



# *Monster*

FRANCETTE PHAL

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## Chapter One

It was on occasions like these that Eden realized how very little she mattered to her husband. He never failed to remind her of her status in their marriage, whether it was with his remarks, that have only grown nastier over the years, or the reproachful looks, that seemed to carve across her flesh like a whip. Like now for instance, she could feel that piercing stare from across the room, the distinct bite of his scorn putting her instantly on alert. She hadn't really done anything in the last few minutes to warrant the reaction, but then again, Dominic Armstrong didn't need much to set him off these days. She sighed resignedly, daring to look away fully knowing that he would discipline her for this unknown reason later. Eden grabbed a champagne flute from the tray of a passing waiter before escaping to the veranda for some much needed air. They were up in the Grafton Highlands, at another dull event that he'd dragged her to, because he wanted to flaunt her to his equally wealthy friends.

He'd made their roles distinctively clear from the beginning, and she'd gone along with it because she'd needed the protection of his name and the money that went along with it. She had been one eviction notice away from homelessness, and he'd done it to, "keep her from ruining his younger brother's life," as he'd put it. Lucas Armstrong had been a good customer of Eden's; coming to Crazy Pussy for a good year before he'd proposed marriage. But then his big, bad brother, the head of the Armstrong family, had gotten wind of his errant brother's ridiculous idea and had marched in to shut the whole thing down. Once he'd seen to bully his brother back to college where he belonged, threatening his inheritance if he refused to cooperate, Dominic had zeroed in on Eden. He'd stalked the club for a good

month after that, always sitting in that wingback chair in the front row, his predatory gaze watching her every night she'd performed. He'd frightened her to the core, big and boorish as he'd been, waiting patiently, artfully manipulating every aspect of Eden's life until she'd come to him.

Since he'd wanted her badly enough, he'd grudgingly agreed to her one condition: marriage. Mistresses were expendable, wives were a little harder to dispose of, and Eden had been armed with at least that little knowledge. He'd given her a day before finally coming to her with his own terms. It'd been overwhelming; the legalese of the documents he'd presented with his attorney had all been a jumble to her. Logic had warned her not to sign the papers before having a lawyer look them over, but she'd been blinded by the seven-carat diamond ring he'd presented her with. Their wedding had been a quiet affair with little frill, and the honeymoon had been on a private island on the Mediterranean Sea. Twenty-three to his thirty-five, Dominic Armstrong, media mogul and one of Fortune 500's top five wealthiest people, had paid quite handsomely to possess her, to own every inch of her, a fact he rarely forgot to remind her. He was the bread winner, the Alpha dog with a type A personality, and Eden was tasked to do simply two things: be the arm candy in public and a whore in bed.

He made sure he stirred a response from her each and every time he fucked her, and while he tended to be quite cruel when the mood stuck him, he received a sick fascination from hearing her beg for more. But Eden never protested, never complained in the face of his oftentimes sadistic streaks. She was the dutiful, obedient wife who lived a lavishly luxurious life, and in exchange, he could damn well treat her however he wanted. In comparison to the squalor she'd grown up in and the poverty she and her single mother had faced, Eden would say that her marriage to Dominic was a small price to pay.

She downed the champagne in one go and set the flute on the balustrade. She peered down just below into the nothingness and silently mused whether the darkness would catch her if she plummeted. Giving into a sudden bout of inanity, Eden slipped out of the four inch heels that had cost a small fortune and lifted herself up on the ledge. She bit her bottom lip to keep her smile at bay as she spread out her arms and closed her eyes. Fear was not an emotion she felt here, it was simply the darkness around her and the summer breeze caressing her skin. Exhilaration swept through her, the wind making her feel like she was flying. In that moment she was free. Freedom enveloped her on all sides and took her away from everything. Up here she was nothing and everything all at once. She opened her eyes and looked down into the abyss, facing her mortality. Laughter bubbled up from the pits of her stomach and escaped on the wind.

“Don’t jump.” The unexpected sound of that voice shattered through Eden’s introspection, startling her completely. She wavered, her body teetering towards the precipice and her heart racing, now for a completely different reason as real fear poured like ice water into her veins. She was going to fall, she thought inanely, but then... she wasn’t. Instead, she was forcefully yanked backwards by an unyielding manacle of flesh around her waist. Eden landed unceremoniously on top of her rescuer in complete disarray, stunned at what had almost been her death.

“I do sincerely hope this isn’t what it looks like, Eden?”

Her senses returned just then, and her husband’s drawl had Eden closing her own eyes for a brief second, attempting to regroup herself before she had to face him. She came to her feet unsteadily, unconsciously leaning on the guy who’d not only caused this mess, but had also rescued her from impending death. When she found her footing, Eden turned to him with a tentative smile before meeting her husband’s gaze. There was

nothing on Dominic's classically handsome features that indicated his fury; he looked unperturbed, bored even with this scene, but Eden knew the truth. She'd become a veteran in reading his moods and nothing foretold it more than those cold green eyes.

"Well, I'm not sure what it looks like to you, sweetheart, but this man just saved my life."

"Did he?" he retorted, sizing up the other man and quickly dismissing him as someone of no consequence. "And what exactly was it that he saved you from, pet?"

Caught once more beneath that cold green stare, Eden attempted another tactic knowing that she was only making it worse for herself. "I was being silly," she said with a small laugh, raking a hand through her hair to act every bit the airhead he believed her to be. "I was sitting on the ledge, not realizing how much I've had to drink. This man..." She stopped suddenly looking at the man with the blue eyes. "I'm sorry...I didn't catch your name."

"Matt."

"Matt came along and pulled me down just before I tipped over."

"Well then, we should commend Bruce on hiring such agile employees." He smoothly took off his dinner jacket and swept it over Eden's shoulders. "And you, dear wife," he tugged on the lapels of the jacket to bring her closer to him, "need to be a lot more careful." The kiss was not only meant to exhibit ownership, but it was precursor to the punishment that was to come. "Now, let's go home." When he made to lead them away, Eden set a gentle hand on his chest to halt his progress.

"What about the man who rescued the woman you love?" Dominic looked down at her and Eden knew she'd pushed too far, but she wanted him to acknowledge the man—Matt—for what he'd done. Eden wanted to



watch her husband lower himself for a moment to the man he'd dismissed as nothing more than something he found under his shoe.

"Very well." He disengaged himself from her and slipped a hand inside his pocket. "What's the going rate for rescuing damsels these days? Two... three hundred?"

"A thousand dollars should do it, I think," Eden said with a touch of spite, meeting those blue eyes that peered at her curiously.

"A thousand dollars," Dominic chuckled drily, "I seem to recall paying a lot more for you, my sweet."

Eden blanched and her heart slammed painfully against her breastbone at the backhanded comment. He was so much better at playing this game of malice than she was. To think that she'd set out to humiliate him just now, but he'd volleyed so effortlessly, hitting her exactly where he knew it would hurt the most. She felt so sick all of sudden, and the air outside wasn't enough to ease the tightening in her chest.

"I'm good," she heard Matt say, "I was just doing my job, sir."

"Then we'll let you get back to it." He turned away from Matt, a sure dismissal as any, before setting a hand at the small of Eden's back, leading her away.

\* \* \*

He was brutal, completely without mercy as he took her. He burrowed his hands in her hair, cruelly yanking her head back to meet his hard stare.

"You're such a fucking whore." It was his favorite thing to call her when they were in bed. Debasing her this way, making her remember exactly who and what she was, fulfilled his complete dominance over her. The diamond studded collar he'd purchased for her adorned her beautiful caramel neck, the leather chain attached to it was wound tightly around his other hand so that his every thrust coincided with the tugging of the chain. "I own you,

Eden,” he whispered harshly, breathlessly along her ear. “Every inch of you belongs to me and I will brand my name on your delectable ass, my pet, so that you never forget it.” His thrusts grew erratic as he brutally rammed into her, and then, with a smack on her ass, he was finished.

When he eased out of her and rolled off the bed, Eden did not utter a word and remained completely still, trying to become one with the mattress he’d just viciously fucked her on. She even tried to keep her breathing minimal and simply listened to his movements around the bedroom. He would go to the bathroom first and rinse off his brutality like it was a coat of dirt that could be washed off with soap and water. Then he would return to the room, twenty or so minutes later, freshly clean and head downstairs to his home office where he would remain locked away for the duration of the morning. Eden anticipated that moment, waited patiently for it, and when she heard the hushed click of the door closing behind him, she finally allowed her body to unfurl from its fetal position.

Knowing she had the next few hours all to herself, Eden sat on the edge of the large sleigh bed, her smooth caramel legs dangling from the edge, her feet barely touching the cream carpet. She’d always been short, standing no taller than the woman who’d given her birth. A sad smile touched Eden’s lips as she thought about her mother. She wouldn’t be happy if she knew this was how Eden had ended up.

A rich man’s blow up doll.

Helen Mercer had always wanted more for her daughter, believing, as all ’mothers do, that her child was special and could reach the stars if she wanted. And while she was alive, Eden had bought into her mother’s dream, had believed that her voice could change their lives, could bring them out of the poverty that was all around them. But a senseless tragedy neither one could’ve predicted stole not only Eden’s mother, but her voice

as well. It'd been a drive-by shooting, and in the ghetto of South Rochester, an everyday occurrence. The stray bullets had ripped through her mother that summer evening while she'd been walking home from her night shift at the local burger joint on Third Street. She'd died before the ambulance was called. Eden turned eighteen the following day. She'd stopped celebrating her birthday the day her mother died. After that, it'd been a series of horrible misfortunes brought on by too much debt and not enough money to pay them off. Graduating high school had not been without its efforts, and she'd gone through high school long enough to receive her hard earned diploma. She'd owed her mother at least that, a small honor that would, at the very least, overshadow the shameful way she was going to make money. Learning the finer points of stripping at the Crazy Pussy downtown had been a real low point.

College was put on the backburner for a part time job at Lou's as a waitress in the morning and her full time gig at the Crazy Pussy at night. The money had been good for a while, but not enough to cover the substantial debts that her mother had kept hidden from her. Life had seemed pretty bleak until the moment Lucas came stumbling into the strip club. Lucas had been an obnoxious, entitled, spoiled asshole with too much time on his hands and an entire inheritance he'd seemed determined to unload at the club. He'd treated the dancers like meat, harassed the waitresses, and made the bartender's life hell, but he'd always been welcomed because he'd been extremely generous with his money. Eden had not only seen the scope of his generosity with the way he showered the stage with cash when she danced, but he'd made sure to lavish her with extra gifts. Lucas had wanted her but Eden hadn't taken his pursuit seriously. He'd been incoherently drunk for most of the time he'd spoken to her anyway. But then with Lucas came Dominic. Imperious, indomitable and ruthless, Dominic Armstrong

had ridden roughshod through her life. The moment she'd seen him, Eden had known things would never be the same for her. There had been her unimaginable attraction to him, tall, dark and handsome as he'd been, every single female inch of her had prickled with awareness of him. Lucas's half-brother had looked nothing like his inebriated, slovenly sibling.

Dominic had come with an offer, which Eden has capriciously countered with one of her own. She'd done it simply to knock him off his high horse because she knew people like him would never marry below their station. He'd been so bold, so sure that she would jump on the opportunity to become his mistress that she'd wanted to see how far he was willing to go to have her. Apparently he'd been willing to go quite far. Eden had never expected him to agree to the marriage proposal, but then she quickly saw the advantages it would bring her when he offered her entry to his world. He flaunted his money and she'd been greedy enough to jump on the opportunity. Accidental gold-digger. She laughed humorlessly; she'd done the one thing her mother had cautioned her against doing. Stripping had been one thing, but Eden had sold her soul for wealth and the horrible part was that it hadn't even been for her voice.

Eden came to her feet wincing when a slight bit of pain shot between her legs. The shower felt great, but the soreness would remain for a few days, along with the bruises that marred her skin.

She wiped the condensation from the bathroom mirror and found a pair of honey gold eyes staring back at her from a round, somewhat attractive face. She wasn't ugly honestly, although she could say that her mouth was a little too wide and her eyes a little too sunken, but those were features she'd inherited from an unknown father. Her mother hadn't spoken much of the man who'd been in her life for only period of time, but she did tell Eden that she'd inherited the "music" from him. He'd been a jazz musician from

what she knew, and they'd shared a supernova romance that had come and gone, leaving Eden as a result.

Her mother had been in love with him, but he'd already devoted his life to music. And so he'd gone, and she'd been left to raise Eden by herself—a white mother raising a biracial child in the heart of crime central. They'd had more than a few challenges to say the least. It was with her mother's eyes that Eden assessed herself further, grateful the bruises were not substantial this time. She could hide them well. She was petite but well proportioned, with breasts that were still perky and full, although she'd been on the smaller side when she'd been at Crazy Pussy. Her ritualistic morning jogs kept her fit, her stomach flat, arms and legs well-toned, and a cute little butt she thought to be her best feature. Dominic liked her hair long so every few weeks Eden paid a ridiculous amount of money to have a few pieces added to her wavy, shoulder length hair so that it nearly reached her butt when it was done. She'd gathered the mass of chestnut waves into a topknot for now. Eden stepped a little closer to the mirror, her fingers shooting up to her neck and sighed at the bruise forming from the collar. Dominic was bastard.

## Chapter Two

Exercising helped. Putting her body through its paces eased her troubles, helped her forget that she wasn't bruised and aching from Dominic's horrible mistreatment of her, that she wasn't some mindless blow up doll who catered to Dominic's every sick need. For an hour, Eden could pretend that she hadn't married prematurely, and that she was just a twenty-three-year-old woman doing normal twenty-three-year-old things. The pain melted into the sweat glistening off her skin, the burn was inconsequential, and all that mattered was finishing strong. Raising her hand, she tapped a finger on the treadmill to accelerate the speed. When the machine beeped and gradually slowed for her cool down, reality seeped back in. She headed upstairs to shower, grateful that she didn't run into Dominic. She didn't know where he was today—Eden had woken up and he'd been gone—but she really didn't care. The days were hers; he seldom bothered her when the sun was up. She was a lady of leisure, so she dressed, set her oversized, designer sunglasses on her face, and went about putting her husband's credit cards to work.

She returned later in the afternoon to Dominic promptly informing her that they were going to have guests, and she was to be well prepared to play hostess. It was while seated in front of her vanity, freshly showered and wearing a newly purchased royal blue satin robe that he came to her again. She felt his presence instantly and tried not to stiffen. In the attempt to ignore him, Eden concentrated on her reflection. Having chosen to keep the makeup minimal; she'd accentuated her eyes with liquid eyeliner, making sure to pull slightly at the end to give her a cat-eye effect. Mascara made her lashes exotically lush, while the slightest bit of blush to her cheeks gave

one the mistaken impression of innocence. She could feel him watching her, examining her every move with a criticalness that always set her on edge. Eden didn't miss the slight tremor of her hand as she picked up the YSL tube of lipstick.

"I prefer the red," he said tonelessly, and as hard as she'd tried not to meet his gaze in the mirror, her eyes inadvertently slid up to those hooded green eyes. His expression revealed nothing of what he was thinking as he silently strode towards her, his leonine grace making her feel every bit the prey she was. Her heart picked up speed and she hated that he had the ability to affect her this way. He came to a stop behind her, and she locked her spine, sitting ramrod straight, she refused the gasp that threatened to escape at the whisper of his touch. It was the slightest of caress, his large hand whispering ever so gently down the column of her neck. Tension locking her bones, anxiousness arresting the air in her lungs, Eden watched bemusedly as that large hand crept lower, nudging away at the satin robe until one side slide down, pooling at her elbow, and exposing the swells of her macchiato cleavage to his avaricious gaze. It was achingly sensual watching him as that skillful hand slid down until he cupped her breast.

He was riveted by her expression, his green eyes watched her carefully, assessed her, craved her reaction like sustenance. Eden fought to keep that reaction to herself, refusing to share with him what she knew he so desperately craved. But he was a master at this game, the puppeteer to her marionette, and he pulled the strings accordingly, index and thumb tugged and twisted her nipples to tender peaks, and his lips drew up when he heard that delicious little moan. He stooped down just a bit and languidly slid his tongue up the side of her neck and while she shuddered, he took her ear between his teeth and nipped. "The red, my pet," he said huskily, "so I can

see it on my cock.” He kissed her shoulder before meeting her gaze in the mirror. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

He was gone and Eden was once again left utterly bereft. She stared at the woman in the mirror with silent reproach, realizing how differently things turned out in the four years since she’d been with Dominic.

She’d been painfully naïve in that first year of their marriage, believing with a hopeful heart that love would somehow bloom from their union. She hadn’t deluded herself into believing that they’d come together for any other reasons than using each other, but she’d been hopeful that they would overcome their dysfunctional beginning and form some sort of companionship. With her mother gone, Dominic had been her family and he’d been Eden’s hope of having children of her own. But he had quickly disabused her of those notions. Dominic Armstrong had married her simply for her body. A warm, supple body he could master and manipulate between imported cotton cloud sheets. And her body always surrendered to his mastery, didn’t it? Denying it seemed futile when the evidence was between her thighs. How was it possible to share an emotionless, loveless marriage with someone, yet be so drawn to them? So pathetically impassioned of them? She didn’t want to feel this way. Eden didn’t want to need him. The hypocrisy made her sick.

\* \* \*

Dominic was a connoisseur of beautiful things. He had a room just below the mansion filled with priceless artifacts he’d collected over the years. Some of those things had been acquired through less than scrupulous means, but all the same, he’d eventually obtained them. Money made the world go round, it was a great incentive to nearly everything, and people were always more accommodating when they saw it. His little wife had certainly been impressed enough to sell herself to him for a measly half-



million dollars. He watched her enter his private room, his methodical gaze raking over her with chilling accuracy. He knew every inch of that sinful body, had fucked and defiled every hole. He knew the location of every birthmark, had swept his tongue along every contour. He'd dined on the sweetness between her legs, had devoured her essence like it were ambrosia, and he found that he still could not get enough. The hunger he'd felt, the unmitigated lust that had struck him the very first time he's laid eyes on her, refused to ebb.

He and his half-brother had the same taste in women, so Dominic hadn't been surprised that Lucas had found Eden Mercer fascinating. Hell, he'd been completely bowled over the first time he saw her too. She'd been nineteen, nubile, and ripe for the picking, even in dark rinse jeans and the camisole she'd been wearing that night four years ago when she'd piqued Dominic's interest. He remembered the bar. He remembered the cigarette smoke that had hung over the crowd like a cloud. The reason as to why he'd been among the common folk of late night downtown, attempting to drown his troubles in cheap watered-down liquor had evaporated the instant she'd stepped on stage. Eidetic memory replayed that very first moment, her hair had been shorter then, skimming just above her shoulders.

Skin like honey had glowed beautifully beneath the soft light of the stage, Dominic remembered sitting up a little straighter in his seat in the darkened corner of the bar. There'd been nervous energy haloing her petite frame, Dominic remembered the sweep of her pink tongue across her full mouth and how that one small gesture had made him want to bum-rush the stage and go caveman on her. He remembered the soft strains of the acoustic and then her voice—a breathy, gravelly sound that had instantly conjured images sex and made him rock hard. She'd sounded like the jazz singers of old, a siren at her microphone seducing the crowd with that low,

smoky voice. When she'd disappeared, the absence of her presence had been staggering. He'd blinked a few times as if emerging from the best orgasm of his life. He'd felt unbalanced and remembered going home, standing beneath the powerful sprays of his shower and jacking off like some prurient teenager with his first porno flick.

She became Dominic's obsession, and he'd known instantly that he would own her. She'd been a rarity, an artifact, another possession he needed to add to his innumerable collection. He'd worked diligently after that, twisting the hands of fate by calling in favors from the seamier lot of the city's underbelly. He'd further compounded her and her mother's staggering financial debt, he'd wanted them cornered and desperate. Then Dominic had waited patiently for the right moment to pounce. And it had all worked accordingly, although the slight hiccup with Lucas had been unforeseen.

She'd been Lucas's latest amusement, but unlike his half-brother's previous vices, this had been strictly off limits. Luckily Gregory and Millicent Armstrong had gotten wind of Lucas's inane idea of marriage the very same time Dominic had discovered his brother sniffing around his property. And, just as he'd done when they were younger, Dominic had been called upon by the Armstrong patriarch to clean up his brother's mess once again. The mess had been none other than Eden Mercer. The irony hadn't been lost on Dominic. He couldn't have worked it out better himself, but then again, he had.

Although the unexpected change of plans had taken him off guard. His lips drew upward slightly but not enough to form a smirk at the memory. Marriage. The idea would've been laughable had she not been so serious. He'd been inclined to call her bluff, but his own needs had been far too great. Pestered by a psychosis that he'd acquired sometime in his late

teenage years, Dominic had been determined to have her, to own her, another rare beautiful piece for his vast collection. She could've made several other conditions and he would've agreed to anything just to possess her. But aside from that stipulation, she'd come without protest. She had seen the dollar signs and had eagerly given him access to the heaven between her thighs, where he reaped the benefits of his investment each and every night he was able.

The two men seated in the room with him were his special guests tonight. Bruce Barrett, the only person in the world he could call his best friend, sat a few inches from him in the leather wing back chair. While Brandon Jacobs, his VP, occupied another chair across the room. Dominic had invited them to dinner, he'd offered them the best of his liquor, and now he wanted to share with them his finest possession. It was about pride in all honesty, his Eden was another way for Dominic to further feed his ego.

She appeared in his line of sight, the satin robe she wore hanging slightly open but the sash kept it place—for now. She was barefooted as she came to a stop beside his chair and from beneath the veil of her dark lashes she looked at him, there was defiance in those honey gold eyes, but Dominic knew she wouldn't dare embarrass him. He didn't mind the defiance; in fact, he relished the challenge of breaking her each and every time. It made him hard just thinking about it.

“What will it be?” she asked in that dick stroking voice.

“Put on a show, my sweet,” he replied, taking a sip from his tumbler.

“Anything you want.”

He liked that. He was going to reward her for that.

He turned on the music for her, something slow and sultry but rich in bass. Seduction in every delicate footfall, she was every inch the seductress as she sashayed to the center of the triangle they made. She drew the corner

of her bottom lip between her teeth while slowly tugging on the sash. His hooded gaze settled on her, raked her from head to toe with a sharp look that missed nothing. She'd left her sable black hair undone just as he'd advised from previous shows. It framed her oval face in loose waves, tumbling around her delicate rounded shoulders and down her back. The slight bit of makeup she had on only accentuated her features because he didn't like her beauty tainted with.

Slowly shrugging out of her robe, she allowed it to slide down her body and pool at her feet. Dominic's cock twitched even before the first glimpse of macchiato skin was revealed. The corners of his mouth rose slightly in semblance of a smile as he watched her. She had a body that was made for sin, and Dominic was just wicked enough to partake of the pleasures it offered. She was a slight little thing. Standing no taller than 'five foot, but she had the most alluring curves, rounded perfectly in all the right places. The bit of titillating black lace that covered her high, full breasts had Dominic's hands itching to tear it off. His gaze veered down further, to the flat of her abdomen, halting briefly on the black lace garter belt and matching thong. She painted an alluring image, the combination of French lace and caramel skin made it nearly impossible to remain seated. Dominic aspired for control; he would have her soon enough. All in good time.

She began with a slow seductive strut, one delicate foot in front of the other, while swaying her body to the music. She touched herself, gliding fingertips slowly and lightly down the side of her body, caressing her neck and her tantalizing cleavage. Instead of focusing her attention on him, she went to Bruce and looked at Brandon as she seduced both men, completely ignoring Dominic. With her back to Bruce and her gaze locked on Brandon, she bent at the waist and grazed her hands down her legs, swinging her hips back and forth, the position giving Bruce, and only Bruce, a tantalizing

image of her ass and the thong that gloved her shaved cunt so perfectly. Lifting her head slightly, she tossed her hair back, and found Bruce's gaze trained exactly where she wanted it.

She lowered on all fours hedging backwards and stopped when she was between his parted legs. Settling her hands on either side of his knees, she slowly stood and rocked her body, swaying her hips from side to side on his lap, feeling the evidence of his arousal like steel beneath her. For just a brief second she dared to look in Dominic's direction and nearly faltered at his hard, narrowed, cold stare. She should've stopped then, preservation begging her to think of the consequences of her actions, but Eden failed to heed caution and pressed on. She rolled her body to a standing position; reaching behind her to unhook her bra Eden maneuvered her arm to cover her breasts as she tossed the flimsy piece of garment at Brandon.

He'd done this to humiliate her. His sexual proclivities were always accomplished at Eden's expense. He wanted to humiliate her, fine. She could have her own fun in the process. Bruce wanted to fuck her, Eden made sure he got close enough. She was playing a dangerous game, poking the predator with a stick, but she didn't really give a damn. She straddled his lap and removed her arm, all for his viewing pleasure. With a coquettish smile she undulated her body so that her breasts, her nipples scraped deliciously across his dress shirt. The moment she raised her arms to settle her hands on Bruce's shoulders, she felt the hot brand of Dominic's hand at her nape, his fingers wrapping securely around her neck.

"Get up," the quietly voiced command was uttered against her ear, shocking Eden. He didn't give her the option of refusing, and in the deafening silence of the room, she could hear the rapid cadence of her heart. Eden rose shakily to her feet, but he did not lead her away as she'd hoped he would. "Your knees." The deadly calm of his voice belied the surge of

emotions rampaging through him. Dominic needed to reestablish control. Right the fuck now. He needed to show his little wife exactly where she fitted on his payroll.

Large, beautiful eyes that could beguile him so effortlessly blinked bemusedly at him. “Wh...what?”

“Get on your knees.” There was no mistaking the directness of his voice this time and something sinister in him smiled when she jumped to obey. Jealousy was a petty emotion, but Dominic gave into it wholeheartedly, he allowed it to consume him as it festered uninhibited in his chest, growing larger. She was his! Like a child with a toy who refused to share, Dominic allowed other men to look, but touching her, fucking her, was his right. That privilege belonged only to him. Paddling now in the cesspool of his rage, Dominic wanted to make her suffer for daring to forget exactly who it was she belonged to.

There was the slightest moment of hesitation where Dominic believed she would refuse him, but she thrust her head up slightly as though resolving herself to this situation, ready for anything he would throw at her. When she fell to her knees and raised her long, dark lashes to deliberately meet his hardened gaze, the devil in Dominic welcomed her to his den of inequity.

He loomed over her and looked down with a keen, shrewd stare. He threaded his fingers through the slightly curled tresses, fingering the silky strands before anchoring his hand in the warmth. He cupped her face, caressing her cheek while his thumb indolently traced her bottom lip. “Cock sucking lips,” he mused, almost quietly to himself. His gaze roved over her upturned face, but the veil of her lashes hid those beautiful eyes from him. “Look at me, pet.”

Her eyes fluttered up. “That’s a good, girl,” he murmured, his smile without humor. Dominic released himself from his trousers with his free hand. “Show Bruce and Brandon how good you are at sucking cock, my sweet.” He pulled her head to his throbbing erection until the head of his straining cock bumped and slid across her sensuous, soft pink lips, leaving a slick trail that she instantly lapped.

She opened her mouth wider in blatant invitation and Dominic slid into the wet, welcoming heat. He felt her tongue on the underside of his cock, stroking expertly against the long vein while he dove in deeper. When he nudged against the back of her throat, she relaxed her jaw further to accommodate his girth. Dominic released the grip in her hair and instead trailed the hand to the nape of her neck until he was buried in the tight sheath of Eden’s throat.

He closed his eyes against the image of her sucking hard on his cock, her cheeks hollowing in the attempt to give him release. His hips began to thrust on their own accord, intensifying that burning pressure to find release. He felt the vibrations of her moans at the base of his spine and his thrusts took on a sporadic rhythm. He felt himself swell, his cock growing heavier, but Dominic would not come in her mouth, instead he withdrew and worked himself with his left hand and spraying her with his release. It was another mark of ownership, his come sulling her beautiful face. She turned her face up, cheeks ablaze with cooling passion, and lips glistening from her own saliva and Dominic’s orgasm. She looked debauched.

He dug his hand in her hair and tugged her head up. “Be very careful, pet, not to underestimate the extent of my generosity.” He bent down so that he was inches away from her face, his cold green eyes piercing her. “Now, go clean my come off your face and wait for me like a good little wife, hmm?” When she refused to answer, he gave her head a tug.

“I hate you,” she said venomously and he smirked.

“Well, then it’s a good thing I didn’t marry you for love.” He shoved her away from him. “Get the hell out of my sight, Eden.”

She shoved passed him and Dominic laughed at her hasty retreat. He tucked himself back into his trousers, ambled to the bar in the corner, and poured himself a generous amount of scotch. He turned to the two men and raised his glass. “I hope you enjoyed the show, gentlemen.”

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## Chapter Three

Bruce Barrett regarded the diminutive woman seated across from him with keen eyes. He had to admire her tenacity; it took guts to blackmail someone of his position and a cunningness he hadn't realized she possessed. He'd completely underestimated her upon their initial meeting. He had believed, like everyone else in their circle, that she was nothing more than Dominic's beautiful little toy, a toy Bruce had wanted to play with, but she'd quickly disabused him of that idea. Beneath those mesmeric honey gold eyes, and curves that were a temptation to any man, lay a conniving mind that was capable of many things. Bruce had a wife and kids and was also the mayor of Langston who had higher political aspirations.

It would be safe to say that if the press ever discovered his philandering ways, it would be quite detrimental not only to his political career, but his marriage as well. He hadn't known until it was too late, too enraptured by the idea of a ménage à trois to pay close attention. The presidential suite at the Piedmont was known for their discretion, and with the many times he'd been there, and the amount of money he'd spent, they were prone to turning a blind eye whenever Bruce came around while accommodating his every wish. The three women had been stunning, and with the abundance of alcohol and drugs, Bruce had been completely out of his mind with delirium. They'd recorded every sordid act, and Eden had been the mastermind behind it. It took her a week before she came to Bruce with the evidence of this current affair. She'd wanted his help and his full cooperation, in return she would keep his name out of the press and give him the micro SD card once she'd received the necessary assistance from him.

That was only a few months ago, and in that time, Bruce had done everything she'd asked without question. There was too much at stake for him to do otherwise. So far, all she'd had him do was trade the countless jewelries Dominic had given her over the years for some cold hard cash. She was smart enough not to pawn it herself, but getting Bruce to do it would not arouse any suspicion, especially from her husband. Nearly ninety thousand dollars he knew she had in her possession. He'd had his guy get her nearly exactly what it had originally cost. The fact that Dominic had no idea she was squirreling away this money was quite impressive considering the short leash he had on her. Bruce could only imagine his best friend's wrath when he discovered her plans and Bruce's involvement in aiding her. Dom would kill them both.

He should've gone to Dominic months ago, but the risk had been too high, it was still too high. He could very well call her bluff, but she was desperate now. Last month's episode in Dominic's office had undoubtedly pushed her over the edge. He could practically smell the desperation on her now. He watched as she emptied the contents of her bag on the glass coffee table between them. There wasn't as much this time: a diamond encrusted ring, a ruby bracelet, and an emerald necklace. She had on those overlarge sunglasses, the ones that practically hid her whole face from the world.

"You have to get me the money by tomorrow," she said quietly.

He scoffed. "How do you suppose I do that? It takes at least a week to \_\_\_"

"Tomorrow, Bruce," she pressed firmly, looking at him through those dark shades. "I also need you to arrange a flight for me."

This was new. Bruce perked up a little realizing that this could be it. She was making a move, readying herself to leave Dominic. "Where to?"

"Italy."

“And the SD card?”

“It’s safe and you’ll get it once I’m on the plane.”

“What’s to stop me from telling him where you are?”

The corners of her mouth turned up. “The death of your political career and a very expensive divorce. I’m not trying to hurt you, Bruce. I just want to get the fuck away from your sick best friend.”

“He’s going to find you.”

She stood. “I’m good at hiding.” Ambling to the front entrance, she turned. “You’ve been really good so far, Bruce, don’t do anything stupid. I want my money and my flight booked tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

She’d wanted to wait a little longer, save a little more, and finalize her plans, but her homage to the porcelain throne just this morning alone proved that time was no longer on her side, and she needed to act now if she had any chance of pulling this off. The opportunity presented itself the week of his absence; the business trip overseas gave her a small window to act. Bruce had given her the money along with the plane ticket and with the nice little nest egg she’d stashed away, Eden had more than enough to live comfortably for a while. That was all she needed anyway; she could find a job when she settled down. She waited until the very last minute, beneath the veil of darkness when the mansion was dead quiet, Eden snuck out, taking with her only the clothes on her back and the money in her bag. She’d left her wedding ring on his pillow, refusing to take any more than was necessary. She hopped in the green, beat up Camry waiting for her just around the bend.

“Anyone see you?”

Eden shook her head as she tugged the seatbelt across her body and clicked it in place. “I don’t think so.” She hoped not. Everything she’d

worked for, the humiliation she'd endured, would've all been for nothing if anyone alerted Dominic of her escape. She needed to be at least five steps ahead of him before he found out.

"Man, I would hate leaving all of that behind." Jenna was looking at the disappearing mansion through the rearview mirror. To her, Eden was being stupid, reckless, leaving all of the material trappings because she couldn't deal with a little roughness in her marriage. Jenna was a ride or die chick; she was the sort to stand by her man, regardless of what occurred. Hell, she'd been with Asshole Alex since she'd been sixteen, despite the fact he occasionally treated her like a punching bag. Eden had met the pair at the club. Alex had been one of the bouncers and Jenna had been the one to show Eden the ropes. They'd formed a friendship of sorts after that, although with her marriage to Dominic, they hadn't spoken much. But Jenna was good people. Eden trusted her in spite of her skewed opinion. She'd been instrumental in getting Eden this far, and she'd promised to do anything she could to help her further along. Eden was counting on that. Rifling through her bag she found the ticket that Bruce had booked for her. "Everything you need is in there."

Jenna hesitantly reached for the ticket. "You sure about this?"

Eden nodded. "I need him to believe that I'm the one who got on that flight. It'll give me a head start."

"Damn... Italy." Eden could hear the blond woman's grin and was silently glad to have made Jenna happy with this small gesture. "Alex is going to shit bricks."

"You can't tell him..."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Can't tell him where the tickets came from. Don't worry, babe. I'll come up with something." She turned to look at Eden, her

coffee brown eyes bright with concern. “What are you going to do? Do you know where you’re going?”

Eden reached over to pat Jenna’s thigh reassuringly. “Don’t worry about me; I always land on my feet. It’s better if you don’t know where I’m going, that way if he ever asks you, you won’t have to lie.”

She couldn’t give away her trump card, regardless of how much she trusted Jenna. Dominic had ways of getting to people, making them do things they didn’t want to do. Eden needed to keep Jenna in the dark about her location, not only for her own protection, but for Eden’s peace of mind. This was all happening too quick; she’d given herself a deadline and was a year too early, but she couldn’t turn back now.

Unconsciously her hand settled on her abdomen. She couldn’t feel anything, it was still flat, still unnoticeable, but all the same she knew that life grew there. There was a tiny little creature thriving just beneath the layers of clothes and skin. Her heart thudded against her chest at the thought. She was going to be someone’s mother. She remembered the visit to her OB just two weeks ago. It’d been a regular checkup, nothing unusual, but then a few days later, she’d received a call from Dr. Carlson’s office, asking her to return for a follow-up. She’d been just a day shy of eight weeks, and Eden had gotten sick right then and there from the shocking news. She’d been sent home with prenatal vitamins and lollipop to settle her stomach.

In the days following, she’d contemplated long and hard on whether to tell Dominic of his impending fatherhood, but Eden had already known what his answer would be. That was the main reason why she’d enacted her plan this early. Dominic had never wanted children. He’d told her as much on the day he’d married her and had repeated it often over the last four years of their marriage. He would tell her to get rid of it—in those exact

words, in that cold and detached voice that Eden had come to despise—and would arrange for her to have it taken care of. Getting pregnant didn't fit into his sadistic agenda, because how could he possibly abuse her, humiliate her and parade her around like a prized show bitch when she was growing fat with child? Eden scoffed to herself; pregnancy wasn't even a thought to Dominic. But it was reality to her now. Fear was a real thing, the idea that she now had someone else to consider, someone that would inevitably rely on her for everything, frightened her like nothing else.

"We're here." Eden looked out of the passenger window, and sure enough they were already at the Langston Transportation Authority station. She took a deep breath; there was no turning back now. She'd resolved to put her past with Dominic behind her and although the uncertainty of her future seemed utterly daunting at this point, Eden needed to rise to the challenge. Not just for herself but for the baby that would arrive in just a few short months. She gave Jenna a hug that lasted a beat too long, and when she pulled away, it was with a watery smile. "Thank you, Jenna."

"God, Eden, take care of yourself, okay?"

Eden could only nod before drawing away and heading inside the station. She stood for a moment to peer at the large travel board high up in the rafters, finding her destination she ambled to the service window, and with Dominic's card, she bought a ticket to New York and one to New Orleans. The third ticket she purchased with cash. She gave away her first two tickets and the third she kept with her. An hour later, Eden boarded the passenger train headed to Amesbury, only a few hours out of Boston and settled in for the three hour ride. Sometimes the best place to hide was in the most obvious. He wouldn't look for her this close to home.

\* \* \*

She was looking at perfection. Ten perfect, pink little toes. Ten perfect, pink little fingers. Two perfect eyes. One perfect button nose. Liam Bennett Mercer, born exactly two months ago today, was his mother's pride and joy. He cooed a little, his fingers balling into small fists, his face scrunching in what was the beginning of a tantrum, but just before he could release that heartbreaking wail, his mother cradled him close to her overlarge bosom and he quickly latched on. Eden was completely in love. She set the wooden rocker in motion and watched him eat, a smile on her colorless lips. She'd never realized she could love someone so much that it could hurt so good. Her Liam was wrapped in and around her heart so tightly, so intricately that no one could even begin to unravel the bonds of that love.

From that first moment of birth to this moment now and forever more, Liam was her everything. It brought tears to her eyes that she'd nearly lost him, during those first critical two weeks when physical and mental exhaustion had been so prevalent, her hormones running rampant, one careless mistake had nearly cost her this precious little gift. All she'd wanted was a small nap, just to rest her eyes for a few minutes but then those few minutes had bled into an hour and then another and by the time she'd woken up, Liam had stopped breathing. Eden unconsciously whimpered as the memories assailed her. She looked down to check if he was still breathing and even though she could feel the strong pulls of his mouth at her nipple as he greedily fed, she still checked, she still needed to see for herself. Assured that he was just fine, the rapid beats of her heart tempered and she exhaled.

God, but she'd never known true fear until those eternal seconds when she'd tried to resuscitate him. It'd been her neighbor who'd ultimately saved Liam's life. Eden owed so much to Wes Courtland. His swift actions that day had saved her child's life, and Eden was forever indebted to him.

His experiences as a nurse had enabled him to get Liam to breathe again. He'd driven a frazzled Eden to the hospital soon after and had stayed with her the two days it'd taken to clear Liam. He'd been there over the last two months, buying her groceries, cooking for her, and providing stimulating adult conversation when she'd needed it most. Eden had a sneaking suspicion that he liked her, but she couldn't really say for sure, considering the amount of women she saw coming in and out of his condo when he was home. But regardless of his unclear personal life, he was a great friend to Eden, and she appreciated his friendship. It was really all she could manage anyway; Liam was the only love she would allow in her life. She came to her feet, gently humming gently so he remained asleep. Eden carefully put him down in his bassinet and stood over him for a long while, caressing the tuft of jet black hair he'd been born with. This was among the other attributes he had not inherited from her. But she quickly shook her head, refusing to think about him.

Instead she pooled all of her focus on her day tomorrow. She was returning to work at Banks and Ronald, the real estate firm she'd been a part of since moving to Amesbury. She'd worked there temporarily as a receptionist while attending real estate classes, and the instant she'd received her license, they'd offered her a full time job as an agent. It was a small firm, fairly new, but was growing increasingly fast due the rising real estate market, so they'd needed all hands on deck and Eden had readily jumped on the offer, grateful to the two women who'd given her the amazing opportunity.

