



BEAUTIFUL DESPERATION

RAVEN WOOD

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CONTENT WARNINGS

Beautiful Desperation is a **dark bully romance** intended for mature readers. It contains violence and graphic sexual content, including dub con. If you have specific triggers, you can find the full list of content warnings at: www.authorravenwood.com/content-warnings

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For all the good girls who secretly dream of dominant and possessive men

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OLIVIA

They say that everyone has experienced desperation at some point in their life. That everyone has felt that soul-crushing weight that wraps around you like steel bands when you want something so desperately that you can barely breathe. Something over which you have no control. But as I study the well-dressed students who are moving towards the massive oak doors of Huntingswell University, I can't help but wonder how many of these rich people have actually experienced even a shred of desperation. After all, money is the key to the world.

Drawing in a deep breath of crisp September air, I banish my musings and the familiar anxiety that always surfaces when I think about my future. I shake my head. No. Not when I *think* about it. The anxiety that *used to* surface when I *thought* about my future. I'm here now, which means that the future I so desperately wanted is already on track.

Winds smelling of leaves and wet stone tug at my clothes as I follow the other freshmen into the grand building made of pale stone. The architecture alone would be a telltale sign that the university is old, but that combined with the almost reverent atmosphere inside these halls is making the entire place exude history. My heart flutters in my chest.

I can't believe that I'm here. After sacrificing everything to become valedictorian and secure one of the elusive scholarships, I'm finally here. At one of the best universities in the country.

It's hard not to gawk like a peasant as I walk through the richly decorated halls and towards the auditorium where the dean will give a speech to welcome this year's new students. But then again, to many of these people, I might as well be a peasant, so I knock myself out and stare

as much as I want at all the beautiful paintings that line the white stone halls.

A low murmuring sound drifts out from the open doors ahead. I tear my gaze from the incredible architecture and focus on the room before me as I at last step across the threshold and into the massive space beyond.

The auditorium is shaped like a half-circle. Seats made of dark wood and plush red fabric are arranged in tiers leading down to the spotless stage below. Without hesitation, I march down the steps until I reach the first empty seat as close to the stage as I can get. I might be a scholarship student from a small town that no one here has even heard of, but I refuse to be intimidated by the wealth and power that most of these people possess. I have more than earned my seat.

After sneaking past the already assembled students, I slide into the only empty seat left on the third row. It offers an excellent view of the stage. A smile spreads across my face as I wait for the rest of the freshmen to arrive and for the dean to start her speech. This is where I belong. Here. At Huntingswell University with other people who are passionate about their studies and who want to create a life worth living. Not trapped in a small town with limited opportunities.

Those euphoric feelings continue swirling in my chest as the dean, a dark-haired woman in her fifties, at last appears and gives a speech that almost directly echoes my own thoughts. Opportunity. Passion. Life. All there for the taking. And by God, I am going to take it.

A round of applause sweeps through the auditorium as the dean finishes her speech.

“Thank you,” she says with a polite nod. “And now, it is time for the customary welcome address from our university’s great benefactor, the Huntington family. Please welcome to the stage Alexander Huntington IV.”

Another round of applause sounds as the dean steps away from the microphone and motions towards the dark-haired man who is now striding across the stage. I clap politely while struggling not to roll my eyes.

Alexander Huntington IV. *The fourth*. As if he is some kind of British royalty. A very untimely snicker escapes my throat as I imagine him in a powdered wig and a cravat.

I start slightly as a pair of sharp blue eyes look straight at me. Panic flickers through my chest. Did he hear me? No, he couldn’t have heard that faint little snicker over the noise of the applause.

My heart rate slows down as his perceptive blue eyes continue scanning the rest of the crowd as he closes the final distance to the microphone. All around me, people are staring at him as if he is in fact royalty.

Annoyance burns out the previous flash of panic in my chest. Why should I care if he heard me snickering? Someone like him could damn well do with a bit more scorn and a lot less adoration.

“On behalf of my family, I would like to welcome you all to Huntingswell University,” he says in a voice that is practically dripping with authority.

Crossing my arms, I lean back in my seat and adopt a nonchalant expression as he continues speaking.

Alexander Huntington IV. Even though I’m not from here, I know exactly who he is. I know everything there is to know about him and his family. The Huntingtons founded the city of Huntingswell in 1692 and practically built it from scratch. They funded the first school, the first hospital, the first fire department and police station. And of course this university. Their family owns the very land we walk on.

With my arms still crossed over my chest, I run scrutinizing eyes over the well-dressed man on stage.

He is only twenty-three years old, and a senior here at the university, but his pale blue eyes possess uncanny confidence and shrewdness as he watches the crowd react to his every word. He doesn’t use any hand gestures as he speaks. The power his whole being exudes is more than enough to captivate the audience.

I flick a glance up and down his toned body. He is wearing a three-piece suit in dark gray that perfectly accentuates his sculpted body. Add to that his sharp cheekbones and smooth dark brown hair, and even I can’t deny that he is devastatingly handsome.

Another wave of irritation washes over me. He is hot, rich, and powerful. And worst of all, he knows it. Bitterness crawls up my throat. I despise people like that. People who have the whole world at their feet and who have never had to fight for anything. I give him another mocking once-over. Well, he will not find *me* fawning over him at least.

“As is our custom here, the student body will also host an initiation ceremony for the new freshmen,” Alexander continues despite my mental dismissal of him. “As I am the student body president, you will encounter me again at that event.” His eyes glint and a slight smirk lurks at the corner

of his lips as he scans the crowd again. “But you will receive more information about that later.”

Once again, I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he is the student body president. As I watch him bestow a gracious nod on the enraptured students, I briefly wonder if he would have survived at a normal school without all his money and power. Probably not at my high school at least.

As soon as Alexander has left the stage and the dean has said her closing words, I stand up from my seat and make my way back to the dorms. Classes start tomorrow and I want to be settled in and have everything ready before then.

I inhale more of that wonderful early fall air as I walk back across campus. The university is located a half hour drive outside the city of Huntingwell, and it’s surrounded by beautiful woods and fields and clear lakes. Because of that, the winds always carry the fresh scents of nature when they whirl between the stone buildings that make up the university.

Passing the grand houses where the richest parts of the student body live, I walk to the shared dormitories that have specifically been set aside for scholarship students. It’s not much to look at, but I don’t mind. I’m here. That’s all I need.

My keys clink as I fish them out of my purse and insert them into the lock on my door. There are seven other students in this corridor, and we share a kitchen and two bathrooms at the end of the hall. I haven’t met any of them yet, but we all only just arrived this morning, so there will be plenty of time for that later.

After pulling the door closed behind me, I stuff my keys back into my purse and set it down on the small table next to the door. My suitcase is still waiting for me where I left it in the middle of the room, so I walk up and tip it on its side before unzipping it.

The rest of the day is spent unpacking and scouting out the building.

Once everything is done, I change into my sleep shirt and plop down on the bed to read a bit. My first history class starts tomorrow, and I want to come prepared. But soon, my eyes start to droop. The journey here was long, and dealing with something new and unfamiliar always exhausts me.

Rubbing my eyes, I set down my history book and roll off the bed. I need to lock the door before falling asleep since I have no idea how honest and decent people on this campus are.

Just as I reach the door, a muffled sound comes from somewhere outside in the hallway. I freeze. Straining my ears, I wait to see if the noise comes again. A faint sound of scuffing boots drifts through the door. I frown as I stare at the handle.

Whatever it is, it's probably none of my business. But what if someone needs help?

I stand there right inside the door for another few seconds while indecision flashes through me. My gaze drifts down my bare legs. And then I make a decision. I'm not even wearing pants, so no, I am not going to go out into the corridor and investigate strange noises.

Shaking my head, I lift my hand to lock the door right as the handle is pushed downwards.

Alarm crackles along my spine as my door is yanked open.

Four men are standing on the other side.

I open my mouth to scream, but no sound ever makes it out because the closest man lurches forward and slaps a hand over my mouth while two of the others grab my arms. Panic pulses through my whole body as I try to fight them off, but it's no use.

My arms are twisted behind my back, and then someone ties my wrists together with rope while someone else uses a thick roll of fabric to gag me.

Only garbled mumbling makes it out of my throat as I try to call for help while fighting hard against their hold on me.

Then a hood is shoved over my head and I'm dragged away into the night.

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ALEXANDER

Tension fills the room. It thrums in the air like lightning before a violent storm. The floor below the raised dais is now packed with people, and all of them are glancing between me and the factions with worried eyes. I lounge on a high-backed chair made of dark wood, watching them all with a smirk on my lips.

The student body has its very own building. It's meant to be used for meetings about important matters that we want brought before the faculty. It's mostly used for parties. And for the initiation ceremony, of course.

Firelight flickers over the nervous-looking people below the dais. Naturally, there are normal lamps in the ceiling that we could've used, but for this particular event we prefer to only light the candles in the candelabras along the polished floor and the candle holders that are mounted on the dark wooden walls. It casts the room in shifting shadows and makes it look ominous. Which is of course the point.

A few people jump as the double doors are thrown open yet again. I watch lazily as some people from the factions herd another group of freshmen into the room. They yank off the newcomers' hoods before untying their wrists and removing the gag. A satisfied smile slides across my lips.

The initiation ceremony is as old as the university itself, and it's meant to remind the first-year students that they need to respect their betters. I myself have never taken part of it from that side, because the moment I set foot on campus, the previous president abdicated and handed me the crown. As is to be expected. After all, no one wants to risk offending a Huntington.

So for the past four years, I have sat in this chair when the freshmen are kidnapped from their dorms and brought here to swear their allegiance.

Another thud echoes as Herman pushes the massive doors shut. His eyes find mine across the sea of anxious people, half of which are dressed in pajamas. He gives me a nod.

Good. Everyone is here now.

I push up from the chair and straighten the cuffs of my suit jacket. After the short address in the auditorium earlier, I switched to another three-piece suit. One in all black. Because I have noticed that people are even more intimidated if I wear black.

Stopping at the edge of the dais, I sweep my gaze over the gathered crowd. Some of them shrink back slightly. Smug satisfaction pulses through me.

“Welcome to the initiation ceremony.” I pause for a few seconds to see if anyone dares to point out that I told them at the welcome speech earlier that they would receive more information before it happened. No one does. “We have very few rules here at Huntingswell University, but the ones we have, we take very seriously.”

A soft rustle of clothing sounds as parts of the crowd shift their weight nervously.

“First rule,” I continue. “We do not involve the city in illegal activities. That means that if you want alcohol or drugs, if you want to set up illegal bets, if you want someone to settle your scores, or anything else that is less than reputable, you do it on campus.”

Since we have done this several times now, I don’t need to signal the faction leaders. The moment I stop talking, the five of them walk up and position themselves in front of the dais. They keep their backs to me so that the gathered freshmen can see their faces.

Raising my hand, I point to the blond woman on the left.

“This is Jenna. She’s the leader of the alcohol faction. If you’re under twenty-one, or if you just want to avoid going into the city, and you need alcohol, you reach out to her.” I move my hand to the brown-haired man next to her. “This is Kenneth, the leader of the drug faction. If you want drugs, you go to him.” I point to the next man. “This is Thomas. He runs the basher’s faction. If you want someone beaten up or intimidated, and you don’t want to get your own hands dirty, you find him.”

Shock and worry flickers across several faces as they glance around. If they think that violence doesn't exist on our campus, they're sorely mistaken. We have just found a better way of getting away with it.

I point to the redhead next to Thomas. "This is Moraine. She's the leader of the gambler's faction. If you want to set up bets on something that involves illegal actions or outcomes, you do it through her." Shifting my hand, I motion towards the final person in front of the dais. "And this is Herman. We like to call him Miscellaneous Herman. If you want to do something illegal that isn't part of the other four factions, you reach out to him."

Herman raises two fingers to his forehead and gives the freshmen a lazy salute.

"That's the first rule," I say, sliding hard eyes across the crowd. "Here's rule number two. You can do whatever you want... as long as you don't get caught. And if you were to get caught, you go down alone. If you are busted for underage drinking or drugs or performing sexual favors to settle a lost bet, or anything at all, you take the fall alone. You do not implicate the faction leaders. Because if you do, we will destroy you."

Deafening silence fills the candlelit room.

I level a hard stare at them. "Understood?"

"Y-yes, sir," about half of them stammer.

"Good. Here's the final rule. This university is mine. You know exactly what I can do for people... and to people. Do not approach me thoughtlessly. If you want something from me, you'd better have something worth trading. And if I give you an order, you execute it. People who disobey me do not survive long on this campus."

The freshmen exchange uncertain glances as the five faction leaders move away from the dais and instead take up position along the walls. But no one dares to say anything.

"You will now swear your allegiance to the university and to me," I state.

Parts of this crowd is made up of very rich and very powerful people. To say that they are unaccustomed to bowing their heads in submission is the understatement of the decade. And that is why I love this day. They might be used to wielding power, but they are on my land now. My university. My city. My universe. And here, my word is law.

I watch them with a smirk on my face while Herman instructs them on what to do and say.

Once he is finished, I pause for a few seconds and let the silence stretch until the most nervous among them begin to shift their weight uncomfortably.

“Kneel,” I command.

Clothes rustle as the whole room of freshmen lower themselves to their knees.

“Swear your allegiance,” I order.

As one, they speak the words I’m waiting to hear.

“I swear allegiance to Huntingswell University. I swear to obey the rules set forth by the president. I swear to never implicate the faction leaders. And I swear to obey Alexander Huntington IV in all things, from today until my last day on campus.”

Satisfaction pulses inside me. Not a lot of things bring me joy, but I do love it when people kneel before me and offer their complete submission.

I scan the kneeling crowd, soaking in the rare feeling of excitement.

My eyes snag on something at the back of the room.

No. On *someone* at the back of the room.

Incredulity fills my chest as my eyes land on the one person who still remains standing.

She is wearing a simple white t-shirt that falls down to her mid-thighs. Her legs and feet are bare, which means that she was likely kidnapped from her bed. Wavy blonde hair cascades down her shoulders and back, and even from this distance, I swear I can see some freckles on her nose and cheeks. She would have been gorgeous, if it wasn’t for the incredibly insolent expression on her face.

Keeping her arms crossed over her chest, she stares straight at me with sharp brown eyes that bore into me. As if she has any right to glare at me in such a disrespectful way.

A dangerous expression spreads across my face, and I raise my eyebrows expectantly before shooting a pointed look at the floor.

She scoffs, actually *scoffs*, and just raises her shoulders in a nonchalant shrug.

Disbelief washes over me. Does she really think that she can get away with this kind of insubordination?

But the rest of the freshmen have finished swearing their oaths now, so I tear my gaze from the infuriating blonde and instead sweep it across the others. “Rise.”

They climb back to their feet.

“You have half an hour to introduce yourselves and swap contact information with the factions whose services you might need. I suggest all of them, just in case.”

Then, without another word, I stride away from the dais and approach Daniel. Being a Huntington means that I also have private security, and Daniel is my most trusted man.

After turning so that I’m facing the crowd, I nod towards the insolent woman from before. “Bring her to me.”

“Yes, sir,” Daniel replies.

With only a few pointed looks, he informs the other three guards I brought tonight. And then they’re all moving. I don’t watch them descend on her. Instead, I make my way into the adjacent room.

She thinks that she can just refuse to kneel and swear obedience? No one refuses me. And I am going to give her one chance to correct her mistake. For her sake, she had better take it.

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OLIVIA

The moment that his ridiculous bow-before-me-peasants speech is over, I make for the doors. I have no need of the illegal factions, so there is no reason for me to stay. My fingers have barely just brushed the handle when a hand wraps around my forearm, stopping my movements. A second later, three more men appear around me.

“Please come with me,” one of them says.

He has brown hair and dark brown eyes.

I watch him in silence for a few seconds before simply replying, “No.”

“It wasn’t a request.”

“Then why did you phrase it like one?”

He jerks his chin, and two of the others grab me by the arms. “Let’s go.”

My bare feet slip against the polished floor as I try and fail to dig my heels in to stop them. “What are you doing? You can’t just...”

The other people in the room are turning to stare, but none of them do anything to help me. I glare pointedly at them in order to shame them into helping. It only makes them avert their gazes.

“Assholes,” I mutter under my breath.

The crowd parts before me as I’m dragged towards one of the side doors. I yank against the hands around my arms, but they don’t budge.

“I can walk on my own,” I growl.

“You should have thought about that before you refused,” the dark-eyed man says.

Before I can spit out a retort, we reach the side door. He raises his hand and knocks once.

“Come,” a now familiar voice says from inside the door.

The wooden door is pulled open silently, and then I'm hauled inside. All four of my captors join me and then close the door behind us. I yank my arms from their hands again, and this time, they let me pull free.

After straightening my sleep shirt, I look up to find Alexander Huntington IV watching me with cold blue eyes.

"I've been manhandled quite enough for one day, thank you very much," I snap at him while rolling my shoulders back.

He cocks his head. "Did I tell you that you could speak?"

"I didn't know that I needed permission to do so."

"Well, now you know."

I snort.

His pale eyes flash. Then that cool mask slides home on his handsome features again. "I noticed that you failed to participate in the allegiance swearing."

A mocking smile spreads across my lips as I shrug. "Sorry. Bad knees."

"You're nineteen, correct?"

"Yes."

"You're a bit too young to be having bad knees, don't you think?"

I just shrug nonchalantly again.

His smirk sharpens. "Or perhaps it's because you have already spent most of your life kneeling on hard floors while working your lips."

Heat sears my cheeks. Pushing aside the flash of embarrassment, I instead paint an innocent expression on my face. "Oh, I didn't realize that giving too many blowjobs would lead to knee problems." I give him a sweet smile. "But who am I to argue with someone who is clearly speaking from experience?"

All four of his bodyguards jerk back slightly, as if they can't believe what just came out of my mouth. But I don't dare take my eyes off the man before me, so I can't spare them any attention.

For a few seconds, the room is deadly silent.

Alexander's eyes are like shards of pale ice as he studies me for what feels like an eternity.

"You've got quite the mouth on you," he says eventually, his tone deceptively smooth. Then he flicks his gaze up and down my body. "What's your name?"

I flash him a cold smile. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Another spark of irritation flickers in his eyes. "Daniel."

"That's a man's name," I reply before I realize that he isn't speaking to me.

The guard with brown hair and dark eyes standing next to me doesn't even turn to look at me. He keeps his attention on Alexander as he says, "Her name is Olivia Campbell."

I whip around to stare at him. Still not looking at me, he just continues watching Alexander.

"Olivia Campbell," Alexander says, as if tasting the name on his tongue.

A warm ripple rolls down my spine. Despite the current situation and my disdain for this arrogant man, I quite like the way he says my name.

"You are not one of the Virginia Campbells," he states. "So, who are you?"

Meeting his gaze again, I shrug. "Who says I'm not?"

"I do."

Since I have no idea who the Virginia Campbells are, I keep my mouth shut. They sound important, and if I can convince him that I'm one of them, he might back off.

When I continue saying nothing, he slides his gaze to Daniel again.

"She's a scholarship student," Daniel very unhelpfully provides.

I shoot him a glare before turning back to Alexander. And at that moment, I can feel the class difference between us. As vast as an ocean. He is standing there in an impeccable designer suit that probably costs more than the rent for my dormitory while I'm wearing a plain white t-shirt that I bought at Target for five bucks.

Both surprise and amusement drifts across Alexander's face, and he raises his eyebrows at me. "A scholarship student?"

Crossing my arms over my chest, I growl, "So what?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he just watches me with that damn smirk on his face.

Since I refuse to break first, I simply stare right back at him in silence. He huffs out an amused breath and then clicks his tongue.

"I will give you one chance to rectify your earlier mistake," he announces.

"What mistake?"

"Failing to participate in the allegiance swearing."

I barely manage to stop myself from snorting. I have absolutely no intention of swearing any allegiances. To him or anyone else.

"It wasn't a mistake," I tell him while raising my chin a little.

"I disagree. It was a very grave mistake. But I can be persuaded to forget about it." He flicks a hand towards the floor before his feet. "Get down on your knees, press your forehead to the floor while swearing your obedience to me, and then lick my shoes."

A laugh tears from my throat. It's a shocked and utterly disbelieving sound.

Alexander only continues looking at me, his face dead serious.

"I don't think so," I press out, since he is clearly incapable of deciphering that from my laugh alone.

"Kneel. Bow. Lick my shoes. And submit."

"I will be doing no such thing. This is the United States of America. This is a free country."

"I think you are greatly overvaluing what this country is like."

"I don't care what you think. I will not be bowing to you, now or in the future, because regardless of whether you like it or not, freedom is one of the corner stones of this country."

"Freedom?" A slow smile curls his lips. "Money is freedom. Power is freedom."

"And integrity is power," I throw back at him.

A laugh escapes his lips. I blink at the unexpected sound. He looks genuinely baffled for a few seconds before a dangerous expression descends on his features. An involuntary spike of fear shoots up my spine.

"No, it's not." Those cold blue eyes of his rake over my body, sending ice skittering across my skin. "Do you want me to show you what power is?"

I edge a step back.

"*This* is real power." With that cruel smile still on his lips, he snaps his fingers. "Hold her."

Before I can even finish sucking in a breath, his bodyguards grab my arms. I thrash against their grip while Alexander prowls up to me. My heart thunders in my chest.

"You have tried to humiliate me several times this evening." He stops so close that I can almost feel his expensive suit brush against my bare skin. "Let me teach you how it's done."

Reaching up, he takes a firm grip on the collar of my shirt.

For a moment, my mind cannot seem to process what is happening.

Then he rips my shirt open.

I jerk back as the sound of tearing fabric fills the room, but the guards holding on to my arms keep me from retreating.

Cool air rushes over my skin and my naked breasts, making my nipples harden.

Alexander doesn't appear to notice as he quickly rips through the sleeves as well so that he can simply push the whole garment off my shoulders. It falls to the floor in a flutter of white fabric.

Panic crashes over me. "Wait!"

But he doesn't stop there. Curling his fingers over my panties, he slides them down my thighs until they fall to the smooth wooden floor as well. The brush of his fingers against my bare thighs sends lightning crackling over my skin. My heart hammers against my ribs as I stand there before him, completely naked.

The bastard looks me up and down. Slowly. Meticulously. The heat of his gaze sears through my soul, and an involuntary throbbing starts in my core at the intensity of his stare. For a moment, I can't remember how to breathe properly.

He meets my gaze again.

And then smirks.

Fucking *smirks*.

Humiliation washes over me like a tidal wave. Wishing that a hole would open up in the floor and swallow me, I drag in short breaths as I try desperately to banish the shame and fear that now fight in my chest. My pulse thrums in my ears. It doesn't look like he has any intention of actually touching me, but I have grown up with enough horror stories to still worry.

Abruptly turning away, he stalks over to the door and throws it open.

Another crashing wave of mortification hits me as the other freshmen in the room outside turn to stare. Shock bounces across their features, and some of them avert their eyes. But far from everyone.

"Anyone who helps her answers to me," Alexander declares in a voice that echoes throughout the candlelit room. "Clear?"

"Yes, sir," they hurriedly reply.

Alexander turns to me. Authority pulses from his sculpted body as he locks eyes with me. "*That's* power." He jerks his chin. "Now, get out of my

sight.”

His bodyguards release my arms immediately. I flick a quick glance down at my clothes. Alexander catches the look, and a smile brimming with challenge spreads across his lips, as if he is daring me to try. But I know that no good will come of it. I lost. Tonight, at least, I lost. And now it's time to cut those losses before they get even worse.

Drawing in a deep breath, I straighten my spine and stalk right out the door as if I don't have a care in the world.

Alexander tracks my naked form with his gaze as I brush past him, but he does nothing to stop me.

The crowd outside seems caught between staring at me and trying to stare at anything *but* me. I ignore them as I stride through the room and towards the doors. The problem is of course that I have no idea where I am. Since I was brought here with a hood over my head, I don't know how to get back to my dorm.

And now I have to try to find my way back in the dark.

While also completely naked.

As I move across the threshold and walk into the cool September night, I can't help but worry that I might have made a mistake by picking a fight with someone like Alexander Huntington.

Then my steel resolve returns.

I did not make a mistake. He is the one who made a mistake.

If he thinks that this pathetic stunt will break me, he has another thing coming.

Because Alexander Huntington has never gone up against someone like me.

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ALEXANDER

I have to admit, I'm surprised by her fire. Leaning one shoulder against the doorjamb, I watch as Olivia Campbell strides across the room.

Despite her nakedness, she keeps her spine straight and her chin up as if she is a queen walking through a room of peasants. I expected her to hunch in on herself and try to cover her tits and pussy while darting through the room with embarrassment searing her cheeks. But she doesn't.

Amusement tugs at my lips. I can't wait to break her.

The rest of the freshmen react in two different ways. Half of them cast worried glances in my direction, probably wondering what she did and how they can avoid sharing her fate. The other half stares at her. I recognize the look in their eyes. When I declared that no one is allowed to help her, I might as well have told them that it's open season on her. Most of these people are rich and entitled, and I just made them get down on their knees and swear obedience to me. They don't like that. But now I have given them someone who they can take out their frustrations on. And as long as they don't get in the way of *my* plans for her, I don't mind them adding to the pressure.

My gaze drifts over her naked form again as she moves towards the doors. She does have a great body. And her face is even prettier up close than what I saw from across the room. The only problem is that smart mouth of hers.

Another wave of incredulity washes over me.

A scholarship student. I still can't believe that she's a scholarship student. Based on the way she spoke and acted, I assumed that she was from one of the more powerful families. That was the only explanation for

why she would dare to defy me in such a way. I did not expect her to be a random nobody with a tongue sharper than her common sense.

Doesn't she understand that I can crush her without even breaking a sweat? This is my world. No one so much as breathes on this campus without my permission.

A wicked smile slides home on my lips as I rake my gaze over her body one last time before she disappears into the night. Oh I am going to enjoy this game.

Pushing myself off the doorframe, I straighten and then jerk my chin. "Faction leaders, with me."

Without waiting for an answer, I turn around and walk back into the small room. They naturally obey and follow me through the doorway. Herman closes it behind him once they're all inside. I meet each of their gazes in silence before speaking.

"That is Olivia Campbell. Until I say otherwise, she is cut off."

"Cut off from what, exactly?" Thomas asks, his gray eyes already glinting with anticipation.

"Everything." I level a commanding stare on all of them. "You do not give her anything. You do not help her with anything. I don't care if her clothes are on fire, you do not so much as piss on her to help put it out. Understood?"

"Yep, got it."

I look from one person to the next until all of them have dipped their chin and acknowledged the order.

Silence descends on the room. Light from the wall-mounted candles flickers across their faces as they watch me. Jenna and Kenneth look impatient to get back out into the gathering hall. Probably because their factions are the most popular ones. Kenneth even drums his fingers against his thigh while glancing over his shoulder, but neither of them dare to say anything.

Next to them, Moraine watches me with scheming green eyes while Herman keeps that usual casual expression on his face. He drags his hand through his curly blond hair before sliding it into his pocket again. Both of them keep their mouths shut as well.

All four of them have been faction leaders long enough to know not to push me. The only one who looks ready to speak is Thomas. While he is on his third year at Huntingswell U, he only became a faction leader this year

after the previous leader of the basher's faction graduated at the beginning of summer. He hasn't stepped out of line yet, but I have a feeling that I will have to break him in more directly than his predecessor.

"Can we..." He hikes a thumb towards the door. "Go back out?"

The other four stiffen almost imperceptibly. Jenna even flicks an alarmed look between him and me. I just give Thomas a slow once-over.

He is tall. As tall as me. But much bulkier. His bulging muscles strain against his tight dark blue shirt even when he is relaxed. There's a reason he became the leader of the bashers. But unfortunately for him, his muscles will always be woefully inadequate against the kind of power that I wield.

A cold smile stretches my lips.

Thomas seems to remember himself, and blinks before clearing his throat. "I mean, is there anything else you want us to do?" He falls silent for a second before hurriedly adding, "Sir."

I let the silence stretch for an uncomfortably long time. He shifts his weight while his gaze darts around the room.

Once I have made him squirm a bit more, I finally flick my wrist. "That is all. You may leave."

All of them incline their head before promptly filing out the door. With a jerk of my chin, I order my guards out of the room as well before I drift over to the window.

Clasping my hands behind my back, I study the night outside.

Leaves rustle on the trees as winds whirl between the white stone buildings, and pools of yellow light from the streetlamps break up the darkness. But the area outside is empty. Well, almost empty.

Wickedness swirls inside me as my eyes land on a lone figure walking down the road to my left.

Olivia Campbell.

She disappears from view as she continues down the road. It's a dead end, but she doesn't seem to know that.

Indeed, after a few minutes, she comes stomping back up the street. Turning in a circle, she studies the buildings around her.

Her naked skin glows in the darkness when she stops underneath a streetlamp. Another night wind whirls down the street, making her wavy blonde hair flutter forward and across her face. She forces it back behind her ears again with angry movements. Then she takes one last look at the buildings around her before stalking down another street.

I let out a chuckle.

I have been playing games with people's lives since I was old enough to realize how much power my family possesses. And here is some random nobody thinking she can outmaneuver me. Thinking she can defy me.

No one defies me. I am the law here.

A smile dripping with threats descends on my features as I watch her naked and shivering body disappear into the darkness again.

She has no idea who she is playing against. But I'm going to teach her.

I'm going to make her so desperate for my mercy that she has to crawl back to me and beg me for the privilege of kneeling at my feet and licking my shoes while groveling for forgiveness.

Oh this is going to be so much fun.

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OLIVIA

Excited murmuring drifts out into the hall as I open the doors to the canteen. Giddiness still bounces around inside me from the fascinating lecture on Egyptian history that I attended this morning. I feel much more optimistic now. Last night was a less than optimal way to begin the semester, but after the lecture this morning, I feel like that is all behind me now. Today is a new day, and I will not let an entitled brat ruin my year.

With a smile on my face, I step across the threshold and into the high-ceilinged hall.

The pleasant murmur dies immediately.

A jolt of surprise and panic shoots through me as all the students who are seated at the tables turn to look at me. The large circular room is suddenly so deafeningly silent that I swear they can all hear my thumping heart.

Then someone coughs. “Whore.”

That breaks the spell.

A man with round, black-rimmed glasses meets my gaze from two tables away while saying loudly enough for the whole canteen to hear, “Is it true that you tried to fuck Alexander Huntington at the initiation ceremony last night?”

Heat floods my cheeks. “What? No!”

“Then why did he throw you out of the room? Completely naked?”

Another wave of humiliation crashes over me. Clenching my jaw, I try to stave it off while instead raising my eyebrows nonchalantly. “Because he’s an arrogant asshole who doesn’t like being told no?”

Several sharp intakes of breath echo throughout the room.

Before anyone can speak up again, I stride towards the closest restaurant.

The room is completely circular, and different restaurants line the walls around the whole room. Though, restaurant might be a bit too generous a word for it. It's more like a small kitchen with a metal counter set where the curving wall should be. Each small kitchen sells a different kind of food so that the students never have to get bored. After all, we eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner in this place.

Since the entire canteen is still staring at me, I don't want to walk around and check out all the places, so I just pick the first one I come across. It appears to be Italian food, which I fortunately love.

There is a card reader on the wall next to the counter, so I pull out my canteen card as I approach the woman behind the metal counter. I press the card against the slick black surface while I say, "Hi. I would like a—"

A loud noise comes from the card reader.

Surprise flits through me. Stopping in the middle of my sentence, I turn back to the reader and press my card against it again. That same error noise comes from it, and the light flashes red. I frown.

Lowering my card, I wipe it against my white skirt in case there was some dust on it or something. Then I press it against the reader once more.

Another error noise.

The woman behind the counter looks at me with brown eyes full of concern, but she says nothing.

I clear my throat and point awkwardly towards the next restaurant. "I'll just try over there instead."

The next one appears to only sell sandwiches, but I'll take what I can get so I hold up my card to that reader and pray to God that it works.

Red lights flash and another error sound blares into the room.

The students at the closest tables behind me snicker.

"You sure you put money on it?" someone calls in a mocking voice. "Food and rent are not part of the scholarship grant, you know."

I did put money on it. In fact, I transferred almost all of the money I had left to this card after I paid this month's rent for my dormitory.

I almost snap the shiny black card in half when that screeching error message sounds again.

Another burst of laughter erupts from the people behind me.

Ignoring them, I reach for my wallet instead. "I guess I'll just pay cash."

The woman behind the counter gives me an apologetic look. "We do not take cash. Sorry."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" I say with a bit more force than I had intended. Wincing, I add in a softer voice, "I'm sorry. I just... What am I supposed to do if my card doesn't work even when I know I have enough money on it?"

"I would suggest heading to the administration's office. They should be able to help you."

Gritting my teeth, I draw in a long breath through my nose and give her a strained nod. Then I stuff my card back into my purse, adjust the shoulder strap, and stalk back towards the doors.

"Hey," a man calls after me. "If you get naked for *me* instead, I'll let you use my card."

Laughter cascades from the tables behind me. I curl my fingers into fists and keep walking instead of replying. Assholes.

The halls are deserted since everyone else is at lunch, so I quickly make my way through them and thankfully arrive at the administration's office without further issue.

A man who looks to be in his mid-thirties sits at a desk behind the wooden counter. The other desks are empty, so I assume most of their office is on their lunch break as well.

"Hi," I say as I reach the counter. "My canteen card isn't working."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that." He smoothens down his green polo shirt as he stands up and approaches me. "Let me see what I can do."

Pulling out the card, I hold it out to him. "I have money on it, but for some reason, it's giving me an error message every time I use it."

"How strange." He frowns down at it as he takes it from my hand. "Can I borrow your student ID?"

"Of course."

I reach into my purse and pull my student ID from my wallet before holding that out to him as well. His hand moves towards the card and then stops.

A beat of silence passes.

He flicks a quick glance between the card and my face.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

“No, no, not at all.” He recovers and takes my ID card as well while giving me a reassuring smile. “I’ll just...”

Without actually finishing the sentence, he drifts over to his computer. I study his hands. My frown deepens as I watch him just click on some random buttons on his keyboard while barely looking at the screen.

He turns back to me with an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid there is nothing I can do.”

“What do you mean there is nothing you can do?”

“The card should work fine, so there is nothing to fix.”

“But it obviously doesn’t work.”

His gaze darts around the room. “I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.”

“You’ve already said that.” I motion towards the empty desks. “Can’t one of your colleagues do something about it then?”

He walks back to the counter and places both cards on the smooth wooden surface before taking a step back, as if wanting to keep his distance. “I’m sorry. We really can’t help you.”

I arch an eyebrow and shoot him a pointed look. “Can’t? Or won’t?”

Edging another step back, he grimaces and shrugs apologetically.

Irritation burns through me.

Snatching up my cards, I shove them back into my purse and spin around. My angry footsteps echo against the white stone walls as I stomp towards the door and throw it open. It bangs against the wall outside, but I don’t care as I storm away.

I only make it halfway down the hall before I notice a man leaning against the marble wall a short distance ahead.

Alexander Huntington.

He is wearing a dark blue suit, and he has his arms crossed over his chest while he leans one shoulder against the wall. Amusement dances in his eyes as he watches me.

The irritation inside me morphs into fury.

“You!” I snap as I stalk up to him while pointing an accusatory finger at his chest. “This is your doing, isn’t it?”

He remains leaning casually against the wall while raising his eyebrows in a lazy gesture. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Stopping a single stride away, I glare up at him. “The canteen card. There is money on it, but it’s not working.”

“How unfortunate. But why would that be my fault?”

“Because as soon as the guy in there,” I stab a hand towards the administration’s office, “saw my ID, he didn’t even try to help me fix it.”

A smirk plays over his lips as he looks me up and down. “How terribly inconvenient for you.”

“For me? *You* did this, you asshole!”

My stomach lurches.

I’m so shocked by his speed that I have no chance to react as he suddenly lunges forward and grabs me by the throat. Spinning me around, he shoves me up against the wall. My back hits the cold marble with a thud, and my breath explodes from my lungs. Before I can draw in a deep breath to refill them, his hand tightens around my throat.

Danger lurks in his cold blue eyes as he braces his other hand against the wall next to my head and leans down. “I would choose my next words very carefully, if I were you.”

His fingers relax again, allowing me to finally suck in that breath. But his hand stays around my throat, a solid weight to remind me who holds the power here.

Refusing to let myself be intimidated, I tilt my chin up and retort, “Or what?”

Sparkles dance in his eyes. Like light glittering in a lethal shard of ice.

A slow smile spreads across his face as he moves his thumb from the side of my neck and draws it along my jaw before reaching my bottom lip. In an almost loving gesture, he traces his thumb over my mouth.

My heart skips a beat.

Then that cruel glint returns to his eyes, and he pushes his thumb between my lips and draws my bottom lip down, pressing it against my chin hard enough to make me flinch.

“Or I will find another use for your disrespectful little mouth,” he at last replies, his voice like a midnight wind.

Everything inside my head short-circuits. And without thinking, I yank my hand up and slap him across the face.

He jerks back, his left hand dropping from the wall and his right falling away from my throat as he stumbles a step back. Utter disbelief pulses from his entire being as he stares at me. I have an overwhelming and absolutely insane urge to laugh. Because based on the way Alexander is looking at me, it appears as though no one has ever slapped him before. Never. In his entire life.

And I love that that first now belongs to me.

Before he can recover from his shock, I slip past him and dart down the hall.

Our lunch break is almost over now, so I abandon my efforts to buy food and instead set course straight for the lecture hall. Part of me is convinced that Alexander is going to hunt me down and kill me for daring to lay a hand on his privileged face.

The rest of the day I spend casting discreet looks over my shoulder to see if I'm about to get murdered. But he never comes.

When my afternoon classes finish, I head back to the canteen to try my card again.

Only angry error noises and red flashing lights answer me every time I try to scan it. And I try every card reader in the entire place.

Blowing out a resigned sigh, I'm forced to accept that the card is not going to work. But I'm nothing if not resourceful, and I refuse to give up, so I change into a pair of jeans and put on my most comfortable sneakers. And then I start towards the gates.

I know that there is a convenience store about an hour's walk from campus. I can't afford to take a taxi there, but an hour's walk isn't too bad.

Alexander thinks he can win that easily, huh?

I don't think he has ever even visited a convenience store on his own before. His servants and his cooks probably do that for him. So he hasn't even considered that I can easily solve the problem he created for me. If I can't buy food in the canteen, I'll just have to go to the store and buy food to bring back instead.

That's the problem with spoiled people like him.

They have no idea how to outsmart someone who plays on a completely different level.

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ALEXANDER

I still can't believe that she actually slapped me. No one has ever slapped me before. It was a very annoying experience. One I intend to make her pay dearly for.

Staying a short distance behind, I track her as she walks across campus. She has changed into a pair of pale blue jeans, a long-sleeved black shirt, and a pair of sneakers, and she walks with sure and confident steps. I narrow my eyes at her. What is she up to?

Since I had the administration's office restrict her card before the canteen even opened this morning, I know for a fact that little Olivia Campbell has not eaten breakfast, lunch, or dinner today. And yesterday was arrival day, which means that she was not able to eat in the canteen then either. That means that the only thing she has eaten since yesterday morning is whatever breakfast she had before she left her hometown. She must be starving. So why is she walking with such brisk and determined steps?

With a slight frown on my face, I follow her as she makes her way across campus and all the way to the front gates.

The front gates? Why is she...

Realization dawns inside me.

Oh. I smile. Clever girl.

A wicked laugh escapes my lips.

Clever indeed. But not clever enough.

Taking a sharp right, I let her walk through the gates while I head for the parking lot instead. Far from all students here have a car onsite since everything we need is already available on campus. And besides, the city is

only a cab ride away. But I prefer the freedom of being able to come and go as I please, so I have my black sports car parked in one of the few indoor spaces. Right as I reach the door, a voice comes from behind.

“Sir?” Daniel says.

I recognize the tone. It means that he’s wondering if he should follow me or not.

Twisting my head, I meet his eyes over my shoulder and reply, “It’s fine. You can go home for the day.”

He dips his chin. “Yes, sir.”

A wicked smile spreads across my lips as I slide into my car and drive away.

What I have planned for Olivia is not for Daniel to see. It’s for my eyes and my eyes only.

The road that leads to the convenience store, and then the city beyond, is framed on both sides by a lush forest. The leaves have just begun to turn yellow and orange in places, sprinkling the otherwise green landscape with bright colors. There is only one lane in each direction, and since this road is meant for cars, there are no sidewalks. I pass Olivia after less than a minute of driving. She is walking on the small stretch of asphalt outside the solid line on the other side of the road, so that she is facing the cars that are heading towards the university.

She doesn’t turn to look at my car as I drive past her. Why would she? She has no idea that it’s me.

While speeding down the street, I glance at her in the rearview mirror. She still walks with her spine straight and her head held high. So full of determination. I laugh as I shake my head at her foolishness. I am going to break her. And the first blow is coming her way right this evening.

Colorful leaves blur around me as I drive to the convenience store that I know she’s heading for. She’s a scholarship student, so I know that she can’t afford to have food delivered all the way from the city. It’s the same reason why she is walking to the store instead of calling a cab. Dear lord, being poor must be so inconvenient.

The small parking lot is deserted when I reach it. I glance at the clock before getting out of the car. Seven minutes. A seven-minute drive at this speed should be about an hour’s walk. Closing the car door, I turn and scan the area around me.

It's a combined gas station and convenience store surrounded by trees. I can't see the main road from here, but I can hear the cars as they drive past. My gaze sweeps across the building.

There is one security camera, but it's pointed at the front door, which means that nothing that happens in the parking lot will be recorded, so I don't have to buy that out as well.

Since there is no one else here, I don't even bother locking my car as I start towards the store. Winds smelling of damp soil and leaves blow across the asphalt and mix with the faint smell of spilled gasoline. I steer clear of the pumps and instead approach the door.

A small bell tinkles above it as I pull the door open and stride inside. It's a quite small building, but the shelves are stacked tightly to make room for as many products as possible. I glance at the colorful bags of chips that have been mashed together on the shelf right next to the counter as I stop before it.

There is a man about my age behind it, and he is currently searching for something in a cabinet underneath the countertop.

"Be right with you," he calls.

Dull clanks and plastic rustling join the noise from the humming refrigerators as he continues rooting around inside the cabinet.

"Aha!" he says at last, and pops up holding what looks like a new roll of receipt paper.

Then his eyes focus on mine, and the color drains from his face. For a few seconds, he just works his mouth without actually producing any sound. I cock my head as I watch him.

God, I do like it when they squirm like this.

Clearing his throat, he slowly sets down the roll of receipt paper on the scratched wooden counter and drags a hand through his unruly brown hair. "Mr. Huntington. How can I help you?"

"A girl will come here in about..." I push back the sleeve on my suit jacket and glance down at my watch. "Fifty minutes."

The cashier stares at me, confusion flickering in his brown eyes. "I... what?"

"A girl is coming here in fifty minutes." I level a pointed stare at him. "Do try to keep up. I don't like repeating myself."

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir. I... uhm..." He trails off.

“She has blonde hair, brown eyes, and freckles. And she’s wearing jeans, a long-sleeved black shirt, and sneakers.”

“Okay?”

“She will try to buy food, but you won’t sell her any.”

“I won’t?”

“What did I just say about repeating myself?”

“I won’t,” he confirms instead, putting conviction into his voice.

“Good. No matter what she tries to buy, you refuse her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Reaching into my pocket, I slide out my wallet and pull out a couple of hundred-dollar bills. The cashier’s eyes almost bulge out of his head as I set them down on the counter in front of him.

“Here’s for your cooperation.” Pausing with my fingers still on the bills, I lock eyes with him. “And for your discretion. Do you understand?”

His eyes shoot back up to my face, and he nods vehemently.

“Excellent.”

I withdraw my hand, and the cashier immediately scoops up the money.

Turning my back on him, I stroll towards an open fridge with different kinds of sandwiches and salads in plastic containers. I scan the meager selection before picking one of them. It’s nothing more than two triangular pieces of white bread with a sad-looking slice of cheese stuffed between them.

“How much for this?” I ask as I walk back to the counter.

The cashier looks down at the two hundred-dollar bills in his hand before meeting my gaze with uncertain eyes. I just raise my eyebrows expectantly.

“Four dollars and 95 cents,” he replies.

I pull out a twenty-dollar bill and toss it on the counter while I continue towards the door. “Keep the change.”

A ding sounds as he fumbles to get the cash register open while he calls after me, “Thank you, sir.”

Not bothering to reply, I simply push the door open and stride back to the parking lot. Another evening breeze tugs at my suit jacket as I make my way back to my car.

