with peacocks engraved in the wood.”

I nod, skipping the thank you. I’m too angry.

I climb the stairs two at a time, and the second I enter the knitting room—because I’m assuming that’s what women used to do in here while waiting for their cheating husbands—about five heads turn to me.

Why do they come here? Why would anyone want to come to a place where they know their partner is somewhere else having sex with another woman at best and abusing her at worst.

“What the hell are you doing here?” some random blonde asks me. “Aphrodites are not allowed in our room.”

“It’s fine,” Megan intervenes. “I invited her.”

She didn’t, but she knows she’s about to win this war I never wanted to be part of. I walk across the room to her. This battlefield is her territory, and it’s fitting to receive your enemy’s surrender.

She’s sitting on a sofa, a cup of tea in her hand.

“What else?” I rasp, feeling out of breath.

Cocking an eyebrow, she can barely hold back the smirk that tries to spread on her lips. “What else?” she repeats, as if she didn’t understand me.

“What else did he do to destroy me? He had a plan, didn’t he? When did it start?”

She takes her time sipping, delicately putting the cup and saucer back on the table. She just loves watching me squirm, doesn’t she?

“I can’t tell you his exact plan because no one knows it. No one can win a chess game if the pawns know they’re going to be sacrificed, can they? Every move is a secret he keeps to himself, but I can tell you the ones I know he’s made.”

I’m almost shaking from the need to hear the truth. What if this is more than I can handle? There’s always something terrifying about knowing who someone really is, especially someone who you have a codependent relationship with. If I learn the truth about who he really is...I might never be able to forgive him. It will be the end of him and I, forever.

And why is this so hard to accept? Ignorance is bliss, and I want to keep telling myself Chris is the man who will protect me, use me and make me feel good in the process, build my confidence as he controls me. It’s fucked up, but it’s our kind of fucked up and that’s the way we love each other. He gives me what I need and, in exchange, I give him exactly what he wants, what he obsesses about, what he can’t live without...me. My all. My

conscious sanity and my instinctive, unconditional love. It's how we've always worked.

But I am not the woman I used to be. I'm not the impressionable teen he molded. And he might have never been the man I thought he was.

"Nothing in our world comes for free, Ella." Her rich voice is so assured and pompous compared to me, that I feel our difference in status deep in my bones.

"What do you want?" I croak. This is not what I ever saw for myself. I worked hard to become the girl everyone respected and envied, and the Circle shattered it all.

Maybe it was a lie. A very good lie I told myself.

"You know what I want."

"You already have him, Megan."

"Because I'm not giving him a choice. But if you shut him down once and for all, I'll be there to pick up his broken pieces."

"I tried."

"No," she snorts. "You pretended you didn't want him, but everyone can see through that. *Yes, no, yes, no.* It's so obvious you can't resist him, it's disgusting and pathetic. I want you to shut the door on him, lock it, and throw away the key."

She's right. It's something I've always known myself, but that was easy to forget when Chris was away. I'm never able to truly say no to him, my will breaking at his first insistent actions.

But we all have that person, don't we? That one individual we continuously accept back into our lives. The person we know will hurt us, but hope for the hundredth time will have changed. We all have our weaknesses, heart palpitating if we see a text from them after a long time waiting to have news. We melt when they give us attention and change our behavior to fit what they want from us in the hope that they'll choose us this time.

They come in all shapes and forms. Sometimes it's a toxic crush. He's not that into you, but he won't let you go. Sometimes it's a family member who calls only when they need something. And sometimes...it's an obsessed ex who enjoys manipulating you.

Who is the real danger when we adapt to the people who hurt us? Is it them? Or is it ourselves by showing them we are willing to accept their behavior? The truth is, the stupid saying of loving yourself fully before loving someone else is too common to ignore. Because if we wait for

someone else to fill the well of love in our heart, they might fill it with poison instead.

The intensity of Megan's gaze makes me want to shrink, but I force myself to stand still. Time protracts, the room becoming just me and her. And I break.

"I will. I'll close the door. I'll throw away the key."

She relaxes on the sofa, resting back like a king on a throne.

"The Juilliard thing wasn't a lie," she explains. "I know because I was the debt."

"Excuse me?"

She lets out a little sigh, understanding she's going to have to explain every single thing to me.

"A Shadow can ask any favor of his brothers in the Circle. But Chris wasn't a Shadow when you applied to Juilliard. He and I had been dating, and he broke up with me for the first time saying he 'still had feelings for his ex.' Little did I know that by feelings, he meant *insanely obsessed*." She snarls the last words like it's my fault.

"He asked them for a favor. He wanted your application rejected. And a favor from the Circle always comes with a debt. I was the debt. My dad was desperate to get me in as a Hera, and I needed someone to marry. That was the deal. He tried to leave so many times, like he had a choice. And then his dad betrayed yours, and he understood that this was serious. He asked me to save him, and I had to remind him that if he wanted his pitiful thing of a father to stay alive, he had to be with me, and be *loyal*."

Was she born this evil, or did life make her that way? She talks about Chris being obsessed, but she does the exact same things as him. She trapped him like he tried to trap me.

"You didn't even protect his dad," I hiss.

"I did. But then he tried to break up again. He wanted to move back to Stoneview, transfer to Silver Falls University to keep a closer eye on you. So I showed him what happens when I *don't* protect his dad. Poisoned. Ever heard of organophosphates? It wasn't pretty, believe me. But hey, he wanted an excuse to move back to Stoneview. I gave him one."

"What else?" I ask between clenched teeth. Will I even be able to stop myself from killing her before she gets to the end? "He ruined my chances at getting into my dream school. What. Else."

"He knew you were in Reeves's class and told him he wanted to be his

assistant. Reeves had already picked Rose White, so that's why there are two assistants this year."

"What the hell." I shake my head. It seems small compared to Juilliard, but it's still manipulative.

I can feel the will to understand him leaving me. I feel numb, practically paralyzed from learning about this.

"Matias and Enzo. He's the one who hurt them."

I knew that, but it doesn't mean it makes it any easier to digest.

"And the two guys who had an 'accident' for driving under the influence after that first party of the year? He's the one who drugged them."

"Anything else?"

"You should take a seat." She points at the armchair perpendicular to her, and I stop trying to force my trembling legs to hold me up.

Once I've fallen into the seat, she licks her lips, smiles, and destroys me.

"Who invited you to the initiations?"

"Reeves," I answer without hesitation.

"No," she insists. "What was the name on the invite?"

"Hades. That's Reeves." Does she have to make it so stupidly complicated?

She presses her lips together, because I think she wasn't sure about this one, and I just gave her the answer she needed.

"See," she explains, "I thought Reeves invited you too. Because when you showed me your invite, it was signed Perseus."

It takes me a moment to understand and remember what happened that night. And then I realize she's right. I was talking to a girl, and we exchanged invites to look at who had signed them. Then Megan arrived and took the invite I was holding. The invite signed Perseus.

"Reeves is called Perseus in the Circle," Megan continues. "That's why I pointed at him when I told you he was the one who invited you. But then a few weeks later, I overheard him say he had refused to send you a card to be initiated. And that's when I thought something was wrong. But I had no way of being sure until I asked *you* the name on your invite."

"I don't understand." I rack my brain, trying to put two and two together.

"Amanda," she calls behind her. "Turn on the TV, will you?"

Another Hera walks to a screen on the wall. Megan looks at me and discreetly adds, "Amanda is Reeves's Hera. But I didn't tell her about how you let him fuck you for good grades *before* you became an official whore."

I ignore her, focusing on the screen coming to life. I see a video feed to the Shadows' library, where ten or so men are talking, drinking, and smoking cigars.

"We don't get to go in or hear what they're saying, but we're welcome to look at our Shadows," Megan explains.

I notice right away that while Chris's behavior shows that he's eager to leave, he's in a heated conversation with Achilles, and every time he tries to take a step toward the door, my best friend pushes him back with a hand on his chest. We have no way to truly know what they're arguing about, but I can guess it has something to do with what happened earlier.

"Amanda." Megan's voice brings me back to reality. "Point at Hades for me."

My heart is already beating out of my chest, harshly kicking against my ribs and making me feel lightheaded. It's as if my body knows what's about to happen, but my conscious mind refuses to see or accept it.

Amanda presses the screen, her perfectly manicured finger right on Chris's head, and my heart freefalls to my stomach. Megan was right. If I had been standing up, I would have probably fainted.

And I know it's true. They're not lying. But still...I don't want to accept it.

"But..." I panic, my lips feeling numb from the blood draining from my face. "He refused my mom when she asked him to get me an invitation. I heard it. He tried to get my brother in. That was his plan. Not me, Luke. It was the Circle who put me in this situation because they refused my brother to initiate. And when...when he found me after the maze, he told me I shouldn't be here." My teary gaze moves from the screen to Megan. "It doesn't make sense."

She leans forward, putting a hand on my knee to pretend reassurance. "Ella," she sighs. "Chris didn't ask the Circle to invite Luke. They didn't refuse because Chris never put his name forward."

My vision narrows, ears ringing as pain tears through my chest.

"But..."

She shakes her head. "He wanted *you* to initiate. He just didn't want you or your family knowing it was coming from him, so I'm going to assume that's why he refused your mother; because he already had a plan for you, and that's why he said you shouldn't be here when he found you after the maze. To keep you believing he wasn't involved. But the truth is, Chris is

Hades. He's the one who sent you the invite, not Reeves."

"How..." A single tear of betrayal rolls down my cheek, and I'm too weak to even wipe it away. "...could he do this to me?" I croak, looking Megan in the eye.

"Because he's cunning and heartless. He wants you; I won't deny that. He'd clearly go to great lengths to have you. But Chris needs you clueless and weak to manipulate you. You poor thing, handing it to him on a silver platter."

My gaze drops to my lap. I'm scratching my thigh through my jeans. I notice tears crashing against the denim and only now realize I'm silently letting go of the pain.

"I don't understand," I rasp. I sniffle, focusing on my fingers desperately trying to get to my skin. "How someone who says he loves me could be so cruel."

I look up at her, searching for answers in an enemy who wants nothing but my downfall, and I know she won't offer comfort, but I'm past that now. I just want sincerity.

And it's exactly what I get. Cold. Hard. Truth.

"I do," she answers, completely detached from my situation. "I would do the same to have him."

I wipe my face with the sleeve of my cardigan, shooting into a standing position as fury zaps through my spine. "Of course you do," I hiss. "You're as insane and controlling as he is. Have him, Megan. Marry him and spend the rest of your life with him. Just leave me the fuck alone. Both of you. I want nothing to do with either of you."

She nods, a bright smile spreading on her face. "Make sure you tell him that too."

The bitch is getting off on my misery, and something hits me like a slap in the face. Her and Chris...they're exactly the same. And yet I hated her because she was the woman who wanted the man I love. And him...I let it go because...well, because he was the man I love. *Loved*.

He made my life hell, and she probably had the time of her life posting it all over Hermes's account.

"You two deserve each other," I spit out.

With more tears streaming down my face, and a newly broken heart, I leave knowing that she got exactly what she wanted out of me. And I got nothing but the devastating truth.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Ella

Pain - Nessa Barrett

I burst through the door of my college house, tears still streaming down my face as I run to my bedroom. I still don't have my phone, so I grab my tablet to call my brother. I don't know what's going through my head anymore. I don't know how I feel.

All I know is I don't want to feel anything at all.

"Hey, El— What's wrong?" His serious face shows on my screen. I hadn't even realized I clicked on a video call.

"Do you know what kind of man you associated with to kill Dad?" I yell, completely out of my mind.

His face falls, and he looks around him.

"Oh my god," I croak, barely able to catch my breath. "It's true. You did it."

I see him walk, then open and close a door. He's in some sort of office.

"Where are you?" he asks me. "I'll come right now."

"I don't want you to come," I spit out. "I don't want to be near you. I want you to know who your best friend really is."

"Ella, please, calm down. You know just as well as me that it had to be done."

"Too bad you picked a lying bastard to do it with. He's the one who convinced you, wasn't he? Murder, Luke. Murder."

"I trust Chris with my life," he answers sternly.

"And with mine?" I snarl. *"You know nothing about that man."*

"Ella, please calm down. Are you at your house?" I see him stand up. *"I'm on my way. We can talk."*

"We used to date. In high school. Did he ever tell you that? I know he didn't. He made me fall in love with him. He was controlling. He fucked me behind your back while you were telling all your friends to not approach me."

For a few seconds, nothing shows on his face. Then his breathing starts accelerating, his nostrils flaring.

"Are you making this up to piss me off?"

"I fucking wish. I didn't get into Juilliard because of him!"

"You and Chris dated behind my back?"

"I wanted to tell you. But he didn't. Because he's a coward and a liar. He's still after me, did you know that? Did your best. Friend. Tell you that he cheats on Megan with me? Did he tell you that he never brought your name to the Circle because he wanted me to initiate so he could use me as an Aphrodite? That's the man you trust with your life. The same one who filled my head with lies so he could keep controlling me, and my heart with hope so he could keep me close."

He opens his mouth to say something, then clamps it shut in a click of teeth. I watch as his eyes darken, and his jaw tightens. And out of nowhere, his phone flies across the room. All I see is a blurry image and hear a crash before everything goes black.

I throw my own tablet on the bed, and a scream of despair leaves my lungs. It lasts until I'm out of breath and anguish has filled my body rather than air. My throat is sore, and I can taste blood in my mouth. I want to rip my skin off, escape from my body so my soul doesn't have to suffer so much.

I have never felt a betrayal like this, so heart wrenching. It was one thing when he broke up with me to move on, and I was stupid enough to stay around for him to hurt me and manipulate...but to the lengths he did? This is a deception I can't handle.

Is this all I'm good for? Lies and schemes?

I push the door to my ensuite bathroom and fall to my knees in front of the cabinet under the sink.

Am I only worth something if I'm the dumb, clueless girl who can be controlled?