Eden raked a hand through her chin length bob, having gotten rid of the extensions and hacking nearly everything off during the first week she'd been here. She'd kept it short since then, keeping her naturally tawny locks a shade or two darker. Eden deviated from nearly everything in her old life,



the only luxury afforded to her now were the occasions when she got to paint her toes and shave properly. Knowing Liam would be out for a few hours, she took the opportunity to clean her apartment.

With Liam's laundry in the wash, she went about vacuuming, swiftering the hardwood floors until they shone, and then dusting every little corner her petite frame could reach. Tackling the kitchen next, Eden went about washing dishes, cleaning out the cabinets, cleaning out the subzero and throwing out dated food. She made sure Liam's food supply was in order for the sitter in the morning, having pumped his milk in little bottles, Eden knew he was good until late afternoon, and by then she should be home from her showings. She walked into her bedroom and contemplated on what to wear for her first day back on the job. Eden settled on a navy blue pencil skirt, a white satin capped sleeve top, and a pair of black sling-backs.

An hour later, exhaustion finally took hold of her, and she set a hand on her mouth to cover a yawn. She chanced a glance at the clock on her nightstand. Liam would be up in exactly three hours for his next feeding, so she had exactly that amount of time to rest. She drew the bassinet to her until it was flush against her queen size mattress, once again assured that he was alive and breathing, Eden gave a sigh and relaxed. Sleep should've come then, but she found herself wide awake, blinking up at the ceiling as her mind wandered aimlessly, until it came to the very subject Eden had tried ignoring for nearly a year. And because there was no cure for memories, she grew sicker at the thought of him, but she couldn't *stop* thinking about him. Around and around and around her mind went. Menacing green eyes haunted her, while the impression of his touch echoed along her skin and lingered in her pores.

This was when she hated herself most. At night, when her mind ran uninhibited and her body fevered so wantonly for...for...no! She couldn't

possibly be so stupid. She was just horny that was all, it could really be anyone, but not him, never again with him. Then her heart quickened at the thought of him finding her, of the unspeakable wrath he would bring down on her, and breathing became nearly impossible at idea of him taking Liam away from her. Dominic Armstrong was ruthless enough to take Liam from her out of spite, just to punish her for daring to leave him. No! Eden shot up, panic constricted her breathing, and it took all her effort not to hyperventilate. Once she was calm enough she closed her eyes and prayed fervently to remain hidden.

The last year had not been easy but she would've chosen this struggle any day to the degradation she'd faced as Dominic's wife. She would be damned if she had to go back to him. She'd taken the tentative steps four months ago in contacting an attorney, but with the distraction of work, her classes, and seeing to Liam's nursery before he arrived, she had lost focus. Eden vowed to make it a priority now. She was still married to that sadistic prick, but would resolve that soon enough. Divorce was the only option. She'd been young, desperate and had fallen for the lure of all that money. But she wouldn't let herself fall back into that trap. She was a mother to a boy, a boy that would one day grow up to become a man, and Eden couldn't very well allow him to think that degrading women was okay. She had to be the example she wanted to set, and every day she spent with her child Eden was learning that. The mistakes of her past were just that, mistakes, which she was learning from, another year, another touch of wisdom. Dominic was her past. A mistake. Divorce would rectify that.

She didn't want anything from him. Even the half million dollars that was contracted to her at the end of their marriage no longer seemed appealing. There was still money left over from the jewels she'd pawned, it was enough to support her and Liam for another year if she maintained her

frugality. Bolstered by strength of purpose, Eden settled back on her bed, scooting just a little closer to her slumbering child. She closed her eyes and while sleep did eventually come, it was a fitful one, filled with plaguing dreams of her husband and the ominous inevitability of his return into her life.

A good shot of espresso with her morning coffee waylaid the fatigue so that she was able to make it to work without looking like she felt. The sitter had shown up on time but it'd taken Eden some time and effort to leave her little baby behind. The day progressed uneventfully and by midmorning she was making great time with her clients. The Wilsons, expecting their third child in October, were looking for a single family, with three baths and five bedrooms. Mr. Wilson wanted a pool and Mrs. Wilson wanted French doors and a solarium for her studio. It was a bit of a challenge, but Eden was up for it. She had seven homes to show them all within the quiet suburban area of Amesbury. By the sixth showing, they were leaning towards the colonial and the Cape Cod. Mrs. Wilson, well past the eight month and nearly ready to burst, was just about done with looking, so Eden suggested they meet up at one of the local cafes. Mr. Wilson deferred to Mrs. Wilson's choice of Italian and while they put in their order, Eden laid out the pros and cons of the six homes, with an emphasis on the two they were leaning on.

"The Cape Cod is move-in ready, although we can get the seller to fix a few things before we finalize everything. The bit of renovation on the colonial would be slightly over your overall budget, but I'm sure I can roll it in your loan. Also take into consideration that neither one of these is a short-sale, so we're pretty good with that."

"I think we're leaning towards the colonial, right, sweetheart?" Mr. Wilson looked at his wife, who was too busy shoving a slice of pizza into

her mouth to bother looking up at her husband. When he cleared his throat, she looked up with an embarrassed smile.

“Well,” she began, setting the slice of pizza down then wiping her mouth, “I really like the Cape Cod, honey. It has just about everything we want.”

“Except the pool.”

Mrs. Wilson rolled her eyes. “We can have an above ground for now.”

“We shouldn’t settle,” he groused.

“Yes, settling would be the worst thing you could do,” Eden quickly interceded, sensing an argument. “Buying a home is a huge investment and everything should be carefully considered before making the commitment. We have plenty of time. So, this is what I’m going to suggest. Take the information I’ve provided today, go home, and talk it over. If you want to put in an offer, we’ll go from there.”

They reluctantly agreed, and once they finished eating, Eden settled the check, thanked the Wilsons, and proceeded to her next appointment.

\* \* \*

Dominic was in a foul mood and that mood was only getting fouler the longer he remained in the presence of the rat-faced moron seated across from him. Settling back in his seat, he steepled his fingers and regarded the man narrowly. He searched his mind briefly for a name and quickly found it...Alex. Dominic could not recall a last name, but he did remember giving the man his card several months ago. The reason why he was seated across from him now could only pertain to one thing; at least Dominic hoped so for Alex’s own good.

“What can I do for you, Alex?” he inquired laconically and Dominic was pleased to see that he had the good sense to look anxious.

“You...you said I could contact you if I had information about Eden.”

“And do you? Have information on Eden, that is?”

He smiled triumphantly at Dominic. Rising just a bit out of the leather chair to search for something in his back pocket, he slid a piece of folded paper towards the dark haired man. Dominic simply raised an eyebrow as he stared at the offensive crumpled paper. “What exactly am I looking at?” He didn’t move, didn’t even reach out to touch it. He returned his gaze to the grinning man and itched to press the button for security.

“That’s your girl, man. I found your bitch!”

In that instant Alex paled considerably, wishing he could take the words back as hunter green eyes pinioned him, nearly drawing blood from where he sat. There wasn’t much he knew of this man. All Alex saw was the grandness, the wealth, and the fact that Dominic Armstrong could very well be the answer to all his money problems. But looking at him now, caught temporarily in those cold, calculating eyes, he wondered whether he hadn’t bitten off more than he could chew.

“Be very careful, Alex,” he began voice like sandpaper on silk, “I don’t take kindly to people insulting my wife.” His lips drew back, showing nothing but teeth. “Now, I strongly suggest you tell me exactly why you are here, or I will have security escort you out.”

“She’s in Amesbury. She’s been sending my girl some money every few months. I was looking through Jenna’s things and I found that.” He pointed at the crumpled paper. “It’s an envelope that has a post office box address on it, but I’m sure you can find her with it. It has her name on it—Eden Mercer.”

So it did. Dominic, having reached for the wrinkly envelope minutes ago, peered at it now while his mind worked. Laughter nearly burbled up from his gut. Right under his own fucking nose. A whole year, searching as he had, and she’d been right under his nose! Simply brilliant.

“You...you said you’d pay me if I had information.”

And pay him he would, for Alex had given him something the highly paid PI he’d hired couldn’t have: his pet’s location.

With a Cheshire Cat grin, he glanced at Alex. “Twenty thousand dollars, as promised. See yourself out and my personal assistant will cut you a check.”

When he was alone again, Dominic pored over the crumpled envelope as though it had more to convey. He looked at the perfect curve of her writing. She’d touched this. His fingers traced the blue ink absentmindedly. He could remember that night he’d returned and had found her gone. Dominic had nearly lost his mind. His rage had blinded him to everything, pushing him far too close to murder; it’d taken an act of God alone to bring him back from the edge. But he’d been wrathful, scouring nearly every crevice for her to no avail. He’d torn the mansion upside down looking for clues, anything that would tell him where she’d gone.

It’d taken holding Bruce at gunpoint before his so called best friend confessed to his part in abetting Dominic’s deceitful wife. That bit of information had led him to the stripper and her boyfriend, the one who’d just left Dominic’s office. He’d gone to Italy on the off chance that he would find her, but he’d realized how stupid that had been considering he lacked the exact destination. Every trail he’d chased had been a dead end. But he’d refused to stop; nothing would’ve made him stop looking for her. He would’ve searched for her until his dying breath. But it wouldn’t come to that it seemed. He finally found her, and it was high time he returned his pet to her cage. Dominic had underestimated her once; he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

## *Chapter Four*

Jenna knew she shouldn't have pushed, but with Alex's track record it was only natural for her to be apprehensive, especially after coming into such a large amount of money. The last time he'd had nearly this much money, it'd been borrowed from a few unscrupulous people who hadn't been shy in detailing exactly how easy it would be to not only break Alex's body, but take a piece of Jenna's ass in the process. She'd spent nearly two months on her back getting the loan sharks their money back, and Jenna wasn't about to go through that shit again. So she'd posed the question when he'd returned from clubbing with "the guys". She'd ignored the pussy and liquor cologne that oozed off him like noxious fumes and instead got straight to the point. His reply had been a brusque shove that sent her stumbling back. She'd returned with a slap to his face, and he'd countered with a punch to hers, the sort of punch a guy would throw during a fight with another guy. It'd hurt like a motherfucker, and despite the fact that she'd taken more than her fair share of his love taps, this one hadn't hurt any less. He hadn't stopped there; one punch was never enough for him.

To minimize the damage, Jenna had assumed the fetal position, one she'd become accustomed to over the course of their relationship. She didn't know how long it lasted, but when he'd finally grown tired, she was a mass of burning agony. Every inch of her being throbbled mercilessly, and she knew he'd broken a few things. Blood coated the inside of her mouth, nearly gagging her. Breathing was agony, moving was sheer hell. So she'd lain there, praying for the darkness at the fringes of her vision to consume her. But her body refused to shut down, refused to give in, and when he'd

began to disrobe her, carelessly tugging her jeans down her hips and further down her legs, Jenna had dared to attempt an escape.

“This is the only thing you’re good for, Jen,” he’d grunted in her ear, “and you can’t even give good pussy right.” He’d been short of breath as he’d carelessly flipped her onto her stomach. His weight had fallen on her again, and he’d raised her hips to brutally thrust into her. Jenna had closed her eyes and prayed it would be over. When he’d finished, he’d gone out again, leaving her exactly where she was now, prone on the hardwood floor. In an attempt to assuage the pain, she allowed her mind to wander.

She can’t remember her parents because she never had any. Well, she did technically because two people did fuck to conceive her, but she’d never known who they were. She’d grown up in the foster system, bounced around from home to home, and had no stability whatsoever. Puberty hit her all in the right places far too early, and one too many men who were supposed to nurture her took notice and took advantage. Jenna grew up too fucking quick. Her first time was with the high school quarterback. She could barely remember his name now, but he’d been a senior and she’d had a thing for older men and muscle cars. In the backseat of his Mustang behind the football field, her popularity had been forged in virgin blood. She became known as the quick and dirty girl. She’d met Alex when she’d been sixteen and he got her a job at the Crazy Pussy. He said she’d be his girl, and they’d been together since.

What Jenna had begun to realize a very long time ago was that being Alex’s girl was like being fucked in the ass without lube, and she was getting tired of limping her ass everywhere. Getting off the floor was a huge challenge, and it took nearly all she had, but she managed the feat. She was a ball of agony, and propped up against the loveseat, she felt like the loneliest person on the face of the earth. Raising a hand up she felt around



for the bag she'd left on the loveseat when she'd arrived home earlier. She looked at the phone in her hand, tears pooling in her eyes. She shouldn't call. They'd promised each other to have as little contact as possible to maintain Eden's whereabouts and to keep Jenna safe. But Jenna needed her best friend. She was the only family she had.

\* \* \*

"Hello?" Eden answered tucking her phone between her ear and her shoulder while she rummaged for her keys.

"Eden?"

Eden's heart lurched for a second in a desperate attempt to come up her throat at the sound of that voice. She stopped her search and took the phone in hand. "Jenna, what's wrong?"

"I know you said not to call, but Alex and I had a fight..." she trailed off, but Eden instantly knew the implication of that. Alex had laid into her again. For the life of her, Eden still could not understand why Jenna stayed with the scumbag when he treated her no better than a punching bag with a convenient hole to stick his dick in when the mood struck him. Alex was a piece of shit boyfriend and each and every time he laid a hand on Jenna, Eden wanted to gut him.

"How bad is it?" she asked, stepping inside her apartment.

Eden heard her sigh, the sound coming from a place that was familiar to her, too. It was a broken sound, a tired sound that came from living a tumultuous life that never seemed to end. "It's not too bad, but it hurts to breathe...my face is pretty banged up, too."

Eden swore under her breath. Promising Jenna that she was on her way, she hung up the phone. Eden didn't go into much detail with the Amy, her sitter, simply that there was emergency she needed to tend to and would pay double her regular fee if she stayed with Liam for a few more hours. Ami

readily agreed, and with a kiss on a sleeping Liam's cheek, Eden was out the door again.

The two hour trip was mercifully brief, with the late hour the interstate was quiet, making it easy for Eden to get where she needed to be quickly. She hurried up the concrete stairs, paying no mind to the stench of urine or the loud arguing coming from the closed doors.

"Jen!" She knocked on the door, hoping desperately that in her two hour trip over, Alex hadn't returned to finish what he'd started. "Jenna, it's Eden." She raised her fisted hand to knock again, but the door opened before her hand made contact. The sight of Jenna's face broke her heart.

"Jesus." Eden followed her inside the dark apartment, closing the door behind her. "Let me see." She put a hand on Jenna's arm stopping the other woman from picking up an overturned chair.

Eden had never actually seen Jenna's injuries without the passage of time or the added effect of makeup to conceal them. Seeing them now, in the raw, was something else. Her ordinarily pale face was a patchwork of bruises; her left eye was swollen shut, blackness haloing the perimeter; and there was a big purpling gash on her cheek that had congealed with blood. She tried smiling at Eden, undoubtedly attempting to alleviate the horror she saw in honey eyes, but her smile came out as a wince.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she said instead of smiling, the effort it took to talk was even worse than when she tried smiling.

"You need to leave him." It was an old song, one Eden had been singing since they'd met. Jenna was probably the only person Eden would consider her friend. Hell, she was practically family. Their instant friendship at the strip club hadn't been a fluke; there'd been a kindred spirit in each other that had been hard to resist and still it persisted, making it hard for them to turn their backs on each other. Eden could no more ignore Jenna than if she

were her own blood. “Come live with me,” she said suddenly. “I have an extra room that I won’t need until Liam is older. You and I can live together, at least for a little while. Take a break from, Alex.”

“I don’t know...”

Sighting her opportunity, Eden jumped on it. “Rent free, you can just watch Liam as payment.”

Jenna’s eyes lit up at the mention of Eden’s baby. “I can watch over the little porker?”

Eden laughed. “Yeah.”

Jenna looked over at the woman who she’d known for such a short time, yet treated her like a sister, and the tears in her eyes began anew. Eden was offering her the change she so desperately needed, and she was doing it simply because she wanted to. It wasn’t the way of her world to have someone do something for nothing. But Jenna knew there was no ulterior motive here. There rarely ever was when Eden was concerned. She’d done so much for Jenna so far, more than she could even begin to say. She sniffled and reached out to embrace Eden mindful of her injuries. “Thank you, Ede,” she uttered through the tears. “Thank you for this.”

Eden drew away slightly. “Thank me by not packing anything. Let’s just get out of here before Alex gets back.” When Eden headed for the entrance, Jenna stopped her.

“Wait...” She left Eden’s side and hastened to the bedroom just around the corner from the living room and returned a few minutes later. She held up a roll of cash. “My tips from CP.”

“I taught you well. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

\* \* \*

With a heavy sigh Eden fell back on her large bed, the down comforter breaking her fall. She was drowning in it all, drowning in clouds

impersonating pillows. Heaven was royal blue Egyptian cotton sheets against her naked skin. With a long, body deflating sigh, her eyes fluttered close, and the events of the last forty-eight hours bled out of her. It'd been a hell of a few days. It had begun with one of her biggest clients failing to close on a commercial property because the financiers decided to back out at the last minute. The agency was looking into litigation, but all Eden saw was failure. This would've been huge for her had she been able to pull it off and regardless of her best efforts, everything just fell apart. This was supposed to be cake. It should've been an easy commission for her, with both sides getting what they wanted. It just didn't make sense that they would simply walk away, even with the threat of a lawsuit for breach of contract. Eden knew that these investors were going to get a good deal. She just couldn't figure out what could've possibly made them change their minds.

And then, as though that hadn't been bad enough, Eden had been called home by a frantic Jenna while in the middle of an emergency meeting with Annie Banks, telling her she needed to hurry home because she hadn't been able to get Liam's fever down. With her heart in her throat, Eden had instructed Jenna to call an ambulance and would meet her at the local hospital. It'd taken her twenty minutes to get to Amesbury General and another two hours sitting with Liam while they ran tests.

By then, Eden had been hysterical, with Jenna doing all she could to keep her from wearing a hole through the waiting room carpet. It'd taken a variety of blood tests before the ER pediatrician informed Eden that he had an infection that they could treat with IV antibiotics. It wasn't until late the following day that Eden was allowed to take Liam home. He'd thankfully returned to normal and had eaten more than usual much to Eden's delight. She'd just settled him down for the night, and after eating

her own well cooked meal, compliments of Jenna's excellent culinary skills, Eden had been ready to crash. She turned on her side, teetering between slumber and wakefulness as a dream lured her deeper into sleep. With a furrowed brow, she tossed and turned, consumed now by the lurid nightmare.

*From the shadows of the candlelit room, she stood spectator to her own debauchment. On a bed that was meant for more than the two people it had been purchased for, Eden saw herself splayed out like some Dionysian offering, naked and aching for something. That something had yet to make itself known, but one didn't need much thought to decipher exactly what that something was. The air in the dimly lit room crackled with passion so potent that one need only inhale to taste it. Eden watched herself, hoisted by a bevy of pillows while smooth caramel legs fell akimbo, golden eyes riveted by something between those parted legs, something—or rather someone—holding her complete attention.*

*"Are you ready, my sweet?" Dominic inquired silkily from the shadows, his voice like sex with the right bit of growl that made dream Eden jump.*

*"Yes," came out on an exhale, like it needed to be said.*

*"Then fuck yourself for me."*

*Dream Eden eagerly pleased herself for him. Without pause, without even a single thought, one hand crept down of its own accord, eager fingers sliding a path down her neck to find and gently cup her breast.*

Eden gasped inaudibly, eyes widening marginally upon the realization that she felt everything that dream Eden did. She was suddenly there, no longer a spectator, but a participant in every way possible. She saw him behind her lids, descending upon her, mastering her with large hands that knew nearly every supple inch of her body. Between her middle finger and

thumb, Eden tugged and twisted her nipples to tender peaks, imagining it was him playing with her.

It was so real, so pronounced. It was as though Dominic was there, on the bed with his solid frame looming over hers, surrounding her. He was gloriously naked, his physique something of legends, while his long, thick cock enticed her mouth and her cunt. The emotions running through her were carnal, and Eden submitted as her fantasy intensified. Wetness pooled between her thighs, dampening her panties. Her body was on fire, scalding hot, and there was only one man who could temper the fever, assuage the inferno.

With her right hand on her breasts, the left slid down the flat of her belly, the goal the honeyed sex between her trembling thighs. Breathy moans filled the room as she inserted first one finger and then another, lifting her hips off the bed to meet the stroking motion of her hand. It was inadequate, but Eden's imagination was remarkable in making it feel like the real thing. It was Dominic fucking her, and she melted around his generous cock.

She panted, her fingers delving deeper while she arched and fell, writhing and moaning with the sweetest abandon, entangling her limbs in her sheets. Her orgasm hit her hard, and Eden rode the delicious tremors that rocked her entire body.

She came awake with a gasp, rising up in bed with wide eyes staring into the dark. She scrambled for the night light and frantically searched the room. Dear Lord, it had felt like he was here! Like he'd been in her bedroom with her, touching her...fucking her. With her heart beating too fast out of her chest, Eden felt like she was going to faint. She brought a hand to chest, while sweeping another through her hair. How is it that he could affect her after a year apart? Why did he continue to haunt and plague her

dreams when all she wanted was to be rid of him? What sort of freak...what sort of woman was she to want a man who'd lived to degrade her? Eden was beginning to suspect that she wasn't quite normal. She'd fought so hard to escape him, had done all she could to elude him, yet she continued to have these dreams—nightmares—about him and his depraved sexual appetite. What did that say about her? For goodness sakes, she'd practically performed for him! All that had been missing was a big top and a whip. Even now she could feel the evidence of her arousal between her legs. She sighed in disgust. She needed a shower if for nothing else than to at least wash away her shame.

Saturday proved to be far better than the past two days, and she and Jenna decided that with the weather being so warm, they would make a day of it and take Liam out. They journeyed around the small rural town that was more village than anything else, and Eden showed Jenna around. Though she'd kept mostly to herself in the last year since moving to Amesbury, the openness of the locals had made it hard for Eden not to make a few acquaintances. Like Wendi from the bakery who'd been an accomplice in contributing to Eden's extra weight gain with a tempting treat here and there when she'd been pregnant. Wendi was nice, a primary example of the sort of people that lived in Amesbury. They stopped by her bakery to pick up a few fruit tarts for desert later tonight before continuing on their way.

"That's like the twentieth time you've done that since we've been out," Jenna remarked quietly, pushing Liam's stroller.

Eden kept pace although the slight faltering of her step did not go unnoticed by the other woman. "Done what?" she asked with a frown, tossing a cursory look over her shoulder.

"That, you just did it again!"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jenna abruptly stopped and turned to her best friend. “You’ve been a little jumpy all day. And you probably don’t even realize you’re doing it, but you keep looking over your shoulder like you’re waiting for something to jump out at you.”

“Not something,” Eden murmured distractedly, peering over her shoulder again. That ominous feeling she’d had since earlier this morning continued to gnaw at her.

“What?”

Eden blinked and met Jenna’s gaze. “I said not something. I don’t know, maybe I’m just being paranoid, but I have this feeling we’re being watched.”

Jenna’s eyes widened as she too began to look around anxiously, blue eyes clouding over with fear. “Alex...?” Eden could hear the dread in her voice. Since having moved in a month ago, Jenna had been recuperating, thriving even, watching Liam had given her a sense of purpose. Eden refused to allow her scumbag boyfriend to come in and wreck it all. Besides, Alex wasn’t nearly so clever. There was no way he even knew where to begin looking for them.

Eden feared a far more sinister enemy: her husband.

Eden looped her arm through Jenna’s and encouraged her to continue walking. “It’s not, Alex, Jen.” No, not Alex. “I don’t want to draw further attention, let’s just keep walking.” Eden could swear the man walking a few paces behind them had been following them since they began their outing. She’d had the feeling of being watched but she hadn’t noticed him immediately. It wasn’t until they’d left Wendi’s Bakery that she’d seen him. He was a wiry man, small in stature, with a beige windbreaker, dark Dickies and a blue cap that concealed the upper half of his face. “Whatever you do,



don't turn around. Let's get Liam in the car and drive." If this were any other time she would realize how insane she was being right now, but something in Eden told her that this wasn't just paranoia. Her gut was screaming at her to take flight. She needed to keep a level head, she needed to remain rational, and she had both Liam and Jenna to protect now. If Dominic really had found them, they needed to move fast because it would only be a matter of time before he caught up to her, and Eden would be damned if she allowed that to happen.

As a precautionary measure, they waited an extra half hour in the car to make sure they hadn't been followed before hurrying inside the condo. Eden was at war with herself. She wanted so badly to pack, pack everything and run. But where would she run to with an infant in tow? How long would she continue to run from him? She'd built a life for herself in Amesbury. She had a job now, she had place of her own, and apart from Jenna she had friends here. She couldn't allow her fear of Dominic be the reason to uproot herself. She'd dealt with him for three years, had endured his humiliation and enmity, and had not uttered a word. She needed to face him now, needed to ask for a divorce so she could finally be free of him. It all sounded good in theory, it all seemed so perfect in her head, including his acquiescence for a mutual separation. But Eden knew it wouldn't be so simple in reality, not even close. She needed to prepare herself for the mudslinging she undoubtedly knew Dominic would toss at her.

"Do you really think he found you, Eden?" Jenna asked from her seated position at the window, her gaze looking out into the dark courtyard.

"It's a feeling. I've always had this horrible ability to feel when he's close. It's like all the air's being sucked out of the room, and I'm left gasping for breath." She'd had that feeling on and off again, all day long. "Any sign of our friend?"

Jenna shook her head. “Not since we saw him in town. Do you think maybe you’re wrong?” she asked hopefully.

Eden sighed, drawing Liam gently away from her breast. She came to her feet and maneuvered him over her shoulder with all the expertise of a mother and soothingly rubbed his back to get him to burp. “I hope I am, but I’ve learned when it comes to Dominic, nothing is impossible.” He was as relentless as he was ruthless. Eden would put nothing pass him.

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## Chapter Five

Two weeks later, she felt relatively safe enough to lower her guard again, although it wasn't without effort. Work had returned to normal, and she was back in her bosses' good graces having just closed on a mansion in the Heights. She went home feeling happier than she had in a while, and in her good mood, Eden gave into impulse and agreed to go out with Wes. It was while deliberating on what to wear that she began to regret saying yes.

"I'm going to call him and—"

"You're not going to cancel on that delicious piece of man!"

"But—"

"No buts, missy. You need a night out. You've been cooped up in this place for the last three months and as much as I love Liam, you need another man in your life." No she didn't. Men were the root of all evil. Okay maybe that was exaggerating a little, but they didn't do anyone any good. Well, except for that appendage between their legs, but at this point, sustaining for as long as she had, Eden was contemplating long and hard about visiting that little erotic boutique downtown and picking herself up a nice little battery operated friend.

It took Eden changing four times—all the other outfits had apparently been too "nun-like" to be seen by decent company—before Jenna deemed her sexy enough to be let out of the house. They settled on an ivory dress that stopped about mid-thigh, with a lace embroidered back and a sweetheart neckline that hugged every possible curve on her lithe body, accentuating her tits and ass to perfection. She didn't do much with her hair, and only a sweep of eyeliner, mascara, and her favorite chap stick for makeup.

“You’re going to tell me every single detail when you get back so I can live vicariously through you,” Jenna said urgently. When they heard the knock at the door, they both hurried to the living room. Eden kissed Liam goodnight and told Jenna that she would try to absorb every single detail to recount later.

Wes Courtland was the sort of guy that cheerleaders dated in high school. Blond hair, blue eyes, tall, with an athletic build and a dimpled smile that Eden knew had the power to drop panties. He had such an easy going demeanor about him that it was impossible not to like the guy.

“You look stunning, Eden.”

“Thank you. I can clean up pretty nicely when given the opportunity,” she quipped, giving him a grateful smile when he held the car door open for her and closing it when she was completely settled. He had a nice set of wheels; the fully loaded black Mustang was incredibly sexy.

“I’m very happy you finally decided to go out with me,” he said, shifting the car in gear and driving away from their complex.

They arrived at the restaurant soon enough and were led by the hostess through the intimate setting to a table in the back. He walked to her side and pulled her chair out for her, waiting until she was seated before returning to his own seat. Eden was nervous, and it didn’t help that he kept looking at her like she was dessert. She didn’t really know what to say, this being her very first real date since marrying Dominic. There certainly had been little room for wooing in that union. He’d shown Eden money, and she’d readily jumped on the opportunity never once contemplating the consequences.

“Uh oh, this date isn’t starting off well if you’re looking ready to leave already.”

Eden had the good graces to look embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Wes, it’s not you. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Want to share? I’ve been told I’m a very good listener.”

Eden smiled. “From your trove of women?”

He chuckled, and her smile widened at the sight of his reddening ears.

“What can I say, I love women.”

“And they certainly love you.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Eden laughed. “Immensely.”

The rest of dinner continued on that amiable note, and the occasional moments of silences, which were thankfully few and far in between, were easily filled by conversation that did not pertain to any personal matters on either side. Wes did not want to part so soon, so Eden agreed to continue their evening at a bar a few blocks away from where they’d eaten. Far too absorbed in her companion, Eden failed to notice the man covertly trailing behind them as she and Wes entered the bar.

Just as he’d done throughout the night, he remained inconspicuous, but close enough that he could see his intended target. James was given very specific instructions, and he carried them out with the expertise attributed to his name. He remained ever vigilant, cataloging every minute detail for his report.

The man she was with touched her like he owned her and hung onto her with appalling familiarity. James took out his camera to take pictures. They stayed for a time, lost in the cigarette smoke that hung over the crowd like a cloud. They sat close, side by side, his arm slung over the threadbare couch they’d claimed as their own. He drew her to his side, and she remained there for the duration, lulled by the gentle strains of jazz filtering through the speakers. To anyone else, they appeared the perfect couple out on a date. To James it was proof of his employer’s wife’s infidelity. Heads were surely

going to roll and James was happy to know he wouldn't be on the end of that falling axe.

\* \* \*

Eden's mind was reeling. She sat immobile inside her desert hot car in a complete state of shock, wondering when she would wake up from this nightmare. She tried swallowing around the lump in her throat but found bile crawling its way up, threatening to make her sick. She drew in deep steadying breaths in an attempt to calm herself, and even though the tears pricking her eyes were just shy of falling, she refused to give into them. At least not yet. With tremulous fingers she started the car, shifted into gear, and wrapped her fingers around the steering wheel. She needed to get home. Home to Liam. Home to stability because she feared the world was crumbling beneath her feet. In a daze, her mind revisited the scene from earlier, still unable to grasp that she'd been released from her contract at the brokerage.

Eden parked her car in her designated parking space. She caught a quick glance at the clock on the dashboard and cursed softly. Annie had asked her to come in early today because they needed to discuss a few things, and after the incident of a few weeks ago, the last thing Eden wanted was to further infuriate her boss. She grabbed her coffee cup and her overlarge purse before jumping out of the car and hastening to the office. There wasn't anyone at the front desk. Courtney, their receptionist, was scheduled to come in at ten, and the five other agents working here followed their own personal schedules, so the office was relatively empty when Eden walked in. Her heels clicked and clacked against the linoleum floor stifled only when she reached the carpeted floor next to her desk.

She set her purse down and although she wanted to check her messages, she knew now wasn't the time. Eden found Annie in her office but was

taken aback when she saw Sarah Ronald seated across from her. Although partners, Annie was the face of the brokerage, she was the one who spoke to the clients and designated the listings to the agents. It was quite rare for Sarah to be in the office. She was the silent partner who dealt more with the financing part of the business. Eden instantly knew something was up. Apprehension made her palms sweat and her heart race as she desperately tried to think whether she did anything wrong. She'd been on her best behavior since she'd failed to close on the multi-million dollar property a few weeks back. And regardless of being reassured that she'd done nothing wrong and that her job wasn't in jeopardy, Eden had worked doubly hard to prove herself again, doing all she could to sell as many properties as she could. In the following weeks, things had looked, for all intents and purposes, as if they'd been back to normal. She'd foolishly allowed herself to think she was in the clear.

"Have a seat, Eden" Sarah's tone was curt, being the more serious of the two, she indicated with a cock of her head to the adjacent chair beside her own.

Eden did as bidden and settled into the chair, licking her suddenly dry lips as she silently waited. The silence was deafening. "Is...is there something wrong?" she decided to break it, unable to withstand it any longer.

Annie rustled with some documents on her desk before clearing her throat and looking at Eden with clear blue eyes. "Sarah and I went out on a limb for you and gave you a chance at our company believing that you could contribute something great here. And you have. You've been great up to this point."

"What point? What did I do?"

“It’s come to our attention that you’ve been going behind our backs and making deals with clients without our knowledge and keeping a percentage of the commission for yourself.”

Eden chortled. “You can’t be serious,” she asked incredulously, but looking at the dire expression on their faces, Eden was mortified to see that they were absolutely serious. “Come on, you guys can’t actually believe I would do something so stupid.” She shook her head, her eyes bouncing from one woman to the other. “I would never do something like that.”

“We have proof.” Annie sighed, extending a folder to Eden. “It’s all there. And the worst part is you’ve been badmouthing our agency to our clients.”

“That’s not true! I...I wouldn’t do that!” She hastily leafed through the folder, all the while trying to defend herself to the women who’d already passed judgment. Eden couldn’t believe what she was seeing, if she were in their shoes, there would be no contesting this. Her signature was on more than a dozen contracts she didn’t remember signing or making the deals in the first place. “This is...this isn’t me...please—”

“We’ve done all we could for you, Eden, but unfortunately your time here is over.”

“Please...please don’t. Annie, you know I would never do this. I love working here. I love this job, why would I jeopardize that?”

“Money is always a great incentive,” Sarah retorted, and Eden felt like she’d been smacked. She wasn’t cold, but tremors shook her body as she unsteadily got to her feet.

“Thank...thank you for the opportunity. I’m...” *Innocent* didn’t get a chance to get through the tears choking her. Before they could fall, she whirled around and ran out of the office, remembering to grab her bag.

\* \* \*



Still largely mortified and completely devastated that she'd just lost her job, Eden remained in her car even though she'd pulled up to her home nearly an hour ago. She'd honestly loved working at Banks and Ronald. It'd given her purpose, drove her to be better than she was. It'd challenged her, made her feel like she was part of something bigger than herself, and she'd been damn good at it. But now it was all gone. Ripped right out from under her. It wasn't as though she couldn't start again, she had enough credentials to get hired at any brokerage firm, but it wouldn't be the same. Despite the competitiveness, there'd been a light camaraderie about the place that been amazing to be around. God, how could they think she was capable of that? Someone was framing her, setting her up to make her look bad, and Eden had a sinking feeling she knew who that someone was.

"Fucking bastard," she cursed silently, knowing Dominic had been the mastermind behind this. She knew his handiwork. The realization that he'd found her, and more than likely had known where she was for some time now, felt like ice water in her veins. Eden could imagine him sitting behind his large desk, in his executive chair as he silently devised new and painful ways to make her suffer for daring to run from him. She could see the smirk on his lips that never quite reached those razor sharp, green eyes that had the ability to make her feel worthless in his presence. She shuddered at the thought of what would come next, because she knew this was only the beginning of her end. It was only going to get worse from her, and again her mind flirted with the idea of running. She wasn't strong enough to face him just yet, especially now that she was jobless. But then knowing how unscrupulous he was, Eden knew Dominic would stop at nothing until she had nothing, and he would wait until the very last moment, in the fits of her desperation, before he magnanimously graced her with his divine presence

and offered a helping hand. Unfortunately, Eden feared he wouldn't be offering help this time—he was out for blood—her blood.

When she arrived home, Jenna, amazing cook that she was, had whipped up lasagna that tasted like the best thing Eden had eaten in weeks. She took comfort in Liam, his toothy smiles and ongoing efforts in 'tummy time'. He helped her forget for a moment that his father was lying in wait, like some evil entity ready to gobble them up. It wasn't until much later after she'd given Liam a bath and put him down for the night that Eden finally told Jenna about her job or rather the lack thereof.

"I got fired," she said miserably, throwing back the wine glass and swallowing every little bit of the red wine. She reached for the bottle on the coffee table and poured herself a generous amount.

"Oh no, what happened?"

Eden recounted the ordeal and the bogus reasoning behind it. "I can't believe they bought it!" she fumed, just slightly tipsy now. "I mean, honestly, if I wanted to do something so stupid, I wouldn't leave evidence lying around!"

"Shhh, you'll wake up the baby," Jenna admonished softly, but still feeling bad for her sullen friend. "Well, you did say that the proof was really good. I'm sure he made it so that regardless of your denial you'd still looked guilty."

"They didn't even give me a chance," she lamented, polishing off yet another glass. "God, Jen, what I am going to do?"

"Well for starters, you're not going to drown your sorrows in that bottle. Liam needs you, especially if what you say about Dominic is true; he's not going to stop until he gets his revenge." She chewed on her bottom lip as a sudden, horrible thought came to her. "If he's as ruthless as you say he is, then he might try...he might to take Liam, Eden." At her friend's sudden

ashen complexion, Jenna knew she probably should've exercised a little more tact.

Eden's beautiful honey gold eyes widened in horror suddenly sober and alert. "He wouldn't..."

"I'm not saying he will," Jenna was quick to soothe, "I'm just trying to prepare you for the worst."

"No, I know." Eden sighed, threading a hand through her hair. "I don't know why I'm so shocked. I know exactly what he's capable of and I certainly wouldn't put it past him to use Liam to hurt me."

Eden wouldn't give him the chance. Dominic had another thing coming if he thought he could use her son for his own selfish gain. It was imperative for her to consult with an attorney, because without the law on her side, Eden was virtually powerless against her husband.

\* \* \*

It was with somewhat bolstered spirits that Eden exited the office of Dunn and Associates the following afternoon. Her meeting with Diana Ramirez had been very reassuring, and despite the hefty price tag, Eden had encouraged her newly hired attorney to proceed with the divorce. This would resolve everything. She didn't want his money, and Eden wouldn't require him to give it. She would have Liam, and they would be free to continue on with their lives. Everyone would be happy. Deciding to stop by the bank to draw up what would be the first of many payments to Diana, Eden's world was once again turned on its axis, discovering that she had a zero balance.

"What do you mean I have a zero balance? There's supposed to be over eighty thousand dollars in that account. Check it again." She was bordering hysterical as she tried holding herself in check but found that she was failing miserably. With only two haggard tellers working and the line

behind Eden getting longer with impatient customers, Eden could feel their judgment at her back, and that only seemed to complete her humiliation and heighten her frustration.

The teller was getting aggravated with her but Eden could care less at this point. She watched the woman behind the counter press a few keys, prompt Eden to enter her pin, and was once again given the same answer. “Ma’am, I understand your frustration but there is nothing in your account. Now, my manager would be more than happy to further assist you if you could please step aside and wait over to your right. She will be right with you.” Left with little choice, Eden reluctantly stepped aside to the indicated area and thankfully wasn’t made to wait too long for this manager, who was all smiles despite Eden’s declining mental state.

Her name was Amanda Kelly, and once she’d led Eden to one of the side offices and asked her to take a seat across from her, she presented that infuriating smile and asked how she could be of any help. “I need to know how eighty thousand dollars can just disappear from my account. All your teller can tell me is I have a zero balance when I know damn well how much money was in that account to start with.”

The smile remained in place. “Oh, well, I’m so sorry to hear that this has happened to you, ma’am, we’ll do all we can to help you. I need your social security number and two forms of ID, please.”

It took a few minutes and some vigorous clicking on the keyboard before she was able to pull up Eden’s account. “From what I can see in our records, Eden, there were several small transactions made before a large transfer was made three days from this account to a joint account.”

The wind was literally knocked out of her as she sagged in her chair now completely incapable of thought.

Amanda's cheerful disposition faltered slightly at Eden's desolate expression. "We can begin an investigation into this transfer and see who authorized it..."

"No," she said quietly, rising from her seat, "there's no need. I know who's responsible."

The moment she believed herself a step ahead, Dominic already had three on her. He made her believe she was in control, made her think that she could somehow beat him, but it was all an illusion. It was his game and he'd mastered the rules; Eden was simply a pawn to be moved at his discretion. But with that understanding came a torrent of fury unlike anything she'd ever felt before. The instant she hopped in her car, Eden had only one direction in mind, and she drove like a bat out of hell to get there.