Sliding into the driver seat, I toss the ridiculous sandwich down on the passenger seat.

And then I settle in to wait.

Fifty-three minutes later, my target finally deigns to make an appearance. I sit up straighter as I watch Olivia Campbell trudge down the small dirt road that separates the main road and the parking lot. And she really is *trudging*.

When she left campus, her spine was straight and her posture confident. Now, her shoulders are hunched and her head slumped forward slightly. She is walking with slow and heavy steps. She looks utterly exhausted. I suppose almost two entire days without food will do that to you.

She doesn't even look at her surroundings as she closes the final distance to the door. Pulling it open, she stumbles across the threshold. Then she stops for a few seconds, as if trying to catch her breath. I study the cashier through the windows. My car is parked far enough away that I can barely make out the expression on his face from here.

At first, he greets her with a smile. Then he freezes, and it looks as if his gaze darts towards my car.

Olivia doesn't seem to notice because she is gathering food from some of the shelves.

The cashier looks between her and my car again.

Then Olivia makes her way to the counter and dumps an armful of food on it.

Raising his hands, the cashier says something while shaking his head. Olivia jerks back as if he had physically slapped her. Then she points at the stuff on the counter and pulls out her wallet. The cashier shakes his head again.

Even from this distance, I can see the anger pulsing from her small body.

Her mouth moves while she stabs her finger against the counter repeatedly. Fortunately, the cashier keeps his word and only continues shaking his head and holding up his hands. She slams her hand down on the counter. It makes him jump, but he still refuses to accept her purchase.

For a moment, everything is still.

Then Olivia buries her face in her hands.

A smile slides across my mouth.

She stands like that for another minute while the cashier looks on. Then she lets her arms drop down by her sides. Her chest rises and falls rapidly as she stares at the food still sitting on the counter.

My eyebrows shoot up. Is she going to try to steal it?

Another few seconds pass.

Then she turns around and trudges towards the door. She pushes it open and all but stumbles across the threshold and into the now darkened parking lot.

But even from this distance, I can read every deliciously hopeless emotion on her face. And I love it. Because I want her desperate. I want her broken.

Opening the car door, I slip out and then move around the car before leaning back against the passenger side.

And then I wait for her to notice me.

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OLIVIA

Desperation crashes over me. It's so heavy that I almost drown underneath its cold black weight. I suck in deep breaths as I stagger towards the door, but it feels as though there is not enough oxygen in the air.

God, I'm so hungry. And so exhausted.

Tears prick behind my eyes, threatening to spill out.

I walked all this way, and he refused to sell to me. How could he just refuse me like that? After everything I went through to get here. Hell, I even considered stealing the food. That's how desperate I feel. But I know that in this weakened state, I wouldn't even be able to make it out of the parking lot with my stolen loot. All it would do is ruin my future.

My mind is spinning with fatigue and lack of food, so I barely even feel the cool winds as they hit my face when I stumble back out into the darkness.

Tears well up, and I try to convince myself that it's because of the wind.

It would take too much effort to reach up and wipe the tears away, so I let them blur my vision as I stagger across the asphalt and towards the road. But something appears at the corner of my eye when I move closer, so I quickly blink the tears away and turn towards it. Hoping against hope that it might be a kind stranger who will help me.

My blood freezes as my eyes land on the man casually leaning against the passenger's side door of a black sports car.

"Alexander," I blurt out.

"Hello, Olivia," he says, a smirk playing across his lips. "Is there a problem?"

“You...” Anger burns through my exhaustion, making it disintegrate until only rage remains, and I stalk up to him while stabbing a hand towards the store. “You told him not to sell to me.”

The bastard doesn’t even try to deny it this time. “Yes.”

“You son of a bitch.”

He shakes his head and tuts as if I’m some kind of disobedient child. “Is that really how you want to start this negotiation?”

“Negotiation? I have no intention of negotiating anything with you, you bastard.”

I fish my phone out of my pocket and pull up Google maps before searching for grocery stores near me. But before the results have even finished loading, Alexander snatches my phone out of my hand and peers down at it. Amusement dances across his sharp cheekbones as he looks up and meets my gaze while handing the phone back.

“Another store, huh?” He rakes his eyes up and down my body. “You really are a stubborn one, aren’t you?”

Shoving my phone back into my pocket, I simply turn and take a step towards the road. But his voice stops me before I can take another one.

“Do you really think that you can get there before me?”

Cold dread sluices through my veins. For a few seconds, I barely even dare to breathe. Let alone move. Then I slowly turn back to face the devil in his dark blue suit.

Alexander just watches me with eyebrows raised.

“You wouldn’t,” I manage to press out.

“You clearly don’t know me at all.”

“People need to eat in order to live, Alexander. *I* need to eat.”

“I know.”

I throw my arms out and all but scream, “Why are you doing this to me?”

He straightens from his car. Taking a step closer, he reaches up and trails his fingers along my jaw. It draws an involuntary shiver from my exhausted body.

Winds smelling of damp leaves whirl around us, making my hair flutter behind me.

Alexander tightens his grip on my jaw and locks eyes dripping with authority on me. “Because I need to teach you where you belong.”

“And where is that?”

“On your knees, love.”

The utter power and confidence in his voice vibrates through my bones, and my stomach flips. But before I can say anything, he releases my jaw. I immediately take a half step back in order to put some distance between us.

“Do you want me to let you eat?” he asks. When I don’t immediately reply, his voice drops lower as he adds, “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Yes,” I manage to press out. “Yes, I want to be able to eat.”

“Then you need to show me that you deserve to put something as precious as food in your mouth.”

“I... what?”

“If you can get me off using only your mouth, your card will be working tomorrow.”

My mind refuses to process what he just said. And I’m pretty sure my jaw drops as I just stare at him in silence.

He looks perfectly composed. There is not a wrinkle on his expensive three-piece suit, and his dark brown hair remains perfectly styled even when another gust of cool air sweeps over us. The only thing that gives away his malicious excitement is the wicked gleam in his eyes as he studies me.

“You want me to...” I begin before trailing off.

“Suck my cock,” he finishes for me in a neutral voice. “Yes.”

Shaking my head, I take a step back. “If you force your cock into my mouth, I swear to God, I will bite it off.”

“Force it?” He raises his eyebrows, looking genuinely offended. “I’m not going to force anything into your mouth. I’m simply giving you a choice.”

“A choice?” I throw my arms out. “This is *blackmail*!”

“Blackmail?” He stares me down for a second, as if he can’t believe that I had the audacity to say something like that. “I was being generous, offering you a solution to your problem, and you spit on my mercy?” With a scoff, he turns and starts towards the driver’s side of the car. “Well, I guess I’ll just leave you to it, then.”

My hand shoots out and grabs his wrist before he can leave. “Wait!”

He arches an eyebrow and glances down at the fingers now creasing his impeccable suit. I snatch my hand back. He lifts his eyes to mine.

“Changed your mind?”

War rages inside me. Part of me wants to slap him again. And much harder this time. The other part of me realizes with bleak clarity that I have lost this round. I need to eat. I won't survive if I don't have access to food, and this damn bastard can and will take that away unless I admit defeat right now.

I stare into those calculating eyes for another second. He just looks back at me, as untouchable as a god.

"Yes," I at last force out.

"Well, get to it then."

I glance around the deserted parking lot before meeting his impassive gaze again. "How?"

Before he even opens his mouth, I realize that I know the answer.

A smug smile slides across his lips as he shoots a pointed look at the ground before his feet. "On your knees, love."

Humiliation washes over me. God, I can't believe I'm doing this.

Drawing in a deep breath, I push aside my embarrassment and anger. I only lost one battle. It doesn't mean that I've lost the war.

After bracing myself against another wave of mortification, I lower myself to my knees in front of the smirking bastard. Since he does nothing to unbutton his pants, I hesitantly reach up to do it for him. His eyes track my every move, but he doesn't intervene.

Metal clinks faintly as I unbuckle his belt. Then I slip out the button on his pants and draw the zipper down. He just keeps watching me silently.

A car drives past on the main road, making me snap my head towards it. But it continues past without stopping. I cast a glance over my shoulder. The guy inside the store is nowhere to be seen.

"I would suggest you get started before I withdraw the offer," Alexander drawls.

Offer, my ass. More like threat. Blackmail. Coercion.

But I bite back those snarky words and instead slide my hand underneath his dark underwear and free his cock.

A jolt shoots through me at the size of it.

And for a moment, I just sit there on my knees like an idiot while my fingers remain wrapped around his cock.

"I said mouth only," his voice cuts through the silence, snapping me out of my stupor.

Releasing his length, I let my hands drop down into my lap.

My heart is pounding in my chest.

God, I really, *really* can't believe I'm doing this. I'm actually going to suck a stranger's cock. For food.

Alexander lets out an annoyed sigh, and I know that I'm about to lose this chance, so I rise up onto my knees and take his cock into my mouth.

A low sound comes from his chest. I flick a worried glance at his face, but he has closed his eyes and he doesn't look angry, so I swirl my tongue around his shaft and then suck more.

It's not the first time I've given someone a blowjob, but I'm not exactly an expert either, so I watch the expression on his face as I continue working my lips. As if he can feel me watching him, his eyes snap open and lock straight on mine. Challenge dances in those blue shards of ice as he holds my gaze, as if he doesn't think I can actually make him come.

I narrow my eyes at him and take him deeper into my mouth.

His hand shoots out and grabs my jaw, stopping my movements for a second. His voice pulses with command as he snaps, "Mind your teeth."

Since I have his cock in my mouth, I can't exactly reply. He seems to realize that too because he eventually releases me.

Relaxing my jaw, I start my movements back up again. I hollow my cheeks and suck before drawing back enough to swirl my tongue around his tip, and then I take him deeper again.

A dark moan rolls from his throat, and his eyes shutter.

Smug victory flickers through me. And at that moment, I quite like what I'm doing to him. I like seeing his cold façade crack as I shatter his control little by little and draw pleasure from his body. It makes me feel as if I'm the one who is in control of the situation.

He yanks his hand forward again, but this time, he threads his fingers through my hair instead. I continue sucking and licking, driving him closer and closer to the edge until a groan rips from his chest.

Using his grip on my hair, he holds me firmly in place as release crashes over him. A salty taste fills my mouth as he comes, but because of his tight hold on me, I can't pull my head back.

For another few moments, he keeps me like that. On my knees with his hand in my hair and his cock in my mouth. Then he slowly pulls out.

I immediately get ready to spit his cum all over his expensive shoes, but before I can do it, he slaps his other hand over my mouth. I try to jerk my head back. It only makes him tighten his grip on my hair until pain pulses

through me. The fingers of his other hand dig into my cheek as he leans down closer to my face.

Cruel amusement dances across his lethally handsome face.

"I thought you were hungry." With a vicious smile on his lips, he levels a commanding stare on me while nodding towards my mouth. "Swallow."

With his hand in front of my mouth, I can do nothing except follow his order. While glaring up at him with furious eyes, I swallow his cum.

He chuckles.

Then he takes his hand from my mouth. But instead of simply releasing my hair, he shoves my head down so that I have to yank my hands forward and brace my palms against the ground before his feet in order to stop myself from toppling forwards.

Slowly raising my head, I glare up at him. "And our bargain?"

He slides his cock back into his pants and zips them up before replying, "Your card will be working tomorrow."

A cold weight drops into my stomach as I finally process his words. His *exact* words. "Tomorrow?"

He gives me a knowing smile. "Yes, tomorrow."

Still on my knees, I glance towards the store while dread snakes through my chest. As if on cue, my stomach growls. Just the sound of it makes exhaustion crash back over me until I'm ready to bawl my eyes out. I have to walk an hour back to campus. Without any food.

"But..." Alexander begins while he finishes buckling his belt.

I snap my gaze back to him, hope fluttering its delicate wings in my chest. "But?"

"If you thank me for the privilege of sucking my cock, I might give you something tonight."

My heart stalls. But I hesitate for only a second. I have already survived the humiliation of giving him head in the middle of a dark parking lot. Lying through my teeth and thanking him for it is nothing compared to that.

"Thank you," I say.

He lets out an amused breath. "Surely you can do better than that."

I swallow down a snarky reply and instead press out, "Thank you for allowing me the privilege of sucking your cock."

"Sir."

It takes all my self-control not to leap up and strangle the arrogant asshole. Instead, I draw in a deep breath through my nose before amending,

“Thank you for allowing me the privilege of sucking your cock, *sir*.”

He chuckles. “Good girl.”

Opening the passenger’s side door, he pulls out a small plastic container and tosses it into my lap. I stare down at it. Dumbfounded.

It’s two triangular pieces of white bread. With what looks like a single slice of cheese in between.

“Enjoy,” Alexander says as he saunters around the car and opens the driver’s side door. “You’ve earned it.”

Before I can scrape together my scattered wits, he gets in and starts the car.

I look up from the pathetic excuse of a sandwich and watch as the damn bastard drives away in his black sports car, leaving me there. On my knees. With his cum in my throat. And a fucking cheese sandwich in my lap.

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ALEXANDER

A flash of excitement shoots through my chest as I finally spot that telltale wavy blonde hair that always seems to ripple around her even when there is no wind. Leaning against the wall with my arms crossed, I watch as Olivia exits the canteen and starts down the hall in the other direction. She practically inhaled half of the canteen at breakfast this morning. In fact, she was so distracted by eating that she didn't even notice me watching her. I did watch her, though. I like knowing that the only reason she is allowed to eat is because of my mercy.

Memories from last night swirl through my mind, and blood rushes to my cock in response.

Yesterday was such a memorable evening. After all her posturing and refusal to obey, it took me less than two days to win the first battle. I will forever be replaying that moment in my head. The stubborn tilt of her chin as she informed me that she would not be negotiating with me. The dread that washed over her gorgeous face when she realized that I really would drive to every store and every restaurant in this city just to make sure that she couldn't eat without my permission. And then that beautiful desperation in her eyes as she was forced to admit defeat and submit to me.

But most of all, I remember the feeling of her lips around my cock. I mostly did it to humiliate her, not for my own release, so I hadn't expected to enjoy it as much as I did. But by God, I did.

Still leaning against the wall, I let my eyes slide across Olivia's body again. My cock stirs at the sight of her in those tight jeans. Are they the same ones she wore last night? God, I want to feel her lips around my cock

again. And I want to see her kneel before me again too. She belongs there. On her knees and with my cock in her mouth.

I raise my eyebrows as a group of people suddenly block Olivia's way. She screeches to a halt as well. From this angle, I can only see her back, so I can't read the expression on her face. But her posture stiffens.

The corridor goes deadly silent as everyone else turns to watch.

"Excuse me," Olivia says, her voice now clearly audible in the otherwise quiet hall. "Could you move a little so that I can get past?"

A blond man, who I recognize as one of the other freshmen, crosses his arms and stares her down. "We heard that not only did you try to fuck Huntington for special favors, you also refused to swear allegiance to the university."

Her back goes ramrod straight. "I did *not* try to fuck Alexander."

"Alexander? Do you really think that you're so high and mighty that you're on first name basis with the king of Huntingswell U?"

"I..." She lets out a frustrated noise and waves her arms. "Just get out of the way."

"And now you're trying to give me orders?" He arches an eyebrow at her. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"I don't give a shit."

"You should." He takes a step closer to her. The rest of his group follows. "Because you're a nobody. A *scholarship* student. If you had any idea which families we're from, you would've located those nonexistent manners of yours and shown us some damn respect."

She cocks her head. "So what you're saying is, I'm here because I got a scholarship for being the smartest student in my entire home state and you're here because... your family is rich? And you think *I* should show *you* respect?" A mocking laugh rolls off her tongue. "It's the other way around, sparky. But you'd know that, if you actually had a single braincell inside that large head of yours."

Surprise blows through my chest as I stare at her, my eyebrows raised. Damn, she sure isn't taking any shit. From anyone. I'm almost a bit impressed.

The blond guy, on the other hand, is not impressed. Not in the slightest. Fury flashes across his face and he lurches forward. Grabbing Olivia by the arms, he spins her around while another one from his group opens the door to the supply closet next to them.

I realize that this ambush must have been pre-planned, because they have somehow managed to get their hands on the keys to that supply closet. Only the maintenance staff is allowed to have those.

Olivia fights with everything she has, but given her size, that isn't much in the grand scheme of things.

Cocking my head, I watch as the guy shoves her into the small room. I can't see inside it from this angle, but the noise of clanking cans and clattering mop handles fills the corridor.

"People like you will always be stuck cleaning up after people like us," the blond guy says while his friends chuckle around him. "So *this* is where you belong, bitch."

With a malicious smile on his face, he throws the door shut and uses the borrowed keys to lock it.

A moment later, a weight crashes against it from the other side.

"Fuck you!" Olivia screams from inside the closet.

Then she either kicks the door or pounds her fist against it. The freshmen outside laugh and pat themselves on the back.

Pushing off from the wall, I saunter up to them.

Shock crackles across their features as they notice me, and then they all whip around to face me while casting uncertain glances between me and the door. The smooth slab of wood continues to vibrate as Olivia pounds on it three more times.

"I'm sorry," the blond guy says hesitantly as I stop in front of the door. "Do you disapprove of—"

"No, it's fine," I interrupt. Snapping my fingers, I hold out my hand. "But I'll take it from here."

"Of course." He scrambles to hand over the keys. "Are you sure it's alright that we—"

"Yes." I slide my gaze to him while curling my fingers over the keys in my palm. "Now, leave."

He and his whole group of friends disappear down the hall immediately.

The door has stopped vibrating, and everything is silent inside the room now. A small frown creases my brows as I insert the right key. What is she doing in there? Did she truly give up that quickly?

I unlock the door with a click and pull it open.

Light floods the small dark space, illuminating Olivia's surprised face.

She is standing hunched over, barely half a step in front of me. I flick my gaze down to her fingers and the pins she is holding.

For a second, we just stare at each other in silence.

Then she clears her throat and straightens while letting her hands drop back down by her sides. "Thanks."

Before she can take a step forward, I move so that I'm blocking the doorway. Leaning one shoulder against the doorjamb, I cross my arms. She glares at me and takes a step back.

I nod towards her hands. "Are those lockpicks?"

"No." She shoots me an irritated look. "They're bobby pins."

"That you were using to try to pick the lock?"

She doesn't reply. Only shoves her bobby pins into her pocket and crosses her arms while staring back at me in stubborn silence.

"Do you know how to pick locks?" I push. When she doesn't reply, I add, "The sooner you answer my questions, the sooner you can get out of this closet."

An annoyed noise comes from her throat. Uncrossing her arms, she instead raises her hands and drags them through her now slightly disheveled hair. And I find myself quite liking that messy and disheveled look on her. Though, next time, I want to be the one responsible for it.

"I had a friend back in my hometown," she says at last. "And she believed in the school of life rather than... school."

"I see."

"So, can you move out of the way now?"

I smirk. "I do like it when you ask politely."

"Asshole."

"Not very polite." I shoot her a reprimanding look, which just makes her roll her eyes at me. Heat surges through me, and I have to fight down a sudden impulse to bend her over a table and spank that insolence out of her. Instead, I bait her with, "Did you learn nothing last night?"

She frowns at me. "What happened last night?"

For a moment, I actually believe that she's serious. That what happened last night was so inconsequential that she doesn't even remember it. It makes a very strange cold sensation sluice through my veins. Then I notice the glint in those intelligent brown eyes of hers.

A smile laced with threats curls my lips. "Are you saying that you need me to refresh your memory with a practical demonstration?"

She snorts and flicks her hair behind her shoulder. "I would like to see you try."

Locking eyes with her, I just stare her down for a while. She stares right back. Her chin is even tilted up in that intoxicatingly stubborn way of hers.

When the silence begins to stretch, I wave a hand to indicate the supply closet she is currently trapped in. "I can make this all go away, you know."

Her eyes narrow. "Make what go away?"

"The bullying. The harassment. The dirty looks and the snide remarks."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." I flash her a smile full of challenge. "All you have to do is surrender to me."

She lets out a baffled laugh. "Surrender? Oh honey, I hate to break it to you, but my mama didn't raise a quitter."

That draws an equally baffled laugh from my own chest. Even though I'm shaking my head in disbelief, I can't help but be a little impressed by her resilience.

Switching tactics, I ignore her reply and instead ask, "How was lunch?"

A knowing look blows across her features. "Filling."

"Hmm." I cock my head. "You do realize that I can take that away again just as easily."

Excitement thrums inside me as I wait for her to panic. Wait for fear to wash over her features. For that wonderful desperation to make her submit to me once more.

It doesn't.

Instead, she raises her eyebrows and clicks her tongue. "I see. I thought you were a person who kept his word. Someone who honored his bargains. But I guess I was wrong." She shrugs nonchalantly. "Alright then. Go ahead and take it away. I'll figure it out, and in the meantime, I'll make sure that everyone knows that Alexander Huntington IV welches on his bets."

A flash of stunned surprise hits me in the chest. Did she really just...?

"Now, my next class is about to start," she continues before I can decide how to respond. "So how about you kindly fuck off so that I can get out of this closet?"

That jolts me out of my stupor, and I shake my head to clear it before I give Olivia another wicked smile. "I can. If you're in the mood for another bargain."

Her lips around my cock right now would be the perfect end to this little skirmish.

But the infuriating woman apparently has other plans.

Moving like a viper, she snatches up the fire extinguisher that was leaning against one of the shelves, and then holds it up before her like a weapon. “You have three seconds to move before I use this to ruin that expensive designer suit of yours.”

Shock crackles through my veins. And for a moment, all I can do is stare at her.

“One.”

The audacity. The absolute audacity of this girl.

“Two.”

A disbelieving laugh rolls from my chest as I raise my hands in mock surrender. “Well, I suppose I have no choice when you pull a gun on me like that, love.”

Taking a couple of steps back, I move away from the door. Olivia studies me through narrowed eyes. Amusement pulls at my lips when I watch her edge out of the closet while still holding the fire extinguisher in front of her. She walks backwards until there is enough space between us to make sure that I can’t grab her. Then she slams the fire extinguisher down on the floor and darts away.

From my position by the still open door, I smile as I watch her escape.

This is what I like about her.

Because of who I am, people always back up and bow down whenever I show up. And without any challenges, my life can get so dull sometimes.

But she’s not like that. She doesn’t back down. She’s not intimidated by my power or my wealth. By *me*. She fights and struggles and refuses to go down without a full-out war.

And I do love a challenge.

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OLIVIA

“You probably shouldn’t be seen with me.”

He blinks at me, surprise lighting up his dark blue eyes.

“Unless you want to incur the wrath of God,” I continue. “And by God, I mean Alexander Huntington IV.” I tip my head to the side. “*And* the rest of the school.”

A soft laugh escapes his lips. “I’m not afraid of Huntington. Or the rest of the school. What I am afraid of is failing this class.” He gives me a long-suffering smile. “Again.”

“Well, I suppose we should get started then.”

Paper rustles as I flip open the textbook and turn to the first chapter. I study the man before me as I explain the part he asked about earlier.

Philip is a good guy. He is actually a third-year student, but he failed this history class during both his first and second year. He, just like most of the school, has now heard that I’m one of the scholarship students. And that told him two things. One, I’m really good at studying. And two, I’m in need of money.

The scholarship covers the tuition fee and the cost of all the course literature. However, it doesn’t cover food and rent. Because of the canteen system and the dorms, they assume that all scholarship students will be able to cover such *miniscule* costs. That’s because they are far too rich and have no real sense of what things are worth. So most people like me end up tutoring those rich students so that we can make rent and so that they can pass the courses that they’re barely even qualified for. Win win. Or something.

Though, I *am* grateful that Philip approached me. I thought my plans of tutoring were shot to hell when Alexander made me into undesirable number one. But now, I am finally making money.

The afternoon wears on while Philip and I go through the first few lectures and the upcoming assignment. Around us, people come and go.

Even though the library is full, it doesn't feel packed. Groups of students occupy the clusters of sofas and armchairs by the windows, quietly discussing their own classes. Other students sit alone at the desks arranged in several long lines, their heads bowed over notebooks, and headphones over their ears. And all around, shelves upon shelves of books. It muffles a lot of the sound and creates a very cozy atmosphere.

Once we reach the end of our session, Philip stretches his arms above his head and yawns loudly.

A woman by the table next to us gives him the evil eye, but he doesn't appear to notice. We're sitting opposite each other at a table for four, and I slowly begin to gather up all my books while he leans forward again and rakes his fingers through his thick blond hair.

"I can't believe that I'm getting tutored by a freshman," he comments.

"Hey!" I swat his arm with a notebook before sliding it into my bag. "I can always take my brilliance elsewhere."

He chuckles. Then a serious expression descends on his features. Wariness floods my chest.

"Was it hard?" he asks.

I finish packing up my books before I meet his gaze. "Was what hard?"

"Well, you know." He shrugs, but there's a thoughtful expression on his handsome features. "Having to work so damn hard for everything?"

His question stuns me enough that I just stare at him in silence for a moment. I guess what surprises me the most is the fact that he's even self-aware enough to realize that we've had very different opportunities in life.

"Yes," I answer eventually. "Yes, it was."

"Hmm." He spins a pen on the desk in front of him for a while before looking up to meet my gaze again. "Why do you put up with him?"

"With who?"

"Huntington. I heard about what he did to you at the initiation ceremony. And I saw him corner you in that supply closet earlier today."

"What makes you think I have a choice? I don't exactly have a powerful and influential family who can intervene on my behalf."

“I suppose.” He spins the pen again. “Too bad you can’t just report him.”

“Report him? For what?”

“Bullying? Harassment? Sexual assault?” He shrugs. “I don’t know. Anyway, I should get going.” The chair scrapes loudly against the floor as he stands up, which earns him another evil eye from the dark-haired woman next to us. “I’ll see you again same time tomorrow?”

I nod, a bit distractedly. “Yeah. See you.”

Plans swirl inside my skull as Philip hoists his backpack and makes his way out of the library.

Report him. Now there’s an idea.

Alexander has so much power that it’s not even close to a fair fight between us. If I’m going to even the playing field, I need some more weight in my corner. Alexander might be the student body president, but he is still just a student. This is a university. A university run by actual adults.

Wicked excitement bounces through me as I grab my bag and hurry towards the office for student resources. I shove the door open a bit too forcefully, making the middle-aged woman behind the counter jump up from her chair. With a sheepish smile on my face, I throw out an arm and grab the door before it can hit the wall.

I wince. “Sorry.”

“It’s quite alright,” she says. After smoothening down her light brown hair, she pushes her glasses up her nose and approaches the wooden counter. “What can I help you with, dear?”

“I would like to file a report.”

“Oh. What kind of report?”

“For bullying, harassment, and sexual assault.”

Her eyes soften. “Oh dear. I’m so sorry you’ve had to experience that.” Reaching out, she pats my hand. “I’ll get you one of those forms right away.”

“Thank you.”

Resolve seeps into my spine as I wait for her to retrieve the correct document.

I’ve had it with spoiled rich kids who think that the world is their playground and that everyone else is just there for their enjoyment. It’s time to show them that the real world has consequences.

Behave like an ass, and it goes on your record. Permanently.

A vicious smile settles on my lips.

Oh I can't wait to see Alexander's face when campus security, and probably police, show up to question him.

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ALEXANDER

I have to admit, little Olivia Campbell has balls bigger than most guys on campus. Reporting me for bullying, harassment, and sexual assault? I didn't see that coming.

Murmur fills the pale marble corridor as the door to the lecture hall is pushed open and students start streaming out. I remain where I am, half hidden behind the stone bust of one of our university's most famous professors. The students cast nervous glances at me as they walk past, but no one dares to comment.

At last, Olivia walks across the threshold. She is wearing a black skirt and a cheerful yellow top today, and her hair has been pulled up into a high ponytail. And all I want to do is to just wrap her hair around my fist and yank her head back so that I can reach her throat better. Maybe I'll do just that.

Olivia is staring at something straight ahead, so she doesn't notice me until it's too late. A yelp slips past her lips as I grab her from the side, twist her arm up behind her back, and shove her up against the wall.

She lets out a huff as her chest connects with the cold, hard surface, but before she can recover, I place my other hand between her shoulder blades and push her harder against the wall while still keeping her arm twisted up behind her back.

"You reported me?" I say, my voice low and dark.

A few of the students still in the corridor cast shocked looks in my direction.

"Move along," I snap.

They hurry down the hall immediately.

Olivia presses her free hand against the wall and tries to use it as leverage to push herself away from the cool marble. Needless to say, her strength is no match for mine.

An annoyed noise rips from her throat, and she slams her palm against the wall. "Let me go."

"You reported me," I repeat. "For bullying. Harassment. And sexual assault."

She doesn't reply. I give her two more seconds to do the smart thing. She doesn't. I force her arm higher up her back until a whimper of pain spills from her lips.

"Answer," I order.

"Yes," she blurts out, her cheek still pressed hard against the wall. "Yes, I reported you."

I tut and shake my head. "Bullying and harassment I can get behind. But sexual assault? I quite distinctly remember that you agreed willingly to suck my cock. And even thanked me for it afterwards."

"Willingly?" She practically spits the word. "I told you, it was blackmail!"

"Semantics."

She lets out an angry snarl and tries to shove herself off the wall again. I push her arm farther up her back. Another whimper tears from her throat, and she squeezes her eyes shut and curls her fingers against the white marble.

My cock stirs. God, I love having her at my mercy.

"You can't do this," she snaps. "You can't just do whatever you want. I've reported you now. So good luck explaining the *semantics* of your blackmailing to the police when they come knocking."

Taking my hand from her shoulder blades, I instead brace my forearm against the wall as I step closer to her. I move close enough that I can feel her perfect ass press against my thighs. Her breathing kicks up a notch.

Leaning down, I place my lips next to her ear. "It's cute how you still think normal laws apply to me."

"That report—"

"Has already been burned. Just like any report that is filed against me for any reason."

She goes still. Even her breathing almost stops. Then she blurts out, "What?"

I release my grip on her and step back. For a moment, she just remains like that, leaning against the wall.

Then she slowly turns around and meets my gaze. “They burned my report?”

“Yes.”

“But...”

I spread my arms to indicate the building around us. “Do you really think that people here will save you? I could shoot you in the head right in this corridor, and people would rush here and clean up the blood just to make sure that I don’t slip on it.”

Her eyes widen, and she tries to take a step back only to bump into the wall again. But then that steel returns to her gaze and she shakes her head at me. “No. The world doesn’t work like that.”

“My world does.”

A harsh laugh rips from her throat. “You’re so fucking full of yourself.”

“Really? Would you like me to illustrate just how powerless you are against me?”

Before she can answer, I grab her and throw her over my shoulder. After two seconds of stunned shock, she starts kicking and screaming. People around us turn to stare, but no one intervenes.

Cool September winds caress my face as I shove open the main doors and stride out into the courtyard beyond. Olivia continues trying to fight me, but I keep my arm around her body like a steel band. She’s not going anywhere.

While setting course for the flagpole in the middle of the open space, I slip my other hand into one of my pockets and pull out the handcuffs I brought. I’ve had this revenge scheme planned since I found out that she tried to report me yesterday.

I set her down as I reach the pole, but slide my hand down to her wrist.

“What are you?” she growls as she straightens. “A fucking caveman who...”

She trails off as a metallic click sounds. Disbelief washes over her features as she snaps her gaze down to her handcuffed wrist. Using her moment of stunned disbelief, I yank her other arm behind her and then shackle that wrist as well. Since the flagpole is now between her arms, it leaves her trapped there.

“You...” For a few seconds, she just stares down at her own body while her mouth hangs open in an adorable little o. Then her eyes lock on mine, and fury burns through them. “What the fuck? What in the actual fucking fuck!”

“Watch your mouth.”

Her eyes widen even more as she stares at me. “Watch my mouth?” Metal rattles and clanks as she yanks against the handcuffs, making them bang against the flagpole. “Watch my mouth! You are insane!” Whipping her head from side to side, she looks at the other people standing in the courtyard. “Do something!”

“I told you, they won’t help you.” I close the distance between us in one quick stride. Raising my hand, I draw my fingers along her jaw in an almost loving gesture before I grip it tightly and level a hard stare on her. “So, go ahead. Scream for help. No one will save you. And do you know why?”

She glares at me as if she can kill me with her furious eyes alone. I relax my grip on her jaw and instead use my thumb to caress her cheek. It draws a shudder from her body, and her eyes flutter for a second. Then they snap open again, and she goes back to glowering at me.

I draw my hand down her throat, lightly caressing the side of her neck with my thumb. Another shiver rolls down her spine.

“And do you know why?” I ask again.

“Because you’re a psychopath?” she offers, a fake smile on her lips.

My hand tightens slightly around her throat. I lift my other one to gesture at the university around us. “No. Because I can have everyone here fired or expelled within minutes. I can ruin people’s entire lives with one phone call.”

“How very evil overlord of you.”

I draw my hand downwards and then trace my fingers over her collarbones. “Perhaps.”

She yanks against the handcuffs again. “You can’t do this.”

My fingers move towards the back of her neck, and as I caress that spot, her eyes flutter in that intoxicating way again. So I grab her hair and wind it around my fist, forcing her head back and making her expose her throat to me before I lean down to whisper my next words against her lips. “I can do whatever I want, love. Because my family owns this entire city.”

She draws in a shuddering breath.

Then I abruptly release her hair and step back. While dusting my hands off, I shrug and flash her a knowing look. “But I can be persuaded to free you from those handcuffs.”

Her eyes narrow into slits. “If...?”

“If you suck my cock again. Right here. Handcuffed to that pole. In front of all these people. Then everyone will know that you really are my bitch.”

“Fuck you!”

I lift my shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. “I was only asking for a blowjob, but sure we can go with that instead if you want.”

“You are unbelievable!” Metal clanks as she yanks violently against the handcuffs again. “I have never met a more arrogant, domineering—”

“Is that a no then?” I interrupt.

“Yes, that’s a no, you asshole.” She raises her voice until she’s practically screaming the words. “I wouldn’t suck your tiny little dick again even if my life depended on it.”

A vicious smile curls my lips. Tiny little dick, huh?

Moving a step closer, I take her chin in a punishing grip. Then I lean forward and slant my lips over hers, just shy of touching, before speaking my next words directly against her mouth. “I’ll remember that you said that.” I release her and instead give her cheek two brisk pats as I pull back. “Well, good luck then.”

Angry cursing follows me as I abruptly turn around and stride away. It is accompanied by clanking and rattling as Olivia bangs the handcuffs against the pole again. I let out a low chuckle.

Now, all I have to do is to go home and wait for a phone call. No one out here will help Olivia out of her predicament, which means that she will eventually break and beg someone to call me and tell me that she has changed her mind.

I love how hard she tries to fight.

But against someone like me, she will always lose.

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OLIVIA

S mug victory still sparkles inside my soul as I roll out of bed and stretch my arms above my head. I can see the scene play out in my mind. In about an hour, Alexander will swagger into that courtyard, expecting to find me still handcuffed to the pole, sobbing and ready to beg him for mercy.

A chuckle escapes my lips. I can't believe that he thought that would work. Wasn't he paying attention earlier? He can never win a war against someone like me.

I shake my head at Alexander's folly as I gather up my towel and toiletries so that I can head to the shower. Casting a glance over my shoulder, I check to make sure that I haven't forgotten anything while I open the door into the corridor.

But my movements come to an abrupt halt as I slam into something hard. Confusion ripples through me as I turn my head back and stare at the surprise roadblock.

My eyes widen.

Shit.

Alexander Huntington is standing right outside my door, blocking the way out. He is wearing a three-piece suit in a dark gray color, and his pale eyes gleam with wickedness as he cocks his head and looks down at me. Detaching myself from his hard, muscular body, I stumble a step back and drop my towel and toiletries while I try to wrap my head around what is going on. Alexander follows, forcing me to back farther into the room.

A cold feeling spreads through my chest as he closes the door behind his back.

“You can’t be in here,” I blurt out.

The moment the words have left my mouth, I regret them. I might as well have screamed to the whole world that his unexpected appearance threw me off my game.

He flashes me a knowing smile. “I thought I told you yesterday that I can do whatever I want.” Sunlight falls across his face, making his eyes glitter, as he advances on me with the slow and careful moves of a predator. “Or perhaps you would like another demonstration?”

At last, my mind finishes piecing together my scattered wits, and I pull confidence back around me like a shield. Raising my chin, I stop retreating and instead shoot him a mocking grin. “Ah yes, because that worked out so well for you yesterday.”

He continues advancing even though I’m no longer backing away, so after a few strides, he’s standing so close to me that I can feel his chest brush against mine when he breathes. Without thinking, I edge a step back. He smirks but doesn’t close the distance again.

Instead, he studies my face intently. “How did you get out of the handcuffs?”

“I dislocated my thumb and then slipped out of them.”

Surprise, and... something else, flickers in his eyes for a second. Then his gaze shoots down to my hands, and before I can react, he has grabbed both of my wrists and moved them up in front of his face. I yank against his grip but it’s no use. I will never be able to win in a battle of physical strength, so I just stand there while he studies my hands with narrowed eyes.

After another couple of seconds, he raises his gaze to my face instead. “No, you didn’t.”

I just give him a nonchalant shrug in reply.

“How did you get out of the handcuffs?”

A smirk slides across my lips. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Olivia...” My name rumbles out of his chest like a threat.

I just continue smirking. “Alexander.”

“You have three seconds to tell me how you did it.”

“Or what?”

He rakes his gaze up and down my body. Since I just got out of bed, I’m only wearing a t-shirt and panties, but under the scrutiny of his gaze, I suddenly feel as if I’m completely naked. I try to back away, but Alexander

is still keeping my wrists trapped so I only manage half a step. He immediately closes the distance again.

“Or...” He drags his gaze back up to my face. “I’ll haul you back out to the flagpole and handcuff you there again. Except this time, I’ll strip you of this shirt and these panties as well and leave you there naked and handcuffed. And then I’ll stand there watching you the whole time so that you can demonstrate exactly how you got out last time.”

My heart flips in my chest at the thought of being naked and handcuffed in front of him.

“So unless that’s something you’re secretly craving, I suggest you answer the question,” he finishes.

Question? What question? My mind took a detour down insanity lane, and now it feels as if I’m just spinning uncontrollably inside a wind tunnel while trying frantically to grab something solid.

Before I can get my mind back on track, Alexander blows out an exasperated sigh. “Three seconds have long since passed, love. But I suppose I do prefer practical demonstrations anyway.”

My mind snaps back into the present as he spins me around and shifts his hold on my wrists. Using the moment, I yank them out of his grip and bolt for the door.

I sprint across the room, and my fingers have almost reached the handle when strong arms wrap around my waist. A yelp rips from my throat as I’m lifted off my feet. I flail my arms as Alexander spins us around and then throws me face down on the bed.

The mattress bounces underneath me, and I let out a huff as I slam into it chest first.

Before I can push myself up, Alexander climbs onto the bed and straddles me. While settling his weight on my ass, he grabs my wrists once more and twists my arms up behind my back. My hair fell across my face when I landed, so I desperately shake my head to try to get the blonde waves away from my eyes so that I can see what’s happening. It only serves to make more of it slide down across my cheek.

Cool metal wraps around my wrists as Alexander snaps a pair of handcuffs shut, trapping my arms behind my back.

I suck in a sharp breath.

Then his hands disappear from my skin, but he remains straddling me on the bed. I start as his fingers suddenly appear against my cheek. He

gently brushes my hair away from my face and hooks it behind my ear.

My heart is pounding so hard that I swear I can hear it through the mattress.

With one cheek still pressed against the bed, I try to glance over my shoulder so that I can see the expression on his face. But from this angle, it's impossible.

"I quite like you handcuffed and helpless underneath me," he comments in a tone I can't entirely read.

I scoff. "Shocker."

He trails a finger down my spine, and I swear I can feel the heat of him even through the fabric of my shirt. It draws an involuntary shudder from my body, and I press my thighs together.

For another few moments, he just remains like that, and I wonder what he's doing.

Then, without warning, he climbs off the bed and grabs me by the shoulders, pulling me up as well. After spinning me around so that I'm facing him, he unceremoniously reaches up to grab the collar of my shirt with both hands.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get started then," he says, and moves as if to rip my shirt open just like last time.

I jerk back, and the sudden move makes the fabric slide out of his hands. "No, wait."

He advances on me while I desperately try to back away. A flash of panic shoots through my spine. I can't let him handcuff me naked to the flagpole for everyone to see. I can survive a lot, but I really don't want the whole university to see me naked, *again*, if I can help it.

My back bumps into the wall next to my bed a second later, and Alexander is immediately there to cage me in again. I try to slip past him, but his hands shoot upwards and grab my collar again. Much more firmly this time. I try to pull away once more, but this time his grip on my shirt doesn't budge.

"No, wait," I repeat just as his fingers tighten on the fabric.

To my surprise, he actually does wait. Stopping with his hands still gripping my collar, he arches an eyebrow at me in silent question.

"I'll show you," I press out. "I'll show you how I got out of the handcuffs."

"Yes, you will. Out there in the courtyard. Naked."

“No.” Shaking my head, I try to back away, but there is no more space to do so. “No, I can show you here. I can show you right here.”

“I gave you that chance earlier. You didn’t take it.”

His fingers tighten around my collar again, and I know that I only have one second before he rips my shirt open.

“You messed with my head,” I blurt out.

Surprise flickers in his eyes, and he pauses.

“You being here in my bedroom, talking about getting me naked and handcuffed, it messed with my head.” It’s the truth. And I’m pretty sure it’s the only thing that will save me right now. “I was going to tell you how I did it, but because of that, I just lost track of what was happening. And before I could get my head on straight, your deadline had already passed.”

Silence descends on my small room. Birds chirp in the bushes outside the window, and sunlight streams in, painting the opposite wall with shifting shadows as winds rustle the branches.

“I see,” Alexander says eventually.

There is a neutral mask on his face, so I can’t read his emotions. But I decide to keep pushing now that I’ve gained a foothold. “So how about a deal? Instead of telling you, I’ll show you how I did it. Right here in my bedroom. And then you’ll leave.”

Cocking his head, he studies me in silence for a few seconds. It makes me feel as if I’m a mouse cornered by a massive predator. And this time, I’m sincerely hoping that he wants to play with his food.

As if Alexander can read the emotions on my face, he flicks a glance up and down my body before meeting my gaze again. Then a smile laced with arrogance slides across his lips. “Say please.”

“Please.”

He just raises his eyebrows expectantly.

If my hands hadn’t been handcuffed behind my back, I might have slapped him again. Instead, I swallow down the flash of annoyance and force out, “Please, sir.”

He grins. It’s smug and victorious and makes me want to knee him in the balls. It takes all of my willpower not to.

“Well, I’m nothing if not merciful.” Finally releasing my collar, he takes a step back and then jerks his chin. “Go ahead then. Show me.”

I hold his gaze, glaring up at him in silent defiance, for another moment before I slip away from the wall and instead move towards the skirt that I

was wearing yesterday. When I got back to my room, I tossed it on the desk chair, but it must have tumbled down at some point because it's now lying on the floor.

Stifling an annoyed sigh, I move so that I'm standing with my back to it and then lower myself to my knees so that I can reach it.

Alexander moves so that he's standing right in front of me. Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he looks down at me kneeling there while amusement dances across his sharp cheekbones. I shoot him a murderous look as I move my handcuffed hands over the skirt until I find the pocket I was aiming for. After a few tries, I manage to fish out the pair of bobby pins I kept in there.

Once I have them, I immediately rise to my feet again. Alexander lets out an amused breath, but thankfully doesn't provoke me further.

Since I promised him that I'd show him, I turn around so that my back is to him instead. And then I use the pins to pick the lock on the handcuffs.

It opens with a soft click after a minute.

Sliding the manacles off my wrists, I turn around and hold them up in front of Alexander's face. "Like that."

If I didn't know better, I would almost think he looks a bit impressed.

Then realization blows across his features. "The supply closet."

After the incident when the other students tried to lock me in there, I've begun carrying a few pins in my pockets wherever I go just in case they try something like that again.

"Yes," I answer, and arch an eyebrow at him. "I thought you considered yourself intelligent, so imagine my surprise when you forgot that I know how to pick locks."

"Careful now."

"You're the one who made a mistake. I just pointed it out."

He curls his fingers around the handcuffs and takes them from me. Schemes gleam in his eyes as he spins the manacles around his finger before gripping them fully in his hand. "I suppose I'll just have to position you differently the next time I handcuff you."

"The next time?"

"Yes."

A shiver courses through my body at the way he is looking at me. My mouth suddenly feels very dry, and I have to work my tongue around it before I can manage to say, "You promised to leave after I showed you."

“Yes, I did.”

“I’ve shown you now.”

“Yes, you have.”