I reach for the box of razors, my hands fiddling with the plastic wrapped

around it.

I've only ever been surrounded by men who exploit me one way or another. And when I want to hide from one, it's in the arms of another who is worse.

A smile reaches my face when I finally pinch the blade between my fingers. I don't even know when I got rid of my jeans. I'm only wearing a white cardigan on the floor of my bathroom, and I find it weirdly satisfying that it'll soon be soaked in blood.

I'll lie down in it and smell the copper tang in the room. And I'll embrace the pain when I close my eyes.

I cut a first line, the same usual pinch of a surface wound. It's not much, just a short release of pain. But I can finally take a full breath. So I do it again, adding to the collection of thin white scars on my thigh.

A moan of relief escapes me. It feels too good not to cry, so I let more tears fall as my lips part.

My chest can finally expand when I press deeper, and I throw my head back, crying out as my mind alleviates. I'm slightly lightheaded when I look down at my right thigh again, and I press my fingertips on the three new cuts. The deeper one sends a wave of dizziness through me, my stomach twisting.

I like it.

So I make another one just as deep.

Four. I smirk. That's a record. It feels heavenly.

"Ella."

I shriek as my body jolts so hard my ass leaves the floor and crashes back down.

Chris's eyes are wide, his gaze stuck on my leg, on the blood dripping down, and on my white sleeves. I didn't hear him come in. All I could hear was the steady beat of my heart as beautiful pain ran through me.

"Ella, baby..." His face pales as reality hits him.

Falling to his knees in front of me, he takes the blade from my hand. "What are you doing?" he croaks.

He presses a hand on my leg, and I start shaking from shame. This is mine. My secret, my coping mechanism. And no one is allowed to know about it. A strange giggle leaves me, and I look past him.

It's like the world loses color and sound when I dissociate. I know I'm here, but my soul isn't.

"Don't," he says sternly. "Come back."

How does he even know?

“How could you do this to me? How could I believe you when you gave me that stupid excuse,” he implores, his voice so desperate for understanding. He kisses my forehead. “Come back.” My cheeks. My lips. “When did this start? You didn’t have those scars in high school.”

How could he do this to me?

“I don’t know,” I repeat in a whisper. “It started after the breakup. Or maybe when things got worse with my dad. The parties. I’m dumb. He said I was so stupid. I’m stupid. I don’t know... I hate you.”

I blink slowly, my strength not so present anymore. I feel dizzy.

“I know everything,” I croak. “*Everything.*”

“Sweets.” When I open my eyes, he’s standing in front of me, his black shirt gone. “You know nothing.”

“I know what you did,” I say on a choked breath. Nothing is real, is it? Nothing *feels* real.

My eyes catch the blade he’s holding. “Give it back.”

It’s heading toward his stomach.

“What— *Chris!*” I’m brought back to reality like someone just threw a cold bucket of water.

He cut himself.

“Why do you do it?” he asks, his soft tone edged with torment. “When?” As he talks, he cuts himself again.

And again.

“I need to understand,” he explains, as if he can’t feel anything. “If I understand, I can stop it. Help me.”

I shake my head, a sob bursting out of my mouth. “I don’t understand it myself. Stop. Stop hurting yourself.”

“When do you do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“When was the last time?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know,” I cry out, tears flowing down my cheeks and neck, wetting my chest as my hoarse voice keeps begging. “Please, stop.”

“No.” He does it again and blood drips down his abs. “If you hurt, I hurt. And if you bleed, I bleed.”

“You broke me. You broke us. Stop!” I shriek.

“You know nothing of why I did what I did... I had to.”

“No. You could have been honest. You could have...you could have...*stop!*” Another line that will scar appears on his stomach. I’m nauseous at the sight, my chest aching with desperation to stop this. Stop everything.

“Listen to me,” he says in a low, almost threatening voice. “You didn’t want me back, and I warned you. There is absolutely nothing, and I mean *nothing* I wouldn’t do to have you back.” And he cuts himself again. “I will bleed to within an inch of my life if I have to. I will ruin your entire future. I will drag you kicking and screaming, but what I *won’t do* is let you move on from me.”

He’s panting now, his muscles flexing, his abs tensing as he’s about to cut another time. Stopping short, he looks down at me on the floor.

“If you hurt, I hurt,” he repeats in a calmer voice. Then he kneels in front of me and puts a hand on my cheek. “Why did you do this?”

“My life is falling apart,” I sob brokenly.

Wiping away my tears with his thumb, he brings his other hand to my face and repeats the process.

“Let me put it back together. Please. Please, I’m begging you. Let me pick up the pieces.”

“There are no pieces left, Chris. It’s all gone. There is nothing left to fix and it’s all your fault.”

“Then build a new life with me. Let’s build our own world. You be the sun, and I’ll bask in your light. Be the air, and I’ll breathe you in. Give me life, give me a purpose. Be my everything. I know...” He inhales a deep breath, taking everything in. “I know I want a lot. I know you’ll struggle to relinquish control, but I also know you could bloom into who you should really be. I’m no artist, no poet. I’m no painter who will depict you in a beautiful way. The only thing I can do is shape you into the goddess you are.”

He presses the back of my head, pulling me to his chest. “Breathe, Sweets. Breathe for me, please.”

It seems like an impossible thing to do. But then, with my ear pressed against his hot skin, I hear the sound of his heart. He takes another breath, and I sense it settling.

“Like me,” he says quietly. “Just like me.”

I follow the way his chest expands, holds, and depletes. I do the same, imitating him.

“Again.”

Inhale.

Block.

Release.

“Atta girl. Look at you, baby.” He caresses my hair. “You’re such a good girl for me.”

I nod against his chest. “I won’t do it again.”

He pulls me away, looking in my eyes. He caught the lie. I can see it. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

More tears roll down my cheeks. I feel like I’m being torn apart. “I don’t know what to do.”

“What you’ll do is the next time you take a step toward hurting yourself, I want you to call me. It doesn’t matter what time of day it is. It doesn’t matter where you are, who you’re with, what you plan on doing. If you think it’ll hurt, you call.”

He kisses my lips, hard and violently. “Do you feel this?” he growls against me. I feel like my body is only alive in the places he touches me. “What you’re feeling when I hold you. That matters. That’s what you focus on.” He presses a hand on my heart, and it beats steadier for him. “And this.”

He kisses me again. Roughly, as if to keep me in the present.

“Where is the rest? Show me, baby.”

I move to the side, showing the cabinet behind me, and I open the door. Instead of giving him anything, I hold the box of one hundred razor blades to my chest.

“Don’t look,” I sob, but it’s more like a shout. “Please, *please*, don’t.”

He pries my arms away. “It’s okay. I won’t judge you.”

“I don’t know why,” I repeat. “I don’t know why I do it.” And it’s true. All I know is that it happens, and it feels good, but my mind is never clear enough to understand what’s happening.

“I understand.” He takes the box from me, and when I dare to look at him, his face is paler than I’ve ever seen it, but he still gives me a small, reassuring smile. “It’s going to get better.”

And I thought I was going to shake my head and disagree with him, but I catch myself nodding, a desperate plea leaving my lungs, “Do you promise?”

He bites his trembling lower lip, taking a deep breath through his nose. “I promise you I’ll be there to make it better.”

The relief that washes over me like a wave is short-lived.

“Get the fuck away from my sister before I blow your brains out.”

I love you

If it takes until the day I die to fix this, I'll work tirelessly every single day I'm alive. All I want is to see your beautiful eyes shining with love before I close mine for eternity.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chris

I'll Make You Miss Me - Artemis

I can see the way Ella comes back to reality. It's instant. The second her brother's voice reaches us, the haze is cleared, and her hatred for me comes back tenfold.

I'm starting to think that keeping her captive in my house isn't that crazy of a solution. I could just cut her off from the rest of the world. That spell she succumbs to when she lets me take care of her would never lift. That's what we need. Time, just her and me.

Or is that too much?

She pushes me away, but I struggle to let go. *Please, don't make me let you go. I just want to make it right.*

It's only when I feel the muzzle of a gun at the back of my head that I start considering stepping back. It's not for me. It's because I wouldn't want her covered in my brains and traumatized forever.

"Els, are you okay?" Luke asks, panicked. I'm sure the blood isn't helping my situation.

"I'm okay," she rasps as she gets up on shaky legs.

She sways on the spot, and I stabilize her from my position on my knees by putting my hands on her hips. Luke presses the gun harder against my head.

"Get your fucking hands off her."

Ella's wide, teary eyes are on her brother as she pushes my hands away. "Let go," she murmurs to me. "Please, let go."

I only do it because she's in a state. She needs help calming down, and I don't want to make it worse for her. I stand when she disappears out of my field of vision, walking behind me to join her brother. Turning around, I make sure to put my hands up so Luke doesn't feel like I'm going to try anything.

"Did he hurt you?" he asks, wrapping his free arm around her shoulders, the gun still pointed at me. "Do you need —"

"I'm fine. I need him gone. That's it."

She shrugs him off and disappears into her room, leaving me with my best friend.

"You betrayed me." The fury in his voice covers the hurt, but I still hear it. "You didn't stay away from her." He clenches his teeth, barely able to articulate his thoughts. "You hid it from me." His nostrils flare as he cracks his neck. "And I could have forgiven that. You're my best friend. I could have looked past the backstabbing if she was happy."

In true Baker style, like brother like sister, he runs his palm against his forehead, then pulls at the roots of his hair.

"But you hurt her, Chris."

"She cuts herself," I explain slowly, trying not to trigger a violent response from him.

My only goal is to get back to Ella. I don't care what he thinks.

"I know that. See, I'm her big brother. I know her better than you ever will. I would have shot you on sight if I thought you were the one who made her bleed. I know she does it to herself. I'm the only one she ever told. But you did worse. You betrayed her trust. You initiated her into the Circle while lying to me about protecting her from it. You pretended to be on my side, only to betray me harder."

I eye the gun still pointed at my face, then back at my best friend. "I'm not on the Circle's side, Luke."

"No," he snorts. "You're on your own side, aren't you? You lie, you manipulate. When I came to you about my dad being an issue, all you saw was an opportunity to take control over my family." For a split second, the anger disappears, replaced by pain. "You can ruin everything I trusted you with. I don't care what happens to me, and I don't care if I have to take on the Circle myself. But my sister, Chris? I trusted you with her *safety*."

“I helped with your dad because it would keep *her* safe. I initiated her into the Circle because you know your mom would have married her to someone in there anyway. That was your dad’s plan too. If I kept her close, I could protect her. I’m at this college, assisting her class, because I can’t *breathe* when I’m not near her. The men who hurt her are gone. The people who got in her way regretted it. My only goal is her. And if it ruins our friendship...” I shake my head. I don’t want to lose him, but I will die if I lose her. “Then so be it.”

“You’re willing to sacrifice everything to have her, huh? Sacrifice everything *for* her?”

“I know what she needs, Luke. I know how happy she is when she’s with me.”

“I only have one question for you.”

He lowers his gun because he knows that’s not what he needs to control me. Stepping forward, he digs his baby-blue eyes into mine. They’re lifeless, the opposite of Ella’s, despite the identical color.

His face is a mask of ice-cold blankness. Luke can be a ruthless man. Just because he doesn’t like to be doesn’t mean he’s not capable of it. He learned business from heartless men, and any deal or transaction can be settled easily for him. He just needs a bit of time to figure out someone’s weakness. And now he knows mine.

And he decides to absolutely destroy me with it.

“Does she look happy to you?”

Time stops, and I feel like I’m being pulled backward by a force more powerful than anything I’ve ever felt. I can’t answer his question, feeling myself falling into a black hole.

Does she look happy to you?

Does she look happy to you?

The words resonate, bouncing around the walls of my skull. I take too long to answer, and it would have been useless anyway. We both just witnessed the massacre she made of herself. It doesn’t look like someone who is *happy*. And I did that.

“That’s what I thought,” he finally says. “Stay away from my sister. It’s my last warning.”

He turns around, about to exit. I know I’m going to regret these words, but if I can’t listen to his warning, I can at least tell him the truth.

“I will stop at nothing to have her, Luke.”

His jaw clenches tightly as he faces me again. "I don't think you understand me. You are my best friend. You were a brother to me. But you are *not* above her. She comes first. She always has. If you go near her again, I will kill you."

"You're not going to kill me." I'm not making it sound like a threat, but I know what I'm saying. I know this man. He won't.

He chuckles. "No, I won't." Then he shrugs. "I'll get you killed. Just like I did with my dad. I wanted him out, and I found someone to do the dirty job for me. I can do the same for you."

Now, that sounds a lot more possible. For a second, I wonder if I manipulated Luke into getting rid of his dad, or if he used me to do the job so his hands would stay clean.

His threat is very real. I'm pretty sure I should fear for my life. But my life is meaningless if it's without Ella.

"I have a question for you too," I rasp. "If you're drowning and only one person keeps you afloat, why would you let go of your lifeline?"

Taking a step toward him, I try to keep his attention for one more second.

"Ella is my lifeline."

He still walks away, leaving behind his hanging threat.

But I warned him. I told him I would stop at nothing, and I hope he took that seriously and is preparing his defense, because I already know what my attack is.

I pull out my phone, scrolling through pictures I've been keeping for this very reason. I really wish I didn't have to do this, but Luke didn't leave me a choice.

If Ella thought I'd mess with her life before...she's about to find out exactly how far I'll go to have her. To keep her.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ella

Daylight - David Kushner

I love you. *That's what matters. I love you, Nicole.*

I grab the remote and turn off the TV.

"What did you do that for?" my brother asks, taking the remote from my hand.

I'm lying on the sofa, my head on the pillow I put on his lap.

"Because I'm sick of romantic movies."

"You love those stupid holiday movies. He was about to stop her from going back to New York." He turns the TV back on. "I need to know if she stays in their hometown."

I snatch the remote back. "She does. Those endings aren't realistic. We must stop watching them."

"You watch them," he mutters.

"You love them. Shut up."