One of the highest buildings downtown with its gunmetal mirrored exterior was like some formidable edifice from a distant future. It was the head office of the Armstrong Corporation. Eden was on a warpath as she trudged through the expansive first floor and rode the elevator to the thirtieth floor. Determined strides took her past the surprised receptionist who'd been situated just at the front of the elevator like a sentinel. Eden paid her little mind when she hastily chased after her, nothing would deter her from searching out her bastard of a husband. His office was just beyond the closed double doors, and without further regard, Eden wrenched one of the doors with all her might and strode inside. There were two men with him when she entered, who turned bemused glances her way, but again, Eden's mind wasn't on anyone but the man seated behind his imposing executive desk. Eden took a momentary victory in the fleeting look of surprise that she spied on that fiercely handsome face before he quickly schooled those features into one of impassivity.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” she fumed through gritted teeth, needing some answers. But Dominic was intent on acerbating her anger as he didn’t even acknowledge her.

“As I was saying...”

“I swear to God, Dominic, if you don’t excuse these men right now, I will air all our dirty laundry in front of them, and they’ll know just how twisted and vile you really are.” When he finally slid his green eyes to her, Eden’s heart stopped for an instant at the blazing fury she spied there. He didn’t like being threatened, and the fact she was pushing back, something that she’d never done before, only added fuel to the fire. Eden was ready to roast his ass in the inferno. And maybe he knew exactly how serious she was because he finally excused the men who’d taken on the brief display with curious and confused stares.

“Gentlemen, I’m afraid we must reschedule our meeting. My darling wife has only just returned from a trip to Italy and wishes to regale me with tales of her fascinating time there,” he drily delivered, prompting both men to chuckle appropriately before rising from their seats and leaving the room. The tension that poured in upon their exit was palpable, so thick that Eden could feel it choking her.

“Well, my pet.” He smoothly popped the button of his suit jacket as he leaned back in his chair, framed by the floor to ceiling windows, looking every bit the executive. “Do tell me about your adventurous trip to Italy.”

He was so goddamn smug, so damn confident in his indolent pose that Eden wanted nothing more than to jump across the expansive desk and choke him with his dove grey tie. She was so angry that she was literally shaking from it, attempting to scrounge up a modicum of composure was a complete failure. “I don’t care how you did it, but I want you return every last red cent of my money—”

His bark of laughter caused her to jump at the unexpectedness of it. It wasn't a delightful sound, it was completely devoid of humor, and only served to unnerve Eden.

"How predictable you are," he indolently chided.

Eden watched wearily as he straightened, unfolded his leonine form from the chair, and walked with measured steps around the desk. The dangerous glint in his eyes made her take an involuntary step back, and although he didn't advance on her as she'd initially presumed he would do, she quickly formed an escape strategy, noting the double doors behind her. Despite his immorality, he'd never laid a violent hand on her, but Eden wouldn't put it past Dominic. Especially now, given the almost lethal expression on his granite features, he looked like he wanted to throttle her.

"But then again, it has always been about the money, hasn't it?" he derided almost silently to himself, leaning back against the edge of the desk and crossing his feet at the ankles. Narrowed green eyes fastened on her, raking languidly down the length of her body, making Eden feel instantly exposed to him. She fought the urge to raise her arms and cover herself, which was completely ridiculous given that she was fully clothed, but Dominic had that effect on her. "I knew money was the only way to draw you out and you fell so perfectly for it. Although I shouldn't be surprised, a money hungry whore is always a money hungry whore, regardless of how much time has passed."

"I may be a money hungry whore, but then what does that say about you? I don't imagine it would go too well if the press learned about your depravity and how you paid me to be your wife. I can see it now, media mogul, Dominic Armstrong, so desperate for female companionship that he would resort to paying cold hard cash just for sex. Very pathetic." Eden barely had time to retreat before she was faced with Dominic's ferocity.

He'd closed the distance between them in one long stride and clamped a hand around her arm in the next second. He deliberately invaded her space, coming so close to her that she could smell the citric notes of his cologne. Held completely at a disadvantage because of his towering height, she had to crane her neck up to meet his gaze, and Eden shuddered at the unadulterated rage that blanketed his savagely handsome face. The murderous glint she spied in his emerald eyes made her want to run for cover. "Let...let go..." She attempted to pull away with futility, finding that the manacle of flesh around her arm seemed to only grow tighter.

"You vindictive little—" he thundered, but stopped himself before he could say the word that was on the very tip of his tongue. "Be very sure that you are ready to carry out that threat, sweet pet, otherwise you will not like what will come after," he spelled out with deadly calm, but the tension of at his jawline was a clear indication of his restraint.

Fear breathed down her spine, telling her to tread cautiously, but that warning went unheeded as Eden squared away with him, refusing to back down. There was too much at stake now to allow him the upper hand in this. She couldn't afford to cower, not when there was Liam to consider. "You don't like being threatened, Dominic? Welcome to my world. That's exactly how you've made me feel every single moment I was married to you," she fired back, looking him dead in the eye to convey exactly how serious she was. "I won't let you bully me anymore. You may have the power and the money, but I know all your secrets. And if you push me, I will go to the press. Now let me go." She was surprised to find her request obliged when he released her. Eden distanced herself from him quickly enough, putting a hand to her arm to nurse the area where he'd held her. "See, Dominic, I can play just as dirty as you can. Being your wife has taught me a lot."



In the ensuing silence he was a veritable statue, his face was devoid of any emotion. He simply regarded her, but then the corner of his mouth quirked upwards in a smile that the Cheshire Cat would've envied. "Yes, but apparently not enough," he pointed out with cool temperance, turning his back to her, ambling to the liquor cabinet on the far right that she hadn't noticed until now. With his body concealing his activity from her, Eden heard rather than saw him pour a drink into the short glass. "But I must say, I'm enjoying this side of you," he lauded, raising the glass towards her with that damnable grin. "It pleases me immensely to know there's more to you than what's between your legs." He tossed back the drink and scrunched his face a little at the burn. "Although I must admit, I have sorely missed being between your legs."

The heat that sluiced over Eden's skin at his candidness was blamed entirely on her anger. "You're disgusting."

"No, what I am, is incredibly horny, but more on that later." He poured himself another shot, but drank it much slower than before. In his progress back to her, Eden took him in, incapable of doing otherwise. A year hadn't changed him much. He was still agonizingly handsome, his thick dark hair well-coiffed to fit the aesthetics of his sharp, patrician features. The tailored suit he wore, Hugo Boss, if she remembered the name of his favorite designer correctly, fit him to perfection, cut and fitted to his athletic regal physique. He'd always carried himself with an air of superiority that went hand in hand with the understated sex appeal that seemed to lure the fairer sex.

"Or we can do something about now." Eden's faced warmed as he cast a knowing glance her way, and she cursed inwardly at being caught staring. "I want to bend you over my desk and—"

“You’re such a pig.” She made to retreat, heading towards the door. She stopped and turned. “You have until tonight to give me back the money and then I want a divorce.” Eden had her hand around the silver handle, all she needed to do was pull down and freedom would’ve been hers, but she knew escaping the devil’s lair couldn’t have been so easy.

“You seem to be under the impression that you’ve bested me in some way, but let us be completely clear on this.” His tone sent a chill down her spine as she foolishly waited for him to continue. “If you so much as speak an unkind word about me or my family, I promise you, Eden, I swear it, that you will never see your son again.” As he cruelly ripped the ground from beneath her feet, she felt him behind her, the warmth of his body radiated sun hot against her back, while the length of him pressed invasively close to her. His hard hand around her wrist whirled her around to face him. He was impervious to the fury alight in her golden honey eyes as he captured her jaw with bruising fingers and leaned down to capture her lips in a hard, punishing kiss. The crack of her palm connecting with his cheek resonated in the next second, and he recoiled slightly, but not enough for Eden to escape. Momentarily stunned, he looked at her and finally saw the revulsion in tear laden golden eyes. Dominic tongued the inside of his cheek and came away with the coppery taste of blood coating his tongue. “I would so hate to see Liam grow up without his mother.”

“Don’t you dare—”

“What you have failed to learn, sweet pet,” when he reached out to caress her face with his hand, she instantly recoiled, “is that I always win.” She made to strike him again, but Dominic was ready, catching her wrist mid-swing. “You are mine, Eden. Till death do us part.”

## Chapter Six

He took great satisfaction from having her cornered, completely at his mercy. Dominic took a moment to bask in his victory. He would collect his spoils soon enough. It was all a matter of patience. He'd given her space, taken a step back to allow her time to process her current predicament, but not far enough that he couldn't reach for her if he wanted. Tension saturated the air between them as the silence swelled, but Dominic did not mind as it gave him the opportunity to take her in. His emerald gaze ate her up, not missing for a second the shorter length of her hair. Upon closer inspection, Dominic found that he preferred this haircut much more than the long tresses that had been a signature. The darker shade suited her dusky complexion as it drew attention to those fiery bourbon eyes that regarded him with absolute contempt. He could read her like a label, her emotions playing across the face that had plagued his dreams for the better part of a year. There was nothing Dominic wanted more in that instant than to take her in his arms and ravage the angry pout from her coral lips.

He curbed the impulse by slipping his hands inside the pockets of his slacks and continued his silent perusal. Dominic had never known her to wear anything other than the designer clothes she'd sheathed herself in since he'd married her, but the simple cream colored blouse and dark rinsed skinny jeans she wore seemed off the rack. She looked...comfortable. Even the dark sandals at her feet were far removed from the precariously high heels she'd previously worn. For just an instant, Dominic was taken back to the innocent she'd been just before their marriage. But then just as quickly as the thought came, another more cynical and jaded one soon followed.

How quickly that innocence betrayed itself the instant he'd added money to the equation.

But that had been the crux of their marriage, hadn't it? They'd both gotten something out of the arrangement. He, the unrestricted use of her delectable little body and she in turn had been given unlimited access to his bank account, all the while pawning the innumerable jewelries he'd showered upon her and squirreling away the money to make her grand escape. All without his knowledge. It still gnawed at him to have been bested so easily by his seemingly vapid little wife, but Dominic was spirited enough to appreciate her guile. He was cheered enough to find that there was more to her than her substantial beauty. He could even go so far as to call her a worthy adversary; her impromptu visit to his office has been quite bold, a move he would have never expected from her. It took a lot to unhinge a man of his stature and the fact that she'd so fearlessly accomplished the feat, twice now, had Dominic quickly reassessing his wife. She'd taken a firm stand against him, refusing to cower in the face of his imperiousness. There were layers to this woman—who looked at him as though he were the devil himself—that he wanted to unravel. Admittedly, Dominic was quite intrigued by this latest discovery.

“Have dinner with me,” he said without preamble, switching tactics. Dominic could tell that he'd shocked her, the unexpected invitation instantly putting her on edge. But she was right to be distrustful of him. Dominic could be the first to admit that his intentions were rarely pure, especially when it came to Eden.

“What?”

“Dinner,” he pressed on, speaking so quietly that she could barely hear him. “I want you to have dinner with me.”

The incredulous look on her face was completely justified. The unladylike snort however drew Dominic's brows together. "Have you completely lost your mind?" she nearly screeched.

"I assure you, my mental state is well intact, pet. What I want is your company for dinner."

"Hell would freeze over before I'd willingly sit down to dinner with you."

"Well then, considering your unwillingness, I'd say you are now being coerced into this. You will stay at The Roosevelt Hotel until this evening. James will pick you up promptly at seven and bring you to Hyacinth where you and I will sit down and have a nice meal. Conversation naturally will be played by ear."

She scowled. "You can go fu—"

"None of that, pet. Crassness does not become you," he chided mildly although his expression spoke of his seriousness.

"You think you can threaten to take my child, take away my livelihood, and I'm just going to cordially sit down and have a peaceful meal with you —"

"Yes, that is exactly the point," he drawled. "What I need you to understand is that your attachment to this child, your motherly bond as they call it, has given me the upper hand. Refuse me, sweeting, and I will file for sole custody of that child, and make no mistake, I will win. I have a team of attorneys on retainer more than capable of making sure I win. In doing so, I will have them take their time, drag this out in court until Liam is well out of diapers and ready for school. What little money I'm sure you still have will run out long before a judge will even take this case. What lies ahead of you is a very unpleasant, very arduous future of court dates, and very little time to raise a son. Any further resistance from you, and the boy will be

sent to a boarding school well out of your reach,” he spelled out with finality, showing exactly the depth of his ruthlessness.

“How can you be so heartless? He’s your son,” she said bitterly, hating the very idea no doubt.

“Yes,” he agreed. His face, as usual, revealed nothing of what he was feeling. “But seeing as I never wanted children, he is simply another pawn for me to use however I see fit. And right now, he is my best arsenal against you.”

“I won’t let you use him this way, Dominic! It’s too vile, even for you.”

“Then I’m sure I will see you this evening.” He turned his back to her then, disregarding her latter comment, pressing a button on his desk. It only took a moment for the new head of his security to appear. James Maxwell had been in Dominic’s employ for the better part of a year now and had come highly recommended. He was considered more than a bodyguard. He was an enforcer. The one Dominic found himself calling on to perform the messier part of his business. At ’six foot four and two-hundred-fifty pounds, he was extremely good at what he did.

“Sir?”

“Mrs. Armstrong has just returned from a very long trip and wishes to retire at The Roosevelt until this evening when she will accompany me to dinner. Please see that she makes it to her suite.”

“Yes, sir.”

He reclaimed the seat behind his imposing desk before deigning Eden with his attention once again. “I will see you this evening, sweeting.” That was a clear dismissal as any, punctuating the effect by poring over the documents on his desk.

\* \* \*

Eden wanted to scream. She was at her wit's end and as she angrily paced the length of the presidential suite he'd stashed her in, the childish need to throw things nearly choked her. But unfortunately that would resolve nothing. The one she wanted to rail against, the one she was so moved to murder, was nowhere in sight. She'd been here for the better part of the afternoon trying to devise a plan, but any attempt she'd made thus far had been thwarted by James, the mastiff bodyguard's refusal in letting her leave. The more time passed, the more desperate she became. Her gaze bounced around the room, and once again, temptation presented itself in the open balcony. She'd immediately dismissed the idea before, but now it seemed her only choice. Eden practically ran for it, but was painfully disappointed to find that her earliest assessment had been correct.

It was too far down for her to even chance the jump. But then, anything was better than the alternative, wasn't it? Dinner with Dominic Armstrong was anathema to her. For just a moment Eden was transported back to that evening just a year prior when she'd climbed up on the ledge at Bruce's home. She'd had nothing then but bleakness, but now there was Liam. Sweet Liam who may have had a bastard for a father, but needed his mother now more than anything else. Eden had no doubt that Dominic would carry out his threat, and even now, the merest thought of subjecting her son to Dominic's dose of parenting sickened her. She would die before she allowed Dominic to take her son from her.

Fighting off the hopelessness that was beginning to bleed into her bones, Eden returned to the room. She collapsed in one of the low brocade chairs and pulled out her phone. She needed to speak to Jenna. Her best friend responded on the first ring and Eden instantly knew something wasn't quite right with her.

“What’s the matter?” God, please she couldn’t possibly deal with any more bad news.

“Eden—”

“Just tell me.”

“Four men showed up a little bit ago. Two of them are at the door and the other two are outside. They haven’t knocked or bothered us, but I can’t leave the condo, Eden.”

“Fuck,” Eden cursed, bringing her hand to her face. He was so ahead of her. Always two steps ahead! She breathed deeply, the sting of tears tickling her nose before pooling in her tightly closed eyes.

“Eden.”

“Uh...it’s...it’s okay.” She released a shuddering sigh. “It’s going to be okay. Just stay put. They’re Dominic’s security team. They won’t hurt you or Liam, just...just wait them out. I’m going to be home later tonight.”

“Don’t worry about Liam, Eden, he’s fine. I can take care of him until you get back. I just don’t want you to do anything crazy. Don’t do anything you’re going to regret.”

“He has me tied up in knots, Jen. I don’t know how I’m going to get myself out of this. Every time I think I have him beat, he’s quick to disillusion me of that fact.” She raked a hand through her hair in frustration. Too agitated to sit still, she jumped to her feet and began pacing anew. “You were right about him wanting to take Liam. He threatened to file for full custody.”

Eden heard the sharp intake of breath. “No judge is going to take an infant from their mother, Eden. You can win this.”

“I won’t even have the chance. He took all my money...I have maybe five hundred dollars to my name right now. Even if I found an attorney who



would take my case, I wouldn't put it pass Dominic to use his resources to bribe the judge or something horrible like that."

"What are you going to do? Tell me how I can help?"

The genuine concern in the other woman's voice thawed a little bit of the ice Eden felt like she was encased in. She was glad to know, despite everything that was going on, she had Jenna in her corner. Her best friend had yet to let Eden down. She'd been incredible throughout all of this.

"You're doing more than enough. I just need some time...I need to regroup and think. Everything is happening too fast for me to come up with a plan."

"What did he say when you asked for a divorce?"

"Till death do us part," she quoted bitterly.

"I didn't realize he took your vows so seriously."

Eden snorted. "He doesn't. Nothing about this sham marriage is serious."

The unexpected knock on the door caused Eden to halt midstride. With her heart suddenly in her throat, she warily looked at the door, hoping with every fiber of her being that it wasn't Dominic.

"Everything okay?"

"I'll call you back."

He wouldn't knock, Eden silently acknowledged on the second knock. Dominic was not one to value her privacy. She pocketed her phone and tentatively journeyed to the door. Rising on her toes to peer through the peephole, she saw one of The Roosevelt's concierges holding a long, black garment bag across his right arm, while his fisted left hand prepared to rap once more at her door. Eden pulled the door open before he could knock and was greeted by the concierge's practiced smile.

"Ma'am, Mr. Armstrong has requested we bring these up for you?"

Of course he did. Eden stepped aside, allowing him to enter the room. “Where do you want this, ma’am?”

“Where ever is fine.” He didn’t miss a beat as he effortlessly set the black bag on the massive, well-made king mattress and hastened to fetch the black shoe box he’d left at the entrance. He wasn’t stupid enough to wait around for a tip and Eden made no move to stop him when he turned on his heel and left soon after.

\* \* \*

In the ensuing two hours, Eden fought a hard, mentally exhausting battle with herself that ultimately led to her pounding headache. Try as she might she couldn’t come up with a way to leave this damn hotel room. She hadn’t even figured out a way to outsmart the guard dog at her door. She’d thought about calling his bluff several times now. She could push Dominic’s hand and see just how far he was willing to go. But she feared doing so would set off a domino effect that would somehow affect Liam and Jenna in some way. Dominic had his security in Amesbury for a reason, a warning maybe, but Eden wasn’t ready to test the theory yet, not when Liam and Jenna’s safety depended on it. What she needed was more time, but that too had quickly slipped from her fingers when the clock struck seven a few short minutes later. Doom settled in the pit of her stomach like stone as she was forced to face the inevitable.

Dominic had stacked the deck against her, and there was nothing Eden could do in that instant but bide her time once again, until she could find some leverage to use against him. While she headed to the bathroom to freshen up, resolve settled in her. She would go along with his game, play the arm candy he’d married, until she figured out how to beat him. Thinking it however was one thing, actually carrying out the act, reverting back to

that loathsome role, donning that degrading mantle was like wading through a cesspool. It felt like she was betraying herself.

Eden felt a piece of herself wither further when she finally slipped into the cream colored dress he'd purchased for her.

It was designer, delicately embroidered lace that hugged her curves and stopped about mid-thigh. Stepping in front of the mirror, Eden was faced with the reflection of her old self; the expensive, well bought girl who'd feared destitution like the plague and had willingly sold her soul to the devil for a life that had turned out to be less than ideal. It was difficult looking at the girl, looking at exactly what sort of person she'd been a little more than a year ago.

For just a moment, that shallow girl, along with her insecurities and fears, threatened to overshadow the self-reliant, courageous woman Eden had worked so tirelessly to become. But Eden was quick in nipping it in the bud. She would be damned if she allowed that snake to strip away her self-worth. God, she couldn't believe it had come down to this! All that planning and all that saving just to end up back at square one! Right under Dominic's thumb. Despite the direness of her current predicament, Eden refused to concede defeat. There was still fight left in her. Self-preservation thrived at her core, made her carefully evaluate the situation and strategize accordingly.

Eden made sure to remain in the suite for as long as she possibly could before James's persistent knocking had her walking to the door. By the time they made it to the restaurant, it was well past the allotted hour, but Eden was beyond caring. If she had to endure him back into her life, she sure as hell wasn't going to make it easy. Once was she safely ensconced inside the cossetting interior of the sleek, black Rolls Royce he'd sent for her, they were off. The ride was surprisingly brief, but it afforded Eden enough time

to gather herself and try not to act like a complete moron when she finally faced him. She scrounged up some much needed bravado and fueled it with renewed ire. She was however taken slightly aback when she alighted from the vehicle and found herself facing a high-rise rather than the restaurant she had been expecting. Puzzled she turned to James who silently stood at her side.

“Where are we?”

“There’s been a slight change of plans, Mrs. Armstrong.”

“I can see that, but why?”

“Please, ma’am, Mr. Armstrong has waited long enough for your arrival.” With a steady hand on her lower back and an arm indicating that she should walk forward, James urged her towards the entrance of the building. Blood rushed to her head, her heart was beating too fast now, and sweat began to pearl against her skin. Everything was a blur to her, even the elevator ride to the very top floor of the high rise didn’t seem to register in Eden’s current state. She hadn’t anticipated this. She could’ve handled the restaurant—the buffer of the patrons would’ve made it easier for her to fend him off—but it was just them now. Eden’s heart lurched painfully in her chest, warning of an incoming panic attack. She told herself to breathe, even as they drew nearer to the place where she least wanted to be. Turning back however was no longer an option when the door flew open before James had the opportunity to knock.

He stood there like the devil incarnate, the tautness of his features and the barely restrained hold he had on his fury put the fear of that devil at Eden’s core. He looked murderous.

“That will be all, James,” came the terse dismissal, and he failed to give his bodyguard anymore mind as he wrapped a hand around Eden’s wrist and brusquely tugged her inside, closing the door soundly in James’s face.

Eden struggled to free herself from his unyielding hold as he dragged her behind his unforgiving frame. When he finally stopped it was to shove her onto the leather couch that thankfully broke her fall. His unnecessary brutality sparked Eden's rage again, and she shot to her feet facing him with a glare of her own. "How dare you—"

"Sit down."

"Like hell..."

"Sit. The. Fuck. Down." His naked fury was terrifying; his dark green eyes gleamed and his mouth compressed in a hard line. The aggression radiating off of him smacked into Eden instantly, pushing her back down on the couch. He loomed over her, a great big shadow of a man with a snarling face. "Listen to me very carefully," he breathed, barely containing himself, "do not mistake my tolerance for patience. I can only be pushed so far."

"And how far are you going to push me?" she fired back, hands balling into fists at her side, refusing to stand down. "What is it going to take for you to leave me the hell alone?"

"You are my wife!" he roared as though that was the answer to everything.

Eden laughed without humor. "Do you honestly think that's what I am? Do you honestly believe this joke of marriage is anything other than a well-dressed act of prostitution? I wasn't your wife, Dominic, I was a very well paid sex toy, and you were the sad and pathetic asshole who paid for it."

"Well then," he bit out, tearing his shirt out of his trousers and raising a hand to undo the remaining buttons, "seeing as I am still paying for it, I might as well get my money's worth." With the shirt hanging open, he was exposed to her now from throat to navel and a little further down, a point where she absolutely refused to look.

The implication of what he was about to do hit Eden squarely in the face, and she regarded him with a mixture of disbelief and resentment. “I hope you’re prepared to rape me, Dominic, because that’s the only way you’re going to touch me,” Eden said gravely, feeling completely unhinged by the situation and Dominic’s menacing form.

He took a staggering step back from her the instant she uttered those words, and then another as if suddenly faced with a two headed monster. Shock turned his face noticeably pale, and Eden was glad to see that she’d finally struck that boundless ego. “I wouldn’t...” he trailed off, abandoning whatever he had been about to say, and lanced Eden with his narrowed stare instead. “You are not to leave here until I return,” he ground out. Turning away from her, he marched out of his penthouse without a second glance.

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## Chapter Seven

*Dominic heard a noise, one that made his heart jump and had him out of his bed in record time. He hastened to the door but stopped instantly, his hand outstretched towards the knob. He knew he shouldn't. He was told to stay in his room; she hated when he disobeyed, and the last time he'd failed to do as he was told, she'd gotten incredibly angry and had locked him in that dark place. He'd been good since then, doing everything she asked without complaint. But the noise...he heard it again. Louder this time. Was someone in the house? Was she in trouble? Pressing his ear to the door, he listened carefully. There it was again! The loud thud had him blowing caution to the wind and yanking the door open. The hallway that led from his bedroom to hers was a long one, blanketed by darkness.*

*He hesitated again, this time standing at the threshold and staring into the gaping nothingness in front of him that frightened him like nothing else. It reminded him of that place. Dominic shuddered at the thought of having to walk through the darkness. But what if she needed him? What if she was in trouble again? The man from last time had hurt her very badly because Dominic had been too much of a coward to do anything about it. He'd hated seeing her in pain days after, even when she'd taken her anger out on him. The innate need to see that she was alright jostled him forward and before he knew it he was running down the stretch of foyer that seemed so infinite, but couldn't have ended soon enough.*

*"Mom..." He was at her door, hand on the doorknob, turning it even as he heard the muffled voices inside. "Mom," he called again, with his heart racing he heard the pained moans and entered her bedroom. "Mom, are you okay?"*

*“Fuck.” He heard the expletive in his search for her and found movement coming from her bed. There was some rustling of sheets before Dominic was faced with her scowling visage and that of a man he did not recognize. The man had been the one who’d whispered the obscenity. “You didn’t tell me you had a kid.” He stumbled out of the bed, nude except for the chain he wore around his neck as he frantically searched for his clothes. He found his jeans strewn on the floor a few feet away from where Dominic was currently standing. While he slipped them on, giving a small hop to get them over his hips, he looked at Dominic, who bemusedly retuned his stare.*

*“No, baby, don’t worry about him...” his mother tried to soothe, and with little regards to her own nudity, she chased after him.*

*“Jesus, Sheila, I’m not fucking you while you’re kid’s in the next room. Look, I’ll hook you up with this stash, but have my money by next week.” Having found his shirt seconds prior, he rustled a hand through Dominic’s hair on his way out.*

*“Come on, Randy, don’t leave. He’s a stupid little kid; he doesn’t even know what’s going on. He’s a little slow. Let me just put him in his room and we’ll party.”*

*“I think you’ve partied enough for the night, and I’m getting pretty tired of fucking you as payment. Free ride ends tonight. Don’t call me unless you have money to pay for it.” Dominic jumped again as the front door slammed shut behind the man who’d been in his mother’s bed.*

*It wasn’t too long before he felt the repercussion of his actions. She came at him with an open palm across his face. “You stupid little boy!” she screamed, anchoring a hand through his hair and tugging his head back to look into her sneering face. “God, I knew I should’ve killed you when I had the chance!” She dragged him behind her by his hair and Dominic raised his hand to hers to lessen the pain.*



*“Mom, I’m sorry...” Panic began to settle in when he saw exactly where they were headed. This was worse than the closet. “Mommy... Mommy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it,” he pleaded with raw desperation as she thrust open the basement door, and tugged him down the stairs. “Mommy...Mommy, please!”*

*“You’re just like him!” she screeched, battling to pick him up as he struggled to free himself. But as much as he tried, his seven-year-old body was only capable of so much. “You’re horrible, just like your father!” She shoved him in the crawl space and yanked the metal door shut just before he could run out. “You ruined everything. You ruined my life!”*

*“Mommy, I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I won’t do it again! Mom! Mom, it’s dark! It’s too dark!” Dominic sobbed, banging futilely against the metal door. He couldn’t breathe. He was suffocating. He banged and scrapped his nails raw, bleeding and crying into the enveloping, stifling darkness until finally he succumbed to the darkness itself.*

*\* \* \**

*“I believe the last time you were here we came to the agreement that the sum of money we gave you would take care of the little issue, thereby permanently removing you from our lives.” Winston Virgil Armstrong stared his imperious nose down at the haggard woman standing unsteadily in front of him. She oozed of degradation; the stench of her addiction permeated the air in his office. She was someone he’d believed he’d dealt with years ago. One of his son’s proclivities having spun out of control, he’d written a substantial check to the woman who’d come crying rape because Gregory had gotten a little too physical. Winston had done so to keep their family name out of the papers, but mostly to preserve his son’s future. He and his father and his father’s father had toiled for far too long to build their enterprise.*

*The name Armstrong was synonymous with trust, respect, and upstanding family values to the thousands upon thousands of consumers who purchased their products. To have had such a scandal threaten to tarnish that good name would've been mayhem. Furthermore, with 'Gregory's impending nuptials to Millicent Wentworth, heiress to one of the largest cosmetic lines in the country, the scandal would've shattered that possibility. The union presented a lucrative opportunity for a merger between their companies; it'd been quite imperative that nothing interfere with the wedding. Therefore, Winston had dealt with the problem in the manner befitting. Unfortunately, it appeared he'd been foolishly optimistic in believing the situation could've been so easily rectified.*

*"Well, I didn't get rid of it." She sniffed indignantly, folding her tattered cardigan over her emaciated form.*

*No, she certainly had not. Winston's gaze drifted down to the gangly child at her side. He could no more deny the child's paternity than he could ignore those unmistakable sharp, green eyes that were an inheritable trait in his family. Although he would have a definitive answer before the day was out. Then there was also the fact that the boy bore a startling resemblance to Gregory when he'd been that young. Much as he wanted to, Winston knew that the boy was his grandchild. His brow furrowed further as he carefully assessed the child. There were bruises covering his pale face, and the clothes he wore hung off his disturbingly slight figure. He looked malnourished, the gauntness of his features making him appear close to death.*

*"What will it take to get rid of you permanently?"*

*"How much is the child of a rapist worth?" she countered nastily, shrewd, despite the glassiness of her coal black eyes.*

*"You're willing to part with him?"*

*“You can have him and my silence, for a price.”*

*“Name it.”*

*“Two million dollars.”*

*“Done. In turn, you will never step foot on this property again. If you return, make no mistake, I will have you shot for trespassing.”*

*He cut her the check and the instant she had it in her hand, she stepped away from the boy, who quickly reached out to grab her sweater.*

*“Mommy...” he called softly.*

*“You’re not my problem anymore,” she said coldly, wrenching the little bit of her sweater he held in his small hand. She turned her back to him and walked out the door, leaving Dominic behind in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar faces.*

\* \* \*

He’d seen Sheila Swanson only once more after that when he’d been eighteen. She’d been a shell, more so than what he’d remembered her to be, and Dominic had been grateful for his upbringing in that his indifference had been able to help him cope with her perpetual contempt for him and the unforgettable way he’d been conceived. When he’d finally heard of her passing some months later, an overdose or some such, he’d already shut himself off from everything and had barely given her a thought until this evening. He raised a hand to the bartender for another shot, his fourth now, but Dominic had only just begun to drown the memories. God, he hadn’t gotten this drunk in quite some time now, but it seemed his demons were in quite the mood, gnawing away at Dominic’s soul with avaricious frenzy.

*I hope you’re prepared to rape me, Dominic, because that’s the only way you’re going to touch me.*

Ah yes, there it was again. He noticeably shuddered at the statement that continued to replay unendingly in his mind. Dominic closed his eyes,

but there was no finding peace there as eidetic memory detailed the gravity of her solemn expression when she'd uttered those damning words. The irony of the situation was not lost on him he realized as he tipped another shot down the hatch. He couldn't fault her for thinking he was capable of such a reprehensible act. But being a product of that act himself and being so unknowingly reminded of it sickened him. Dominic was many things, his vices were quite numerous, and he was the first to admit he was his own worst enemy, always toeing between that line of what was appropriate and what was not. But even he had limits. There weren't many, but physically accosting a woman, using brute strength to force himself on her, was something he could not do.

But then his father had been such a man, hadn't he? His mother, as twisted and loveless as she'd been, had certainly not been the first. Just another on a long list of paid off names. Dominic had never been close to his father and while Gregory was instructed to mind his new wife and the impending family that would come, Dominic had been sent abroad to boarding school and had rarely seen his father. Growing up in his grandfather's home, it'd been Winston and the mansion staff who'd welcomed him when he'd chosen to come home for the holidays. His grandfather had been the one to raise him, and even then, that relationship had been subpar at best. When Winston had finally passed, Dominic had finally been forced to go live with his biological father. But not before he'd discovered the truth about the things his grandfather had covered up for his son. In the documents he'd hidden in his safe behind the Degas in his office, there'd been documents detailing Gregory Armstrong's felonies, countless as they'd been Dominic had been sick from learning the truth.

When he did finally meet his father, it'd been with a very low opinion of him, one that had only plummeted in the ensuing years. Gregory had

been an ornery, egotistical brute who had not only relished pitting his two sons against each other, but had made it a point to completely disregard the increasingly repressible behavior of the youngest, while continuously lambasting the eldest. Dominic had always been the outcast, the black sheep...the bastard. He'd learned very early on to stop seeking validation from Gregory, who had seen him as nothing more than a constant reminder of his mistakes. Dominic was far past the age of begrudge his father or even the cards that fate had dealt him. But what did bother him more was the increasing concern that he'd somehow predisposed to behave as his father had. From the moment Dominic had made those discoveries, to his own gradual descent into immorality, the question of whether he was like his father had never been too far from his mind.

*I hope you're prepared to rape me, Dominic...*

No. He certainly had not been prepared to force himself on her. God, but the avowal had shaken him to the core, and to think, it'd all began because she'd once again dared to defy him. He'd been punctual; arriving at the restaurant with renewed focus, Dominic had been ready and willing to return a morsel of what he'd taken from her. He had even foolishly asked his personal assistant to pick out something from Eden's favorite jeweler. He had examined the diamond tennis bracelet with an appreciative eye on his ride over and had surmised that she would like it. Dominic had waited and waited and waited, his ire meanwhile had only grown increasingly worse as the restaurant staff and patrons alike subtly looked on, spectators to his humiliation. After two hours of waiting, he'd angrily marched out of the restaurant, practically scalding James's ear off when he'd gotten him on the phone. It had been that same anger that had pushed him to act so irrationally. But then rationality always seemed to elude him when it came

to Eden. She'd made a sport out of getting under his skin, he thought morosely.

“Another, sir?”

That question penetrated through his muddled brain, and he knew another shot would put him over the edge; another shot would serve no purpose but to have him embarrass himself further, and suffice it to say, Dominic had been humiliated quite enough this evening to last him a few years. Raising a hand to indicate that he'd had enough, he rose to his feet and was grateful that he only wavered a bit. James, trusty bodyguard that he was, would handle the tab. Dominic did not wait for him as he began a measured pace towards the private elevator. Luckily for him, there was no one in the immediate vicinity to witness his attempt at walking in a straight line. He was quite coherent, but he was more relaxed now. The demons had been quelled, resting once more in the shadowed recesses of Dominic's mind. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the metallic elevator wall behind him and exhaled deeply. What exactly was he going to do with his wife? And she was still his wife. Regardless of her immediate thoughts on the matter, Dominic had no intentions of granting the divorce. That was one thing he absolutely would not do; the why of it still managed to elude him, but he was adamant on the matter.

Upon entering the penthouse, Dominic was greeted with silence. The door closed with a hush snick behind him, and as he toed off his shoes, his gaze instantly searched for her. Some morbid part of him wondered if she was hiding among the shadows ready to spring out at him with a butcher knife. With a wry grin at the conjured image, he ambled further inside the expansive penthouse, making a beeline for the living room where he'd left her. And there she was. He stopped short at the sight of her, curled up on the

leather couch. Dominic was momentarily arrested by the contradicting image she presented.

Huddled as she was in the fetal position, she looked like a little girl, with wisps of her hair skimming along her slumbering visage, and her mouth parted slightly, her innocence struck him. But that was where the similarity stopped. From where he stood, Dominic had a spectacular view of the sexy curve of her ass and how enticingly high her dress rode up. If he tilted his head just a bit to the right, he could see her panties and how it sweetly gloved her cunt. His cock did not thank him when he decided to forgo his teenage inclination and instead headed to his bedroom to grab a comforter.

Ah yes, she was the sweetest thing, lying there so openly, on impulse he crouched down to her level and reached a hand out to her face. God, he'd missed touching her. Just the feel of her smooth skin beneath his fingertips electrified him like nothing else. His caress was feather light, barely skimming the surface of her skin, but it was enough to send blood rushing between his legs. He needed to stop, Dominic knew that he should stop; he knew that at any moment she would wake and look at him with those stunning citrine eyes and there would be hell to pay. But Dominic was all too willing to pay the price for another second of this. He could blame his imprudence on the alcohol...he could blame the kiss on the alcohol, too. The instant his mouth fell on hers, Dominic knew it would not be enough because the soft beds of her lips compelled him to deepen the kiss. He instantly stopped himself. Rising, he raised a hand to his face in frustration. He needed a fucking shower!

\* \* \*

Eden came awake with a jolt, puzzled for a moment as to where she was. It didn't take too long for the memories to come crashing down on her, and

she cradled her head in her hands when it began to pound.

“Here.” Startled, she whipped her head up and regretted it when she felt a twinge at the base of her skull. But she recovered quickly enough, concealing the pain long enough to look up at him. He donned only a pair of dark blue jeans, slung low to display his immaculate physique. His hair stuck out around his head, slightly damp as though he’d recently taken a shower. She didn’t even know he owned a pair of jeans, Eden thought inanely, all the while staring dimly at the black mug he held out to her. “It’s only coffee, light on the poison and heavy on the cream,” he said wryly, reading her like a book. When she still refused to accept the coffee mug, his impassive features turned into a scowl. “Suit yourself.”

“I want to go home,” she said petulantly, glaring at his retreating back. “You can’t hold me here against my will, Dominic. Besides, I have responsibilities back in Amesbury.”

“Last time I checked you didn’t have a job anymore,” he derided.

Eden’s eyes widened. “So you admit it? You’re the one who got me fired?” Sure she’d suspected it. But to have her suspicions realized was awful.

“Obviously it was not the right working environment for you if your bosses were stupid enough to believe that lie.”

Eden sprang to her feet. “What gives you the right to think you can just unravel everything I’ve worked so hard to accomplish? You had no right to interfere in my life!”

“I believe I had every right.” He strode towards her barefooted, his own coffee mug still in hand. He stopped a few feet away and Eden was internally glad for it. “As I have said before,” he continued, staring pointedly at her, making sure that she understood everything he was about to say, “you are my wife and your place is at my side. I’ve indulged your



little escapade long enough. It is high time you returned home,” he finished cuttingly.

“My home is in Amesbury,” she gritted.

“I’ve instructed my men to escort Liam and Jenna to the mansion in Langston, along with some of your things. I will leave the rest for you to sort out before I put your condo on the market.”

“You did what?”

“You are no longer living in your condo in Amesbury. As of today, your home is at the mansion.”

\* \* \*

It didn’t take long for it to dawn on Eden that she’d naively contributed in her own downfall. This had all been strategically connived from the start, and she had stupidly fallen into the well laid trap. There were no coincidences when it came to Dominic. He was painstakingly methodical about everything he did. He didn’t make a move unless he’d carefully considered all possibilities, weighing the consequences until it was within his favor, and only then would he act. So Eden understood that everything that had transpired so far had been his doing. But what truly bothered her in all this, what infuriated her most, was that she’d made the stupid mistake of sending those letters to Jenna with her name on them. One thoughtless mistake, and she’d given him the gun with which he now used to hold her hostage. That gradual realization was a bitter pill to swallow, and it didn’t go down easy at all. She leaned her head back against the headrest, the Rolls that had brought her to the penthouse the night before was now en-route to take her back to that place. Regardless of the manner in which she was returning to the mansion, Eden still felt like a prisoner being carted away to the penitentiary. She didn’t want to think about the memories that awaited her, or the degradation she’d faced in nearly every room of that gilt

prison. The one comforting prospect in all this was that she was thankfully left to wallow in her humiliation alone. In his typical charming manner, after ordering Eden to the mansion, he'd informed her that he had business to see to, and she was not allowed to leave until he returned. Eden had tuned him out after he'd told her where Liam was.