He still makes no move to leave. Standing there in front of me, he is studying me as if he’s trying to read my very soul. His gaze burns across my skin, and I have to resist the urge to back away. I once again become acutely aware of the fact that I’m practically half-naked when he slowly slides his gaze down my bare legs. I shift my weight.

When he meets my eyes again, there is a sly smile on his mouth. I stiffen as he reaches a hand up to my face, but he only draws two fingers along my jaw.

“I’ll see you soon, love,” he says.

And before I can catch my breath again, he spins on his heel and strides out of my room without a second look back.

Stumbling backwards, I collapse onto my desk chair and rake a hand through my hair.

My heart is still slamming against my ribs.

Alexander Huntington should not be affecting me like this. Because if I let him get under my skin in this way, I will definitely, *definitely*, lose this war.

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ALEXANDER

Steam rises above the cup in lazy circles as I pour the coffee into it. Since it's Sunday, I don't have any classes to attend, so I take my time eating the breakfast that my housekeeper has prepared for me. While the butter melts on my toast, I reach for the bowl of fruit salad and pile some of the colorful pieces on my plate.

Sunlight falls in through the windows, slanting over the row of hedges outside, and illuminates the kitchen. I stare out the window, as if I can see all the way across campus, while I drum my fingers against the smooth mahogany tabletop.

I should be studying today, but I've been having trouble concentrating lately. Technically, I could fail all of my classes and still get my law degree. But I don't want to do that. When I leave this university and start my career for real, I need to know what I'm doing. If I just get the degree without putting in any of the work, I'll just be at a severe disadvantage later because I won't know how to actually do my job. And that is something I simply cannot accept. I need to be in control. And that means that I do need to study.

But lately, I've been feeling... restless.

That worries me. I don't like feeling this unfocused. And it's all because of *her*.

I haven't seen Olivia since I ambushed her in her dorm Friday morning, but she still keeps invading my mind. I have to admit, I find her rather fascinating.

People from every social class usually fall over themselves trying to get on my good side. And people from her economic background in particular.

But she doesn't.

She isn't trying to please me. She doesn't fear me either. And as far as I can tell, she doesn't even seem to envy me.

Instead, she's simply full of stubborn defiance. It's rather intriguing. And it makes me want to keep playing with her. To see how much she can take before she waves the white flag. And to see what she's like when she finally breaks.

A crunching sound fills my ears as I take a bite of my toast.

I could have Olivia expelled tomorrow if I wanted to, but I don't want to resort to that. It might be the thing that makes her surrender to me, but if it doesn't break her, it will just end our game prematurely. And I don't want to risk that.

What if I—

My phone vibrates on the table, startling me out of my schemes. I glance down at the screen and frown when I see Benedict's name there. Then I remember that it's Sunday.

Swallowing my piece of toast, I take a sip of coffee before picking up the phone.

"Yes?" I say.

"What do you mean 'yes'?" Benedict huffs on the other end of the line. "Is that any way to greet your precious little brother?"

I roll my eyes. "Ah, my apologies. Good morning, Benedict. It's so nice to hear your voice. How are you doing?"

"That's much better."

"I was being sarcastic."

"Hey, don't ruin my perfect moment of familial bliss."

I blow out an amused breath and shake my head before popping a grape into my mouth. "How's the internship?"

A groan answers me on the other end.

While eating a few pieces of kiwi too, I reply, "That bad, huh?"

"I'm bored out of my mind, Four. We just do the same thing day in and day out. Every day of the week."

"That's usually what people do when they work."

He groans again. "I'm not cut out for this."

I tip my head to the side in silent acknowledgement. He really isn't cut out for normal things. In fact, I've never met anyone who gets bored as easily as my dear brother.

He's only twenty-one, so he should technically be starting his second year here at Huntingswell U, but he stopped attending classes after the first semester. And by the end of the first year, he almost set fire to his house while experimenting with a bunch of highly flammable materials just because he was bored.

So our father, the great Alexander Huntington III, arranged for him to do a year-long internship instead. It has only been a few weeks since he started, but apparently, he is once again bored out of his mind.

"So, what are you going to do?" I ask.

"I don't know." I can hear him fidgeting with stuff through the phone. "But dad says I need to stick it out at least until the end of the year."

"Wow, tough crowd."

"Tell me about it. Anyway, how are you doing? I know the initiation ceremony was last week. Was it fun?"

Olivia Campbell's beautiful face flashes in front of my eyes. First the image of her staring me down while everyone else knelt and swore loyalty during the ceremony. And then her flustered face from two days ago. My cock stirs at just the memory of how she looked when she was handcuffed underneath me as I straddled her on her bed.

Pushing aside the images, I reply, "Yeah."

"So...? Anything interesting happen? Any schemes going?"

"Not really."

"Don't try to bullshit me, Four." His voice is laced with both reprimand and amusement. "I know you. You're always playing games with people. Scheming and manipulating. So, what's going on?"

I push a strawberry around my plate while considering. Part of me wants to keep Olivia all to myself. But Benedict and I made a deal. After mom died, we swore that we would never drift apart. That we would always stay in touch and be there for each other. It's why he calls me every Sunday.

Releasing a long exhale, I put down my fork and instead run my hand through my hair while leaning back in my chair. "One of the freshmen refused to swear allegiance."

"Seriously?" He sounds as shocked as I was. "Has that ever happened before?"

"Not on my watch."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm trying to break her."

He chuckles. “Naturally. And how’s it going?”

“She’s.... more stubborn than I expected.”

“Alright, now you really need to tell me all about this girl and what you’re doing with her.”

I heave a deep sigh, because I can’t really put into words what is going on between me and Olivia. At least not yet.

So instead, I decide to distract my inquisitive brother by effortlessly changing the topic to his always very chaotic love life. It works.

But as he launches into a thorough explanation of his latest escapades, Olivia’s face floats back in front of my vision again. And the more I think about her, about that defiant tilt of her chin, about the intelligence in her eyes, the hidden talents like lockpicking that she possesses, and the sheer resilience that she’s showing, the more I want to force her to come crawling back to me and surrender.

Olivia Campbell is affecting me in a way I hadn’t expected. Making me obsessed in a way I can’t afford.

And I will make her submit to me if it’s the last thing I do.

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OLIVIA

Nothing happened all weekend. It's almost disconcerting. After Alexander ambushed me in my dorm room, he has kept his distance. And all he has done today is to just lean against walls, with his arms crossed and a nonchalant expression on his face, while he watches me get harassed by other students. As if he is somehow suddenly content just watching others bully me. But that doesn't quite seem like his style, so it makes me feel as if he's simply gearing up for something big.

I glance over my shoulder while also trying to eat the chicken parm that I bought. Students talk loudly at their tables while they eat their own food. I scan their faces in the gray light that falls in from the overcast sky outside the windows. But Alexander is thankfully nowhere to be seen.

The tension in my shoulders ease a bit, and I begin to actually taste what I'm eating instead of just inhaling it.

Voices, laughter, and clinking utensils fill the high-ceilinged canteen. None of it comes from my table. Well, maybe some faint dings that my fork makes when I stab it into the bowl of pasta. But nothing else.

A hint of regret blows through my chest. Maybe I made a mistake. When I saw Alexander's arrogant face, all I wanted to do was to provoke him by poking a hole in his narcissistic bubble and show him that the world doesn't belong to him. But now as I sit here all alone, eating while also trying to watch my back, I can't help but feel that I made a stupid mistake in challenging him.

This was not what I had expected my time at Huntingswell U to be like. Half of the students are openly bullying me. The other half doesn't dare to

even look in my direction so that they won't incur Alexander's wrath as well.

I heave a deep sigh as I finish my meal. This was supposed to be my great future. Attending one of the most prestigious universities in the country and studying history, which I've always been passionate about, while making wonderful new friends and having fun experiences. But instead, I'm carrying lockpicks everywhere I go in case someone tries to lock me in a supply closet or handcuff me to a flagpole.

Raising my hands, I rake them through my hair and expel another sigh. Fucking hell.

But it's too late for regrets now. What has been done cannot be undone. All I have to do is to just keep at it until Alexander finally loses interest and moves on. Because he must eventually lose interest. People like him always grow bored of their toys and then decide to pursue a shiny new plaything instead.

With my resolve strengthened again, I push up from the table and head for the door. I still have half of the lunch break left before my next class, and I want to get some air to clear my head before then.

While adjusting my backpack on my shoulder, I open the door and step out into the gray light. Cool air washes over me like a silken blanket. Closing my eyes, I draw in a deep breath smelling of damp woods and wet stone. Calm returns to my body.

Feeling a bit more like myself again, I open my eyes and start towards one of the benches by the fountain.

I don't even make it one step before a hand is slammed over my mouth.

I yelp as I'm hauled sideways and into the corner next to the doors, but the noise is muffled by the hand covering my mouth so no one looks in my direction. Or at least I don't think anyone does. It's hard to tell because a group of people form a ring around me, blocking both my view and my escape route, as they throw me up against the cold stone wall.

"Olivia Campbell," says a tall and muscular man with short blond hair and gray eyes.

I immediately recognize him as Thomas, the leader of the basher's faction. The other men around him are unfamiliar, but I'm assuming that they belong to his faction as well because they're all built like boxers.

My heart drops into my stomach. Did someone pay these people to beat me up?

I flick my gaze from side to side, looking for a way out. There is none. I'm trapped in the corner between the entrance and the outer wall, and seven muscular men form an impenetrable wall between me and the rest of the courtyard.

"I hear you're a history major," Thomas says from where he's standing in the middle of their semi-circle. "And a scholarship student, which means that you must be smart too."

I can barely hear over the rapid heartbeat thrumming in my ears, but I manage a, "I guess."

My mind spins as I try to process what's happening while also figure out a way to escape. But if they were here to beat me within an inch of my life, they wouldn't be talking to me. Right?

"The paper that's due on Wednesday," he continues. "You're going to write it for me."

"I..." This was not at all how I had expected this conversation to play out. "What?"

His gray eyes harden. "You heard me."

"Yes, but well..." Shaking my head, I stare up at him in confusion. "Are you even in that class? I haven't seen you once at the lectures."

The dark-haired guy to his right chuckles. "That's because he took that class as a freshman, but he's failed this particular assignment."

"Three times now," the one on the left adds.

"Shut up," Thomas growls. After casting sharp looks at his subordinates, he levels a hard stare on me. "The point is, I really need to pass it this time, so you're gonna write it for me."

"No," I blurt out.

Shadows pass over his angular features. And it's not just because of the thick gray clouds covering the heavens. A cool wind whirls through the courtyard, and I have to suppress a shiver that isn't entirely caused by that gust. Thomas is looking at me as if he might bash my face in any second, but I raise my chin anyway.

"If I'm caught cheating for you, I'll be expelled too," I explain.

"Then don't get caught."

"I can't risk it." Desperation washes over me as I shake my head. "This is my future on the line. I can't..."

"You don't have a choice."

I fling my arms out in exasperation. "The paper is due in less than two days! I spent half of last week plus the entire weekend writing mine!"

He blows out an annoyed breath through his nose and then jerks his chin.

Immediately, two of his guys lurch forward and grab me. Panic crackles through me as I try to fight them off while Thomas stalks up to me.

"No, wait, wait," I blurt out.

But he doesn't stop.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I brace myself for the pain that's about to come.

It doesn't.

Surprise clangs through me as I feel my backpack being jostled instead. I snap my eyes open again right as Thomas pulls out two of my history books from my bag. While holding them with one hand, he pulls out a lighter from his pocket and flicks it on.

Ice washes through my veins.

"No." The word is barely more than a whisper. I yank against the two men's hold on me while their leader slowly moves the flame closer to my books. "Don't."

Those course books are worth hundreds of dollars, and the only reason I could afford them is because it was included in my scholarship. But if those get destroyed, I won't get new ones. And I sure as hell don't have enough money to buy them myself.

Malice shines in Thomas's eyes as he moves the flame along the length of the book. It's not close enough to set it on fire. Yet. But it's close. Far, far too close.

"You will write that paper for me," he repeats, his voice hard.

"Yes," I blurt out. "Yes, I'll write it for you. Now, please put down the lighter."

"And it will be finished before the end of the day on Wednesday."

"Yes. Yes. Please, put the lighter down."

"And it will be good enough to make sure that I finally pass the course."

"Yes, it will. I promise. Now, please..."

He says nothing. Only continues holding the lighter underneath the books. My heart stalls when it looks as though he might actually set the books on fire anyway. I desperately need those course books if I'm going to pass the class myself. If he destroys them, I'll have to beg someone else to

lend me theirs. And with the precarious position I'm in thanks to Alexander, no one will dare to do it. My pulse thrums in my ears.

Then he flicks the lighter off.

Relief crashes over me like a massive wave, and a sigh escapes my throat.

"Good," Thomas says.

A thud sounds as he tosses the books to the stones before my feet. Anger spikes through me at the careless way he handles them, but I bite my tongue.

For a few moments, he only watches me, as if waiting to see whether I'll dare to curse him for it. I look back at him but say nothing.

He lets out a low chuckle and then jerks his chin.

His goons release my arms and return to his side. With one final smirk in my direction, he turns and strides away with his people flanking him.

Crouching down, I pick up my precious books and gently dust them off. I turn them over and inspect every side to see how much damage the idiot did to them. One corner is a bit creased now, and some pages look a bit ruffled. But other than that, they appear mostly unharmed.

Fury burns through my soul as I stare after that damn brute.

Does he really think that I will bend that easily?

Oh I'm going to make him regret this.

Dearly.

Because just like Alexander, this guy has no idea who he is messing with.

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ALEXANDER

A crumpled-up sandwich wrapper hits her in the temple. It bounces off her head and lands on the table before rolling over the edge and falling to the floor next to her white sneaker.

“Ohh, I’m sorry,” a guy calls from the table on her left. “I thought you were a trash can. My bad.”

His friends burst out laughing. Some of them thump the table as they continue howling with laughter, while one of them slaps the guy on the back. He is grinning from ear to ear.

I slide my gaze back to Olivia. Studying her face, I wait for her to snap. Wait for anger to flash across her beautiful features. For her to shoot to her feet, whirl around to face the other table, and scream at them.

She doesn’t.

In fact, she doesn’t even react at all. Without so much as a glance in their direction, she simply continues eating her salad as if nothing has happened.

“Easy mistake to make...” a woman joins in. She’s sitting next to the guy who threw the wrapper, and there’s a malicious glint in her pale eyes as she looks at Olivia. “Since she belongs with the trash.”

Still, Olivia just keeps eating. With her back straight and chin up, she looks like a queen who simply cannot be bothered with the opinions of peasants.

A thrill races down my spine as I watch her. And at that moment, I have to admit that I respect her strength. It also makes me want to bend her to my will even more.

Pushing aside my empty plate, I set course for Olivia’s table.

The people who were harassing her snap their gazes to me. But when they realize that I'm coming for her and not them, they sit back in their chairs and grin.

Even though Olivia continues eating, I can see her eyes steal a glance in my direction. She knows I'm coming, but she does nothing about it.

The wooden chair scrapes loudly against the floor as I pull it out. She still doesn't look at me.

All around us, the entire canteen seems to be holding its breath. I shoot them a sharp look.

Utensils clatter and voices stutter as they all immediately go back to their own food and their own conversations. I make sure no one is staring in our direction before I at last sit down on the chair across the table from Olivia.

"Can I help you with something?" she drawls, still not looking up from her now half-eaten Caesar salad.

"How kind of you to ask," I reply.

Reaching forward, I pluck a crouton from her plate before I start to pull back.

Her arm shoots up from the table, and she slaps my hand. Hard. It makes the crouton fly from my fingers and tumble back down to her plate.

For a second, time stops moving entirely. We just sit there opposite one another, staring at each other with equally stunned surprise.

Then reality comes crashing back again.

I slowly look down at my hand and then the crouton before locking eyes with Olivia once more.

Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open, as if she is just now realizing what she did. Alarm blows across her features. Then her gaze darts around the canteen, as if to check whether someone else saw what she did, before she meets my eyes again.

"I, uhm..." she begins.

She trails off and flicks a glance at the tables around us once more. She must realize that I don't tolerate this kind of blatant disrespect. Especially not when we have an audience. Fortunately for her, I had already made sure that no one dares to look in our direction, so her little stunt went unnoticed. But I sure as hell am not going to tell her that.

Holding her gaze, I reach forward and pick up the crouton again. This time, she lets me. Her brown eyes betray nothing as she watches me pop the

crouton in my mouth and then slowly chew it.

The crunching sound fills the silence.

Once I've swallowed, I just sit there. Watching her. Waiting to see what she will do. She doesn't look worried anymore. In fact, I can't read any emotions on her face at all.

"What made you this stubborn?" I ask eventually.

She blinks, the only evidence that she's surprised by the question. But she recovers quickly and instead lifts her shoulders in a casual shrug. "Having to work for things my whole life."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." She flashes me a smile full of challenge. "I'm sure you're not familiar with the concept."

I mirror her sharp smile. "Careful now. I could crush you without even breaking a sweat."

"Well, you've tried, and it hasn't worked so far."

"Tried?" I raise my eyebrows at her. "I'm just playing around."

"Oh really?"

I shoot her a patronizing look. "Come on. You must realize that this is just a hobby for me. A pet project."

"How sad. Don't you have any real hobbies?"

Surprise flits through me. Hobbies? Do I have any real hobbies?

"What do you even do in your free time?" She arches an eyebrow at me. "Do you just play mind games with people?"

I barely manage to stop myself from replying, yes. Because that is exactly what I do. It's what I have always done. I play games with people, making them do whatever I want so that I can feed off the control that it gives me.

It takes everything I have not to frown. Do I seriously not have any actual hobbies?

"I see." She flicks a glance up and down my body in a highly dismissive way. "So you're just a lonely little rich boy with no real hobbies or purpose in life, huh?"

A stab of unexpected pain sears through my chest.

It's followed by a burning wave of anger. It infuriates me that she managed to hit so terrifyingly close to home with her taunts. How could this girl, this *nobody*, manage to read me like that?

My hand shoots forward and I snatch her still half-full plate off the table in one fluid motion while I get to my feet. Shock pulses in her eyes, and she leaps up from her chair.

Lurching forward, she tries to take the plate back. I wrap my free hand around her throat when she gets close. While holding her firmly in place, I lock hard eyes on her and then slowly tip the plate to the side.

Lettuce and croutons and pieces of chicken tumble over the edge and fall to the floor in a rain of food.

The rest of the canteen is staring at us now. And this time, I don't mind.

Rage pulses in Olivia's brown eyes, and she tries unsuccessfully to pry my hand away from her throat. I'm not squeezing it. Just holding her there to make sure she understands who's in control.

Once all the food has landed on the smooth marble floor in front of my shoes, I set the plate down on the table again. Then I move so that I'm standing almost behind Olivia instead. With my hand gripping her neck hard, I push downwards.

She tries to fight it, tries to get my hand off and remain upright, but her strength is no match against mine.

Eventually, her knees buckle and she crashes down on the floor.

With my hand still on the back of her neck, I force her down farther until her forehead is pressed against the scraps of lettuce that cover the ground. Her palms are flat against the floor, and she uses them to try to push herself up again, but I keep her mercilessly trapped.

Leaning down over her, I speak in a low and dark voice. "Since you're such a rude little girl who apparently lacks basic manners, you can eat off the floor like the uncivilized creature that you are."

"Fuck you," she snarls.

I push her face down harder, forcing her to turn her head so that her cheek is flat against the messy floor. Sauce is smeared across her forehead, and pieces of lettuce are stuck in it.

"I have no desire to fuck you, love," I say, my voice taking on a vicious edge. "Because you're nothing to me. Nothing to anyone. Remember that."

Then I give her one final shove down against the floor before straightening and stalking away.

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OLIVIA

Cool night air wraps around me as I step out of the library. While stretching my arms above my head, I scan the dark courtyard before me. It has been almost an entire week since the incident in the canteen, and even though Alexander hasn't come after me again, I still check my surroundings regularly. But I'm starting to feel hopeful now, for the first time since that damn initiation ceremony, because I think that Alexander might have finally lost interest in tormenting me.

His comment about how I'm nothing to anyone stung a bit, but I'm pretty sure that hearing him say it was a good thing. Ever since then, he hasn't bullied me or tried to harass me in any way. In fact, he has been behaving as if I don't exist at all. He used to watch me all the time. I used to feel his eyes on me whenever I was eating or moving through the halls, but now there's nothing. He never looks in my direction. And if we happen to walk past each other somewhere, he looks right through me.

Part of me is so relieved that I feel like I could float away and join the clouds above. Being targeted by the untouchable king of Huntingswell U made my life a living hell, and I'm so glad that it's finally over. Since he is no longer interested, it should mean that everyone else stops bullying me soon too. Maybe then I can start over. Get some friends and finally live the life I dreamed of. Just that thought alone makes me want to grin like an idiot.

The other part of me feels a strange sense of loss that I can't quite explain. It's almost as if some part of me enjoyed trying to outmaneuver Alexander. Which would be ridiculous, of course. But the fact that he now treats me as if I don't exist hurts more than I expected.

Shaking my head, I push aside that absolutely nonsensical notion. I don't miss sparring with Alexander. I'm happy and grateful that he is finally leaving me alone. Like it should be.

With my head finally on straight again, I walk down the steps and start across the courtyard. It's completely deserted since it's late at night. I was the last person in the library, and the staff had to practically kick me out. But the days I spent writing Thomas's essay last week made me get behind on my own studies.

A smug smile spreads across my lips as I think about that essay. We got the grades for it today. I did amazing on mine, naturally, but I wonder how *his* was received.

As if summoned by my thoughts alone, a group of men suddenly appear from the shadows. Thomas is at the front, and he is looking at me as if he wants to murder me. Alarm crackles along my spine.

Picking up the pace, I head for the nearest street.

The moment I change direction, they start running.

My heart leaps into my throat.

Their feet pound against the ground behind me. I try to skirt around the large fountain, but another group appears from the other side. I screech to a halt and whip my head from side to side. But I'm now trapped between the two groups and the pool at the base of the fountain.

"Going somewhere, rat?" Thomas taunts as he saunters closer.

Gathering my courage, I wipe the panic from my features and turn to face him head on. "I was, actually. So if you don't mind stepping aside."

Rage flashes across his angular face. "You've got some nerve. Being this flippant when you know exactly what you've done."

"And what's that?"

"You ratted me out." He stops two strides away, and anger roars in his gray eyes as he stares me down. "You told the professor that I wasn't the one who wrote that assignment."

Well, technically, I didn't *tell* the professor. I just included a paragraph in the middle of the paper that said: *Thomas did not write this essay. I can't tell you who I am, but I can tell you that Thomas blackmailed me into writing this paper for him.*

Then I sent it to Thomas. I banked on the fact that he wouldn't even bother reading the whole thing before handing it in. And lo and behold, that's exactly what happened.

“I haven’t talked to anyone,” I say.

“Don’t lie,” he growls.

“It’s true. You can ask any of the faculty. The students in class too. I haven’t spoken to the professor.”

“Well, you did something. Because they know that I didn’t write that essay.” A dangerous edge seeps into his voice. “And do you know what they did because of it? They failed me again and banned me from taking that class again. And then they tried to expel me. *Me.*”

Victory pulses through my chest. I knew that they would fail him, but I hadn’t expected them to take it that far.

Raising my chin, I look back at him with contempt. “Well, maybe you should’ve thought about that before you got someone else to write a paper for you.”

Something snaps behind his eyes, and in a matter of seconds, every ounce of humanity bleeds out of him. Only cool lethal rage remains as he stares at me.

My blood goes cold.

And that’s when I realize that I have just made a mistake. A gigantic fucking mistake. I underestimated him. I knew that he would be pissed that he failed the assignment once again. I had even prepared for a beatdown because of it. But as I stare into his cold gray eyes, I realize that I *vastly* underestimated what this man is capable of.

Every alarm bell inside my skull is blaring at full force as I flick my gaze around the area, looking for a way out of this insanely dangerous situation.

No one else is around.

Only Thomas and his people who have formed a half-circle around me, trapping me against the low stone wall at the base of the fountain.

Before I can figure out what to do, Thomas lurches forward.

Without thinking, I unsling my backpack and swing it at him. The heavy history books inside smack into his arms, forcing them sideways before they can reach me.

But it only buys me a second.

Cold fury crackles across Thomas’s face as he grabs the backpack and yanks it towards him. I’m forced to let go or else I’ll be pulled right into him.

Panic flashes through my every vein as he throws the backpack aside and advances on me again. I whirl around and leap over the edge of the fountain. Water splashes up around me as I land on the other side.

A hiss tears from my throat at the coldness of the water that reaches halfway up my thighs, but I force the shock aside as I desperately try to sprint through it and get to the other side.

I only make it a single step before another splash echoes into the silent night. My jeans and sneakers are completely soaked through, and water sloshes up over my stomach as I try to wade through it. I manage to make it one more step before a massive weight slams into my back.

My stomach lurches as I fall face first into the water.

Coldness shocks my body into deeper panic as my chest and then head goes under water. I kick furiously, trying to get the weight off me. My feet hit something, and the force holding me down disappears.

I twist around and shove my head back above water. Air floods my lungs as I gasp in a deep breath. But before I can get my feet underneath me, two large hands wrap around my throat.

Thomas is standing above me, as cold and unfeeling as a statue. All except his eyes. They burn with inhuman rage as he stares down at me. "Die."

Fear, the likes of which I have never felt before, crashes over me like a tidal wave.

Then he shoves my head under the water again.

My survival instincts scream in panic as his large hands hold me by the throat underneath the surface. I kick and thrash with everything I have, trying to get his hands off me, but it's as if he's made of stone.

Bubbles float to the surface above me as he shakes me hard. I want to scream and cry and sob all at once, but I force myself to try to keep my mouth closed and save what little air I have.

All around me, the world is just a blurry mess of sloshing water crowned by a massive dark shadow above. At first, I try to kick his legs out, but I'm in the wrong position for that, so instead I focus on trying to break his grip on my throat. My fingers claw at his hands, my nail scratching the skin like a feral animal, but he doesn't even appear to feel it.

I can feel myself getting weaker. The fight is leaving my limbs and darkness creeps in at the corner of my eyes. My lungs burn with the lack of air.

And that's when a cold hard realization settles in.

I am going to die tonight.

This man is going to drown me in the fountain right here on campus. Everything I have ever worked so hard for in my life has been for nothing. I never got to taste the freedom outside the small town I grew up in. I never got to pursue my passion for history. I never got to fall in love. I never got to truly *live*.

And all because I tried to outmaneuver a nutjob who wanted me to cheat for him.

What a fucking waste.

Bitterness floods my chest, burning its way up my throat like acid. Or maybe that's the fountain water I inhaled combined with the lack of air.

Black spots swim before my eyes and my arms fall down to float uselessly beside me. I have no strength left. Nothing else to give.

This is it.

Just as I'm about to close my eyes and accept the cold embrace of death, the hands disappear from around my neck.

Using my last ounce of strength, I manage to get my head above water.

My vision is blurry and my ears are ringing, but I cough up water and then gasp in a deep breath of cool air that tastes like the nectar of the gods.

"You got lucky, bitch," Thomas snarls in my face. "Next time I see you, I'll finish the job."

Water sloshes around me and splashing sounds echo into the night as Thomas leaps out of the fountain.

I can barely hear it over the ringing in my ears, but I swear it sounds like someone is yelling, "What are you doing? Stop at once!"

Crawling over to the fountain wall, I manage to drag myself up and over it. But I have no strength to catch myself, so I just roll over the edge and then crash down on the hard stone ground on the other side. Boots pound against stone as Thomas and his people sprint away.

I roll over on my side, alternating between coughing up water and sucking in desperate breaths.

But all I can hear is that final sentence, swirling around inside my skull on endless repeat.

Next time I see you, I'll finish the job.

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ALEXANDER

The doorbell rings. Rolling over in my bed, I look at the clock on my nightstand. It's past eleven. No one rings the doorbell at this time of night. Well, no one rings *my* doorbell at this time of night, anyway.

I'm about to ignore it when the person outside rings it again. An annoyed groan rumbles from my throat as I get out of bed and pull on a pair of gray sweats and a white t-shirt. The doorbell sounds again.

My feet thump against the wooden steps as I descend the stairs and head towards the front door. I rake a hand through my hair before turning off the alarm and unlocking the door. Then I push it open, ready to bite the head off the presumptuous stranger outside.

Surprise ripples through me when, instead of a random person with a death wish, I find Olivia Campbell standing on my doorstep.

"What do *you* want?" I say, bestowing my most arrogant expression on her.

She casts a worried look over her shoulder, as if she's expecting someone to hunt her down and stab her in the back, before she meets my gaze again. Her brown eyes are wide, and her breathing fast. If I didn't know better, I would think she's terrified.

"Can I come in?" she asks in a surprisingly soft voice.

I narrow my eyes, studying her. That's when I realize that she's soaking wet. Her jeans and long-sleeved shirt are much darker than they were this morning, and they're plastered to her skin. There's even a puddle on the small stone porch where she has been standing. My confusion deepens.

"Please," she says, staring at me with pleading eyes.

And now I *know* that she's terrified.

I have absolutely no idea what's going on, but now I'm kind of curious. Stepping back into the hallway, I jerk my chin at her, motioning for her to come in.

Relief washes over her features.

She steps across the threshold and pulls the door shut behind her. But before she can take so much as a single step off the doormat, I hold up my hand.

"Take your clothes off," I order.

Surprise and confusion flicker in her eyes, and her mouth drops open slightly.

"All that water dripping off you will ruin my mahogany floors."

She glances down at her wet clothes for a few seconds. Then she immediately begins to pull her shirt off.

Now I'm so confused that I don't even know what to think anymore. She didn't even protest. Didn't try to fight me on it. She just... obeyed. What the hell is wrong with her tonight?

Standing a few steps away, I watch as she strips out of her wet clothes. Embarrassment colors her cheeks as she removes her underwear, but she doesn't complain. When she's done, she just stands there, completely naked on my doormat, holding her dripping wet clothes in her arms.

I had planned to make her have this conversation naked like that, as payback for daring to knock on my door uninvited, and for what she said in the canteen last week. But she's so far off her game tonight, that I decide to show her some very uncharacteristic mercy.

"Give me that," I say, nodding towards the wet clothes.

It's the only thing offering her even a smidgen of modesty, so she hesitates for a second. Then she swallows and hands over the dripping bundle.

"Wait here," I tell her.

Taking her clothes with me, I walk into my laundry room and toss them into the dryer. Then I pull out a clean shirt for her. There are no pants in here at the moment, so I just grab the shirt and a towel and walk back to the hallway. Besides, I'm being generous enough as it is.

"Put this on," I order as I toss her the white dress shirt.

Genuine surprise shines in her eyes as she catches the shirt. But she only hesitates for a second before pulling it on. It falls down to cover half of her thighs, so I suppose she didn't really need pants anyway.

Once she has finished buttoning the shirt, I toss her the towel.

“Dry your hair.”

She simply catches the towel and does what she’s told.

I watch her while she squeezes the water out of her wavy blond hair.

God, she’s beautiful. Sculpted legs and curves in all the right places. And without a bra, her stiff nipples push against the white fabric of the shirt. *My shirt*. And God does she look hot in my shirt.

When she’s done, she looks up and meets my gaze uncertainly. I twitch two fingers at her. Leaving her soaked sneakers on the doormat, she carefully moves closer to me.

I take the towel from her and toss it back into the laundry room while speaking over my shoulder, “Follow me.”

Her bare feet barely make a sound as she follows me into my study.

There’s a fireplace along one wall, but it’s unlit since it’s not that cold outside yet. Along the perpendicular wall are bookshelves full of expensive antique books that are not meant for reading. A grand desk and chair wait by the wall opposite those. But I set course for the leather armchair that is positioned next to the fireplace. It faces the rest of the room, so when I sit down in it, I notice that Olivia has stopped on the plush carpet in the middle of the room.

She’s fidgeting with one of the buttons on the shirt, and she is looking more uncertain and awkward than I have ever seen her. An unexpected pang hits my chest. I shove aside the feeling.

Nothing changes the fact that Olivia is a damn nuisance who needs to learn her place. And now, I’m going to make sure that she does.

“Why are you wet?” I ask, my voice pulsing with command.

She finally stops fidgeting and instead stands up straight. After drawing in a deep breath, she meets my gaze head on. “Because Thomas tried to drown me in the fountain.”

Inexplicable rage roars through my head, and I barely managed to stop myself from growling, *he did what?*

Instead, I keep that disinterested mask on my face and ask, “Why would he try to kill you?”

“Because he blackmailed me into writing an essay for him, and I made sure that the professor knew that he hadn’t written it, so he failed the entire course and was almost expelled.”

A surprised laugh almost rips from my throat, and yet again, I barely manage to restrain myself. Of course she would do something like that.

Keeping my composure, I instead cock my head and cast a pointed look at her body. "If the leader of the basher's faction tried to kill you, how come you're still alive?"

"Because someone interrupted him."

"I see. But that still doesn't explain what you're doing here."

"Before he ran, he told me that the next time he sees me, he'll finish the job." She bites her lower lip, and all I want to do is to draw my thumb along it and free it from her teeth. "And I believe him."

"So do I. But I fail to see how any of this is my problem."

I can almost see the war raging behind her eyes. Whatever it is that she's planning to say, she doesn't want to say it. But I'm going to force her to do it anyway, because if she wants something from me, I'm going to make her spell it out.

Leaning back in my leather armchair, I keep my legs spread in a deliberately arrogant pose while I watch her expectantly. And when I speak, I make sure that there is unmistakable authority dripping from every word.

"Why are you here, Olivia?"

She glances down at the carpet in front of her feet. Blood rushes to my cock. I love seeing her so submissive.

"To ask..." Raising her chin again, she meets my gaze once more and then clears her throat. "I'm here to ask for your help."

I arch an eyebrow at her.

She shifts her weight uncomfortably and then bites her lip again while her fingers fidget with the hem of the shirt. Blowing out a forceful breath, she lets her hands drop back by her sides as if she is finally ready to amend her previous statement.

And she is.

Holding my gaze, she says, "I'm here to *beg* for your help."

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OLIVIA

I need protection. When I decided to get Thomas caught, I made a terrible, terrible mistake. I know that now. I expected him to be angry. I didn't expect him to actually try to murder me. And when he told me that he would be back to finish the job, I knew without a doubt that he meant it.

Given my status on campus, no one would dare to stand between Thomas and me. I could probably report him to the police. But just like most people on this campus, Thomas is from a rich and powerful family. It will be my word against his. And in this world I have stumbled into, people like Thomas and Alexander don't even play by the same rules as me. If I report it, it will probably be swept under the rug. Or at least delayed until Thomas can actually kill me. He looks like someone who is capable of covering up a murder. And besides, who would even miss me? A scholarship student that nobody likes.

So I can't rely on the other people on campus, and I can't go to the police. But if I don't do something, I won't live to see the next sunrise.

I need protection. And there is only one person with the power to save me.

Standing there barefoot on the carpet, wearing only a borrowed shirt, I watch the man who holds my life in his hands right now.

Alexander Huntington.

As my words reach him, I swear I can see delight sparkle in his pale blue eyes.

"Well..." He chuckles and casts a pointed look at the floor. "If you've come to beg, you should be on your knees."

Swallowing the flash of anger and humiliation, I lower myself to my knees on the soft carpet before begging, "Please."

"Please what?"

"Please help me."

"Why would I?" He flicks a dismissive hand. "You have done nothing but disrespect me from the day you set foot on my campus."

"He's going to kill me if you don't."

"I know. And again, how is that my problem?"

Desperation bleeds into my voice. "Please, you have to."

His gaze hardens. "I *have to*?"

I wince. "No, I didn't mean... I just meant..." Trailing off, I end it with a pitiful, "Please."

Leather groans as Alexander abruptly gets to his feet. While striding towards the door, he flicks his wrist at me. "Get out."

Full-blown panic slams into me like a semi-truck. Leaping up from the floor, I dart towards the doorway and skid across the polished mahogany floor so that I get there before he can leave. With desperation clawing its way up my throat, I throw my arms out to block his path.

He stops a single stride away. After giving my body a mocking once-over, he scoffs. Then a lethal smile spreads across his lips as he locks eyes with me again. "Really? Is that the way you want to go about this?"

My head is pounding as fear spreads through my veins. I can't let him send me away. I'll be lying dead in a ditch this time tomorrow if I can't convince the man who hates me to save my life. And based on the expression on his face, he really couldn't care less if I live or die. I feel like screaming. Or crying. But I can't do either of those, so I do the only thing I can.

I beg.

And I bargain.

Dropping to my knees before his feet, I look up at him with pleading eyes. "Please, I'm begging you to help me."

He watches me in silence, his face a blank mask. It hurts my heart and shatters my pride to beg my worst enemy for mercy in such a pathetic way. But right now, I don't care. I can survive the humiliation. What I can't survive is another murder attempt from Thomas.

"What could you possibly give me that would be worth your life?" he says at last.

“What do you want?”

“Nothing.” He looks at me as if I’m something he scraped off the bottom of his shoe. “I have no use for you.”

And with that, he makes as if to start walking again. Panic flashes through my limbs.

“I can be your plaything,” I blurt out.

Alexander pauses. Shifting his weight back to where he was standing before, he slowly turns his head back to meet my gaze.

“I can be your plaything, *sir*,” I add, because I know that he likes that.

He just raises his eyebrows in silent question.

“I’ve seen you,” I explain, and even I can hear the desperation coloring my voice. “I know that you like playing games with people. Manipulating them. Making them do what you want. I’ll let you do that to me.”

It’s faint, but I swear that I can see approval blow across his handsome features. Hope sprouts in my chest. For a few seconds, Alexander says nothing.

Then he tilts his head slightly to the side. “I’m listening.”

“I’ll give you one hour every week where you can do whatever you want with me.”

He scoffs. “One hour *a day*.”

My instincts take over, and I blurt out, “No.”

“Alright, fine. Two hours a day.”

“No, wait—”

“Alright, three then.”

I raise my hands, making appeasing gestures. “Okay, okay, one hour a day.”

He studies me with intelligent blue eyes, and for a moment, I think he’s going to push for even more time. But then he shrugs. “Fine. One hour a day.”

“Yes.”

“And if I don’t use it that day, it rolls over to the next day and the next and so on.”

Alarm rings through my skull. I don’t like that condition. It means that it would be possible for him to save up enough hours to take an entire day from me. It could be a day when I really need to study. Or worse, a day when I have an important exam. And if he orders me to skip it, I can’t refuse him. I don’t like giving him that kind of power. I don’t like giving

him *any* power over me, but this particular condition feels like it could really screw me hard.

Licking my lips, I try to think of a way to refuse this part without making him withdraw his entire offer.

He raises his eyebrows expectantly.

I swallow, but I still don't have a solution to this problem.

Snorting, he shrugs. "I guess you don't want my help after all."

He quickly takes a step to the side so that he can walk around me. Since I'm still on my knees, all I can do is to throw out a hand and grab his pant leg to stop him.

"No, wait, please," I press out, still holding on to the soft fabric of his pants. "Yes, fine, the hour rolls over to the next day and so on."

"Good." He flicks a glance down at my hand, and then arches an eyebrow at me. "Unless you're planning to pull my pants down and give me a blowjob, can I suggest that you take your hand off my clothes?"

I snatch my hand back as if the fabric burned me. Alexander lets out a dark chuckle.

Leaning down, he draws his fingers along my jaw and then cups my chin. He holds it firmly so that my eyes remain locked on his. "Well, I suppose we have a deal then."

A ragged breath full of relief escapes my throat, and I close my eyes for a few seconds.

Alexander brushes his thumb over my cheek. "And because you begged so prettily today, I'll let you have tonight. Your first hour starts tomorrow."

I draw in another shuddering breath and nod.

"Get up," he commands.

Once he has released my chin, I slowly climb back to my feet. He doesn't move back to give me more space, so I'm left trapped between the closed door and his body, standing so close to him that my tits brush against his chest when I breathe.

After drawing my palms down my borrowed shirt, I look up to meet his eyes again. And then I ask, because I need to hear him say it out loud, "And now you'll stop Thomas from killing me?"

He steps closer, pressing further into my space. My back connects with the dark wooden door behind me as Alexander moves closer while holding my gaze with his intense eyes.

"Thomas won't touch you," he promises.

Another sigh of relief escapes me.

“No one will touch you now.” He draws light fingers over my collarbones. “And do you know why?”

My heart is hammering in my chest, so I only manage to shake my head in reply.

He wraps his hand around my throat and pins me to the door with effortless strength. “Because you’re mine now.”

It suddenly feels as if there is not enough oxygen in the air. And it’s not because of the hand around my throat. He isn’t even squeezing, only holding me there to demonstrate his power, but I still feel as if I can’t breathe properly anymore.

His eyes glitter as he leans down and slants his lips over mine. Then he whispers his next words against my mouth. “Aren’t you going to thank me?”

“Thank you,” I manage to press out.

And I think I might actually have meant that too.

With Alexander’s power and authority on my side, Thomas won’t dare to come after me again. I’m safe. I won’t be murdered in my sleep tonight.

But as I look up into those wicked blue eyes, I can’t help but feel like I’ve just sold my soul to the devil in exchange for my life.

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ALEXANDER

By the time Thomas arrives at my house, I have put on a full three-piece suit and styled my hair even though it's the middle of the night. Perception is everything, and I am going to make sure that Thomas leaves this building with a clear reminder of who is the real judge, jury, and executioner on this campus.

Leaning casually against the edge of my grand desk, I cross my legs at the ankle and then cross my arms over my chest as well. Thomas is standing on the plush dark red carpet, close to where Olivia was standing less than an hour ago. Even though I didn't see it, the image of him trying to drown her in the fountain flashes before my eyes, and I have to fight down the urge to retrieve my hunting rifle from the safe and shoot him in the face.

Thomas draws a hand over his short blond hair and clears his throat. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes." I let the silence stretch for a few seconds while I hold his gaze with hard eyes. "Do you know why you're here?"

"I assume it has something to do with what happened outside the library earlier."

"Indeed. Why don't you start by explaining what exactly happened?"

"Well, uhm..." He clears his throat again. "So you know how I've failed that history class three times now."

"I'm aware. Seeing as you've been thoroughly unsuccessful in persuading me to intervene for the past three years now."

"Yes, well, I decided to go about it differently this time. I got that scholarship student—"

"Olivia Campbell."

“Yeah, her. To write the assignment for me. But she somehow managed to rat me out to the professor.” He clenches his jaw and squeezes his hands into fists, making the veins on his skin stand out. “And now I failed the entire course. And if it wasn’t for my dad practically fucking bribing the brass, I would’ve been expelled too.” Rage burns in his eyes as he shakes his head. “That little rat deserves what’s coming to her.”

Cold fury sears through me.

As if he can feel my rage, he snaps his gaze back to my face and holds up his hands. “Look, I’m sorry for messing it up. I was interrupted before I could finish the job, and I know that the first rule of Huntingswell U is to not involve the city. But I’m having my contacts monitor the station, and I don’t think she’s reported it. I swear I’ll finish her before she can call it in and make trouble for anyone here.”

Lethal silence descends on the room. Branches rustle in the wind outside the dark windows, and wood creaks from somewhere inside the house. I just stand there, studying the man before me. Uncertainty creeps into his gray eyes, and he shifts his weight.

“You think that’s why you’re here?” I ask eventually.

“I...” He furrows his brows in confusion. “Well, yes. Why else would it be?”

“Why else?” My words slice through the air like a blade. “*Why else?*”

His confusion deepens, and he shakes his head as if he doesn’t know what to say.

“Perhaps you need a more practical demonstration.”

Before he can reply, I push off from the desk and walk straight to the safe located next to one of the bookshelves. Thomas remains standing awkwardly on the carpet in the middle of the room while I turn my back to him and open the safe.

Then I turn around and level my hunting rifle at him.

Shock and fear pulses across his face, and he stumbles a step back while raising his hands in the air. “Alexander... Sir... What...?”

I don’t reply. Instead, I prowl towards him. With his hands still raised, he backs across the floor until he hits the wall. I keep advancing.

Only when I’m so close that the muzzle is pressed against his chest do I stop. He draws in rapid breaths as he watches me with worried eyes.

I cock my head. “Would you like me to tell you what your mistake was?”

“Y-yes.”

“You acted without my permission. You really should know by now, Thomas, that I own this university. I am the judge, jury, and the executioner. Always. Did you really think that I would allow you to kill someone without my permission? To kill *her*?”