I sit up and he messes with my hair. His eyes drop to the bandages on my right thigh, and I pull down the sleep shorts I'm wearing. "Stop looking at them, Luke. I'm fine."

"It's the worst it's ever been."

My gaze drops. "I know. But it'll never be like that again. I feel better."

"It was yesterday. It's okay if you don't feel better, but you need to let me know."

I throw my head back, looking at the ceiling of the theater room in our family home, and decide to change the topic.

“When’s Mom coming back from France?”

“I don’t know, but you’ll be fine for another week here, at least.”

My brother can really read me, can’t he? “I should go back to campus. I can’t miss classes.”

“You’re unwell. You’ll go back when you’re better.”

“Peach and Alex are worried.” Who wouldn’t be after they saw the massacre I had made of myself.

“Then text them that you’re safe here with me. I’m telling you to rest, Ella, and I’m telling you you’re not going anywhere I can’t keep an eye on you. If Chris approaches you. I want to know.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks, translating the anger amping up within me. “Don’t tell me what to do. I’m a big girl, not the stupid five-year-old you think I am.”

“I should have told you what to do a long time ago,” he snaps, standing up from the sofa. “I should have *clearly* spelled it out to you to not date my best friend. Had you had an ounce of honesty toward me, I could have told you he was a controlling asshole with a handsome face. Why do you think I told all my friends to stay away from you? I know they’re not good enough for you. Do you think you know him better than I do? You fell for his stupid shit like every other girl did, and now I’m forced to fix shit I was never prepared to deal with. So cut me some fucking slack.”

My gaze drops to my hands on my lap, shame tightening my chest. “We were in high school. I had no idea what I was doing.”

“*He* knew what he was doing. He’s the exact kind of man I wanted to protect you from, Els.” His voice is calmer, but I can still hear the betrayal in it.

“It’s not my fault this time,” I rasp. “I... He...” I’m so scared to say the words out loud. “He doesn’t want to let me go. Even with Megan in the picture.”

“He will let you fucking go, or he’ll die.”

My heart stutters before it drops to my feet, and a wave of dizziness washes over me. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“He’s your best friend. Even if he wasn’t, you can’t...you can’t *kill* people.”

He crosses his arms over his chest, facing me and forcing me to face the truth in the process. “Do you *want* him to let you go?”

The honesty in his question makes me unwell. I don’t want to answer that.

“Do you?” he insists.

“Things between Chris and I have always been complicated, and I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Do you hate him, or do you want him, Ella? The question can’t be any simpler than that.”

“Both!” I bark. “Both, okay? Now leave me the fuck alone.”

I stand up with a huff, ready to avoid the questions that point out exactly how fucked-up my feelings for Chris are, but my phone makes a noise.

The Hermes noise.

And my gut is telling me that I should check it *right. Now.*

I look down, unlocking the SFU app with a swipe of my thumb and let the post load.

“No,” I cry out, the floor falling under my feet. “No, *fuck. No.*”

I collapse back onto the sofa, head swimming.

She just can’t get enough!

Uh-oh... is this how Ella Baker keeps her spot in Professor Reeves’s class?

Sometimes under the desk, sometimes bent over...and her grades keep climbing!

I think those two are about to get in serious trouble.

#EllaBakerfutureattorney #GoodbyeProfessorReeves

#whowillbeournewcriminallawprofessor?

The picture is of me exiting Reeves’s office, hair disheveled, shirt unbuttoned, and uniform skirt barely put together. Reeves is holding the door behind me, leaving no doubt as to who put me in that state.

“What, what is it?” Luke asks, trying to take my phone.

“Don’t look!” I jolt to my feet and step away from him, fear flowing thickly through my veins. “Please, don’t look.” He just found out I’ve been seeing his best friend. I can’t let him know I slept with Reeves.

I already know I’m not going to survive this from Hermes, but the next notification that comes from my phone gives me a near heart-attack.

“Luke.” My voice trembles, a mere whisper compared to what I intended.
“We have a problem.”

I show him my phone.

Unknown: Aphrodite, you have been called to the temple immediately. There has been a request to change your status within the Circle. Zeus

“You’re not going,” he says right away.

“I can’t do that. I have before and...I won’t again.”

“Ella, you can’t go. This has Chris written all over it.” He’s trying to stay strong for me, but I can see the panic in his eyes that matches mine.

I look at the message again. “It was sent by Eugene Duval.”

“But whatever change of status they mean was initiated by Chris, I’ll bet my life on it.” He turns around, starts pacing, and looks at me again. “I swear to God, I’ll end him.”

“Stop saying that!” I fight back. “Please, just... I’ll go. I’ll go, and I’ll tell you what they want. I’ll call Achilles on my way, ask him if he knows anything. But I can’t not show up.”

His jaw clicks, his eyes hardening on me, but his tone is a plea. “I don’t want you to go, Ella.”

“Achilles is allowed in the temple. If anything goes wrong, I know he’ll be there.”

“I want you to message me. Every step of the way, do you hear me?”

“I will if I can. Luke...I know how you feel, but you are *not* useless. You did everything you could to protect me. I don’t doubt that, and I never will.”

I can breathe a little easier when I see his shoulders relax. I understand what’s been angering him so much. The helplessness. I hid my relationship with Chris and it meant he couldn’t protect me from it. He’s not part of the Circle and can’t save me from them.

“Sometimes things are out of our control. But I promise I’ll be perfectly fine.”

A lie neither of us believe, but still, it feels good to say it.

Once in a taxi on my way to the Stoneview Country Club, I call Achilles. I’m wearing jeans, pressing on the denim where my cuts are bandaged and letting a string of dull pain run through me to calm me down.

“Tell me you know something,” I murmur as soon as my friend picks up.

“About?”

“About my ‘change in status’ within the Circle.”

There's a pause before his low voice comes from the other side of the line again. *"Did that come before or after the picture Hermes just released?"*

"Right after."

He thinks for a moment.

"Achilles," I insist. *"What's happening?"*

"There are only two options for an Aphrodite's status to change. Either a Shadow asked to marry her and she gets to become a Hera..."

"Or?"

"Or she's being removed from the Circle."

"Being removed?"

My heart stops altogether, my lungs refusing to draw in a breath.

"I'm going to assume that what Hermes just published put you and Reeves in a tricky situation. It's more than okay for both of you to sleep together, but not to put the Circle in jeopardy. Everyone knowing a professor slept with a student is a risk for us. It puts eyes on a Shadow and also on the Circle."

I run my hand through my hair, pulling at my roots as my chest tightens some more.

"Are they going to kill me for putting the Circle at risk of being found out?"

"Where are you?"

"Why aren't you answering my question? Am I safe?"

"Are you on your way to the temple?"

"Yes! Achilles —"

"I'll meet you there."

The second I go past the front door, two men are on me. *"This way, Aphrodite."*

They don't touch me, but their mere presence is terrifying. As we walk up the stairs, my legs feel like jelly. I don't think they'll get me all the way to Duval's office before giving up on me.

We're almost by his door when it opens, and Megan and her dad walk out.

She's crying, screaming at whoever is inside the office while Gabriel McLean holds her tightly by the upper arm.

"Dad—" she attempts as he drags her away violently. *"I didn't —"*

"You are a disgrace to this family," he cuts her off, then snatches the

necklace with the lotus flower she has around her neck. Her sign that she was a Hera. “Your jealousy and hysterics have cost me enough. You’re lucky I’m too important that you’re not being killed.”

She notices me, her face reddening some more. “You,” she snarls.

“What’s happening?” I barely choke out.

“You’re finally going to get what you want, aren’t you? Little fucking bitch...” She tries to come my way, but her dad holds her back.

“I don’t understand,” I rasp as I try to calm my breaths.

“Into the office, Aphrodite,” McLean growls, dragging his daughter away from me.

I don’t even dare to not listen, hurrying into the office.

My brother was right.

Chris is there, standing tall with his hands in the pockets of his suit and a serious look on his face. Eugene Duval is in front of his desk, running a hand through already tousled hair. His angry stare comes to me, and I notice his jacket has been thrown on one of the chairs.

“Ella Baker.”

I try not to gulp, but I fail, and my knees almost give up under his dark voice.

“You’re becoming more trouble than you’re worth.”

“I’m sorry?” My trembling voice doesn’t impress any of them, and even Chris doesn’t give me an ounce of reassurance.

“Aphrodites only have one job. To be used when we want to use them. You failed that already and had to be punished. We granted you a favor, though. So that’s already us doing more for you than you did for us. And now we have to cover for you again. Sleeping with a professor? I guess you only ever found one way to get help from people.”

Shame burns my face all the way to the tips of my ears, and my stomach twists, eaten by the disgrace demon. What a way to call me a whore.

“That was...before,” I attempt.

“Before? Oh, well. If it was before, then it doesn’t matter that some student account outed you and that the Circle has to intervene to save the reputation of not one but two members.”

“I’m sorry...I —”

“That’s the problem with our kids. We spoiled you too much. You think we’re going to clean up after all of you before you’ve even earned your rightful place in this society. If Christopher hadn’t come to me, how long

would this have kept going? When were you going to tell me that a social media account was targeting you? If you're at risk, the Circle is at risk. What if their next post was to tell the world you were an Aphrodite for the Silent Circle?"

"It wasn't —"

"But it was."

I look at Chris, and I notice the faintest shadow of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"I don't understand," I admit, talking to whoever wants to hear, but looking at him.

"This." Duval gets my attention again. He's holding a phone, waving it at me. "Hermes was Megan McLean. Christopher found this phone at their house. It's logged into the account. She had a post scheduled for today that we didn't manage to stop on time. It posted as we were going through the phone. And there was one scheduled for a week from now to tell everyone you were part of a secret society. *Our* society. We were about to be exposed."

My eyes practically bulge out of my head. This is exactly what Peach and I thought—that Megan was after me. I look back at Chris, but he stays quiet, unreadable. So, I bring my attention back to Duval.

"She...she posted all those things about me?"

"She did. I know you three had some trouble, and I didn't care, but she isn't allowed to put the Circle in jeopardy."

That bitch hated me so much she was willing to expose the Circle. She ruined my life, destroyed my reputation. I was right. She and Chris deserve each other.

My heart races, realizing her dad said she wouldn't be killed. She *deserves* to be killed. "What is going to happen to her?"

Eugene puts the phone back on his desk before huffing and looking at me. "She's been banned, her engagement with her Shadow broken, and her father will send her to Europe on family business."

I struggle to take another breath, my eyes darting to Chris again. This doesn't erase the things *he* did. It only shows that they're both insane.

"What's going to happen to me?" I whisper.

"Well." He runs a hand through his hair. "You were going to be removed from the Circle. As I said, you're more trouble than you're worth."

A chill runs down my spine, and I take a step back toward the door.

"No need to be scared, Ella. It just so happens that one of our Shadows is

now without a Hera and is adamant he wants to pick you out of the pool of Aphrodites.”

I don’t register what he said for a moment, blinking up at him.

And when I do, my head whips to Chris.

“So that’s why you told everyone Megan is Hermes. How long have you kept this to yourself? You were waiting for the perfect time, weren’t you?”

“I only just found out, Ella. There was no scheming here.” How anyone could believe his almost shy smile right now is beyond me. He’s a liar, and I know it. “I lost my Hera. I can’t be without one if I want to stay a Shadow. And I have to choose from the Aphrodites. That’s all this is.”

“And you chose *me*?” I snarl past the knot in my throat. “What a surprise.” I look at Duval, pointing an accusing finger toward Chris. “He knew she was Hermes.”

“How the hell could I have known? I’ve been warning the Circle about this account for months.” Chris snorts and shakes his head like he’s disappointed. “The woman hates you so much she was willing to expose the Circle. You’re lucky I found that phone.”

“Ella.” Duval’s patience is wearing thin. I can hear it in his voice and see it in the way he now stands straight in front of his desk. “I am about done with your impudence. You are *nothing* here. Your family is nothing. And you apparently learned nothing from your punishment. So here’s what it is: You are being expelled from SFU as punishment. The only choice you get is whether you want to become a Hera for Christopher, or to be removed from the Circle.”

“I want to be removed!” I rage.

He licks his lips, smirking at me. “Believe me, you don’t.”

“This isn’t fair...I... He’s tricking me into this! And how...how can you kick me out of SFU?! I worked my ass off to —”

“You slept with a professor.”

“What about him? He slept with me. He sleeps with many of his students.”

“Reeves is a Shadow,” Duval explains, like I’m so stupid for not understanding. “Don’t you know the hierarchy here? You’re at the bottom. His life within the Circle will always be easier than yours, because he serves us in ways you never could. He’s useful, not just three holes to keep us satisfied. He’s been warned to stop, he’s been warned of the consequences of his actions, so you worry about yourself.”

“But—”

“If you choose to become a Hera, your Shadow can decide whether you can go back to college or not. But currently, you belong to the Circle, and as Zeus, I’m the one in charge of the decisions for you. You’re out of SFU.”

The door to the office opens, and Achilles storms in, stopping by my side.

“Can I talk to you?” he asks his dad.

“Can’t you see we’re busy?”

“Let me talk to you,” he insists. “Now.”

Eugene narrows his eyes at his son, but he nods. “Wait outside my office, Ella. Christopher, I’ll see you around.”

I flip around, practically running out of the office, and Chris is right on my heels.

“What the fuck?” I snap, the second the door closes. “You are out of your fucking mind, Christopher Murray.”

“Full name, huh?”

“You’ve gone *too far*.” I just barely suppress the will to scream. “This is my fucking life.”

“Language.” He plays with something in his pocket, and my eyes dart to it, wondering what he uses as a coping mechanism to keep calm. “I’m getting rather annoyed by your lack of listening skills. I *told you* I would do anything to have you, and it looks like I did, doesn’t it? The how doesn’t matter. What’s done is done. Megan is out. I’ve freed the space for you like I promised. Now, take your rightful spot next to me. Because God forbid, I take this a step further. I will, but I don’t want to.”