The thought of seeing her baby boy again brought a smile to her face. Liam was her Achilles' heel and that was the only reason she'd agreed to return to the mansion in the first place. He'd lured her with her son.

*...he is my best arsenal against you...*

The conversation in his office came back with a flash, taunting Eden with her failure. Liam was certainly his best defense against her, and for now, Eden would give Dominic that, she would allow him to believe that her resignation was permanent. With his ego being the size it was, stroking it further would only benefit her in the end.

When the car rolled up to the circular driveway, Eden did not wait for the driver to come open the door for her. She jumped out and made a dash up the three half-moon granite steps that led to the frosted glass entrance. Before she could reach for the brass doorknob, the door flew open and Eden was faced with Jenna's grinning face. She didn't even have time to collect herself when her best friend jumped into her arms and embraced Eden for all she was worth. It was silly that they were hugging like they hadn't seen each other in years, rather than the day and a half it had been, but all the same it felt good to see a friendly and familiar face.

"I'm so happy to see you in one piece, Eden!" she breathed, taking a step back to look at Eden critically. "You are in one piece aren't you?"

"Well, that depends on who ask. But I'm dealing, I guess." Eden closed the door behind her as they stepped further into the mansion's foyer, large as it was with its massive skylight just above. "Where's Liam?"

“Taking a nap in the living room.” With their arms linked at the elbow, they walked side by side through foyer and down the hall. “He’s been a good boy, but I think he missed you.”

Eden knew she’d missed her son, too, but she didn’t know how profoundly until she laid eyes on his slumbering form. Jenna had made a bed for him on the plush carpeted floor, adding Liam’s own fleece and down blankets to provide extra comfort for him. He looked so peaceful. She blinked back tears as she detached herself from Jenna’s side and quickly made her way to him, toeing off her shoes in the process. Gingerly she knelt at his side, careful not to wake him, she bent down and pressed a lingering kiss to his forehead, taking an infinite second to inhale his sweet scent. He jerked for a brief second as though aware of his mother’s presence before settling back into sleep, the slight frown that had creased his brow disappearing in the process.

“Did he eat?” she asked a moment later, staying at his side, making sure to keep her voice low. Going nearly on two days since she’d last nursed, her breasts were engorged. The only relief she’d gotten was ridding herself of the excess in the shower earlier. But more than anything, Eden missed the bond they shared in doing something so natural.

Jenna nodded, understanding written all over her face. “Yeah, he had a bottle just a little bit ago, and he’s freshly changed.”

Eden looked at her friend with a watery smile, unable to contain herself. “Thanks, Jen,” she said quietly.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Jenna was instantly at her side, another hug at the ready. “Eden, you know I’m your road dog. I would do anything for you and the butterball,” she quipped. “I’m just so sorry I couldn’t prevent this from happening. Everything happened so fast, one minute I’m holed up in the apartment with Liam, and the next, they’re telling me to open the door

and come with them or something bad was going to happen to you. I couldn't do anything about it.

"Trust me, I know," Eden returned with a reassuring smile, pulling away and wiping her tears in the process. "Dominic's an asshole like that. No isn't part of his extensive repertoire. He rarely ever gives you a choice when he's got you down."

"So are you staying here for the time being?"

Eden looked at her. "We're staying here for the time being. At least until I can come up with a way to get us back into our condo."

"I don't know if he'll let me stay, Eden, with what I've experienced so far, the man doesn't seem like he wants any sort of obstacle standing between you and him."

"You're staying, Jenna...that is, if it's what you want."

"Of course I want to stay with you and Liam. You guys are all the family I have, but—"

"But nothing. If you want to stay, then you're staying. There's no one else I trust more than you. We're in this together, all or nothing."

\* \* \*

A little while later Eden, Jenna and Liam were in the kitchen. With Eden refusing the cook's help in making them something to eat, both women were left in peace to fend for themselves. A task that presented very little challenge for the cooking-inclined Jenna who managed to make them pesto chicken pasta for lunch with the extensive ingredients in pantry. They ate in amiable silence that was intermittently broken by Liam's fervent coos, clearly happy to have his mother back.

"Alex has been calling me," Jenna injected soberly, playing with Liam while Eden washed their dishes. She noted the slight pause in her friend's movements before the other woman quickly recovered and turned to her

with brows raised, waiting for Jenna to continue. “He’s the one who told Dominic where you were. I haven’t spoken to him directly, just listened to the voicemails. He’s been bragging about it. Apparently Dominic gave him a lot of money for the information. But knowing Alex, he’s probably blown through it by now. He wanted me to join him in Vegas.”

“You’re not thinking of going...are you?”

At Eden’s lingering stare, Jenna looked away guiltily, too ashamed of what had been a momentary bout of weakness to look at her best friend. “I thought about it,” she admitted ruefully. “Seven years of bad habits are extremely hard to break, I’ve learned.” She gave a deprecating smile before continuing. “And he’s really good at telling me what I want to hear.”

Eden frowned, set the dish she held on the veined marble countertop, and hurried over to Jenna. “Jen...”

“I know what you’re going to say, Ede, and trust me it’s the same things I’ve been telling myself for years. But don’t worry; I’m not ready to be used as a punching bag again. I think he actually knocked some sense into me the last time he beat me. He’s a habit I have to kick; I’m not deluding myself into thinking it’s going to be easy, but being away from him and that atmosphere has been really good.” She leaned into her friend’s one shoulder hug with a smile. “I’m afraid you’re stuck with me for a while.”

“Please, like I’m ready to get rid of you.” They laughed, and while Eden grabbed Liam, Jenna stood to retrieve a fancy bottle of water from the stainless steel subzero that blended perfectly with the black kitchen cabinetry. The kitchen, massive in size and stocked with an extensive array of food was equipped with state of the art appliances and kitchenware. It was modern, clean and simple in its aesthetics, yet it screamed class. Its best feature was undoubtedly the center island with its beautifully veined black and white marble countertop.

It had been quite overwhelming for Jenna the first time she'd laid eyes on the mansion and had continued to be blown away once she'd stepped foot inside. She'd never once imagined herself in this sort of place and was still coming to grips with the sheer splendor of it all. Casting blue eyes on Eden who was too preoccupied with Liam to notice, Jenna was assaulted with a slight twinge of envy that rapidly went away the second it arose. She flushed guiltily, hating that she'd even conjured the emotion. Eden may have been surrounded by luxury and had an über-wealthy husband, but that didn't mean it was a good life. All of this opulence undeniably came with a price and its own set of problems which Eden had to deal with now. But still, Jenna thought quietly to herself, it must be nice to have a mansion over your head while she contended with those problems.

Throughout the latter portion of the afternoon, Eden spent time showing Jenna the rest of the mansion. All ten bedroom and ten baths, the indoor and outdoor pools, the tennis court that was well maintained but rarely used. They proceeded to the indoor workout room, the two dining rooms, the living rooms, and lastly, the guesthouse that was separated from the main house by a breathtakingly beautiful landscaped garden that appeared to provide a sweet sort of sanctuary from the outside world. The sheer magnitude of the place simply bowled Jenna over. It wasn't just a mansion...it was an estate. She was still trying to wrap her head around everything when they sat down for dinner a few hours later.

"This place is breathtaking."

"Don't be fooled, Jen," Eden warned over her salad, "it might seem nice on the outside but not everything is all rainbows and unicorns," she echoed Jenna's earlier sentiment. "There's a monster that lives in the castle with me," she deadpanned, completely serious in her statement.

Jenna patted her hand comfortingly. “We’ll figure it out, Eden. We always do.”

Indeed they did. The impending arrival of the monster however weighed on her as time marched on and the day grew that much closer to an end.

Dominic had yet to make an appearance, and while Eden had been distracted enough for the better part of the day with Liam and the impromptu showing of her former home to her best friend, she couldn’t keep him out of her mind for too long. He was always there, right around the corner of her subconscious, lurking in the shadows and waiting to pounce. But as she’d done on previous occasions, she pushed the thought of him as far away as she possibly could so she could continue the rest of her night in relative peace. Jenna had instantly taken to the guestroom Eden had led her to just down the hall and while she occupied herself with the ensuite bathroom, Eden slipped back into mommy mode.

She’d deliberately set herself up in the room furthest away from the master bedroom she’d shared with Dominic. There was no way she was going to sleep in that room. Riffing through the large bag Jenna had brought with her, Eden was cheered to find that she’d remembered to pack Liam’s brown bear, along with several of Eden’s clothing. While she got Liam ready for bed, changing his diaper, wiping him down with a cloth and some warm sudsy water, Jenna made an appearance. She looked freshly showered, pairing her pajama shorts with a cute pink camisole. She’d gathered her damp wheat blond hair to one side so that it hung just past her ample chest.

“I needed that shower,” she cheerfully announced, walking into the room with a great big smile on her makeup free face. “Do you want me to watch Liam while you get settled?”

Eden blinked, not having even thought of herself. “Uh...” She’d showered earlier this morning and had slipped back into the clothes she’d worn the previous day, when she’d barged into Dominic’s office. It would be nice to put on a clean set of clothes. “You don’t mind?” But before Eden posed the question, Jenna had already taken Liam from her.

“Go. Relax for a bit. I can hold down the fort until you’re finished.”

Eden smiled gratefully, rummaging through the bag once again, searching for some clothes for herself. There wasn’t much of an option, so she grabbed the first thing she found. “I won’t be long,” she said before disappearing inside the bathroom. This bathroom, unlike the others, didn’t have a separate bathtub, simply a standing shower that was nearly the size of the bedroom itself. Eden wasn’t looking for luxury, she simply wanted to get clean and change her clothes afterwards. She stepped out of the shower and onto the heated ceramic tiles; the thick mist enveloped her as she reached for her towel on the rack. She made short work of drying herself and sliding into the nightgown she’d grabbed. When she finally emerged from the bathroom Eden was slightly more reinvigorated and ready to nurture her child.

“I can’t thank you enough, Jen,” she said wryly, gathering the bevy of pillows against the headboard.

“Don’t mention it,” Jenna handed Liam over with a smile, “but I’m beat. I think I’m going to hit the sack.” The impromptu yawn only reiterated her statement.

“Goodnight.”

“Night.”

Then she was gone and Eden was left once again with her son. She settled against the pillows while cradling Liam in her arms. “Hi there, sweetheart,” she cooed to the wide-eyed infant, who looked back intently at



her smiling face. “Mommy missed you so much.” Eden slipped the strap of her dress down her shoulder until her left breast and nipple was exposed. It took her a second to maneuver him in a position they were both comfortable with before guiding him to latch on. She winced a little when he clamped on, but soon forgot about the pain when he began to feed. “Did you have fun with your Auntie Jenna?” Eden spoke quietly into the silence as her son ate, comforted by his presence. “I’m so sorry about all this moving around, baby. But don’t worry, we’re going to go home soon enough.”

“You are home.” Eden jumped at the unexpected sound of his voice. Her eyes flew to the door and found him at the entrance. He cut an intimidating figure in his tailored charcoal grey suit, pristine white shirt, and burgundy silk tie. Eden’s heart gave an involuntary jolt at his presence, quickening considerably when he ambled further inside the room and closed the door behind him. She’d done such a spectacular job in shoving him from her mind that she’d forgotten about his arrival. Her tongue slid nervously across her lips as she watched his unhurried gait towards her, but he stopped short and Eden released a relieved sigh when he remained at the foot of the bed.

“Our home is in Amesbury,” she said tautly into the silence, regarding him from beneath a veil of dark lashes. “The only reason we’re here is because you’ve left us no choice.” As though sensing his mother’s agitation, Liam fussed a little, eliciting a rather loud mewl that Eden instantly quieted with rhythmic pats on his bum and a few shushing sounds.

Bereft of speech, Dominic was left to stare momentarily. Stunned didn’t quite capture the feeling coursing through him in that instant, yet it nevertheless seemed appropriate a word. The whole of her attention was no longer on him as she centered it on the bundle she held preciously against her chest. As he watched her, tending to that bundle, her beautiful visage

transformed into something Dominic found difficult to pinpoint. But he was altogether fascinated.

“You always have a choice,” he murmured with silken reproach, “I simply steer you in the right direction.”

“Your direction,” she bit icily.

His lips quirked up. “Precisely.”

“And the fact that I want nothing to do with you bears no consideration?”

“I see you’ve settled in quite nicely, but this isn’t the room you’re supposed to be in,” he remarked with candor, disregarding her previous statement completely. “I had a crib brought to the master bedroom for the... for the boy.” He recovered quickly enough, but not before Eden had a chance to note the slight bit of discomfort that had flitted across his handsome features.

“His name is Liam, Dominic. You’ve said it before, and I’m sure you can manage to say it again. Or is it harder to say your son’s name when you’re not bullying me into submission?” she queried with icy contempt. “If you went to the trouble of getting a crib for Liam then you can go the extra length to have it brought to this room, because he and I are not going into that godforsaken bedroom. You may have brought us here, but hell will freeze over before I allow you to touch me again.” Honey gold eyes burned with unwavering fire as they met his narrowed gaze with unflinching resolve. By the stubborn set of her jaw and pursed lips, Dominic was wise enough to know he would not win this battle, at least not tonight. The war between them however was ongoing and would undoubtedly come to a head someday soon and defeat on his part would be unacceptable in that arena. So Dominic decided that conceding defeat now would only make his inevitable victory that much sweeter.

“Stranger things have happened,” he drawled. “Very well, you may remain in this bedroom for the time being, but understand that it is because I allow it.” He turned to leave but stopped short at the entrance. “The boy... Liam will have his crib here no later than tomorrow.” With that said he waltzed out of the room in the same manner he’d entered it with superiority and egotism that swathed him like a second skin.

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## *Chapter Eight*

They were at a stalemate. One week since her arrival, Dominic had yet to accomplish what he'd set out to do—bring his wife back into his bed. It wasn't for his lack of trying, but it seemed circumstances were no longer the same. For someone who lavished in control over himself and others, admitting that his authority was now restricted, by an infant no less, wholly irked him. His expectations had been quite high when he'd set out on his course in returning Eden to the mansion where she belonged. He'd believed their marriage would revert back to what it had been when she'd left. In her yearlong absence, Dominic had surprised himself in abstaining from taking another woman to his bed. He'd made the attempt a week after learning of her disappearance. In a fit of blind rage and drunkenness, he'd invited a very eager, well-endowed blue eyed brunette to his hotel suite, where he'd then instructed her to strip and had been angrily underwhelmed by what he'd seen. He'd wanted to fuck her, but Dominic had ended up with his left hand, the images of his caramel skinned wife and the lushness of her curves had driven him to his rather unsatisfactory release. That had been the first and last time. He'd hired the PI soon after, determined to have her back. That had been a little over a year ago. He had his wife back, but not the way he'd wanted. Rather than the passion soaked reunion he'd envisioned, there was nothing but an icy tolerance of his presence, and it was all thanks to Dominic's own child. Because of his child, he was looked upon as a scourge in his own damn home. Yes, his child. The son he had yet to acknowledge.

“Here.” Saved from reflecting on the subject for too long, Dominic accepted the amber filled short glass from Bruce with a silent thanks. They

were at Bruce's home, in his home office to be precise. The incident of Bruce abetting his wife in her escape had soured their near two decade long friendship, but not enough that Dominic would turn his back on Bruce in his hour of need. When he'd phoned, the direness of his tone had been enough to bring Dominic from his downtown office as soon as he was available. Any thoughts of going home had quickly come and gone. He would not be missed.

"Thank you for coming." It was said with tight courtesy as he took a seat across from Dominic in the dark leather chair.

"Tell me what's going on, Bruce," Dominic invited with reserved patience. He brought his glass to his mouth, and from over the rim, he watched Bruce's inner struggles play out across a face that had aged considerably in the years since he'd taken up office. They'd met in college, and in the fraternal halls of their alma mater, they'd cemented their brotherhood. Despite that they were friends, Dominic and Bruce couldn't have been more different. Bruce was the personification of charm; he had the movie star good looks along with a smile that had people eating out of the palm of his hand.

He was a great orator, with a public image that spoke of sturdy values and integrity that the public adored. Bruce had all the attributes of a good politician. What made him great was that he was smart enough to keep his hands clean when it came to the dirty dealings of politics. That task was charged to his best friend. Dominic's lack of scruples made it easy to handle the matters Bruce could not. The lying and the cheating and the manipulation came at a high price, but it was one Dominic was willing to pay. They both had high political aspirations, and Dominic was content to remain in the background, pulling the strings in order to achieve their goals.

They made a great team and had the chance to make it to the senate if they stayed the course.

“Cassie found out about Lucy,” he said tightly, claiming the dark leather seat across from Dominic. “She took the children to her parents’ home in Vermont. She’s threatening divorce.” He tossed back the well-aged whiskey and waved the glass around.

It was truly unfortunate that Bruce couldn’t keep his cock in line. Dominic uttered a curse with a long narrowed glance at his philandering friend. “Were we not clear that you were supposed to keep your affairs discreet, Bruce?”

“I did...I don’t know how she found out.”

“You were careless,” he condemned icily. “Are you asking me to interfere?” If he stepped in, made calls, the situation would be aptly handled and Bruce would have his wife and children before the end of the following day. The bad part about Dominic stepping in, however, was that his way was oftentimes quite ruthless, brutal even, so it was only when the situation truly called for it did he intervene.

“No,” Bruce said curtly, already aware of Dominic’s results. “I’ll take care of it.”

“It was only a one time affair. It meant nothing. You’ve been under a great amount of stress recently and she—”

“I said I got it,” he ground out impatiently. Shooting to his feet, he trudged back to the ornate liquor cabinet. “Tell me,” Bruce began casually, “how’s it going with your wife?” At the flash of those narrowed green eyes, Bruce knew he’d hit a nerve which was exactly what he’d intended. He was just drunk enough to disregard the fact that he was walking into dangerous territory. Given the current state of his own marriage, it cheered Bruce to know that his best friend was also failing at his. What was the adage? Ah

yes, misery did love company. “Should we toast to your fatherhood?” At Dominic’s abrupt curse, Bruce tossed his head back and laughed.

“By all means continue, Bruce, I would so love to provide the rope with which you might hang yourself with,” Dominic murmured darkly, bringing his glass to his mouth.

“Don’t be like that, Dom,” he said laughter in his voice. “I was only remarking on the irony. Is the child even yours?”

That was a question Dominic had asked himself the instant he’d learned of the child’s presence in Eden’s life. It hadn’t taken long to obtain the answer, one which had made it possible for him to move along with his plans. An extensive search into her life in the year long course of her absence had revealed no lovers, except for the male nurse, who she’d seen only a handful of times. From Dominic’s knowledge, they hadn’t slept together; a notion that had cheered him immensely.

“He’s...” he faltered a deep frown creasing his brow, “he’s mine.” Hearing the admission was halting, so was the emotion that came along with it. It was foreign thing, difficult to process and knowing this wasn’t the place for, Dominic tamped it down, refusing to give it further thought.

Bruce whistled. “I never thought I see the day.” Dominic hadn’t either. Being anyone’s father had never been in his plans, and if he could help it, those plans would not change. “What are you going to do? You guys have an even more dysfunctional marriage than Cassie and I do.” That was mildly stating things. What he and Eden had was a business arrangement that she’d complicated by bringing this child into the world.

“Divorce seems to be rather popular these days.”

“You’re going to let her go?”

“Popular, but not an option as far as I am concerned.” Letting Eden go was something Dominic would never do, not unless of course she killed

him herself, a notion he realized could very well happen considering her surmounting hatred for him. But it was a small price to pay. He would rather have her at his side, bathed in her enmity, than away from him where he knew happiness awaited her. It was selfish and petty of him, but Dominic never professed to be anything else.

\* \* \*

Insomnia was a fickle mistress that denied him sleep, and though he should've spent this time in his office working on ways to appease his finicky investors, Dominic walked the darkened halls of his home with only one destination in mind. He stood outside of the guestroom door, vacillating like a recalcitrant puppy on whether to enter or turn back with his tail between his legs. He contemplated long and hard before irrational need won over logic, and he silently opened the door to creep into the room. He approached the bed silently and watched her sleep.

She shifted slightly, and he held his breath, releasing it only when she settled again, her steady breathing reassuring him that she was once again fully asleep. His brooding gaze swept over her delicate features, running lasciviously across the contours of her body, knowing fully that just beneath the royal blue sheets, was skin that he hungered to taste. His hand reached out before he could stop himself, the need for contact far too great. The gentle sweep of his fingers along her soft cheek had her moaning softly. She did not wake, but shifted restlessly, moving her body in an unconscious effort to get closer to him.

He sucked in a breath, instantly aroused. He could feel himself hardening, hot, potent blood rushing through his veins to settle like lead in his cock. His thumb skated tantalizing slow across her bottom lip, tugging it down gently to feel the wet warmth of her mouth, an inadequate substitution for the hot set of lips he knew lied between her caramel thighs.



Dominic craved her, hungered to slide his tongue down her wet clit and savor the ambrosial essence of the pleasure only he could bring her. He wanted to pull away the sheet and tear at her measly nightgown, to feel the weight of her breasts in his hands, he wanted to lower his mouth to her dusky nipples until she begged him to enter the welcoming heat of her wet pussy and bury himself to the balls.

“Fuck,” he uttered harshly, taking a step back from her slumbering form. The curse came from a very dark, very primal place. It was the curse of an unsatisfied male. It was the curse of a man who knew if he continued, he would not be able to stop. What was it about Eden Mercer that enthralled him so thoroughly? Why wasn’t he able to satiate this burning hunger for her? His desire for her was so potent, so prevalent that Dominic felt her beneath his skin, in his blood. He should’ve gotten her out of his system by now. It had been his plan all along. Marrying her was not supposed to have been a long term thing. But one taste and she’d become his drug of choice. She had his dick on lock, coming to life for no one else but her. When it came to sex, she was his weakness, and Dominic hated that he wanted her this much.

A sound, a whimper from the far right of the bed drew his gaze to the crib that he’d sent his personal assistant to purchase. If Gina had been at all surprised by her boss’s odd request, she’d been professional enough to conceal it as she’d swiftly carried out his wants with the proficiency he’d associated her with. No expense was spared and the result was a hand crafted, rich espresso sleigh crib that contained one Liam Bennett Mercer, who was fully awake now and flailing arms and legs. It was with a sick sense of curiosity that prodded Dominic to move forward, slowly closing the space between himself and the crib.

When he finally stood close enough to peer into the crib, Dominic cast his critical gaze on the child. He was illuminated by a soft night light emanating from somewhere on the crib. Looking at him, staring into his large, round, hunter green eyes that were so inherently like his own, Dominic was once more taken by that foreign emotion. But unlike before, wrestling the emotion down proved rather difficult as he was forced to acknowledge it. What was it? Dominic couldn't put a name to it, but it stirred something, something he hadn't thought existed in himself. While he stood over the crib, scrutinizing pale cherubic features and a small body encased in a light blue onesie with tiny brown bears, Dominic waited for the indifference and the detachment to come, but he was sorely disappointed. Impulse, sheer stupid impulse, made him reach down, made Dominic awkwardly scoop up his son and hold him up to his eye level. His child. His son. He was a father. And in his hands was his child. Terror. Dominic was finally able to identify the emotion. It was pure, unadulterated terror that coursed through him as he looked into eyes that were a mirror reflection of his own.

"Hello," he murmured thickly, "I'm sure your mother has not spoken much to you about me, and for good reason I would say," Dominic brought him closer, his heart shifting uncomfortably fast in his chest. "But I am your father, and I am terrified of you."

\* \* \*

*But I am your father and I am terrified of you.*

In the dimly lit stillness of the room, Eden had heard the softly uttered admission. The instant she'd felt his touch, she'd come awake beneath the intimate brush of his fingers on her cheek. And when she felt the slow, enticing sweep of his thumb on her bottom lip, her body had flared with instant recognition. Fear of her body's inevitable betrayal, Eden hadn't

dared open her eyes but had remained utterly still, fighting to control her breathing even as unwanted desire tautened her nipples and pooled between her thighs. It had been sheer torture having him stand over her, touching her as he had, and part of her had questioned whether he'd been aware of her feigned slumber and was doing this to test her nerve. But then as quickly as he'd roused her passion, he'd been quick to temper it as he'd stepped away from her with a roughened curse. In the lapse of those eternal seconds when nothing but her own heartbeats had echoed through the silence, Eden had fought to keep her eyes closed.

It was only when she'd finally felt the weight of his gaze stray away from her that Eden had dared to open her eyes. From beneath the veil of her darkened lashes she'd watched him carefully as he'd stood over the crib. When he'd reached inside to take Liam, Eden's heart had battered fitfully in her chest, while motherly instinct to protect her child had urged her to intervene. But something had kept her rooted as she'd been forced to watch Dominic handle their child. He'd held the infant as one would a foreign object, at a distance, and to Eden it'd been such an awkward display to witness. And then she'd heard him speak, the deep reverberation of his voice filling the silence as he'd uttered those words that had Eden in her current state of confusion.

Once he'd returned Liam to his crib, Dominic had taken his leave and Eden had finally been able to go to her son. She'd nursed him and rocked him back to sleep, but remained awake, venturing out of her bedroom about an hour ago to make herself some coffee. Curled up on the couch with Liam sleeping peacefully in his playpen, Eden brought her cup of coffee to her lips, hoping the caffeine would somehow help her make sense of her muddled thoughts. Dominic's confession however continued to play ceaselessly in her mind. It hadn't been so much the words he'd said,

although they'd carried meaning in their own right, but the emotion with which he'd uttered them was what really bothered her. Part of her said that she was overanalyzing things, seeing meaning where there was none. Dominic had made it no secret that he didn't want Liam and in doing so he'd been free to callously use their child as a weapon against Eden.

Hell, he hadn't even acknowledged Liam's presence until only a few hours ago, and that initial introduction had seemingly impelled him to reveal something so personal, something Eden wasn't meant to hear undoubtedly. But she had heard it, and not for the first time in the last five hours since he did, she wondered whether this was another finely developed ploy. Another one of Dominic's schemes to bring Eden to heel. He'd continuously proven that he would stop at nothing until he had her exactly where he wanted her even if that meant using their child to do so. So she wasn't wrong in being overly suspicious, doing otherwise was a recipe for disaster.

For someone who'd come to relish her freedom over the last year, having it so abruptly snatched away made it extremely difficult to remain in place. She'd remained in captivity for a week now, and though Dominic had not directly prohibited her from venturing out, the pervasive team of bodyguards stationed outside the mansion had spoken loud enough for him. Eden had yet to make an attempt to leave, but if the head of his security detained her like he had at the hotel, they were going to have problems. There was no way in hell she was going to be locked up like some eighteenth century damsel. It'd taken her a good long week before forming a tentative plan. It wasn't much, but at least it would get her back on her feet again.

With Dominic having taken everything she'd worked so hard to attain, Eden literally had nothing to call her own. Despite her current resolve to

remain at the mansion, she refused to ask Dominic for anything; she would not lower herself again to depend on him like she'd done in the past. He'd made good on having the items from her condo brought to the mansion and aside from her car she had nothing. She needed financial freedom and to have that she needed a job. She'd scoured the meager internet job offers in real estate and had been able to find only a few. The job search was bleak, but Eden was anything if not determined. She'd made a few calls and had sent emails to others with her resume attached. But no one had called her. With Jenna readily accepting to watch Liam while Eden hit the pavement, she slipped into a pair of black wedges and headed out the door.

“Ma’am—”

Eden held up a hand, and though the wedges gave her slight frame an extra three inches, it did very little giving her the height needed to look James the watchdog in the eye. But craning her neck gave him a good look at her glowering face and that was all she really needed him to see. “Let me tell you how this is going to go down, James,” she began levelly, “you’re going to step aside and let me continue on my way, otherwise I’m going to call your boss and let him know you’ve touched me inappropriately.” It was a dirty move and Eden immediately felt guilty for hitting below the belt, but honestly what choice did she have? Playing fair had gotten her back at square one, exactly where she didn’t want to be. So if she stood any chance of making it out of this with a modicum of pride left, she needed to fight fire with fire and to hell with the casualties and her conscience.

The astonished expression that flitted across his normally impassive features was subsequently followed by one of chagrin as he vacillated between letting her go and following his orders. “I wonder how long he’ll let you keep your job...or your life,” she intoned blithely.

“You know I’m going to be tailing you,” he tonelessly informed her.

“I don’t really care what you do as long as I get to leave.”

With a curt nod of acceptance, he simply moved aside and allowed her to go on her way. It was only when she was safely inside her car that Eden allowed herself the joy of her momentary victory. It wasn’t much and it certainly wasn’t a victory over Dominic, but Eden took it for what it was.

A few hours later, her joyful mood took a hit, turning into hopelessness. No one seemed to be hiring. She’d gone to nearly ten different real estate agencies in the area, and they all had the same answer, “We’ll call you,” while inconspicuously shuffling her resume beneath the reject pile. Feeling like the world’s biggest failure, she stopped at Carver’s Grill to drown her sorrow in a cheeseburger, an order of fries, and a large chocolate milkshake. A bolt of panic rent through her at the prospect of having to subject herself to Dominic’s brand of mercy. Everything came at a price with him and what he wanted from her, Eden was not ready to pay. Pushing her fries around on her plate, she barely tasted her burger and her milkshake had turned to liquid some time ago.

“If your face were any longer, it’d be in that burger, honey.” Eden looked up into the smiling face of her scantily clad waitress before scrounging up a halfhearted smile. “Is the burger no good, hon? Carl can grill you up another one.”

Eden shook her head. “No it’s not the burger.” She sat up straighter, struck by a thought. “You wouldn’t happen to be hiring would you?” It was a desperate attempt. “I can...I can wait tables or wash dishes or—”

“How soon can you start? We just had one of our regular girls, Tina, quit on us a few weeks ago, and we’ve been sort of shorthanded.” Sheer dumb luck was on her side it seemed, and Eden wanted to whoop out in joy because finally something was going right.

“When do you need me?”

“Well, we get pretty swamped here on weekends, so we’ll need you then. The weekdays are covered, but I know Lena said we needed a few girls on the night shifts. But that’s something you’re going to have to discuss with her.”

“Lena...? Is she the manager?”

“Yup. She’s in the back. Come to the bar when you’re done, and you can talk to her then. But I’m pretty sure you’re going to get the job on the spot. You’re fucking gorgeous.” She leaned down slightly to stage whisper, “House rules: we only hire pretty girls. The customers love getting food from attractive waitresses, and we make good tips. I’m sure you’ll have no problem raking it in.”

“Thank you so much.”

She smiled prettily, eyes like sapphires gleaming. “Don’t sweat it. I was in your situation not too long ago and someone here gave me a chance. Just thought I’d pay it forward. Don’t forget to come by the bar when you’re done.” She turned to leave, but stopped. “I’m April, by the way.”

“Eden.” Eden returned her smile.

Lena was a thirty something woman with skin like burnt sienna and exotic almond shaped eyes that made it difficult to discern her ethnicity, although if Eden had to guess she would say there were hints of African American roots there. She was Amazon warrior tall, with neat, tightly locked dreads that she’d gathered in a high ponytail. Her outfit differed slightly from the black daisy duke shorts, tight white tank top that had Carver’s Grill inscribed across the bust, and black low tops. She wore the same shirt, but rather than the shorts, her legs were encased in tight black skinny jeans that displayed spectacular curves. When she walked from around the bar, she took the empty seat adjacent to Eden and gave her the

onceover, from the tips of her wedged soled shoes, to the top of her auburn head to finally meet Eden's gaze.

"Why do you want to work at Carver's?" she asked curtly.

Taken aback, Eden froze for a second; unsure of whether this was an interview, she scrounged for a response, "I...uh...I need a job?"

She raised a perfectly arched brow. "Are you asking me?"

Color shot to Eden's cheeks. "I need a job," she said with a little more conviction. "I'm a really hard worker and I can do whatever you want me to do. I don't mind getting my hands dirty—"

"So you wouldn't have a problem cleaning up bathrooms? We have very exuberant customers here and they love their alcohol, but some of them can get a little sloppy. Puke...urine..."

Eden hesitated, trying to tamp down her disgust and find a suitable response. "I have a three month old, so if I can clean up after him, I'm sure I can handle whatever slovenly mess I have to."

Lena snorted. "Trust me, sweetheart, cleaning up your baby's shit isn't nearly as bad as some of the things that go on in these bathrooms. But luckily for you, we have a cleaning staff to handle that. April was right, you do have a beautiful face so that'll definitely play in your favor; it'll bring in good tips. We have a community tip jar and at the end of every shift the girls divide their tips. Work the outfit, charm the hell out of your customers, and you'll make good money. If you're on the prudish side, I suggest you leave that at the door. You'll get more pinches and pats on the ass than you've ever gotten in your life. If you have a jealous boyfriend, tell him to stay the hell outside until you're done with your shift. Carver doesn't put up with that shit. Any question?"

"Who's Carver?"



“Carver is the owner. He comes around mostly on the weekends. Big guy, tattoos and piercings, you can’t miss him. Any other questions?”

“Do you I have the job?”

Finally Lena smiled. “Yeah, toots, you’re hired. Come by tomorrow night and we’ll fill out the paperwork. If everything goes well, I’ll put you in the schedule this Friday.”

“That fast?”

Lena frowned. “Is that a problem?”

Eden shook her head, taking a deep breath. “No...no, it’s not a problem and thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Just be here tomorrow.”

Just like that—that quickly—and her life was once again back on track. A flurry of excitement and anxiousness rushed through Eden on her drive home. The hours were going to be long, strenuous, but Eden wasn’t afraid of a little hard work. Her mom had worked three jobs to support them, and even then it hadn’t been enough, but Eden was determined to provide a better life for her son. This was only a temporary thing until she landed a real estate job. Eden wanted to return to school. She needed to know business if she wanted to open up her own real estate brokerage firm, which was ultimately her goal. Waitressing was just a pit stop. It wasn’t real estate, and it sure as hell wasn’t stripping, and the money was nowhere near the former or even the latter, but it was something. It was a way for Eden to make her own money, and regardless of how long it took her to scrimp and save, she would regain everything Dominic took from her.

## Chapter Nine

“So, I found a job,” Eden announced later that evening. They were once again in the living room and while Eden held Liam on her lap, intermittently cooing at him, her best friend was polishing off the rest of her meal.

“You did?” Jenna raised an arched brow, her puzzlement written clearly on her face. She was still trying to understand how Eden’s mind worked; how one could be so opposed to simply basking in the luxury that surrounded them. Despite her best efforts, Jenna could not prevent the small stabs of jealousy that had been frequent as of late when she thought about Eden. If a man of Dominic’s caliber wanted to cage her in his twenty six thousand square foot home and shower her with innumerable gifts, while only asking for the pleasure of her body every now and then, Jenna knew she would’ve spread her legs open in a heartbeat. She couldn’t understand why Eden fought so hard against it. Why go out and bust your ass looking for work when you had a sugar daddy that could support you? Why runaway to nothing when you had such an abundance of wealth waiting for you right here? Not only that, but Eden had a child with Dominic, a surefire way to guarantee her livelihood for years. Yet with all this, Eden wanted to leave. She wanted a life of misery and hard work.

Eden smiled brightly ignorant of the resentment that afflicted Jenna. “Yeah, it’s a waitressing job at Carver’s Grill on North Main Street,” she divulged. “It’s only part time for now, but I can make really good tips. If it’s going to be a problem watching Liam, I can find a sitter—”

Jenna snorted. “What and let someone else watch my little butterball? Don’t worry about it, Ede. I told you I’m here for you. Do what you have to

do; I'll watch Liam whenever you need me."

"I feel like I'm taking advantage of you. Are you sure you're okay with this, Jen? Please don't feel obligated—"

"Eden," Jenna interrupted, looking pointedly at the other woman. "I'm good. If I wasn't, I would've told you by now. Don't stress about Liam, he and I are used to each other now anyway. Bringing in someone new might mess that up."

"You're the best, Jenna. Thank you. Did you hear that, Lee, Auntie Jenna can watch you while Mommy's working. Yay, Auntie Jenna!" With Eden so absorbed in speaking to the infant on her lap, Jenna's resentment abated somewhat at the image. Regardless of her own complex emotions, Jenna was glad to know that at the very least she could take joy in watching her best friend with her baby. Eden had done a lot for her so far and Jenna owed her a lot, it was just going to take some time to come out of her own head.

Now that Liam finally slept through the night, Eden was given a reprieve from her every-four-hour scheduled feedings to sleep, too. When she woke up the following morning, she was well and thoroughly rested. But alarm swiftly shot through her when she headed to Liam's crib and found him missing. She told herself not to panic but hastened to Jenna's room, sure that she would find him there.

"I didn't take him." Jenna informed her moments later, clearly as rattled as Eden.

"Oh, God." Color bled out of her face as terror seized her, making her world spin. She put a hand to her chest, feeling the thundering of her heart against her clammy palm. "I...we need...we need to find him, Jenna."

Jenna took Eden's other hand within her own and held on tight. "Don't worry. He's probably with the housekeeper. I'll go check downstairs; you

stay up here and wait to see if she comes back.” She took a deep breath, attempting to bolster her friend’s flagging spirits. “She probably took him down to give you time to rest.”

It wasn’t likely though, because despite Jenna’s reassurance, they both knew no one else in the house came near Liam except for the two of them. If it wasn’t Jenna, it was always Eden, and that was exactly how Eden had wanted it. She hadn’t wanted to rely on Dominic’s people and she’d made that clear in the first few days of returning to the mansion. She knew the housekeeper, Jacqueline, a stout, matronly woman who’d been in Dominic’s employ for years. She had been there when Eden had initially moved in after her wedding and had been a quiet spectator to their dysfunction, turning a dutiful blind eye to her employer’s oftentimes sadistic vices. Eden knew she couldn’t have possibly taken Liam, at least not without telling her first. But then again, Jacqueline didn’t work for her.

That sudden thought was swiftly followed by another and working on nothing but her suspicion alone, Eden raced from Jenna’s bedroom down the hall. The master bedroom was in the east wing at the end of the hallway she shot right and sprinted to the bedroom she’d once shared with Dominic. She wrapped both hands around the matte black handles and yanked them open. Memories instantly assailed her, crashing into Eden like a massive wave at the sight of the massive sleigh bed that stood raised on a dais. She shook her head to dislodge them; there was only one thing on her mind now, and as she searched the expansive bedroom, her eyes shooting from one extravagant corner to the other, she found no hint of him. The bed was neatly made, the pristine cream colored sheets and curtains standing out against the dark chocolate of the furniture.

Everything was custom made, built exactly to Dominic’s specifications, even the tray ceiling with its sunken levels and crown moldings was

precisely how he'd wanted it. The white double pillars framed French doors that led to the open terrace. A flash, a memory of a chain, a delicate, fine black lace domino mask, a riding crop and Dominic gripping her as she stepped between those pillars. But again, Eden shoved those memories where they belonged and continued forward. It was there that she found him, seated in a wicker recliner, one leg slightly tossed over the other so that it formed a square and it was in the cradle of that square that he had Liam nestled on his lap. It was beautiful outside and even though there was a slight warm breeze blowing every now and then, Liam was well and truly bundled.

Utterly conflicted by the image, Eden summoned an emotion that was far more familiar to her and used to confront him.

"How dare you just come and grab him from my room without my permission," she kvetched, coming around to face him, hands at her hips and a fire in her gold eyes that could scorch a lesser man.

Impassive features conveyed nothing as Dominic quietly surveyed her, attuned to the anger that burned off her like sparks; he wanted nothing more than to capture the succulent pout of her lips and taste that fury for himself. "I didn't realize I had to ask permission to visit with my son."

"Your son?" she exclaimed. "When did he start becoming your son? Or is he your son when it's only convenient to your needs."

"Keep your voice down," he instructed, the rumble of his voice conveying his burgeoning irritation. "He has always been my son."

"You told me you didn't want him."

"It appears I've changed my mind," he imparted coolly.