“I—”

“Olivia Campbell is mine. Her life is mine to do with as I please. And I don’t like it when others presume to touch what belongs to me.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” When he notices the sharp look in my eyes, he presses out, “I mean, I did know. I just... I wasn’t thinking. Please. I’m sorry. Of course I should’ve asked your permission before moving against her.”

“Yes, you should.”

“It won’t happen again, I swear.”

“No, it won’t.”

For a few seconds, I just stare him down in silence. He flicks nervous glances between my face and the rifle in my hands, as if he’s worried that I might shoot him anyway. To be fair, I’m tempted. Very tempted.

“If you ever step out of line again, I will have you expelled from this university. And no amount of daddy’s money will be able to save you.” I shift the rifle upwards until it’s aimed between his eyes. “And if you go within six feet of Olivia Campbell, I will have you shot. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.” He must be able to tell that I mean every word of that, because he swallows and quickly amends it to, “Yes, sir.”

Dark amusement and vicious satisfaction spread through my chest.

Yes, *sir*, indeed.

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OLIVIA

Before I left his fancy house last night, the dictator of Huntingswell University ordered me to be back there at eight o'clock tomorrow evening. So at exactly eight o'clock, I stand on Alexander's stone porch and ring the doorbell.

My heart skips a beat when he opens the door. He is wearing the same all-black suit that he wore at the initiation ceremony. It makes the pale blue of his eyes stand out even more in contrast. I flick a quick glance up and down his body, and he might be the devil incarnate, but I have to admit that he's really fucking hot.

"Punctual," he comments.

"I had a 4.0 GPA. Did you really think I got that by being tardy?"

He chuckles and then jerks his chin. "Get in."

Stifling a rude remark, I step across the threshold and pull the door shut behind me. Then I bend down and take off my shoes.

"Well-mannered too," Alexander says, amusement clear in his voice.

After placing my shoes to the side, I straighten and flick my hair back over my shoulder. "Well, you made such a fuss about your precious mahogany floors last time, so I figured I would save us both the trouble of arguing about it."

"Smart choice."

Without waiting for me to retort, he turns around and walks straight towards the same study we used last night. Since he didn't offer any other explanation, I assume that he wants me to follow, and do just that.

When I was here last night, I was so panicked and out of sorts that I barely noticed what the room looked like. But now as I step across the

threshold, I study every inch of it.

It's made of dark wood, and filled with furniture and items that all look extremely expensive. I'm not exactly an expert on wood, but the massive desk as well as the bookcases and the side tables all have the same color and texture as the floor, so I assume that they are also made of mahogany.

I quickly scan the bookshelves while I take my time closing the door behind me. They're all full of very old-looking leather-bound books, and I'm pretty sure that they're only used for decoration.

Since the sun has set, the lamp in the ceiling has been turned on. It's an antique-looking thing that probably costs more than my entire dorm, and it bathes the whole room in a warm glow.

"Did Thomas give you any trouble today?" Alexander asks.

I finish closing the door and turn around to face him. "No. In fact, he almost ran in the opposite direction when I saw him in one of the corridors."

A satisfied smirk lifts his lips. "Good."

After sweeping my gaze over the room again, I move a bit closer to where Alexander is standing. "The other students are still bullying me, though."

He arches an eyebrow at me. "So?"

"So we made a deal."

"I promised to stop Thomas from killing you. I said nothing about making everyone else stop bullying you."

"But..." Annoyance and confusion swirls up inside me. "But you said that no one will touch me. Because I..." I trail off a bit awkwardly and clear my throat before managing to finish that sentence. "Because I belong to you now."

That damn smirk on his face grows. But he says nothing as he prowls towards me.

When he reaches me, he doesn't stop. His muscular body just keeps moving, so unless I want to be mowed down by him, I have to let him back me towards the wall. A soft thud sounds as my back connects with the smooth wood panels.

Alexander moves until he is standing only a single stride away. "Yes, you belong to me now. And that means that I decide who is allowed to do what to you."

"So you're going to let them continue bullying me?"

“You haven’t given me a reason to be generous, so, yes.”

“I begged you on my knees yesterday.”

His fingers skim my collarbones, drawing an involuntary shudder of pleasure from me. “And you looked so good doing it, so I made you a deal to stop Thomas from killing you. But I made no promises about everyone else’s bullying.” There is a wicked glint in his eyes as he cocks his head. “But if you want to make another deal for that, I’m listening.”

Anger crackles through me, and I give his chest a shove. “Fuck you!”

His hand shoots up and wraps around my throat. The back of my head thuds against the wood as he pushes me up against the wall and crowds further into my space. I can feel his powerful muscles shift against my body. Heat rushes through me.

“Watch your mouth,” he warns in a low voice. “Or I might do just that.”

My core throbs and a strange sense of dark desire ripples through me.

Alexander slowly drags his gaze up and down my body. When he locks eyes with me again, a sly smile lifts his lips. “Does this turn you on?”

It does. I have no idea how or why, but by God, the way he commands the situation like this really does turn me on. Fuck, there must be something wrong with me.

My body thrums with forbidden excitement, but I refuse to let him know that, so I just glare up at him in silence instead of answering.

He flicks a glance up and down my body again, smirks, and then finally releases my throat. I run a hand over it while he steps back.

Striding over to one of the bookcases, he grabs an antique hourglass with pale sand in it. Then he walks over to his desk. I step away from the wall and move closer to him while he turns to face me.

“When I turn this hourglass, our time starts,” he declares. “And while there is still sand in it, I own you. Body, mind, and soul.”

“I am not your slave.”

“For the next hour, you are.”

I scoff and click my tongue as I glance away.

“Look at me,” he orders.

Irritation ripples through me, but I drag my gaze back to him.

Power and absolute authority rolls off him like black waves as he locks eyes with me. “For the next hour, you cannot object to anything I order you to do. You will obey my every command without question. Do you understand?”

My heart flutters nervously in my chest.

When I take too long to reply, he snaps, "Answer."

"Yes, I understand."

"Good."

For a few seconds, he just looks at me in silence while a sharp smile plays over his lips.

Then he turns the hourglass.

It hits the wooden desk with an ominous thud.

I swallow a flash of worry as I look into Alexander's unflinching eyes.

"This all started because you refused to participate in the allegiance swearing during the initiation ceremony," he states. "In that back room, I offered you a chance to rectify that mistake. You did not take it. Today, you will finally set the record straight."

My stomach drops.

Still standing next to his desk, he twitches two fingers at me. "Come."

It feels as if a storm of erratic butterflies is whirling through my stomach, but I manage to keep a neutral expression on my face as I close the distance between us.

"Do you remember what I told you to do back then?" he asks once I have stopped two strides away.

"You wanted me to swear the allegiance to you privately."

"The exact order, Olivia."

I shake my head. "I don't remember."

He lets out an amused breath. "Well, after tonight, you will never forget. I told you that I could be persuaded to forget about your insubordination, if you got down on your knees, pressed your forehead to the floor while swearing your obedience to me, and then licked my shoes."

My mouth goes unnaturally dry.

With a cruel smile on his lips, he casts a pointed look at the floor before his feet. "So, go ahead then."

For a moment, I can't make my body move. My mind is frozen and my heart is pounding so loudly that I can hear the blood rushing in my ears.

Alexander is actually going to make me lick his shoes. Fuck, maybe I should've let Thomas kill me instead.

Steely determination crashes over me. No, I'm stronger than this. I've survived much worse. Whatever happens, I will not let someone like Alexander Huntington break me.

Drawing in a deep breath, I lower myself to my knees. His glittering eyes watch me the whole way down. I block out the odd tingle that shoots down my spine at the way he is looking at me, and instead break eye contact. After another bracing breath, I place my palms against the floor before his feet and then bend over until my forehead is pressed against the polished floorboards.

I rack my brain, trying desperately to remember the oath that the faction leaders told us to speak. After four very tense seconds, the words finally flood my mind.

“I swear allegiance to Huntingswell University,” I say, keeping my head bowed. “I swear to obey the rules set forth by the president. I swear to never implicate the faction leaders. And I swear to obey Alexander Huntington IV in all things, from today until my last day on campus.”

Silence falls over the room. It’s so loud that I can almost feel it pressing against my eardrums.

Then, the devil in his black suit finally speaks. “Yes, you will.”

I grit my teeth, but remain where I am.

A breath of amusement sounds from above. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Every single one of my instincts is screaming at me not to do this. That I can’t let him see me like this. But we made a deal. An hour a day of being his plaything, his willing slave, in exchange for my life.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I scrape together the final bits of determination that I can muster. And then I raise my head and open my eyes again.

He is wearing a pair of polished black oxfords that look incredibly clean. There is that at least, I suppose.

My heart is slamming against my ribs, and humiliation sears my cheeks, as I lean forward and lick the side of his shoe.

A sound of approval rumbles from his chest.

“Again,” he commands.

I lick the side of his other shoe as well.

“Good girl.”

My heart flips in my chest, and a pulse shoots through my core. And suddenly, the heat in my cheeks isn’t just due to humiliation.

Raising my head, I sit back on my heels once more and then look up to meet his gaze.

His normally so pale blue eyes seem to have gotten darker, and he is watching me with an intensity that makes my heart begin to pound again.

“Oh if you could see yourself now. If you could see how perfect you look right now.” Reaching down, he draws a hand along my jaw in a gentle caress. “Didn’t I tell you that this is where you belong? On your knees at my feet.”

His touch draws a shiver from my confused body.

He slides his fingers down to my neck. For a few seconds, he just strokes them over my fluttering pulse. Then he tightens his hold and uses his grip on my throat to pull me to my feet.

Once I’m standing up again, he keeps his hand around my throat and studies every inch of my face as if trying to read my emotions. “Do you like it when I humiliate you like this?”

“No.” I think that’s the truth.

He cocks his head, but he appears to accept my answer because he doesn’t call me on it. Instead, he says, “Do you like it when I dominate you?”

“No.”

“Lie.”

“It’s not. I don’t.”

A jolt shoots through my body as he tightens his grip on my throat and leans closer. “Need I remind you that you cannot refuse me right now. You cannot complain or protest or evade. So, I will give you one more chance... Do you like it when I dominate you?”

“I don’t know,” I blurt out.

For a few nerve-wracking seconds, it looks as if he is going to call me a liar again. But then a wicked smile spreads across his lips instead. “Well, I suppose we’ll have to check then.”

Confusion blows through my chest. Check? Check how?

“Take off your panties.”

I suck in a breath between my teeth, and my eyes widen as I stare up at him in shock.

His voice drops lower. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

With his hand still locked around my throat, I reach up underneath my knee-length black skirt and slip my fingers underneath my panties. He keeps his eyes on mine while I push the fabric down my thighs and then wiggle my hips a little so that it falls down to the floor.

Alexander holds my gaze for another few seconds before glancing down at them. Another sly smile drifts across his mouth.

Using his other hand, he slides it up underneath my skirt. A jolt shoots through my body as his knuckles brush against my naked pussy.

I close my eyes against the humiliation, because I know what he finds there. I'm wet. Very wet.

But all he says is, "I see."

His fingers brush over my throbbing clit, drawing a whimper from my lips.

He shifts his hand and then rubs lazy circles over my clit. Spikes of pleasure shoot through me, and I wriggle my body. But his hand around my throat forces me to remain in place as he continues toying with me.

I suck in a shuddering breath as two of his fingers brush against my entrance. His thumb keeps tracing circles over my clit. When another whimper spills from my lips, he abruptly pushes two fingers inside me.

My eyes fly open as I gasp in surprise and pleasure.

"Good," he says as he begins to slowly pump his fingers. "Keep your eyes on me."

Tension builds inside my body as he slides his fingers in and out while he continues torturing my clit. My heart patters against my ribs and I suck in increasingly rapid breaths as the pleasure inside me grows.

"You're not allowed to come."

My eyes widen, and I stutter, "W-what?"

"If you come, I will make you lick it off the floor." Dark amusement plays over his lips as he holds my gaze. "Can't have you ruining my precious mahogany floors and all that."

Panic crackles through me. How am I supposed to stop the tidal wave that's building inside me?

"Please," I press out.

"Please what?"

I don't even know what I'm supposed to ask for, and before I can figure it out, his circling thumb sends a flash of intense pleasure through me that makes me soar rapidly towards the edge.

His fingers pump in and out of my pussy, creating mind-numbing friction. I try to back away, to put some distance between my aching pussy and his far too clever hand, but his grip on my throat forces me to stay rooted in place.

Pent-up tension pulses inside me. It's so intense that I can almost feel my entire body vibrating. The edge is so close. I won't be able to stop it.

"Please," I beg again.

"Please what?"

"Please may I come?"

"No."

A desperate noise tears from my throat as his thumb mercilessly rubs my throbbing clit while he pushes his fingers inside me again. I whimper. Tension swirls in my chest like a storm just waiting to break.

He curls his fingers inside me on the way out, and I come completely undone as a wave of intense pleasure crashes over me.

Incoherent moans tumble from my lips as I come hard all over his hand. My legs shake as pleasure ricochets through my limbs, and if it weren't for his hand around my throat, I wouldn't have been able to remain on my feet.

Heat floods my cheeks as my inner walls flutter around Alexander's fingers when he keeps pumping inside me.

When the last waves of pleasure have died out, he at last removes his hand from my pussy. His other stays around my throat.

I just stand there, completely spent, like a used doll. My arms just hang by my sides and my legs don't even truly support me. In my chest, my heart pounds so hard against my ribcage that I'm worried it might shatter the bone.

Blinking my eyes back into focus, I look up into a dangerously handsome face.

Alexander tuts and shakes his head. "You really are dead set on ruining my floors, aren't you?"

Before I can reply, he releases his grip on my throat.

With the loss of his support, I crash down on the floor right next to the small puddle that is now visible on it. My chest is still heaving from the orgasm, so for a few seconds, I just sit there on my knees, dragging in deep breaths.

Then I glance up at Alexander.

He looks like a ruthless dictator in that sharp black suit of his. As untouchable as a god. And right now, that's exactly what he is.

His eyes glitter in the warm light as he grins and casts a pointed look at the evidence of my orgasm. "You came without permission. So go on then. Lick it up."

And as I bend over on the floor yet again to obey his command, I can't help but feel that I might be in way over my head.

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ALEXANDER

Low murmuring fills the library around me. It's only early evening, so the building is packed with people studying for their various courses. I wasn't planning on going here myself since I prefer to study at home, but Olivia has been coming here a lot so I wanted to see what she was doing. Now, I guess I know.

She is sitting at a table a short distance from me. And so is another guy. He has blond hair and blue eyes, and he looks to be a year or two older than her. If Daniel was with me, I could have asked him exactly who this clown is. Since it's Daniel's job to protect me from any and all threats, he knows the names and faces of every student and faculty member on campus. But I told Daniel to stay at home because... Actually, I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because I don't want anyone to know that I'm keeping an eye on Olivia. It makes me seem needy. And I don't like that.

It has been just over a week since our arrangement began, and I've called her over every night to cash in my hour. That first night was... unexpected. I was surprised by how much I liked watching her cheeks flush with color and her eyes roll back in her head as she fell apart underneath my hand. By how much I loved listening to those cute little noises she makes when she comes. It's rather disturbing. She shouldn't have that effect on me. She shouldn't have *any* effect on me.

So after that first night, I've mostly used my hour to just humiliate her. To rub my power in her face. To push her farther and farther to the edge. But she never breaks.

Last night, I handcuffed her and made her kneel naked next to me while I just pretended to read for an hour. She didn't so much as grumble. Not a

single crack in her determined façade.

I have to admit, I find her resilience, her sheer stubbornness, fascinating. And quite attractive.

Pushing aside those ridiculous thoughts, I drift closer to their table. They're sitting opposite each other, and from this angle, I can only see half of Olivia's face. She hasn't spotted me, so I stay hidden behind the rows of shelves while I move closer so that I can hear what they're talking about.

History.

I almost roll my eyes. Of course it's history. What else would it be?

Olivia is gesturing excitedly with her hands as she explains the key points of the time period and, even in the unforgiving light from the fluorescents above, her brown eyes glitter as she speaks. Standing there, leaning against a shelf, I listen to her for a few minutes. I can hear the passion in her voice with every word and see it in every hand movement.

It makes strange emotions snake through my chest. I'm not *that* passionate about anything. Am I even passionate at all about anything? I study law because it's expected of me. I don't dislike it, but I don't particularly enjoy it either.

Olivia's jab from earlier drifts through my mind again. *Don't you have any real hobbies? What do you even do in your free time?*

I hadn't even realized it until then, but I don't have any hobbies. And now, standing here and listening to how passionate Olivia is about history, I realize that I don't feel that way about anything.

It sends another bout of cold snakes twisting through my insides.

I'm forcibly yanked out of my irritating feelings by the sound of Olivia's rippling laugh. Blinking, I snap back to the present.

By the table, Olivia is laughing about something that I missed. She's throwing her head back, making her loose curls sway across her back. The other guy is laughing too. I narrow my eyes as he reaches forward and places a hand on her arm.

An irrational flash of anger and jealousy shoots through me. He does not get to touch her. She is mine.

Pushing off from the shelves, I stalk towards them while anger gathers around me like dark clouds.

Olivia spots me when I'm two strides away from their table. Surprise pulses across her beautiful features as she blinks at me. A second later, the other guy notices me too.

I lock eyes with him as I reach their table. "Leave."

His mouth drops open a little, and he glances uncertainly between me and Olivia.

"Are you hard of hearing?" I demand, my voice cutting through the sudden silence like steel. "Leave."

The guy snaps his gaze down to the table and immediately begins to gather his things. But Olivia, that infuriating woman, places a hand on his arm, stopping him. Another flash of rage shoots through me, and all I want to do is to just rip her hand away from his arm.

"No, Philip," she says, ignoring me. "You don't have to leave. We still have half an hour left on our tutoring session."

"Yes, Philip," I interrupt. "You really do need to leave."

At last, she drags her furious eyes back to me and growls, "I'm working."

"I don't care."

"You can't just—"

"I'm cashing in my hour. Right now."

Anger flashes in her brown eyes. Grinding her teeth, she looks like she's about to argue with me. I just raise my eyebrows expectantly.

On the other side of the table, Philip sits with his hands frozen in the middle of packing up his things. His eyes dart back and forth between us.

A low snarl rips from her throat, and she blows out a forceful sigh. "Fine." Her eyes soften as she turns to Philip and gives him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you tomorrow."

"No, you won't," I interrupt before he can answer.

Philip glances between us again. "I, uhm..."

After shooting me a scorching glare, Olivia gives him a reassuring smile. "I'll be in touch."

"No, you won't," I repeat.

Fury burns across her whole face, but before she can do anything about it, I grab her by the elbow and drag her away from the table. She barely manages to scoop up her books and bag as I all but haul her down the nearest aisle and towards the private rooms that I know to be located farther down.

"Let me go," she snarls and tries to yank her arm out of my grip.

I just tighten my hold and continue dragging her with me. "My hour has started, which means that you don't get to protest."

“You’re an absolute bastard, do you know that?”

“Watch your mouth.”

We reach the first room and I yank the door open. The three students who were sitting around the table inside leap up from their seats in surprise as I throw Olivia into the room. She stumbles a little before straightening again.

“Get out,” I bark at the three gawking students.

Papers rustle and books slam as they trip over themselves in their haste to follow my order.

“Now,” I snap.

They practically sprint out the door. I slam it shut behind them the moment they’re outside and then turn to face Olivia. It’s a rather small space. The pale wooden table and the four chairs around it have been placed in the very center of the room, and they make up the entirety of the furniture in there. There are no windows, so the round lamp in the ceiling is the only source of illumination.

I sweep my gaze around it one more time before locking eyes with the infuriating woman standing in front of the table.

She has put her stuff down on the tabletop and is glaring at me with fury that could burn the world down.

“You will not be tutoring that guy anymore,” I announce, my voice pulsing with command. “In fact, you will not be tutoring anyone anymore.”

“Yes, I will.” She stares right back at me with equally hard eyes. “You may command an hour of my time every day, but the rest I will do with as I please.”

“It’s not up for discussion.”

“I agree, it’s not. I will continue to tutor Philip, or anyone I choose, in the twenty-three hours of the day that you do not own.”

I advance on her. She raises her chin and stands her ground as I prowl up to her until only two small strides separate us. Anger rolls off me, and off her as well, as we stare each other down.

“No,” I reply at last, my voice low and dark. “You will not.”

“Yes, I will!” She throws her arms out. “I need money to pay for my dorm room, and for food. And as opposed to you, you privileged prick, I actually have to work for that.”

An annoyed sigh rips from my chest. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my black leather wallet. “How much do you make?”

She just glares back at me in stubborn silence.

“A hundred bucks?” I raise my eyebrows. “Two?”

Only angry silence answers me.

I slide out two hundred-dollar bills from my wallet and toss them on the ground between us. “Here.”

“No.”

“Are you saying that you make more than two hundred bucks off one tutoring session?”

“It’s not about that!”

A lethal edge bleeds into my voice as I stab a hand towards the money on the ground. “Pick it up.”

“No.” She shakes her head while stubbornness pulses from her entire being. “I don’t *take* things. I *earn* them.”

I let out a laugh that is half mockery, half irritation. “Fine. If you want to earn it, then get down on your knees and work for it.”

“I’m not a prostitute!”

Taking a step forward, I force her up against the edge of the table. “Aren’t you?” I stroke a hand along her jaw. “You sell yourself to me every day.”

She slaps my hand away. “For safety! For the promise that I won’t be murdered in my sleep by a crazy maniac!”

“Safety... Money... Does it really make a difference? I still own you.”

“Fuck you!”

My restraint snaps. Wrapping a hand around the back of her neck, I yank her troublesome mouth to mine.

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OLIVIA

Our lips clash in a furious kiss. There is nothing sensual or romantic about it. Only anger and pent-up frustration.

I lock my fingers behind the back of his neck and pull him harder against me as I ravage his mouth. Our kiss is like a battle. A war that needs to be won to settle who holds the power between us.

He slides his hands down my sides and then pushes them up underneath my shirt. While still stealing the breath from my lungs, he draws his hands up my bare skin, sending lightning skittering across it in their wake.

A jolt shoots through me as he brushes the underside of my tits. Then he abruptly pulls back and yanks my shirt over my head. I barely have time to catch my breath before his lips are on mine again.

I move my hands towards his suit jacket, but before I can even reach the first button, he has unclasped my bra. It falls away as he slides the straps over my shoulders with expert movements.

Cool air rushes over my naked skin, and my nipples harden at the exposure.

While I renew my efforts to unbutton his jacket, he traces his fingers down my stomach. A pleasant shudder rolls through my body.

With deft fingers, he unbuttons my jeans and pulls down the zipper while I've only managed to undo one button on his suit jacket. His warm hands slide over my hips and underneath the fabric of my pants and underwear as he pushes them down.

His lips ravage mine as he shoves my jeans and panties over my ass and down my thighs. I gasp against his mouth while undoing the final button on his jacket.

Breaking apart, we finish that last bit on our own. While I step out of the clothes now bunched around my knees, he shrugs out of his jacket.

Heat washes over me as I straighten and realize that I'm standing there completely naked while he is still more or less fully dressed. But before I can do anything about that, he closes the distance between us again and draws his hands down my sides. Electricity crackles across my skin and a moan slips from my lips.

He grabs my thighs and lifts me up onto the table while I snake my arm around the back of his neck again. The cold wooden surface sends a jolt through my body as my ass connects with the tabletop. But Alexander doesn't stop.

While kissing his way down my throat, he begins to unbuckle his belt. I throw my head back, exposing my throat fully to him as he continues brushing his lips over my sensitive skin. Pleasure washes over me.

God, I love the feel of his lips on my skin. The taste of them against my mouth. The feeling of his hands on my body.

Fabric rustles as he finishes with the belt and then unzips his pants. I pant into the ceiling as he kisses my collarbones.

Then his strong hands appear on my hips and take them in a firm grip. I barely have time to tilt my head back down and meet his gaze before he shoves his cock into me.

A moan tears from my throat.

Fuck, he's big.

With his fingers digging into my skin, he holds me trapped like that with his cock inside me, letting me adjust to his size. His pale blue eyes are locked on mine, and the look in them takes my breath away.

Anger slices through my insides. Why is he making me feel like this? How can he possibly affect me like this? He has made it his mission in life to humiliate me, and he spends an hour every day doing exactly that. He made me clean the remnants of my orgasm off his floor with my tongue, for fuck's sake!

"Fuck, I hate you so much," I press out.

A wicked smile curls his lips. "I know."

And before I can retort, he pulls back and shoves his cock into me again. A moan rips from my throat instead. I throw my head back as he withdraws and then slams into me once more. My chest rises and falls rapidly as my breathing picks up.

While keeping one hand on my hip to hold me steady, he traces the other one up my stomach. I suck in shuddering breaths as he rams his cock into me while his knuckles brush the underside of my breast. He moves his hand with slow circling motions, teasing my skin and moving ever closer to my nipple.

Pleasure courses through my body.

I let out another blissful moan.

As if that sound alone made him realize that he's giving me exactly what I want, he tightens his grip on my hip and then picks up the pace.

The table scrapes against the floor as he starts thrusting into me with savage strength. It creates mind-numbing friction and makes me soar towards an orgasm. My eyes flutter. I dig my fingers into his shoulders as he shoves into me, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

Pain shoots through my body as he suddenly grabs my nipple and twists it hard. My eyes fly open and I gasp, but it's cut off by his lips as they crash against mine. I moan into his mouth as he rubs his thumb over my sensitive nipple. As if remembering himself, he pinches it hard again while he bites down on my bottom lip.

The hand on my hip disappears as he pulls his lips back and instead wraps a hand around my throat. Using that as leverage to keep me in place atop the table, he thrusts into me forcefully enough to make my ass slide back and forth across the smooth tabletop. And all the while, he's rolling and twisting and pinching my nipple hard with his fingers.

This is no longer about releasing pent-up tension.

This is about dominance.

He's fucking me as if he's laying claim on me. Body, mind, and soul. Just like he promised when we struck this bargain.

I wrap my hands around his forearm for support as he continues pounding into me while keeping his hand firmly around my throat to stop me from sliding off the table. His eyes burn into mine, branding me, as he stares me down while thrusting into me.

Tension builds inside me like an explosion waiting to be released.

White lights flicker in my brain as he continues inflicting that intoxicating torture on my nipple while he slams his cock into me.

Then his cock hits a spot deep inside and release crashes over me.

My clit throbs and my pussy tightens around his length as he continues pounding into me, riding the orgasm with me, until a dark groan tears from

deep within his throat and he comes as well.

My heart thunders in my chest and I gasp in shallow breaths as pleasure ripples through me, making my legs shake against the tabletop. I dig my fingers into his toned forearm. Holding my gaze, he keeps his firm grip on my throat.

Once the final remnants have faded, a thick silence descends on the room.

For a while, neither of us moves. Alexander remains standing there, one hand around my throat and his cock buried deep inside me, while I just sit there on the table, watching him.

I feel lightheaded, and euphoric emotions crackle through my veins. God, I can't even remember the last time I felt something like this. Have I ever felt something like this before?

And I'm not sure if it's because of those insane feelings wreaking havoc in my mind, but I swear that I can see strange emotions swirl in his eyes as well.

Right then, he breaks the connection and abruptly pulls out.

Releasing my throat, he takes a couple of steps back while sliding his cock back into his pants. I remain sitting there on the table, suddenly feeling oddly empty.

Once he has buckled his belt again, he bends down to retrieve his suit jacket as well as the two hundred-dollar bills that were lying underneath it. I watch as he slips the jacket on and buttons it before he looks up to meet my gaze again.

That cold ruthless mask of a bloody dictator is back on his features again.

For a few seconds, no one speaks.

Then a cruel smile settles on his lips.

"Here." He throws the two hundred-dollar bills on the ground in front of me as if it's nothing. Because to him, of course, it is nothing. "You earned it."

Pain, as well as a cold feeling of shame, tears through my stomach.

After giving me a mocking once-over, he turns around and strides towards the door without another word.

"Fuck you, asshole!" I yell after him as he shoves the door open and walks out.

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ALEXANDER

My footsteps echo against the wooden walls as I pace back and forth across my living room. Once again, that terrible sense of restlessness whirls inside my chest like a storm. I want to drum my fingers against something. Or to throw open the front door and just start running. Except, I don't actually want to do either of those things.

I cast a glance at the darkness outside the window. It's a Friday evening. I should be attending one of the numerous parties that are no doubt in full swing in various locations across campus. But instead, I'm pacing through my living room. Alone.

Well, not *alone* alone.

While I turn at the sofa yet again, I flick a quick look towards the other wall. Daniel is standing there right next to the doorway. His dark eyes rest casually on the opposite wall, and there's a neutral expression on his face. Even though I have been behaving this strangely for a while now, he hasn't commented on it. Hasn't even scowled at me when he thinks I'm not looking. He doesn't judge me. Never has. It's one of the many reasons why he has been my closest bodyguard for so many years now.

In an effort to stop the constant churn of emotions in my head, I force myself to come to a halt. Raking my fingers through my hair, I tip my head back and blow out a long sigh.

I'm not used to this. All my life, I have been calm and in control. Always. But now, I feel unsettled. Off-kilter. And it's all because of *her*.

Ever since Olivia Campbell inserted herself into my life, I barely even recognize myself. She throws me off my game in ways I hadn't expected.

It has been over a week since we hate fucked each other in that little meeting room in the library. And I've left her alone since then. Because I can't stop thinking about it. About *her*.

I liked it too much. I liked fucking her too much. The way she took charge. The way she kissed me as if it was a battle that she was determined to win. A desperate war between our bodies that she refused to lose. I loved the way she tore pleasure from my soul. And the way her body surrendered to mine in the end as I sent her over the edge and she trembled with release on top of that table. Those little moans she made at the back of her throat as she came. The way her eyes glittered. And the knowledge that I was responsible for all of it.

Shaking my head, I force out another breath. Damn, this is bad. I realized it already back then. Back inside that room after the final waves of release had finished crashing over our bodies. It's the reason why I tossed her the money afterwards. I needed to do something to piss her off, because I can't have her thinking that it meant something. That it was anything more than just sex. Plain and simple hate sex to relieve my frustrations about her and her absolutely infuriating insistence on not doing as she's fucking told.

That was all it was. Just sex. So I tossed her the money and then left her alone for over a week while I cooled down and tried to get her out of my system. Well, actually, for the past nine days, two hours, and fourteen minutes, to be precise. But hey, who's counting?

It's only when I hear my footsteps echo against my mahogany floor that I realize that I've started pacing again. A low snarl tears from my throat as I force myself to stop.

"If I can make a suggestion, sir?"

I blink at the sound of Daniel's always so calm voice, and then school my features into a composed expression before turning to face him. "Of course."

"Call your brother."

Surprise flickers through me.

"Talking to him usually helps you think things through," he continues.

I raise my eyebrows at him in both surprise and silent question.

A small smile ghosts across his mouth. "In case you've forgotten, sir, noticing things is kind of my job."

Huffing out a laugh, I give him a nod in acknowledgement. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Sliding my hand into my pocket, I fish out my phone and pull up my last dialed numbers. Benedict's name is right there at the top.

"I'll be in the hall," Daniel says, and then dips his chin before disappearing out the open doorway.

I move over to the spacious sofa by the TV and drop down on it. The beige cushions let out a huff as my weight lands on them.

Then I call Benedict.

He picks up after the third tone.

"Four?" he yells into the phone.

I frown and shift it a bit farther away from my ear. Loud music thumps in the background, and the noise of people talking and laughing is mixed with it too.

"Are you at a party?" I ask.

"Am I at a party?" he says, as if that's the daftest question I've ever asked. "The better question is, why aren't you?"

A smile tugs at my lips. "Who says I'm not?"

"That broody tone of your voice does."

I grimace. It's that obvious, huh? Suddenly regretting my decision, I instead reply, "It's nothing. I'll talk to you on Sunday. Have fun."

"No, no, no," he protests. "You called me, on a Friday evening, which means that you really need to talk about something. Hang on." The music grows fainter in the background, as if he's moving away from it. Then what sounds like a door clicks shut and the music and chatter becomes muted. "So, what's up?"

Leaning back against the cushions, I drag a hand through my hair and stare up into the ceiling. "I think I'm becoming obsessed."

"Good."

I start slightly. Shifting the phone in my hand, I frown at it for a second, wondering if I misheard him.

With my brows still creased, I put the phone back against my ear. "Good? What do you mean *good*?"

"Oh come on, Four." He blows out a sigh as if this should all have been obvious to me. "When was the last time you cared about something? Actually cared?"

"I don't care about her."

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. Raising my free hand, I rest it over my eyes and massage my brows. Damn it.

I can practically hear the grin in Benedicts voice as he replies, “*Her?*”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Oh no, you’re not!”

“Benedi—”

“So, who is this mystery girl that you *don’t* care about?”

“I don’t know.” Letting my hand drop back down on the sofa, I blow out a sigh. “I mean, of course I know. I just...”

“So she’s not your girlfriend then?”

“No!”

“Yet.” He chuckles as if he’s very satisfied with himself. “What’s going on with you and her then?”

She refused to bow to me so I decided to get revenge by making her life a living hell by bullying the crap out of her. Oh and then another guy tried to kill her so she had to sell herself to me in exchange for safety and now she’s practically my slave for an hour every day. But I also can’t stop thinking about her because she’s unlike anyone I have ever met and it drives me up the wall that I have to keep my distance from her but I also don’t want to be near her because it will only make this obsession worse.

I stare at the black TV screen across the low table as that explanation finishes flashing through my head.

Yeah, I’m so not telling him that.

“It’s, uhm...” I begin instead. “Complicated.”

“Isn’t it always? But so then what do you want from her?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

“Then perhaps you should start by figuring that out.”

I snort and roll my eyes, even though he can’t see it. “Yeah, thanks, Einstein.”

“You’re welcome, loser.” He lets out a light laugh that makes another smile pull at my own lips. “But look, you want my advice?”

“That’s why I called, idiot.”

“Hey, don’t offend your wise mentor now, peasant.” Before I can throw an insult back at him, he charges on. “My advice? My serious advice? Go after her. So what if you don’t know what it is or what you want? You’re never gonna figure that out by just pacing through your living room.”

God, my brother knows me far too well.

“So pursue her,” he continues. “See what happens. I’m sure you’ll figure out what this is and what you want along the way. And if it all turns

into a total shitshow, then it wasn't meant to be anyway."

"Now you're starting to sound like a horoscope."

He groans, and I can almost see him flipping me off through the phone. "You know what I mean. Besides, this sounds like a challenge. And I've never seen you back down from a challenge."

A challenge, huh? I like the sound of that. Olivia Campbell is a challenge. Something I need to study, figure out the secret behind, and then crush into oblivion so that I can destroy this strange hold she has on me. I can work with that.

"That's... actually sound advice," I say.

"Actually? What do you mean *actually*?"

I chuckle. "Thanks, Benedict."

"You're welcome." Something clatters on the other end of the line, and then wooden furniture creaks. "And now, I'm going back to the party. I was *this* close to getting laid when you called, by the way. So thanks for being a cockblocker, dick."

"As if you've ever had any trouble getting laid, whore."

He snickers, and I can hear the grin in his voice as he replies, "True. Thanks for the pep talk!"

Before I can say anything else, he hangs up. Another laugh escapes my chest as I shake my head at my phone and my weird little brother.

The sofa groans faintly as I push myself to my feet and slide my phone back into my pocket. Running my hands over my hair, I smoothen it down as I start towards the door. Daniel is standing there a short distance away. I give him a nod as I pull on my suit jacket. He was right. Talking to Benedict really did help me think things through.

A small smile drifts across Daniel's features.

I push open the door and stride out into the dark evening. Since I didn't tell him to stay, Daniel follows as well and closes the door behind us.

Cool evening air washes over my face as I set course for the library. It's either that, or her dorm, and I have a feeling that my little scholarship student is busy studying even though it is a Friday evening.

Thumping music spills out of the open windows of a house farther up the street. I was invited to that party. Well, technically, I'm invited to every party. But that one in particular is hosted by a wealthy family that is on good terms with mine. If I hadn't been so out of sorts, I would've made an appearance there tonight.

But I won't. Because now, I have another destination.

I reach the library in short order, and this time, I don't even have to go inside. As I get closer to the building, I find Olivia sitting at one of the tables by the large windows. Yellow light fills the spacious room inside, so I can see her perfectly. But because of the darkness outside, she won't be able to see me.

She is wearing a white blouse that enhances her perfect figure, and she has pulled her hair up into a ponytail. It exposes her slender neck and makes a thrill race down my spine. I want to kiss that neck. Or maybe wrap my hands around it. Or both.

With wicked plans swirling inside my skull, I start towards the front doors. But right as I'm about to enter the building, another figure appears at her table.

Fury crackles through me like lightning.

Screeching to a halt, I watch as that Philip guy sits down opposite her at the table. She smiles at him as he settles into his seat. And it's a real smile. One that actually reaches her eyes.

My head is suddenly pounding, and I have to flex my fingers several times before I can manage to pull out my phone.

After scrolling through my list of contacts, I press one I have never called before.

Ten signals pass before a nervous voice finally answers, "Mr. Huntington?"

"Yes."

"I, uhm... What can I do for you?"

My eyes are locked on Olivia as she draws a hand over her neck, pushing her ponytail aside, and then laughs at something Philip said.

"Mr. Huntington?" The man on the other end of the line sounds even more worried now. "Are you there?"

"Yes," I reply again.

"What can I do for you?"

Philip leans forward and places his hand on the table, close to her arm. Far too close. Rage roars through me.

"It's about one of your tenants."

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OLIVIA

It has been almost two weeks since I last saw Alexander. After that insane day when we fucked in the library, he hasn't cashed in any more hours. That means that he now has twelve hours to collect. Worry twists through my stomach like snakes. I can't help but feel as if he's gearing up for something big.

"Hello?"

I blink, yanked out of my troubled thoughts, as that very familiar, and very stressed, voice at last comes from the other end of the line.

Adjusting the phone in my hand, I say, "Hi, Mom."

Shouts and clanking noises come from her end of the line for a few seconds, followed by her own voice telling someone to settle down. Then she finally returns to the call, "Olivia? Is that you?"

"Yes. How are you, Mom? How are things going back home?"

My siblings scream somewhere in the background again.

"Stop yelling," my mom calls. Then she laughs. It's a strained and exhausted sound. "Oh, you know. Same as usual. How are things up in Huntingswell? Have you started classes yet?"

A sigh almost escapes my lips. *Yes, a month ago.* But I don't tell her that. Instead, I say, "Yes, I have. I'm learning so much about—"

A loud bang echoes from somewhere in the background. It's followed by a wailing cry that makes me move the phone farther away from my ear.

"Jim Frederick Campbell," my mother says in a stern voice. "How many times do I have to tell you? We do not throw footballs inside the house. Look, now you made your sister cry."

"But Mom—" Jim yells.

It's cut off by what sounds like my little sister Jenny letting out another banshee wail.

"Sorry, honey," my mom says into the phone. "I've gotta go."

Disappointment floods my chest, but I muster a cheerful tone as I say, "Yeah, of course. Can you call me when..."

A sigh rips from my lungs when I realize that she has already hung up. Coldness that has nothing to do with the afternoon air seeps through my body as I slide my phone back into my pocket and continue trudging towards my dorm.

Of course she has to go. Of course she doesn't have time. She never does. Never did. I'm the oldest of five siblings, so there was always someone who needed Mom more than me, which means that I practically had to raise myself. I've always done everything myself. Cooked my own food. Cleaned and washed my own clothes. Done homework and used my bike to get to extracurricular activities by myself.

I don't really blame my parents for not being there for me. With five kids, no one has time for everything, right? But sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to be put first. To actually be taken care of by someone else instead of only having to rely on myself.

Shaking my head, I push aside those silly thoughts. If you want something done, you have to do it yourself.

Humid air wraps around me like a thick blanket as I step into our corridor. Someone must have been showering too long and in too hot water again. Adjusting my bag on my shoulder, I shove aside my hair that has already begun sticking to the back of my neck by the time I reach my door.

Two other students give me strange looks as I insert the key. But nowadays, everyone gives me strange looks so I don't think much of it as I unlock my door and pull it open.

For a few seconds, I can't comprehend what I'm seeing. I just stand there. On the threshold. Staring into my dorm room.

Then I look down at the key in my hand before leaning out into the corridor again to make sure that this is in fact the right door. The number four painted on the wall next to me stares back at me uncomprehendingly. Or maybe I'm the one staring at *it* uncomprehendingly.

Giving my head a few quick shakes, I return my attention to the small room before me.

It's empty.

Completely bare except for the furniture that belongs to the building.

It looks exactly like it did when I first moved in. Before I unpacked all of my things and turned this bland room into my place. My home.

Staggering across the threshold, I turn in a slow circle as I stare at the bare room. All my things are gone. As if I never lived here.

Disbelief still rings inside my skull like a bell when I complete the circle and my gaze lands on the wall right next to the door.

There is a yellow post-it note on it.

With a frown on my face, I walk up to it and read the words written on it in neat handwriting. It's an address. A kind of familiar address. Where do I recognize it from?

Realization dawns like a red sun.

Oh no, he didn't. He fucking didn't.

Anger roars through me, and I snatch the post-it off the wall before storming out of the room. The two students who were giving me strange looks when I arrived leap out of the way as I stomp down the corridor and shove the front door open.

I can practically feel the smoke billowing behind me as I stalk across campus while fuming like an angry storm cloud.

When I reach my destination, I don't ring the doorbell. I pound my fist against the door and scream the devil's name at the top of my lungs. "ALEXANDER! Open this door right now, or I swear to God I will fucking break it down."

Bangs echo between the white stone buildings around me as I continue to pound on his carved wooden door.

After about half a minute, the lock finally clicks open. I'm forced to step back as the door is pushed outwards.

An entire truckload of gasoline is dumped on the roaring anger inside me as I found Alexander standing there in his perfect hall with amusement dancing across his features.

"Careful now," he says, and shoots a pointed look at the door. "You break it, you buy it."

I hurl the crumpled-up post-it note at his chest. "You had no right!"

It bounces off his muscular chest and impeccable dark gray suit, and lands on the floor in front of his polished oxfords. He casts a lazy glance down at it before meeting my gaze again.

"You had no fucking right!" I scream at him.

He smirks and raises his eyebrows at me. "I think you will find that I have every right to do whatever I want."

"You kicked me out of my dorm room! My home. You absolute bastard! Where even is all my stuff?"

"Careful with that sharp tongue of yours." He gives me a patronizing look. "Now, would you like to come inside and finish this conversation like adults? Or do you intend to continue standing there on my porch, screaming like a toddler?"

It takes every ounce of my rather considerable self-control not to leap forward and strangle him. Forcing out a long breath through my nose, I scrape together the last bits of my restraint and stalk across the threshold. But just because I'm the petty bitch that I am, I slam the door shut behind me hard enough to make the windows rattle.

Alexander's pale eyes sharpen, but he says nothing.

I raise my eyebrows expectantly.

Without another word, he turns around and walks into his study. God, I feel like I know every inch of this room by now after all the hours he has cashed in here.

Golden afternoon sunlight filters in through the windows and falls across half of Alexander's face as he turns around and meets my gaze again. He crosses his arms over his chest while I close the door behind me.

And suddenly, all the fight bleeds out of me. Instead, I just feel tired.

Heaving an exhausted sigh, I press out, "What the hell did you do, Alexander?"

"I canceled your lease agreement," he says matter-of-factly.

I shake my head at him. "Why?"

"No dorm. No need to pay rent."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" I throw out an arm, stabbing my hand towards the windows. "Sleep on the street?"

A threatening smile spreads across his lips.

It sends a flash of panic down my spine. Is he actually going to make me sleep on the street? It's October. It will be cold as hell at night. And I have nothing except the clothes I'm wearing.

He lets the silence stretch until I'm on the verge of breaking and asking him if he actually is going to force me to do that. Right before I can open my mouth, he finally speaks.

"I moved all of your stuff here."

Confusion swirls through my chest. “What do you mean here?”

Uncrossing his arms, he motions at the building around us. “Here. To my house.”

“What on earth for?”

“What do you think?”

For a moment, I just stare back at him. He can’t possibly mean...? Giving my head a short shake, I pull myself together enough to ask, “You expect me to live here?”

“Yes.” He shrugs. “No rent. Free food. Which means that you won’t have to tutor Philip anymore.”

He practically spits out Philip’s name like a curse.

Anger pushes out the exhaustion and disbelief still ringing inside me. I curl my fingers into a fist as rage burns through me. Again with the fucking tutoring! We’ve had this conversation already. Why is he so damn fixated on my tutoring?

“I’m not quitting my job,” I grind out between gritted teeth while leveling a hard stare on him. “I know that this is a foreign concept to you, but I need money to live.”