“You can’t —”

He puts a soft hand on my cheek. “I can do whatever. Never forget that. I always play to win, and victory comes at any price. I promise you that at the end of this, you will be by my side, Ella. You decide when you’ve had enough of the torture and are ready to give in.”

With the knuckle of his index finger, he grazes the gold necklace I wear, the one with the shell that shows I’m an Aphrodite.

“This will be gone soon,” he says assuredly, and I wish that made me feel an ounce of relief. But I’m sickened, even as my skin tingles beneath his touch.

The door opens again, Achilles walking out. He takes my hand under Chris’s dangerous stare.

“Cut her some fucking slack, Murray. You’re a cunning motherfucker if

I've seen one." Then he turns to me, eyes searching mine. "I bought you two days to decide. Let's go."

My best friend drags me with him, and I look over my shoulder.

As composed as ever, Chris is smiling beautifully at me, making my heart skip a beat.

The fucker has me, doesn't he?

He fucking did it.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chris

Take Me To Church - Hozier

Rose grabs the vase next to her, ready to throw it across the room where I stand.

“Ozy,” Jake warns her. “Put the vase down.”

She narrows her eyes at her twin brother but does as she’s told. “Christopher,” she snarls. “Listen to me and listen well. You *cannot* force someone to be with you.”

“She wants to be with me,” I answer calmly. “She’s just scared because of what happened last time.”

“You’re breaking us apart,” Jake adds. “Luke wants to kill you. Do you understand that fully? We’re your family. You can’t do this to us.”

“I love you. Both of you. And I love Luke. But I love Ella more.” I don’t need to justify myself more than that.

“You force the poor girl’s hand, and then what? Where will you live? What will you do? You still go to law school here. Luke will find you. You can’t keep Ella captive in your home. Please, Chris,” Rose huffs. “Understand that what you put in place is not a solution. You’re meant to be the sensible one. You’re the only one in our group God gifted with common sense. *Use it.*”

I shake my head, sitting down and relaxing on my sofa because nothing can stress me out when I know Megan is about to move across the pond, and

Ella will be mine soon. She had two days. They're over.

"Love overcomes common sense. You wouldn't know, you never had any."

"Okay." She nods and walks all the way to me. "I never had common sense. I'm a jealous, possessive bitch, and I made all the mistakes one can make."

"Yes," I agree. "And I was the one always fixing your mistakes, so the least you could do is not be a hypocrite."

"I could. But I'll give you advice instead. As the one who fucked it all up before she got it right, I have plenty of that. I'll keep it short." She takes a breather, looking at me with pity rather than anger. "Forcing someone to be with you is like driving through a wall and calling it a shortcut. It's not real; you're not going to get to your destination intact, if at all. But mostly, someone will get hurt."

She's right. And I hate that, but it's too late to change my mind. All I need is Ella to be by my side, to give me that second chance she never wanted to give me. Then I'll win her heart all over again. I know what we can be, she just needs help seeing it too.

"Chris," Jake jumps back in. "You're spiraling. You've gone too far, and you don't know how to come back, so you're justifying your actions. Even if you scare Ella into accepting this deal, Luke won't. You might be dead before you even get to be with her."

I stand up, sick of hearing lessons from two people whom I've had to save more times than I can count.

"I'm done with the two of you. You"—I point a finger at Jake—"bullied your fiancée into dating you. The girl almost lost her life from the bullshit you put her through."

"I was in high school," he snaps. "I was young and completely stupid."

"Yes, and I was the one who had to protect her from you over and over again. And you"—this time, I look at Rose—"put me through hell with your self-destructive behavior. For years. And you put your three partners through worse. Everyone had to adapt to you because you're so jealous and selfish. But, please, your brother threw some dumb excuse at me, so what are you going to justify yourself with?"

She pauses, blinking at me. "Trauma?"

"Shut up, Rose. I —"

My phone rings, cutting me off from the ridiculousness of this

conversation. It's Duval.

I raise a hand as Rose is about to talk again, picking up in a hurry. A rush of excitement makes my limbs tingle, and my heart accelerates to an unhealthy rhythm.

"Duval," I say as smoothly as I can while my other hand goes to my pocket, rolling the pearl there.

"*Christopher.*" His serious voice tempers my excitement. This isn't going to be good news. "*I spoke to Lucas Baker.*" Fuck. "*Ella chose to be removed from the Circle. Listen, I was happy to threaten her for your sake, but I can't kill a girl because she refuses to be your Hera. This is not how we function.*"

"I can make her change her mind," I blurt out.

"*The Bakers called our bluff, and we lost. I have to get back to them with something. I'll offer Ella to go back to being an Aphrodite so she chooses that over...whatever threat I can't truly execute.*"

"No."

"*I can't kill her, Christopher.*"

"Give me the night. Ella will come to you tomorrow with a changed mind."

In my peripheral, I can see Rose and Jake shaking their heads, disappointed in me. I might be suicidal saying that. The more I push Ella into a corner, the harder it will be to pull her back, but I need to get her to that point of no return.

I hang up, already opening the message app.

"I don't want to hear it." I stop Jake before he can even start his sentence.

He says it anyway.

"I regret helping you."

I barely glance his way. "I don't care."

I'm typing like a madman, knowing this is the last thing I can do. If I haven't by now, the line will definitely be crossed by the end of the night.

Looking down at the text I sent, I take a deep, steadying breath.

Chris: I spoke with Duval. I'll get you back into the Circle. Meet me at the edge of the forest behind the campus residences. Now.

She deserves it, I tell myself. After everything she did. My dad, the hits, the manipulation. She hurt Ella.

She deserves it.

Her response comes quickly.

Megan: Coming now.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ella

Way Down We Go - KALEO

I'm shaking. I can't stop it. It's cold outside, a crisp fall wind that seeps down to my bones. It's not raining, but the dark clouds in the night sky are promising a storm to remember.

"Megan?" I call out, walking deeper and deeper into the woods.

The branches are thickening, and the moonlight was already missing, so the darkness is becoming eerie, sending another chill slithering down my spine. I wrap my coat tighter around my body and walk farther.

"Megan, I swear to God..." I jolt when I hear a branch cracking next to me.

An animal runs past, making me gasp as I jump to the side. My heart races, and I have to put a hand on my chest to calm myself.

This looks a lot like a trap. Especially coming from Megan. Her message was strange, but then I asked myself, *what is the worst she can do?* She's not going to kill me.

She can try. I'm so furious with her, I might be the one ending up killing her. The woman used Hermes's account to ruin my life, my reputation, and my self-esteem. I think one of us has more reasons to kill the other.

I look at my phone, already in my hand because I'm using the flashlight to go through the woods.

Unknown: Meet me in the woods behind the residences. I have something you can use to get out of your situation with Chris. He played us both. Megan.

There's some noise coming from a few feet in front of me, but the trees are so thick I can't see anyone.

Hearing a struggle, I freeze. Then a whimpered *no*.

"Megan? I swear if this is a trap, I'm going to kill you."

I barely say the word "kill" when her scream resonates through the woods. Probably all the way to the residences.

And out of nowhere, she's running toward me. Her long legs, her shoulder-length hair. She slaloms between the trees, but with every step she takes, she slows down, struggles harder.

"Ella," she croaks, holding her hands to her chest.

I take off into a sprint, running to meet her, and she crashes in my arms, smearing blood all over my beige coat.

"H-help...help..." But she's too heavy, and we both collide onto the damp forest ground.

My hands hover over her chest, and I try to press on the wound in a panic, but there are too many. She's holding a knife. Did she do this to herself?

I take it out of her hands, putting it beside me, and that's when I see the small piece of ripped paper crunched in her fist.

I can't stop hearing it. The sound she made a few seconds ago.

The bloodcurdling scream of someone being murdered is like nothing I've heard before.

During those long, horrifying seconds, only the sounds and smells stick with me.

The gasping of her emptying lungs. How she chokes on her blood with dire gurgling noises I will never forget.

Blood smells strong. So strong I can practically taste it in my mouth, dying along with her as crimson liquid spills from her lips. A cough and it splatters on my face.

The images don't stay. They're flashes of blurriness my brain already tries to erase. To protect me from.

She's on the ground. I know she is because I am too, kneeling next to her on the forest soil.

She's dying.

There's mud and blood in her black hair. That I notice. And her hands

come to scratch her throat, her bloody lips. She's ripping into her skin, coughing over and over again.

She's dead before I get myself out of the haze.

I can already see the headlines.

College queen bee turns out to be a murderer.

Is this how I'll go down? For the murder of the woman who had become my ex's new girlfriend?

What was the point of becoming picture-perfect, of being the popular, flawless girl if my downfall all comes down to this? The murder of my enemy.

My left fist tightens around the note in my hand, hopelessness growing within me.

It's just a tiny, bloody, ripped piece of paper carrying simple words.

Victory belongs to the most persevering.

"Megan," I rasp. My throat tightens, reality hitting me harder than a punch to the gut. "Oh my god, Megan." A sob bursts out of my mouth, my breaths coming in shallow pants.

I hear leaves ruffling behind me, someone stepping close, and a mighty presence settles beside me.

His hand comes to the top of my head, pressing dominantly and forcing me to lean against his thigh.

"Oh, Sweets," he purrs. "What have you done?"

I'm shaking from my forceful cries, and I retch dryly as my gaze roams over her dead body.

"You did this," I whimper. "You did this...you did this..."

"Hm, yes. I did." He caresses my hair, and I weirdly don't fight him, taking in the reassuring gesture. "But this picture truly shows you did."

Something drops between my knees, and I glance down at the lit-up screen. The picture clearly shows me, holding the knife from when I took it from Megan's hand, and looking down at her dying body.

"Do you know what would be terribly unfortunate, Sweets?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, tears falling so freely I can't see clearly anymore.

"If Hermes released that picture."

My eyes fly back open, locking onto his. "It was you."

He nods. I swallow down the bile rising up my throat.

“You set her up to make Duval believe she was the one behind the account.”

He nods again. “If it can ease your mind. Everything Megan got, she deserved.”

And she did, didn’t she? She was violent, abusive, malicious, threatened his dad, got him hurt.

“But I didn’t,” I croak with a shake of my head. “I don’t deserve this.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He even says it like he means it, but he doesn’t take his blackmailing threat back. “Once you’re all mine, I’ll make it all better. I promise you.”

“You did it.” My voice is barely audible, but I don’t care. “You burned down my entire world.”

His hand caresses me some more, and he softly grips my hair to keep me looking up at him as my hopeless gaze strays to the sky.

“I did. Now might be the time you want to take back your words, baby. Because if this gets out, you won’t only have the police after you, but the entire Circle.”

“What words?” I whimper, a sob choking me.

He smirks, the devil within him darkening the already blackened forest.

“I wouldn’t go back to you if you were my last option on earth. It looks like I’m your last option. Are you sure you don’t want to choose me?”

I blink up at him, realizing that those words will forever haunt me. Unless...unless I do choose him.

And I truly don’t have a choice this time.

He doesn’t force it with violence. He helps me up with gentle hands, pushes strands of wild blonde hair away from my face, and wipes the tears from my eyes.

And he doesn’t make me spell it out. Doesn’t make me admit defeat. He takes pity on me and simply says, “Shall I take you back to our home now, Sweets? We have to call Zeus and tell him you changed your mind.”

I nod, sniffing.

The worst part isn’t that I lost.

I once heard that people on the run from the police for years almost look relieved once they get caught. They couldn’t take the fear anymore. Looking back over their shoulders constantly, living a life of paranoia isn’t worth it.

That’s the worst part. That feeling of relief enveloping me. There’s no

more running away from Chris. He got me, and I can finally let go.

Chapter Forty

Ella

Born To Die - Lana Del Rey

“Is your brother home?” he asks as he parks in front of my house in Stoneview.

I assume he drove me here rather than my college house because he wants to talk to him.

I nod. I haven’t been able to talk since we left the forest. I still can’t believe he went as far as framing me for murder. I’m not sure I want to wrap my mind around it.

“Let’s both go in. I’ll tell him the truth so he understands that you don’t have a choice. While I do that, you get some stuff to spend the night at mine. We can move the things from your SFU house another time.”

I nod again.

“Sweets.” His grip on my jaw is soft, but so possessive. He forces me to turn away from the window and to look at him. “Everything is going to be okay. You’re safe now.”

He kisses my forehead, not my mouth. As if he’s giving me time to adapt, even though he knows I’ve always been his. That there was a time I was willingly his. That I couldn’t get over him when we separated. That the second chance he’s offering us is what I’ve always dreamed of. Just...not like this.

I don’t say anything. I walk into the house before him, and I don’t know

why he's not right behind me, but I use the time wisely. Even though it breaks my heart.

I hurry to my dad's office where I know Luke has been working hard trying to build back a different company with whatever contacts he still has. Something he can achieve without the money from our dad and without the Circle's help.

"Els," he exclaims, jumping from his seat. "Where the hell were you? I've been trying to call you. I thought—" His eyes widen when he realizes me covered in blood. "*What happened?* Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. It's a long story," I say. I jog to him, opening the jacket of his suit and taking his phone from him. "Chris is here."

"What? What are you doing?"

Unlocking his phone, I lift my finger to my mouth to tell him to keep quiet when I hear the front door open and close.

"Trust me," I whisper. "Let him talk and let me go."

I'm about to press the record button, but I look up into his eyes so he can see he needs to trust me.

I almost don't do it. After all, the truth is that, deep down, I'm in love with Chris. If he had told my brother about us years ago, I would still be his. If he hadn't been with Megan when he came back, I would have given us a chance. If I had had the semblance of a choice, I would have chosen him.

But his mistake was imposing his rules, his plan, his way.

And if love couldn't stop him from destroying my life...why should it stop me from destroying his?

"Don't kill him," I whisper, taking in the mix of concern and rage taking over my brother's features. "Give this to the Circle and let them do it." And I press record before putting the phone back in his pocket.