"Change it back," she returned, hating his cavalier approach to something so meaningful to her. "He isn't a toy, Dominic. He's not

something you can pick up and play with, and then abandon the next day. He's a child, he's my child, and I am the only parent he's going to need."

"He needs a father."

"You're the furthest thing he needs. You are as incapable of being a father as you are of being a good husband," she spat venomously.

For a long moment he said nothing and when he unfurled his body from the recliner and came to his full height with Liam held carefully in his arms, Eden stood her ground to face him. Standing there, towering over her, it seemed as though he would say something. In his dark green eyes, Eden tried to decipher the emotions that were whirling like black smoke, but he closed himself off before she could glean anything, withdrawing into the depths of his twisted mind. He wordlessly turned from her and headed back inside the bedroom with Liam.

"Oh thank God, you found him!" Jenna exclaimed, having found her way to the master bedroom with Jacqueline's help. She'd practically ran to find it. She nearly lost the breath she was trying so hard to recuperate when her blue eyes landed on Dominic's formidable form as he entered the bedroom. She'd only seen him once before in passing over the last week, but was finally given the opportunity to look at him fully, and the full-on view was astounding. Dominic Armstrong possessed the sort of look that made a woman instantaneously aware of herself, made her aware of the sort of wickedness he could invoke with just one look from those smoldering, dark green eyes.

He was strikingly handsome, tall in the way that made a woman feel delicate and vulnerable beneath his towering height. Dark, jet black hair was cut stylishly short to fit the symmetry of his face. True masculine beauty shone in his lean features; a perfect aquiline nose, high cheekbones and a wide, sensual mouth made her stare openly. The long sleeved sky blue

shirt he sported, neatly tucked into a pair of fitted dark trousers, outlined the definition of his physique. Broad shoulders, long muscular arms, what she could only assume to be a washboard abdomen led to narrowed hips. Knowing she was gawking, Jenna returned her gaze back up to that beautiful face and flushed embarrassingly at that one curious raised brow. There was a frighteningly powerful energy about him, something dark and a little sinister that threw Jenna off balance, and she was forced to avert her gaze when he regarded her in kind, those rapier sharp green eyes skewering her.

Beautiful and frightening. That was Jenna's impression of Dominic Armstrong, and she was now vaguely aware why Eden wanted nothing to do with him. He looked like he could pleasure a girl and devastate her all in the same breath without even trying. And that was even more dangerous than the glint in his green eyes.

"Yes, but given that he was not lost in the first place, I don't see the cause for alarm," he drawled.

"Of course you don't see the cause for alarm because you can't possibly know what it's like to wake up and find your child missing," Eden fumed, reaching out her arms to take Liam from him, but he used his substantial height to evade her, smoothly sidestepping around her. "Give me my son."

With complete disregard to Eden, he handed Liam over to Jenna. "If you will excuse us for a few minutes." His dismissal was said with the cool confidence of a man who was used to getting his way, and against her will, Jenna found herself ready to do his bidding.

"Jen..." Eden called hurrying after the other woman, but Dominic's immediate snatch of her wrist prevented her from going too far. "Jenna!"

Jenna turned. "We'll be right outside, Ede." With that she made her exit, the door closing quietly behind her retreating back.

Whirling on him, Eden wrenched her hand from his grasp and shoved at his chest for good measure, but assault did very little in budging him.

“Damn you, Dominic, damn you to hell!” she screeched, so consumed with anger that she was shaking from it. Tears of frustration stung her eyes and made her heart race. She cursed him again, cursed him to the deepest, darkest part of hell and hoped that he burned.

“You’re trembling,” he noted quietly, advancing on her, closing the space between them in one long swift stride that imprisoned Eden between his all-consuming body and one of the pillars behind her. And in a move that was at contrast with his typical cool, he cupped her face in his hands and took possession of her lips in a kiss that split through Eden like a bolt of lightning. She fought, honestly she fought against it, fought him to release her, fought not to succumb, but failure was imminent in the face of his expertise. Balled fists, unfurled to flatten against his hard chest, only to clench again, holding on to his shirt as he pried her lips open with a tongue eager to delve deeper. God, the man could kiss.

Her heart felt like a battering ram in her chest, while blood rushed to her head, making Eden lightheaded, so she held on even tighter, knowing she should push him away but failing in doing so as she surrendered to him. Recognizing her submission, a ragged groan of intense need rumbled through him as he wrapped a possessive arm around her waist to pull her inexorably close to his straining erection. He threaded his fingers through her hair before fisting and anchoring his hand in the warmth. Eden whimpered at that marked assault of dominance. He awakened her, made Eden painstakingly aware of the pleasure that pooled between her thighs and dampened her panties. He was waging an all-out war against her, one that her body was ready to surrender to if the prize was his ravishment. But Eden wasn’t ready, she wasn’t mentally ready for this and as she found



herself moving painstakingly slow against the thigh he'd thrust between her parted legs, she was completely appalled at herself.

"St...stop..." she managed unevenly, looking down to avoid his gaze and to calm her beating heart. An unbelievable wave of shame washed over her, putting color high on her cheeks. "Let me go."

"Look at me," he ordered from above her, not at all rattled like she obviously was.

"No," she replied petulantly, childish to even her own ears. But she couldn't possibly look at him knowing how close she'd come to betraying herself. She felt like the world's biggest hypocrite in that instant and fleeing would've been her best option had he not been blocking her path.

Slipping his thumb beneath her chin so that she had little choice but to look up, Eden caught her breath at the rapacious gleam she saw in his hunter green eyes. "I hate you," she declared wretchedly in the vibrating, lust filled air.

He leaned in close, lips barely touching hers as he nudged at her cheek with his nose, his warm breath a seduction of its own until he was at her ear, "No, sweet pet, you hate that you want me," he imparted huskily. "Do you feel that?" Her kiss bruised mouth parted in a soft gasp, her golden eyes widening as she felt his fingers dancing just beyond the damp barrier of her panties. "How wet you are? That's your pussy salivating for my cock." The words crackled through her like electricity. It didn't take him much at all to nudge that delicate barrier aside to gain access to her volcanic center. Eden's eyes clenched shut as she bit hard on her bottom lip to keep the moan from tearing through her. "Say it," he demanded raggedly, barely restraining himself in the process of his seduction. "Tell me how much you want it." He laid an open mouth kiss on her cheek and sensually ran his tongue down the side of her neck.

“N...no...” It wasn’t at all convincing, but all the same, Eden was proud of herself for having said it. She expected him to continue his overwhelming seduction, so it came as an utter shock when he relinquished his hold and stepped away from her. Trembling, breathless and utterly unhinged she blinked, looking up to find him at a distance, a look of pure male satisfaction painted on his arrestingly handsome features.

“I have a proposal for you,” he revealed, his narrowed green gaze intent upon her impending reaction. “I am prepared to give you that one thing you want so badly.”

“What?”

He angled a mocking brow at her. “Your freedom, of course. My signature on those divorce papers.”

She had every right to be skeptical. “What’s the catch?” There was always a catch, always a price to pay.

The devil was in the curve of his smile. “Have dinner with me tonight, and I will be more than happy to discuss the details.”

“I won’t play games with you, Dominic,” she pronounced stiffly.

“I assure you, Eden, I am completely serious in this,” he said with flourish, convinced that she would readily agree to the offer once he’d spelled out the details. She had much to gain, and he was putting a lot at stake, but Dominic was sure the final outcome would be in his favor.

On her way to Carver’s later that evening, Eden remained uneasy at having agreed to the dinner with him. She didn’t know what to expect, but given Dominic’s track record, Eden knew to anticipate the worst, but surely it was worth going if it meant that she would be free of him? After the horrifying episode this morning and her desperate reaction to him, Eden was not ashamed to say that she had avoided him until he’d left some time in the afternoon. God, she’d practically thrown herself at him, and all it’d

taken was a kiss. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel him, still feel the impression of his mouth on her lips, still feel his index and middle finger gliding down the center of her clit.

“Damn it.” She raked her hand through her hair in frustration and thanked the lord she’d finally arrived at her destination. Stepping out of the car, Eden peered down at her watch. She had nearly two hours until she was to meet Dominic for their scheduled dinner. But for now, Eden shoved him to the back of her mind as she stepped inside Carver’s. It was busy, loud, with the scent of alcohol and grilled food permeating the air. Eden made a beeline for the bar, knowing it was her best bet to finding Lena again. She bypassed waitresses who balanced several plates on each arm with a deftness that awed her. The bar was crowded, women and men alike vying to get their drink orders in to the bartender. Eden made an attempt to get through the crowd, elbowing and shoving, but unfortunately there was no getting her diminutive frame on the other side. She took a resigned step back and nearly collided with a waitress who skillfully managed to jump out of the way.

“Watch it!” she snapped, tossing a glare over her shoulder at a flustered Eden.

“I’m sorry!” she called but knew her apology was neither heard nor wanted. Standing in the middle of the crowd feeling overwhelmed and slightly out of her element, Eden contemplated bolting, but reminded of what awaited she bolstered her spirits and continued her search for the elusive Lena.

“Eden, over here!” Eden whirled at the sound of her name grateful that Lena had found her instead she doubled back and walked to meet the other woman. “I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“No, I just got here.”

“Let’s head to the backroom where it’s a little quieter.” With Lena in the lead, Eden followed her through the double doors marked “Employees Only” that was just to the right of the bar. They walked through the bustling kitchen and further back through another set of doors that led to a surprisingly quiet and pleasant sitting room with black micro suede couches. There were three in total positioned in a semicircle with a glass coffee table at the center. Lena invited Eden to take a seat and after offering some beverages to which Eden politely declined, they got to work. It was straightforward paperwork, her application mostly and her identifications. Once that was done, Lena handed her an employee handbook. She advised Eden to read it but essentially summarized it for her.

“We’re about five things here at Carver’s: tits, ass, food, service, and entertainment. The majority of our customers are men. We get them all—frat boys from the surrounding colleges, businessmen from downtown and the regulars, who work a nine to five—and they only want to come here, unwind with a pitcher of beer, and stare at our girls. The harder they stare, the more tips you make.”

“What if they get out of control?”

“We have Vin and Randy to keep them in line. Most of our patrons know our rules, and they’re typically harmless when it comes to the girls. Like I said yesterday, if you’re shy you’re either going to have to get over it very quickly or tell me now so I can look for someone else.”

“I’ll be fine,” Eden affirmed. “I used to be a stripper.”

Lena laughed. “Well then, this should be a cakewalk. Come on, I’ll show you around the place.”

By the time they were finished, Eden was understandably overwhelmed, but it was too late to turn back now. Lena had already scheduled her to work a closing shift this upcoming Saturday, so bailing

was no longer an option. With the impending dinner with Dominic still looming in front of her, Eden reluctantly made her way to the mansion. She made a quick dash to check on Liam and Jenna, who told her Dominic, had charged her to watch over Liam while they dined. There'd been an odd mood about her. She hadn't seemed her usual cheerful self, and Eden wondered at that, worried that leaving Liam with her all the time was finally taking its toll. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to bring up the matter, and settled to speak to Jenna later.

When she finally made it to her room, it was nearly eight, giving her only a half hour to shower and get dressed. It was when she found herself in front of the mirror, fussing with her appearance and vacillating on what to wear that she took a momentary step back to reprimand herself on her behavior. What did it matter what she looked like? It wasn't like she was going on a date. Without thought Eden scrambled for the bathroom to rid herself of the makeup she'd applied. When she was through, she rummaged through her clothes and found a faded navy blue shirt and a pair of comfortable skinny jeans. She shrugged out of the dress she'd initially slipped on and threw on the clothes she'd picked out. And, because she knew he'd always preferred her hair down, Eden gathered it all up in a topknot and tucked the wispy tendrils behind her ears. Returning to the mirror, she smiled at the woman staring back at her. Naked face, comfy clothes, and catching sight of her wiggling toes, she grinned mischievously, she might just go down with no shoes on.

## Chapter Ten

In response to their failed dinner plans a week back, he opted instead to conduct this dinner in a more intimate setting. And what was more intimate than the terrace of their bedroom? Jacqueline had done a spectacular job in arranging the small table for two. Her fine attention to detail in the white French table linen to the long stemmed gold candleholders and the beautiful china dinnerware that housed two intricately folded napkins was well and truly appreciated. And while Dominic sat in quiet contemplation, trying not to peer down at the expensive watch around his wrist, he reminded himself to increase her pay, if for nothing else, than her tireless devotion to him.

He reclined back in the chair and raised his arms, crossing fingers to cup his head. Fully aware of her tardiness, Dominic fought against his surmounting irritation and instead pondered at the details of his plan. But then he felt it, that indiscernible influx of warmth that he'd come to associate solely with her presence washed over him, and his eyes peeled open to search for her. He didn't have to look too far, for there she was standing a few feet away from him a vision in dark skinny jeans that encased her sexy legs, smooth, caramel legs that had once upon a time wrapped around his waist in full anticipation of his thrusts. His fixated stare slid languidly upwards to perfect sized breasts enhanced by a short-sleeve shirt. She was fresh-faced, the lack of make-up made it possible to admire her flawless complexion. The three dark beauty marks on her cheek he remembered so well stood out, and he wanted to trace his tongue in the small triangle they formed. Her luscious, full pink mouth conjured images of what he wanted to do with those lips and he was instantly hard. He sat up, cleared his throat, and fought to find a comfortable position.

“You’re late,” he murmured, reproach in his deep dark voice. As she walked forward, his eyes shot to her feet and noted that she was barefooted. Cute and sexy came to mind, provoking a wry smirk. Rising, he came around to pull her chair out for her; a move he realized stunned her as she stared owlishly at him. “I am capable of being gallant,” he uttered drily. “Sit.” He followed his command with a gentle grasp of her forearm to help her slide into the seat. Once she was seated, Dominic lingered for a beat, inhaling the scent of jasmine and rose that permeated from her skin. Disciplined enough not to lower his lips to the graceful column of her neck, despite how bad he wanted to, Dominic stepped away from her and returned to his seat.

“You look lovely,” he said graciously, watching as the knit at her brow tightened at the compliment. Her slim tautened shoulders were nearly to her neck. She sat there like a doll, refusing to meet his gaze as her legs bounced furiously beneath the table. Nervous tension peeled off her so strong that he could taste it. “Try the wine,” he advised. At that, she looked to her right at the wait staff who’d appeared from seemingly nowhere, dutifully pouring wine in the stemware at her side.

“No, thank you,” she said curtly. “I want that divorce and you said—”

“All in good time, pet,” he cut her off, raising his own glass to his mouth. Wine was not Dominic’s drink of choice, but he knew she enjoyed the Bordeaux. The rich and voluptuous aromas of mocha, chestnut, and cedar danced enticingly on his tongue, reminding him of the kisses he’d stolen from her.

She made a noise that was born of frustration. “I told you I’m not going to play your game. You wanted me to come to dinner, I’m here. Tell me how I can get you to sign those damn divorce papers so I can go.”

“I asked you to dinner. We have not had dinner yet; therefore, I am unwilling to discuss anything further until we are both well and thoroughly fed.”

“Then tell them to serve us,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I enjoy a little conversation with my dinner,” he injected smoothly, setting his glass down and sitting back. “Tell me about Liam.”

Eden’s irritation was far too potent to be contained beneath the veneer of cordiality he was conducting. She didn’t know what he was doing. Why he was acting this way when they both knew he was the furthest thing from civil. His sudden change of behavior was at complete odds with the monster she knew him to be. What did he want? Aside from her body in his bed, there was something else he wanted from her, something else that gleamed behind those smoldering green eyes. She didn’t like not knowing. She didn’t like not being able to read him, because that only meant trouble for her. In addition to that, his sudden inquiry and interest in Liam made Eden wholly uneasy.

Having bonded with her child throughout her pregnancy, then going through the agony of giving birth to him, and nurturing him now, Eden was unwilling to share that part, that bond with Dominic. Of course he had every right to know his son, and a small part of her knew the inevitability of that moment, but selfishness and self-preservation made her reluctant. Eden knew Dominic. She knew more than anyone what he was capable of. How emotionless and self-serving he could be. Liam would not benefit from knowing his father, because Dominic was not capable of simple human emotions. He was incapable of love and affection, and Liam would suffer for it, because his father would never give him what he would certainly crave. Dominic’s interests laid only in himself and how best he could manipulate and use those around him to his benefit.



“There’s not much to tell,” she murmured evasively.

“Come now, pet, surely there’s something you can tell me about my son.” The imperceptible quirk of his lips made Eden look away. “No… nothing? Well how about the incident that nearly killed him. Tell me about that.”

Eden’s head whipped to face him, her luminous golden eyes widening like a doe caught in the headlights. Silence stretched as she finally reached for the stem of the wide mouth wine glass with tremulous fingers and brought it to her lips. She did not sip, but gulped it down until there was little left. “How do you know about that?” her voice barely rose above a whisper.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “I know many things. Tell me what happened,” he prompted levelly, noting the pallor of her skin and the array of emotions playing across her beautiful face. It was something that he knew she did not want to discuss, but Dominic reasoned it would take her mind off wanting to leave him. He was quite good at slinging mud. In fact, it was the only way he knew how to deal with her. Sentimentality had certainly never been his forte, and it didn’t seem like it was a quality Dominic wanted to acquire any time soon. Although the adage of catching more flies with honey than vinegar certainly rang true in this situation.

Eden took in a shuddering breath, setting down her wine glass. “I don’t owe you anything, least of all an explanation.” She rose to her feet and thanked God that they weren’t as wobbly as she was feeling inwardly. “If you have nothing more to say to me then I’m leaving.”

“Leave and you can forget about my offer.”

“You haven’t made it yet.”

He studied her as if she was an odd little specimen caught beneath the lens of his microscope and though she stood over him, stared down at him,

Eden couldn't have felt smaller or even more insignificant than she was in that instant.

"Sit down," he said with a quiet calm, stretching out a hand to indicate to her seat. "If you do not wish to discuss the matter then I will not pursue it."

It took a long moment for Eden to reclaim her seat and was saved from saying anything when the food arrived. Had this been another time and probably with different company, she would've enjoyed the steak that paired so beautifully with the Bordeaux. But unfortunately for Eden, things were not different at all; she was in the now, and the man seated across from her was a sociopath who, if given the chance, would suck away her sanity until she was just as demented as he was. Given her lack of appetite Eden stared across the table at him, inexplicably drawn to the way he ate his steak.

Control freak that he was, Eden was not surprised to see him eat in the same controlled, structured way that he governed everything else around him. He sat erect, knife and fork working to cut into the porterhouse and bring it to his mouth. Watching him chew and then swallow was sickeningly fascinating and it was only when she found his dark green eyes fixated on her that she looked away, a dark flush overtaking the high bones of her cheeks. After that Eden occupied herself with her own steak, finding it far more interesting and safer to look at than the man who sat across from her, undoubtedly laughing at her if that smirk was any indication.

Dinner couldn't have been over fast enough for her, and though he refused to say anything else until they'd properly eaten, Eden had had just about enough and promptly refused dessert when it was offered. "We're done with dinner."

"Yes, it looks as though we are," he drawled.

“Dominic.”

“Spend the next six months here with me, as my wife, and at the end of that time I will have my attorney draw up the divorce papers. I will make sure that you are well and truly cared for afterwards.”

Six months in his company playing a role that Eden had come to find demeaning and intolerable. He’d humiliated her, debased her in front of his friends in the worst way possible. He’d treated her as nothing more than a whore for years, and now he was asking her to do it again. Be his convenient little arm candy and sex doll. But at what cost? Was her freedom worth her degradation? “I won’t play your whore.”

“Not publicly, no. But you will not deny me the pleasures of your body when we are alone.”

“I am not going to sleep with you!” She remained adamant on the subject, the obstinate set of her jaw indicating that she would not yield on the subject. Curbing the kneejerk instinct to fire back and force her to acquiesce to his demands, Dominic found himself relenting, not on the off chance of having suddenly sprouted a conscience, but with the full knowledge that she would eventually end up in his bed.

“Very well, pet, sex will not factor into the agreement without your consent.” He was quite capable of playing nice when he wanted to; being bad, however, got things done a lot quicker.

“My name isn’t pet or sweetie or whatever else your twisted mind might think up to call me. It’s Eden, it has always been Eden, and it will always be Eden, so give me the courtesy of calling me by my given name.”

“Very well...anything else?”

“I want you to call off the bodyguards you put on me. Jenna is my best friend, and she has been really good to me through all this. I want you to hire her, make her Liam’s nanny. You are not allowed to threaten to take

Liam from me at any time, and when this is over, you will relinquish all your parental rights and let me leave with him.”

At that proposal, Dominic paused for a moment, seized by a sudden memory. He felt like he was reliving a scene, one that had undoubtedly been an integral part of shaping him into the man he was today. A mother, a prostitute, a drug fiend accepting a paltry sum to sell her child, a child who would’ve stupidly, trustingly remained at her side if she’d given him the choice. A child who had loved and needed her despite the horrendous way she had treated him. Dominic remembered the memory, tasted the pungent acridness of that day like it was sustenance; it coated the walls of his mouth, slithered down his throat, and worked itself through his system, wrapping and constricting a heart that was as black as the night sky. He had never wanted a child, but losing this boy after only knowing him for such a short time produced an emotion so fierce in Dominic that he was nearly bowled over by it.

Eden noted the instant change in him and shuddered at the menacing look in his eyes.

“Let us be clear on this one matter. Regardless of what I have said or how I have felt in the past, Liam’s presence in my life will remain a constant, even if you and I part ways.”

“I won’t let you turn him into you.”

“And what exactly am I?”

“You’re a monster.”

His deep, dark chuckle lacked any humor or warmth as it failed to reach his impenetrable gaze. “I am the monster I was created to be.” The deprecating smile remained in place as he regarded her in kind. “Liam will know me as his father; that is not negotiable,” he said with finality, daring her to challenge him.

But Eden couldn't challenge him even if she wanted to. There was too much at stake for her to go against him. She would lose, she was sure of it, because his show of knowledge earlier about what happened with Liam in those early weeks of his life, was a warning, a little precaution to Eden that he knew things about her, things he would not be afraid to bring to light and use against her if she did not tread carefully. "Fine, you can spend time with Liam. We both know how fleeting that's going to be anyways. At least when you lose interest, he'll be too young to understand."

"Well, time will tell, wont it?"

"When this is over, we're done. You're going to sign the divorce papers and give me back everything you took from me, and we'll go our separate ways," she announced.

"As you wish."

Eden took in a bracing breath, sure that she was doing the wrong thing, sure that she was bargaining with the devil himself and would inevitably burn from this. "Make it legal." She pushed her chair back and came to her feet. "I want everything on paper, and I want my own copies."

Dominic stood as well and smoothly walked around the table to stand at her side, temporarily blocking her path. "Of course." When he looped an arm around her waist to draw her close, Eden gasped at his boldness, her eyes instinctively flying to his face. "Should we kiss to seal the deal?"

He didn't give her a chance to deny him as he slanted his head and touched his lips to hers. It was rather unfortunate how easily she responded to him, how embarrassingly pliant and willing she became when he traced the seam her lips with his tongue demanding access to delve deeper. "If I can't be buried inside you, at least I can have these sets of lips instead," he murmured raggedly, his voice a low growl against her warm, wet mouth.

The instant he slackened his hold, Eden did not struggle long before he released her completely. She didn't linger but rather fled to her bedroom, refusing to look back even at the sound of the throaty laughter that followed her.

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## *Chapter Eleven*

Eden was finally getting into the swing of things at Carver's three weeks later. Her first night on the job had been far more challenging than Eden had anticipated. And rather than being assigned to April for her training like she'd initially thought she was going to be, Lena had placed her with Sara, the woman who Eden remembered running into when she'd come for her interview. From the moment they were introduced, Eden had been laden with the other woman's derision and could not understand why. Eden had apologized more than once for running into her and had even attempted to make a joke out of it where she was the butt of that joke, but all she'd received was a glare. Sara had made that Friday evening a nightmare for Eden with her dismissive and downright rude replies in front of customers, to the way she would completely ignore Eden when she asked a question. It had been a difficult evening to be sure, but it'd made Eden stronger. Hell, she'd gone up against far worse than a prickly bitch of a waitress who disliked her for no particular reason.

Luckily for Eden, Sara had taken a vacation after that disastrous Friday and April had taken charge of her training. It should've been this way from the start, in Eden's opinion. April showed her the ropes: taught her how to jot down orders so that she didn't get any wrong; she explained the menu, the specials, and pointed out the regulars and how they preferred their meals; and she introduced her to Mickey, the bartender, and how to butter him up to get your drink orders in quickly when it was busy. It was essentially one big display of flirting—playing up the vapid, amply endowed, giggly girl who was there solely to fetch, serve, and entertain.

April and the other girls had it down to an art form. Eden, on the other hand, found it difficult to acclimate to the role, and thought maybe it was because it hit too close to home. The women at Carver's were, in every sense, being objectified, parading around in those tight, short uniforms and seen as nothing more than a pretty face and body meant to be ogled and touched, meanwhile they were to take it with a smile and hope the men who frequented Carver's found them adequate enough to fork over some money. Eden was far too familiar with this. The more she thought on it, the more it made her ill, because suddenly she was faced with the fact that maybe she'd picked this job because it was so close to what she was used to, so close to her marriage with Dominic.

But then, didn't it go further than Dominic? Wasn't her job at Crazy Pussy the beginning of it all? What did it say about her that she had begun using her body simply to get by, and then again to marry a wealthy man, and now resorting to old habits to work for scraps? It was a habit, easy, a crutch. She didn't need Dominic to make her feel less than she was, because Eden was quite good at doing it herself. Honestly, what did it say about her? About her self-worth?

In a desperate grab for financial freedom and independence from her overbearing, demeaning spouse, she found herself back at square one. Eden sighed miserably, raking a hand through her hair. Most of the time she could push those thoughts away, and she could manage the daily grind without being bogged down by all this self-incrimination, but sometimes it got the better of her, sometimes it was just too much.

Hopping out of her car, she headed for Carver's. She forced herself to think of the bigger picture, the ultimate prize that awaited her. A divorce from Dominic and money enough to start her own business. The papers had been drawn up, spelled out to her in very plain English, and signed by the



attorney, herself, and Dominic. There would be no loophole for him to weasel out of giving her what was in the contract, what was rightfully hers. All she needed to do was withstand the next six months with him, and she would be free. The only downside was the clause that prevented her from suing him for sole custody of Liam in the future. But Eden was sure Dominic would lose interest in their son soon enough.

Saturday night was packed, but Eden expected no less. And with what she hoped was her best smile, she dove right into the job, leaving her baggage at door to be picked up once again on her way to the mansion later this evening. Confident enough that she could handle her own section, Lena had taken April away and Eden was left to her own devices. But maybe, Eden thought dejectedly, that move had been made too premature as she found herself dropping yet another plate of food—her fourth one so far—and it wasn't even two hours into her shift. Muttering a curse under her breath, she stooped down to clean up the mess, all the while attempting to hide the rising heat in her cheeks as she felt a dozen or so pair of eyes on her. Okay, so maybe she hadn't left her shit at the door.

"Damn it." She shook her hands, attempting to rid herself of the tension that tightened her body, but she found it futile as her hands continued to tremble terribly. Stress, she reasoned, it was only stress. Everything was coming to a head, and she couldn't stop the emotions from leaking out.

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

Eden spun around at Lena's blistering tone. "I'm sorry...I'm just..." She swallowed around the lump in her throat. "I'm sorry, Lena. I'm fine now."

"Get your shit together, Eden. I don't have time to babysit you. You told me you could handle this job..."

"I can...I'm sorry."

The other woman softened a little, but her frown remained. “I don’t want you to apologize. I want you to do the job you were hired to do. Whatever you’re going through, get over it. Cry, slap someone, grab a shot at the bar, I don’t care, just fucking get over it and get your ass on the floor, got it?”

“Yeah...yeah, I got it.”

“Good. Now look alive, Carver is going to be here in the next half hour, and I need this shit to run as smoothly as possible.”

“You alright, Eden?” April asked worriedly, sidling up to her when Eden emerged from the backroom some time later.

“Just a little breakdown.”

April laughed. “Look at it this way, at least you didn’t spill drinks on customers. Trust me everyone here has their horror stories. Come on, let’s do a shot.” Eden wasn’t given a moment to protest as April dragged her to the bar.

Two hours later and Eden was back into her groove, decidedly tipsy because her one shot had turned into several others, but that was because Lena had stuck her at the bar, where her easy rapport with customers earned her a shot that they boisterously encouraged her to take.

“Easy there, kid,” Mickey, a lumberjack of a man with an easy smile under his grizzled face, grabbed the shot glass from her hand and poured the contents beneath the bar. “You got to water the hell out of those shots; otherwise we’ll be picking your ass off the ground in no time.” He poured her a cup of water over ice and handed it to her. “They want a shot, you take this.”

With a grateful smile, Eden took a mouthful of water before getting back to her bartending duties. Of course she couldn’t sling drinks to save her life, but at least she was more helpful here than on the floor. Thankfully,

Mickey didn't mind her being in his space; in fact, he had her man the taps while he mixed the fancier drinks.

There was a lull in the crowd a few hours later giving Eden time to clean the glasses that had accumulated and wipe down the bar. It was while she took a moment to drink from her cup of iced water that she saw him, and as Lena previously said, he was very hard to miss. The eyes of nearly every woman in the vicinity were fixated on the man who had the perfect combination of rugged and sexy stamped on nearly every inch of his incredibly built, well-proportioned physique. He was linebacker big, broad in the shoulders and chest, the navy blue v-neck t-shirt he wore fitted him perfectly, accentuating his pecs and what was assumedly a rock hard abdomen that tapered off into a waist that held boot-cut dark rinsed jeans. His arms were as big as she was, muscled, and covered from bicep to wrists with tattoos. His hair was cut short to his head, too short to discern the color, but looking at the shadowing of facial hair around his chiseled jawline one could easily make out dark hue.

Beneath slightly angled thick dark brows was a pair of deep set bedroom eyes that were as riveting as the man himself. He had a wide, full mouth that held a grin as he spoke to one of the girls on the floor. There was easygoing air about him as he made his way through the crowd, greeting customers like they were old friends and sharing in their laughter when appropriate. Too soon he was at the bar, standing just to the side of her as he engaged Mickey in conversation, and then for the briefest of moments his gaze veered slightly in her direction, and that full mouth turned up into a crooked grin. Eden silently cursed at getting caught looking before quickly scrambling to find something to occupy herself with.

"So, you're the new girl." She heard seconds later, his voice like a shot of bourbon going down.

Eden turned back to face him now, far more in control of herself than she'd been a moment ago. "Yeah...I'm Eden."

"I thought Lena put you on the floor," he stated, his steel blue eyes trained on her.

She froze not exactly sure of how to convey that she was a walking disaster as a waitress, but could sling drinks with the best of them behind the bar. It seemed Mickey had overheard the conversation, and much to Eden's relief, spoke up for her. "She's better behind the bar, boss man. Just look at that tip jar." He wandered over and set a large hand on her shoulder. "She's green, but I can teach her the ropes back here. She'll be bringing in the big bucks in no time."

"You ever mixed drinks?"

"No, but I'm a quick learner," she recovered, putting a smile for added effect, although she was sure it wasn't executed as smoothly as she wanted to believe.

"Good, at least that'll keep you from breaking anymore of my dishes and wasting my food." There was wry humor in the jab, and Eden's face went up in flames as he chuckled. "Welcome to the team," he said over his shoulder before turning to leave.

\* \* \*

A few days later, Eden readied Liam for a walk out in the park. As requested, Dominic had appointed Jenna Liam's nanny, but with the increasing sourness of her best friend's mood over the last few weeks, Eden had decided to give Jenna some time to herself. It was the least she could do after having imposed on her time for so long. Jenna had readily accepted the chauffeured ride that Eden had offered and had squealed with delight when she'd been told that her day of shopping and beauty would be covered. Eden hadn't exactly told her best friend who would be covering it,

choosing instead to let her friend assume that Dominic was picking up the tab. But in reality, Eden had spent quite a lot on the spa package, the expenses had put a large dent in her savings, but she knew she could recover it quickly enough with her tips from Carver's. The way she looked at it, this was a small price to pay for everything Jenna had done for her, and it would be well worth it if the blond haired woman returned feeling like her old self again. It hadn't even crossed Eden's mind for a moment to ask Dominic for help. She did not want to owe him more than she was already indebted; she was here solely for one reason, and Eden did not want to give him reason to curtail her endgame.

Settling Liam inside the ridiculously fancy and undoubtedly expensive stroller, Eden was faced once again with Dominic's increasing influence in Liam's life, and she wasn't sure whether she liked it or not. First the crib and now the stroller, these were two of hundreds upon hundreds of things Dominic had had purchased for Liam over the last few weeks. There were the abundance of clothes and shoes that were nearly as costly as Eden's car and then there were the toys, so many of them they had a room of their own. Eden wasn't sure exactly what it was Dominic was trying to accomplish, but she knew it was too much too fast. But then, wasn't this the only way she knew him to be? His wealth, his power, this was the only form of affection there would ever be from Dominic Armstrong. He'd showered Eden with materialistic things at first, too, but then had deprived her of the one thing she'd craved far more from him than the endless parade of trinkets, but that craving had ebbed considerably over the years, soured even in the face of his debasement and cruelty. Now all she wanted to do was get as far away from him as possible and attempt to protect Liam as much as she could from the inevitable disappointment.

God, she was starting to sound bitter. Eden sighed, she wasn't this person. Too much had happened in the last five years, but she couldn't allow her resentment and bitterness to eat away at her like this. It wasn't good for either herself or Liam. Determined to start their day off on a better note, Eden applied the brakes to the stroller and jogged to the living room to grab Liam's diaper bag, her wallet, and the small basket she'd prepared earlier, then hastened back to the foyer. She loaded Liam in the car seat first, making sure he was well and truly strapped in before putting the rest of the items she had in the ample trunk space of her car, including the stroller.

She drove to a local flower shop and spent some time picking out a few arrangements, and with the salesperson eager to help her find whatever it was she was looking for, Eden was out of there in no time. After four months of motherhood, she was damn proud of herself in being able to multitask with an infant constantly vying for her attention. Case and point, readying the stroller, taking the car seat out with Liam in tow and locking it in place, all the while carrying the baby bag and the bouquets was one hell of an accomplishment. Feeling decidedly proud of herself, Eden smiled broadly as she pushed the stroller through the open wrought iron gates of the cemetery. It was peaceful here, quiet, and as they steadily made their way to her mother's grave, the warm summer breeze gently swept through the trees above, and Eden believed it was her mother welcoming them.

Too soon they were at Helen Mercer's grave, and Eden was taken aback by the beautiful flower arrangement that was already there. They certainly weren't from her, seeing as she hadn't visited in quite some time, so she was rather curious as to who might have left them. Her mother hadn't had many friends, and the few she'd had, Eden knew wouldn't be so generous as to do this.

“Hi, Mom,” she greeted, smiling as she took Liam’s car seat out of the stroller and set it beside her as she took a seat. “I’m sorry I haven’t come to see you in a while. Life’s been crazy.” Setting down the three arrangements she’d chosen earlier, Eden raised her hand to the thick, marble headstone, tracing the engravings of Helen Parker, Beloved Mother, with her fingertips. “I brought someone very special to meet you,” she said with a watery smile, reaching for Liam. “Mom, this is Liam, your grandson.” Eden raised a hand to swipe at the tears on her cheeks before releasing a sound that was both sigh and laughter. “He’s four months now. He’s such a sweet baby boy, Mom. He reminds me of you sometimes. There’s so much I want to tell you about him, about me...just everything.” And she did; she spoke of her pregnancy and delivery, and how she’d wished that she’d had her there to share the joys along with the pains of motherhood. How she’d wanted guidance, especially in those first few precious weeks when hormones, emotions, and fatigue had run extremely high. She refrained from divulging her marriage issues and how, hopefully by the end of the year it would all be over, nothing more than a bad memory. She kept to the subject of Liam, spoke of the simple things he did that awed her and made her smile and laugh for no particular reason sometimes. Eden spoke of nothing and everything that encompassed her child and expressed how desperately she was missed and loved.

“I promise to come see you more often. I’ll bring Liam every time I come.” With a sigh Eden rose to her knees and set Liam back into the car seat. “I love you so much, Mom, and I miss you. But I know you’re in a better place and probably looking down on us. I know you’re probably worried sick about me, but I promise I’m okay, Mom. I have Liam now, and he and I will be just fine.” With a silent prayer, Eden came to her feet and commenced her trip back to her car.

Sometime later, after a long leisurely walk around the park Eden found a nice shaded spot beneath a tree to set up her little blanket. The weather had grown increasingly warm over the last few hours, so the tree provided ample shelter from the scorching sun and had the added benefit of concealing Eden as she nursed Liam. But for added protection, she'd taken his swaddling blanket out of his bag to cover herself. While he fed, Eden sat back against the tree and amused herself in people watching. There were joggers, mothers walking with their children or pushing their strollers, elderly couples walking hand in hand around the park or sitting on benches feeding the geese over by the pond. There were others, like herself, who'd found prime real estate beneath other trees and had laid out blankets for picnics.

It was while her gaze veered back around that she saw him and tensed; even at a distant Eden was instinctually aware of him. She had only moments to assess him while his long, even strides brought him that much closer to her. Eden wasn't even sure the word jeans and casual was part of Dominic's extensive repertoire of vocabulary, but then if one could wear a tailored suit as well and impeccably as he did, one wouldn't bother with such menial things. Grey sharkskin suit, royal blue silk tie, pristine white shirt, and trousers that accentuated his long, powerful legs that reeked of wealth and power made him look wholly out of place. More than a few heads turned to look at him, but it seemed he only had eyes for the lone woman seated beneath the tree, holding a covered bundle in her arms.

He was breathtakingly handsome and her heart skipped a beat as he drew nearer, thudding in her chest when he finally came to stand before her. She was at a complete disadvantage seated as she was on the ground with her child nestled to her chest, but Eden would not crane her head back to stare up at him, and he instantly figured that out as seconds later she found



that he'd lowered his immense frame to the blanket, not quite sitting but poised on his haunches. "Hello," he greeted after a moment.

"How did you find me?" she fired back, angry, but not at all surprised that he'd recanted on the promise he'd made of not following her. "You told me you wouldn't follow me."

"We agreed that my security wouldn't follow you," he countered smoothly. "We said nothing about me doing the following."

"It's always a technicality with you," she said reproachfully, glaring at him.

"The devil is always in the details, my pe...Eden."

Eden looked at him for an eternal second after that, and he stared back at her evenly, not entirely open with emotion, but showing enough that she knew the utterance of her name had been done to please her. "What do you want?"

"Far more than you're willing to currently give me," he murmured, reaching out involuntarily to tuck a tendril of hair behind her ear, his index finger lingering on a caress down her cheek. "But for now, I simply wanted to spend time with my son."

Eden tilted her head away from his touch. "You could have waited until I got back to the mansion."

He shrugged his broad shoulders, finding interest in the picnic basket she'd packed. "I lost patience." He retrieved a roll of crackers and went on to tug it open. "How is he?"

"Sleeping," she said curtly. "You're not leaving, are you?"

"Not just yet, no." And just to prove his point, he sat down on the blanket. "When was he born?"

The unexpectedness of the question surprised Eden but she quickly recovered. "March, twenty-third," she answered quietly.

“Tell me about him.”

“I’m sure you have a folders filled with information about him.”

“Yes,” he admitted, “but not with what matters. I want to know more about him. Tell me.”

Forced to look beneath the order to the quiet desperation she heard in his voice, Eden sighed. “What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you wish to tell me.”

“He was born on March, twenty-third, at five-thirty in the morning. I was induced and ten hours later he was born. He weighed just under six pounds, but he was very long. He was very colicky at first, but we got through it. The thing with the hospital...” Eden swallowed hard, looking at everything but him, “it...it was an accident,” she murmured. “It was a few weeks after I had him. I was still trying to get used to being a mother. I was exhausted and I...I would never do anything to purposely hurt him.”

“Go on,” he urged succinctly, his green eyes focused on her completely.

“I overslept and when I woke up he wasn’t breathing. But someone came to help, and he got Liam to breathe again. We took him to the hospital soon after.”