“I can give you money.”

“I don’t want your money!” Stalking forward, I stab my hand against his hard chest. “How is this so fucking difficult for you to understand? I don’t want your money. I don’t want anything from you. I want my job and my dorm that I got for myself.”

He turns his head this way and that, as if looking for something.

“What?” I snap, flicking my gaze around the room.

Shifting his attention back to me, he raises his eyebrows in a cocky gesture. “I’m searching for all the fucks I’m supposed to give.”

“You are unbelievable!” I shove him straight in the chest, which does nothing to actually move him. “You—”

His hands shoot up and grab my wrists, holding them in a firm grip before I can attempt to shove him again. “Listen to me, and listen carefully, because I will only say this one more time. From this day forward, you will no longer be tutoring Philip. Or anyone else for that matter.”

“Not gonna happen! I will do exactly what I want because—”

The rest of my sentence gets cut off by a yelp as Alexander uses his grip on my wrists to drag me towards his massive desk. I yank against his hands

and try to dig my heels into the floor, but it does nothing to even slow him down.

“What the hell are you doing?” I growl. “Get your hands off me.”

He releases me, shoving me against the desk as we at last reach it. Then he lifts the antique hourglass on the smooth tabletop and turns it before slamming it down again.

“I’m cashing in another hour,” he announces.

My stomach flips at the unyielding power that pulses from his whole body as he stares me down. It sends a ripple of dark desire straight to my core.

“Pull down your pants,” he orders.

A jolt shoots through my body, but I slowly undo the button and slide down the zipper on my jeans. Then I began pushing them over my ass.

“Panties too,” he snaps.

Holding his gaze, I do as he says and slide my jeans and my panties down. Once I reach my mid-thighs, he orders me to stop. I frown but just look back at him in silence as I let my hands drop back by my sides.

“Now, bend over the desk,” he commands.

My heart does that weird thing again where it drops and then beats twice as hard.

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” he warns.

Moving quickly, I turn around so that I’m facing the mostly empty desk and then bend over it. It leaves my naked ass on full display for him. Closing my eyes, I push aside a flash of embarrassment.

“Hold on to the edge of the desk,” his dark voice cuts through the air right next to me.

I slide my arms over the massive desk until I can reach the other side. Then I curl my fingers around the edge.

Slap.

I hear the sound before I feel the sting. A cry of surprise tears from my throat at the unexpected pain pulsing through my ass. But before I can process what Alexander just did to me, it happens again.

His hand cracks against my naked skin with a slap that seems to echo through the whole room. I suck in a sharp breath between my teeth and wiggle to get out of the way of his hand.

“I said, hold on to the desk,” he growls. “Don’t you dare move.”

Slap.

A whimper escapes my lips, and I dig my fingernails into the wood as his hand connects with my ass again. And again.

Bent over a desk with my naked ass in the air while Alexander Huntington spans me...

I've never felt more humiliated, and more turned on, in my entire life.

Heat floods my cheeks, and my clit throbs with a suddenly desperate need that I'm not even sure I understand. I moan into the polished tabletop as Alexander spans me again. My pussy gets wetter with every slap. The sting makes me wiggle my ass to get some relief, but I manage to obey his orders and remain bent over the table like that.

After a few more strikes, he stops and instead slides a hand down to my pussy. I squeeze my eyes shut. I know what he will find. Fucking hell, what is wrong with me?

He huffs out a breath when he feels how wet I am, and I can't tell if he's amused or pleased.

Then his shoe appears against the inside of my foot as he kicks my legs apart, widening my stance. He runs his hands over my ass a couple of times, soothing the ache.

Right as I'm about to shift my ass against his hands to help him along, he shoves his cock into my pussy with enough force to make me gasp.

Pleasure crackles through my veins as he pulls out and then slams into me once more.

The edge of the table digs into my hips as Alexander sets a brutal pace, fucking me with a dominance that makes my heart pound and my core clench.

"You. Are. Going," he begins in a commanding voice, each word punctuated by a powerful thrust. "To. Quit. Your. Job."

"Alexander—"

He slams deep inside me, making me cry out and grip the edge of the table harder as tension builds inside me like a lightning storm.

"Listen to me." He continues pounding into me. Claiming me. Owning me. "I don't want his hands on you. I don't want him to even breathe near you. So you *are* going to stop tutoring that fucking bastard. Am I making myself clear?"

Confusion whirls through me. Why does he care so much if I spend time with someone else? Why does he care if Philip touches my arm or laughs at my jokes?

It's such a caveman logic anyway. I'm allowed to talk to whoever I want. To any man I want. And it's none of his fucking business.

Though, I have to admit, I quite like the blatant jealousy and dark possessiveness in his tone. And I'm secretly pleased that he's annoyed by the fact that I spend time with another man. It makes him seem needy. And like he's losing control. Like *I'm making him* lose control of his perfect world that otherwise always bends to his will.

Tension pulses through me as Alexander slams into me again.

"I said," he growls, once more punctuating each word with a dominant thrust. "Am I making myself clear?"

My mind flickers as I soar towards the edge. I open my mouth to reply, but I never find out what I was going to say, because his cock hits the perfect spot inside me and pleasure explodes through my body.

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ALEXANDER

Her body trembles against the smooth wooden tabletop as an orgasm crashes through her. It makes her pussy tighten around my cock. I continue pounding into her while she whimpers and moans incoherently.

Release explodes through me as well. God, I love those sounds she makes when she comes.

She's gripping the edge of the table so hard that her fingers have turned white. I let my gaze drift over her perfect body as I finish emptying myself inside her. I already know that she's on birth control because I made her tell me that early on in our arrangement. And also because I called her doctor to make sure.

When the orgasm drains from her, she just slumps down fully on the table. Her chest heaves and her cheeks are flushed. Or at least the cheek that I can see, since she's resting the other against the tabletop. There's a dazed look in her eyes.

I remain where I am. With my cock still buried deep inside her, I lean forward and brace one hand against the table while placing the other one against the back of Olivia's neck.

"Since you refuse to answer, let me spell it out for you." I tighten my grip on her neck, pushing her down harder against the smooth wood. "None of the dorms on this entire campus will accept an application from you. So right now, you only have two choices. You either continue tutoring Philip and sleep on the street. Or you break off all contact with him and live here."

"You can't just—"

Her protest is cut off by a sharp intake of breath as I straighten and abruptly pull my cock out of her pussy before zipping my pants back up again. She tries to push herself up from the tabletop the moment my hand is gone from her neck, but I plant my palm between her shoulder blades and shove her back down while I round the desk.

“Stay down,” I order.

She grits her teeth but returns to her original position. I yank open one of the drawers as I reach the other side of the desk. Then I grab her wrist and handcuff it to the leg of the table.

“What the hell,” she snaps.

Metal rattles against wood as she yanks against the manacles while trying to quickly snatch her other hand back from the edge. I grab it before she can and snap the other pair of handcuffs shut around it before locking that one to the other table leg as well.

Since the desk is so wide, she can’t move around it when her hands are secured in this position. Which means that she is now completely trapped like this. Bent over the table with her pants halfway down her legs and her naked ass on full display.

“Alexander,” she growls, trying to shift her head so that she can meet my gaze. But in her current predicament, she can’t. “You—”

“Do you remember the choice I gave you?” I cut her off.

“Choice?” She practically spits out the word. “It’s not a choice. It’s blackmail—”

“So you do remember it?”

“Yes,” she grinds out.

“Good.”

I draw my hand over her cheek and neck, pushing her hair away from her face. It draws a shiver from her body. Removing my hand, I instead reach out and grab the hourglass from the other side of the desk. Sand falls lazily down, creating a small pile on the bottom. I move it so that it’s right in front of Olivia’s face and then I set it down.

“I will leave you here for the rest of the hour to consider your options.” Starting towards the door, I trace my fingers down her spine on the way past. “I would choose very carefully, if I were you.”

Vicious cursing follows me as I saunter out of the room. She yanks against the handcuffs again, making them rattle against the wood once

more, and stomps her foot. I leave her to it as I walk up the stairs and head towards my bathroom.

Water splashes against the dark gray tiles as I turn on the shower and strip out of my clothes. I leave them in an uncharacteristically messy heap as I step into the water.

My mind churns and a storm of emotions swirls inside my chest.

Closing my eyes, I draw my hands over my face and then rake them through my hair as warm water crashes over me. A sigh rips from my lungs.

God, she is absolutely infuriating. I offer her the opportunity to live here, in my luxurious house with no rent and free food, instead of in her crappy little dorm room. And she acts as if it's a fate worse than death. Why can't she just do as she's told? And show some gratitude while she's at it too?

Though I have to admit, I quite like that she doesn't want my money. That's certainly a first for me. All my life, I have been painfully aware of the fact that anyone who approaches me does so with an agenda. They never do it just to be friends or partners. They do it because they know who I am, and know what I can give them if they get on my good side. It puts me in a position of power, which I enjoy, but it also means that I can never form genuine connections with anyone outside my immediate family. Because everyone else always wants something.

So it's rather refreshing to meet someone who wants absolutely nothing from me, even when I'm trying to be nice and offer it freely.

The warm water calms the whirl of strange emotions inside my chest, and I spend a bit longer underneath it than I need to.

Once I'm finished showering, I stroll into my bedroom and throw myself down on my massive double bed. The thick mattress shifts underneath my weight as I settle down against the pillows and pick up my phone.

While waiting for my hair to dry, I scroll through Olivia's Instagram account again. She hasn't posted anything new in the hours since I checked it last time, but I still scroll through the pictures. Some of them are of the campus, some are weird history memes that I don't understand, and a few of them are of her. She looks happy in the photos. Her brown eyes glitter in the sun as she smiles for the camera. And I can't help but wonder if it's real, or if it's just an act to fool the rest of the world that she is in fact happy.

Panic flashes through me.

What does it matter if she's happy? I'm not trying to make her happy. I'm trying to break her. Trying to get her to surrender to me and admit that she made a grave mistake in challenging my authority. That has nothing to do with her happiness.

Throwing the phone down on the bed, I drape an arm over my face and close my eyes.

When the hour is almost up, I put on a fresh dress shirt and a pair of black pants and then draw a hand through my now dry hair. While walking down the steps, I roll up my sleeves, exposing my forearms.

For some reason that I still haven't been able to work out, women find it incredibly hot when a man rolls up his sleeves like that. And I love watching the way Olivia's breath hitches when she sometimes studies my body. She thinks I don't notice. But with her, I always notice.

The final grains of sand tumble down onto the now large pile inside the hourglass right as I walk across the threshold and enter my study. Olivia is still waiting exactly where I left her.

Blood rushes to my cock as I rake my gaze over her body.

God, I love her like that. Handcuffed and bent over my desk with her naked ass in the air and my cum running down her bare thighs.

It takes all of my self-restraint not to stalk over there and take her again.

Instead, I cross my arms and cock my head as I watch her from behind. "So, have you reached a decision?"

"Yes." She practically growls the word at me, informing me that she hasn't cooled off one bit in the hour since I left her handcuffed across that desk.

Amusement blows through me. She sure is a stubborn one.

But I keep the mirth from my voice and instead lace it with authority as I demand, "And?"

"I'll quit tutoring and stay here."

I let out a dark chuckle. "Smart choice"

Sauntering up to the table, I reach into the still open drawer and fish out the key to the handcuffs. Olivia's back rises and falls as if she's having trouble containing her anger. I smirk down at her for another few seconds before finally removing the handcuffs from her wrists.

The moment they're gone, she shoots upright and yanks her panties and jeans back up. I chuckle again as I toss the handcuffs back into the drawer and then round the table so that I'm standing right in front of her.

Once she has finished buttoning her pants, she yanks her hands up and shoves me in the chest while her eyes flash with fury. “You’re such an asshole!”

Since her adorable little shove does absolutely nothing to push me off balance, I simply reach out and wrap a hand around her jaw. Holding it firmly, I lean closer to her face. “Watch that mouth.” Before she can spit out her retort, I release her forcefully enough to snap her head to the side. “Don’t make me cash in another hour.”

She slowly turns her head back so that she can look at me. Or rather *glare* at me. She grinds her teeth so hard that a muscle flickers in her jaw. But she says nothing.

Amusement sparkles in my chest. She’s finally learning how to obey.

Jerking my chin, I start towards the door. “Now, follow. I’ll show you your room.”

Her footsteps echo between the dark wooden walls as she stalks after me in angry silence.

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OLIVIA

As we make our way towards the stairs, I look around for something with which I can stab him in the back. Luckily for him, there is nothing within reach. I slide my gaze over the expensive paintings on the dark wooden walls as we close the final distance to the stairs and then start upwards.

My heart patters in my chest as we reach the second floor. Given everything I know about Alexander Huntington, he is probably going to make me sleep in a damn closet or something. But there really was no other way. He has made sure that I won't be able to rent anything else on campus, so it was this or nothing.

And a small part of me, one that I barely even want to admit exists, is secretly relieved. No longer having to worry about whether I'll be able to make enough money to cover both food and rent has taken a huge weight off my shoulders. Even if I'll have to sleep in a closet in exchange for it.

Surprise flits through my chest as Alexander opens a door to an actual bedroom. A bedroom that contains all of my things. With my mouth slightly open, I turn slowly to take in the whole room as I step across the threshold.

It's twice as big as my dorm room. There's a large closet, a set of drawers, and a bookcase made of dark wood, a full-size mirror, and even a comfortable armchair in beige fabric. Against the back wall is a double bed with cream-colored sheets, and it looks like there's a private bathroom through the doorway on my right. I stare at the room around me. All of my things have been placed neatly on the shelves.

I turn to face Alexander.

Golden afternoon sunlight streams in through the windows and makes his eyes glitter as he watches me. And suddenly, I can't think of a single thing to say.

"The bathroom is through there," he says before I can figure it out, and then nods towards the doorway on my right. "Just put your clothes in the laundry basket in there, and my housekeeper will take care of it."

Giving my head a few quick shakes, I snap out of my shock and instead arch an eyebrow at him. "Your housekeeper? You have a housekeeper?"

He raises his eyebrows as well. "Do I really look like someone who enjoys things like vacuuming and doing laundry?"

"No." I snort and then flash him a teasing smirk. "You look like someone who has never worked a day in his life."

"Hey." He shoots me a warning look, but there's a smile lurking at the corner of his lips too. "Watch it."

"Uh-huh."

He shakes his head at me. "Breakfast will be ready an hour before classes start."

"Your housekeeper also makes you breakfast?"

"And lunch and dinner. So you no longer have to eat in the canteen."

"Seriously?"

"Yes." A sly smile plays over his lips as he flicks a glance down at my pussy. "Now, may I suggest putting those jeans in the laundry basket right away, unless you want my cum to leave permanent stains on them." He shrugs. "Which I'm all for, by the way, but you know... Just friendly advice."

I blush furiously at the reminder that I still have his dried cum on my thighs.

He lets out a satisfied laugh and then strolls back towards the door while tossing over his shoulder, "Welcome home, Olivia."



I did actually take his advice and put my clothes straight in the laundry basket. Then I took a nice long shower to wash off all traces of him, which was more distracting than I had anticipated because it just made me remember how insanely turned on I had been when he spanked me and then

fucked me possessively against his desk. God, there really is something wrong with me.

Once I was done showering and had put on fresh clothes, I spent the next hour or so checking every inch of the room to see where he put everything. As I was going through the room, it surprised me to see the care with which Alexander had arranged my things. When he told me that he had moved my stuff here, I half expected him to have destroyed it all in the process. But everything has been neatly placed on shelves or folded and put in drawers.

Closing the bottom drawer, I straighten and drift over to the bookcase. All of my course literature is there. Thank God. And so are the other books that I brought.

But there are more books on the shelves than there should be. I trace my finger over the spines as I read the titles of the ones waiting on the shelf below.

My heart almost stops.

Letting my hand drop back down, I stare at the ten hardbacks on the final shelf in open-mouthed shock. They're history books. A series of ten books about world history from the time humanity learned how to use fire all the way until today. I gape at them. They are incredibly expensive. I know because I've been dreaming about buying them for years.

Very carefully, I pull one off the dark wooden shelf and open it. The spine creaks, informing me that the book is indeed brand-new and has never been opened before.

Happiness flutters in my stomach like butterflies. With a ridiculous grin on my face, I hurry over to the plush armchair and sink into it before opening the book again. I think I smile the whole time as I flip through the pages.

Hours have passed by the time I finally remember where I am. Jerking my head up from the book, I glance out the window. It's dark outside now.

After carefully putting the book back on the shelf, I sneak over to the door and press my ear against it. There is no sound coming from the rest of the house. I frown. Where is Alexander?

Pushing the door open, I tiptoe into the hallway. The lights are on, but the door to what I'm assuming is Alexander's bedroom is closed. I continue towards the stairs instead.

My feet barely make a sound as I walk down and into the hallway downstairs. The lights are on here as well, but there is no movement. And no sound. As far as I can tell, there's no one in the house at all.

I still move quietly as I sneak towards the closest door and peer inside. Ever since we started our arrangement, I've only really been in this hallway and in the study. And I'm curious to see what the rest of the house looks like.

As I move through the building, I have to admit that Alexander, or whoever decorated these rooms, has impeccable taste. Expensive taste, but impeccable nonetheless. Everything is made of shining dark wood and rich fabric. Apart from the kitchen, where all the countertops are made of some kind of sleek dark gray stone, and the fridge and all the other appliances shine with the spotless gleam of stainless steel.

My fingers drift over the handles of the terribly expensive-looking kitchen knives. These are the ones I would've stabbed in Alexander's back if they had been a little closer earlier.

"Anything I can help you find?"

I practically leap out of my skin at the unexpected sound of his voice. As if my thoughts alone had summoned the devil, I whirl around to find Alexander watching me with an amused look on his face.

"Uhm..." I begin, very eloquently, before trailing off and clearing my throat when I can't think of anything clever to say.

He is leaning his shoulder against the doorframe, and he has his arms crossed over his chest. The infuriating man still has his white shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, exposing his toned forearms, which is so stupidly hot that I lose my train of thought for a moment. He cocks his head as he watches me with those far too perceptive eyes of his.

"You don't have to sneak around, you know," he says, and jerks his chin at the building around us. "You live here now."

"I, uhm..." Clearing my throat again, I scramble to gather my scattered wits. "I didn't want to disturb anyone."

"There's no one here to disturb."

"What about your housekeeper? Or that guard who always lurks around you?"

"Daniel is here when I want him to be here, which is currently not at the moment. And as for Meryl, she gets here tomorrow morning."

"I see."

He nods towards the knives that I was studying earlier. “Planning to stab one of those in my back?”

A jolt of alarm shoots through me at the wholly accurate guess, but I recover quickly and instead flash him a sweet smile. “Yes.”

“So why haven’t you?”

“When I was in the mood to do it, they were out of reach.”

“I see.”

“A very fitting way to die, though. For you, I mean.”

“Oh?”

“Being stabbed by something expensive. We wouldn’t want the great Alexander Huntington IV to be killed by something as mundane as a five-dollar piece of cutlery from IKEA, now would we?”

“Indeed not. Can you imagine the jagged cut it would leave in my suit? Unacceptable.”

A soft laugh escapes my throat. His eyes glitter as he watches me while still leaning against the doorjamb.

“About the history books,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

He raises his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“The ones in my room. That series of ten books about world history.”

“I’m still waiting for a question, love.”

“Did you buy them for me?”

The question sounds absolutely ridiculous, and I regret it the moment the words have left my tongue. Of course he didn’t buy them for me. When would he have had the time to do that? And more importantly, why would he have done that? His sole enjoyment in life is to make *my* life a living hell. Not to mention that he owns an hour of all my days for the next four years, during which he can make me do whatever he wants, so there would be no need for him to waste energy on a nice gesture like that.

“Yes,” he replies casually.

My eyebrows shoot up. He *did* buy them for me? I’m pretty sure that my mouth is hanging open, but Alexander just remains there, leaning against the doorframe and watching me with a neutral expression on his face.

“Why?” I manage to press out.

“You like history, so...” He shrugs, as if it’s no big deal.

Unexpected warmth floods my chest, and a smile spreads across my lips. “Thank you.”

At last, that blank mask on his face cracks. And the look in his eyes as he watches me makes my heart skip a beat. I open my mouth, but no other words come out. Alexander doesn't speak either.

He just smiles and dips his chin in acknowledgement.

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ALEXANDER

Having Olivia live in my house is different from how I had imagined it. I expected her to sneak around, barely noticeable, and avoid me at all times. Just like she did that first night. But that's not at all what happened.

Naturally, she spends most of her days attending classes. I do too. But she eats breakfast with me before we leave together, and then she comes home to eat lunch with me every day as well, and then in the evening she joins me for dinner.

And now, the house feels different.

Even though she is currently studying in her bedroom with the door closed, I can feel her presence from across the building. It's like a warm light. The bright hearth in the center that gives the house its soul.

To me, a house has always just been the walls and furniture and all that. But now, it's not. Now, it's... something more. I can't explain it. It sounds ridiculous even inside my own head. How can a person make it feel as if a building has a soul? It's absurd.

Shaking my head, I pace back and forth across the living room. But every few steps, my gaze drifts back towards the ceiling to where Olivia's room is. Like a moth to a flame.

We ate dinner together just an hour ago, but I'm still not satisfied. I can't get enough of her presence.

Instead of trying to suppress it, I give in to it and stride towards the stairs. I take them two at a time and quickly find myself outside her door. I contemplate knocking first, but decide against it. She has been messing with

my head so much lately, throwing me off balance and making me lose control over the world around me, so I need to do something to remind myself that *I* am in control here. Not her.

She jerks her head up and whips it towards the door as I pull it open and step inside. There's a slightly confused look on her face. It's the kind of look that I've seen other people get when they get so lost in what they're doing that they forget where they are. I've never experienced it myself, but I've seen it enough times to recognize it in others. And seeing that look on Olivia's face sends a strange stabbing feeling right into my heart.

Then her eyes focus on my face, and something like exasperation mixed with annoyance descends on her features. Tipping her head back, she blows out a heavy sigh before meeting my gaze again.

"Please leave," she says. "I'm trying to study."

I just close the door behind me and move farther into the room. "I'm cashing in my hour for today."

Another bucketload of exasperation crashes over her face. With a groan, she closes her book and begins to push herself off the bed since she is probably expecting me to lead her to my study.

"No," I say before she can climb off.

She pauses with her legs halfway over the edge of the mattress and raises her eyebrows at me questioningly.

"We're staying here this time," I explain.

Surprise pulses across her face, and her gaze darts to the bed she's sitting on. "Here?"

I like making her nervous, throwing her off balance like she does to me, so I don't answer and instead just saunter towards the bed. She watches me with those discerning eyes of hers as I sit down on the mattress so that my back is against the headboard. Leaning back against it casually, I keep my legs spread more than necessary as I draw them up until they're slightly bent.

She adjusts her position on the bed so that she is on her knees, facing me. Then she flicks an uncertain glance between my legs, as if she's trying to figure out whether she should ride or suck my cock. The fact that *that* was her first instinct sends a ripple of deep satisfaction through my soul.

It also makes blood rush to my cock. Now I really do want her to first suck me off and then ride my cock until she comes all over it while making those cute little noises.

I almost shake my head. *Focus*. That was not why I came here.

"Tell me about the history you're studying," I say.

She blinks at me. For a few seconds, it looks like she's trying to recalibrate her brain to process what I just said. But all that comes out of her mouth after those five seconds is still a simple, "What?"

I nod towards the stack of history books and notebooks scattered on the cream-colored bedding. "Tell me about the history you're studying."

"Is that really how you want to spend your hour?"

"Yes."

Confusion and uncertainty blow across her features, but she says, "Okay."

Paper rustles as she slides her books across the mattress so that they're in front of her while she shifts her position so that she is sitting cross-legged instead. Flipping the book back open, she searches for the page she was presumably reading when I walked in.

"I'm reading about the Mongols in the thirteenth century," she says, her eyes still on the book as she turns the pages.

"That sounds dreadfully boring," I say in order to piss her off and make her snap out of her confusion.

It works. An adorable flash of anger flickers in her eyes as she sits up straight and meets my gaze. "It's not boring."

"Oh really? And why is that?"

"They conquered like half of the continent! How could you possibly call that boring?"

"Wait, is this about Genghis Khan?"

"Yes!" She raises a finger in the air, and the most incredible light fills her eyes as she adds in an excited voice, "Though, technically, his name isn't Genghis Khan. That's just a title that means Great Ruler. His real name was actually Temujin."

"I... did not know that."

"Right? I didn't either until I started reading about this because you only ever hear people refer to him as Genghis Khan."

Cocking my head, I study her as she starts explaining how Temujin began in a vulnerable position after his father died but then started gaining followers through his skills and bravery until he was eventually proclaimed Genghis Khan at a great gathering of tribal leaders, which made it possible for him to start conquering in earnest.

She gestures excitedly with her hands and points to different drawings and passages in her book while she speaks, and her brown eyes are glittering so brightly that, for a moment, it takes my breath away.

“Why do you like history so much?” I blurt out, unable to stop myself.

Starting slightly, she looks at me as if the answer to that question should be obvious. “Because it’s us.”

I just frown at her in silent question.

“History is who we are.” She taps her hand against the book in front of her. “Everything that has happened before is the reason why the world looks like it does today. And every mistake that someone can possibly make has already been made in some form throughout history. Why did the Mongols succeed in conquering such vast territories when so many others had failed? They were nomads who were vastly outnumbered by the societies that they conquered, so why did they win? Well, they were incredibly talented horsemen and archers. They were also open to trying new military technologies from all different kinds of cultures instead of just assuming that their own was better. And they were really skilled at exploiting internal division and pitting people inside a society against each other.” She draws her finger over the map. “And because they conquered all these territories, the spread of technology across the continent increased which then led to developments that shaped...”

She trails off and a self-conscious expression blows across her features, as if she is just now realizing that she has been speaking nonstop without barely taking a breath. Or perhaps it’s because she notices that I’m studying her. I’m not sure. But she draws a hand through her hair a bit awkwardly and then clears her throat.

“So, yeah, I guess that’s why I like it,” she finishes.

Pain stabs through my chest like a blade, and I suddenly feel irrationally envious. Envious of the way her voice turns breathless and the words tumble out of her mouth when she talks about history. Envious of how her eyes light up and her hands move quicker. I wish I was that passionate about something too.

That feeling slithers through my stomach like a cold snake. It sends a flash of panic shooting through me because I’ve never felt that way before. Forcibly shoving that awful emotion aside, I try to get my usual air of cool control back.

“I see.” I let a sly smile slide across my lips. “And I have to admit, I do find the Mongols’ tactics rather interesting.”

She snorts. “Of course you do.”

I arch an eyebrow at her. “What was that?”

“I’m just saying, if you were a thirteenth century Mongolian nomad, I’m pretty sure you and Temujin would’ve been best friends. He slaughtered entire cities when he conquered them and then sent word to their neighboring cities that they could either surrender to him before he even got there or share the same fate.” She flashes me a knowing grin and shrugs. “Just sounds like something you would do.”

A laugh rips from my chest. “Indeed, it does.”

“Told you.” She winks. “Dictator.”

Before I can think of a clever comeback, she rolls off the bed and walks over to the bookshelf. Then she pulls out one of the books that she brought with her to campus. Strolling back to the bed, she tosses it into my lap.

“Here,” she says as she climbs back onto the mattress. “You can borrow this, if you want.”

Picking up the book, I glance at the title. *Genghis Khan: The Rise and Fall of the Mongolian Empire*. Surprise swirls through my chest as I look up and meet her gaze again.

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re really trusting me with one of your precious history books?”

“Yes.”

She shrugs, as if it’s no big deal. Though, to her, I know that it is.

Then she narrows her eyes at me while holding up a finger in the air. “But if you dog-ear so much as a single page, I will take one of those expensive knives in the kitchen and slit your throat while you sleep.”

Another surprised laugh escapes my chest. Shaking my head, I flash her a smile full of challenge. “You could always try, love.”

She rolls her eyes at me and shakes her head too.

When she meets my gaze again, I hold it and give her a small nod while saying in a once more serious voice, “I will take great care of it.”

That warm light shines in her eyes as she smiles back at me.

And right then, I think something might have irrevocably shifted between us.

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OLIVIA

Cheerful music already pulses from several buildings around campus. I never need a calendar to tell me when the weekend begins because all the parties do it for me. And the students of Huntingswell U really do know how to party. Not that I've been to any of them. But still. From what I've seen on my walks the mornings after, it looks like they've all had a night they'll never forget. Or a night they can't remember, depending on how you look at it.

I adjust my bag over my shoulder as I turn the corner and start down the street where Alexander lives. Were we live. I still haven't quite gotten used to saying that.

Alexander is... strange. Ever since I moved in with him two and a half weeks ago, I've started to see another side to him. Before, it was just the bloody dictator who ordered me around and made my life hell. But now... Now, I don't know what to think.

He mostly uses his hour to listen to me talk about history. It baffles me and I still can't really wrap my head around *why* he wants to do that. But he comes in, leans against the headboard, and then just sits there listening while I talk through the lectures I've attended and the reading we've been assigned. And he actually listens. Like really listens. Sometimes he asks me to elaborate or explain something, and when I do, he watches me with such intensity that it's hard to remember what I'm supposed to say.

It's such a strange experience. But it makes me feel seen in a way I never have before. It's such a powerful feeling, and it has made me actually look forward to the times when he cashes in his hours.

He doesn't always use it for that, though. Sometimes, he doesn't use it at all and instead lets it roll over and build up the hours he already has stacked up. And sometimes, he uses it to punish me.

That usually happens for the most ridiculous reasons. Like two days ago, he told me that I had been smiling too much at one of the guys I was partnered with during an assignment. *Smiling* too much. What an absolute idiot. But yes, he told me that I had been smiling too much at a guy, so when I got home, Alexander handcuffed me naked to the stairs and then edged me until I thought my mind would shatter. And then we hate fucked against the railing.

It's funny, that. Whenever he uses his hour to punish me or humiliate me for some imagined wrongdoing, it usually leads to sex. It's damn good sex, though.

But other than that, these past weeks have been pretty much like all the others.

I stop dead on the street as a sudden realization hits me like a brick to the face.

No, these weeks have not been exactly like all the others. There is one thing, one very important thing, that has changed.

My heart beats faster and confusion ripples through me as I hurry the final distance to Alexander's house. The door is unlocked so I just walk right in. After taking off my shoes and jacket, I dump my bag on the floor in the hallway as I stride into the living room.

There's no one there, or in the kitchen, so I set course for Alexander's study.

I find him in there, sitting in his leather armchair by the unlit fireplace.

As I walk inside, I open my mouth to ask him the question that's burning inside me now, but when I notice what he's doing, I lose track of what I was going to say.

He is sitting there, reading that book about Genghis Khan that I lent him. And based on the page he has open right now, he is almost finished. Incredulity pulses through me. He actually read it? The whole thing?

His pale blue eyes flick up from the page, locking directly on mine. "Is there anything I can help you with, Olivia?"

Giving my head a short shake, I force it back on track but it's very difficult when he's looking at me like that. "Well, yes."

"And what is that?"

“No one is bullying me anymore,” I blurt out.

Amusement plays at the corner of his lips as he looks back at me. “Was there a question somewhere in there?”

“No one has touched me. No one has said a mean word to me. No one has so much as looked at me wrong. Nothing, for the past two weeks.” I shake my head in disbelief. How am I only just now realizing this? “Is that your doing?”

He just lifts his toned shoulders in a nonchalant shrug.

“So it *is* your doing?” I push, my eyebrows raised in surprise. “You told everyone to back off?”

“I don’t like it when people touch my things.”

I snort. “Your *things*?”

“Tomorrow night is the annual Halloween party,” he says as if I hadn’t spoken.

It takes me a few seconds to recalibrate after the sudden change of topic, so I only manage to reply, “And?”

“And you’re going.”

“No.”

He closes the book with an ominous thud and then slowly sets it down on the mahogany side table next to him. Authority pulses from his muscular body as he meets my gaze again. “It wasn’t a request.”

“Yeah, I could kind of tell that from your arrogant tone, but the answer is still no.”

“It’s mandatory for freshmen.”

“I don’t care.”

“You will be there.” A lethal smile curls his lips and wicked promises blow across his face as he levels a commanding stare on me. “Don’t make me come and get you, because I promise you, you won’t like it.”

“Right.” I roll my eyes and then give him a mocking bow. “And what else would you have me do, master?”

His eyes darken with desire, and the dangerous smile transforms into a sly smirk. “You can call me that again.”

I snort.

He holds my gaze for another few seconds while tension crackles through the room like electricity. Then he jerks his chin towards his desk. “You’re wearing that to the party.”

Turning in the direction he indicated, I find a large white box on his neat desk. Suspicion whirls through my chest as I walk over to it and lift the lid. With a frown, I pull out the garment inside and hold it out in front of me.

My heart lurches in my chest.

“No!” I blurt out. Shaking my head, I repeat, “Oh no, I’m so not wearing this.”

He cocks his head. “That also wasn’t a request.”

An exasperated sigh rips from my lungs as I drop the absolutely scandalous outfit back into the box and turn to face my devil in his impeccable white dress shirt. “Would it kill you to say please?”

“Yes, I’m fairly certain that I would combust into flames if that word ever passed my lips.”

I barely manage to stop myself from laughing out loud. I’m supposed to be angry with him. Not laugh at his witty comebacks.

Placing a hand on my hip, I arch an eyebrow at him. “Have you ever asked for anything? Begged for anything? In your entire life?”

He lets out something between a snort and a disbelieving laugh before raising his eyebrows at me. “Begged? No, love, I don’t beg.”

“Really? What if someone threatened to kill you, and you knew without a doubt that they would let you go if you only begged, wouldn’t you do it then?”

“No. I wouldn’t get down on my knees even if you put a gun to my head. I don’t kneel or beg for anything.” He shoots me a pointed look. “Now, are you quite finished trying to distract me from the topic at hand? Or would you like me to put you on your knees and make *you* beg?”

“And we’re back to threats,” I mutter and roll my eyes. Then I glance towards the box again. “Do I really have to?”

“Yes. I have fourteen hours stacked up. I’m cashing in six of them tomorrow.”

I release a resigned sigh. “Fine.”

“You will arrive at the party at eight o’clock.” He nods towards the box. “Wearing *that*. And you will follow all the traditional customs for the freshmen at the party. Understood?”

Giving him a sweet smile full of mockery, I bow deeply again. “Yes, master.”

His answering smile makes my toes curl and my spine tingle.

“Oh, I do love it when you call me that.”

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ALEXANDER

The man at the front of the line approaches me nervously. He is wearing a black suit, just like the invitation specified, though it fits his gangly frame rather poorly. When he reaches the spot before the carved wooden throne I'm lounging on, he stops and bows deeply.

"All hail the king," he says.

Amusement curls around my spine. We make the freshmen do this every year at the Halloween party, but it still never gets old watching people bow before me.

I twitch my fingers at him while the faction leaders instruct the rest of the people in line on what to do.

He approaches carefully.

Taking out a silver-colored mask, I hand it to him. "Welcome to hell."

A bit of color drains from his face, but he takes the mask and then quickly hurries aside to let the next person approach. I repeat the process with all the men and women who are waiting in line.

This year, everyone has managed to adhere to the dress code. Black suit for the guys. White dress for the girls. I keep handing out silver masks until a splash of color becomes visible behind the girl currently curtsying in front of me.

Olivia.

My heart stops and I can't seem to remember how to breathe.

I barely manage to complete the greeting ceremony with the woman who is already standing before me, because I can't take my eyes off Olivia. God, she's gorgeous. And all mine.

My eyes rake across her perfect body.

Fortunately for her, she's wearing the dress I got for her. And she's looking around the already packed room with an expression of dread on her face. A wicked smile blows across my lips.

As soon as the other woman has moved aside, Olivia stalks up to me. She opens her mouth as if to spit out an angry accusation, so I raise my eyebrows and shoot a pointed look at her to remind her of the order I gave her yesterday. She has to follow all the traditional customs for freshmen.

Apparently understanding my silent reminder, she grits her teeth and stops at the designated spot before dropping into a curtsy. But fury still crackles in her eyes. My cock stirs at the sight.

"All hail the king," she presses out between clenched teeth.

The grin on my lips widens as I twitch my fingers at her. She stalks right up to me.

"This is a black and white party," she hisses, quietly enough that only I can hear.

"Yes."

"I'm wearing red," she growls. "I'm the only one wearing fucking red."

I flash her a victorious smirk. "Yes."

The dress I picked out for her is not only red, it's also much more revealing than what everyone else is wearing. A deep V neck continues halfway down her ribcage, giving a tantalizing view of the curve of her breasts. Thin straps run over her shoulders, and then it opens down her back as well. Delicate golden chains are draped between the edges so that they're resting across her naked shoulder blades.

Normally, people aren't allowed inside the building if they haven't followed the dress code. But I told the faction leaders beforehand to let Olivia through.

Reaching behind my throne, I pull out a mask and hold it out to her.

She doesn't take it. Only stares down at my hand while anger ripples off her body. "It's gold."

"Yes."

Everyone else's mask is made of silver. She flicks a quick glance around the high-ceilinged hall that we use as our ballroom for these types of events. All the decorations are either white or black. Everything from the tablecloths to the large vases to the flowers in them. Not to mention all the people in the room. Even I am wearing a three-piece suit in all black.

Everyone and everything except for her is decked in those colors. So in an entire sea of only black and white, she stands out like a glittering red ruby.

“You fucking bastard,” she snaps as she snatches the gold mask from my fingers.

“Watch that tongue.” I slide my gaze up and down her body. “Or I’ll make sure to find another use for it.”

Grinding her teeth, she shakes her head at me with the promise of vengeance. I just smirk back at her.

“Welcome to heaven,” I say, breaking from the usual script of the greeting ceremony.

“I will be your own personal hell.”

Before I can say anything else, she storms away while fastening the swirling golden mask over her eyes. I chuckle as I watch her go.

Once the rest of the freshmen have finished bowing to me and receiving their masks, I rise from the throne and walk up to the edge of the small platform. The faction leaders fall in on either side of me as we look out across the sea of people.

“Welcome to your night in hell,” Jenna calls from my right. “May it be glorious.”

Excitement buzzes through the crowd.

“Inside the mask you’ve just received is a number,” Herman picks up. “Check it, and then find the person who has the same number as you.”

Clothes rustle and jewelry clinks as everyone takes off their mask to read the number that has been etched into it. I keep my eyes on Olivia.

Her slender fingers turn the mask over several times while a frown appears on her brow. Then she narrows her eyes in suspicion as she looks up and meets my gaze. I flash her a knowing smile.

There is no number in her mask.

Once all the other freshmen have paired up according to their numbers, I step off the platform and stride straight up to Olivia. The men and women standing closest to her edge a couple of steps back.

“You will dance at least once with the partner you have been given,” Moraine calls from the dais. “Then the party starts. But first, the king will dance. Alone.”

I don’t usually dance. But this year, I made an exception.

Stopping in front of Olivia, I hold out my hand.

Panic flickers in her eyes, and her gaze darts around the room for a second before it returns to me. Then she swallows and places her hand in mine. Taking it in a firm grip, I pull her close to me and then move us out into the middle of the dancefloor.

“I don’t know how to dance,” she presses out in a low voice.

“That’s okay.” I shift her into position. “I do.”

And then the music starts.

With one hand in hers and the other on her waist, I move us into the dance. She’s stiff as a board at first, dread rolling off her body as she tries not to trip. But then she seems to realize that I know what I’m doing. Her tense muscles relax and she lets me lead her across the floor. She’s still casting worried glances at the crowd, though.

“Everyone is staring,” she whispers.

“Let them.”

“You shouldn’t have made me wear red.”

“Why not?”

“Because everyone is staring.”

“That’s why I did it. So that they would stare. So that they would know that they can look, but not touch. Because you’re not one of them. You’re mine.”

Her breath hitches, and she almost stumbles a step.

I tighten my hold on her, steadying her, until she has regained her balance. “Don’t worry about them. Let them stare. You just keep your eyes on me.”

She draws in a shuddering breath, but her eyes remain firmly locked on mine.

The rest of the world disappears as Olivia and I dance around the room. I know that everyone is watching, waiting for the music to end so that they can join the next dance, but all I can see is her glittering brown eyes and all I can feel is her warm body move underneath my palm. Just as it should be.

When the music at last ends, we trail to a halt in the middle of the room. It feels as though the entire crowd is holding its breath as Olivia and I stare at each other. And I get the strangest urge to kiss her.

But that would be too far. That would be crossing a line that shouldn’t be crossed. That *cannot* be crossed.

With great effort, I release her and then step back.

The crowd exhales, and the tension disappears from the room as the others move onto the dancefloor and take up positions.

Olivia just stands there, watching me, and for a few seconds I get the feeling that she is about to ask me something that I really don't want to answer.

Then she gives her head a little shake as if to clear it, and a teasing smile spreads across her lips instead. "So, what are my orders for the rest of the night, *my king*?"

A relieved chuckle escapes my throat at the return to our familiar banter. Reaching up, I draw light fingers along her jaw. "Dance. Have fun."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Before she can say anything else, I abruptly turn around and walk back towards my throne because I suddenly feel the need to put some distance between us. Otherwise, I might say something that I really shouldn't.

The faction leaders leap down from the dais and join the party once I return. I move over to the carved wooden chair that serves as my throne and drop down on it. Spreading my legs, I lounge back in it while propping a lazy elbow on the armrest. On the dancefloor below, all the other freshmen are participating in the mandatory ballroom dance. I rest my chin on my fist while watching them. And Olivia.

Once the first dance is done, it turns into a proper party. Loud thumping music blares from the speakers and people jump and dance together in the packed crowd while Jenna's faction plies them all with alcohol.

At first, Olivia just stands there awkwardly at the edge of the crowd. Then she shrugs as if saying 'fuck it', and downs two shots before heading out onto the dancefloor. I chuckle.

For the next hour, I just sit there, watching her as she drinks and dances and... lives.

When I first met her, she always looked like she was carrying around a massive block of stone that was weighing down everything in her life. I'm not sure if it was because she was worried about money or about her future or something else entirely. But she doesn't look like that anymore.

Now, she's smiling, laughing even, as she jumps around on the dancefloor while throwing her arms in the air. Warmth spreads through my chest at the sight. I like seeing her happy like that.

That thought shocks me enough that I sit up straighter on my throne. This is not the first time Olivia's happiness has crossed my mind. My mission was to break her. To show her that against someone like me, she is completely powerless. Her happiness should be of no concern to me. So why am I yet again thinking about it?

Before I can finish that line of thought, something else draws my attention. A man. He looks very drunk, and he dances close behind a woman in a sleek white dress until she slips away. Then, he turns around and finds Olivia.

My blood heats as he moves up behind her instead, dancing close to her back. Far too close.

His hand brushes over her bare shoulder.

Red flashes before my eyes.

Shooting up from the throne, I stride towards the edge of the dais and leap down. I land with a thud, making the people closest to me whip around in surprise.

The crowd parts before me like the Red Sea as I prowl towards the man. Most of them even turn to stare at me. But since both the man and Olivia have their backs to me, they haven't noticed yet.

I wrap my fingers around the man's wrist, taking it in a punishing grip, and rip it away from Olivia's shoulder. When I speak, my voice comes out like crackling thunder. "Get your hand off her."

"Hey," the guy protests as he spins around to face me. "You can't just..."

He trails off, and his eyes grow wide as dinner plates as they focus on me. His previously drunken state disappears in a flash as fear sobers him right up. Olivia whirls around too. Surprise dances across her features as she flicks her gaze between me, the guy who was touching her, and the hand I still have locked around his wrist.

"Oh, fuck," he finally presses out in a pitiful voice after a few failed attempts to get words out of his mouth. "Mr. Huntington. I'm sorry. I didn't realize that—"

"What's your name?" I interrupt.

"C-Colin."

"Your full name?"

"Johnson. Colin Johnson."

I tighten my grip on his wrist, crushing it until the bones grind together and he cries out in pain. Now, everyone is staring at us.

Olivia hurries up next to him, holding up her hands in a placating gesture. “Alexander—”

“Colin Johnson,” I say, cutting her off, while leveling a commanding stare at the man now cowering before me. “Your enrollment at this university has been terminated.”

Fear washes across his features as he blurts out, “What?”

“You no longer attend Huntingswell University.” I release his wrist, shoving it sideways. “You have until morning to pack your things and vacate the premises.”

“N-no, wait.” Full-blown panic flashes in his eyes as he stares at me. “Please, *please*.”

Raising my hand, I stab it in the direction of the exit. “Get out.”