There's a knock on the office door, and Chris comes in.

"Go pack your things, Ella," he says calmly.

I exchange a look with my brother, silently begging him to do as I say, and I run out of the room.

I pack a bag in only a few minutes, but I give them time before going down. My brother and I are on the same page, and he gives me a tight hug, slipping a "got it" in my ear before I leave with Chris.

The moment we're at his house, a new anxiety takes over me.

"This is where you lived with Megan," I croak.

The only house I've ever known him to live in is the one next to my family house. The one where he grew up. The one where we met when I was just a little girl coming over because Luke had been playing all day over there, and I wanted him home back with me. Chris always welcomed me in. He let me sit on the sofa while they played video games in the Murray's game room.

Now I'm about to enter the house he shared not only with the woman he murdered, but the woman who I know abused him. Who was he with her behind closed doors?

"It was," he confirms as he unlocks the door. "And we'll move. I want something by the lake because you like it there. And with a dance studio. Don't worry, I started looking already. I'll find a place you deserve."

Refusing to acknowledge the warmth it brings to my heart to know he remembers exactly where I want to live, I bring him back to reality.

"We wouldn't want to have her ghost sharing the bed," I say tartly.

"That." He holds the door open, letting me in before him. "And I also don't have the best memories here."

That stupid string that links from my heart to his tugs, and I subconsciously take a step closer.

I want to ask what happened here exactly. Who was Megan when they were alone? How far did she go? Morbid curiosity and the desire to kiss him better anywhere she hurt him take over my spiraling thoughts.

You are here because he tried to pin a murder on you.

You are here because he left you no other choice.

My thoughts keep going back to that August phone call.

I wouldn't go back to you if you were my last option on earth.

He will forever make me eat those words. I will never digest them. He stored them, destroyed my life, used them against me. Because I rejected him when all I ever wanted was to be his unconditionally.

I follow him to the stairs, him carrying my bag and me carrying my regrets, and he leads me to a bedroom with an ensuite. It's not a grand mansion like we have in Stoneview, but his Silver Falls house is big and beautiful. Especially for a couple.

"Shower, Sweets. I'll make you some food. You need to eat and rest. I texted Duval, but he wants to see you tomorrow morning. We'll go to the temple so you can tell them your final decision."

"They weren't going to kill me, were they? When they threatened to

remove me from the Circle.”

“No,” he admits as he walks to the ensuite. I follow and watch him turn on the shower. “But they will now if they think you killed Megan. Her dad will unleash them on you.”

“And you’ll let them?”

“Of course not. I’ll try to save you.” Content with the water temperature, he takes my coat off me, then pulls the gray cashmere sweater I’m wearing over my head. “But contrary to what most believe, I’m not invincible.” There goes my white shirt. “I’ll try to save you, and I’ll probably die with you.”

He does always look invincible. It’s probably what reassures most people he cares for. I know it’s always reassured me. But the truth is, he’s not, and he’s willing to sacrifice both of us to get what he wants.

Steam swirls around us, fogging most of the bathroom. He undoes my jeans, pushing them down my legs, and I’m left topless with just my panties on.

“Let’s just hope you can behave, and we can avoid death.”

He rids me of my panties, and I stand naked in front of him. He appreciates the view; I see it even through the steam, but he doesn’t touch me.

He touches the water instead, hissing at the heat. “You love your showers way too hot,” he chuckles.

When I walk in, it’s perfect. Because he knows me and how I take my shower. It’s annoying, but the burn is delicious.

“I’ll be downstairs. Take your time.”

I do. I need time to get the forest off me, the images of Megan, the blood, the dirt.

I need a minute to accept that this is my situation now, and that the only other possible outcome will hurt even more. If Luke manages...the pain will last forever.

I’m wearing a robe he left on the bed when I step into the kitchen. It’s a satin blue robe, almost see-through but not quite. He’s washing up whatever he used to cook, and the oven is on.

“I made vegetarian lasagna,” he tells me quietly. “Grab a mug from that cabinet. I’ve got that strawberry soda you like.”

It’s such a strange atmosphere between us. I don’t want to listen to anything he says, but at the same time, I’m here, and I’m not sure which things I have a choice in anymore.

“A mug?” I say as I open the cabinet. “Don’t you have glasses?” My question is answered the second I look inside.

One shelf is empty, the other has mugs. I throw him a questioning look as I grab one.

“She had a thing for throwing glasses at me,” he mutters, avoiding my gaze as he opens the oven to check if the meal is cooked. “Don’t ask me why it was always glasses.”

Pulling the dish out of the oven, he serves me a slice of lasagna before putting the plate on the table between the knife and fork that were already there.

I don’t like the feeling I get when he tells me these things. I don’t want to feel bad for him, and I don’t want to relate to him about abuse. My dad used to make me feel lower than low. The mental pain was unbearable, and I don’t want to imagine what he went through with her every day.

I simply nod, holding back the need to take him into my arms, and I give him the mug. He fills it with my favorite strawberry soda. The silence is eating me alive, and I want to insult him, fight him, do *something*.

I don’t, but he does. He slides his fingers against my cheek, past my hairline, into my hair, and gently pulls me toward him to kiss my forehead.

“Sit down and eat.”

He lets me go, but I stay exactly where I am.

“Is this how it’s going to be from now on? You order, I execute?”

He smiles knowingly. “Was it ever different?”

“It’s not something I love about you.”

“It is.”

The bouncing exchange is only cut short by my mouth dropping open.

“Is it not?” he insists. “You like the way I make you feel when I guide you because it feels like care to you. And it feels to me like I’m caring for you. If it works for us, why not?”

“Because...Chris,” I huff. “It’s not *healthy*.”

“I only care about what makes us feel good. Now sit down and eat.” The change from softness to a stern voice makes me grit my teeth. He notices right away and adds, “I know you have many questions about everything I’ve done since coming back, and I will answer them while you eat. I just want you to feed yourself so you don’t faint. It’s been quite the evening for you.”

Considering it a good deal, I sit down, take the fork, and shove burning hot lasagna in my mouth while he softly says, “Careful, it’s hot —”

My eyes tear up, tongue burning, and he shakes his head, chuckling at my behavior.

I narrow my eyes at him, chewing through the scorching dish and swallow with a gulp.

He plays with his own mug, and I can smell the whiskey from here. No glasses in this household. Truly.

“I’ll answer anything you want,” he rasps.

My gaze bounces between his eyes. I bet the liquid in his mug matches the amber surrounding his pupils.

I burn myself through another mouthful before I push the word that stings more than the food.

“Juilliard.”

His eyes flutter shut, and he licks his lips. He puts the whiskey down to massage the back of his neck. “I thought you’d start with that.”

“Get to it, then,” I snap.

He nods to himself, takes a large gulp of his drink, and puts the glass back down.

“Christopher.”

“Your dad was going to marry you off.”

I feel my eyebrows lift so high I have to consciously force myself to lower them.

“My dad was not going to marry me —”

“Harvey James.”

“That was Bakers Café CFO,” I say right away.

“Yes, before it all became a mess. He lives in New York. Your average middle-aged man who was dying to become part of the Circle. He just needed a wife. Your dad *really* wanted him in the Circle. A great advantage for him and his business. So he offered his daughter.” He takes another sip. “If you had gone to Juilliard, your dad was going to force you into marrying Harvey. The location was ideal, and he didn’t believe you could become a dancer, so he thought marriage was better. Believe me or not, it’s the truth. I wasn’t going to let that happen.”

My throat tightens, and I force more food down so I don’t have to answer anything. I chew, swallow, think carefully about my words.

“So it was a joint effort with my dad to ruin my dream.”

“Ella—”

“All the men around me have only ever had one thing in mind. To control

what I do and who I am. You're just one among many others to have participated."

He pinches his lips. "Is that what you think of me?"

"Did you have my best interests in mind?"

"Did you want to get married to Harvey?"

"I wanted to go to *Juilliard*," I bite out, my chest aching. "For fuck's sake, do you not care?"

He keeps his cool, letting me simmer in my anger as he takes another sip. "Do you think Harvey James would have let you stay at Juilliard, Ella?"

I keep quiet since we both know the answer is no.

"You'd still be in the Circle, married young, with your life out of your control. But to someone other than me. And I...I would have to watch you suffer."

"Poor you," I snort. "Now at least you have to watch me suffer because of you."

"You and I are meant to be, and you know it. Or I wouldn't have taken the risks I took dating you through high school, you neither. Agree or disagree, I don't care. I know it. I understand your frustration, but it won't last. Down the line, your love for me will flourish again. It's not extinguished. But please, tell me if I'm wrong."

Again, I don't want to lie, so I grit my teeth, giving up on food.

"Eat," he says as soon as I drop my fork. "Ask me another question."

"How long have you been Hermes?" The questions are burning my tongue, the food twisting my stomach. But I want to know it all.

"More or less since I came back. The post about you knowing about your dad's parties was my first one."

My mouth drops open. "How could you?"

"The second I saw how important your reputation was, I had to go for it. How can I be your last option if you have something to turn back to? Plus, I had to be ruthless, or Duval would have never believed it was Megan. I hated doing it, Sweets. Please, believe me when I say that. But I had to attack you so he would think it's her. It was my only plan to take her down. Make it look like she's attacking a girl she hates so much that she would put the Circle at risk."

"And you also had to put us against each other?"

"She did that very well on her own." A small smile tips the corner of his mouth. "But I guess I did push it when I couldn't keep my hands off you, my

eyes off you, your name out of my mouth. It was too tempting to rile her up. And it did help.”

“I can’t eat any more,” I squeak. “I’ll be sick.”

“Okay,” he says softly. “Just leave it. But promise you’ll tell me if you’re hungry again.”

“I might never.” I take a sip of my soda. “Do you know who the real Hermes is? How did you hack into their account?”

“I don’t. And Jake got me in.”

Of course, he used his best friend who’s a computer genius.

“How respectful for my brother that his two best friends united against him.”

“Again, your brother only wants you to be happy. And I know I will make you happy.”

“So let me clarify. You broke up with me. You ruined my chances at getting into my dream school. You pretended to my mom and brother you would protect me from the Circle while secretly initiating me so you could use me and require my presence by your side whenever you wanted. You destroyed the life I built as SFU, stalked me. All the while scheming to get rid of Megan. But you think you can make me *happy*?”

He takes in every single one of my words, nodding to himself as if checking I’m not forgetting anything rather than defending himself.

“I’m glad you’re not adding killing your dad to the list.”

I snort. “I’m stupid enough to believe you were protecting me from him.”

“I was.” And then it kicks in. His true reasoning. “Just like I was protecting you from Harvey James when I stopped you from going to Juilliard. From your mother’s desperate attempts to marry you into the Circle when I had you initiate. From Megan when I wasn’t telling you about my deal with her. From Maria Delgado when she tried to take away what you worked so hard for. From Reeves, from the stupid jobs who used you for your reputation.”

He shakes his head, catching his breath, and it barely gives me enough time to process his point of view.

“Was there a part of selfishness in those acts? Of course. I’m human. My heart beats in unison with yours, and I can’t help that. God, Ella...” He stands up, goes to walk away, then sits back down as if calming himself. “You said you didn’t want me even if I was your last option on earth. Do you have any idea what kind of damage that did? I *had* to make myself that last option and

show you you'd choose me. I had to have you."

"But you did all of this while *lying to me*," I rasp. "You pretended to my face that you cared, that you loved me. You begged me for a second chance while scheming behind my back."

He's panting, his eyes searching mine when he says, "I couldn't leave that second chance to fate. That would be insane."

And I can see he truly believes that.

"What is insane, Christopher, is that when all of this didn't work, *you pinned a fucking murder on me*."

"I offered you to be my Hera. Why couldn't you just take that?"

"Because it was *forced*."

"Well, look at us now! You gave me no choice. I'm in love, for fuck's sake. Can't anyone fucking see that?"

The cursing is the only thing I need to know he's about to lose all the patience he has left. So I stop trying to speak louder than him, and I keep my voice level when I say the last thing I have to say.

"Chris," I murmur, holding back a groan. He's infuriatingly delusional. "How do you expect me to be happy when you are forcing my hand? When you *murdered* your previous fiancée?"

His gaze darkens so quickly I pull back on instinct, and when his hand comes for my hair, he pushes his whiskey off the table by accident.

"Hate me for anything you want," he growls. "But if you think I have an ounce of pity for Megan, you're going to have to think again. You know *nothing* of what happened between her and me. But I can tell you if you want."

"You're hurting me," I seethe through gritted teeth.

"You refuse to listen when I don't handle you in a manner that feels familiar to you."

"Fuck you!" I don't know how I dare be offended by the truth.

"What do you want to know about what she did to me, huh? What will make you understand that she had it coming? You know she hurt my dad. You know she blackmailed me into staying with her. She hurt you, too. But you don't even care about yourself, only I do. You care about me, though, right? You've always had this strange empathy for me. So here's what you want to hear."

He pulls me closer, looking right into my eyes. He knows me too well.

"She hit me, slapped me, threw every single fucking glass in this house at

my face. She threw her phone at me that day you saw a bruise.” Something breaks in his eyes. And I break harder. “I lied to you, Ella. We did have sex before I came back to Stoneview. It was blackmail, but hey, who cares as long as she’d get what she wanted? And the first week I came back, we had sex once too.”

I try to move away, out of his grip, but shock renders me helpless. He pulls back, and this time he can’t look into my eyes. So he presses his lips against my ear instead.

“She drugged me, she didn’t put on a condom on me, and she fucked me while I wasn’t really there. When I finally remembered the next day, I had to shove the morning-after pill down her throat to make sure there was no risk of her bearing my child. And who knows how many times I *didn’t* remember.”

He nibbles my ear, sending goosebumps scattering along my arms. “Heard enough?”

“That’s rape,” I say on an exhale. And the worst thing is that I know this isn’t all of it.