It was as the report read, and as Dominic listened to her retell the story now with her own words, he tried not to condemn her for her mistake, but still, the thought that her actions had nearly cost him the life of the child he hadn’t even known he’d wanted until he’d finally held his son, made him want to lash out at her, use this in some way to make her pay. He filed the information for later, to further contemplate when he was alone. For now he simply looked at the mother of his child, fresh faced and astoundingly beautiful and tried not to compare her actions with the woman who’d given him birth. “Tell me more.”

The situation was quite surreal, and she didn't know how to process it. She never would've imagined this in her wildest dreams—this outing, Dominic and herself and their child sitting beneath a tree, the appearance of a perfect family. It was too strange and it was probably that strangeness that kept Eden from losing her head. This wasn't normal. She and Dominic were the furthest thing from a family, and regardless of the fact that they had a child together, there was nothing between them but a sham marriage and a contractual agreement that would come to an end in a few months. She would be a foolish woman if she allowed herself to buy into this fantasy, this misconception of bliss that was creeping in.

They returned home some time later in the afternoon, with Eden arriving at the mansion first and Dominic pulling up behind her in a sleek black car that was quiet but radiated power, he parked behind her Nissan and was there to help her unload Liam, holding him in a cradle at the crook of his elbow. "Leave it," he said in reference to the other items that remained in the car. "Someone will come get them."

"I can do it—"

"Your stubbornness is unparalleled," he pronounced with scathing frustration, putting a hand on her arm to lead her away.

"Yes, and you're still a brute. Let go of me."

He released her only when they were in the foyer. "I've gone from monster to brute; I'm not sure if that's a step up or a step down," he drawled. "In any event, you will have ample opportunity to further assassinate my character this Saturday."

"It's not slander if it's true," she retorted, glaring at him. "What's this Saturday?"

"The Armstrong Charity Dinner. You will accompany me."

"I'm busy."

“Naturally, but you will clear your schedule to accommodate me. I wish to have my wife by my side, so you will be there,” he instructed with deadly calm, his eyes like shards of glass daring her to deny him.

She couldn't refuse him even if she wanted to. Just as she'd had clauses inserted into the contract, Dominic had also put in some provisos of his own, and it appeared he was enacting one of them now. She could deny him the use of her body all she wanted, but he required her full cooperation outside the bedroom. She was his wife in name only, and that meant several things when it came to the Armstrong name. She was to comport herself in a certain manner outside of the mansion. She was to play devoted companion and wife when she accompanied him to the events that required her by his side. There were other things, smaller things, but this one was what made Eden feel like a puppet, and Dominic relished tugging on the strings to make her jump.

It was with a great trepidation and wariness that Eden called Carver's the following day to request a night off. She hated being *that* girl, the one who called out sick when she knew damn well she'd only been at her employment for a short amount of time. Lena chewed her out and demanded blood before Eden was allowed to get off the phone. Blood translated to a double shift for the next two Saturdays and temporarily stepping back into her waitressing duties so that another girl could take the night off. Later that afternoon, Eden, Jenna and Liam piled into her car and drove to the nearest boutique to shop for an appropriate dress for the event Dominic was forcing her to attend. She'd declined the use of his credit card, choosing instead to foot the bill herself. She had a specific price range in mind and was determined to stick to it, but that resolve seemed to crumble two hours later, as she had yet to find a dress that was affordable and suitable enough for this event.

“What about this?” Jenna held a frilly gold number that looked better suited for an eighties prom queen.

Eden wrinkled her nose in distaste. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, this is cute.”

It was the furthest thing cute, but won hands down on the slutty factor. “Tasteful, Jenna. I don’t need any more reason to stand out among these people.”

“Did you enjoy yourself, yesterday?” she asked, needing to take her mind off this fiasco as she riffled through the racks with increasing frustrations.

“It was amazing, Ede. I so needed that. That spa, Euphoria, it was... magical.” She sighed happily, a wide smile gracing her lip glossed mouth.

“I’m so happy you got pampered. The massage therapists are amazing. Did you enjoy the milk bath?”

Jenna laughed. “It was luxuriant. God, I felt like a housewife,” she joked. “Dominic’s been really great. First the job, and then the spa treatment and shopping spree. I should really thank him.”

Eden peered at her best friend for a moment from beneath the veil of her lashes and was surprised to find Jenna looking back at her with a benign smile. “Don’t worry about thanking him, Jen. It’s the least he could do after uprooting you the way he did,” she said quietly, lying through her perfectly white teeth. Jenna didn’t need to know that Eden had spent this money on her, and she certainly didn’t need to involve Dominic in this.

“I’m just glad he decided to make me Liam’s nanny. I get to stay at the mansion and be closer to you guys. I’m really grateful, Eden. I know you probably had to bend over backwards to get me this job.”

Eden shrugged. “It’s nothing you wouldn’t do for me.” Which was decidedly true, Eden knew Jenna would do just about anything for her and

she'd more than proven that already. "We need to stick together. Anymore contact with Alex?" she hesitantly inquired. She loathed broaching the subject, but she wanted to see where Jenna's mental state was at. There was too much history with her and Alex to sever the ties so easily.

"I've deleted over a hundred voicemails in the last two weeks alone. I've listened to a few of them. He sounded bad, like he's been binging on something heavy. He threatened to come after me...us...he begged me to call him."

"Don't."

"I'm not going to, but I think maybe we should tell Dominic? Maybe he can help somehow?"

"Absolutely not," she said bluntly, "listen to me, Jenna. Dominic is not the lesser of two evils here, he is the evil. Alex is bullshitting you, and even if he isn't, there's no way he will get anywhere close to the mansion to harm you or Liam. There's too much security for him to get through, and he's not clever enough to infiltrate Dominic's security team."

"But—"

"Please trust me on this, Jenna," Eden implored, looking at her friend. "I'll talk to the head of his security team so he can keep an extra eye on you and the baby," she consoled, making sure the other woman understood her stance on the matter: going to Dominic wasn't an option. Alex was a nuisance, but he was certainly one they could handle without involving Dominic in the matter.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Saturday evening rolled in like a massive boulder, too fast and weighed with dread and apprehension. Eden could quite literally count on one hand the number of times she'd met Dominic's family. The initial meeting had been a strained dinner in the first few months of their marriage that had ended quite badly and the second had been at another function, such as the one she was attending tonight, where the members of haute society had looked at her with all the conceit their kind could muster and had found her wanting. And of course there was that little affair she'd had with Lucas Armstrong. Eden wasn't looking forward to this at all. Nevertheless, she armed herself for the battle she was to about face.

She was meticulous with her appearance, applying only the slightest bit of makeup. The heavy eyeliner and mascara accentuated the golden flecks of her eyes, while the peach stain lipstick gave her a perfect pout. She applied bronzer in all the appropriate places before carefully stepping into the full length, blush pink backless dress she'd finally settled on. It'd been slightly over budget, but with the options she'd been given, this dress had been a great find. It fit her well, the capped sleeves gave it a modest appeal, while the daring swoop in the back added a slight bit of sexiness. The neckline did not permit her to wear a necklace, so Eden kept her jewelry minimal, not that there was much for her to choose from. She wore simple teardrop earrings that were put on display because she'd gathered her hair up in a sleek topknot on her head. Knowing she'd dawdled for too long, Eden took in a deep breath before grabbing her clutch from her nightstand. It was time to face the music.

Standing at the foot of the grand staircase in calm anticipation, he felt her presence even before he raised his dark head to look up. Dominic sucked in a sharp breath as he was momentarily stripped of all cognitive thought. Struck completely by the force of her beauty, he simply gawked. She was the goddess Aphrodite, descending towards him, Ares, who, with a simple word, would wage wars in her name. He wanted nothing more than to kneel at her alter and worship the body she'd deprived him of for far too long. When she looked at him, those spectacular golden eyes luring him further into her spell, Dominic ascended the last step to meet her. Without pause he took hold of her delicate hand within his larger one and helped her down. "You look exquisite," he said huskily against her cheek, stealing a moment to breathe in her scent.

"Thank you," Eden murmured unevenly, wholly affected by the unrepentant hunger she saw in his smoldering green eyes, making her feel exposed and threatened all at once.

It continued in much the same manner in the limousine, and though there was ample space to move around, Eden felt fettered by that predatory gleam in his eyes. He sat across from her, his big, dark, brooding, narrowed emerald eyes focused on her, and Eden was reminded of a panther in repose, ready to pounce at the slightest provocation. In an effort to preserve her sanity, she averted her eyes from him, but not before her gaze ran admiringly across his physique, swathed in a tailored dinner jacket that fit his broad shoulders perfectly. The white shirt beneath was accented by a black silk bowtie that was every bit as sexy as the man himself. Eden saw nothing beyond the tinted glass of the windows, but she continued to stare anyway, knowing it was a much safer place to look than at the man seated across from her who affected her so deeply. It was truly unfortunate that she



found herself so attracted to him, that she was drawn by his raw sexual magnetism that lured her in like gravity.

The silence thundered, crackled with energy that vibrated between them, until he finally spoke, the sound of his smooth, deep voice causing her to jump. “I have something for you.” Her eyes flew back to him, apprehension made her instantly tense as she watched him slip a hand inside the pocket of his suit, withdrawing a small, black, velvet box.

Meeting his burnished gaze with trepidation, Eden immediately knew what it was before he even opened the box. He’d had it cleaned so that the light bounced off the facets of the diamonds and gleamed beautifully back at her. “May I?” He didn’t wait for her to give him permission before taking her hand and slipping it on her finger. Staring at that ring was like staring into a crystal ball as every last bit of memory from their four year marriage came flooding back. A cold and loveless marriage filled with degradation and mental abuse that veined through Eden’s core.

“I think a leash would’ve been more appropriate,” she said with a bitterness that coated her tongue.

“Eden—”

“You forgot to go over my duties for the evening.” There was as much warmth radiating from her as a block of ice. “Am I dancing for your friends tonight? Or will it be me sucking your cock in front of all your guests? Will Bruce be there? How about your father and brother? Will they join in on the festivities? Please let me know, Dominic, so I know what I’m in for. Blow jobs, hand jobs, gangbangs—”

“Enough,” he directed very calmly in the dead stillness of the car. Color slashed his high cheekbones as he pierced Eden with his rapier sharp, green eyes that could’ve drawn blood. “We have arrived.” With that, he threw open the door before the chauffeur had a chance of doing it himself and

unfurled his big body from the car. He held his hand out to her that Eden completely ignored as she followed him out. When she took a step towards the granite stairs leading up to the brightly lit entrance, he clamped a restraining hand around her arm to pull her back against his frame. Standing just behind her with the warmth of his breath at her ear, he murmured, “Your cock sucking skills will be relegated to our home only and exercised solely on me. The duties I require of you tonight, dear wife, is to comport yourself like a respectable and doting wife of a very generous benefactor.” In saying that, he took her hand and set in crook of his arm before leading her up the stairs with unmatched finesse.

“Playing your whore would be much more convincing,” Eden grated through clenched teeth, and while she anticipated a response from him, none was forthcoming as he decidedly ignored the comment which only served to further fuel her anger. Nevertheless, she remained at his side as they cleared the main entrance and came into the grand foyer that boasted a massive crystal chandelier high at the center of the vaulted ceiling. There were equally massive paintings lining the stucco walls that were doubtlessly worth fortunes. A red velvet runner stretched from the front entrance of the multi-million dollar home, to the yawning French doors that led to the grand dining room. A number of guests were already there with more arriving by the minute in beautiful cars that queued down the street. A discreet staff of impeccably dressed waiters and waitresses carried out a perfect ballet as they fluidly moved around the room, offering bubbly fluted drinks and hors d’oeuvres to the numerous guests in attendance. There was a bar set up at the far end of the foyer, where guests could imbibe in something stronger than champagne if they wanted. As they progressed further inside the hall, they were detained by several men and while Dominic made introductions and spoke candidly about affairs that Eden did

not understand, he was sure to set a large, strong hand at the small of her back in a move that was a clear mark male possession.

“Dominic, lovely of you to come,” Millicent Armstrong greeted, her saccharine voice holding just the slightest bit of malice. She was tall, nearly as tall as her husband who stood practically toe to toe with Dominic’s six foot three inch frame. She was otherwise a delicate woman, and she looked the same as the last time Eden had seen her. Aside from the smattering of freckles across her button nose, there was little blemish on a face that defied time. Her strawberry blond hair that was too bright to be natural had grown longer than Eden remembered, but it still looked amazing and lustrous in the over the shoulder ponytail she’d styled it in. The chiffon dress she wore was elegance itself, with an empire waist that flowed prettily when she walked. Gregory Armstrong hadn’t changed much either; he still maintained that supercilious air that was so reminiscent of the child who stood at Eden’s side. Even so advanced in age, one could see that he’d been quite handsome when he’d been younger. A touch of wrinkles stretched at the corner of those trademarked Armstrong green eyes that still held a devastating glint to them. He had salt and pepper hair that had grown even whiter in the last five years, but it was stylishly cut to suit his face. The black dinner jacket, shirt, trousers and tie were expertly tailored to his big frame, not a thread out of place.

“I wasn’t aware not coming was an option,” he retorted sardonically. “You do remember my wife, Eden.” In saying that, he did not thrust her forward as Eden anticipated he would; instead he kept her at his side, the hand at her back moving around to settle at her hip. Gregory’s gaze raked over her with a thoroughness that made Eden’s skin crawl, and she unconsciously leaned into Dominic, needing his formidable frame to protect her from his father’s lascivious stare. Millicent on the other hand, quite

possibly used to her husband's wandering eye, regarded Eden with a coolness that could've frozen a volcano.

"Yes...hello again, Eden. It's been far too long." *Certainly not long enough*, the expression on her currently pinched face seemed to say.

"It's good to see you again, Eden. Now, son, if you will permit me a moment of your time, there is something I wish to discuss with you."

"Can it wait?"

"It's a matter of urgency."

When Dominic peered down at her, Eden mustered up a brave face despite that she wailed at the prospect of being alone with his stepmother. Dominic was many things, but he was infinitely better company than the cold woman standing a foot or so away from Eden. "I won't be long." he uttered against her cheek, his breath making her shiver. She watched him stride away and forced herself to keep from running after him.

"Come, Eden," Millicent offered Eden her arm, while attempting a smile that appeared more menacing than she probably intended. "Let me introduce you to the other wives. If you're going to be in our circle, you must learn who everyone is." Right then. So her mother-in-law was attempting to make nice. Well, Eden would play along, but remained guarded. As they walked around the mansion that Millicent explained was a family inheritance received some time ago, and she hadn't begun the renovations until only a few years ago.

"We've restored quite a bit of the original framework. It's been quite the project, just something to amuse myself with while Gregory is away. It's become home to our annual charity events."

"What charity is this dinner for?"

"The less fortunate, dear. The underprivileged families of our city benefit quite a bit from the proceeds of these charities. We only invite those

who have the means to give, of course, the price of each ticket alone disqualifies many.”

“How much are the tickets.”

“Twenty thousand a ticket.”

Oh yes, a mere twenty thousand dollars a ticket. No problem. Eden inwardly snorted. She couldn’t even wrap her mind around spending that much money when she had so little of it herself. God that meant Dominic spent forty thousand dollars on them being here tonight. Well, at least it was for a good cause. With Millicent attempting a hand at cordiality, Eden lowered her guard for a moment, grabbing a drink from a passing waiter to better allay the nervous tension tautening her shoulders. There was a group of women gathered near the entrance of the dining room and this was where Millicent ended their miniature tour.

“Good evening, ladies.” They all turned at the all too cheerful greeting, pasting on smiles that were far from authentic. “I do hope you are all enjoying yourselves.”

“Of course, Millicent, your charities are always so very inspired. We were just remarking on the newly attained Matisse on the west wall. It’s quite breathtaking. Will it be auctioned?”

Millicent’s laughter was not a pleasant sound; it had the same effect of nails on a chalkboard. “Of course not, Beatrice, it’s just like you to say something so absurd.” The remark was a thinly veiled insult that even said in jest cut deep, the shallow laughter of the women around them further added insult to injury. The one named Beatrice, thoroughly embarrassed, hid her discomfort behind a tremulous smile after she’d taken a long sip of her drink. “Ladies, please allow me to introduce you to Dominic’s wife, Eden.”

All eyes turned to her and Eden felt the heat rise in her cheeks. She attempted a smile with the hope it wasn't as terrible as she imagined. "Hello, everyone." It felt like high school, being invited to sit at the popular table all the while knowing that you did not belong there. She felt out of her depth, swimming among creatures that were more likely foe than friend, ready to make a meal of her. No one said anything for a very long time as they sized her up, staring at her from head to toe, trying to find fault with her, something they could use to detract from her worth. It was the furthest thing from a friendly atmosphere, and though Eden knew she could very well be imagining all this, seeing the disingenuous looks in those eyes as nothing more than her failings, she knew it wasn't her imagination.

"We did not realize Dominic had married," this from the matronly woman standing beside Beatrice, who, upon taking a hard look at Eden, had instantly found her lacking.

"Well, it was rather a small affair. Dominic isn't one for frill. But they've been together for quite some time now. How long has it been, dear?"

"Five years." There was a collective gasp and eyes widening considerably at that response.

"How lovely for you." It felt like a firing squad, the snarky condescension aimed at her, this time from another woman in the circle with crystalline blue eyes and raven black hair. "Dominic has attended this dinner since its inception, yet this is the first time we've seen you in the five years of your marriage, Eden."

"I don't get out much," she said with brevity, wishing that she'd followed after Dominic the instant he'd left her.

"Clearly." The acerbic reply was uttered with a smile that was the furthest thing from inviting.

“Ignore her, Eden. Carissa has been vying for Dominic’s attention for a very long time, and as much as it’s been entertaining watching him rebuff her advances, now we all know why,” Beatrice explained.

“So what do you do, darling?”

“Eden is a dancer,” Millicent pronounced grandly, staring down at Eden with a small smile.

They perked up at that, especially the one standing at Eden’s right who appeared much younger than the rest of the women in the circle. “How lovely, where did you train? Are you a classical dancer or lyrical?”

“Heaven’s no, nothing so refined, Lucia.” Millicent laughed sharply. “I’m afraid Eden’s dancing skills lean more to the exotic than anything so cultured, isn’t that right, dear?”

It was a trap—a well-crafted trap that Millicent had facilitated—and Eden unwittingly walked right into it. Cold sweat formed and beaded on her skin making her uncomfortable as they all expectantly waited on her to reveal herself for the classless, unrefined stripper Millicent had all but accused her of being. “I—”

“How very gauche of you to pick on my brother’s wife in such a way, Mother,” chided a voice from the not too distant past. “This color is very unbecoming of you.” Lucas Armstrong was nothing like his brother. Where Dominic was darkly menacing, broody and infinitely more complex, Lucas was fair, careless and shallow. There was no commonality between the two except for the dark green eyes they’d inherited from their father. Lucas was as equally tall as his brother but lacked Dominic’s powerful physique; he was built wirier with a longer torso and arms that fit nicely into the suit he wore. He’d let his ginger blond hair grow longer than what Eden remembered so that it skimmed at the collar of the suit jacket he wore. There was a faint bruise on his right cheek and a cut near his mouth that

spoke of his latest drunken brawl. He stood at Eden's side now, her temporary champion, as he smiled irreverently at the women in their circle, all the while ignoring his mother's disparaging look.

"Lucas, darling, we were not expecting you."

"No of course not, this is why I decided to crash. It's so much more fun this way," he looked down at Eden, "don't you agree?"

Eden frowned, hating her position in the middle of all this. "I think I need a drink," she murmured.

"Well, I know just the place. You will excuse us won't you, Mother? Ladies?" With that, he tugged her away from the pit of vipers and led her to a very far corner where he handed her a champagne flute he'd confiscated from the tray of a passing waiter. "A second longer and my mother was going to unhinge her jaw and swallow you whole," he quipped, standing just in front of her as he watched her guzzle down her drink.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue," she said quietly, feeling lightheaded.

"I can be pretty useful when I'm not drunk." He grinned lopsidedly. "It's been a long time, Eden." He raised a hand to ghost his cool fingers across her fevered cheek. "God, you're still so beautiful. I guess I can't blame Dominic for keeping you all to himself." He took a step closer to her, invading her personal space and assaulting her senses with the sharp, acrid scent of the alcohol that permeated from him. "If he hadn't taken you from me, I would've probably done the same thing." He wasn't drunk, Eden had seen a drunk Lucas before, and thankfully this wasn't it, but she could tell that he'd had more than a few. While his actions were wholly unappreciated, she knew someone else who would appreciate them far less. Sensing the eyes of several and knowing they were garnering the attentions of several others, Eden prudently set a hand at the center of Lucas's chest to



push him away from her. In doing so, she sidestepped him and wrapped her arm around his.

“Come get some water with me.” She led them to the bar, and while Eden ordered herself a glass of water, Lucas requested a shot, taking a seat beside her.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she enquired of the whiskey that was set in front of him.

Disregarding her question, he wrapped his fingers around the glass, raised it up to her, and tossed it back with a grimace. “I saw you first,” he said after a moment, the petulance in his voice making him sound much younger than his twenty eight years. “You were supposed to be married to me.” He raised a hand to flag the bartender for another. “But then I can’t say I’m surprised. My irreproachable bastard brother has always been very good at taking everything that belongs to me.” He nursed the shot glass, oblivious to her presence. He seemed lost in thought as he spoke, looking straight ahead at a memory only he could see.

“He’s always been infuriatingly good at everything, outshining me in every aspect. He even managed to gain the respect and affections of our grandfather, a feat neither me nor our father could accomplish even when the old curmudgeon had been alive. But do you want you want to know the funny part in all this?” When he turned those glassy green eyes on her, Eden saw so much more than the alcoholism that coated his ruddy features. “I wanted a brother. I begged my parents for a brother. And then one day, I had one. But he wasn’t what I’d expected, nothing like I’d hoped. There was something wrong with him, something off about him... But then what was to be expected from the son a prostitute who was sold to his own family? His mother took everything away from him, including his humanity, so is it any wonder that he wishes to take everything that belongs

to me as well, just so he can make himself feel better? It's always been this way, Eden. He took you from me because that's what he does."

Eden reeled from what she'd just heard, stunned into complete silence she stared at Lucas disbelievingly, and then she was thrown into another tailspin of emotion when the hairs at the back of her neck stood on end. Even before she heard the lethal intonation of his voice, she knew he was near. "Another word, Lucas, and you will find how extremely tolerant I've been towards you." He kept a tight rein on a fury that burned like a blaze, but Eden felt it, felt the tension that seized his entire frame, coiled so tautly beneath the impeccable suit he wore that she feared it would erupt at any given moment. And from a face that was as dark and ominous as thunderclouds, Eden saw the way he clenched his jaw from the effort not to rip into his drunken sibling. Without warning, he brusquely apprehended her, wrapping a hand around her arm, drawing her into the unyielding strength and encompassing warmth of his body. "You will leave the premises of your own accord within the next two minutes, or I will have James escort you out." He did not linger a moment longer but rather urged her to the expansive dining room where the guests were now seated at their respective tables.

Dinner came and went, and through it all, Eden expected him to say something to her; for him to refute or condemn any of the things his brother had spoken. But he remained infuriatingly quiet completely disregarding her presence despite the fact that she was sitting right next to him. Though her attention was intermittently diverted by the gentleman to her left who wished to engage her in conversation, Eden ultimately found herself staring at Dominic's profile throughout the evening, wondering not for the first time exactly who he was. She knew this man, knew the lengths of his cruelty, knew the ruthless determination that coursed through his veins

when he desired something and did everything within his power to obtain it, regardless of who he hurt in the process. Eden knew of his insurmountable wealth, knew the sort of power that came hand in hand with that wealth and how expertly Dominic wielded it for his own selfish means.

His immorality was infamous; having witnessed it firsthand, she knew how limitless it could be. She knew that he was gorgeous as sin and knew that despite how much she denied it, she was incredibly attracted to him, inexplicably drawn to the seductive darkness that lay prevalent in him. It was a darkness that both repelled and intrigued her, and it was for this reason that Eden would never openly admit it to anyone else; even now, internally conceding to the notion, made her question the state of her mind. There were things she thought she knew of this man, things that were intrinsically true, things that she'd learned in the five years of their ill-fated marriage, but really Eden knew nothing about Dominic Armstrong. They'd been virtual strangers to each other when they'd married and continued to be so now, stuck in a limbo of their own making.

Lucas's words rang in her mind, the things he'd said of Dominic's biological mother...had she really been a prostitute? And even more startling was the question of whether she'd really sold her son to the Armstrong's. How much of what Lucas had said had been truth, and how much had been simply Lucas's own failings heaped upon his half-brother? A part of Eden wanted answers, wanted to find Lucas and have him divulge every sordid secret of Dominic's past. But she knew embarking on that path, opening that Pandora's Box would inevitably suck her into a reality she didn't want any part of. To know was to care and caring about Dominic Armstrong wasn't in her MO.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

“Did you know Lucas was going to be there?” Eden found herself asking on the quiet, tension filled ride back to the mansion a while later. In fact, she hadn’t meant to say anything at all and inwardly cursed her wayward mouth, hating that she’d goaded herself to filling the deafening silence. Seated once more across from him, she was privy to his facial expressions for only the briefest of moments before he schooled them back to granite, closing her off like he was always did. Withdrawn and mired in silent introspection, he appeared unaware of her presence in the car, and for once Eden wanted to know what he was thinking, wanted insight into that detached expression that shadowed his rawboned features. If they were to have any sort of peace in the ensuing six months of this contract, then they would need to come to some common ground. Never mind that her curiosity was highly piqued now, her mind refusing to ruminate on anything other than what Lucas had told her. It changed nothing of course, but Eden wanted to know what had happened. How that little boy Lucas had described ended up being this brutally contemptuous man who relished controlling every aspect of her life.

Dominic settled narrowed eyes on her beautiful face to find her luminous golden stare focused on him and quickly realized that she was trying to read him, glean secrets he was nowhere ready to share. Never having been the object of sympathy, Dominic’s pride resented the notion that he was the subject of her pity. He wanted nothing more from her than what she could do for him in the bedroom. He wanted her pliant and supple body writhing beneath him as he rode them both to delirium, and in return, Dominic could shower her with jewels and every materialistic thing she

could possibly desire. That was all he was equipped to give her, all he could provide. Anything else...there was nothing else. Lucas's words dragged on with fervor, reminding Dominic of a dismal childhood that had been filled with more fear and agony than any child should ever experience.

It had taken a great exercise in restraint not to violently hurt his younger brother and even still, Dominic was filled with the undeniable urge for vengeance—the inescapable emotion that came so naturally to him—to retaliate in the worst possible way and make his brother pay for divulging secrets that Dominic himself had vowed would never see the light of day. From the very moment he'd come into his inheritance, he'd gone to great lengths to see that his past with Sheila Swanson was eradicated, not only to insure that no one ever learned the extent of his mother's abuse, but to also exorcise himself from that upbringing. He'd worked tirelessly to forget, to bury and remember only when they manifested themselves in his dreams. Those memories, his demons and the shame they brought, were solely for him to contend with, but one careless, or rather deliberate slip of the tongue from a brother who would sooner see him hang, had left Dominic utterly exposed, vulnerable to the one person who had the means to use it against him if she wanted. It unsettled him that she was privy to this information, that along with her already low opinion of him, she now had knowledge of this, too. That unwelcome reminder dragged contempt and savage hatred to the surface, and it burned with acidic rage, wanting him to unleash it.

“What the hell were you doing with my brother?” he queried in a voice edged with unveiled savagery. “Convening on how to take down a mutual enemy? Or scheduling that long overdue rendezvous for the next time you decide to run?”

Taken aback by the unprovoked attack, Eden stared bemusedly at him, astonished at the thunderous expression of anger that clouded his features.

She didn't know why she was so surprised. Dominic didn't need any particular reason to be malicious; he wasn't at all content unless he was being a complete dick at some point. "Yes, of course because you think me so incapable of having a conversation with any man, least of all your brother without it involving sex. I am amazed of how very little you think of me," she shot back with biting sarcasm.

"I did not enjoy seeing you with him," he groused darkly, showing very little sign of contrition. "And it would appall you to learn just how much you consume my thoughts." He shot her a look so raw and primitive that she wanted to open the car door and flee. But imprisoned as she was inside the confines of the limousine, Eden could only avert her gaze and silently sustain the palpable heat of what that look implied.

"I wasn't putting him on my 'who wants to fuck Eden schedule'. Lucas was saving my ass from his snake of a mother and her pit of vipers. He took me to the bar and—"

"And told you an origin story." His mouth twisted. "It's one Lucas is very fond of telling."

"So you tell it," she invited softly, running her tongue across her lips in nervous habit. "What Lucas said—"

"Bears no relevance to our contract, therefore, it is not your concern," he said flatly, his stony expression putting an end to her line of questioning. The limo came to a stop at exactly that moment, and he descended without a word. That he could dismiss her so abruptly, so callously and reduce her to nothing more than the contract that they'd both signed was telling of the endless dynamic of their relationship. In a sense, it was sobering for him to do this, to keep her at arm's length, so that she remembered exactly where she fit in his life and what role she was designated to play. And she'd forgotten that, hadn't she? For one ephemeral moment she'd wanted to

know a little bit about the man she had married, the man who had fathered her child. She'd felt moved to feel something for him, and he'd ungraciously tossed it back in her face. Well, now that Eden was cured of her momentary lapse of insanity, she was once again focused on her goal: the divorce.

Once she'd showered and dressed, she set Liam inside his crib and returned to her bed, collapsing on the yielding mattress with a big sigh. It didn't take long for sleep to weigh her eyes down and slacken her body, and while she tried not to think about Dominic and the shadowy details of his past, Eden slept fitfully while plagued with dreams of a little boy who looked like her Liam and some unknown specter trying to take him from her.

\* \* \*

It was odd that they would both come to the same unspoken truce in the ensuing weeks, where they tried not to antagonize each other, yet worked seamlessly towards a mutual purpose: Liam. Liam was their common ground, and Dominic demanded to be involved in every aspect of Liam's life. From mundane monthly doctor appointments to giving, sometimes unwelcomed input, as to what his child would be wearing. If Eden was annoyed by his highhanded intrusiveness, she kept it to herself. She did however execute his requirements of her with quiet resolve, playing the hostess to his rare and illustrious parties, where she laughed easily and charmed his guests into enjoying themselves.

The parties were very exclusive, very private, attended solely by the city's elite and held almost always on Dominic's yacht. They were daunting of course, and faced with these affluent people who were worldlier and far more educated than she could be, Eden relied solely on her intuition and charm to get her through it. It wasn't anything new to her. She'd done this

before, had been paraded around these people more times than she could count. But there was a glaring difference now than before—Dominic’s attentiveness—his undeniable presence by her side when they attended these events. For one thing, he’d called her “his wife” more times than she could ever remember him saying. There was not only a quiet possession there, but it was said with the authority of a man who understood the significance of the word. There were no piercing glances of reproach or even a hint of that air of entitlement when he introduced her to his guests. For once, Dominic Armstrong did not outright demean his wife or make her feel completely inferior to him. And for all of Eden’s confidence and façade of indifference, Dominic’s mannerisms disconcerted her. She didn’t know what to think or how to react to this side of him, so she said nothing, choosing to ignore the conflicting emotions this sudden change produced.

With sleep eluding him and a stack of neglected work clamoring for attention on his desk, Dominic made his way to his home office to attempt to get some work done. Finding that he did his best work with a little incentive, he ambled to his liquor cabinet to pour himself a glass of his best scotch and that was when he heard it. It was faint, barely discernable at such a distance, so he paused for a moment, thinking he’d imagined it. Standing at the threshold of his office door, he strained to listen from where the sound was coming from. It was louder in the hallway and grew louder as he followed it, drawn like an ill-fated sailor to the siren’s call that compelled him closer, lured him until all that mattered, all that existed for him was that sound.

Up the stairs, around the corner, until finally he stood outside the closed doors from where the sound originated. He drew it open with one smooth yet forceful tug and was instantly besieged with the strains of piano chords, ascending and descending, skimming effortlessly over complex intervals



with dexterity. The melody was a soft one, sad, and her voice accompanied it, fused so perfectly with her playing that Dominic stood arrested. God, she could sing. He'd forgotten she held this pure and natural talent. There was a soulful quality to her voice, one that she possessed with brilliant control, and while the song emphasized the warmth and resonance of her voice, it also stirred something in Dominic, reaching down to the center of him, touching his core, and providing a glimmer of warmth to his otherwise bleak and dark soul.

Breath left his lungs and he felt like he was being choked as memories from his childhood flashed through his mind, where pain, violence, and fear from so long ago contested with the crushing warmth and tenderness that her voice evoked. He must've done something, probably made a noise that put an immediate stop to the song, to her voice, to the torturous memories that left him hating the world. She turned to look at him. He looked at her and then was in front of her. Lightning fast reflexes kept her from leaving; he trapped her, cornered her against the baby grand and his large body. He fisted his hands into her unbound hair, his fingers gripping the silken mass to bring her to him even as his mouth found hers with scorching urgency.

He tasted her, her sweetness his undoing as he groaned, the sound rumbling through his chest. He claimed her, forgoing tender kisses for plunging his tongue into her, angling her head to gain better access. Dominic wanted more, he wanted it all, needed her like he needed his next breath. He nipped at her lips, at her chin, and drew her head back to gain access to her delicate neck, grazing his teeth and licking until he left marks. She was braless, her nipples hardening as he cupped a hand around the shape of her breast. She gasped as Dominic clamped down over that pert little nub between his teeth. She released a sweet little sound that was between whimper and mewl as her back arched reflexively, her chest rising

to meet the unarguably arousing heat of his persistent mouth that suckled her breast through the thin layer of her shirt. He couldn't get enough, ravenous, Dominic wanted to consume her. In the silence, there was nothing but his harsh breaths coming short and fast as he quickly lost his grip on control. His searching hands slid up her smooth legs and as he eased between her parted thighs, he gripped her hips and impaled her on his cock.

Eden choked on a gasp, her eyes wide she stared into the unfathomable vortex of his green gaze and found herself desperate to jump. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, needing to keep the moan she knew he yearned to hear to herself as he moved against her. It was appallingly erotic, devastatingly sensual, and as he moved, sensually thrusting his hips forward, making sure that she felt his length stroking right down the center of her, the disjointed sound of the piano keys punctuated every stroke. God... she felt every single velvet steel inch of him through the layers of the clothes that separated them. And just because he knew she refused to share the symphony of pleasure he so easily evoked, he gripped her jaw, inserting just the right bit of pressure to have her mouth fall open and release that whimper that was music to his soul. She needed him to stop. She needed to push him away. But he deprived her of speech, impeded her actions as he threaded a hand through her hair and took possession of her, filling her mouth in the same manner he wanted to fill her cunt.

"If you won't let me fuck you, then let me taste you." The primitive growl of his voice was unrecognizable as he breathed against her mouth only to astonish her when he lowered himself before her. "Just a taste..." He sounded tortured, agonized, like life in that moment was contingent on her acquiescence. It shouldn't have been a very difficult choice at all, and any other woman, a stronger, saner woman, would've denied him this request, yet Eden found that she could not lie to herself in that instant, not

when every atom in her body strained for his touch. In his all-consuming gaze, she saw her own weakness. Fascination and fear ceaselessly warred inside her, and Eden knew just as much as she hated him, she yearned for him with a raw, unfettered intensity that threatened to burn her from the inside out. But she couldn't say the words, she couldn't give her consent because to do so was to openly admit this weakness to him, to give him access to hurt her again.

Dominic however didn't need her spoken assent as he spied it in her luminous golden eyes, and he relished the small tremor that shot through her when he pressed his mouth to her inner thighs. With all the expertise of an experienced lover, he stripped her of the shorts while the piano keys provided a soundtrack. With the barrier of her shorts gone, his lustful gaze feasted on her with such gluttonous avarice, Eden flushed. Instinct impelled her to close her legs to him, but he put a stop that action instantly with one strong sturdy hand to her thigh. "No...don't..."

When he slipped a middle finger down her slick center, Eden tensed, biting down on her bottom lip she watched him through shuttered eyes, while her heart raced erratically in her chest and every single fiber of her being paused in bated anticipation. He nipped and indolently licked the soft, tender skin of her inner thighs, until he was poised at the apex of her sex, sensuous mouth to wet pink lips. He hovered, the warmth of his breath melting her further as he wrapped his arms around her quivering thighs, anchoring her in place, and then finally, in one long, indolent stroke of his broad tongue, he tasted her, from the bottom of her slit up to her clit. Eden's breath hitched in her lungs, and if it wasn't for his unyielding grip on her, she would've slid off the piano. He did it again and again, the impossibly slow drag on his tongue was sheer torment, but Eden did not want mercy, playing the budding masochist to his delicious sadism, she relished his

torment, setting her legs on his shoulders to gain better purchase, she rode the indescribable riptide of passion rampaging through her. Every sensory nerve clustered and pulsed between her legs, her ability to think was wiped clean making it impossible for Eden to do anything else but writhe wantonly against his face, offering herself up to be devoured like a maenad at his altar. And he worshiped her like a god, licking her with fiendish delight, devouring her like she was the cure to his infinite sweet tooth. He frenched her cunt, fucked her with his tongue, and just when Eden thought she could take no more, he did it again, possessing her so completely that she thought she was going to burn in his consuming inferno.

She threw her head back, her short nails dug into her balled fists, her eyes drew tightly closed as she felt her muscles tightening, “Dom...” she moaned his name, her voice no longer recognizable as the building force of her orgasm tore through her. When it was over and she was a boneless heap in his arms, he rose to full height and captured her lips in raw masculine claim, cupping her ass to draw her to the hard angles of his body so that she could feel the length of his arousal for her. She clung to him, whimpering helplessly as he impaled his tongue deeper into her, making Eden taste herself, taste him, the heady combination a sinful intoxication that made her feel lightheaded. As if he knew that she was near fainting, he jerked back but did not release her. He set his forehead against hers and cupped her face with one hand, his thumb tracing indolently across her bottom lip. “You can’t even begin to understand how badly I want to bury my cock into your sweet little pussy and fuck you until you can’t move,” he said gravely against her mouth. “But I refuse to take what you aren’t willing to give me. So I’m going to let you leave before I do something I will regret.”

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Drawn despite herself because she knew she shouldn't tempt her best friend's husband, Jenna checked to make sure the top half of her two-piece was on properly before hastening onto the stamped concrete of the pool deck. The amazingly lush landscape of shrubbery and blooming flowers made the pool feel like an oasis, but even that wasn't enough to combat the oppressing mid-August heat that instantly drew sweat to the surface of her skin. Though tempted to turn and head back to the air conditioning of the mansion, Jenna continued her journey, finally coming to a stop at one of the lounge chairs around the pool. She took a seat, setting her bottle of sunscreen on the ground. Although the crystal blue water of the pool was temptation enough, something far more interesting caught Jenna's eye. She slipped her sunglasses in place concealing her watchful stare. Naked except for the swimming trunks he wore, Dominic was utterly exposed to her, and Jenna sat back to enjoy the view.

It was extraordinary the effect children could have on people, and it was clear that Dominic was incredibly influenced by his son. Jenna had noticed a change in him the last two months since they'd all come to live in the mansion, and it awed her to see him so uninhibited when he believed no one was watching. There was a slight softening to his typically granite features, and smiles that were rarely seen made frequent appearances, changing the cruel twist of his mouth to something altogether pleasing. Only when in the presence of his child did Dominic display any form of genuine human emotion. It was quite riveting to watch, and Jenna found herself fascinated, reflecting that maybe Eden had been wrong about him. There was definitely more to Dominic than he chose to reveal, and Eden had certainly missed out

on it. But that certainly wasn't to say that he had abandoned his aloofness; he was still just as reserved as the day Jenna had met him, keeping mostly to himself and making very little effort to befriend her. Maybe friendship was a stretch, but at the very least, he could be kind enough to acknowledge her presence. It was in that effort that Jenna made up her mind to approach him.