“No, please.” A choked sob rips from his throat. Sucking in panicked breaths, he drops to his knees before my feet and stares up at me with desperate eyes. “Please, sir. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. Don’t do this. Please don’t do this. Please. My whole future is riding on this—”

Lunging forward, I bury my fist in his collar and growl, “You should have thought about that before you touched something that belongs to me.”

Before he can answer, I yank hard on his collar, throwing him sideways so that he crashes down on the floor.

“Alexander, what the hell—” Olivia begins, but I cut her off.

“You. With me.”

Taking her arm in a firm grip, I haul her away from the dancefloor and towards the door to the secret basement. She mutters curses at me but follows along as I drag her with me down the stairs and throw the door open.

The room beyond is decorated with black roses in white vases because another part of the Halloween customs will take place here later tonight. But that won’t be for another few hours, so no one will disturb us here. And besides, I have a key.

I throw Olivia into the room and then slam the door shut.

The lock clicks ominously as I turn the key.

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OLIVIA

I whirl around to face him as he locks the door and then turns back to me. Opening my mouth, I get ready to snap at him. But the wild darkness in his eyes throws me off, and I just blink at him in surprise.

He doesn't just look angry. He looks furious and... off-kilter. Everything about him usually screams of absolute control. But right now, a kind of restless destructive energy pulses from his tense body as he prowls up to me.

Giving my head a couple of quick shakes, I manage to snap out of my stupor and shove him in the chest when he reaches me. It does absolutely nothing to push him back, but it still makes me feel better.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I give his chest another useless shove. "You can't just *expel* someone!"

Deadly calm settles on his features. I think I almost preferred the chaotic restlessness to this, because the lethal look in his eyes sends a shiver down my spine. Wrapping his hands around my wrists, he slowly moves them down from his chest before releasing me again.

"I think you will find that there are no limits to what I can do," he says, his voice laced with power.

"Just because you can do something, doesn't mean you should. You ruined his future!"

"So?"

"You're overreacting. You can't have him expelled just for touching someone."

His eyes flash like lightning. I jerk back as his hand shoots forward, but I'm too late. Strong fingers wrap around my jaw, holding me firmly in place

while Alexander locks eyes with me. And when he speaks, his dark voice vibrates through my very soul.

“He didn’t touch *someone*. He touched *you*. And you belong to me. You are mine.”

He practically growls out that last word.

My stomach flips and my heart pounds in my chest. And God help me, but I love the way he says that. I love the way he looks at me too. As if I’m the only thing that matters in the whole world. He did that during the party too. While I was dancing, I felt his eyes on me constantly. Tracking me. Watching me. Studying my every move. As if no one else existed in the entire ballroom. And that feeling makes my soul sing.

But I can’t tell him that. Nothing good would ever come of that, because there can never be anything more than this between us. A bargain. Only a bargain to save my life and to satisfy his need for power over me. Nothing more.

So I block out those emotions and instead scoff, “I don’t belong to anyone.”

A wicked smile spreads across his lips. “Wanna bet?”

Before I can retort, he releases my jaw and stalks over to a dark wooden chair that has been pushed against the wall. I narrow my eyes at him while he drops onto it. Spreading his legs with that typical male arrogance, he leans back against the backrest and rakes his gaze over my body in a way that sends a thrill racing down my spine.

“Strip.”

My heart lurches. I cast a glance towards where the party is still in full swing upstairs before meeting Alexander’s unflinching gaze again. “Seriously? Here?”

“Need I remind you that we are in the middle of the six hours I’m currently cashing in?”

“No, but... what if someone comes in?”

“It’s locked.”

“What if someone hears?”

“Let them.”

“Alexander—”

“Strip.” Ultimate authority drips from his voice as he levels a commanding stare on me. “Do not make me tell you again.”

Dark desire pulses through my body, making my clit throb.

Alexander watches me with those intense eyes of his as I step out of my black flats and push them to the side. The stone floor is cold beneath my feet but the rest of my body is completely flushed with heat.

With my heart thrumming in my chest, I slowly strip out of that scandalous red dress. I keep my eyes locked on Alexander's as I shift my arm and pointedly drop the dress on the floor. It flutters through the air in a ripple of red silk before landing on the stone floor, leaving me standing there in only a pair of black lace panties.

His eyes darken.

It makes satisfaction ripple through my soul.

I smirk at him. "See something you like?"

"Yes." His answering smile is a slash of white. "Good thing it belongs to me."

"I've already told you, I don't *belong* to anyone."

A dark chuckle escapes his lips. "I would suggest keeping that tongue in check from now on, love."

"Or what?"

"Keep going and find out." He cocks his head. "Now, take off your panties and get down on your knees."

Heat pools between my legs at his command, and a ripple of pleasure courses through my body.

But I keep all of that firmly off my face as I remove my panties and drop them on top of the dress. My pussy throbs at the exposure, but I cock an arrogant eyebrow at him. "You're really going to make me kneel on this cold, hard stone floor? What is this, fourteenth century England? Though, I suppose you'd enjoy that time period. And besides, what's with calling me *love*? You're not even British."

For a second, it looks like he's fighting a smile. Then that cool mask of absolute power is back on his handsome features again. "Since you are clearly incapable of keeping that pretty mouth of yours shut..." He shoots a pointed glance towards my pile of clothes. "Pick up your panties. And while you're at it, get down on your knees." A smirk tugs at his lips as he adds, "*Love*."

I snort. While giving him my most unimpressed look, I lower myself to my knees next to my pile of clothes. The floor is mercilessly cold against my heated skin. With that arrogant expression still on my features, I pick up my panties and then raise my eyebrows expectantly.

His answering grin makes my thighs clench.

“Put them in your mouth,” he commands.

My eyes widen. “In my...?”

“You really should’ve taken my advice and shut that pretty mouth when I told you to.” His voice drops as he orders, “Now, put them in your mouth.”

I suck in a shuddering breath as my pussy throbs. And then I ball up my panties and put them in my mouth. From his seat by the wall, Alexander watches me with pale eyes full of smug satisfaction.

“Crawl to me.”

My heart skips a beat. But since I currently have my panties in my mouth, I can only raise my eyebrows at him in silent question.

He releases a long exhale through his nose. “I have been very patient tonight, love. But that ends now. If you make me repeat a command one more time from now on, I will spend the rest of this night mercilessly edging you without letting you come until your mind shatters and your turn into a sobbing mess trembling at my feet. Am I making myself clear?” Before I can so much as nod in hurried confirmation, he grinds out, “*Crawl.*”

I bend forward immediately and place my hands against the cool stone floor.

And then I crawl.

Slowly.

On my hands and knees.

Towards the devil in his black suit.

With my panties still in my mouth.

It’s one of the most humiliating things I have ever experienced. And at the same time, my pussy is completely soaked.

Alexander watches me with a half-smirk on his face and a gaze that makes desire burn through my blood. I breathe deeply through my nose as my clit throbs and my heart pounds with both humiliation and pleasure.

I trail to a halt as I reach the spot in front of him, but he twitches his fingers, ordering me to come closer, so I move until I’m kneeling between his spread legs. My pussy is aching with need as I tilt my head up and meet his gaze again.

He just watches me for a few seconds.

Then he reaches forward. Resting his hand against my chin, he draws his thumb over my mouth before pushing it between my lips. I open for him. He traces his thumb along the inside of my bottom lip a few more times before he grabs my panties and pulls them out of my mouth.

I work my tongue around my mouth and swallow while he tosses my panties to the floor.

His eyes meet mine again. "Good girl."

A shudder of pleasure courses through my body.

Alexander draws his hand down my throat and then traces his fingers over my collarbones. Another shiver racks my frame.

"Unbutton my pants," he orders.

Reaching up, I do as he commands.

"Take out my cock."

I slide my hand underneath his black boxers and wrap my fingers around his hard length. My heart slams against my ribs as I guide his cock out until it's fully visible. The throbbing sensation in my pussy increases rapidly.

"You see that, love?" Alexander gently caresses my cheek before his hand locks firmly around my throat. "I can make you crawl. I can make you tremble with pleasure. I can make you obey my every command." His grip tightens, cutting off my air. "You are *mine*."

My heart is beating wildly in my chest.

"Would you like me to let you breathe again?"

I nod rapidly.

"See? Mine." He releases my throat. "Say it."

My clit is throbbing so hard that I'm on the verge of begging him to fuck me. Gasping in a breath, I press out, "Yours."

"Good. Now, suck my cock like you mean it."

Bracing one hand on his firm thigh, I lean forward and wrap the other around the base of his cock.

A deep groan tears from his chest as I swirl my tongue around his tip before taking his length into my mouth. Tightening my grip, I move my hand up and down while I work my mouth over the other half of his cock so that he feels everything everywhere.

His eyes flutter.

Pleasure pulses through me. I like seeing him like this. So far outside his usual air of absolute control. So completely at my mercy.

On a whim, I take him deep into my throat until I'm gagging on his cock. He sucks in a sharp breath and grips my hair hard as a shudder of pleasure racks his muscular frame. I draw back. After swirling my tongue around his tip once more, I take him deeper again.

His chest rises and falls rapidly as I suck his cock with everything I have.

But just before I can make his body submit to me, he uses his grip on my hair to push me back.

Stunned shock flashes through my mind, and I panic, thinking I might have done something terribly wrong.

But it's not anger burning in his eyes as he shoots up from his seat. It's lust.

Pushing me down on the floor, he straddles my hips and then leans forward to brush his lips over my exposed chest. The stone floor is cold underneath my back, but I barely feel it because my skin is on fire where his mouth touches me.

My nipples harden as he kisses his way down my stomach while scooting backwards until his cock is positioned at my entrance. I reach up and thread my fingers through his dark hair as a moan slips from my lips.

He sits up straight. Taking my wrists in a firm grip, he moves them away from his hair and towards the ground. My clit throbs as he leans over me and pins my hands to the floor beside my head.

I stare up into those pale blue eyes, and the look in them snatches my breath away.

Before I can recover it, Alexander thrusts his cock into me.

Arching up from the floor, I gasp into the painted ceiling as his thick length fills me completely. His hands remain firmly on my wrists, keeping them trapped on the floor as he pulls out and then slams back in again.

Pleasure soars through me.

"Eyes on me," he snaps.

It takes a few tries before I can blink my eyes back into focus. When I do, I find Alexander staring down at me as if he is branding his name into my soul.

He shoves his cock into me again. "Who do you belong to?"

I open my mouth to reply, but he pulls out and buries his cock deep inside me again, so only a desperate moan rips from my lungs.

Tightening his hold on my wrists, he pounds into me again. "I said, who do you belong to?"

Pleasure thrums inside me.

"You," I gasp out.

He slams into me. "Say it again."

My every nerve is on fire as tension pulses through my whole body, begging to be released. Another moan spills from my lips as he keeps up his brutal pace, railing me mercilessly on the floor.

I suck in a breath that doesn't seem to contain enough oxygen before pressing out, "You."

Thrust.

"Again," he demands.

Thrust.

"You." My mind is fracturing from the mounting tension inside me, but he doesn't let up. Squirming underneath him, I throw my head back and gasp in desperate breaths. "You. I belong to you."

"Good girl."

Release explodes through my body. Pitiful whimpers fall from my lips as my inner walls tremble and my pussy tightens around his thick cock.

He doesn't slow down.

My limbs shake against the floor as he fucks me hard through the orgasm until my mind threatens to shut down with the storm of pleasure that's wreaking havoc inside me.

I yank against his grip on my wrists while begging him to let me touch him. I need to feel his body underneath my palms. I need to feel him.

He doesn't.

As untouchable as a god, he forces my hands to remain trapped against the ground while he fucks me with sheer dominance until he comes hard as well. I suck in something between a whimper and a moan.

When the final waves of our orgasms have drained from our bodies, I go completely slack against the floor and just lie there utterly spent. My chest heaves and heat radiates from my cheeks.

Still not releasing my wrists, Alexander remains where he is with his cock buried deep inside me while he stares down at me.

Once I blink my eyes back into focus and meet his gaze, he speaks a single word.

A threat.

A promise.
“Mine.”

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ALEXANDER

Something in my chest feels different. I can't put my finger on exactly what it is, but it feels as though something has shifted inside me. Hearing Olivia tell me that she's mine affected me in a way I didn't expect. *She* has affected me in a way I didn't expect.

She can draw a smile from my lips even when I don't want to. She can make me irrationally jealous just by looking at someone else. And she makes me lose control. Her touch, her glittering brown eyes, that smart mouth of hers... Every time I'm with her, she makes me feel things so intensely that I forget myself. Makes me lose control in ways I never have before. It's dangerous. And incredibly thrilling.

"You can cook?"

Amusement ripples through me at the absolutely baffled tone of her voice. Turning my head, I glance over my shoulder to find Olivia standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

My heart does a double beat.

She's only wearing an oversized white shirt that I know she sleeps in, her hair is messy and pulled up in a loose bun, and she has traces of last night's makeup around her eyes. But she's somehow still perfect.

It takes a couple of extra seconds before I can right my world again after she tilted it by just walking into the room. But once I'm in control again, I raise my eyebrows at her.

"I said I don't enjoy cooking." I flash her a knowing smile. "I never said that I didn't know how to cook."

"Huh." She tips her head at me in an approving nod before sauntering towards the kitchen island. "Well then, excuse me while I recalculate your

odds.”

My brows scrunch slightly, but I have to look back at the frying pan and flip the bacon so that I don’t burn them. “What odds?”

“Of you surviving the zombie apocalypse.”

A stunned laugh rips from my throat. Twisting around, I look back at her to see if she’s joking, but she looks dead serious. Another wave of amusement bubbles up inside me. I force it down while shaking my head at this endearingly strange woman.

The bacon sizzles in the frying pan as I flip them again before stirring the scrambled eggs. Once they’re almost done, I pop some slices of toast into the toaster. All the while, Olivia watches me from where she sits at the kitchen island. By the expression on her face, it looks like she’s trying to solve some great puzzle.

“Where are your friends?”

Surprise flits through me at her sudden question. “What?”

“Your friends.” She cocks her head a little, making her blonde hair shift with the movement. “I’ve known you for almost two months now, and I’ve never seen you spend time with your friends.”

An unexpected stab of pain spears through my chest. Instead of replying straight away, I take my time plating the food and putting away the frying pans.

The toaster lets out a faint click as the slices of bread pop back up. I place them next to the piles of scrambled eggs before sliding the butter container onto the counter. Then I turn and set our two plates down in front of us.

When I at last look up from the food to meet her gaze, I find her still studying me in silence, waiting for an answer.

Sitting down on the barstool opposite her, I lift my shoulders in a casual shrug and then pick up my fork. “People like me don’t really have friends.”

“Why not?”

I give her a flat look. “Why do you think?”

She flashes me a teasing smile in reply. “Because you’re an entitled asshole?”

It takes everything I have to suppress a snort. How does she do that? How does she always manage to break my composure so easily?

Keeping the amusement firmly off my face, I instead narrow my eyes at her and shoot her a threatening look. “Watch it.”

She just rolls her eyes at me.

“Now, eat before it gets cold,” I order.

With a knowing expression on her beautiful features, she spins her hand in the air a couple of times and gives me a mock bow. “Yes, master.”

My cock stirs and dark desire courses through me every time she says that. It requires all of my rather impressive self-control not to bend her over this counter, push that white shirt up to her waist, and fuck her until she’s screaming those two words like she means them. Clearing my throat, I stab into my scrambled eggs instead.

“So?” She takes a bite of toast and chews while waiting for me to reply to whatever question she thinks that word contains.

I just look back at her while cutting a piece of bacon.

“Why don’t you have any friends?” she pushes when I don’t say anything. Raising a hand, she starts ticking off things on her fingers. “You’re hot, rich, and powerful. You have all the right characteristics to be popular. So why don’t you have any friends then?”

My insides twist, but I push the feeling aside and instead deflect by saying, “You don’t have any friends either.”

“Well, no. But that’s because you turned me into undesirable number one on my very first day here and made sure that the whole school bullied me.”

“No one is bullying you now.”

“No, but now I’m a slave to the King of Huntingswell U.” She shoots me a pointed look. “And *he* won’t even let me tutor someone. Let alone be friends.”

A wicked smile curls my lips. “Indeed.”

Utensils clink against the plate as I continue eating. The scent of food hangs over the whole kitchen, and I’m secretly hoping that it will distract Olivia enough that she starts eating as well and forgets that I never answered her question.

“You never answered my question.”

I stifle a resigned sigh. Of course she doesn’t. This infuriating woman is too smart for her own good.

Looking up from my plate, I meet her eyes again. She’s watching me intently, as if she’s trying to see into my soul. It makes me want to squirm in my seat. And I never squirm. Ever. God, what is she doing to me?

With a sigh, I set down my fork and instead draw a hand through my hair. “You said that I’m rich and powerful, and you’re right. I am. Very rich and very powerful. And when you come from a family like mine, when you’re someone like me, you realize soon that everyone who approaches you always wants something. Some people are very open about that. Some try to be sneaky. But at the end of the day, everyone always wants something from me.” I shrug. “And that’s why it’s better to keep a healthy distance.”

For a few seconds, she says nothing. She just sits there, her head slightly tilted, studying me as if she’s trying to read my entire life story in my eyes. Once again, I feel the strange urge to shift in my seat.

“That sounds lonely,” she says eventually.

I just shrug in reply.

She opens her mouth as if to say something else, but then she apparently changes her mind because she abruptly picks up her fork and starts shoveling food into her mouth.

Uncomfortable emotions twist inside my stomach like snakes, but I try my best to ignore them as I finish my food and pour myself some coffee. When I raise my eyebrows at Olivia, she holds out her cup as well.

Steam rises in lazy arcs above the dark liquid as I pour it into her mug.

Once she’s done eating, she places her knife and fork neatly on the plate and then wraps her hands around the coffee cup. I take a sip from mine while studying her. Morning sunlight filters in through the windows, illuminating her face. It makes those cute freckles she has across her nose and cheeks even more visible, and I have to fight a sudden urge to trace my fingers over them.

Her eyes flick up and lock on mine. “What do you want to do with your life?”

I blink. Her question takes me a bit off guard, so it takes an extra second for me to reply. “What do you mean? I will take over the family business.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“Does it matter what I want?”

She stares at me, her eyebrows scrunched up. “Yes.”

The way she says it, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world, stuns me. I hadn’t even really considered my future like this before. I’m the oldest Huntington son, which means that I will take over our empire. Whether that is something I want or not is irrelevant. I don’t even know if I

want anything. I know that Olivia is passionate about history, but I can't really relate to the feeling. Taking over our family business is not a burden to me, but it also doesn't fill me with any great feelings of joy. But then again, nothing else does either, so it doesn't matter.

As if Olivia could read part of that in my eyes, she suddenly asks, "Did you like the book about Mongolia?"

"Yes," I answer honestly.

I found it rather interesting how Genghis Khan and his sons managed to create such a vast empire. It made me understand a bit more what Olivia was saying when she talked about why she loves history. About how we can learn from other people's successes and mistakes.

Incredible light fills Olivia's eyes at my answer, and she smiles in a way that makes my heart skip a beat. "Good. Would you like another one?"

"About what?"

A knowing glint shines in her eyes as she cocks her head. "About building an empire."

I chuckle, yet again surprised by her perceptive mind. "Sure."

"How about the rise and fall of the Roman Empire?"

"I'll give it a try."

In fact, if it allows me to see that incredible light in her eyes again, I might just give every book she ever recommends a try.

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OLIVIA

We've settled into a sort of routine. I've been supplying Alexander with history books that I think he might like. He enjoyed the books about the Roman Empire and the Aztecs, so I gave him a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince* as a half joke. To no one's surprise, he loved that one. And he has been using most of his hours to just listen to me talk about history, which has secretly become my favorite part of the day. No one has ever been as interested in what I have to say about ancient cultures as Alexander Huntington IV.

Well, that's one part of our routine anyway. The other half involves him scaring off any guy who even so much as looks at me. After that, he will usually take me back to his house and punish me for it, which always leads to us hate fucking against his desk or on his dining room table or on any other available surface.

That has become our new normal. Having surprisingly deep conversations about life and cultures and history, mixed with him dominating me and making me beg and plead and promise that I'm his while we're having mind-blowing sex all over the house.

And with that routine, October has turned into November and November has turned into December.

I watch the heavy snowflakes swirl outside my bedroom window as I settle into the armchair with a book. Not a history book this time, since the finals are already done and the fall semester is now officially finished. Instead, I've picked up a romance novel that I borrowed from the library. It's not a cute and fluffy kind of romance story, but rather a dark one. I

haven't really read a lot of books in this genre, but I decided to try one because I want to see if it can help me figure out my confusing feelings about Alexander.

Our acquaintance began with him ripping off my shirt and forcing me to walk back through campus naked, followed by intense bullying, starvation, and him blackmailing me into sucking his cock in exchange for food. And now we're... what? Friends? Lovers?

To my utter astonishment, I actually quite like spending time with him. He used to be as cold and merciless as the dark ocean, but these past few months, I've gotten him to laugh. I've drawn out a sparkle in his eyes and a tiny light in his soul. *I've* done that. And I like seeing that change in him. Like seeing that I'm able to affect him like that. I also like how *he* is affecting *me*. How he makes me feel seen. Makes me feel appreciated. Like my words somehow feed his soul. Not to mention how he makes me feel physically. Just looking at that lethal body and those sharp blue eyes makes my core throb and my pussy clench with the need for him.

Which makes absolutely no sense at all.

I should hate Alexander with everything I have. After what he did to me, I should be furious. I should want to get revenge on him. Brutal vicious revenge. And maybe I still do? Maybe there is still a part of me that wants to get even. But how could I even do that? He holds all the power in this dysfunctional relationship. If he wants to end me, he can do that at any time. But I have nothing on him. No way to hurt him. No power over him at all.

Before I can finish that line of thought, the door to my room is unceremoniously thrown open. I snap my gaze to the doorway right as Alexander strides across the threshold.

My heart skips a beat at the sight of him in a sharp black suit that is cut perfectly to his honed body. While trying to bank the heat that flares up inside me, I shoot him an exasperated look.

"Ever heard of knocking?"

"I'm familiar with the concept, yes." He shrugs as he comes to a halt in front of my armchair. "I just choose not to practice it."

"For someone who boasts about having impeccable manners, you sure are an ill-mannered asshole, aren't you?"

"Watch that tongue, love." His eyes dance as he flashes me a wicked smile. "I still haven't cashed in today's hour."

A thrill ripples down my spine at the sight of that sharp smirk.

But before I can retort, he glances around my room as if looking for something. When he apparently can't find whatever it is that he was searching for, he turns back to me with a frown.

"Why have you not packed yet?" he asks.

"Packed?" I furrow my brows. "For what?"

"Aren't you going home for Christmas?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I shrug a bit self-consciously. "Can't afford the plane tickets."

"I could have given you the money."

"I already told you." I raise my chin and lock eyes with him. "I don't want your money."

A whole tangle of emotions blows across his features, too fast for me to decipher any of them, before a confident expression settles on his annoyingly handsome face again.

"Well then." He flashes me a grin. "I'm cashing in the forty hours I have left."

Shock pulses through me. I scramble out of the armchair and put the book on the shelf so fast that I miss half of it. The book immediately tips downwards, and I have to lurch towards it and catch it before it can tumble down. After setting it back properly on the dark wooden shelf, I at last turn towards Alexander again and ask the question that exploded through my mind at his declaration.

"For what?"

"You're coming home with me for Christmas."

My brain malfunctions.

With my mouth hanging slightly open, I just stand there on the smooth floorboards and stare at him while my mind tries to process the words that just came out of his mouth. Outside the window, the snow continues falling, slowly building up a small pile on the windowsill.

"You want me to..." When he doesn't fill in the sentence for me, I finish with a disbelieving, "come home with you? For Christmas?"

He arches a dark eyebrow at me. "That's what I said, isn't it?"

"Yes, but..." Shaking my head, I try to make sense of this. "It's Christmas."

"I'm aware."

“Why?”

“Why is it Christmas?”

“No. Why do you want me to come with you?”

He takes a step closer to me, and I suddenly forget how to breathe. A shiver courses through my body as he draws light fingers over my collarbones and then up my throat.

Then he takes my jaw in a firm grip and leans down until his lips almost touch mine. “I’m cashing in forty hours that you owe me, which means that I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

My clit throbs at the way his warm breath swirls over my lips, caressing them like a lover, and I find it hard to think through the pulsing that has started inside me.

“You’re taking me home to meet your parents?” I blurt out while my heart pounds in my chest.

Alexander releases his grip on my jaw and thankfully moves back far enough for me to suck in a deep breath to clear my head.

Lifting one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug, he says, “Just my dad and my brother.”

“Your mom’s not coming home for Christmas?”

“She’s dead.”

He didn’t say it unkindly, but I still flinch back as if he had slapped me. I should have known that. In fact, I *did* know that. But logic and knowledge seem to elude me whenever I can feel his breath on my skin. Shaking my head, I try to get my scrambled mind back into working shape.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

He just shrugs again. “It’s fine. Anyway, we have the annual Christmas party tomorrow night with the rest of the social elite.”

“And you want me to come with you... to that?”

“Yes.”

Panic and dread, and something else, something warm and fuzzy that I bury deep inside me, washes through my body. “I have nothing to wear.”

He lets out a huff of amusement and shoots me a pointed look. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but I am very rich and very powerful.”

“And humble too,” I mutter under my breath.

“Humility is for peasants.”

I roll my eyes.

“Getting you a nice dress before tomorrow evening will not be an issue for me,” he finishes as if I hadn’t interrupted. Holding my gaze, he cocks his head. “So, what do you say?”

“Oh, I didn’t think I had much of a choice.”

“You don’t.” He smirks at me. “I was just trying to be polite.”

“It’s a bit too late for that.”

“Oh?”

“Santa has already written his lists, you know.”

A laugh rips from his chest. A full genuine laugh that makes my soul flutter. I love that sound. I love that *I* can draw that sound from him.

As if remembering himself, he clears his throat and then smoothens down his already impeccable suit jacket while schooling his features into an authoritative mask again.

“Pack your things,” he orders. “We leave in an hour.”

“I’m still waiting for a *please*.”

He wraps his hand around my throat, making my heart lurch in my chest and heat pool at my core. His pale blue eyes gleam as he leans closer to me again. “I own forty hours of your life, love. I don’t need to say please.”

My heart beats hard in my chest, and part of me wants him to shove me up against that wall and fuck the insolence out of me.

His lips skim across my jaw, just shy of touching. Electricity crackles across my skin in their wake, and I suck in a shuddering breath.

“And do you know why?” he prompts.

I’m having trouble even remembering the original question because my pulse flutters underneath his strong fingers, so I just shake my head.

He slants his lips over mine and breathes his next words directly against my mouth. “Because you can’t deny me anything.”

My clit is throbbing and tension pulses through my whole body.

But before I can do something about that, Alexander abruptly releases me and retreats a couple of steps. Turning around, he strides towards the door without a second look back.

I stagger backwards at the sudden loss of his hand around my throat and the heat of his body against mine until I’m slumped back against the bookshelf behind me.

In my chest, my heart is still thrumming.

Since I need to salvage this embarrassing loss, I gather my scattered wits and call after him.

“Alright then,” I begin, my voice teasing. “Since I don’t really have anything better to do, I guess I’ll come with you.”

With his back still to me, he just shakes his head as he walks across the threshold.

But when he turns and heads down the hallway outside, I swear I can see amusement pulling at his lips.

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ALEXANDER

Murmur fills the high-ceilinged hall. Not too loud and not too quiet. Everyone is keeping their voice to the exact right volume for a space such as this. Because if there is one thing that rich people learn early, it's how to behave perfectly in any social situation. After all, we have an image to uphold.

Our mansion was built when the town was founded back in the seventeenth century, so it naturally has a dedicated ballroom. We have of course added to the building over the years and modernized it with things like indoor plumbing and other essentials, but because we kept the original parts as well, the large marble mansion still has that old classy feel to it.

Right now, the ballroom is decorated with garlands in green and red, and ten whole Christmas trees that were taken straight from our woods. Since they were brought in a week ago for the preparations, they now fill the whole space with the fresh scent of fir. Thousands of candles shine from the glittering chandelier above, as well as the silver candelabras along the floor, bathing the ballroom in a warm glow.

I sweep my gaze over the people gathered throughout the large space, looking for Benedict and my dad. Neither of them were here when Olivia and I arrived yesterday, and we left early this morning to get a dress made before tonight, so I still haven't been able to introduce her to them.

Shimmering dresses in rich colors, sparkling jewelry, and well-tailored suits fill the whole ballroom as our guests partake in the festivities. They all look comfortable and perfectly poised. As if they were born to do this. Because, of course, they were. Every single person in here. Except one.

I cast another glance down at the gorgeous woman on my arm.

Olivia is wearing the dark green silk dress that I had tailored for her, and her hair is pulled up around her face before the loose blonde curls spill down her back. Even though I have seen her like this several times now, she still steals my breath away.

She is walking with her spine straight and her head held high, and if I didn't know her so well, I wouldn't be able to tell how nervous she is. But I have lived with her for months now, so I can see the way her sharp eyes move across the ballroom, as if she's scanning it for threats.

I place my hand against the small of her back in support, but I can't tell if she notices because she just keeps studying the crowd around us.

At last, I spot Dad and Benedict standing between two of the grand Christmas trees halfway down the ballroom. My dad is wearing a dark gray suit and polished black oxfords. His brown hair has started to show hints of gray, but he keeps it flawlessly styled so it's barely visible in the candlelight. Standing with his back straight in a casual display of command, he watches the crowd with blue eyes that are a shade darker than mine.

Next to him is my brother, though he looks a lot less composed. Benedict is also wearing a suit, except his is dark blue, and he keeps shifting his weight from foot to foot as if he's bored. Which I know that he is. My little brother has never been the kind of person who enjoys standing by a wall, watching everyone else, while at a party.

With my hand still resting on Olivia's back, I steer us to the left and start us towards them.

Her perceptive gaze snaps straight to them. "That's your dad and brother."

It's more of a statement than a question, but I reply anyway. "Yes."

Worry flickers in her eyes. I draw my hand slowly up and down her spine as we move closer.

My family spots us when we're halfway to them. Dad narrows his eyes slightly as he sees Olivia next to me, the only indication of his surprise and confusion. Benedict's face, on the other hand, breaks into a wide grin as he notices us. He opens his mouth to call something, but Dad cuts him a warning look. Huntingtons don't shout across ballrooms. My little brother rolls his eyes, which only earns him another sharp look from Dad.

A small smile tugs at my lips.

Benedict looks like a younger, wilder version of me. And he acts like it too. While my hair is straight and always perfectly styled, his brown curls

have that perpetual just-rolled-out-of-bed look to them. And while I keep my facial features firmly under control, he grins and winks and keeps that light in his pale blue eyes wherever he goes. I have no idea where he gets that from, given the general temperament of both of our parents.

“What’s up, Four?” Benedict says, that glittering smile still on his lips, as we stop before them.

“Benedict,” I reply, because he hates being called Ben. He thinks it’s an old man’s name, so I only call him that when I want to piss him off. I slide my gaze to my father while I gently push my hand against Olivia’s back, moving her up even more beside me. “Dad. Allow me to introduce Olivia Campbell.” I glance over at her. “Olivia. This is my dad, Alexander Huntington III, and my brother Benedict.”

She smiles and gives them a nod. “Nice to meet you.”

“Campbell,” Dad says, cutting Benedict off before he can get a word out of his mouth. His eyes are still slightly narrowed as he watches Olivia. “Of the Virginia Campbells?”

“Did you miss the part where she said *nice to meet you*?” I ask, raising my eyebrows at him.

“It’s fine.” Olivia looks up at me, that pleasant smile still on her lips, before meeting my father’s scrutinizing stare again. “No, I’m not one of the Virginia Campbells. But I’ve heard their name every time I introduce myself to someone, so they must be a very memorable bunch.”

“Ha!” Benedict laughs and then wiggles his eyebrows at me. “I like her.”

“If you are not one of the Virginia Campbells,” my dad continues as if he hadn’t interrupted. “Then which family are you from?”

“Not one you’ll know, I’m afraid.”

His features harden. “I know everyone.”

“I doubt you’ll know this one.”

“Try me.”

“Ever heard of Bellview Fields?”

Dad furrows his brows. “No.”

“It’s located a few hundred miles that way.” She points in a random direction. Or maybe she actually knows which cardinal direction it is. Then she meets my father’s scowl again. “Population three thousand two hundred and seventy-five.”

For a few seconds, he just stares at her in silence. Then he shifts his attention to me. "I don't understand. Is she not...?"

"Rich?" Olivia fills in. "Powerful? From a fancy family? No, I'm not."

He cuts her a look that would have sent lesser people running with their tail between their legs. "I was going to say, one of us."

I flinch and snap my gaze down to her, expecting to see a look of hurt flash across her face at his cutting words. But that's not at all what I find.

With a confident expression on her beautiful face, she flashes my father a knowing smile. "No, I am most certainly not one of you."

My heart does a backflip in my chest.

God, this woman. This woman whose infuriating defiance made me want to break her... And now that same stubborn refusal to back down makes my soul thrum and my chest ache with the need for her.

Moving a bit closer, I wrap my arm around her waist in a highly possessive move to let my dad know that Olivia *is* one of us. Because she's *mine*.

"I see," Dad replies, sounding mildly disappointed. "Well then, I should start making my rounds."

Before any of us can get a single word out, he simply turns around and strides away. Shaking my head, I watch him go. He has never been the warm and welcoming type. Instead, he's a ruthless businessman who would do anything to protect his empire and his legacy. Which I am a part of. He probably thinks that Olivia is just a gold digger who is looking to marry into wealth and influence, but he will soon realize that that's not at all what she's like.

"Well, *I* think it's nice to meet you, Olivia." Benedict flashes her a wide grin. His blue eyes sparkle with mischief as he gives her a conspiratorial wink. "Four has talked a lot about you. Like, a lot."

Alarm pulses through me while surprise blows across Olivia's features.

With her eyebrows raised and her eyes wide, she turns to stare at me. "You have?"

"And that's our cue to leave." Clearing my throat, I use my arm around her waist to help steer her away from my troublesome brother. "Come on, love."

"No, wait," she protests, twisting back towards Benedict. "I want to hear what he's been saying about me."

“All good things,” my brother very unhelpfully provides. “Like how he can’t think when you’re in the room because you—”

“I. Will. Kick. Your ass,” I warn, my voice dropping low as I lock eyes with my bastard of a brother.

He just flashes me a wicked grin. “Careful now, golden boy. Wouldn’t want to ruin Dad’s fancy party, would you?”

“Oh, I won’t ruin any parties. But perhaps I will tell Macy why you ditched her last weekend.”

Gasping, he clutches at his heart dramatically. “You wouldn’t.”

“Keep my secrets, and I’ll keep yours.”

“Ohh, blackmailing your own flesh and blood?” He sucks his teeth and shakes a finger at me. “You are one ruthless bastard.”

“Since when is that news to you?”

With his eyes narrowed, he does his best to look angry and dangerous, but the smile pulling at his lips is ruining his attempt.

A soft chuckle escapes my lips.

The sound makes Benedict’s mask crack completely, and he laughs too. Turning to Olivia, he lifts his shoulders in a helpless shrug and then draws a hand through his curls. “Well, it was lovely to meet you, Olivia. But as you can see, I’m being blackmailed by this ruthless bastard here, so I think I’d better make myself scarce. If Macy finds out why I really ditched her, she might actually strangle me with her grandma’s pearls.”

“Uhm...” Olivia begins, looking between the two of us. “Do I even want to know?”

“No,” we reply in unison.

Another couple of laughs slip pasts our lips.

Then Benedict raises a hand to his brow and gives us a mock salute, “I’ll see you later.”

With my arm still around Olivia’s waist, I pull her tighter against me as I move us in the other direction. She looks up at me, and my heart stutters at the way her brown eyes glitter like gold in the light of the candles.

“Well, your brother seems nice,” she says.

“He is. When he’s not running his mouth and making stuff up just to mess with me.”

“Making stuff up, huh?” A scheming glint creeps into her eyes. “So you *haven’t* been talking about me?”

“No. I mean, yes. But not in the way he made it sound.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes.”

She twists out of my arm and jerks her chin towards where a group of guys around my age are talking and drinking whiskey by the crackling hearth. Raising her eyebrows, she shoots me a look full of mischievous challenge. “Then maybe I should seek out better company? Company that properly appreciates my presence.”

A sharp smile spreads across my lips as I lock eyes with her. “Not unless you want to get them all fired from their jobs.”

“You’re really going to get them fired for *talking* to me?”

Grabbing her by the elbow, I pull us around the large Christmas tree next to us so that the thick green branches block everyone else’s view of us. Once we’re out of sight, I release her but step right into her space. She starts slightly as she finds me staring her down from only a breath away.

I lift my hand and draw my thumb over her bottom lip. “I thought I’ve made it clear these past few months what I do to people who dare to touch what belongs to me.”

A shudder ripples through her body as I caress the corner of her mouth with my thumb, making her eyes flutter. Then she clears her throat and levels a pointed look at me. “I said *talk* to them. Not fuck them.”

“I know. But if I were them, I wouldn’t be able to make it one minute into the conversation before I started plotting how to get you in bed.”

Red flushes her cheeks, and a hint of surprise flickers in those beautiful eyes. “Is that so?”

“Yes. So if you take one more step towards them, I am going to drag you into that bathroom over there,” I jerk my chin towards a corridor farther down, “bend you over the countertop, and fuck you mercilessly until you remember who you belong to.”

Her mouth drops open ever so slightly, and lust flares up into her eyes.

The sight of it makes my cock stir, and now I’m suddenly contemplating following through on that threat even if she doesn’t disobey me.

“Is that a threat?” My heart stutters as a sly smile slides home on her lips and she gives me a knowing once-over. “Or an offer?”

An answering smirk settles on my own lips. “A promise.”

“I see.”

Mischief dances in her eyes as she looks back at me in silence for another second.

Then she takes a step towards the group of guys.

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OLIVIA

The door bangs as Alexander kicks it shut with his heel. We're in a luxurious bathroom made of white marble with gold veins running through it and a gold-framed mirror taking up half of the wall above the sink and countertop, but I barely register any of it because I'm too busy drinking in the sight of the devil who has just locked the door behind him.

His eyes darken as he rakes his gaze over my body. I draw in a breath, my heart pounding in my chest.

"God, you're beautiful," he says, his voice coming out rough.

I lock my fingers around the back of his neck and yank his mouth down to mine. Our lips clash in a furious kiss while he draws his hands down my sides, sending lightning crackling through my body. With a firm grip on my ass, he lifts me up while he continues ravaging my mouth. I wrap my legs around his waist and deepen the kiss, tangling my tongue with his.

He walks us over to the sink and sets me down on the smooth marble countertop. I keep my hands locked around his neck, holding him close to me and kissing him so hard that my lips ache, while he releases his grip on my ass and instead swipes a hand over the counter.

Clattering fills the gleaming room as soap dispensers and tiny decorative plants tumble off the edge and fall to the floor below. Alexander doesn't seem to care because he just grabs me by the hips and slides me more firmly onto the counter.

Then he breaks the kiss.

My chest heaves, and I feel a strange sense of emptiness at the loss of his lips on mine. Blinking, I try to get my eyes back into focus. But before I

can, Alexander draws his hands up my legs, pushing my dark green silk dress upwards.

Electricity shoots through me at the brush of his hands, and I throw my head back and gasp into the white marble ceiling as his fingers skim the inside of my thigh.

Shifting my weight, I help him get the dress up so that it's bunched around my waist.

My heart slams against my ribs as Alexander traces his fingers along the top of my panties before hooking them around the edge of the fabric. I lean back on my elbows as much as I can before the back of my head hits the mirror, but it's enough to brace my weight so that I can lift my hips when he slides my panties down my thighs.

The fabric brushes against my heated skin as he takes his time.

Then it abruptly disappears as he moves them over my knees and lets them fall to the floor below. It leaves my pussy completely exposed to him, and my core clenches at the thought.

I begin to push myself up from the counter so that I can sit up straight again, but before I can move so much as an inch, Alexander plants his palm against my chest and pushes me back down.

"Don't move," he commands.

With my pulse thrumming in my ears, I drop back down again so that I'm bracing my weight on my elbows and resting the back of my head against the mirror.

My heart skips a beat as Alexander takes a firm grip on my thighs and spreads my legs wide. I suck in a shuddering breath, feeling heat rush into my cheeks at being laid so bare before him.

"You're perfect," he rasps, his voice pulsing with emotions.

A warm sparkly sensation bursts through my chest like stars. I open my mouth to say... something, but I never find out what, because right then, Alexander swirls his tongue around my clit.

Another gasp rips from my throat as I arch up from the counter.

He draws his tongue along my seam before circling my clit again, making pulses of pleasure flash through my body.

My hand shoots forward, and I run my fingers through his hair.

He rolls my clit between his lips.

I grip his hair hard as lightning skitters across my skin.

His warm breath caresses my sensitive pussy as he lets out a dark laugh. “You can’t come without permission. Got it?”

I open my mouth to reply, but he pushes two fingers inside me before I can get the first word out, so all I manage is another gasp.

Lights flicker behind my eyes as he draws them out and then pushes them back in again.

“I said, do you understand?” he pushes.

“Yes,” I press out as he begins pumping his fingers at a steady rhythm. “Yes, yes, I understand. I—” My legs jerk as he curls his fingers slightly on the way out. “Oh, fuck. Please.”

Only a smug laugh answers me.

Before I can say anything else, he traces his tongue along my pussy and then sucks my clit into his mouth again. Pleasure washes over me and I soar towards the edge.

While his fingers continue working their mind-numbing magic, Alexander tortures my clit with his lips and tongue until I feel like my brain is going to melt. My chest heaves and I tighten my grip on his hair as he continues pushing me closer and closer towards that sweet release.

Tension builds inside me like a storm. Crackling, whirling, pulsing to be released. I can feel the edge sliding closer.

“Please,” I press out while gasping in desperate breaths. “Please can I come?”

“No,” he murmurs against my pussy while he keeps driving me mercilessly towards an orgasm anyway.

“Alexander.” His name rips from my chest like a prayer. “Please let me come. Please, I—”

A whimper spills from my lips as he curls his fingers slightly again.

“Remember what happened last time you came without permission?” He waits as if he’s expecting me to reply, but I can barely even remember how to breathe anymore so I just moan incoherently. “I made you lick it off the floor. Don’t think I won’t make you do that again.”

I squirm desperately against the countertop. It only makes him tighten his grip on my thigh, forcing me to remain in place as he inflicts his sweet torture on me.

My heart is slamming so hard against my ribs that I fear they might crack any second.

“Please, Alexander,” I gasp out. “Please, I’m begging you. I’m begging you.”

“Are you?”

Tension pulses inside me like thunder in a glass bottle. I grip his hair hard and suck in ragged breaths as his fingers and tongue continue working while my whole body thrums with pent-up release. It feels as though my brain is going to short-circuit any second.

“Please, Alexander. Sir. Master.” I don’t even know what’s coming out of my mouth at this point. “Please may I come? Oh god. Fuck. Please. I’m begging you.”

I practically sob that last word.

He swirls his tongue around my clit.

Pitiful noises drip from my lips.

“I like the way you beg, love.” I can hear the smirk in his voice. “You have my permission to come.”

Release explodes through my whole body, sweeping through it like a tidal wave. I gasp up into the pale ceiling as my inner walls tremble and my legs shake against the marble counter.

Alexander keeps pumping his fingers in and out while I come so hard that light flashes before my eyes.

When the final tremors have died out and Alexander has removed his clever fingers, I just slump back against the mirror, my limbs limp and my chest heaving. Lying there, I suck in deep breaths while I try to piece my shattered mind back together.

Soft fingers brush against the side of my neck.

Then Alexander wraps his hand around my throat. Using his grip on it, he pulls me up into a sitting position. My body is utterly spent, so I just let him do whatever he wants.

Once I’m sitting upright again, I’m met with a pair of gleaming blue eyes. Alexander only watches me for a while, his hand still firmly around my throat. Then he leans closer and steals a gentle kiss from my lips.

My stomach flutters like a cloud of butterflies.

Pulling back, he meets my gaze again. “Do you want to see how beautiful you look when you come?”

Since I don’t trust my voice just yet, I nod eagerly instead.

“Good.” He smirks. “Because I’m not done with you yet.”

Leaning forward, he brushes another soft kiss over my lips. Then he releases his grip on my throat and instead grabs my hips.