He finally lets go, caressing the side of my head he just hurt. I blink away the tears from the hair pull and the broken part of him I felt talking to me.

He ignores the truth I just told him. He called it sex, but it wasn’t sex. It was rape.

“You’re done with your dinner, aren’t you?” he asks with a tenderness that had disappeared when he talked about Megan.

I nod. I can see it right here and now. He will never mention this again.

“Good. I’m going to take you upstairs now. And I’m going to fuck you until you remember I have your best interests in mind.”

Chapter Forty-One

Ella

One Of The Girls - The Weeknd

“Do you remember initiation night?”

A shiver runs down my spine, and I look up into his eyes. We’re in the bedroom, and the only thing standing between me and him are my satin robe and the towel around his waist now that he’s showered.

I’m struggling to talk because my brain still feels full of all the things he admitted to me. Some helped, some made everything worse...none made me text my brother to cancel everything he must currently be putting into place.

“Sweets.” He brushes my cheek with his knuckles. His skin on mine feels so good. “Answer me.”

“Yes.” I can’t hide the eagerness in my voice.

“You were blindfolded.”

I gulp. “I was.”

“But you know who it was who fucked you. You know who made you ride that toy and made you come countless times. Who was it?”

I can barely stand still, dying to press my legs together. “You.”

“Take a deep breath and try again.”

I do as I’m told and speak on the exhale. “It was you, Daddy.”

A low grunt of approval sounds from his chest. “Good girl.” He undoes his towel, letting it fall to his feet. “Kneel. Use the towel for your knees, I don’t want you to hurt.”

I think about it for a few seconds, and he doesn't insist, letting me take my time. There's something inside me that wants to let go. It's fighting against the knowledge of everything he did. Is this the last time I'm going to submit to the man I love?

I look into his eyes, then let my gaze roam down his handsome face, his strong body. I feel minuscule facing him, neck craning until I'm staring down at his hard dick in front of me. Another couple of seconds, and I fall to my knees. I don't know what happened, I just did it.

It really could be the last time.

"Open your mouth, baby. I'll be gentle."

The care in his voice makes me melt, and I open my mouth.

"Show me your tongue."

I do, and let him push his tip against my tongue, sliding until he's inside my mouth and stretching my lips.

"That's it, relax for me," he murmurs as he pushes deeper.

He's quickly hitting the back of my throat, and I pull away slightly before he can make me choke. He lets me do that a couple of times before putting a hand in my hair.

And that's when all my previous thoughts disappear. This. This is what I want right now. Him, taking over my body and soul.

"I want you to take me as deep as you can and then hold me there for a few seconds."

Tears prickle my eyes as I hold him at the back of my throat. I pull back, licking his entire length hungrily, and take him in again. A groan of pleasure leaves him, and he pushes farther in.

"Swallow me...there you go. That's my pretty girl. Looking so perfect, drooling around my dick."

I moan around him, his words my undoing. My core clenches around nothing as I suck him harder.

Pulling his length from my mouth, saliva keeps us connected. "Fuck. You're going to make me come. Here, get up." I take the hand he offers and let him guide me to the bed.

"I'm going to put you in a position, and you're going to stay exactly like I put you, do you understand?" As he asks, he turns me around so I'm facing the bed and he's standing behind me.

He bends me over until my upper body is flat against the mattress, and he presses a hand between my shoulder blades while the other comes between

my legs.

Sliding his fingers over my entrance, he runs them up to my clit, then back. The light touches already have me quivering.

“Do you understand?” he repeats again.

“Yes, Daddy,” I moan.

“If you listen, and you behave, I’m going to make you feel very good. But you have to promise to be a good girl for me. Can you do that?”

His hand keeps going. Two fingers dragging from my entrance to my clit, my clit to my entrance, pointing out how wet I’m getting with every stroke.

“Spread wider.” I move my feet across the floorboard, spreading my legs, and he caresses me from my shoulders to my lower back, making me arch for him.

“Daddy, please,” I sigh as desire completely takes over. “Please...”

“What is it?”

He does it again, pretending he’ll push his fingers inside me, but stopping just before he does.

“I need you...I need you inside me.”

“You do? How badly?”

“So much...oh my god, Daddy, please.” Bordering on delirious, I push back against him, and a slap lights my ass cheek on fire.

“I was going to be nice if you stayed in position, but you keep trying to force my fingers inside you.”

“I’m sorry,” I pant.

“Now, I won’t be so nice.”

He doesn’t even give me time to take my next breath because his dick is already pushing roughly inside me.

I cry out, feeling myself stretch around him. The burn is delicious, and moan after moan flees from my lips as I adjust to how he fills me.

“T-too deep,” I squeak, barely able to breathe as he buries himself inside me.

“But you’re going to take it for Daddy, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I whimper and nod mindlessly.

“Yes,” he growls. “You look absolutely gorgeous when you take me deep. When you push yourself past what you can take for me.”

The praise sends another wave of pleasure through my body.

“I can feel you getting wetter. You like to suffer for me, don’t you?”

His thrusts become more powerful, and he pulls back only to come back

in harder.

“Do not come, Ella,” he commands.

“What?” I let out between a gasp and a moan. “I need to...”

“You’re going to hold back for me and show me how pretty you are when you’re not given what you want.”

When he pulls out, I feel myself tremble, and like I’m being punished, he cups my pussy with his hand.

“No,” I cry out. “Please.”

“Breathe. Daddy knows best, and you’re going to listen, aren’t you?”

I try to, but I was so close to coming, I could cry. I don’t want to cry any more today.

“Breathe, calm down, and I’ll fuck you again.”

I do my best to take a breath through my nose and release it through my mouth.

“Good girl.” The tip of his dick pushing inside me accompanies his words, and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

He goes slowly this time, rolling his hips with a perfect, sensual rhythm mixed with power. It’s not long until I’m squirming under him again, and the closer I get, the slower he goes, until he stops completely.

“Oh my god, *please*.”

“We’ll get there, don’t worry. Settle down.” He slaps my ass cheeks, one after the other, and I grunt into the pillow.

Then he grabs my hips and flips me over, forcing me legs around his waist. Pushing inside me again, he looks into my eyes as he takes me to the edge, pulling out until I relax. And again, staying deep inside me until I’m attempting to move back against him.

“Daddy,” I whine.

“What a beautiful girl,” he pants, thrusting in and out of me. “Keep looking at me. There you go. Are you going to come for me, baby? Are you all mine now?”

“Yes...yes.” I’m losing my sanity at the idea of finally being able to give my body the release it needs.

“Show me how beautiful you are when you come. Make sure you keep your eyes on me.”

“Fuck!” I scream, bringing my hand to my lips to bite into my palm, my other fists the sheet as I push hard against him.

Wrapping a hand around my wrist, he pulls my arm away from my face,

pinning it to the bed. He thrusts without mercy until I hear him reach his peak, folded over my body and grunting in my ear. I feel his pounding heart against my chest as he stays like this for a minute. I revel in it.

He only pulls away to dig his whiskey eyes in mine.

“Ella,” he rasps. “Everything is going to be okay. You have my word. I love you.”

My eyes flutter shut, and my heart skips several beats from all those butterflies taking so much space in my body.

Why does his word mean so much to me? Maybe because he always keeps his promises.

He promised to make me his again, no matter what, and he did.

He promised he’d always protect me, and he did.

And if he promises everything is going to be okay...then maybe it will?

We both lie in bed after he runs to the bathroom and brings back a cloth to clean me up. My head is on his chest since I can’t get enough of hearing his heartbeat, and I look into the rest of the room when I say,

“I don’t want to marry you.”

He brings his hand to my hair, caressing me while he takes a few seconds before answering.

“There will be no wedding until you’re ready. We don’t need to be married, but you will be promised to me in front of the Circle. You will get a Hera’s necklace from me, and you will put a new signet ring on my finger.”

“I hate the Circle,” I murmur.

“Me too. But it’s better to be part of it than not. It offers more protection.”

My eyes are heavy, but I feel him move under me. “You need water,” he says as he gets up. “I’ll get some for you. I also have to make a quick call to my mom. I haven’t had time to get news from my dad today.”

He grabs a pair of boxers, and I ogle his perfect ass as he walks out of the room. Once he’s left, my eyes catch the clothes on the chair next to the door. The pants of his suit are hanging from the back of it, and curiosity gets the best of me. For months, I’ve been wondering what he keeps in his pocket, and I finally get to have a look.

I dig into the left one, but there’s nothing there. When I check the other pocket and finally grab and pull out what feels like a hard sphere, my stomach flips.

A pearl.

That's what he plays with in his pocket every time he's calming himself down. A small pearl, like the ones he gave me to make necklaces to help me cope with anxiety.

"Christopher Murray, you're something else," I chuckle to myself.

I walk back to the bed, getting under the covers. But I can't help it. I want to know what else he hides. I want to know what other things I can discover about him.

I turn to my side and open the drawer of the nightstand, and a gasp escapes me as I see the pile of pearl necklaces.

"What the hell?"

I take them out by the fistful, putting them next to me on the bed, and I count them. Sixty-eight. Sixty-nine, if I include the one that isn't finished.

Why does he have so many of them?

"I put a pearl on a necklace every time I thought of you since our breakup."

My head snaps up from the necklaces. I'm caught red-handed.

"There are 4,122 pearls. That's about twice a day since I broke up with you."

I sit straighter, the need to kiss him flaring inside me. How could he hide something so beautiful from me?

But then he takes a deep, trembling breath, and I feel his composure failing.

"Chris, are you okay?"

"I need you," he croaks, tears building in his eyes. "Every day of my fucking life I need you."

I stand from the bed, wrapping the robe around me.

"What is it?" I lift onto my toes, dropping a soft kiss on his lips and putting a hand on his cheek. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't have time to call my mom. The hospital called me."

My heart drops before the news does.

"My dad. He's dead."

* * *

I put a cup of steaming hot coffee in front of him, and check I have everything in my bag.

“I really need to go.” His voice is vacant.

“I know. I’m just checking I’ve got your phone and everything.”

“I don’t want to go,” he adds. I’ve never heard or seen him so frail. I’m worried he’s going to fall the second he stands up.

We’re about to leave to go to his mom’s house to tell her the news. Earlier tonight, this man was everything I hated. And now I want to be the person he relies on to keep going.

“I just need to make a quick phone call,” I explain. “Drink your coffee. It’s going to be a long night.”

I don’t wait for his answer. I run up the stairs with my phone and call Luke the second I’m hiding in the bedroom.

“Call it off,” I say as soon as he picks up, panting from dread rather than the run.

“What?”

“Call everything off. I need more time with Chris... I changed my mind. I don’t know. But call it off.”

I want to scream that I’m in love. That this was the biggest mistake I ever made. That I would rather the Circle kill *me* than touch Chris. I want the man who made sixty-nine pearl necklaces because he missed me by my side.

“Ella—”

“His dad just died, Luke.”

He pauses for a second. “*That’s the Circle.*”

How could I think for one second that everything would be okay? Of course it won’t. I told my brother to set the Circle on Chris.

Reality crashes into me, fear wrapping itself heavily around me.

“Oh my god,” I whimper. “Call it *off*.”

“*It’s too late, Els. They’re on their way.*”

And with perfect timing, I hear a commotion downstairs. A window breaking, followed by grunts.

“Chris!” I shout, running down the stairs two at a time. “Wait...wait... leave him alone!”

My heart is racing, my ears ringing when I get downstairs.

I’m too late. I can hear tires screeching, and all that’s left is the broken mug and coffee spilled all over the kitchen floor.

They’ve got him. They made him weak by killing his dad, and when he was at his lowest...they got him.

And they’re going to kill him.

Chapter Forty-Two

Chris

Work Song - Hozier

He's the only thing I think of as they drive away.
When they take me out of the car in the middle of the forest, I don't resist. Fighting isn't on my mind. Ella is.

There are four of them walking me to the hole they dug for me. The president of the board, of course, Eugene Duval, is leading the way. The only two men they found who are bigger than me are on either side of me.

And behind me, my best friend, Luke Baker, isn't saying a word.

It's barely big enough for me, but deep enough that a strong man couldn't dig his way out.

Duval's unimpressed look doesn't make me feel a thing.

All I see are blue eyes, perfect porcelain skin, and all I hear in my mind is the way she came undone for me tonight.

My beautiful Ella.

Duval plays something on his phone. It's a recording of me admitting to Luke what I did tonight. That I murdered Megan McLean and threatened Ella to pin it on her if she didn't accept me as her Shadow.

There isn't an ounce of regret within me. I can't feel it. Because I felt the way Ella was coming back to me tonight. I felt her mind open to mine. I felt that tug between our hearts.

It's beautiful.

Why would I regret how I got to that?

Luke stays silent.

The only conclusion I can come to is that Ella warned him to record. It was going to be her only proof so she could get rid of me.

God, I love that woman. Nothing and no one can take her down. Not even me.

"It was a smart move, Christopher," Duval says calmly. "Deserving of a Shadow." He shakes his head. "If only you didn't get caught. Things like this can't go unpunished." Huffing, he looks me dead in the eye when he adds, "I had so much hope in you. Your cunning brain is unmatched. It'll be hard to replace you."

I suppose that's meant to be a compliment.

Luke approaches me, looking me up and down with a completely unreadable expression on his face. Is he sad? Furious? Is he eager to kill me? Does he already regret it?

"I warned you," he says with enough composure it keeps me calm too.

"And I told you I would stop at nothing to have her."

"That's why I have to be the one to stop you. I chose the spot where you'll be buried myself."

I nod, showing my understanding. He's right; if he doesn't stop me, no one else will be able to.

"I'll take care of your father's funeral," he adds. Like a true best friend. *I'll kill you, but I'll take care of your grieving family.*

"I will get out," I tell him. Licking my lips, a rush of unfamiliar fear pours through my body, numbing my limbs. I'm not scared of death...I'm scared of never seeing Ella again. "But if I don't...tell Ella I love her. Tell her I tried with all I have to crawl out of a grave for her."