Dominic noticed her the moment she stepped outside, but then it was impossible to miss her with what she was wearing. There was also the rather tantalizing performance she was putting on in applying sunscreen to her body. Any red-blooded male would've been instantly aroused by the display, and it wasn't to say that Dominic was immune to the subtle game of seduction she was employing, but his mind was consumed by another woman who had eyes like citrine and a body capable of hardening his cock at just the thought of her. A woman who could evoke the most explosive reactions from him, be it anger or the dark desire that nearly always tempted him to drag her off to their bedroom and perform acts on her that some would consider highly unconventional. There was nothing else and no one else that compared to her, every other woman paled in comparison, and that included Jenna Mills.

"Mind if I join you guys?"

"By all means." He returned his hold on Liam, remaining in the cool water of the pool. The late afternoon had dulled the stifling heat of the scorching August sun, making it much easier and comfortable for Dominic to enjoy swimming lessons with his fast growing son. Two months had already gone by in which he'd learned an overwhelming amount of information about this child who continued to worm his way into the empty hollow of Dominic's chest, the ruins of a secret dark place that had not seen light in a very long time. Yet every moment he spent in Liam's company

was a moment Dominic wanted to prolong, a moment he found himself cherishing because he knew how fleeting they were. Affection however did not come easily, having it stripped from him at such a young age it evaded him now, remaining ever elusive, even in his anguish to grasp it. There was nothing, no source of love from which Dominic could draw from to bestow upon his son, and it seemed that his failure was imminent, yet with every toothless smile he received and every milestone he saw Liam through, Dominic understood that, if nothing else, his son needed him in his life. It was that one fact, that one assurance that kept him battling the part of himself that wanted to withdraw, to keep his son at distance and guard that which had been so severely damaged. Damaged beyond repair he feared.

“Dominic?” the soft call of his name drew Dominic from his internal reflection to find Jenna peering reservedly at him. She was at the shallow end of the pool, not too far from where he stood. The water lapped rhythmically at her waist as she slowly moved, and while he said nothing, she continued, finding that she now had his attention. “I just want to thank you for letting me stay here and for giving me the job as Liam’s nanny. I really appreciate you doing that for me.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” he imparted laconically, his perforating stare prompting Jenna to look away in embarrassment.

Unaccustomed to his candor, she sank beneath the water for a moment trying to recover her bruised pride. Of course Jenna knew he hadn’t done it for her, but was he so jaded that he couldn’t even accept her simple gratitude? “I know...I know you did it for Eden, but I’m still grateful. It’s not every day your boss treats you to a spa and day of shopping.”

Dominic eyed her curiously and though he did not display his confusion, he did angle an inquisitive brow. “I’m afraid I have no idea what

you are talking about,” he replied flatly. “I have never treated you to anything.”

Jenna frowned now, wondering if he was playing with her. “But I... Eden told me...”

“She told you what?”

Jenna shook her head, knowing that she probably put her foot in her mouth. “Nothing...she didn’t say anything,” she said weakly. He had her in his line of vision, and as skewered as she was by the intensity in his green gaze, Jenna could do nothing but simply stand there.

“I am not partial to people lying to me, Jenna, and I despise the trait even less in my employees,” he asserted calmly, placing Liam in the bright yellow inflated duck that had been among the many toys Dominic had purchased for him. “If you are to remain in my employ, I would strongly suggest you learn to be honest. Now, would be a perfect time to start.”

His highhandedness was overwhelming, and the slick way he went about acquiring what he wanted was even more alarming. And to think this was only because she’d evaded telling him the truth. Jenna couldn’t even imagine what it would be like if she betrayed him outright. It was easier for her to understand why Eden wanted to distance herself from him, especially when he looked as he did now, like he relished the thought of causing her pain. For a moment, Alex came to mind; Alex who was volatile and angry and had battering rams for fists, but could apologize like a saint.

These two men, both worlds apart in personality, mannerism, upbringing, social class, and wealth could not have been more different and yet to Jenna they were exactly alike in one aspect, the similarity was so prominent that she didn’t know how she’d missed it before. It frightened her that she hadn’t caught it until now. Eden had not shared much of her marriage with Dominic, but Jenna knew that he’d hurt her, not physically,



but Jenna could spot the effects of emotional abuse a mile away and Eden had been swathed in it. She, more than most, understood abuse, both physical and mental, and though the body healed and the bruises disappeared, the emotional scars remained long after, affecting the individual in the worse way possible. Alex had abused her and Dominic had done the same to Eden, the only difference was that one knew how to dress it up better.

“She told me it was a gift from you, the spa treatment and the shopping trip. I was so happy that I didn’t even question it, but I know she paid it for herself now. I can’t believe I didn’t realize it before. I mean, it’s not like she’s been spending your money. God, I bet she probably used up all her paycheck and tips to—”

“Tips?” He clutched on that one word as a look of black fury blazed across his features. There was only one implication to that word for Dominic, and it touched on a distant memory of his wife on a steel pole.

Aware of the conclusion he was making, Jenna quickly tried to dissuade the situation. “Look, Dominic, she’s not working at—”

“Where is she?” he enquired slowly.

“She’s working at Carver’s Grill,” she replied. “It’s nothing like Craze Pussy!” she yelled after him. He handed Liam off to her and hastened out of the pool.

It was easy enough for him to find the address, and though he could’ve taken James with him, Dominic decided to forgo his bodyguard and instead, journey out to find Eden on his own. The car he chose was a shiny, sleek black, import with a six speed transmission he handled with enviable expertise as he gunned down the streets with one destination in mind. It was only Jenna’s assurance that Eden had not resorted back to stripping that made him handle the car with care, but still, he kept a lead foot on the gas,

needing to find her and demand to know why the hell she was working for tips. She hadn't spent a dime of his money, her friend said, and that avowal would've been incredibly difficult for Dominic to believe if he hadn't checked for himself.

There'd been no expenses on the credit cards he'd given her nor did she withdraw or spend any of the money he'd put in her bank account. Everything had been there, untouched and Dominic remained unsure of what bothered him more: the fact that she hadn't spent any of it or the increasing notion of having misjudged her. The basis of their relationship, their marriage, was built solely on the insurmountable wealth she'd wanted from him. To realize that may have somehow changed in the duration of her absence continued to gnaw at him. The idea of being proven wrong was not something he was ready to admit.

Eden had never worked a day in the five years of their marriage; why work when Dominic had given her nearly everything her greedy little heart could possibly desire? But then she'd left him. And in that year spent away from him, he'd learned that she had worked herself to the bone until she'd given birth to Liam. When he'd coerced her back to the mansion and had his attorney draw up the contract that would keep her there for the next six months, it had been on the belief that she would revert back to the self-centered, money hungry, little minx he knew her to be, that Eden Dominic knew how to control. He knew what to offer to have her carry out his every wish. However, this Eden, who behaved so unexpectedly and was capable of landing a real estate job but chose to work some menial job for scraps, was the Eden that frustrated Dominic to no end. He didn't understand her motive. Dominic could not comprehend the reason why she wanted to work when she could easily buy anything she wanted with the money he'd set up for her. He entered Carver's Grill with these frustrations.

\* \* \*

It was insanely busy, but luckily, Lena had hired a few more girls so they were able to handle the increase of customers, but just barely, which was why Eden had been relegated back to her waitressing duties. The patrons were rowdy, their jokes were offensive and obscene, and once or twice she'd been peeved enough to smack at a few hands bold enough to touch her ass. With the harrowing pace of carrying out food and drink orders while dodging men with octopus hands and bad cases of BO, Eden had to put this night up there with not only one of the most stressful, but the most exhausting as well. The upside was that she hadn't dropped anything, which she was sure Carver was very happy about. While waiting on her orders, Eden noted the gaggle of women at the bar and grinned drily.

Having sampled some of the food, she could affirm that that wasn't the reason for the surplus of estrogen at the bar. And even though Mickey made cocktails like he was born to it, the women weren't interested in his fruity concoctions. They were there for only one reason, the six foot one inch, tattooed man with the rock hard body and swoon worthy dimpled grin, drawing them in like moths to a flame. They hung on his every word, giggling like school girls, batting their garishly long lashes, and displaying enough cleavage that could've qualified them to work at his establishment. He had a wry sense of humor that some mistook for cockiness, but undoubtedly found sexy as they continuously returned for more. He probably had more contacts than most people had in their phones, certainly more than Eden that was for sure. Regardless of his demeanor, he always took someone home at the end of the night. He had a type: tall, slim, always blond, and always leggy, exactly like the woman currently monopolizing his time.

It would be lie to say that Eden didn't find him attractive; there was an underlying roughness about him that called to the fairer sex with the promise of pure masculine power. He made Eden nervous in a way that was all racing heart and sweaty palms. The only other time she'd ever felt that way was when she was in Dominic's company. And just like that, as though a mere thought had conjured him, he was there. *Speak of the devil and he shall appear*. He commanded a room when he entered it, and people naturally turned to stare, craned their necks to gape at the authority that swathed every inch of his powerful physique.

A sovereign among commoners, he appeared far removed from the common patrons of Carver's, everything from the impeccable cut of his suit to the manner in which he carried himself, Dominic exuded refinement, a cool sophistication that set him apart. Standing by the bar and steps away from the swinging door of the kitchen, Eden stood rooted as she watched him looking over the crowd, clearly searching for her. While she wavered on whether to flee or remain where she was, her heart battered anxiously against her breastbone. She couldn't believe he was here, at her place of work, but then Eden had known it would only be a matter of time before he'd made the discovery. What surprised her more was the length of time it had taken him. She'd expected him to break his promise about snooping into her life some time ago. When his green eyes finally landed on her, he cut an immediate path towards her, an easy feat as the throng parted for him like the Red Sea.

His eyes raked over her body with such thoroughness that color bloomed in Eden's cheeks, exacerbated by the memory of what she'd allowed him to do to her not long ago. In her own immature way of dealing with the harrowing encounter of that evening, Eden had been avoiding him as much as she could, remaining in his presence only when absolutely

necessary. Work had been her escape, but now he was here intruding on her space, her territory. Just a mere glimpse at his full mouth reminded her of how miserably she'd failed at rebuking his advances. Heat suffused her entire body at the memory of just how shameless she'd been.

"We're leaving," he directed brows furrowed in impatience.

He reached for her but she evaded his grasp, taking a furtive step back. "I'm working," she replied firmly, hoping he was kind enough not to draw attention to them and simply leave. But Eden knew it was all wishful thinking on her part.

"Do not try my patience, Eden."

"Go away, Dominic." She had orders to take, drinks and food to serve, and by the incensed look Lena was sending her, Eden knew she needed to haul ass. Now. Her attempt to sidestep him only caused him to capture her arm; the grip wasn't enough to hurt, but it did restrain her. "You can leave here of your own accord, or I can carry you out kicking and screaming, either way you will not remain in this place a second longer."

"Is there a problem here?" Carver's smooth baritone voice had Eden glancing to her left to find him standing there, big and bold, while carefully assessing Dominic, who, for his part, retained his hold on her arm, not at all ready to release her.

"It's none of your concern," he said dismissively, his cold tone would've put off a lesser man, but Carver stood his ground, more concerned for Eden's safety than cowering beneath that derisive glance.

"I concern myself with all of my employees," he replied evenly. "Eden, is everything alright?" Steel blue eyes searched her face for any sign of distress, his stance instantly on alert, ready to jump to her rescue if need be, regardless of the man accosting her. Doubling as owner and bodyguard of sorts, it was natural for him to want to protect the girls working for him.

Customers at his bar were oftentimes unpredictable, add in alcohol and the situation turned volatile. Brawny as he was, Eden had seen him engage in a few scuffles since she'd come to work here, and he'd come out the victor in many of those cases. Of course that wasn't to say Dominic couldn't very well hold his own if the situation called for it. With the amount of testosterone jumping in the dead air between them, it could very well end up being something very ugly, very fast, and that certainly wasn't something Eden wanted. "Eden?"

"Everything is good, Carver. Can I—"

"Consider her one less person you have to concern yourself with. She quits," he announced prosaically, and without as much as a backward glance, he dragged Eden behind him with all the courtesy of an ape.

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## *Chapter Fifteen*

She was so angry that she could barely think straight, and though she fought futilely to be released, he refused to relinquish his hold of her wrist, forcing her to keep pace with his incredibly long, determined strides. It took her making a sound of distress before he deigned to stop, and Eden took the opportunity to wrench her wrist from his grasp. In a fit of absolute white hot rage, she swung her hand and it cracked satisfyingly with his cheek.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, echoing Eden's emotions. The late night crowd turned curious eyes to them but all Eden was aware of was the blood rushing between her ears and the intense burn radiating from the palm of her hand, throbbing from the sheer impact of the slap. But good God that had felt good! She'd never been one for violence and even as she saw the blistering red imprint of her hand on the side of his face she was instantly overcome with guilt, but that guilt turned into quiet triumphant as he looked at her in stunned disbelief. That one expression to Eden was worth her impromptu act of violence.

"You hit me."

"It's not less than what you deserved," she rebutted, fire burning in her veins.

He said nothing for a time, but looked at her with an intensity that made her squirm; Eden however held her head high, refusing to be browbeaten. When he moved, it was with a fluidity that had her taking a step back, afraid that he would grab her again. But he didn't, instead he marched the few steps that led to his car and smoothly held the door open for her.

"Get in the car."

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she returned, stubborn pride had her in a chokehold. “I have a shift to finish, and I have my own ride so you can just—”

“Please.” That one beseeching word, uttered so quietly it disappeared on the warm summer wind, sent Eden’s world skittering to a startling halt. She raised her lush lashes to gape at him, her golden gaze searching for a hint of the raw emotion she’d heard in that one singular word. And there, just beyond the scope of his too green eyes, amid the darkness that seemed so inherent in him, Eden saw his vulnerability. It was only for an eternal second, but it was there, hidden within the haunting shadows that barred anyone from breaking through the impenetrable walls that surrounded him. In all the years she’d known him, Dominic had shown Eden only one side to his personality: indomitable, overbearing and controlling on a constant cycle, wash, lather, rinse, repeat. So for her to catch this glimpse of this atypical emotion was startling.

*His mother took everything away from him, including his humanity...*

Lucas’s words played like scratched vinyl in Eden’s mind further adding to the difficulty of maintaining her resolve to deny him. It was with a long, deep sigh that she ultimately found herself ensconced in the luxuriant, deep burgundy leather of his sports car. Eden waited for him to say something, anything to break the suppressing silence that vibrated in the space between them, but he remained silent. As she tossed a perfunctory glance his way, she took in his hardened profile, and while tension tautened his entire body, she saw the effect in his bloodless knuckles as his grip around the steering wheel tightened considerably.

“You had no right to do what you did back there,” she finally forced to say, needing to break the silence. “I agreed to remain your wife, but I’ll be



damned if I let you continue to treat me like your property. I am done enabling your sickening need to demean me at every turn.”

“That place is not somewhere you should be working. You demean yourself by working there,” he quietly countered. “It is beneath you.”

“It’s the only choice you’ve left me.”

“Because your place is at home with our son. Why work when there is no need for it?”

“I like working. In fact, before you came in and ruined what I had, I was happy working at the brokerage firm. But then again my happiness has never mattered to you, so why should it now?”

“Your happiness...” he trailed off, voice weighed with emotion that he would not convey. He said nothing after that until the car drove past the wrought iron gates and slid quietly into the circular driveway. Eden barely gave him time to stop the car before she jumped out, her shapely legs carrying her as fast and as far away from him as physically possible. But he quickly closed in on her, long legs eating up the head start she’d gained on him. When he caught her, it was to draw her into his inescapable hold, his arms spanned her waist, and wrapped tightly around her with his unyielding strength. And before she could protest, he took possession of her lips, covering her mouth with a desperation that thundered in his chest. The whimper she made, from deep in the back of her throat, was a protest that thawed to helplessness; the deep, gnawing need to have him close, to have him possess her this way, was all that mattered. He tasted of whiskey and apples and something distinctively Dominic, a taste that she feared she was now addicted to. While she clung to him, Eden followed his lead, where his tongue brushed up languorously along her own she reciprocated, the sensual feel of their tongues melding elicited a groan from him and she sucked in a

breath as he practically picked her up so that only her sneakered toes skimmed the waxed floor.

He dove in deep, kissing her with savage hunger, the luscious strokes of his tongue and lips were unimaginably provocative. In a move driven purely by passion, Eden reached between them to grasp at the erection that stabbed at her abdomen, and he sucked in a breath, breathing her lust into him. His hand came over hers, wrapped around her hand and held it there, over his hard, thick, straining erection that pulsed between them. The air between them was like it fuel, and with only a spark, it would detonate, blowing them both to smithereens. Doing something that shocked them both, he shoved away from her with enough strength that he stumbled back a few steps. "If I am to respect the terms of the contract, you cannot do that again, Eden," he warned jaggedly, his breath coming out sharp and fast. He looked every bit as ruffled as she felt, if not more so. "There is only so much provocation a man can take before he is driven to devour his temptation," he pronounced, his voice returning to normal, but the color that remained high on his cheeks was telling of his current state. To see him so affected, so undeniably unraveled was entirely refreshing for Eden.

"I...thank you..."

He tossed her a disparaging look; the sneer that tugged his full mouth upwards was not pleasant. "For not devouring you like the big, bad monster you've made me out to be?"

"I didn't make you out to be anything that you weren't already, Dominic," she snapped, not understanding him at all. How could he kiss her so thoroughly one second and be this condescending jerk the next? He mystified her in the same way that he frustrated her and made her wish for a blunt object with which to knock him out with when he behaved like the

proverbial asshole, like now for instance. Deciding that she'd had her fill, Eden turned on her heel to leave.

"It matters," he called after her and stupidly she turned to find him standing right in front of her.

"What?"

"Your happiness," he began roughly, "it matters."

Eden regarded him in silence, unsure of how to take the admission, but knowing by the expression on his face that it hadn't been easy to admit. She didn't trust that he wasn't playing her, but what more could he possibly want from her when he had exactly where he wanted her? With the many chances he'd had to proceed in taking her treacherous body to bed, he'd shown astonishing restraint, the likes of which Eden would've thought impossible a year ago. "Why now? When it never had before?"

"You had my wealth. You were happy with what I gave you."

Eden stiffened. "You can't possibly be that clueless, Dominic."

"You married me for my money," he imparted with biting scorn, the sardonic angling of his dark brow daring her to refute the claim.

"I married you because I was desperate, yes, and I needed your money to get me out of debt. But do you honestly believe money, jewelry, even this mansion was what I needed to make me happy? Do you honestly believe that this is what I wanted my marriage to be like? This cold, unfeeling, back and forth that has left nothing but resentment and hate? A husband is supposed to love, cherish and protect his wife, not parade her around like arm candy to prove his manhood. Do you have any idea how what it felt like when you made perform in front of your friends?"

She was so furious that she was shaking from it. Years of pent up resentment burbled up like vomit, burning her throat, impatient to find its mark. She hated the tears of frustration that stung her eyes and made her

look weak in front of him, but she persevered, needing to get her point across, needing him to understand an ounce of the animosity that thrashed through her veins. “Not once in the five years that I’ve known you have you made me feel anything but degraded and worthless, and trust me, I don’t blame you completely for it, because I stupidly allowed you to treat me that way, to take away my self-worth. Did you even ask yourself, once in the year that I was away, why I left? Why I needed to get away from you? Because it sickened me to be around you. It hurt, in the worse way possible to be around a man who thought of me as nothing more than two convenient holes.” She angrily swiped at her cheeks with trembling fingers and met his shadowed gaze. “You didn’t know me when you married me, Dominic, and you know me even less now.” She spun on her heel and ran up the grand staircase, disappearing around the corner soon after.

Dominic had lost count of how much he’d had to drink, but with every trek made to his liquor cabinet he found himself stumbling a little more each time, until he grabbed the nearly emptied decanter and plopped down into the high back wing chair that served as his final resting place. He’d believed getting drunk to the point of incoherence would’ve tempered the incessant echoes of memories knocking at his temples, but the finely aged whiskey only intensified those emotions, those unwanted memories, and Eden’s condemning words served as the battering ram that shattered the dam, allowing hell itself to run rampant inside Dominic’s core. There was nothing good about him, nothing soft and sweet that he could provide for anyone. Sentimentality, love and anything resembling the gentle side of human emotion had been beaten, burned and scared out of him by the only person in this world who should’ve been the one to protect him. The most harrowing part about it all was that Dominic knew he’d deserved what his mother had done to him. There’d been something inherently wrong with

him to provoke such mistreatment. Dominic was damaged, rotten to the core, and he'd been dealing with that truth for as long as he could remember. He'd shut down everything and abandoned what remained of his heart in the bareness. He hadn't recognized the emptiness, the desolation, until recently when he'd taken Liam into his hands and held a part of himself. He hadn't realized how much he'd hungered, how deeply he'd craved that of which he'd never had. His son was the catalyst, but there was only having him here, being able to see and hold him, stirred a change in Dominic that he now wanted but did not know how to grasp it.

In the pin drop silence, with nothing interfering with his self-reflection but the sound of his own breathing, Dominic could barely attempt to contemplate the atrocities he'd committed against the woman who'd entrenched herself into his bloodstream so thoroughly. It had been easy to brand her the coldhearted gold digger because then he would not need to reflect on his own insecurities, on his own failings as a man, a man who still very much had the mentality of the child who'd been locked away in that crawlspace years ago, for days on end. He'd purposely mistreated her, manifested his internal agonies on her so that he wouldn't need to face the issues at hand. She'd been his own personal whipping girl, the more he'd demeaned her, the more he'd demoralized her, the easier it had been to hide from his own demons.

His cowardice sickened him. He'd defiled her in his this room, had allowed other men to lay eyes on her while he'd forced her to pleasure him, and she'd done it because he'd left her no other choice. The scope of his depravity incurred self-loathing the likes of which Dominic had not felt since childhood. In one swift move, he threw the glass with enough force that it shattered against the adjacent wall. He swiped a frustrated hand across his face, he'd destroyed her...them, a marriage he had not wanted

but was now desperately clinging to because, despite the misery he'd imparted, it was the only thing sustaining him. She and the boy were the only things that filled the emptiness.

\* \* \*

"Don't be mad, but I'm the one who told Dominic about you working at Carver's," Jenna admitted shamefacedly to her best friend. With the day proving to be a nice, mild one, Jenna had decided to tag along with Eden while she ran errands around town. They'd done some grocery shopping, buying a few things for Liam and were only now returning from visiting Eden's mother's grave. It was later in the afternoon now, and with Liam conked out from his productive day, Eden put him down in his bassinet in the living room. She'd brought the baby monitor with her and set it down on the marble island top in the kitchen. Greeted with silence, Jenna carefully observed the other woman to glean her reaction, and if Eden was at all irritated by the admission, she did not let on as she helped one of the house staff unload the groceries they'd purchased. "Eden, did you hear me? I said I was the one who told Dominic where you worked."

When Eden finally turned to look at Jenna, her face remained blank. "I heard you. I'm just waiting for you to tell me why you would do that."

Jenna flushed. "Well, I didn't realize it was some big secret you were keeping from him," she said defensively from her position by the counter. "I mean, I know how things are between you guys, and I'm sorry for blabbing. It's just, I was trying to thank him for the spa day and shopping spree. I assumed he paid for it, and it just fell out of my mouth."

"I asked you to leave it alone, Jenna. If I had wanted him to know where I was working, I would've told him. It wasn't your secret to tell. I didn't realize I had to tell you not to interfere in my relationship with him."

“Okay.” She stretched out the word, not at all accustomed to this caustic side of her friend, who typically wasn’t bothered by much and simply brushed things off with ease. The silence that stretched between them was awkward enough without the weird look the maid was tossing between them. “Alright, I’m sorry. Maybe I overstepped my boundaries a little bit. It was an accident, we were in the pool and I—”

“Wait, you were in the pool? Together?” Eden asked slowly, the incredulous look on her face would’ve been comical if she wasn’t so serious. “What the hell, Jenna?”

Jenna was beginning to regret the conversation. It wasn’t going at all like she’d expected, and the more she revealed, the angrier Eden became. “Excuse us for a minute.” Reaching out to take a hold of Eden’s elbow, she drew her away from the nosy maid. When they were a considerable distance away, Jenna looked at her friend. “Eden—” she began, but was immediately cut off.

“Tell me I’m wrong in what I’m thinking. Tell me you’re not trying to start something with him.”

“I’m not!” she protested sharply, even though the heightened color in her cheeks indicated otherwise. “It was hot, he was in the pool with Liam, and I joined them. Nothing happened. I wasn’t *trying* anything. My God, you know me—”

Eden pulled her arm away. “Yes, I know you and I know how opportunistic you can be!”

“Why are you so angry? For someone who says she wants a divorce, you’re sure as hell possessive of someone you claim you don’t want,” Jenna fired back accusingly, holding that mirror right up to Eden so that she could see her hypocrisy reflecting back at her. “Look, Eden, I’m sorry for telling him where you worked and for trying to interfere with your life. It was an

accident and shouldn't have happened. And I know you probably think I'm trying to start something with Dominic, but you couldn't be more wrong about that. I would never betray our friendship like that." Jenna wasn't being one-hundred percent honest, and although she could pretty much bullshit a lot of people, convincing herself to swallow the crap she was spewing was a little harder. Okay, so maybe she *had* attempted to seduce Eden's husband, and maybe she'd believed, for just one insane moment, that if Eden divorced Dominic she could expertly position herself to take her place in his life when Eden was gone, if as nothing else than someone to warm his bed. But really, those thoughts had been conjured by sheer lunacy, nothing worth entertaining for longer than the moment it had lasted. Aside from the fact that Dominic had clearly seen through her advances in the pool and had immediately shot her down, it had dawned on Jenna that she couldn't possibly jeopardize her friendship with Eden for a shot at nothing. Eden mattered too much to her.

Eden released a drawn out sigh and threaded her fingers through her layered shoulder length hair. "What Dominic and I have is...it's complicated. There are things he's done to me that I'm not sure I can forgive, but I'm still married to him and until he and I sign those divorce papers, he's still my husband. He can do whatever or whoever he wants after we're divorced."

"Do you... care about him?" Jenna asked slowly, knowing the sensitivity of the subject.

Eden didn't answer immediately, but rather took her time to ponder on that question. Did she care about Dominic? The answer should've been a resounding "No", but it was more complicated than that, more complex than the slight shade of grey in their otherwise black and white world, making it difficult for her to answer so abruptly. How could she care for



someone who'd treated her so abominably? Someone who had kept her at arm's length, rarely ever displaying a side of himself that hadn't been steeped in cruelty? But then one could argue that he'd been rather cordial as of late, the slight glimpses of gentleness he'd recently displayed towards her could count for something. But wasn't he quick in turning into the contemptible ape at the drop of a hat?

The truth was that Eden simply had no idea how she felt towards Dominic. Every moment she was in his company, she teetered precariously on that line of contempt for him, but it never shoved her quite over to hatred. She hated, with every fiber of her being, how he'd treated her, but she couldn't bring herself to hate the man. Wasn't it said that the ones you care about are the ones capable of hurting you the most? If there wasn't one minuscule part of her that cared for Dominic then his actions would not have cut her this deeply, where the hurt sank to the marrow.

"I don't know," she answered honestly, her hushed tone conveying her confusion and frustration with the matter. "Like I said, it's complicated. The sad part is we've been married for five years, and we don't even know each other."

"Do you want to know him? I mean with all that's happened between you two, do you think there could ever be anything there?"

Eden bit her bottom lip. "I don't know, Jenna." She sighed again. "All I know is that Dominic scares me. He scares me because he has this horrible ability to hurt me so badly and I can't trust myself around him. Opening myself up, even just a little bit, is like inviting him in to break me again. I'm not changing my mind about the divorce; I think it's the best thing to do for me and for him."

"Well, whatever you decide to do, I'm here for you. Are we...are we good, Eden?" she asked hesitantly.

Eden smiled slowly. “I overreacted. I’m sorry. And I should’ve told you I was the one who paid for your little day of fun.”

Jenna grinned. “Thank you, by the way. You really shouldn’t have done it, but I appreciate it. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“So should I start looking for apartments for us, since we only have, like, four months left here?”

“Yeah, sure. Something small and affordable for now, I guess.”

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## *Chapter Sixteen*

The devil was in his head, banging with incessant relish at his skull, until Dominic felt like ripping off his own head would be the only way to gain reprieve. Plagued by exhumed memories that played out in nightmares, sleep eluded him. Fatigue made him ill-tempered, and his lack of focus made it impossible to concentrate on work, but stubbornness kept him going, determined to read through the necessary portfolios on his desk and make the proper calls to neglected investors. But by midafternoon the banging morphed into a scraping sort of agony that occurred only on the right side of his head, and it was only then, unable to withstand the pain that Dominic decided to forfeit the day and haul his ass home.

What he needed was sleep and either a very strong drink or a painkiller that would knock him out for days. What he got instead was a call from Bruce's wife while he was being chauffeured home, urging him to come to their home. Now. It was only the urgency in her voice that had curbed the impulse to hang up on her, but not by much. And Dominic was beginning to regret that decision more and more as each second ticked away. He watched Cassie Barrett pace the length of her perfectly decorated living room, her bare feet stifled by the undoubtedly expensive beige carpet, while she talked in circles.

"Please, do take your time in getting to the point," he bit out caustically, cutting her off in the middle of her tangent. She was well into her fourth glass of wine now, the alcohol not having far to go for a woman her size. She was diminutive, frail almost, with pale, almost translucent skin, and large blue eyes that made her look younger than her thirty-six years. Cassie prided in appearances, whether it was with herself or the lavish life that

she'd born into, appearing perfect was always her goal. So to see her this way, her dark wavy black hair in disarray, face devoid of make-up, and appearing as though she'd slept in her designer clothes, was quite the sight. Not once since he'd known her had he seen her so...unhinged. Dominic would've felt moved to feel sorry for her, except his irritable mood and the damn headache didn't allow him an iota of compassion.

"Did you know?" she asked in the silence, her voice soft and needy.

"Did I know what?"

She regarded him with dark blue eyes that appeared far too lucid considering the nearly empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. "Please don't treat me like I'm stupid."

"Then I would suggest you stop asking stupid questions," he supplied coolly, not at all in the mood to deal with another one of Bruce's fuck-ups. "Why am I here?" And more pressingly where the hell was Bruce? This was his responsibility. He had assured Dominic he would take care of the matter, yet it appeared said matter was still very much unhandled. "Where is Bruce?"

"Do you know what I always wondered?" she went on with complete disregard to his questions. She raised her glass to her mouth and peered at him over the rim. "Do you hand select them for him and have them delivered to his hotel room? I know you're his puppet master, but are his pimp, too?"

"Cassie," Bruce took that exact moment to appear from where, Dominic hadn't the slightest, but his disheveled appearance was indication enough. Dominic suppressed a groan. It was as though the other man *wanted* to get caught. He watched as Bruce quickly assessed the situation, his gaze flying first from his wife to Dominic and back again. With the tension in the room thick enough to choke, dawning swept over his features and a fine sheen of

sweat formed on his skin. “Cass...” he took two steps towards her but stopped instantly as he saw her arm rear back and hurl the glass at him. Bruce managed to duck, but just barely, as some of the wine splashed him but the glass luckily shattered against the floor, missing its intended mark.

Shaken but undoubtedly okay, Bruce found his footing once more and raised his hands up in surrender to the seething woman across from him. “Cass, I need you to listen to me—”

But she flew at him before he could finish, her weight alone paled in comparison to Bruce’s substantial size, but her anger combined with her fists, kicks, and sharp fingernails went a long way in doing some damage. She was like a banshee and bearing witness to this scene, Dominic was at advantage to pry her off Bruce, but some twisted part of him delighted in his friend’s temporary agony. It was almost worth the migraine. He stood on the sidelines for another minute or so before finally intervening. She was a snarling thing, fiercer than a poodle but Dominic managed to subdue her without much effort, grabbing her by the waist and hauling her off Bruce. “Enough,” he said with brevity when she made to lunge for Bruce again. “Get a hold of yourself.” Holding her arms at her side, she was forced to look up at him, and the scowl on her face indicated her displeasure at doing so.

“Let go of me.” Despite her harsh breaths, the gravity of her tone had Dominic relinquishing his grasp, but he prudently remained close.

Bruce looked worse for wear, through the countless scratch marks on his face and neck, there was a genuine look of remorse on his face as he looked at his wife. Oblivious to the possible dangers he faced as he came around to Dominic’s side and approached her, he stopped just in front of her, raising his hands once again. “Cassie, baby, please—”

“I’m done,” she whispered on a shuddering breath, tears welling in her blue eyes. “It hurts too much to have you treat me this way. I don’t care about this marriage. I don’t care what happens to me, but I want out.”

“Do you care about what happens to your children?” Dominic intruded, keeping his tone light enough, but the menacing undertone was not lost on the other two occupants of the room, Bruce especially.

He turned a sharp eye to Dominic and shook his head. “I can handle this,” he said resolutely, forcing Dominic to back off. “Cassie, please listen to me, please. I...I have a problem, okay, and I promise, baby, I’ll do whatever it takes to make this better.” Voice tinged with a crazed desperation Dominic had never heard in his friend, he watched the play of emotions on his face, all in the neighborhood of pure despair. “I’ll get help, Cass, I promise. I’ll take a break from it all, resign from office if I have to, just please don’t leave. I need you too damn much.”

It was a surreal moment for Dominic. Awkward on so many levels but no less surreal, yet somehow he understood how crucial this moment was for Bruce. He knew he needed to leave them, but something compelled him to stay. As he watched Bruce take a tentative step towards a stagnant Cassie, she did not recoil when he reached for her.

“Damn you,” she muttered. It was only when she moved into Bruce’s embrace that Dominic finally forced himself to leave.

\* \* \*

It was with the strangest feeling lying heavy on his chest that Dominic continued his journey home. His migraine had abated and was bearable now, but as he reclined his head back against the leather seat, he could still feel the echoing thud at the back of his skull. Somewhere between introspection and sleep, his thoughts inevitably touched the dire state of his own marriage. After witnessing the display with Bruce and Cassie, he

wasn't fool enough to believe that his and Eden's problems could easily be rectified. Bruce had a sex addiction; Dominic's issues...well his issues were much more inexact and Eden would not forgive so easily. For a moment he imagined what it would be like if he revealed it all to her, told her of the innate darkness that laid in him that compelled his own mother to treat him with such cruelty. He imagined telling her of the fear, the pain, and the debilitating humiliation of peeing himself just because he'd been too much of a coward to face the darkness like she should've. Even still Dominic imagined telling her about the consuming rage and the hatred for everything around him that had wrapped around his bones like another layer of flesh. His mind, however, instantly rebelled, showing Dominic how quickly she would reject him, how disgusted and indifferent she would be if he dared to expose his demons to her. And who could blame her after all he'd done to her?

It would be over in a few short months; she would leave him, and the desolate part was that he had no clue where to begin to rectify his wrongs.

\* \* \*

Eden didn't know why she found his spending time with Liam so disheartening, but the more she found her child growing attached, the more morose she became. Liam had only ever had her to rely on. She was the only parent he knew. The thought that she may very well have to share custody made her uneasy. Three more months and she would be free of him. Divorced, finally without contest. But he would not allow her to take Liam; she'd known this tentative truth since the beginning and now the reality of it was filtering into her delusion. The more time he spent with Liam, the closer they became, forming a father and son bond that far eclipsed any sort of connections she'd ever made with Dominic. Liam's laughter and squeals had Eden raising her head and glancing just to the side of her to find a sight

that further added to her discomfort. It seemed nearly incomprehensible to find business mogul Dominic Armstrong lying on a carpeted floor with a toothless infant pinning him down and if Eden hadn't seen this for herself, she wouldn't have believed it.

From her vantage point across the way, she watched them play, when Dominic jerked his body up, raising both his chest and Liam in unison, it provoked the infant's infectious laughter. On and on it went, every giggle tugging Dominic's lips into an imperceptible smile that Eden would've missed if she wasn't looking as hard as she was. It was the most perplexing thing, seeing this change in him. They were subtle, the changes that she saw, but no less disconcerting. It was such an opposing image of what Eden was accustomed to from him.

He appeared so relaxed, the naked joy peeking through the austerity was something to behold. He was gentle and attentive, and though sweet wasn't a word Eden would have ever attributed to Dominic, he accomplished it with Liam. He was sweet and tender when he needed to be, mindful of his son's infancy but handling Liam with a sturdy hand of a father who wanted to test the limits of his son. He wore fatherly pride like armor; Liam's accomplishments, laughter and cries, the helmet that he poised on his head. It was with a heavy heart that Eden silently acknowledged to herself that fatherhood looked good on him. He may have been a shit husband, but at least he made efforts to be a good father. It was what Liam deserved. Their son hadn't asked to be born at the center of their mess, and Eden would be damned if she allowed him to end up there. Her issues with Dominic were *her* issues with Dominic, not her child's. Liam deserved love and devotion from them both and if Dominic found that he could provide it, then who was she to stand in the way? What it all came



down to was Eden's own unshakable fear that Dominic would disappoint and hurt Liam in the long run. Like he'd disappointed her.

When she heard the deep, throaty sound of his laughter—laughter that wasn't steeped with derision or contempt—her heart lurched, twisting painfully in her chest, driving in the fact that he'd never allowed her close enough to elicit such a sound. Putting in much more effort than necessary in folding Liam's laundered clothes, she did not want to put too much thought on *that* subject. It didn't matter now anyway. Their marriage had started off corrupted and had only grown worse in the ensuing years, the decaying layers of lies, distrust, humiliation, animosity and resentment had poisoned the very foundation of their union, making it impossible for anything else to flourish there. The only undeniable truth between them was the uncontainable lust that drew them together with such cataclysmic force that it nearly always maimed her not to be touched by him. But what was lust without love? What was soul searing, body melting sex without the enduring love to sustain it? Building a life on solely money and sex had been their downfall. It was better that it ended now; they needed to cut ties and walk away, it was the only decent thing they could do for each other.

"He needs a change." Eden drew in a sharp breath and tensed not having realized he'd come so close. He stood at her side, the scent of his cologne not helping the sudden effect he had on her as he moved to set Liam on the changing table. He didn't wait for her but rather gathered the items he needed before he continued on his task. Eden watched silently as he carried on with a methodical thoroughness of a determined male and as opposed to the prior times he'd attempted to change Liam, where clumsiness and cursing had been prevalent, he was doing a great job now, showing much progress in Eden's opinion. She saw him struggling a little with the diaper's side closing flap and though instinct compelled her to

move forward and help, she remained where she was. It was only when she heard Liam's slight cry of discomfort that she was moved to walk forward.

"This is what I get for buying bargain brand diapers," she mused, reaching over to help him. In doing so, their hands touched, a slight bit of unexpected intimacy sent a jolt through Eden. She didn't dare look up at him as she was tempted to do, but rather continued on as though nothing had happened, although her heart raced so fast in her chest that she knew he probably heard standing as close as he was. "It also doesn't help that Liam is growing like a weed. But there's a trick to get the diaper to close." In saying so, she demonstrated, gathering Liam's chubby feet in one hand and lifting his bum up slightly so that she could slip the diaper beneath him, making sure it did not go all the way up his back. She folded the front panel over his penis and gently detached the Velcro on each side to close it. It still appeared a little snug but at least it was better than having one side of his butt sticking out.

"I do not see why you insist on him wearing bargain brand when we can very well purchase the entire damn name brand aisle."

Eden shrugged, distracting herself with Liam. "That would be a little excessive. Besides, I don't see the point in paying more for a product that does the same thing as the cheaper guy." She didn't protest when he reached over to reclaim their son. Unable to stand in his presence for too long without fidgeting, she stepped around him and continued her task of folding Liam's clothes. The nursery had been a first in a slew of compromises they'd made over the last few weeks. Eden had tired of him coming into her room at all hours, and he'd been adamant on spending as much time with his child as possible. So they'd agreed to convert the room beside the master bedroom into a nursery while Eden conveniently occupied the room directly across, making it possible for them both to be around Liam.