I draw in a sharp breath as he pulls me off the edge of the counter, but his firm grip on my hips keeps me steady when I land. After brushing a few loose curls out of my face, he spins me around so that I'm facing the mirror instead.

My pulse kicks up as he flashes me a wicked smile in the mirror and then moves me so that my hips are snug against the edge.

"Bend over, love," he orders.

Bracing my palms on the cool marble, I lower myself until I can rest my forearms on the counter instead. My dress had fluttered down around my legs again when I slid off the edge, but Alexander quickly pushes it back up around my waist. I let out a yelp as he gives my bare ass a slap.

"Spread your legs."

I comply. Bracing my weight on my forearms, I widen my stance to give him better access while he unzips his pants. A satisfied smile lurks on his lips as he watches me in the mirror while he takes his cock out.

Once I'm in position, he takes my hips in a firm grip and angles my ass upwards so that he can reach my pussy.

"Keep your eyes on the mirror," he commands. "I want you to look at your face while I fuck you."

I flash him a teasing grin in the mirror. "Yes, sir."

His answering smile makes my soul soar. "Good girl."

A shudder of pleasure ripples through me right before Alexander slides his cock inside me. My eyes widen in the mirror and my mouth opens as a moan rips from my throat.

He pulls out and then slams into me all the way to the hilt.

I gasp and curl my fingers into fists as the feeling of his cock filling me completely sends another pulse of pleasure through my body. He slowly draws out and then shoves back in again.

My eyes flutter at the friction.

A groan slips from my lips as Alexander sets a brutal pace. I watch the way my mouth drops open slightly every time he thrusts into me and the way my eyes swirl with pleasure when he moves.

Sparkles skitter across my skin as he caresses my bare hips before tightening his grip again.

I let out a moan as he increases the pace.

Tension builds inside me.

The slapping sound of naked bodies echoes through the bathroom as Alexander pounds into me with savage strength. My hips slam against the edge of the counter. Squeezing my hands into fists again, I suck in ragged breaths as the pent-up pleasure inside me grows and I soar towards another orgasm.

Arching my back, I glance down briefly in an effort to relieve the tension pulsing through my body.

A hand immediately grabs my hair. Rolling my blonde curls around his fist, he yanks my head back up, forcing me to face the mirror again.

Once my eyes are locked on my own face again, I expect him to release me. He doesn't. His fist stays buried in my hair as he slams his cock into me over and over again.

"Look at that face," he commands between thrusts. "Look at that beautiful face."

My heart thumps wildly in my chest as I stare at my own reflection. Lust shimmers like golden glitter in my eyes and waves of pleasure blow across my features.

I slide fast towards that sweet edge as Alexander pounds into me with absolute confidence and control. I can feel him laying claim on every shred of my being with every thrust of his cock and every yank on my hair.

The image of me blurs slightly at the edges as my eyes slide out of focus. Pent-up release thrums through my whole soul. I need to come. I need to—

His cock hits a spot deep inside me, and release slams into me like a hurricane.

Garbled moans tumble from my lips as the orgasm crashes through me, making my inner walls flutter and tighten around his cock.

He rolls my hair around his fist again, holding my head up so that all I can see is my own reflection. Pleasure dances in my eyes and flickers across every one of my features.

"Look at this," he orders, using his grip on my hair to give my head a firm shake while he continues fucking me through my orgasm. "This face is only for me. No one else will ever see this face. Ever. Only me. Do you understand?"

Lightning is crackling through my limbs and my very soul vibrates, but I manage to press out, "Only for you."

“Yes. Because you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.” My heart feels like it’s going to burst. “I’m yours, Alexander. Fuck, I’m yours.”

A dark groan rips from his chest as release explodes from him.

I gasp at the feeling. At the sensation of him coming inside me. Of the incredible experience of watching what this man does to me. Watching the emotions he can draw from me. The glitter he can put in my eyes. The sheer bliss he can paint across my features.

I have no idea how we got here.

After beginning our relationship with bullying and blackmail and humiliating degradation, how did we get to the point where we can create such a perfect slice of heaven together?

I don’t know the exact moment things shifted between us. I don’t know what caused it. I don’t even know if I understand it.

So no, I have no idea how we got here.

But it doesn’t matter.

Because right now, I’m just damn glad that we’re here.

When he at last pulls out, I just remain there, bent over the countertop, trying to regain my breath and slow my thundering heart.

Alexander zips up his pants again before gently shifting my dress so that the skirt falls back down over my legs. My panties are still on the floor next to me, so I draw in a bracing breath and push myself up from the cool marble. Turning around, I get ready to bend down and pick up my discarded underwear so that I can put them back on. But Alexander has already retrieved them.

I hold out my hand as he straightens again.

There’s a devilish smirk on his lips when he meets my gaze. And instead of giving me my panties, he slips them into his pocket.

My eyes widen. “No. Wait.”

I lunge for him, but he easily grabs my wrist before I can steal my panties back from his pocket.

“Give those back,” I demand.

A dark chuckle rolls from his chest. “No.”

Yanking my wrist from his grip, I instead fling my arm out and stab a hand towards the door. “I can’t go out there without panties! What if someone sees?”

“I suppose you will just have to keep your legs closed the rest of the evening.” He wraps a hand around my jaw and leans down to claim my lips with a possessive kiss. “A reminder of who you belong to.”

“You are one evil bastard.”

“Yes.” He steals another kiss that makes my spine tingle and my toes curl. “But you already knew that.”

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ALEXANDER

Music swirls through the air like ribbons of silk, and candlelight shines from the glittering chandeliers above, but I barely notice any of it because the gorgeous woman in my arms commands all of my attention.

Olivia's blonde curls flutter in the air as I spin her around before pulling her back against me. She stumbles slightly but manages to right herself quickly. And all the while, she keeps her chin up as if nothing happened. It makes a smile tug at the corner of my lips.

"Is ballroom dancing a mandatory extracurricular activity for all rich kids or what?" she says, flicking a quick glance at the couples dancing alongside us.

A soft chuckle escapes my throat. "More or less."

"Damn. And there I was, wasting my time taking advanced math."

I raise my eyebrows. "You took advanced math? I thought you were a history nerd."

"I am a history nerd, thank you very much. But I also needed to become valedictorian so that I could get the scholarship, which means that I had to be excellent at *everything*."

There is no bitterness in her voice as she says it. That surprises me a bit. I was handed the world the moment I was born, but she has had to pour her blood, sweat, and tears into everything she does just to have a shot at a future. If I'd been forced to work that hard, I would have most certainly been bitter about it.

"Why are you not angrier that you had to put so much effort into studying?" I ask because I can't help myself. "When you could have been

doing other things with your time?”

“Why would I be?” She looks up at me with such a genuinely open and curious expression that I almost miss the next step in the dance. “No knowledge is ever wasted. Being well-read in a whole bunch of subjects will always be an asset, no matter what I do.”

“I suppose you’re right. And that will certainly be helpful once I take over the empire.”

Surprise flashes across her face, and I realize what that had sounded like. Plans for the future. Which is not something we have ever discussed before.

Thankfully, the song ends before either of us can say anything else, and we trail to a halt.

For a moment, we just stand there, watching each other.

Then she clears her throat and takes a step back. Raising her hand, she motions towards the tables by the wall. “I’m just going to get something to drink.”

“Yeah. I’ll, uhm... wait here.”

It looks like she is going to say something else, but then she just shakes her head and turns around. I watch her walk away before twisting in another direction and moving off the dancefloor. Raking my fingers through my hair, I blow out a long sigh.

Uncertainty floods my chest. Which both stuns and angers me. I’m never uncertain. But ever since I met Olivia Campbell, I’ve begun feeling all kinds of emotions that I never did before. Though I’m pretty sure that’s not a bad thing.

“What is she doing?” a woman hisses from somewhere behind me.

“Has she no manners?” someone else mutters.

Suspicion ripples through me. Raising my eyebrows, I turn around to check what the disturbance is all about.

A surprised laugh tears from my throat. It’s so loud that two of the Sandall heirs whip around to stare at me. But I can’t bring myself to care. I just stare at Olivia from across the room.

She is standing in front of the main food table, and she’s cutting into the fancy, decorated Christmas cake.

No one has ever cut the cake before. We always have one every year, but no one ever eats it. It’s like an unspoken rule in our entire social circle. Most people usually have a grand cake at their parties and celebrations, but

it's more or less only for decoration. I mean, it is very much edible. But it's just... not eaten.

Completely oblivious to the aghast people around her, Olivia finishes cutting herself a slice and dumps it onto the small plate she has placed next to it. A berry made of red marzipan rolls away from the now severed holly leaf, also made of marzipan, as the cake hits the plate. Scrambling frantically, Olivia drops the utensils on the tablecloth and slams a hand in front of the escaping berry, stopping it before it can tumble over the edge.

Another laugh bubbles out of my throat. This time, several more people turn to stare at me as if they have never heard such a sound come out of my mouth. To be fair, they probably haven't.

I ignore them all as I instead stride straight towards Olivia with that genuine smile still on my mouth.

At last, she turns around.

Surprise flashes across her beautiful features as she notices the mass of people staring at her. But she recovers quickly and instead draws her eyebrows down in a scowl that she directs at everyone around her.

"What?" she says loudly. "Have you never seen a girl eat cake before?"

People around her cast uncertain glances between each other, as if they're not quite sure how to respond to that. I reach Olivia before they can figure it out.

"Why is everyone staring?" she says as I come to a halt in front of her.

I just shake my head. "It doesn't matter."

"Tell me."

"It's just... No one usually eats the cake at these kinds of events."

"What do you mean no one eats it?"

I shrug. "People just look at it."

"But it's a *cake*." While holding the plate with one hand, she throws out her other arm and stabs it in the direction of the pristine table and the now massacred pastry. "It's meant to be eaten. That's literally its sole function."

A chuckle rolls off my tongue, and I shrug again. "I never said it made sense."

She blows out a contemplative sigh and shakes her head. "No wonder you're always in such a foul mood."

I frown at her in silent question while she picks up the tiny fork and stabs into her cake. She lifts the fork to her mouth, but then pauses with it in the air and instead flashes me a mischievous grin.

“Since you always have to attend all of these fancy parties without ever actually tasting the delicious cake,” she finishes.

Yet another stunned laugh rips from my chest.

Olivia just winks and shoves the bite of cake into her mouth. An approving moan slips from her lips as she makes a show of fluttering her eyelashes as if she’s having an orgasm.

I step closer to her. “Didn’t I just tell you that that face was only for me?”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew just how good this cake actually is.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me while lifting another forkful towards her luscious lips. “Sure you don’t want some? You really should try it.”

Amusement pulls at my mouth as I move closer to her again.

She quickly shifts the plate away. “But not this one! I journeyed through the fires of social ostracization to get this slice. You’ll have to get your own.”

There’s a very distracting crumb from the sponge cake at the corner of her mouth, and I can’t stop myself from reaching up and using my thumb to brush it away. She blinks at me in surprise, and a hint of red creeps into her cheeks. Leaning down, I kiss the side of her mouth right where that crumb used to be.

“You know what?” I whisper against her lips before drawing back. “I think I will do just that.”

I can feel my father watching me through narrowed eyes from across the ballroom as I cut myself a slice of cake as well, but I really couldn’t care less. After grabbing one of those tiny forks, I turn back to Olivia.

And I momentarily forget how to breathe.

She’s grinning at me with such unbridled joy that I can feel it radiate across the whole room.

Every one of these events I have been to, all my life, has always felt... rigid. Unnatural, in a way. As if we’re all just performing for each other. Keeping up our social standing in the face of this country’s elite.

But now, the party feels different. The whole *building* feels different.

She makes it feel different.

Just by being here, and being herself, she has somehow managed to fill the whole room with light. With a presence. As if there is now a soul in here between these spotless marble walls.

And as I look at that glittering smile, a great tension loosens inside my chest.



“Good night,” my father says from where he is standing on the steps to our mansion. “Merry Christmas.”

The Johnsons echo the phrase before walking down the snow-dusted steps, leaving the four of us at last alone in our home. Benedict is standing on our dad’s other side, and his curly brown hair somehow looks even messier than usual. He has also unbuttoned the top button on his dress shirt, which I caught dad glowering at earlier, but apart from that, he mostly behaved himself tonight.

As soon as the Johnsons are out of sight, I motion to the valet on the ground below. “Bring my car around.”

“Yes, sir,” he replies and immediately walks off.

Dad turns to me. “You’re leaving?”

“We’re going to the cabin.”

“Ohh.” Benedict whistles suggestively and then grins. “The cabin, huh?”

“Shut up, asshole,” I toss his way.

“Language,” our father scolds.

Olivia glances between the three of us. I didn’t tell her beforehand that we were going to the cabin, so she had no idea that we wouldn’t actually be spending Christmas Day with my family. We don’t really do Christmas that way anyway.

“Uhm,” she begins as she glances up at me. “My things...?”

“They’re already in the trunk,” I reply.

Before she can say anything else, my car arrives. Our valet parks it right in front of the steps and then gets out and stands next to it. Placing my hand on the small of Olivia’s back, I start us downwards.

“Alexander,” Dad says before I can take so much as a single step.

Donning my most patient expression, I turn back to face him. “Yes?”

For a few seconds, he says nothing. Only locks hard eyes on me as if he is weighing my soul. A few snowflakes slowly fall through the dark night

and land in his immaculately styled hair. I just keep looking back at him, my expression calm and confident.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he says at last.

I tip my head in a nod. "I always do."

Not waiting for a response, I start us down the steps. Olivia grips her dark green skirt and lifts it slightly as we move over the snow-covered ground below. I walk up to the passenger side and open the door for her.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "You're... opening the door for me?"

"Of course. I have unimpeachable manners."

She scoffs and rolls her eyes at me. "Right."

I draw my fingers along the side of her ribs as I guide her into the car. Leaning down, I whisper, "Careful now. Or I will make you pay for that scoff, love."

After smoothening her dress over her thighs, she shoots me an amused look. "You really don't see the irony, do you? Manners, and all that?"

I just flash her a villainous smile.

"Have fun, kids!" Benedict calls from the top of the stairs.

Closing the passenger door, I flip him off without even turning to look as I walk around the car to the driver's seat. I can feel our dad shake his head, but he says nothing as I slide into the car and pull the door shut.

Snow flutters behind us as I drive away from the steps and towards the already open gates. Olivia turns to look at them as we pass them. Then she shifts her attention back to me.

"So, where is this cabin then?" she asks.

"About two hours away."

"I see. And what will we be doing there?"

I smirk as I take one hand off the steering wheel and instead use it to slide Olivia's dress up her legs. Her breath hitches as I dip my fingers down between her thighs.

"I can think of a few things," I reply.

She draws in a shuddering breath as I trace lazy circles over her skin, inching closer to her pussy.

"I'm still not wearing any panties," she states, as if I haven't been completely aware that I've had her lace lingerie in my pocket this entire evening.

"I know."

My knuckles brush against her entrance. A faint whimper falls from her lips.

While keeping my eyes on the road, I draw my thumb around her clit over and over again. She throws her head back against the headrest and bites her lip to stifle a moan. And since I have absolutely no mercy, I use that moment to push two fingers inside her.

She squirms against the leather seat, and another moan rips from her throat.

While driving us down the dark forest road, I pump my fingers into her perfect pussy while I tease her clit with my thumb.

Her breathing grows heavier, and more whimpers spill from her lips. God, I love it when she makes those cute little pitiful noises. She pushes her hips forward, as if to get my fingers more firmly against her sweet spot. I turn us down another road while I continue to edge her.

Just when I can sense that she's about to come, I stop and pull my hand back.

"Wh-what?" she blurts out as her eyes fly open. She's practically squirming in her seat with pent-up tension. "No. Wait."

I just flash her a wicked smirk.

"Oh come on." Crossing her arms, she cuts me an adorable glare. "Seriously?"

I chuckle. "All good things come to those who wait."

"Uh-huh." She snorts. "I don't think you've ever waited for anything in your entire life."

While she's busy sliding her skirt back down over her legs, I steal a long glance at her. Those loose blonde curls fall down over her shoulders like a rippling waterfall, shifting with her movements, and her cheeks are flushed with her almost orgasm. As we pass under a streetlight, the warm glow illuminates her face and makes her brown eyes sparkle with life.

A sharp pang hits my heart.

Up until now, she would have been right. Just like she said, I used to think that I had never waited for anything in my entire life.

But now, as I look at the brilliant woman beside me, I realize that I have spent my entire life waiting.

For her.

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OLIVIA

Fuffy white snowflakes tumble down from the darkened heavens as we walk up the short path to the cabin. It's relatively small, and made of thick timber, with a chimney sticking up on one side. Majestic fir trees surround the whole area, their dark green branches now dusted with white snow.

"It's breathtaking," I whisper.

A smile plays over Alexander's lips. "I know."

He unlocks the door and pulls it open, creating a rut in the layer of snow that covers the small porch. After adjusting our bags on his shoulder, he motions for me to follow and starts across the threshold.

Golden light floods the space as he flicks the switch next to the door. I move inside as well and close the door behind me.

The inside is just as picturesque as the outside. There is an open kitchen and living room area, complete with a large fireplace and a plush carpet in front of it. Paintings of woodlands hang on the walls, and beautiful furniture made of dark wood has been neatly arranged throughout the rooms.

"Have you spent a lot of time here?" I ask as I bend over and take my shoes off.

"Some," Alexander answers while doing the same. "We come here when we want to get away from everything. Check your phone."

Surprise flits through me. Once I'm finished with my shoes, I straighten again and pull my phone out of my purse. I raise my eyebrows.

"No reception, huh? Which means that I can't call for help." A teasing smile slides across my lips as I look up at Alexander again. "Tell me the

truth, have you really brought me here to murder me just like they do in the movies?”

“Naturally.” He smirks and drags a slow gaze up and down my body. “No reception. And no one around for miles.” Walking backwards, he spreads his arms wide to indicate the area around us. “Which means that no one can hear you scream.”

“Good. Because I have to admit, I have been holding back in your campus house. But now I can truly scream my lungs out when I orgasm without worrying about waking the neighbors.”

A surprised laugh erupts from his chest. Then his blue eyes glitter as a wicked grin spreads across his lips. “Oh I’ll make sure you do.”

Lightning skitters over my skin.

He flashes me another smirk before turning around and walking over to the fireplace. I watch with raised eyebrows as he stacks some firewood in it and then lights it. Maybe he really would survive the zombie apocalypse after all.

Orange flames flicker in the hearth as the wood catches fire. I move over to the plush brown carpet in front of it and sit down. But my body is exhausted after a night of dancing and standing and being railed in the bathroom by Alexander, so I lie down on my side instead.

Alexander is still watching the fire, making sure that it’s truly catching. When he is apparently satisfied, he takes a step back and almost trips over me. Stumbling slightly, he turns around and stares down at me with raised eyebrows.

“There is a perfectly nice bed in the bedroom over there,” he remarks.

“I assumed as much. But you can’t see the fire from in there.”

He lets out a huff of amusement and shakes his head at me. But then he shrugs out of his suit jacket and hangs it on the arm of the brown sofa next to him before rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt. I raise my eyebrows in surprise as he lowers himself to the carpet and lies down behind me.

Warmth spreads through my whole body as he drapes his arm over my waist and pulls me snug against him. I can feel his chest expand against my back as he draws in a deep breath. In front of me, the fire crackles merrily.

“I’m glad you came with me tonight,” he murmurs, making his breath caress the back of my neck.

“Again, I didn’t think I had much of a choice,” I tease.

He huffs out a low chuckle. “Fair point.”

My mind drifts back to the party. To the way it all felt incredibly pre-rehearsed. Like one of those fancy photo spreads you see in magazines sometimes. Or a commercial for some high-end perfume or something. Everything, down to the tiniest decoration, is perfect, and everyone in there is behaving perfectly. As if they're following a script. Even though the mansion was absolutely stunning and beautifully decorated, the house felt incredibly hollow.

"Is it always like that?" I ask eventually.

"Is what?"

"Your home. The Christmas celebration. Everything. Is it always so... perfect?"

"You mean soulless."

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you were thinking it." He blows out a long breath, which tickles the back of my neck. "And you're right. Because the answer is yes, it is."

Pain twists my heart, and I can't help but wonder if his whole life has been like that. My family isn't exactly perfect either, but at least our home felt alive.

He removes his arm from my waist and instead rolls over on his back. The loss of his body against mine is like a blow to the gut. I shift onto my back as well and then turn my head so that I can watch him. He raises a hand and draws his fingers through his hair while releasing a long exhale.

"I'm sorry," I whisper while studying his profile. "I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's alright. I was actually thinking the same thing earlier too." He lets his hand drop back to rest on his chest instead, but he keeps his eyes on the dark wooden ceiling above. "Tonight was the first time that the party felt... Well, that our mansion has felt... alive."

My heart flutters erratically against my ribs.

"In our world, we always have to keep up a certain façade. Especially in public. But more than that..." At last, he turns his head so that he's meeting my gaze head on. "You're going to scoff at this, and rightly so, but here's the thing. We have everything. Anything I want, I can just snap my fingers and make it happen. And that makes practically everything worthless. Meaningless."

I don't scoff at that. Because I understand where he's coming from. He has never had to work for anything. He has never wished for anything. Hoped for anything. Because he already has the world on a silver platter. And that makes any reward, any price, any achievement, essentially meaningless.

Do I wish that I didn't have to work so damn hard for everything in my life? Yes. But at the same time, I wouldn't want a life where I don't have to work for anything at all. When there is no effort, there is no joy in the completion of the task.

"That makes sense," I say.

"It does?"

"Yes."

For a few seconds, it looks like there is a war raging behind his eyes. As if he is trying to decide whether or not to tell me something. He opens his mouth, but then closes it again.

I just lay there on the soft carpet, with my arm pulled up and my cheek resting on the back of my hand, and watch him in silence.

"I'm worried that..." he begins, but then trails off. Clearing his throat, he starts again. "You remember that I told you that my mom died?"

"Yes."

"She, uhm... Everyone thinks that she died of a heart attack." He swallows, and hesitation flickers in his eyes. But then he charges on. "She didn't. That was just a cover story that we made up to preserve our family's image."

My eyes soften. "What happened?"

"She killed herself." He draws in a shuddering breath. "She committed suicide. She was suffering from apathy for years because she didn't have anything to live for. She didn't have to work. She didn't have any hobbies. She didn't have any interests or passions. She didn't have any real friends."

"I'm sorry."

"Just like me." He chokes out that last word. Then he draws in another strained breath, and there is panic swirling in his eyes as he stares straight at me. "I don't want to end up like her."

My heart clenches painfully at the desperation coloring his voice.

Reaching out, I trace my fingers over his forehead before cupping his cheek in my palm. "You won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

“Because you’re trying.” I caress his cheekbone with my thumb. “You’re aware of the struggle, and you’re fighting against it. You’re reading history books, for God’s sake. Even though you’ve never been interested in history. But you’re doing it anyway. So think about if there is something in there that you like. Something that you want to learn more about. And if you decide that you don’t really like history, we’ll just try something else. And then something else. Until you find what’s right for you. Until you find the thing that makes your soul sing. And you don’t have to worry in the meantime either, because you’re working on your issues. You’re trying. And that makes all the difference.”

Gratitude floods his features. It’s so intense, so incredible, that my breath hitches.

Wrapping his arm around me, he pulls me close to his chest until I swear that I can feel his heart beat in rhythm with mine.

“You’re far too brilliant for your own good, you know,” he says, his breath ruffling my hair with every word.

I chuckle. “You know you love it.”

He tightens his arm around me and then kisses my forehead. “Yes, I do indeed.”

Sparkles dance through my chest.

And for the first time, I feel like the power balance between us has evened out. Before tonight, he held all the power in our beautifully messed-up relationship. But now, he has told me a secret that no one knows about his family. And he has shared his fears with me.

With only a few sentences, he has finally given me power over him too.

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ALEXANDER

I feel lighter than I have in years. I have been carrying around that secret for so long now. I've been carrying that *fear* for so long without even realizing it. Ever since mom died. And now, I finally feel like I can breathe properly again.

Olivia and I spent the past three days in that cabin. No reception. No internet. Just the two of us, the roaring fire, and the glittering snow outside. It was the best Christmas I've had in... forever.

And naturally, I kept my promise and made sure that she had a chance to test out her vocal cords now that there was no one around to hear. Or, lots of chances, in fact. And by God did she use the opportunity. My cock stirs at just the memory of those days and nights by the fire and in the bed and on the kitchen table. I'm not even sure what I like best anymore — her cute little whimpers or her breathless screams.

But now, we're back in the real world. On campus.

Most students come back after spending Christmas with their families to attend the massive New Year's Eve party that the student body throws every year. And since I am the reigning president, I naturally have to attend it too.

After adjusting my pants slightly again, I button my suit jacket and then head downstairs. My footsteps echo against the wooden steps, providing the only sound in the otherwise silent building.

"Did you have a good Christmas?" I ask Daniel as I reach the hallway downstairs.

My trusted bodyguard is standing like a statue by the wall close to the front door, his dark eyes alternating between scanning the street outside and checking the hallway. But he turns towards me once he hears my question.

“I did, sir,” he says.

I always give him five days off for Christmas, which I know he spends with his sister Jessica and her kids in Wisconsin.

“Jess told me to tell you thanks for the Crock-Pot you got her,” he says, his eyes full of a warm glow that he rarely lets others see. “You really didn’t have to.”

I wave a hand in front of my face. “It was nothing.”

“It was everything. She’s been wanting one of those for years.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “I’m glad she liked it.”

“She also told me to bring you with me next time I come to visit so that she can finally meet you and treat you to dinner.” He grimaces and shoots me an apologetic look. “But I know that you’re a busy person, so I told her not to—”

“Actually,” I interrupt, making a split-second decision. “I think that sounds like a great idea.”

Shock pulses across Daniel’s features. “You do?”

“Yes.”

Olivia was right. If I want to avoid falling into apathy and ending up like my mother, I have to make an effort to actually do things that make me feel something. And I think meeting Daniel’s sister is something I would enjoy.

“I’m heading to the library,” I say before Daniel can respond, because though I’m trying, I don’t really know how to handle the happiness that flooded his eyes at my reply. “Olivia is there, getting some books. But she’s been gone for an hour now, so I’m going to go up there and drag her back from whatever history book she must have gotten stuck in.”

Daniel composes himself again and gives me a nod. “Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be back soon,” I say as I pull on my coat.

Cold winds tasting of ice and pine trees whirl around me as I step outside and start down the street. Snow crunches under my shoes as I walk. Looking up at the gray clouds that cover the heavens, I draw in a deep breath.

Someone slams into me.

I jerk back as a man with a hat pulled down almost fully over his eyes collides with my chest as he rounds the corner quickly.

He stumbles back, almost losing his footing. Flailing his arms, he manages to stabilize himself before he pushes his hat higher up his

forehead.

His eyes widen as he sees my face. “Oh, God. Mr. Huntington, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

I pointedly dust myself off. “Clearly.”

“I really am sorry.”

“Watch where you’re going next time.”

“I will. I will.” Pity suddenly floods his features, and he softens his voice even more. “And can I just say, I’m sorry about your mother.”

A coldness that has nothing to do with the weather washes through my chest, and all I manage to press out is, “Excuse me?”

“Your mother.” He looks at me with that awful pity again. “I didn’t know that she had committed suicide. That must have been such a terrible shock for you and your family.”

It feels as though ice has crawled into my every vein, and for a moment, I can’t get a single thought through my head. “What?”

“Well, it was in the papers this morning and... Well, I just...”

Even I can hear the razor-sharp steel in my voice as I grind out, “Leave.”

I’m not sure what he sees in my face, but he jerks back and then practically runs down the street.

Cold winds whirl around my hands as I pull out my phone, but I barely feel it as I type our last name into the search bar.

Dozens of articles instantly pop up. All of them have been posted in the past hour. My heart stops beating in my chest as I skim the headlines.

HUNTINGTON FAMILY TRAGEDY WAS REALLY SUICIDE.

ARE THE HUNTINGTONS REALLY AS HAPPY AS THEY SAY?

THE HUNTINGTON MATRIARCH: VICTIM OF DEPRESSION.

SUICIDE COVERED UP BY THE HUNTINGTON FAMILY.

There is an unnatural silence inside my head as I pull up my dad’s number and press call.

It rings only twice before he picks up.

“What the hell happened?” I blurt out before he can speak a single word.

“You tell me,” Dad growls from the other end of the line. “I’ve been doing damage control for the past hour. Every single person who has posted an article is going to find themselves without a job before the end of the day. And if they don’t pull those articles and publish new ones explaining

that they were wrong, along with groveling apologies, I will bankrupt the bastards by fucking lunchtime.”

My father almost never swears, so his harsh words throw me off enough that I can’t formulate a reply straight away.

“How did those damn sniveling journalists find out?” he snaps. “Did you tell someone?”

My blood grows impossibly colder.

“Don’t tell me you told that fucking gold digger?” He growls another curse before I can even open my mouth to speak the words that I really don’t want to be true. “I’ll handle this. You handle your end. And if your brother calls, tell him to call me too. We need to close ranks.”

Before I can reply, he hangs up.

I’m left standing there, in the middle of the snowy street, staring at the grand university building up ahead.

Somewhere in there is Olivia.

The person I trusted with my deepest darkest secret.

The person who sold me out not even a day after we got back to the real world.

Fury burns through my shock and dread. It burns so brightly that I can almost feel my blood boiling in my veins. I squeeze the phone in my hand so hard that I almost crack the screen.

Olivia fucking Campbell.

I trusted her and she stabbed me in the back.

She is about to learn exactly what I do to people who betray me.



It’s already afternoon when Olivia finally returns. But I’m glad she took her time. It gave me the chance to exhaust every other possibility, and once I had done that, it gave me time to set things in motion.

The front door opens and then closes. I remain where I am, leaning against the desk in my study with my arms crossed over my chest.

“Alexander?” Olivia calls.

I don’t reply.

“Are you here?”

Her footsteps sound from the hallway outside. I keep my eyes on the doorway.

After another few seconds, she peeks inside and smiles. Fucking *smiles*.

"You *are* here," she says. Looking down, she pulls out a student card while saying, "The strangest thing happened at the library earlier. My card suddenly stopped working, so I barely got back out of the library again."

"That's because you're no longer a student at this university."

"I..." She snaps her gaze up to mine as she stops dead on the floor halfway to me. "Wait, what?"

"Did you really think that your actions wouldn't have consequences?"

Panic flashes across her face. "What consequences? What are you talking about?"

I scoff. "Oh, so now that you've realized that you've just screwed up your entire future for petty revenge, you're going to pretend that you didn't do it?"

"Didn't do what?" She throws her arms out while anger flickers in her eyes. "What the hell is going on, Alexander?"

My restraint snaps. Shoving away from the desk, I stalk up to her, forcing her to back up against the wall or be mowed down by me. But she doesn't look frightened. She just looks angry. Which makes me even more furious since it's just more proof of her guilt.

Once her back is against the wall, I step farther into her space and lock hard eyes on her. "You told the press about my mother."

"What?" She actually has the nerve to look shocked. "Of course not!"

I throw my arm out and stab a hand towards the street. "It's all over the news! Everyone fucking knows now!"

"And you think *I* tipped them off?"

"You're the only one I told! And four days later, mere hours after we get back from a place with no reception and no internet, the press finds out. Do you really expect me to believe that that is a coincidence?" Taking a step back, I rake my fingers through my hair and shake my head at her, suddenly feeling more weary than angry. "Was this your plan all along?"

"Was what my plan?"

My fury returns, searing through my veins. "Don't play stupid with me. I know exactly how clever, how *patient*, you can be. It's how you managed to get the scholarship, after all. So tell me, was this your plan all along? To

get close to me, learn my secrets, and then stab me in the back as revenge for what I did to you at the start of the semester?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

She holds up her hands in a placating gesture and takes a step away from the wall, closing the distance to me. I move back because I can't have her that close to me right now. Not when my heart is still bleeding from the knife she shoved into it.

“Listen to me,” she says. “This is a mistake. Whatever you think I did, I didn't do it.”

“Fine, then explain yourself. I won't have you complaining that I just jumped to conclusions. That all of this could have been solved if I had just given you a chance to explain.” A treacherous seed of hope sprouts in my chest, because I desperately *want to* believe that this is just a misunderstanding. “So go ahead.”

“I...”

“Explain yourself. Plead your case.”

Desperation washes over her features as she stares back at me. “I don't know what to say. I didn't do this.”

“In that cabin, four days ago, is the first time I told anyone. It's the first time I have ever spoken those words out loud.”

“What about... What about Daniel? He's always following you around like a shadow. He could have overheard you at the cabin.”

Daniel is currently in the kitchen, in case things get out of hand, and I know that he can hear every word of our conversation.

“You know full well that there was no one around for miles. And besides, I trust Daniel with my life,” I add, my voice coming out hard. “He was also in Wisconsin that day. I've confirmed it with the airline.”

Her eyes dart from side to side, as if she's looking for a way out. “Maybe... maybe there were cameras or...”

“Maybe the cabin was bugged?” I fill in. “I've already considered that. Because believe it or not, I don't actually *want it* to be you. So I had the place swept for bugs while you were in the library. There was nothing there. I've checked everything. Run through every possibility. But it all comes back to one simple fact. I told *you*. And now, a mere four days later, everyone knows.”

Panic and dread swirls in her eyes, and she opens her mouth, but nothing comes out.

“So if you insist that you didn’t tell the press directly, then who did you tell?” I demand.

“No one!”

“Your family?”

“No! I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Then how does the press know?”

“I don’t know!” Throwing out her arms, she stares back at me with pleading eyes. “Please, Alexander. You have to believe me. I didn’t do this. I swear I didn’t do this. I don’t know how they found out, but I swear I didn’t tell them.”

My heart twists. She looks so sincere. Sounds so sincere. And I want to believe her. By God, I really want to. It’s why I spent hours exhausting every other possibility. And even when that revealed no other explanation, it’s why I still gave her this chance to explain herself. Because I don’t want it to be her. But she has no explanation. And no matter how sincere she sounds right now, no matter how much I want to believe her, it still doesn’t change the cold, hard fact that she is the only person I have ever told.

That burning fury inside me morphs into deadly calm as I make a heart-wrenching decision and block out all of my emotions for this lying snake. And the coldness that settles in my soul in their wake terrifies me. But this is how it must be. She betrayed me. Betrayed me more than anyone has ever done before. And now, she will pay the price for that.

“Your scholarship has been revoked,” I state, my voice as merciless and cold as death. “So unless you can cough up a hundred grand, you have until the end of the day to clear out your things and vacate the premises.”

She jerks back as if I have struck her across the face. Panic and dread and desperation washes over her features. She bet her whole future on Huntingswell U. And now, because she decided to exact her petty revenge, her future is irrevocably ruined.

“You can’t do this,” she presses out eventually.

“Watch me.”

Something snaps in her eyes. Lunging forward, she slams her palms into my chest and shoves me backwards with all her strength. “You bastard! You fucking bastard! You think you can play God with everyone’s lives?” She shoves at my chest again. “I thought you were different. I thought I had finally gotten to know the real you. But joke’s on me. The real you was the one who forced me to suck your fucking cock in a parking lot in exchange

for food! You insecure little brat! Fuck, I hate you so much and I *wish* I had been the one to spill your damn secret just so that I could know that I was the one who ruined you and your perfect image.”

Fury and pain tear through my chest like wolves.

“You think you’re a real person?” Icy hatred flashes in her eyes as she locks them on mine. “You’re not. You’re just a shell. With no heart, no soul, inside that cold exterior.” She pauses for a second before spitting out, “You will end up just like your mother.”

The last parts of my stubborn feelings for her shatter like a broken mirror.

With that mask of lethal indifference still on my face, I pull out my phone and hit call on one of my contacts.

After three rings, a man’s voice says, “Mr. Huntington?”

“Thomas George,” I reply.

All color drains from Olivia’s face at the sound of that name. The name of the man who tried to drown her in the fountain and has sworn to kill her.

“Do you still want to make Olivia pay for almost getting you expelled?” I ask.

“No, no, no,” Olivia blurts out. Holding up her hands in a pleading gesture, she shakes her head desperately. “No, please. Please.”

“You made it clear that she was off limits,” Thomas replies carefully.

I keep my eyes locked on Olivia’s as I say, “I have lost interest in my plaything.”

Hurt flashes across her face, but it’s quickly drowned out by full-blown panic.

“So I’m withdrawing my protection,” I finish.

Sheer undiluted terror floods her features, and she drops to her knees before me. Pressing her palms together, she looks up at me with desperate, pleading eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Please, I’m begging you. I’m *begging* you. Don’t do this. Please.”

On the other end of the line, Thomas is silent for a second before asking, “So I can do whatever I want with her?”

I stare down at Olivia. Kneeling at my feet. Begging me for mercy. But it’s too late for that. Far too late. I let her in, and she hurt me worse than anyone has ever done before. My heart has been reduced to bloody pulp in my chest and my soul is shattered beyond repair. Because of her.

Holding Olivia's pleading gaze, I speak the words that will seal her fate.
"Yes, you can do whatever you want with her."

A sob rips from her throat. Slapping a hand in front of her mouth, she curls in on herself as she gasps for air between choked sobs.

I hang up the phone.

Olivia sucks in a shuddering breath before she manages to sit up straight again and meet my gaze.

I level a merciless stare on her and jerk my chin towards the door.

"I would suggest running."

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OLIVIA

My heart bleeds as I run through campus and towards the gates. I only had time to shove my most important things into a backpack before I had to leave. Since I don't have money for a cab, I have to try to make it to the city on foot before Thomas figures out where I am. But I can barely concentrate because my soul fractures with every step.

How did it come to this?

There was a time when I wanted to hurt him. To get revenge for what he had done to me. But not anymore.

I didn't tell anyone about his mother. At least not willingly. Someone must have been eavesdropping or bugged our phones or... something. But no matter how much I try to spin it, I know that there was no one else at that cabin. And if he has swept the place for bugs too, then...

Fuck.

Another wave of terror washes over me as I cast a frantic glance over my shoulder. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. I shouldn't have said that he would turn out just like his mother. I didn't even mean that. I had just wanted to hurt him like he was hurting me. I never expected him to send Thomas after me.

Because I had forgotten how ruthless he can be. How cruel he can be. How merciless. I had forgotten that I sold my soul to the devil in exchange for safety, and that the devil could snatch that safety away at any time if he ever found my soul unworthy.

Fucking hell, how did things get so out of control so fast? I know how it must look from his perspective. All the evidence points to me, and I have no proof, not even a plausible explanation, to back up my claim that I'm

innocent. But part of me is still heartbroken that he thinks I'm capable of doing something like this. That he trusts me so little. Because it means that I was wrong. I thought he actually cared about me, but now I know that I have always just been his plaything to use and discard as he wishes.

And now he has thrown me aside. And given a murderer permission to hunt me down.

Another wave of panic whirls through my soul.

Snow flies around my shoes as I skid out of the gates and take off down the road towards the city. My heart hammers against my ribs, but I keep running until I have put some distance between me and the university.

Eventually, I have to slow down to a walk. My lungs ache, and every breath of cold air feels like I'm inhaling shards of glass, but I force myself to keep moving. I have to make it into the city. At least there, I can hide from Thomas until I can figure out what to do now that...

Pain slices through my soul before I can even finish that thought, and a sob rips from my throat.

My scholarship to Huntingswell U is gone.

And I turned down all the other offers in favor of that one, which means that now I have nothing. No education. No degree. No future. I will never be able to afford classes anywhere else now.

Panic and desperation crashes over me.

Which means that I will have to move home. To Bellview Fields. Population three thousand two hundred and seventy-five. Seventy-six now.

Everything I have worked for, everything I have sacrificed all these years, is just... gone.

I stumble on the side of the road and almost crash down on my knees as another tidal wave of sorrow slams into me.

What have I done? I should have stayed as far away from Alexander Huntington as I could possibly get. I should have just knelt and bowed like everyone else. I should have just written Thomas's essay for him like he demanded. I shouldn't have made waves. I should have just kept my head down and finished my damn education.

Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision. I continue stumbling along the snow-covered road, half-blinded by sadness and regret, while my heart shatters like brittle glass in my chest.

God, I wish I had never even laid eyes on Alexander. I wish I had never gotten to know him. I wish I had never let him into my heart. I wish I had

never given him the power to hurt me this badly.

I can't breathe.

Pressing a hand to my chest, I try to dispel the terrible weight that threatens to crush my ribs.

The sound of a car echoes from behind me, so I move sideways to make sure that it won't hit me on the way past.

Headlights cast pools of light on the snow as it gets closer.

I trail to a halt, trying to breathe through the pain and panic tearing through my insides.

The car speeds past, sending snow flying around its tires, and the pale light becomes red as the taillights shine into my eyes instead.

I suck in a strained breath.

Then the car screeches to a halt.

It's so sudden that it loses traction on the road for a second, skidding slightly sideways before it stops on the side of the road.

I desperately blink the tears out of my eyes, hoping against hope that the driver is someone who can help me.

The driver's side door is thrown open.

My blood turns to ice as Thomas George straightens from the car and locks hard gray eyes on me from across the snow-covered ground.

A vicious grin spreads across his face.

I run.

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ALEXANDER

G lass shatters against the wall. I snatch up another whiskey glass and hurl that straight at the wall too, needing to hear the satisfying sound of something breaking. Something other than my heart.

Broken shards tumble down and clink as they land on the floor below.

Daniel is standing a short distance away, watching me silently. But even from across the room, I can see the concern in his eyes when he looks at me. It just makes another stab of pain spear through my chest.

“FUCK!”

The word rips out of my lungs so hard that I almost taste blood.

“I should never have trusted her!” I scream at the room. At the world. At everything. “I never let anyone in. But I let *her* in.” My voice almost breaks on that word. “And this is what I get.”

My shoes thud on the wooden floorboards as I pace back and forth across my study. Raising my arms, I rake my fingers through my hair repeatedly, messing up the previously perfect styling.

“I should have known.” I shake my head. “I should have known that she was playing the long game. Fuck. She’s brilliant and resourceful and she has spent her whole life working towards a single goal. So what’s a couple of months of pretending in comparison to that? I should have seen it coming. I should’ve seen it.”

Another spear of pain sears through my soul. It’s painful enough that I have to stop and drag in a deep breath. I actually thought that I had found someone. Someone who understood me. Who brought light into my life.

Spinning around, I meet Daniel’s calm eyes, and I hate how broken my voice sounds as I press out, “And I almost believed her too when she said

that she didn't do it." I stab a hand against my chest. "*That's* how deep she had dug her claws into me. I almost believed her. I *wanted to* believe her."

Daniel's eyes soften as he looks back at me. "Are you sure she did it, sir?"

"Yes. I've run through every single possibility. There was no one else at the cabin. Not for miles. There were no bugs. No hidden cameras. No way for anyone to eavesdrop."

"So it has to be her?"

"Yes. She's the only one I told."

He is silent for a few seconds, as if considering. Then he speaks eight words that make my blood freeze and my heart clench in panic.

"But is she the only one who knew?"

For a few seconds, I can't breathe as a horrifying possibility flashes through me.

A possibility that I hadn't even considered.

That the leak was not *my* fault.

My fingers fumble as I try to pull my phone out of my pocket, and I almost drop it on the floor before I can get a firm grip on it. My hand shakes slightly as I call Benedict.

No reply.

I stare at the blank screen for a while before I can manage to hit the dial button again.

Yet again, no answer.

I call again.

And again.

And again.

On the sixth try, he at last picks up.

"I'm sorry, Four," he says, sounding stressed and panicked.

My heart stops and my brain malfunctions. I can't get a single thought through my head, let alone any words off my tongue, so I just stand there in the middle of the room, holding the phone to my ear and staring at the shattered glass on the floor.

"I'm sorry," my brother repeats. "Okay? I've been ducking Dad's calls all day so don't tell him you've talked to me."

"Why?" I at last manage to press out.

"Because I really, really don't want to talk to him because I know exactly what he will say when—"

“No,” I interrupt. “Why are you sorry?”

“Look, I’ll fix this. I promise. I’ll fix it.”

“Benedict.” My heart suddenly thumps twice as hard in my chest, as if it’s trying to make up for the time when it stopped beating entirely. “Why. Are. You. Sorry?”

“Look, I was high. Okay? But it must’ve been a bad batch or something because I was tripping balls in a way I never have before and I just...” He blows out a pained sigh. “It just slipped out. I didn’t mean to say it. And then Macy was there and she had found out why I ditched her so I guess that she wanted revenge and now...” He sucks in a ragged breath. “Fuck, Four, I’m so sorry. I never wanted anyone to know what really happened to Mom. I didn’t mean to. I just... Fuck.”