His jaw tightens, and even in the dark of the night, I see the pain crossing his eyes. He's my oldest friend. My brother.

"I wish you hadn't put us in this situation." His voice is strained, and I force myself to ignore the fact that I hurt my best friend in the process of getting the love of my life.

"I wish it was easy loving her."

Nostrils flaring, he takes a deep breath through his nose, and he holds something in front of me. I will say, that hood doesn't announce anything good.

He puts it on me, and next thing I feel is some sort of leather around my

wrists. They slam together, and I understand Luke tied me with a belt when I feel the buckle against my skin.

“I’ll tell you what, Christopher.” I recognize Duval’s voice. “If you get out of this one...it’s all forgiven. I’ll grant you whatever you want. Good luck, boy.”

They force me to lie down in the grave they dug for me, and the longest minutes of my life start. Punished by the Circle. Buried alive.

The sounds of the shovels are unbearable, and the feeling of heavy soil slowly separating me from the world of the living is a nightmare I’ll never forget.

I expand my lungs, turning my head in a position that I think will allow me some sort of air pocket, but nothing is promised. So all I can do is think of the woman I love, and how I would go through this a hundred times over if it means I tried everything to have her.

When the world disappears, and it’s only me, I finally realize something. That Ella is going to be alone. Without me. And that I’m going to die *without her*. That everything I did...it separated us early rather than give us a second chance.

I can’t die like this.

Chapter Forty-Three

Ella

Slower - Tate McRae

Tears stream down my face as Luke drives across Stoneview. Gated mansions whizz past my eyes. Perfectly trimmed grass on the sidewalks, joggers in luxurious gym clothes, small dogs running with them. A chauffeur opens the door to a man dressed in a suit, already on the phone at 6:30 a.m. A maid walks toward a gate, stopping at the interphone to ring for her morning shift. And I know that beneath all this luxury, in the underground of disgusting riches, the Silent Circle rules everything.

The show feels strange once you've seen backstage. You can't unsee the strings holding the puppets.

This town makes me sick.

"I told you to call it off," I rasp through the tightness in my throat. Licking my dry lips, I rub the palm of my hand across my wet face. "I told you to call it off."

He ignores me, not about to repeat for the hundredth time that it was too late. He can keep quiet. Nothing will make me feel better.

"He's your best friend," I hiss.

"Was." That's all that comes out of his mouth, and it's enough to send me into another crying fit.

Was because Chris isn't anything anymore. Except dead.

Flashes of last night come back in waves that make me want to die. He

made me forget everything. The outside world, the way I hate myself. He made me feel whole like he does so well. He made me *love him* all over again.

God, I can't erase the broken look on his face when he learned about his dad.

Luke won't even tell me what happened, if his family knows about his dad or him. He won't tell me where to find his body. I can't stop thinking of Chris's mom...and Juliette... It's all too much.

I didn't even get one last goodbye.

The walk from the car to the temple is the most excruciating thing I've ever had to go through.

I lost the love of my life, and in exchange, the Circle is offering me to become a Hera to a Shadow they know will initiate next year. They said I'd have a choice between three of them. It buys me a year since nothing will be asked of me until they become fully pledged Shadows.

Maybe I can run away. Not maybe. I *will*.

Luke is allowed in, and I don't know what deal he's been making with Duval, but I don't like how close they've become. My brother isn't the man I knew anymore, becoming a darker person with every new step he takes to survive.

"Ella," Eugene Duval welcomes me into his office yet again. "Please, take a seat."

I do, but my gaze stays on the three men standing next to the president of the Circle. Achilles is one of them, and he doesn't look happy about it. I don't bother answering his questioning gaze. If I have to pick one, I'll pick him. He's my best friend; he'll never hurt me, and we won't owe each other anything. He can fuck around with Aphrodites until he finds the love of his life while I let myself turn into nothing at home.

The perfect couple.

"You know what I expect of you, Ella. You're aware of the kind gesture I'm extending. I won't make this any longer than it has to be." He shows the three men with his hand, like presenting a show. "Choose."

I open my mouth to get this over with, when the door slams open. All heads whip in that direction, mouths gaping at the man standing in the doorway.

He's covered in dirt. His white shirt brown and gray from soil, his hair completely disheveled. He looks unwell, pale, with cracked, dehydrated lips.

Like he came back from the dead. Quite literally.

But he's glorious, mighty...*alive*.

Heart soaring, I jump out of my chair. "Him," I blurt out. "I choose him."

And I don't run to his arms, I practically teleport myself. He welcomes me in a loving embrace, his lips meeting mine in a dangerously possessive kiss that has me melting against him, breathless. I don't care that he tastes like dirt, doesn't smell like himself, and feels weak.

He's mine.

But then he pulls me away, holding me at arm's length. "You know I've wanted nothing but to hear those words, Sweets."

Something twists my stomach at the look on his face. Something *wrong*.

"But not like this."

I blink up at him, confused as to what he means.

"If I've learned one thing through all of this, it's that I want you to choose me not because I forced you to, but because you *want to*."

"But...the Circle," I panic. I won't love him again. Ever. "I don't want to be promised to anyone else."

"You won't," he reassures me, his hands squeezing my shoulders softly. It's already working. His protection takes over my whole being.

"That's not up to you to decide," Duval's voice chimes in, sending an icy chill down my spine.

We both turn to him, and Chris stands straighter, squaring his shoulders. "You said if I got out, you'd grant me anything I want. Here it is: I want Ella out of the Circle."

Duval is about to open his mouth, but Chris cuts him off.

"And I want to be allowed to wait for her. No one will be promised to me until she decides if she'll be the one."

"Leave us." Those are the only words from Duval at first. He's talking to the future Shadows.

They walk out of the room, only leaving me, Chris, Luke, and the president of the Circle.

"I would have to run this through the board," he explains.

"Your word is everything in this society. So, make it work," Chris throws back. "You tried to end me, and I'm back. You should know by now how far I'm willing to go to get what I want."

Duval runs his tongue across his teeth, still thinking.

"I guess if that means we have you in the Circle, I'm willing to make an

exception.”

“Sound choice,” Chris answers smoothly. “And Megan. Do what you have to do, but McLean can never know.”

Hesitating a few seconds, Duval looks at all of us. “This is a big ask, Christopher.”

“If her dad knows what I did. It could destroy the Circle from the inside.” He pauses, clearly unsure if he wants to say his next words. “Think of it as something to hold over me.”

Duval nods. “Why don’t you go home and rest. We will call on you, don’t you worry. Once you don’t look so much like you’ve crawled out of a grave.”

My eyes widen, and I look at my brother. “A fucking grave?”

“Let’s go,” Chris tells me, brushing my hair behind my ear.

“Even being buried alive couldn’t fucking keep him away from you,” Luke mumbles annoyingly as we walk through the hallway.

“You know what’s funny?” Chris says, his voice broken by exhaustion.

He looks at Luke as we keep walking. “For someone who wanted me dead, you put something on my head that helped me not get soil in my mouth or nostrils. And you also gave me a belt I could use to dig. Oh, and chose to bury me in a spot with my head right next to the root of a tree, allowing for air pockets and for me to follow a trail to the surface.”

“You’re imagining things,” Luke answers knowingly.

There’s a silence before Chris adds. “I just find it interesting.”

Luke drives Chris home, and he’s about to leave when I tell him I need to talk to his best friend. I think the thought of losing Chris over all of this made him realize it was not for him to decide whether we should date. He doesn’t allow anything, but he doesn’t stop me either, telling me he’ll be waiting.

The second I’m alone with the man I love, I take him in my arms. His arms wrapping around me feel like they’re already putting me back together.

“You crawled out of a grave for me.”

“What is it you guys don’t understand about *nothing will stop me*.”

I laugh against him, tears in my eyes. “You’re insane.”

He steps back. “Ella, I meant what I said in Duval’s office. You’re free now, not an Aphrodite anymore. And...you’re not mine either. Not unless you decide to come back out of your own volition.”

When I take a step back too, I watch his face fall. The pain it causes is visceral, but I see it too. Carrying on like this, because he didn’t leave me a choice, wouldn’t work. We would never be equals, and there would always

be that part of us that wonders...would I leave if I could?

He's letting me leave now, even if I might never come back to him.

"I realized something, Sweets. Something I didn't want to be true, but that I know is."

He scratches his throat, massages the back of his neck, and locks his eyes on mine.

"I was part of your self-destruction," he admits. "Everything you ever did was because you hated yourself. Because you were taught by your dad to hate yourself. The sleeping around, the no-studying, building a fake personality everyone at college would love, self-harm...and me."

He shakes his head, like he can't believe he's admitting it.

"I am part of the things and people you allowed to destroy you because you thought you deserved to be destroyed. That you weren't worth anything. And in my selfishness, I subconsciously supported that. I thought my obsession showed how much I loved you, but all I did was press on those insecurities and turn you dependent. I'm sorry, Ella. I am so sorry. And if you're going to stop hurting yourself like you promised me, then you have to keep me out of your life. At least for the time being. At least until you're sure of what you truly want."

I swallow the tears that threaten to fall. Not because he's hurting me, but because he's right, and it's always hard to be called out on self-destructive behavior. It's heart-shattering to see how he was very much part of it.

"I love you," I push past the tightness in my throat. "I don't love what you did, and I don't love the man you became to have me. But I love *you*."

"I love you too." He smiles sadly. I hate it on him. I prefer his shy, lopsided smile. Or his beautiful grin when he's truly happy. "God, you can't even begin to imagine how much I love you."

I snort. "I think I'm starting to get the idea."

The kiss on my lips is soft. It's not possessive like he usually kisses me. It's sweet, a perfect goodbye.

"Hold on. I just need to give you something before you leave."

He runs up the stairs, coming back a minute later with a journal.

"Take this," he says, swallowing roughly. "You can read all of it."

I look down at the black notebook. Every single page has a date and a couple of lines written on it. "Did you write all of these?"

He nods.

"Read it. Take your time. Months, if you have to. Years..." He releases a

heavy sigh. “I don’t want that, but I’ll wait. I’ll be taking care of giving you your spot back at SFU. Dance major. Do everything you love, be fulfilled. And then...”

He runs a hand across his face, tears shining in his eyes.

“Then, please come back to me.”

For once it’s not an order this time, it’s a plea.

My beautiful Christopher Murray, who spent months shattering my life to pieces so he would be the only thing in it, is letting me go, hoping it means I will come back one day.

And I can’t promise him I will, but I can promise myself that if I do, it will be because I truly want to.

I love you

*If I ever give you this journal, remember the day they tried to keep me away from you. And remember I crawled home to you.
I will always come home to you.*

Epilogue

Ella

Call My Name - GRAHAM, Henrik

Six months later...

“That’s okay, try again.” I smile encouragingly at Olivia, helping her put her hands properly in front of her for first position. “That’s it, you’re doing amazing.”

She doesn’t say anything. She never does, but she’s becoming so much better every time I see her. Our one-on-one lessons have really paid off. Her parents keep coming back saying she’s asking for more and that the hour we spend together every Friday afternoon keeps a lot of her breakdowns at bay. The only fact that she’s here, doing something without her twin, is a huge step for her.

The alarm on my phone rings, and I run to turn it off.

“That’s our time,” I tell her softly. “Let’s go check if Mommy is waiting outside.”

I walk proudly out of the studio. Since I’m back studying dance as a major, I’ve been enjoying the rehearsal space whenever I want, and I was over the moon when they accepted my special request to teach Olivia one-on-one. The more I was teaching kids, the more I understood this is what I want to do.

I don't want to deal with the anxiety that comes with competing, whether it be cheer or ballet. I don't want the feistiness of the girls going for the main roles in the shows we're performing. And even less in the shows outside of college.

I love dancing, but what I love the most is sharing it with others and seeing them thrive like I do from their growing passion. My dad must be turning around in his grave knowing I not only went back to a career he thought unstable, but also that will never make me the kind of money he would have expected. But fuck him because I love it.

Olivia runs to her mom's arms the second we walk out of the studio.

"How was she?" Kayla asks me, holding her baby girl tightly.

"She's amazing."

She smiles to herself. "She really is."

"Bye, Olivia," I exclaim, waving at the little girl who completely ignores me as her and her mom walk out. "See you next week!"

I pick up a call from Peach as I exit the building half an hour later.

"Last SFU party of the year, baby. What time are we pre-gaming?"

"I'm not sure," I say as I walk toward the humanities building, past it, and then to the parking lot. "I have to go somewhere, and I don't know when I'll be back. Or if I'll be back tonight."

I play with the pearl necklace I'm wearing, rolling a pearl around the string. I finished it myself all those months without Chris. It was like a part of him was still helping me heal while he was staying away from me.

"Um...will you be back at all? You're not running away or something, are you?"

She's referring to me leaving without telling anyone over Christmas break. I didn't want to spend Christmas at the family house, and I didn't want to be in Stoneview knowing Chris was there. What I really wanted was to be in New York City, to see what my life could have been like if I had gone to Juilliard.

I spent a week among the tall buildings, walked in the freezing cold, then entered the stuffy subway. I tried to imagine being married to some middle-aged Shadow here and came to the realization that not only do I hate the city, but I would have hated it a lot more if Chris hadn't stopped me from going there so my dad could marry me off to his CFO. And then I returned to the same usual problem: Chris should have run it past me.

That's all my brain has been doing these last months. Oscillating between

knowing some of his decisions were good, some bad, but that every single one of them was aimed toward getting us together without my knowledge. And every time, I have to purposely tell myself that even if it was everything I wanted, to be his, I should have a say in it.

I sit in my car and grab his journal out of my bag. I can't seem to stop carrying it with me everywhere. I read it all the first night he gave it to me, almost calling him right away and telling him I choose him. But that would have been running back to my old ways.

As humans, we find such comfort in our toxic habits. It's not just the obvious ones like smoking cigarettes or cutting. It's the more subconscious ones. Loving someone who doesn't deserve us. Putting our happiness on the line to please others. Letting our dark thoughts take over because they feel familiar.

It's an everyday conscious decision to do everything in our power to be happy, but down the line, it's worth it. And staying away from Chris for all these months was my own way of showing myself I could try my hardest to be happy without my toxic habits. I stopped cutting, I stopped forcing myself to be the girl everyone loves, and I focused on the things I truly wanted to do. And of course, I kept my ex out of my life.

For once, he was respectful enough to stay away. To not contact me, to not mess with my life so he could be in it. It's funny how once we weren't studying the same thing, we didn't see each other that often. Not in the Law and Humanities building, not at parties, not at sporting events. Turns out, once the man stopped following me everywhere, it was easy to avoid him.

The hardest was his father's funeral. All I wanted to do was run to the front and wrap my arms around him. But I stayed back with my mom while my brother hugged his best friend in front of his father's grave. And that's where I'm going now.

When I park in front of Stoneview cemetery, I open the journal again. Two pictures come out. They're both from our high school years. Selfies we had taken together when we were alone. In one of them, we're kissing, and in the other, I'm kissing his smiling cheek so hard my face is crushed against the side of his head.

We look so silly and happy.

I open to the first page, and it's a note to me. The one I know by heart.

*Dear Ella,
Someday, I will show you this. All the notes I made for you
so you can see yourself through my eyes.
I hope then you'll understand why I can't stop thinking
about you.*

I flick through the journal for what feels like hours. Note after note about what he thinks of my eyes, my skin, my dancing skills. Of the way he sees my body and my mind. Of how impressed he is with me that I have a passion I can't let go of. There are notes from the night I told him I wouldn't be with him if he was my last option. Notes from the days he was assisting classes.

It's all there. His love and obsession for me.

It's crazy to think that for a while, I was writing to him often, little sentences here and there, but that I never showed him how much I missed him. We did the same thing for each other without knowing for so long.

And the last one still brings the strangest feeling through my body. A mix of excitement, honor, and a pull at my heart.

*If I ever give you this journal, remember the day they tried
to keep me away from you. And remember I crawled home to
you. I will always come home to you.*

No matter how far Chris decides to stay, and however long he gives me, that string will always pull us back together. And I'm ready to say that to him.

I know he'll be at his father's grave because he's there every Friday after class. Luke told me. But today, my heart falls.

He's not here.

Out of nowhere, I'm hit with how badly I wanted him to be here. The graves around me start to spin, fear of having truly lost him freezing my blood. My knees hit the grass, and I struggle to take a breath. And for the first time in months, my hand reaches for my thigh. I scratch once, but it feels wrong.

I'm hurting, but I don't want to hurt more. No, if anything, I want Chris to make it stop like I know he could.

I drop the flowers I had brought to his dad, reaching for my phone in my bag. I'm panicking, vision blurry. What if I lost him forever? What if he's moved on because I made him wait for too long?

I press his name on my phone, and it rings once before he picks up.

"Ella." He's whispering, barely pronouncing his words like he doesn't want anyone around him to notice he's on the phone. *"I'm in a quite important meeting, is everything alright?"*

"I..." God, I suddenly feel so stupid. "I'm hurting." There could not have been a worse time to do this. "You once said I should call you if...I was...I wanted to hurt myself. I'm so sorry, this is ridiculous."

There's the scrape of a chair, mumbled apologies to people around him. I hear him say he's got an emergency, and then a door.

"Where are you? Don't move. I'll be there as soon as I can. I just have to get on the jet."

"What?" My chest tightens. He has to get on a jet?

"Where are you?" he insists.

"At the...at the Stoneview cemetery. I came to see you...but you weren't there."

There's the sound of an elevator ding. His voice cuts off when he speaks.

"Okay?" is all I hear.

"I don't know what you said, but you don't have to get on the jet...where are you?"

"Do not move. I'll be there in less than five hours. I'll stay on the phone the whole time."

I bring my hand to my forehead, pulling at my hairline. "Wait, Chris, you don't have to do any of this..."

"Talk to me." In the background, I hear busy streets. *"What made you call me? What hurts?"*

"I feel stupid talking about it," I admit, now playing with the grass around me.

"That's okay. We can talk about something else. Did you have class with Olivia White today?"

"Of course you'd know about that," I snort. "Been spying on me?"

"Always. But I learned to stay away, didn't I?"

"Yes." *And I hate it,* I don't say. "Class with Olivia was nice. She's doing

really well.”

“I’m so glad. Are you happy that you’re dancing every day? Because I am.”

My heart skips a beat, and I can’t help a smile from spreading on my face. “I might have no future, but I’m so happy.”

“You happy is all that matters, Sw—” The way he cuts himself from saying my nickname is like a stab to the chest.

This is still real, the fact that we’re not together. That we’re friends, but that’s being generous. I hate the feeling it brings me.

He asks me more questions about my life in the last six months. Tells me that he and Luke speak, but they’re not on the best terms. Still, he’s confident he’ll make it right to him. The background noise changes from streets, to a car, to streets, to the busy noises of an airport.

He hangs up for barely a minute when he boards the jet, saying he’s switching to the plane’s Wi-Fi, and he calls me back right away.

“I was with him,” he carries on, talking about my brother. *“He had a meeting with some investors for his new company. People he knows from LA. No one from the Circle, thankfully. He wanted me to be there to pretend he had some kind of lawyer with him.”* Chuckling, he adds, *“I don’t know how wise it was to use a law school student, but at least it means he still trusts me.”*

“You left a meeting with my brother’s investors to fly back to me?”

“He should know by now you come before everything else.”

“Chris,” I groan. *“He’s going to be fuming.”*

“More than when he buried me alive?”

I laugh bursts past my lips, and I feel bad about it for a second before he joins me. Then a silence stretches, and I fill it with a question that’s been on my mind for months.

“The Circle...how can you forgive them for what they did to your dad?”

“I will never forget, and I will never forgive,” he explains calmly. *“The Circle will get what’s coming to them. But you know what they say about your enemies.”*

I acknowledge his ominous words with a simple nod he can’t see, my eyes darting to the grave again. “You didn’t cry.”

He knows I mean at the funeral.

“I had to be strong for Mom and Juliette.”

“Even Rose and Jake cried,” I add, feeling the emotions come back. “I

did too.”

“Then I guess I had to be strong for all of you,” he chuckles.

I wipe a single tear falling on my left cheek. “I’m sorry,” I sniffle. “I feel like such an idiot. I just... Did you rest at least? Did you take the time to take care of yourself? I’m worried for you.”

He huffs, and I can imagine him resting his head on the seat of the plane, closing his eyes and opening them again. Maybe even massaging the back of his neck.

“Do you want the truth? Or do you want me to reassure you?”

“The truth. Please, only the truth from now on.”

“I had too many things to grieve in the last few months, Els. I don’t think I had a chance to truly process any of them. I lost you, my safe space. Of course I didn’t cry about my dad’s death. Because I lost the shoulder I could cry on. And it’s my own fault.”

I don’t even know what to answer him. He’s right. All of it is right. So, he quickly changes the topic. We talk for hours on end about many things I never thought I’d ever talk to him about again. Our favorite time to go to the gym at SFU, complaints about our courses, my favorite ballet moves, the ones I’m struggling with the most. We talk about his law essays, his mom, Juliette and her grades. We even talk about our favorite memories together.

“Do you want to tell me what was hurting you? Why you wanted to make it physical?”

“I hadn’t done it in months,” I defend weakly. “I’ve been doing fine.”

“It’s okay. Focus on the progress you made until now. You have to forgive yourself when the darker thoughts creep in. I’m so proud of you for not thinking about it until today.”

Facing his father’s grave, my problems become minuscule. At least I’m alive. I take a deep breath, feeling oxygen bring more life to my body as I finally tell him the full truth of why I called.

“I’m here. I came back to you. Because I want to and not because you forced me. Because no matter how fulfilled my life can be without you, it’s completely meaningless. I came back and you weren’t there. I thought I’d lost you forever. That’s what hurts.”

“I’m right here.”

I jolt, looking behind me from where I’m sitting on the grass.

He’s standing right here, the May sun reflecting in his caramel hair, his wide shoulders stretching a white button-up. He’s holding the backpack he

traveled with. My God...did we talk on the phone for five hours?

His amber eyes light up with joy when he sees me.

"Ella," he exhales, like he's been holding his breath for the last six months.

He takes me in his arms the second I stand up. It could be seen as a friendly hug, but now that I'm touching him, I remember there's never been any friendship between Chris and me. We are star-crossed lovers, and there's no other story for us than the one where we love each other forever.

The only question is, will it be together or apart?

He eyes the flowers I brought on the grave, and he thanks me, standing a step away from me. I can still feel the excitement emanating from him. He's desperate to touch me, hug me...maybe even kiss me.

I feel like a teenager with a crush. The same way I was in high school when he would talk to me or give me attention. It changes from the anxiety mixed with passion we've been feeling around each other.

"I like the necklace," he says almost shyly.

My hand automatically flies to it. "Thank you." And as I roll a pearl around the string, my eyes go to the hand in his pocket. He's doing it too, playing with a pearl to try to keep himself calm.

I lick my lips, not liking that after going through so much together, we're almost scared to cross the final line. So, I don't hesitate to wrap my arms around his neck and pull him until his head rests on my shoulder.

"Here," I croak, trying to hold tears back. "You'll always have my shoulder to cry on."

Pulling me into him, he hugs me hard, and I don't hear a single sound from him, but I feel the dampness on my skin, and so I stay silent, caressing his head and then his back.

The embrace becomes painful in this position, his huge body swallowing me whole. But I let him. When he finally pulls away, he wipes a hand across his face.

He takes something from his pocket and brings it to my lips. A love heart candy. I take it, smiling like an idiot, and he watches me, face close to mine.

"Say it," I rasp, excitement mixing with the longing.

"I'm going to kiss you."

"Do it."

His lips capture mine in a deep kiss. It's like we've never kissed before. Like we waited forever for it. The love heart candy dances along our tongues,

and my arms wrap around his neck.

I never want this to end. Not the kiss, the feeling of belonging to someone so perfectly. The sensation of knowing you have found exactly what you need. Care, protection, a best friend...*love*.

When we pull away, he smiles at me like holding me in his arms is all he's ever wanted to do.

"You're my world, Sweets."

"And you're mine. I've known since high school. I knew when you came back. And I knew when you decided to give me time. You're the one who had to be taught a lesson. I already knew."

"Six months," he rasps, but a smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. "You tortured me for six months, huh?"

"You deserved it." I look around us, knowing nothing will be able to last if I don't bring this up. "So. Am I going to be your Hera, now?"

He runs a hand behind his neck. "If we want to be together...it's not something we have a choice in. I'm part of the Circle. I have to have a Hera, and I don't want anyone else."

When I don't answer, he takes both my hands in his.

"We'll take it very slowly. No marriage, nothing until you're ready. You'll get a necklace, I'll get a new signet ring, and after that you'll never have to go to the temple again. You'll never have to deal with them. I promise you."

It's a strange feeling that goes through my being. Something I didn't expect. I'm not...worried. I'm not anxious about it. Chris is part of the Circle. I'm part of him. It's as simple as that.

"As long as I don't have to see any of them ever again after the ceremony."

"You won't," he reassures me.

"And you won't have an Aphrodite..."

"Oh, Sweets." Shaking his head, his hand comes to the back of my neck. "You deserve to be punished for even having that kind of thought."

He bites along my jaw, up to my ear, and a moan sneaks up my throat. "What kind do you think you deserve?"

"Nothing too bad, I'm sure." When I giggle, I swear his eyes basically glow as he looks at me. The longing there heals the persistent ache in my chest.

"I don't know. We'll have to see how you behave tonight when I take you

to dinner. If you're on time..."

He grabs my hips, pulling them to his.

"Does it depend if I listen well?" I purr. "If I dress in the clothes Daddy chose?"

"Hm, Ella," he growls. "You're going to be such a good girl for me, aren't you?"

He pulls me up, and his lips crash on mine, devouring me.

"The best girl," I pant between kisses.

By the time we get to my college house, he's managed to work me up enough that I'm ready to beg with everything I have for him to touch me.

But it's not going to happen, because my four best friends are waiting in the living room as we walk past, calling our names.

Achilles, Peach, Wren, and Alex look more serious than I've ever seen them.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my hand automatically coming to scratch my chest.

Chris is silently on me, pulling it back and holding it tightly in his.

"Did you not check your college emails?" Alex asks, her worried gaze making me uncomfortable.

I shake my head silently.

"A dead body was found on campus. It's Ania Livingston."

My heart drops. Ania was a close friend of ours at Stoneview Prep.

Our phones all ring at once. The sound of wings moving through the air. Pulling out my device, I unlock the Hermes notification. It's a screenshot of the campus security email saying the body of Ania has been found on campus this morning.

I'm back, babes.

And I have secrets. Secrets that will take one of you down...

I know who killed Ania Livingston.

Who's excited for next year to begin? I'll be seeing you in September.

And remember...

Your secrets are safe with me.

Until they aren't.

The end.

Also by Lola King

All books happen in the same world at different times

STONEVIEW STORIES

(MF Bully):

Giving In

Giving Away

Giving Up

One Last Kiss (Novella - includes spoilers from Rose's Duet)

ROSE'S DUET

(FFMM why-choose):

Queen Of Broken Hearts (Prequel novella)

King of My Heart

Ace of All Hearts

NORTH SHORE STORIES

(interconnected standalones):

Beautiful Fiend (MF, enemies to lovers)

Heartless Beloved - (MF, good girl/bad boy)

Delightful Sins - (MFM enemies-to-lovers)

Lawless God - (MF enemies-to-lovers)

HOLIDAY NOVELLA

Merry Christmas From Daddy to Little One (Prequel to Loving The Liar)

SILVER FALLS UNIVERSITY

(MF, elite college, secret society)

Loving The Liar (dark, second chance)

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