I just stand there, staring into nothingness, while my mind tries to process the words that has just come out of my brother’s mouth.

Macy told the press.

Benedict told Macy.

Which means that the leak wasn’t even my fault to begin with. It had nothing to do with me telling Olivia in the cabin.

Finishing that thought feels like jogging in mud.

But the final words at last finish processing inside my skull, leaving a world-altering realization in their wake.

Olivia didn’t betray me.

I snap my gaze towards the darkening sky outside as panic crackles through my every nerve with enough force to make me want to vomit.

Oh fuck.

Olivia.

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OLIVIA

Fear is a living breathing monster inside my chest. Clawing at my lungs. Strangling my throat. Squeezing my heart in an iron grip. I can't hear anything except the rush of blood in my ears. And the pounding footsteps behind me.

Cold air rasps through my throat as I sprint desperately straight into the gloomy forest. Snow-covered trees flash past my vision. I have no idea where I'm going. All I know is that I need to get away. Fast.

"You really think you can outrun me?" A malicious laugh echoes through the woods. "Well, go ahead then. Give it your best shot. But when I catch you, I will make you pay for every yard."

Panic shoots up my spine, and a sob rips from my throat. I can't spare the time to look, but his voice sounds much closer than it was before.

Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision, while I hurtle through the forest. Snow tumbles through the air as I shove my way through branches and bushes.

The footsteps behind me grow louder.

Closer.

Terror spears through my chest.

I suck in strained breaths as I leap over a fallen tree and then skid around another tree trunk, changing direction right before a hand can snatch at my jacket. My heart pounds against my ribs. I blink against the tears obscuring my vision as I run with everything I have towards a thick copse of trees. If I can just make it in there, maybe I can lose him. Maybe I can—

A massive weight slams into my back.

I scream as I'm tackled to the ground by a huge body. Pain shoots through my elbows as I slam into the ground, sending clouds of snow fluttering up around us. Twisting fast, I manage to roll away before Thomas can lock his arms around me.

Cold snow seeps into my clothes and sticks to my skin, but I can barely feel it because fear and panic burn through my body like wildfire.

Hands scrabble for purchase around my ankles, so I kick hard at them.

Thomas sucks in a sharp breath between his teeth as my heel connects. Rolling over, I manage to push to my knees right as something moves in the corner of my eye.

On instinct, I unsling my backpack and swing it hard.

A thud echoes through the dusky woods.

Thomas lets out a cry and topples backwards as the heavy history book inside my backpack hits him straight in the face. He throws up a hand, grabbing the straps of the bag, but I release it before he can use it to yank me towards him.

Not wasting a second, I leap to my feet and take off between the trees.

"You'll pay for that, bitch!" he screams after me.

My pulse thrums in my ears as I sprint through the snow. His pounding feet beat like battle drums behind me. Throwing out an arm, I swing myself around a tree to change direction. He snarls as he skids past me, but a second later, he's on my heels again.

Hopelessness washes over me.

What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to survive this? I can't outrun him. I can't hide. I can't win a physical fight against him. There's no one here who can help me. Protect me. Save me. It's just me and Thomas George and an empty forest where he can take his time killing me. Slowly. Painfully. Without any interruptions.

Another broken sob rips from my throat.

I am going to die here.

His weight slams into me again.

I hit the ground hard with him on top of me, snow flying up around us on impact. While gasping air back into my lungs, I try to use the same maneuver and roll away, but this time, he has learned from his mistakes.

Pain crackles through my face as he slams his fist into my cheek.

It connects with enough force to snap my whole head to the side. The blow completely dazes me, so I can't even lift my arms to fight back as

Thomas shoves me onto my back and straddles my hips.

My survival instincts scream inside my skull, snapping me out of my stupor. Thomas leans down over me, his hands going for my throat. I struggle to suck in a strained breath while I yank my arms up and smack his hands away.

A cruel glint creeps into his gray eyes as he locks them on me, and the vicious smile curling his lips sends ice raking down my spine.

My cheekbone pulses with pain from his blow, but I block it out as I pound my fists against his muscled forearms before clawing at his face.

Rage flashes in his eyes, and he growls in pain as my nails manage to scratch his cheek.

His fist slams into my face again.

Snow presses against my cheek as the blow snaps my head sideways. Waves of pain course through me, and there's something ringing inside my skull. I just lay there, gasping in air, as I try to get the world around me to make sense again.

Before I can manage that, two large hands wrap around my throat.

My eyes shoot open, and I whip my head forwards again.

Thomas leans down over me, a malicious smile on his lips, as he begins to squeeze.

I kick my legs, trying to get his weight off me, while I grab his thick wrists and fight to break his grip. He remains sitting on my hips like a boulder, his massive frame crushing me, and his hands stay locked firmly around my neck.

"You should have known your place." His gray eyes gleam like sharp steel as he grins. "First, you tried to get one up on Alexander. Then, you tried to get one up on me." He squeezes my neck harder. "And now look at you."

I dig my nails into the skin around his wrists, trying to force him to flinch. To break his grip even just a little.

My lungs scream from the lack of air.

"Do you want me to spare your life?" he asks.

I nod desperately.

"Do you want to bargain, like you did with Alexander? You do whatever I want, and I'll let you live?"

My head pounds but I manage to jerk my chin in another couple of desperate nods.

“See, this is where you belong. Begging for mercy underneath me. Desperately bargaining for the life I hold in my hands. If you had only learned your place before you almost got me kicked out, we wouldn’t be here.”

I nod again, because I think that’s what he wants me to do.

“So, do you want to bargain?”

My lungs ache as I jerk my chin several times.

His mouth splits into a cold smile. “Too bad. It’s too late for that. Because I’ve been dreaming about watching the light fade from your eyes for months now.”

I claw at his wrists again as undiluted terror floods my entire system.

“Fight all you want. But there is nothing you can do to stop me from squeezing the life right out of your worthless body.”

My legs twitch against the ground and darkness creeps into the corner of my eyes. I try to bend his fingers away from my throat, but my arms feel weak and heavy.

Coldness that has nothing to do with the snow pressing against my back spreads through my chest as his words settle like a stone in my stomach.

I am going to die here.

This time, I really am going to die here.

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ALEXANDER

Panic flashes through my body like lightning strikes as I sprint through the forest. Thomas's car was parked on the side of the road, and two sets of footsteps lead into the trees. My heart pounds in my chest as I follow them.

Please don't let me be too late. Please don't let me be too late.

God, what have I done?

How could I have been so stupid?

If he has hurt her...

I can't even finish that thought as I hurtle after them. Sunset is close now, and the sky is already covered by thick gray clouds, so I have to squint to see in the gloomy light.

Where are they?

Where is she?

A scream cuts through the silent woods.

My blood turns to ice.

Olivia.

I redouble my speed, flashing through the trees as I sprint towards the sound of the voice. The footprints become a circle of trampled snow.

My heart almost stops as my eyes zero in on something lying at the edge of it. Olivia's backpack. I whip my head from side to side. They fought here. *She* fought him here.

Diagonally from where I arrived, the footprints start up again. I take off in the same direction.

It feels as though I'm going to throw up. What have I done? What have I *done*? Fuck. She has to be okay. She has to.

Cold air tears through my lungs and rips through my hair as I hurtle after the footsteps in the snow.

Then I see it.

Two people on the ground.

Thomas.

And Olivia.

Her legs are twitching in the snow and her hands fall down from his wrists as he sits on her hips and chokes her.

Fury burns through me like ice.

Raising my hunting rifle, I fire.

A *bang* echoes through the forest. Birds flap away in panic as the noise tears through the silence. The bullet smacks into the tree right next to Thomas's head, sending chips of bark spraying through the air.

Thomas leaps off Olivia and scrambles away as I level the rifle at him.

"Shit. Fuck." Throwing his hands up in surrender, he backs away while shock and fear flash across his face. "I—"

"Back away from her," I growl. "Now."

He retreats farther, terror filling his gaze as he stares between me and the rifle in my hands.

On the ground, Olivia sucks in deep breaths.

Relief crashes into me. It's so intense that I almost gasp. She's alive. She's *alive*.

Rolling over on her side, she coughs repeatedly before drawing more air into her lungs. Then she slumps down on her back again. Her chest rises and falls with long breaths as she stares up into the canopy and the darkening sky above.

My heart cracks at the sight of her like that. I open my mouth to tell her... something, *anything*, but before I can figure out what I could possibly say at a moment like this, my eyes focus on her face.

There is a large bruise forming on her cheek.

And angry red handprints around her neck.

For a single second, I just stand there, staring at those brutal marks on her.

Then everything inside me goes black and deadly silent.

An unnatural calm settles on my soul, as vast and lethal as the dark ocean.

Turning back towards Thomas, I unceremoniously lift the rifle and fire it into his knee.

A scream shatters through the cold winter air.

The shot blows out Thomas's kneecap, and he collapses to the ground as his leg buckles. Ear-splitting screams tear from his throat as he braces his palms on the ground and curls in on himself.

Pain clouds his features, so he doesn't even register me as I prowl up to him. When I reach him, I plant my shoe on his wrist, trapping his palm against the ground.

And then I fire three rounds right into his hand.

Blood sprays into the air and torn flesh flutters as the bullets shred the back of his hand, leaving nothing but a large hole there instead.

Another broken scream rips from his lungs and he tries desperately to pull his hand back. I remove my weight from his wrist, allowing him to yank it back and cradle it against his chest.

Red pools now soak the pristine white snow around him.

He stares up at me, terror and pain pulsing in his watery eyes. Tears and snot run down his face.

"Hold out your other hand," I order, my voice dripping with lethal authority.

He shakes his head desperately while trying to edge backwards.

"It's either your hand." I shift the rifle until it's trained between his eyes. "Or your head." I hold his gaze with merciless eyes. "Choose."

A terrified sob spills from his lips, but he slowly moves his hand away from his chest.

"On the ground," I demand.

His hand shakes violently as he lowers it until his palm is pressed against the snow.

"Please," he begs, crying and sniffing and looking up at me with wide eyes. "Please, don't do this. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

I just stare him down in damning silence.

Then I fire three more rounds.

His voice cracks as terrible screams rip from his throat. Bending over, he presses his forehead against the ground and screams in pain again and again.

Both of his hands are now just shredded heaps of torn flesh and shattered bones. He will never be able to use either of them again.

“Look at your hands,” I command.

He just keeps crying and screaming into the ground while his whole body trembles with pain.

“Look at them!” I yell, shoving the muzzle against the back of his neck.

He snaps his head up, and he blinks furiously as he struggles to obey my order and look at his ruined hands. Blubbering sobs rack his frame.

“Remember this day. Every time you struggle to open a door, every time you fail to hold so much as a sippy cup, every time you have to let a stranger wipe your fucking ass because you can no longer use these worthless hands of yours, I want you to remember this day. Remember that you no longer have your hands....” I position my heel on the fingers of his right hand and grind them hard into the ground, “because you dared to touch *my* Olivia.”

Pitiful whimpers and broken sobs fall from his lips.

“If you ever show your face in Huntingswell again, the next bullet will be between your eyes.” I press the muzzle in that exact spot to really drive the point home. “Understood?”

“Y-yes,” he cries. “Yes. Please. Please.”

Leaving him sobbing on the ground, I sling the rifle over my shoulder and crouch down next to Olivia. She is still lying on the ground, but she has tilted her head as if she was watching what I did to Thomas. Her chest rises and falls with steady breaths.

“Olivia,” I whisper, my voice softer than it has ever been before. “Are you okay?”

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I want to take the rifle and shoot *myself* in the head. Of course she’s not okay.

“I’m so sorry.” Sliding my arms underneath her small body, I gently lift her up. “Oh God, I’m so sorry.”

My heart cracks at the sight of her bruised skin and wide eyes.

Cradling her body against my chest, I run back towards my car.



“She will be fine,” Dr. Ohlsen says.

Pacing back and forth across my living room, I rake my fingers through my hair. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He gives me a confident nod. “She doesn’t have a concussion, and there is no permanent damage to her throat. And the bruises on her skin will heal.”

“Are you sure?” I repeat.

Dr. Ohlsen is our family’s private doctor, and he is the best there is, so if he says that she’s fine, then she is fine. But I still need to hear him say it again.

“Yes, Alexander.” He places a comforting hand on my shoulder, stopping my pacing. “I promise. She needs rest, but she will be perfectly fine.”

I manage a nod.

While Daniel sees him out, I stride straight back up the stairs. My heart is still thrashing wildly in my chest, and the fear and panic of almost losing Olivia wreaks havoc inside me.

Carefully edging the door open, I peer into Olivia’s room. Just to make sure that she’s really here. That she’s really alive.

She has rolled over on her side, and her features are smoothened by sleep.

I grip the doorframe hard as a wave of relief crashes over me.

She is here.

She is sleeping.

She is alive.

The relief quickly gives way to a burning sense of regret. And cold slimy guilt that turns my stomach and makes me want to vomit.

What have I done?

God above, what have I done?

I ruined everything.

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OLIVIA

White walls stare back at me impassively as I lie in the small bed in my dorm room. I got out of Alexander's house the moment I woke up this morning. I know that the only reason I was able to get my dorm room back was because he pulled some strings, but I don't care. As long as I'm far away from him, I don't care.

Pain cuts through my heart like a rusty knife at just the thought of him. I bury my face in my lumpy pillow and scream, letting the fabric muffle the noise.

Fucking hell. I can't believe that I let him hurt me like this. That I let him into my heart. I knew that it was a bad idea. For fuck's sake, the man spent half of the semester bullying me. And still I let him in. Still I allowed myself to care about him.

I curl my hand into a fist and slam it into the mattress.

He somehow found out that I really was telling the truth, that I wasn't the one who had sold him out, and he has called and texted a million times since I left his house. I have ignored every single one.

This experience just highlighted the main issue in our messed-up relationship. I sacrificed for him. I forgave him for bullying me. For humiliating me. For forcing me to suck his cock in exchange for food when I was starving. But he will never make sacrifices for me. Our relationship would've always just been on his terms. Never mine. And the moment he gets bored or angry, he'll just toss me aside as if I'm nothing.

Rolling over in my bed, I drape my arm over my eyes and force out a long breath.

The bruises on my cheek and throat are nothing compared to the bruises on my heart. Fuck, I thought he actually cared about me there for a second. How could I have been so stupid?

A knock sounds at my door.

I frown, removing the arm from over my eyes, and glance across the room.

The knock comes again.

“Olivia.”

My heart stalls at the sound of his voice.

Curling my hand into a fist, I press it against my chest to stop the pang of pain that hits my heart.

“Olivia,” Alexander repeats. “Please, open the door.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“I just want to talk to you,” he continues. “Just open the door so that I can explain. Please, just let me explain.”

Explain what? Everything is already heartbreakingly clear to me. He never trusted me, because the moment something went wrong, he immediately turned on me. He never considered me a true partner. I was always just a plaything to him. Something to satisfy his need for power and control.

He knocks again, harder this time.

I pull the covers over my head as my heart aches painfully in my chest.

“Olivia.”

I grip the sheets hard.

He slams his hand against the door. “Open this door right now, or I swear to God, I will break it down!”

I suck in a gasp. And a small, pathetic part of me hopes that he actually will break the door down just to talk to me.

But then he speaks again, his voice sounding frayed and tired. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. But just... please open the door.”

I turn around so that I’m facing the wall instead. Curling up into a ball, I just lie there, staring at the white wallpaper while Alexander continues knocking on the door. I block it out.



He comes back in the evening again and does the same thing. And on Friday morning too. Telling me that he is sorry and asking me to open the door. I know that he could get the master keys from the landlady if he really wants to, but he doesn't. He doesn't follow through on his threat to break down the door either.

Instead, he just stands there on the other side. Saying my name. Giving me weak apologies. And asking me to open the door.

I ignore him every time.

By the time Friday afternoon rolls around, the bruises on my cheek and neck have darkened to deep purple. The ones on my cheek are ugly, but I fucking hate the handprints around my throat. They remind me of the terror I felt when I thought I really was going to die in that forest.

And it also ruins the good memories I have with Alexander.

He used to wrap his hand around my throat and kiss me senseless and fuck my brains right out of my head. But now, all I can feel is Thomas's hands around my neck as he strangles the life out of me. Though, I suppose that's a good thing. Because the thought of Alexander's possessive hand around my throat and greedy lips on my skin just makes my heart shatter over and over again.

My phone rings.

At first, I don't even glance at it because I expect it to be Alexander, calling for the billionth time. But then, because I'm apparently a masochist, I push myself up on my elbow and look at my screen just so that I can see his stupid name there.

It's not him.

The words *Huntingswell U: Administration's Office* shine on my screen.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I scramble to lift the phone and answer.

"Hello?" I say.

"Ms. Campbell," a woman says from the other end of the line. "I do apologize for calling you like this the day before New Year's Eve, but I'm afraid we need you to come to the administration's office. As you know, there was a slight mix-up with your scholarship earlier this week."

I almost snort. Mix-up, my ass. More like Asshole Number One forced the university to withdraw the scholarship and then changed his mind.

"We have processed the scholarship offer once again," she continues. "So now we just need you to come in and sign it. Again, I do apologize for

the trouble.”

“No worries,” I manage to press out, since it really isn’t her fault that Alexander was being an ass. “When should I come up?”

“Right away, if you’re able.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

After ending the call, I release a long exhale and rake a hand through my dirty and messy hair. I glance down at my body. Damn. I really need a shower.

Blowing out another sigh, I get out of bed for the first time in two days and head towards the shower.

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ALEXANDER

My heart skips a beat as I see her round the corner up ahead. It takes every ounce of my rather considerable self-control to remain where I am, standing in the shadows so that she can't see me. I flick scrutinizing eyes up and down her body, checking for signs of pain.

She's walking like she always does. With her spine straight and her head held high. It makes a pang of longing hit me straight in the chest. It's immediately followed by regret. I can't believe that I allowed myself to destroy the best thing that has ever happened to me. And all because of my own insecurities.

Olivia flips up the collar of her coat and then stuffs her hands into her pockets as a cold winter wind whirls through the street, making the snow on the ground swirl up in small white clouds.

I wait until she's almost upon me before I step out of the shadows and out onto the street so that I'm directly in her way.

Her gaze snaps straight to me, and my heart twists at the rage in her eyes.

"No," she growls, the word more of a command than a protest. "I don't want to talk to you. I have to get to the administration's office."

Holding her gaze, I remain firmly in her way. "No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. Because some fucking asshole decided to have my scholarship revoked before he figured out that I was telling the truth all along. So now I need to go up there and sign the papers again so that I can actually continue my education here."

"No, you don't."

She opens her mouth to no doubt spit out another angry retort, but no words make it out. I can almost hear the gears turning in her head.

Then realization dawns in her eyes.

“You got them to call me. To lure me out here.”

It’s more of an accusation than a question, but I answer anyway. “Yes.”

Her hands shoot up and she gives my chest a hard shove. “You are unfucking-believable!”

I wrap my hands around her wrists, trapping them close to my chest. She tries to yank them back, but her strength is no match for mine, so she instead settles for a withering glare.

“I needed to talk to you.” I shoot her a pointed look. “But you were making that very difficult, and I am not a patient man.”

“So you decided to trick me instead?”

“Yes. Now, come with me. I have something to show you.”

She yanks futilely against my grip on her wrists again. “I’m not going anywhere with you, you fucking bastard!”

Fire burns through me, and I suddenly can’t decide whether I want to crush my lips against her insolent mouth and kiss her breathless or if I want to bend her over a table and spank the insolence out of her.

“You can either walk to our destination willingly,” I grind out, my voice dark. “Or I swear to every god in every religion, I will handcuff you and carry you there thrown over my shoulder. Your choice.”

“Fucking hell,” she growls. Blowing out an annoyed breath, she shakes her head. “Fine. I’ll walk there.”

“Good girl.”

I don’t miss the way her eyes shutter briefly. But she smothers it quickly and instead slams a mask of cool fury onto her features instead.

We walk down along the snowy streets in silence. People glance at us as we pass, but no one dares to say anything.

Thanks to my father’s efforts, the press has already released several articles, correcting their *mistake* and apologizing profusely for believing the story of a spurned woman who was clearly out for revenge. Half of that is true, anyway, so everyone seems to have accepted it. But people still don’t really know how to act around me.

Or maybe they’re staring at the dark purple bruises on Olivia’s cheek. I’m not sure. But I cut lethal stares at the people whose eyes linger a bit too long, and they immediately snap their gazes away.

Once we reach a beautiful house made of white marble, I trail to a halt. Olivia stops too. Crossing her arms over her chest, she raises her eyebrows expectantly while annoyance still flickers across her beautiful features.

“Well?” she demands.

“This is it.” I nod towards the building. “This house.”

“What about it?”

“I bought it for you.”

Shock pulses in her eyes. “You what?”

“I bought it for you,” I repeat. “I don’t want you to be forced to live in that crappy dorm room. But I know that you might not want to live with me either, so I bought you this. Just for you. No strings attached. I swear.”

Incredulity floods her face. It’s immediately followed by rage. Burning, furious rage.

“When are you going to get it through your thick fucking skull?” she screams at me while stabbing a hand towards the house. “I don’t want your fucking money!”

Desperation washes over me. I don’t know how to handle this. How to handle her. I’ve never met anyone who didn’t want something from me. Who didn’t want my money and my gifts and my favors. And it stuns me to finally realize, without one shred of doubt, that Olivia has never wanted to be with me because of my wealth and influence.

I gave her protection from Thomas and she gave me an hour of her life every day. An equal trade. No hidden agenda. No trying to curry favor with me. No trying to use me beyond what we both agreed from the very beginning.

And when her feelings changed, and she was actually enjoying my company, it was because she truly did. She truly did like spending time with me. And I threw it all away in one single moment of insecurity.

“Then what do you want?” I blurt out, because I don’t know what to do anymore. And no matter what she tells me that she wants, I will do it. I will give her anything. I just want her back. I *need* her back.

“I want you to go to hell!” she screams at me. Dragging in a deep breath, she composes herself again and then shakes her head. “Go to hell, Alexander.”

“Olivia.” I reach towards her arm to stop her from turning away. “Please, I—”

“Don’t fucking touch me!”

Letting my hand drop back down by my side, I just look back at her, feeling more desperate than I have ever felt in my entire life. "I'm so sorry."

"I told you that I was innocent, that I didn't sell you out, and you didn't believe me. You didn't trust me."

"I know, I—"

"And instead, you told Thomas fucking George that he could do whatever he wanted with me, even though you knew that he wanted to kill me."

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it! I was almost murdered, for fuck's sake!"

Pain spears through my chest as if someone has rammed a blade into it. Because every word she says is true.

People up and down the street have stopped to stare at us now. Lots of people. But I don't care. Because all I can see is the hurt that pulses from Olivia's normally so glittering brown eyes.

"No matter how many houses you buy, and no matter how many times you tell me that you're sorry, it doesn't change the simple fact that you've never trusted me. Not completely." That terrible hurt lingers in her eyes as she shakes her head at me. "And you never will. You can throw money at me, because it means nothing to you, but you would never sacrifice something that matters. Not for me. Because of how easily you discarded me and threw me to the fucking wolves, I now know what I should have known all along. I was always just a *plaything* to you."

Her voice cracks on that word, and terrible pain floods her eyes. It's one of the worst things I have ever seen. And it makes me want to rip my heart out and hand it to her so that she can use it to mend her own.

Because she's wrong.

By God, she has never been more wrong in her entire life.

She is not my plaything.

She is my *world*.

So I do something that I have never done before. Something that I have never even contemplated doing before I met this absolutely brilliant woman who made me feel alive for the first time in my entire life.

I get down on my knees and beg.

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OLIVIA

My mouth drops open, and shock pulses through my entire soul, as Alexander Huntington drops to his knees before my feet. All along the street, people are gasping and taking pictures. But Alexander only has eyes for me.

“I’m sorry, Olivia,” he says, looking up at me with pleading eyes while he spreads his arms wide. “Please, I’m begging you. Just hear me out.”

Stunned surprise still rings inside my skull, so I only manage a nod.

“I know I screwed up. Badly. And I have no excuses. No explanation other than my own insecurities.” His pale blue eyes are the most vulnerable I have ever seen as he holds my gaze. “I’m so used to people trying to take advantage of me. All my life, everyone who has gotten close to me has done so because they want something from me. They want my power, my wealth, my influence. So that was my first reaction when I heard the news. My worst fears immediately surged to the surface, convincing me that you had only pretended to care about me because you too wanted something from me. Revenge.”

“How could you think that?”

“Because I was horrible to you. I bullied you. Harassed you. Humiliated you. God above, I made you suck my cock in exchange for food and then drove away as if it meant nothing. After all of that, how could you possibly come to care about me?”

“That was back in September! Did these past few months mean nothing to you?”

“They meant *everything*.” The sheer force in his voice makes me jerk back slightly. He lets his arms drop down by his sides. Sitting back on his

heels, he tilts his head up towards the gray sky above, and blows out a long sigh. "But then my own insecurities came back to haunt me." He tips his head back down again and meets my gaze. "I should have trusted you when you told me that you were innocent. Even if there was no proof, I should have trusted you."

"Yes, you should."

"If you want me to spend the rest of my life on my knees, begging you for forgiveness, then that is what I will do. And if you never want to see me again, then I will respect that. But I cannot let you leave here thinking that you were just a plaything to me."

The sheer desperation in his voice makes my heart wrench painfully. And the way he's looking at me... I can tell that he means every word he says. I try to suck in a breath, but my lungs no longer seem to work properly.

"Every time you walk through the door, it feels as though someone has sucked all the air out of the room." His eyes burn through me, searing into my very soul, as he throws his arms out in desperation. "I cannot think properly when you are near me! That's how much your mere presence affects me."

I draw in a shuddering breath, my heart pounding erratically against my ribs.

"I love you." He looks up at me with such sheer open vulnerability that my chest cracks wide open. "I love you so much that it terrifies me."

"I..." I don't know how to finish the sentence. I don't even know how to breathe right now.

"I used to just go through life on autopilot. No highs. No lows. I lived, but I was never alive. Until I met you."

"Alexander..." Yet again, I don't know what to say.

"I will never be able to go back to the way my life was before I met you, and the hole you will leave in my soul if you walk away will be the most painful thing I have ever experienced. But I will endure it, if that is what you choose." His eyes burn into mine. "But never, ever, doubt that my feelings for you are real. I will kneel for you, crawl for you, grovel for you, every day for the rest of my life if that is what you want. Because I love you, Olivia."

The last desperate defensive walls that I had tried to build around my aching heart shatter like glass before a sledgehammer.

Grabbing the collar of his jacket, I yank him to his feet and crush my lips against his. He wraps his arms around me, holding me tightly, as he answers the kiss with a desperation and relief that takes my breath away. His body molds perfectly into mine, as if it were made just for me.

He slides his fingers through my hair and then cups my cheeks while he continues to kiss me as if his life depends on it.

I can feel the wet coldness against my shins from where his pant legs got completely soaked through by the snow when he knelt for me.

Alexander Huntington *knelt* for me.

Begged for me.

In front of all these people.

The untouchable king of this university, of this entire city, who swore that he would never kneel and beg for anything. He got down on his knees for one thing. Me.

I thought he would never sacrifice for me. Thought he would never do anything that cost him even a shred of discomfort. But now half of this street has footage of him groveling before my feet. And he doesn't care.

My heart soars in my chest.

He was willing to endure that humiliation not for the promise of my forgiveness. But simply so that I would know that I was never just a plaything to him. He was willing to let me walk away forever, if I wanted to, even after he publicly begged for my forgiveness.

And if that doesn't prove that I was wrong, nothing ever will.

Alexander Huntington IV loves me.

And God help me, but I think I love him too.

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ALEXANDER

Laughter and music and chatter fill the whole building. Women in glittering dresses and men in expensive suits jump and dance on the dancefloor while others drink and make out in the booths and sofas along the walls. Light shines from a whole bunch of spotlights, refracting against the chandelier in the high ceiling and making thousands of glittering shapes move through the room. But nothing is as brilliant, as splendid, as her.

My breath hitches every time I look at her.

Olivia Campbell.

A dark smile spreads across my lips as I rake my gaze over her body. Mine. Olivia Campbell is all mine.

I'm just reaching down to pick up the glasses of sparkling wine that my brilliant little scholarship student requested when movement draws my eyes. A man in an orange bowtie dances wildly with his back to Olivia, and he jumps back, knocking into her.

Rage roars through me.

Slamming the glasses back on the table, I stalk through the crowd of dancing people with my murderous gaze set on the drunk man. He whirls around right as I reach them.

"Oh, I'm..." he begins, addressing Olivia. Then his gaze snaps to me, and his eyes widen. "Mr. Huntington. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"What's your name?" I demand.

His eyes dart from side to side. Licking his lips, he swallows. "Uhm, John Smith."

Before I can call him on the obvious lie, he spins around and practically sprints off the dancefloor while calling, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

I take a step towards him, intending to hunt him down, but before I can get any farther, Olivia places a hand on my arm.

"No expelling people tonight," she says, both amusement and exasperation dancing in her glittering eyes. "It is New Year's Eve, after all."

"He touched you. And no one touches you."

Her hand drifts up to her neck, and she absentmindedly brushes her fingers over the dark purple handprints that still circle her throat like a brutal necklace. My heart aches at the sight.

But before I can say anything, she lets her hand drop back down and instead entwines her fingers with mine. "Come with me."

She leads us through the packed room full of drunk and dancing students. Music blares from the speakers, echoing against the walls loudly enough to make the windows vibrate. I scan the crowd as we move through the building, but Thomas George is of course nowhere to be seen. Luckily for him.

I slide my gaze back to Olivia as we reach the very room that we met in the first time. The time when I told her to kneel and lick my shoes, and she refused, so I ripped off her shirt and made her walk back through campus naked. Anger flares up inside me at the memory. How could I have let anyone else see her naked like that? That privilege is reserved for me and me alone.

The loud music dies down to a dull thumping of bass as Olivia pulls me into the room and shuts the door behind us. The room looks exactly like it always does. With dark wooden walls and expensive furniture made of the same material.

"I want you to fuck me."

I blink in surprise as I turn to face Olivia. She has moved so that she is standing by the wall a short distance from the door, and there is a determined set to her features as she looks at me.

"You know that I will never say no to that," I reply as I close the distance between us while my eyes search her face. "But what's this about?"

Wrapping her slender fingers around my wrist, she moves my hand up and then places it around her throat. Right above where those awful bruises are.

“I want you to erase the memories of his hands around my throat.” Her gaze is steady as she looks at me. “I want you to replace them with memories of you. Of us.”

My heart fractures a little, and my eyes soften as I give her an understanding nod. “Of course, love.” Leaning down, I claim her mouth in a possessive kiss. “When I’m done with you, you will never remember the feel of anyone else’s hands on you. Only mine.”

With my hand still around her throat, I pin her to the wall while I use my other to slide her black and gold-glittering dress up her legs. A shiver courses through her body as I trace my fingers over the inside of her thighs.

“Drop your panties, love,” I order.

While keeping her eyes locked on me, she slips her hands underneath the black lace fabric of her panties and pushes them down her legs until they flutter down around her ankles. A mischievous smile plays over her lips as she steps out of them.

Then she bites her lip.

Dark desire ripples through my whole body. Lurching forward, I suck that bottom lip of hers into my mouth, freeing it from her teeth, and then claim the inside of her mouth with possessive strokes of my tongue.

“Sneaky,” I growl.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she breathes against my lips, amusement clear in her voice.

I brush my knuckles against her now bare pussy.

She sucks in a breath.

God, she’s already wet.

“Have you learned nothing these past few months?” I say as I draw back enough to meet her gaze. “When we play this game, *I* always win.”

She arches a teasing eyebrow. “Do you now?”

I draw my thumb around her clit.

Another sharp breath escapes her throat.

I let out a dark chuckle. “Yes, I do.”

Still pinning her to the wall, I circle her clit with my thumb for another minute before brushing my fingers over her entrance. A moan slips from her lips. I continue rubbing her clit and teasing her entrance with my fingers. She lets out a whimper.

“Do you want me inside you, love?”

“Yes,” she gasps out.

“Say please.”

“Please.”

“Please what?”

“Please, I want you inside me.”

I steal another kiss from her lips before I draw back again and smirk at her. “Then take out my cock.”

My fingers continue torturing her while she works desperately to unzip my pants and free my cock from my boxers. I push a finger one inch into her pussy.

Her fingers fumble and she throws her head back against the wall as her eyes flutter and a shudder racks her frame.

“Trouble?” I tease.

While tracing my thumb around her clit in the way I know she loves, I smirk back at her as she tries to keep another pleasant shiver at bay.

“Bastard,” she murmurs.

I chuckle.

Drawing in a bracing breath, she composes herself and renews her efforts to get my cock out. A sigh of relief escapes her throat as my hard length springs free.

“Good girl.”

Her eyes shutter.

Satisfaction pulses through me at the sight. Removing my hand from her soaking wet pussy, I instead grab her thigh and lift her leg up. She wraps it around my hip while her chest heaves in anticipation. My other hand remains around her throat.

After drinking in the sight of her gorgeous face and the lust that swirls in those brilliant eyes of hers, I guide my cock towards her entrance and run it through her wetness, torturing her one last time before I shove it inside her.

A moan rips from her throat as I settle deep inside her.

Pleasure washes through my whole body at the feeling of her perfect pussy wrapped around my cock. It’s as if she was made for me.

I draw out slowly before pushing in again.

Another soft groan drips from her lips.

I repeat the slow strokes a few more times before starting up a faster pace. These past months, I’ve realized that my little perfect 4.0 GPA student likes it rough.

Her leg slips slightly down from my waist as I thrust into her, drawing another shudder from her body, so I wrap my hand around her thigh, helping her hold it up. Then I move it a bit higher, giving me even better access, and my next thrust goes even deeper.

She gasps up into the ceiling.

Lust pulses in her eyes as she tips her head back down again and meets my gaze. "Choke me."

I tighten my fingers around her throat.

"Harder," she demands.

I obey. Because whatever Olivia asks for, I will give her. Always.

My grip tightens until I'm cutting off her air completely.

Pleasure flashes across her face as I follow it up by increasing my pace, ramming into her with savage strength. She rests the back of her head against the wall, but her eyes remain firmly locked on mine. As if she is burning the image of me choking her into her mind.

I fuck her hard, feeling her body move against mine as she slips closer and closer to an orgasm.

"Do you want me to make you come?" I ask.

She nods desperately.

"Beg me for it."

I relax the grip on her throat. She sucks in deep breaths as air floods her starved lungs again. Moans escape her mouth between the shuddering breaths as I continue thrusting into her.

"I said, beg," I growl.

"Please," she gasps out. "Please, I'm begging you."

I arch an expectant eyebrow.

"Please, sir," she amends, her voice laced with desperate need. "Please, sir, I'm begging you to let me come."

Instead of answering, I close my hand around her throat again. Her body jerks back and forth against the wall as I drive my cock in and out of her sweet pussy. She opens her mouth, to beg or moan or whimper, but no sound makes it out because I have once again cut off her airways.

This is the only way she will ever be choked again.

This is the only way she ever *should have* been choked.

Not by Thomas George and his brutal hands.

By me. Only by me as I drive her to an earth-shattering orgasm while she willingly places her life in my hands. Just like I'm placing my heart in

hers.

Her eyes shutter and her body trembles slightly in the way that tells me that she's about to fall off the cliff and into that sweet release.

"When I allow you to breathe again, you will come for me," I order. "Understood?"

Her head bobs in jerky nods.

I relax my fingers.

Pleasure explodes behind her eyes as she sucks in a deep breath that turns into a garbled moan halfway through.

Her pussy tightens around my cock.

Keeping my hand around her throat without squeezing, I hold her upright as her limbs shake with the force of the orgasm. I continue pounding into her, riding the orgasm with her, until I can feel the mounting tension inside me reach unbearable levels.

Pleasure crackles through my veins as release crashes over me.

I grip her thigh hard and come inside her while she's still whimpering from her violent orgasm.

And I sear that image into my mind.

Mine.

This perfect woman is mine.

Once her limbs have stopped trembling and she has managed to catch her breath again, I gently pull out and then guide her foot back to the ground. After making sure that she's not about to topple over, I take my hand off her neck.

She tilts her head back, resting it against the dark wooden wall, as she closes her eyes and lifts her hand to her neck. I watch as she traces soft fingers over her bruised skin, as if she is memorizing the feel of my hand there.

I raise my own hand and brush my fingers over her cheek, pushing aside a blonde curl and hooking it behind her ear. "Has the memory been erased? Has it been replaced by a better one?"

"I'm not sure."

Surprise flashes through me. Then she cracks open an eye, and I can see the mischief glittering in that brown depth. Straightening, she lifts her head from the wall and meets my gaze fully while a knowing smile plays over her lips.

“Maybe we should do that a few more times.” Her eyes sparkle in the golden light. “Just to be sure.”

Wrapping my hand around her throat again, I lean forward and kiss those wicked lips. “Whatever you want, love. Whatever you want.”



Starlight shines down on us from the darkened heavens as we stand on the snowy ground outside the building. All around us, people are chatting excitedly and laughing together. Some of them kiss. Others clink their glasses together. I turn and look down at the stunning woman beside me.

Olivia stands with her head tilted back, staring up at the sky above. And I swear I can see the silver starlight reflected in her eyes.

My heart does a backflip in my chest.

As I study every line of her beautiful features and every shimmer of light in her eyes, I can barely believe my luck. This woman, this absolutely incredible person, is mine.

She just waltzed into my life one day and refused to bow, and then made me feel what it was like to live. Really live. Everyone believes that I have power, but I have never met anyone as powerful as her. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that I would meet someone who would turn my world completely upside down like this.

Excited gasps ring out around us as the first fireworks shoot into the dark sky.

Red and golden light explode across the heavens in a rain of sparkles right before blue and purple glitter joins them as well.

The smile on Olivia's face as she watches them thaws the last remnants of that cold apathy in my chest.

She turns to me, her eyes now shimmering with the light of colorful fireworks, and a soft smile drifts across her lips. “I just wanted you to know...”

Another wave of fireworks crackle in the sky above us, making the crowd cheer.

But her eyes remain locked on mine as she says, “That I love you too.”

My chest tightens, and my heart suddenly feels too big for my ribcage.

Sliding my fingers through her soft curls, I cup her cheeks and kiss her with enough passion to set the world ablaze.

The large metal bell atop the university's main tower starts clanking, ringing in the new year.

Olivia locks her hands around the back of my neck, holding me tightly to her as she answers the kiss with the same desperation and excitement that sparkles in my own chest.

Olivia Campbell.

My Olivia.

The one person who makes me feel alive.

And I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with her.

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EPILOGUE

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ONE YEAR LATER

I raise my eyebrows in surprise as someone catcalls behind me. Turning around, I find Benedict and Alexander Huntington III walking up to us. The rest of the people chatting and drinking on the rooftop terrace hurries out of the way as the family who owns this entire city moves across the floor.

“Damn, Olivia,” Benedict says as he and his father reach us. “You’re looking hot.”

Alexander drapes his arm around my back and places a possessive hand on my hip. “Careful now, *Ben*.”

“Oh you asshole. You know I hate it when you call me that!”

“Behave,” their father orders while Alexander smirks at his brother.

After cutting his sons a disapproving look, Mr. Huntington leans forward and kisses my cheek. “You do look lovely, though, Olivia.”

Warmth spreads through my chest, and a smile lifts my lips. It took a few months for him to realize that I’m really not after Alexander’s money or status. And once he was confident of that, his behavior towards me changed drastically. I would even go so far as to say that he might actually like me. When I came over for dinner at their mansion the other week, I even managed to make him laugh. That seemed to shock him just as much as his sons.

“Thank you,” I say. “Though I can’t take credit for the dress. That’s all Alexander.”

My handsome devil in his black suit grins like a satisfied cat.

Even though I have made it clear that I’m not after his money, Alexander still insists on trying to spoil me rotten. I have gotten better at

accepting his generosity, though. It has taken a while, because I have spent my entire life never getting anything that I haven't earned. But the more time I spend with Alexander, the more I realize that I don't have to do everything on my own all the time. It is actually okay to let someone who loves you take care of you too.

"Well, Four does have great taste in dresses," Benedict says, a teasing grin on his face. Shifting his gaze to his brother, he wiggles his eyebrows. "Maybe one of these days we'll even get to see you wear one."

Alexander snorts and rolls his eyes. Then a scheming glint creeps into his gaze as he raises his eyebrows. "How's Mira?"

Benedict grimaces. "Still mad at me."

"And Rebecca?"

"Also mad."

"And Freya?"

"Alright, alright, I get the point." He waves his hands in front of his face. "I'm sorry for the dress comment, dear brother." Blinking rapidly, he gives Alexander the best puppy eyes I've ever seen. "Please forgive me?"

"Well, I am a generous God."

Benedict snorts.

With a wicked smirk on his lips, Alexander nods to a spot behind his brother. "Which is why I will also tell you that Rebecca is on her way over here right now."

"Shit." Benedict casts a panicked look over his shoulder. "I'll see you later." While hurrying away in the other direction, he meets Alexander's gaze and winks. "Good luck."

I look between them, but Alexander only shakes his head in exasperation.

"Come on," he says, slipping his hand into mine and pulling me towards the balcony. Before we move off, he nods to his father. "Dad."

He gives him a very serious nod back. "Son."

Even after an entire year of us officially dating, I still can't figure this family out sometimes.

A beautiful starlit night greets us as we step out onto the balcony. Tiny lights cover the glass railing, casting the whole space in an incredible silver glow and making it look like an extension of the night sky. But despite the beautiful surroundings, the entire balcony is suspiciously empty.

I glance up at Alexander as he moves us to the edge where the silver lights shine the brightest. His pale blue eyes that I used to think looked like lethal shards of ice now remind me more of the stars themselves.

Cool December air fills my lungs as I draw in a deep breath. Below the balcony, the city of Huntingswell stretches out around us like a glittering ocean. I flick my gaze between it and the breathtakingly beautiful man before me.

The fireworks are not supposed to start for another half hour, when the bells will ring in the new year, so I'm not sure what we're doing out here already.

I start slightly at the way Alexander is looking at me. As if he is memorizing every line of my face and every flicker of emotion in my eyes.

"God," he says in what sounds more like a sigh. "Every time I look at you, you still take my breath away."

A blush warms my cheeks. Glancing down, I tuck a loose curl behind my ear while my heart flutters in my chest.

He draws his fingers under my chin, tipping my head back up so that I meet his gaze again.

"I never thought someone could change my life in the way you have." His voice is serious and his eyes sear into my very soul. "And I fall more in love with you every single day."

"Alexander, I..."

"Which is why I have something to ask you."

My heart stops as Alexander slowly lowers himself to one knee. I think I might have gasped, but I can't be sure because my head is spinning as my world tilts on its axis.

Silver light glitter in Alexander's eyes as he looks up at me with such love that my breath hitches and my spine tingles.

"You came into my life and you changed everything. You brought light into an otherwise gray existence and taught me what it is like to truly live. I cannot think properly when you are near me and I can't breathe without you. You truly are the best thing that has ever happened to me." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small velvet box. "And I cannot imagine my life without you."

My heart thunders like wild horses in my chest.

He opens the box, revealing an absolutely breathtaking ring with a diamond that sparkles in the silver light around us.

I forget how to breathe as he takes my hand.

“Marry me, Olivia.”

“Yes!” Tears of joy well up in my eyes, and I have to blink them away as I nod furiously. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“Good.” He slides the beautiful ring onto my finger and then flashes me that devilish smile of his. “Because I really wasn’t taking no for an answer. And I’m not above blackmail, as you well know.”

A laugh bubbles from my chest and I shake my head at him while grinning from ear to ear.

He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses the back of it.

Lightning erupts through my whole soul, and I can’t stop another giddy laugh from escaping my throat.

Reaching out with my other hand, I brush my fingers over his forehead and down his cheek.

“Look at that.” A mischievous smile spreads across my mouth and I flash him a knowing look. “You’re on your knees again.”

He chuckles. Rising to his feet, he cups my cheeks. “Only for you.”

Sparkles skitter across my skin as he steals a possessive kiss from my lips. Then he whispers his next words against my mouth in a way that takes my breath away.

“Always for you, love.”

BONUS SCENE

Do you want to read that **spicy scene** mentioned in chapter 27 where Alexander punishes Olivia for smiling too much at another guy by handcuffing her to the stairs and edging her until her mind almost shatters? Then download this exclusive bonus scene: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/vmxbov17ep>



And now, there is another dark bully romance by Raven Wood waiting for you. Get it here: books2read.com/alluringdarkness

Good girl.

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