It was the most grown up decision they'd made and luckily it hadn't proved very difficult, seeing as they were working in Liam's best interest. He'd deferred to Eden's expertise in the nursery's décor, and Eden had taken on a more minimalistic approach. The dark furniture had been purchased to offset the powder blue of the walls and aside from the few decorative elements she'd allowed in the pillows and stuffed animals at the nook by the wide bay windows, Liam's room was quite simple. The diaphanous curtains at the window were drawn open, allowing ample lighting to filter through and a spectacular view of the east grounds with its lush verdant lawns constantly manicured by a set of invisible landscapers. When she had the luxury, she preferred to sit at the nook and nurse Liam with that amazing view to lull her.

"Do you have plans for the evening?" The impromptu inquiry had Eden blinking a few times uncertain of where this line of questioning was leading.

"Not that I know of," she replied slowly. Done with her current task, Eden pulled open the dresser to put away Liam's clothes. She wasn't scheduled to work until Friday evening, and even then, she was only there for the afternoon shift. Her leaving unexpectedly the other night had not only incurred Lena's wrath but had put her name on the woman's permanent shit list. And in proving just how pissed she was, she'd cut back Eden's hours for the next two weeks. Nothing for her now but slow lunch hours and zero guarantee of the great tips she'd made during the evening's rush. If she wasn't over the whole thing, she would've felt angry enough to say something about it. But working at Carver's had begun to lose its appeal, and the more time she spent there, the more Eden realized how badly she missed being a real estate agent. At least she'd thrived doing it, and it hadn't been a complete blow to her self-esteem. Every time she'd

thought of quitting, she'd chicken out because the thought of getting rejected again scared her. But maybe it was time, she thought silently. Maybe this sudden lull in her schedule was a sign for her to hit the pavement again.

"I want you." That silken avowal had Eden noticeably stiffening, the blatant innuendo she heard in his rich baritone unsettling her even more than the acute focus of his green gaze as she nervously ran her tongue across her bottom lip and found him following the path with marked intent.

"You what?" she asked dully.

"Your company that is," he said with wry amusement, the corners of his mouth quirking. "I would like your company for the evening."

"You're asking me?"

"I guess I am. I've noticed you respond far better to it."

"Yes, it's a little thing called courtesy, but I think that might be a little bit out of your comprehension." The icy rejoinder was unwarranted, he had yet to do anything to incur her wrath, but the bitch in Eden couldn't help the jab. "It would actually require you to think about someone other than yourself."

"I have only ever had myself," he uttered thickly, his candor utterly unexpected. "Self-preservation can turn you into the thing you fear most."

Eden was not sure of how to respond but knowing just how precarious the moment was, she preceded furtively, "Dominic—"

He held up a halting hand, his palm facing her. "I'm not very good at asking for things that I could simply just take, and as much as I hate rejection, I will not push if you wish to deny my request."

He made it simple for her. The choice was hers today. A rather rare occurrence considering the amount of influence he'd had over her life thus far. He wouldn't force her to accompany him to wherever it was he wanted

to take her. She could very well say no and not fear that she was breaching their contract in some way. Eden was poised to say just that, tell him thanks but no thanks for the invite, but unfortunately, she found herself saying something completely different than what was going through her mind. “I’ll go.” *That didn’t sound anything like a rejection*, she thought morosely. “But on one condition.”

“Name it,” he said quietly, battling with a squirming Liam.

“The minute I’ve had enough, you bring me home.”

He paused for an interminable second in which Eden thought he would refuse and call off the entire thing, but with a clenched jaw and shuttered features, he conveyed his resolve. “The very minute.”

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## Chapter Seventeen

The evening started off well enough. He hadn't told her where they were going, and Eden hadn't bothered to ask. But she figured they were probably headed out to eat, and given Dominic's pension for fancy restaurants, she dressed accordingly. The dark rinsed jeans and sleeveless blouse she'd opted for were a far cry from the overtly extravagant dresses she'd worn all the other times they'd gone out. The only thing remotely fancy about the outfit was the pair of opened toe three inch heels adorning her newly pedicured feet. She'd kept her layered locks down so that it just barely skimmed her shoulders, having grown a few inches in the last few months. A gold statement necklace hung around her neck, stopping just about her navel, while a thin gold bracelet adorned her left wrist. It was simple, casual, and comfortable and because he hadn't outright opposed when he'd seen her, Eden had figured it was okay.

Their mode of transportation was another black, sleek vehicle that was as magnificently powerful as its owner, which he handled with fluid control. With the atmosphere in the car rife with pervasive tension, the conversation was strictly lacking, but that was altogether fine with Eden because she wasn't sure if she would've tripped over her tongue if she'd made the attempt to speak. She was incredibly nervous for some undefined reason, and that nervousness only heightened when they finally arrived at their destination. He was at her door before she could open it, and as Eden descended from the car, he set a hand at her hip to draw her effortlessly closer to his muscular frame. "You look beautiful." His radiating breath smelled like cinnamon as it grazed along her ear.

“Thank you,” Eden managed, though inside she was all frantic heart and fractured nerves. She exalted in her outward composure. But with every step they took towards the small Italian bistro, Eden found it difficult to sustain that composure as she grew disturbingly cognizant of his proximity and the familiar sent of his cologne. It didn’t help that he maintained a leading, decisive hand on the small of her back, low enough that he was practically touching the top of her butt.

The maître d’ greeted him warmly as though he were an old friend before signaling the hostess, who led them to their seats. Looking around at the modest setting, with its low slung lights at every small square table and off beat art adorning the stucco walls, Eden was wholly surprised. This wasn’t the sort of place she would’ve ever associated with Dominic who was the quintessence of ostentatious. This place seemed far too rustic for him. And maybe the surprise showed on her face as his mouth turned upwards in semblance of a smile. “This is one of my favorite restaurants,” he quietly informed in a manner that was completely unlike him. “The food is spectacular.”

“How did you find it?” Before he could respond, menus were offered and their waiter made an inquiry about beverages. He requested a bottle of wine, vintage naturally, while Eden asked for a glass of water with a lemon wedge. Again she was surprised to find that he’d actually allowed her to order her own drink rather than do it for her as he’d done on so many prior occasions.

“Mr. Armstrong, it is always a pleasure to have you dine at our establishment.” The man standing at their side was big in girth and height and looked slightly familiar, but Eden could not immediately place him. He wore a chef’s uniform complete with hat and a genuine smile he bestowed on Dominic, who stood to greet him, taking his hand in a firm handshake.

When he looked at Eden his brown eyes widened in his weathered face. “Mrs. Armstrong, what a lovely surprise.” Though Eden shook his hand with a warm smile, she was lost as to who he was.

“Franklin was our chef,” Dominic smoothly imparted, coming to her rescue. “He has since opened up this bistro.”

“Oh, yes, Franklin,” she said weakly, reddening when the man gave her an understanding smile. “It’s good to see you. Congratulations on the restaurant.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Armstrong. I could not have done it without Mr. Armstrong’s generous contribution. He is the reason I even have this place.”

When they both glanced at Dominic, he simply shrugged but remained resolutely silent on the matter. Taking that as signal to get on with it, Franklin cleared his throat and produced an infallible smile. “I will personally see to your meals. The usual for you, sir?”

At Dominic’s nod, he turned to Eden. “And you, Mrs. Armstrong, the wild mushroom risotto?” Ah yes, Eden remembered him now. He’d made the most mouthwatering risotto. At her assent, he left their company and returned to the kitchen to whip up their meals.

“You helped him with his business?” Eden asked a few minutes later.

“Nothing so philanthropic. If anything I am exploiting his culinary skills for my gain.”

Eden assessed him, tilting her head just so to see if she could peer beyond the austerity he wore so well. “Why is it so important for you to have me see you as nothing more than an asshole?”

“Because that is all there is,” he drawled with that self-deprecating air that was not at all like him. “I do not know how to be anything else.”

“But you’re different when you’re with Liam. You’re...kinder.” A soft smile touched his lips, chasing away for a second the webs of stoicism and



aloofness.

“He has become an unexpected surprise,” he quietly confessed, the soft smile remaining. “A pleasant one nevertheless. I did not realize I would enjoy having him so much. It is impossible for me to be anything but kind when I am with him.”

But it seemed he could not extend that same kindness when it came to her. Eden convinced herself that she was okay with it and that it no longer mattered. It would all be over soon enough.

“He likes being with you,” she returned, taking a long sip of her water to allay the lump in her throat.

“Yes,” he assented, anchoring her gaze with his own, “but one cannot say the same about his mother.”

Eden was saved from saying anything else as the first of their three course meal arrived. It was an appetizer of six diagonally cut baguettes topped with tomatoes, basil and parmesan cheese that had just a light splash of vinaigrette dressing. The second course did not take long in coming and too soon they were both immersed in their meal, any conversation thereafter was kept strictly on the subject of Liam. Dessert was an outrageously decadent tiramisu that Eden greedily polished off and etiquette alone kept her from licking her plate clean. Franklin came out some time later to bid them farewell, and though he strictly refused to take any sort of payment for the meal, Dominic left a rather substantial tip on the table. Enough to cover their meal twice over and still leave more than enough for their waiter.

Eden was finding it difficult to reconcile the image of this Dominic, the one who quietly aided a man to start up his business and left exorbitant amounts in tips and spoke so easily about his son, to the hardened, imperious, and manipulative man that she’d known for so long. She didn’t understand how someone could be such an open enigma. But that was

exactly how Eden saw him. She'd formed an opinion of him long ago based on her experiences and she'd been content to believe in that opinion as true, until now. It was the mystery of him that piqued her unfailing curiosity and try as she might, she could not abandon the idea that there was much more to him than what he chose to display to her and the rest of the world.

The night was still young when they left the restaurant, and it seemed he had means to take full advantage as he led her to his next planned destination. Eden did not know what she'd expected and really anything was possible where Dominic was concerned, but driving through the worst part of the city was certainly not it. South Rochester was considered bad, but Green Hill, a byword for urban decay, was something else entirely. Entering Green Hill was like a descent into hell. In comparisons to the splendor that was Langston, with its lush greenery, well-kept edifices and clean sidewalks, Green Hill was a stark and bleak city of graffiti, broken liquor bottles, and trash at every corner made worse by its mentally broken inhabitants and negligent officials. It seemed like the scourge of society had been gathered at some point and dropped off in this failing city to make do with whatever little the government deigned to bestow. It made for a disturbing sight where shady men loitered at every corner and women of dubious profession set up shop. Eden warily glanced in Dominic's direction to find him staring fixedly ahead, tension rippled through every inch of his masculine frame that his grip on the steering wheel was a bloodless white.

"Where are we, Dominic?"

Dominic heard her, heard the uncertainty in her voice, but failed to respond. His jaw worked and it took nearly all he had not to floor it out of this godforsaken hell. He drove to memories, to nightmares to a past that he had been running away from since his mother sold him. He hadn't realized it was going to be this difficult. Hell, he hadn't even known what he was

thinking when he'd embarked on this inane journey. But he'd wanted to show her, wanted her to see what he could not so easily convey into words. Maybe then, he'd thought, it would've been easier to talk, to tell. But this was a huge fucking mistake. Sheer obstinacy fueled him; his sadism rearing its ugly head had him by balls, forcing Dominic to drive. 142 Garrett was the housing project that Dominic grew up in. *This* had once been his reality. He parked the car, killed the engine and stared unseeingly at the ubiquitous dark blue steel door associated with the Green Hill Projects, and he wanted to commit unspeakable violence.

"Dom..." her touch, gentle, soft, and warm like a blessing from the heavens settled on hands he hadn't realized he'd balled into fists until this moment, reaching deep into the dark recess of his center and provided a glimmer of light with which he used to see. See through the darkness that surrounded him. But he was blind. "Dominic...look at me..."

He didn't dare look at her.

"What is this place, Dom?"

"This was my grave..."

\* \* \*

*There were very rare occasions that Dominic caught glimpses of the sort of mother she could've been. Like today for instance, she was lucid, she could see him, and even though he knew he shouldn't, he hesitantly reached out to take the yellow and blue toy truck she held out to him. He'd been good recently, doing everything she asked, so he was happy that she was rewarding his good behavior. The truck was nice; it was the first toy she'd ever given him, and he cherished it, played with it in their small living room while she locked herself in her bedroom. Playing with the truck helped fight the twisting and gurgling of his stomach, the hunger pains that were an everyday part of his life. Drinking a lot of water always helped, but not this*

*time and while he searched through cabinets and fridge for something to eat, his eyes settled on a nearly empty bag of bread. There were only two slices and each one had dusty green and white mold growing on it, but once Dominic cut away the moldy areas, he ate the slices of bread like it were the best things in the world.*

*\* \* \**

*Today she wasn't a good mother. This was the part of her that Dominic didn't like. She was scary when she was like this. He didn't know where she found the gun, but he didn't think she should have it, not when she was like this. Her eyes were glazed over with not only what she'd recently taken but the crazed look he saw there made him want to run and hide.*

*"Come here," she ordered, wrapping her boney fingers around his emaciated arm to tug him forward. "I want to show you something." She forced him to sit and joined him seconds later on the stained threadbare carpet that had seen better days. She was swaying, the hand holding the gun not quite so steady. "Let's play a game," she whispered with a small smile that chilled him. "It's called Russian roulette."*

*Dominic was shaking. His heart was hammering so fast he could feel it in his throat. He had a bad feeling. A very bad feeling. "Mommy..." He wondered if he could outrun her, his verdant gaze frantically eyeing the little bit of hallway behind her. "I...I don't want to play, Mommy."*

*"Shhh..." she soothed. "We're both going to die, baby," she whispered while her dark, dilated eyes held his. "Let's see who God takes first." She raised the gun to her temple and unflinchingly squeezed the trigger.*

*Nothing.*

*The sound of her laughter was off, frightening him like something of nightmares. When she aimed the gun at him, Dominic stared into the perfectly rounded chasm of his death and visibly shuddered. Before she*

*squeezed the trigger, his gaze found hers, and in that eternal moment, he saw...nothing. There was nothing in her dark brown eyes, not even an ounce of warmth a mother should've felt for her child.*

*Dominic, physically too young and yet mentally mature enough to grasp the implication of that moment, closed his eyes to everything: to her, the gun and the burning sensation in his chest that felt like hunger, but hurt so much more. He thought of nothing but the toy truck he'd left on the couch, the one she'd given him, as he heard the click and her laughter soon after.*

It had been in that instant, with the click of the empty chamber, that Dominic remembered shutting everything down. He was lost in his memories, lost in his fear, lost in his rage, lost in the hatred that poisoned his heart, that kept him from seeing or feeling or caring for anything else. Her remembered numbness and the sinister chill that had crept in his veins and swept with agonizing slowness through every crevice of his being, blanketing everything in a dead, cold frost, encasing what remained of his heart in ice. It had felt good not to care, not to feel and the fear that had paralyzed him, made him weak and powerless dissipated along with everything else.

Fueled by hatred, by a twisted form of vengeance, Dominic had lived solely for himself, cruelly exploiting and manipulating the people around him to fit to his needs, only to callously discard them when they had stopped being useful to him. And it should've been the same with his wife. From the very moment he'd seen this woman, Dominic had set out to have her, and when he finally did get her into his possession, he'd lorded his authority over her with a devilish sadism that would've made the Marquis de Sade gleeful. The more she'd resisted, the more aggressive he became, emotionally whipping her with chains that had tethered him. He'd punished her for mistakes she'd never made. Why? Because he'd feared her. She'd

posed a danger to his mental stability, to his very foundation... to the little boy he'd hidden beneath the shallow depths of his soul.

"I lived here. But I wasn't really living so much as surviving. My mother..."he exhaled a sharp breath and drew another back in raggedly; in the excruciating silence of the car it sounded like nails on a chalk board to him. Shoulders raised, brows furrowed and tension ready to go off like a spring trap, he kept his head down unable to look at her, but he saw her hand, delicate, small, and sweetly providing comfort to a man who did not deserve it.

"Tell me, Dominic," she implored gently only to inaudibly gasp when he unfurled his fist and caught her hand within his own. Interlacing their fingers, he gripped her with bruising strength. Almost instinctively her fingers settled and squeezed back to show that she was there.

"There was nothing good about her, but if she'd wanted, I would've stayed, I would've loved her enough for the both of us. But she was cruel beyond comprehension. She hated me too much to see or feel anything else. How can you possibly love the product of your rape? That's why a part of me knew that I deserved what she did. I was a constant reminder of what my father did to her. I can't remember a day when she wasn't high. I can't remember a day she wasn't screwing some guy to pay for that high. When she was high she liked to play games. Russian roulette: one bullet, a fifty-fifty chance that it had my name on it. I think she liked that game the most. Then there were the burn marks, cigarette burns she'd dig into my flesh until I screamed. I handled the beatings alright. Even the lack of food hadn't been so bad. But it was the darkness. She had a special room for me, a little crawlspace no bigger than a box. I'd scratch my nails on the door until it they bled, screaming at the top of my lungs for her to let me out."

Dominic did not allow himself a moment to think; the words came and he permitted them, purging himself of secrets and memories he'd kept for far too long. He told her of waking up in his own filth, surrounded by the stench, while the darkness consumed him, toying with his young mind, driving him further into madness. He shed his pretense, his arrogance, his very pride and laid it out at her feet and dragged a knife from Adam's apple to navel to reveal the ugliness that dwelled at his core. Dominic bared it all.

"Two million dollars and I was no longer her problem. She didn't look back, we didn't exchange words, and the last thing I remember of her is her tattered sweater that smelled of cigarettes and hate. A hate that I have inherited and nourished with rage. It grows in me, Eden. Here," he touched the middle left side of his chest, "there is nothing here but ugliness." Voice raw, he released her hand and gripped the steering wheel once again. "I just...I wanted you to know. I wanted you to see."

For a very long moment afterwards, nothing was said, until she settled her hand on his arm, and Dominic recoiled slightly. When he finally braved a glance at her, anguish twisted his insides. He'd expected revulsion, scorn, or even worse, apathy from her, but what he saw instead was compassion coating her fine-bone features. There had been nothing but softness and understanding in her beautiful amber eyes and Dominic had never felt so underserving, so unworthy of her.

"Thank you for telling me," she uttered in the silence, her voice soft and gentle. "I can only imagine how difficult it was for you to tell me, so thank you."

It seemed as though she would say more; she opened her mouth a few times but words failed her. Dominic could not blame her, the fact that she had listened was more than he could've asked for. With an imperceptible tilt of his head in acknowledgment, he swallowed around the lump lodged in

his throat and started the engine. When her hand slipped away, he fought against the urge to draw it back. But Dominic kept a hand on the steering wheel and another on the gear shift, determined to see them out of this neighborhood unscathed. With just a glance outside, he noted the group of men seated on the playground, their gazes had not left the car since Dominic had pulled into the parking lot. He figured the only reason they had yet to approach was because of the heavily tinted windows that provided them a trace of anonymity. But they would remain idle for long and Dominic wanted to get them out of town before anything happened. With everything else he'd done to her, endangering her life would not be one of them.

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## *Chapter Eighteen*

Eden tossed and turned, punched her pillow a few dozen times to get rid of the lumpiness, hoping to find a comfortable position to sleep, but her attempts proved futile. No matter how hard she tried, sleep wouldn't come. But then it really wasn't from a lumpy pillow or how she couldn't stay cool despite the centralized air conditioning. The culprit of her sleep deprivation was the chaotic state of her mind, and it was wreaking havoc on the rest of her body. Her mind replayed Dominic's confession on an endless loop. She'd had her suspicions about his childhood, especially after the little bit Lucas had revealed, but Eden could not have imagined the extent of the abuse he'd suffered. Even now, she shuddered, horrified by the tale he'd recounted in that bleak, detached voice that had seemed too far away for her to reach him. Sitting up, she drew her legs to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. How could a mother treat her own child in such a way? In her turbulent state, Eden tried to imagine the horror he went through, the crippling fear, and the unmitigated cruelty he'd endured, and it made her heart burn. She hurt for him. She hurt for the abused little boy and for the man who carried his scars, scars that were so deeply entrenched they were now permanently rooted in his core.

Eden had a slight understanding of the man now; she understood the reason for the enmity that he'd harbored for so long, not necessarily towards her, but she'd been the most convenient target. By no means did she condone his actions, but understanding led to clarity, and with that lucidity, she was able to feel compassion for him regardless of the part of her that wished to remain angry. How could he trust when his beliefs were rooted in violence, fear, and hate? How could he show affection and love,

when he had been so cruelly deprived of it? He'd been a child, simply a child, blameless, innocent, and eternally hopeful when he'd undergone those unimaginable atrocities. If his mother had been capable of betraying him this badly, then what was to be said for the rest of the world?

Eden expelled a breath. She was restless, anxious. Her mind had been in a whirlwind since he'd revealed his past to her, and it didn't appear as though it was in anyway ready to stop. He'd remained in the car when they'd arrived and had quietly encouraged her to head in. Eden didn't know whether he'd followed shortly after, but his broodiness had worried her. Still worried her. She'd hoped that he would not do anything rash. He'd all but exposed himself to her, an act that had undoubtedly left him feeling weak and vulnerable. Eden knew Dominic would not tolerate that in himself. Dominic thrived on control, the power he wielded over himself and others was what defined him, but he'd forfeited it all, lowered his impenetrable defenses for a time so she could see who he truly was, see the depth of emotions that he hid so carefully from the world.

A thought suddenly came to mind. What if he regretted telling her? Worst yet, what if he erected those walls again and shut her out completely this time? Springing out of bed, hasty footsteps took her to the double doors of his bedroom before her mind could even register the action. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, Eden raised her hand and knocked gently yet firmly. She blocked out all rational thought, refused to listen to the part of her that screamed out what a monumentally bad idea this was, and instead concentrated on what she would say to him. Adrenaline had her heart battering incessantly against her breastbone while she shifted anxiously in place. When nothing happened on the second or third knock, something akin to disappointment flooded through her veins. She was ready to turn and head back to her room, figuring she would check on Liam before

attempting sleep, when something made her take hold of the gilt handle and pull down. The adjoining door that led to Liam's room was open, and the soft glow of his nightlight was the only source of light filtering in to the master bedroom. After a cursory look around the bedroom revealed it empty, Eden ambled to the nursery.

She wasn't a crier by any means, but what she saw brought instant tears to Eden's eyes, especially in light of what she now knew. Reclining in the rocking chair by the solitary window, Liam lay on his father's chest in slumber, one of his receiving blankets covering the lower half of his body as he dreamed of sweet things, knowing instinctively that he had his father there to protect him. It was such a beautiful sight that Eden was lured closer, until she stood at their side. Sleep softened the hard lines of Dominic's strikingly handsome face. Unguarded as he was, he appeared almost serene, and she fought against the need to reach out and touch him. She wanted to erase the slight crease at his brow and trail her finger down the bridge of his nose, to his high cheekbones and sensual lips that were capable of devouring her with such unbridled voracity. Caught once more in the inescapable force of his gravitational pull, Eden drew closer only to gasp when his eyes peeled open and arrested her in their turbulent depths. For a very long moment there was nothing else but the dark green of his eyes and the intensity that suspended the air in her lungs. It was only when he raised his index to his lips in silent commission for her to keep quiet that she drew in breath and looked away. He came to his feet in one fluid motion, ever mindful of the child he held in his arms.

"He was awake when I came in," he murmured, the gravelly resonance of his tone made it seem like it had been a long while since he'd spoken. Though he'd set Liam down a moment earlier, Dominic remained at the crib, his hand moving rhythmically across the apple of Liam's cheek. In

complete awe of this little boy who was so much a part of him and yet nothing at all like him. It terrified Dominic to even touch him this way, fear that he would somehow taint him, that his own demons would mar his child's innocence made him reluctantly draw his hand back. "I wanted to spend time with him."

"I know," she said softly. Standing at his side, he felt her like the sun on his skin, her radiating brilliance showering him with warmth. Dominic wanted to submerge and bathe himself in that warmth. He stepped away from the crib, knowing that he would give into impulse if he did not. He put even more distance between them, leaving their son's nursery and ambling back to the master bedroom. She followed him like he knew she would and idled in the space between the entrance of Liam's nursery and their bedroom. He could tell that she was anxious about something, subtle signs that he could instantly pick off without even trying. Like the small crease between her brows or the way she absolutely refused to meet his gaze, and then there was the way she would intermittently slide her tongue across her bottom lip that he found incredibly arousing. Just as she was doing now.

To distract himself, he trailed an admiring glance along the contours of her diminutive form and instantly discovered how foolish it was when he found his gaze focused on the satin peach camisole dress she wore and how enticingly it outlined her breasts, stopping a few inches above mid-thigh, putting shapely caramel legs he wanted to slide between on display. Dominic cleared his throat as he felt himself hardening. He slipped his hands in his pockets to hide his growing erection.

"Are you alright?" In making the inquiry, Dominic headed to the sitting area and settled into one of the roll back chairs. Again, impulse gnawed at him to take her in his arms, but his restraint was stronger, but not by much.

“I...uh...yes, I’m alright. I actually came to see if *you* were okay.” She didn’t stand immediately in front of him, but he could see her from his peripheral “I mean I know you’re okay, but I just figured after everything...” Her words trailed off into the silence. He expected her to see the futility of her concern for him, see how wasted it was on such an undeserving man and continue on in her low opinion of him. But Eden was a tenacious little thing. A trait Dominic had come to admire in her. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Dominic tilted his dark imperious head and gave her a perverse smile. “I haven’t been okay for a very long time, Eden,” he said grimly. He wanted a drink, something strong that would lessen the constriction in his chest and allay the feeling of helplessness that he had not been able to shake since telling her of his past. He wanted to run back into that darkness that had consequently become his prison, friend, and master.

“I’m sorry for what you went through,” she said quietly, her voice a caress of compassion that felt so good and so bad in the same breath.

His mouth compressed into a hard line and his darkly handsome features tightened considerably, drawing his brow into a menacing frown. He could only imagine what he looked like. If his appearance was anything like the turmoil raging in him, then Dominic could only surmise that he looked every bit the monster she called him. “It’s fine,” he bit out, harsher than intended.

“No,” she knelt at his side; the tentative touch of her hand on his knee had Dominic looking down into her luminous citrine eyes that were beguiling. “It’s not fine. What your mother did to you was not okay, Dominic. It was cruel and evil and you have to know you didn’t deserve that sort of abuse. No child does,” she whispered emphatically, as if she understood his pain.

“I haven’t gone back there until tonight and a part of me hates that I brought you there,” he confided without rancor. “I should not have said anything to you.”

“Then why did you?”

“Because I break my own rules when it comes to you,” he returned pointedly. “Those memories were mine, and if I had any pride, I would not have shared them with you.”

“Your pride hasn’t done us any good so far,” she said with a soft sigh. “You cling so tightly to something so ugly when it’s only hurting you. It’s a burden you weren’t meant to carry.”

“It is nevertheless my burden. My entire childhood was filled with nothing but ugliness. That is all I’ve known. It is who I am.”

“You are not your mother’s mistakes, Dominic,” Eden imparted gently. “I keep thinking about Liam and try to imagine—”

“No!” he spelled out with unequivocal authority. “He will never know such a life. You have given more to my son in the five months since he’s been born than that woman ever gave me in the eight years I spent with her.” His mouth twisted bitterly in recollection.

“Did you love her?”

He gave a sharp laugh. “I abandoned what little love I had left for her the moment she sold me. I abandoned a lot of things in that apartment.”

“Yourself included.”

His large hand cupped the side of her face with a tenderness that surprised them both, and while he waited with bated breath to see if she would pull away, she remained as she was and simply looked back at him expectantly. “I’ve hurt you,” he conceded. “Tell me how to fix it.”

Eden licked her lips. “Apologize.”

He leaned forward until his breath was her own and said with every bit of sincerity and fervor that lay in him, “There are no words that can convey how sorry I am for what I put you through, Eden. What I did to you is unforgivable. I make no excuses for my actions except to tell you that they were done in fear and weakness. I have made so many mistakes in the last five years in regards to this marriage, but there is nothing I regret more than failing you as a husband.”

Eden’s eyes drifted close as she leaned into his hand and savored this moment. His apology, long awaited, was a balm to a damaged heart, a small but significant step towards mending this chaotically complex relationship. “We didn’t enter this marriage with the best intentions,” she admitted, opening her eyes to find his smoldering gaze intent on her mouth, while his thumb slid languidly across her full bottom lip.

“No, I never did have the best intentions when it came to you,” he said huskily, and just before he claimed her mouth, he uttered the words that sent a current of blazing desire through her bloodstream, “but being in your Eden has made it well worth it.”

He kissed her slow and deep, like mating, it was decadent and carnal. His lips sucked on hers, alternating from top to bottom with every sweet, warm breath they shared. His tongue circled languidly, stroking along hers and took it deeper. He kindled the flames of Eden’s inferno, roused it with this erotic play of tongue, lips and nipping teeth until liquid fire pooled luxuriantly between her thighs. The sensitive tips of her nipples swelled and chafed uncomfortably against her top every time she moved, making her utterly aware of her hunger for him.

She rose to her knees, reached out, and felt the stubble of his jaw beneath the tips of her caressing fingers, and feeling emboldened, drugged possibly by the potency of his kiss, she slid the tip of her tongue along the

barely discernible scar at the corner of his top lip. That one move elicited a deep, masculine groan as he buried his hands in her hair and brusquely hauled her to his lap, deftly positioning her so that his thick straining cock aligned snugly against the thin layer of her panties. “No good intentions here, Eden,” he purred hotly against her ear, bracing a hand at the nape of her neck to hold her steady while the other crept down her back in possessive caress that shot a ribbon of desire along her ramrod spine, leaving goose bumps in its wake. “Tell me to stop.” His urgency came out as a growl as he brushed his lips along the side of her face, his tongue darting out to lick at the racing pulse of her neck.

She was treading on dangerous ground and knew she should stop him. But the truth was that Eden did not want him to. She was tired of fighting this constant battle. Tired of denying herself that one thing she intrinsically knew she wanted. He was the only one who could temper the frantic desire that pulsed inside her. Tossing all conscious thought out the window, she submitted to baser instinct. “Don’t stop.” She barely recognized the breathless, needy sound as her own voice. When her mouth touched his in soft invitation, he accepted it without hesitation, plunging his tongue between her pliant lips to take the sweetness that he craved.

He brushed at the thin, measly straps of her camisole and it slid down the curve of her shoulders, pooling like nothing between them. Her nipples puckered at the weight of his voracious gaze, and color grazed her cheeks as he bent his dark head down, his mouth covering a dusky tip, the gentle suckle sending delicious tremors through her body. She leaned back, needing more of him, more of his talented tongue, Eden wantonly offered herself, rocking steadily all the while against the thick, rock hard shaft beneath her damp panties. The motion had him cursing, a violent word against her skin as he bucked beneath her, needing inside of her. In the



subsequent seconds, Eden heard the distinct sound of her panties tearing and then there was the maneuvering of his large hand between them before freeing himself from the confines of his trousers. Eden captured her bottom lip between her teeth as she stared fixedly at it, her feminine walls clenching in anticipation. “Last chance,” he murmured raggedly against her cheek, his hands all the while kneading the delectable globes of her buttocks. She replied simply by bracing her hands on his shoulders, positioning herself at the bulbous tip of his beautiful cock before slowly impaling herself with it, taking every velveteen steed inch until nothing but skin separated their closeness.

Dominic expelled a breath, sure that he would burst if he didn’t calm the hell down. He closed his eyes and drew in a slow breath. When he reopened them, he found her staring back at him, her amber eyes imbued with the same longing that lived in him. She was tailored made for him, lock and key, she fit him to heart wrenching perfection. Dominic gripped her hips, the unrelenting hold burrowing into her flesh as his face tightened, the pleasure flowing through him a little too much to bear. She set the pace, in control of them both, the headiness of pleasure intensifying on every downward motion. Incapable of remaining idle, he met every falling movement with an answering upward thrust. Her bouncing breasts hailed him to consume, grab and suck and lick to his heart’s content. It drove her crazy. Unable to handle the onslaught, she buried her face in the crook of his neck as she rode the wave of pleasure. His arm spanned her waist to gain better purchase as he frantically thrust into her. Her labored breathing came hot and fast, and her teeth clamped down on his skin. She clenched around him, bathing his cock in volcanic fire, and he felt her coming, her orgasm spearing through her body and aiming for his.

Dominic had never come harder in his life; his whole body seized by impending release. His hands threaded through her hair, completely primal, his mouth finding hers and melding tongues.

Round two was on the gargantuan bed she hadn't slept on for nearly a year and half now. She was naked and he joined her. Words were not meant for this moment but the way he looked at her, like hunger was his first name and devouring her was his sole purpose in life, spoke well enough for them both. His movements were sharp, unhurried as he undressed, first removing his shirt one agonizing button at a time before shrugging it off and tossing it aside. Eden watched him far more carefully than she ever had before. Impervious to the flush heating her face, her eyes caressed every contour, noting the broadness of his shoulders, the length of muscled arms that led to big hands with short, square fingernails.

He had a long torso, pecs, and abs that provoked the urge to run her tongue down the ridges and taste the burnt peaches of his skin. A tapered waist barely held on to his slacks that hung partially open, belt undone and clicking softly with his fluid movements. When he finally eased out of those slacks, it was only the burning lack of air to her lungs that finally made Eden draw in a breath, but even then swallowing her tongue still posed a threat. His length was impressive, but then she'd known it would be. She wasn't an expert on the subject by any means, but Dominic, in Eden's opinion, had the Heisman of cocks. The wicked, slutty part of her that she rarely ever allowed out wanted to cast it in rubber and use it when he was away on business. Almost like he knew what she was thinking, the corner of his mouth upturned into a sexy, wicked sort of grin that shouldn't have made her feel so breathless. Her heart jumped to her throat when he descended on the bed, swooping in to claim her mouth in a surge of male dominance, making her ache once again for his mastery.

“Dominic,” she gasped when he released her, calling his name as though it would draw her from the encompassing fog that clouded her minded.

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited for this,” he said huskily, his green eyes glowing with something far more than his arousal, something that urged Eden to reach out and touch the hard lines of his face. He closed the gap between them, the kiss leading him down her neck until he found her left breasts, opening his mouth to take in a nipple, swirling his hot, silky tongue until the tip was a dark red bud. He did the same with the right, the hot wet strokes of his tongue across the too sensitive tip had her body bowing, arching off the bed to offer more of herself for him to devour. Her gasping moans filled the air as his hand traced a path down the length of her body, a path that his mouth followed with the utmost precision, the details of her skin, every blemish, every scar, nearly every pore he savored.

When that exploring hand gently pried her thighs apart, he discovered her garden, the fountain at her center overflowing with her essence, drenching his fingers. Burnished eyes watched her intently as he brought those slick fingers to his mouth, sucking on index and middle as though it were icing on a cake. “I could live off your sweetness, Eden,” he said against her thigh, covering her center with his hungry mouth, shattering the fabric of her reality and dragging her into his world of unbridled carnality. A world where she was at the mercy of his hot tongue flicking mercilessly over her clit, as his fingers unfurled her wet lips to gain better access to her honeyed sex that he licked with selfish abandon. Every stroke of wet tongue coincided with the two fingers he buried inside her volcanic center. Blinded to anything else but the liquid fire burning through her, Eden clutched the sheets beneath her, powerless to do anything else but writhe helplessly and

raise her hips to rock desperately with the unrelenting motion of his tongue as he feasted on her, a willing sacrifice at his alter.

Nonsensical words spilled from her mouth, begging him not to stop as that precious little death beckoned her to jump. But he dragged her from the precipice, curbed the building explosion, and smothered her protesting mewl with a searing kiss that turned into a deep gasp as he entered her in one long deep thrust, burying himself to the hilt. The level of pleasure surging through her was too much; she was going to faint, her head was swimming, every cell in her body blazing, overstimulated, but there was nowhere for her to run, there was nothing else for her to do but follow his insatiable lead, open herself wantonly to cradle him to her.

“Too fucking long,” he breathed near her ear, his ragged breath blowing hot against her flushed cheeks. He trapped her hands above her head. Interlacing their fingers, he captured her kissed bruised mouth in a slow and deep kiss that matched the rhythm of his plunging thrusts. “Look at me,” his command was a gentle imploration that Eden could not ignore. Her breath was his breath, intoxicated by the potency of their passion, unguarded green eyes anchored glowing amber and in that singular moment, in that raw and naked flow of their brief eternity something they had denied for too long was defined. Beyond the shallow depths, she saw herself in his reflective gaze; she saw how *he* saw her and the intensity there frightened her beyond reason. It was too powerful to speak into words. Too precious, too new, but it vibrated between them like a living entity, so palpable that they felt it on their sweat slicked bodies. It raised goose bumps and brought tears to Eden’s eyes. She tasted it in his kiss, felt it in the way he touched her, the way he grabbed at her thigh, and raised it higher up on his waist to drive in deeper than she’d ever felt him before. He took her fast, and she matched the cantering to and fro motion with ease. His feelings were made real,

manifesting themselves in the way he possessed her. She felt his burning, desperate intensity, his unwillingness to break free of this moment, his need to stretch it further, make it last and last so that reality never caught them. He spoke what he could not say in kisses that she understood, and she responded with gasps, whimpers, and moans, clutching at him like life itself depended on it. He slammed into her with unrepentant vigor, over and over and over again, the rhythm maddening, urgent, and erratic. He made sure that she saw him, made sure that with every gasping breath she took, she took him into every cell of her body. Deep within the feminine mantle that clutched him tighter than a vise, he tattooed his name in slick magma, staking claim where no other man would dare trespass.

Euphoria leveled her, speared through her body, and overflowed; it was too much for her to withstand. She went willingly when it shoved her over the edge, and she fell happily into the arms of her little death. Her orgasm rippled and she milked him of his as he grunted and groaned above her, “Eden.” The bare utterance of her name was said in sweet reverence. “Eden.” And again he whispered it, against her cheek this time, a life line he clung to with unfailing strength.

There was nothing but the symphony of their ragged breaths playing against the walls of the bedroom. He eased out of her and rolled to the side but a possessive arm around her waist kept them entangled, limbs entwined and bodies drenched, neither one seemed inclined to move. Silence washed over them, the ardor temporarily satiated, and they basked in coital bliss. She felt the lazy swirls of his fingertips sliding along the curve of her hip, gliding up to her waist and when they reached near her ribcage she twitched. “Don’t,” she whispered drowsily.

“Don’t what?” he asked blithely, fingertips descending once again.

“Don’t tickle me.”

“Are you ticklish?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

The unexpected sound of his laughter filled Eden with an odd sense of elation, the rich, full sound washing over her like a cool wave. She looked at him beneath the veil of her lashes and found herself admiring the subtle changes, the look of amusement was something she had never had the privileged of seeing until now. Her fingers lifted of their own accord to his mouth, committing the imprint of that unguarded smile to memory, so that when she returned to her room it would be the source of her dreams. He puckered his lips against her fingertips, giving them a gentle kiss. “There are a lot of things I would like to know about you,” he said gruffly. “I’ve missed you.” He followed the admission with an indolent trace of his tongue across her dewy mouth. “Not just your body, Eden, but *you*.”

There went her heart again. The traitorous pumping organ jolted at the words he spoke so tenderly, convinced of the sincerity of feelings behind them. Eden rolled onto her back and covered her eyes with the back of her arm, needing to shut out the intensity bleeding from the green eyes she no longer recognized. She couldn’t do this. She *would* not do this. She’d wanted her visit in this fantasy to last a little while longer, but she could not stay here, because here, this room, this bed, the emotions she felt, were not real. And reality was very quick to reiterate that fact as it intruded on her thoughts and opened crevices where her doubts lay dormant. It preyed on her fears and demanded access to the foolish heart that held on to hope and craved his love like a sinner at God’s feet.

“You can’t say things like that.” *Not when I’m steps away from being free from you.* The words remained unspoken, a scalding steel rod roasting in her throat. She sat up in an instant, feeling a sudden overwhelming loss of control. Tension she hadn’t known in some time coiled inside her like a

snake ready to strike at the slightest hint of provocation. He reached for her and she recoiled. “Don’t,” she said tensely.

“Talk to me,” he urged.

She shot to her feet and looked at him, impervious of her nudity. “You don’t get to do this, Dominic.” The look she gave him shredded Dominic. “I’m still so angry with you, but at the same time my heart breaks for you because of what you went through. I know you have your demons, and I can’t begin to understand how hard it’s been for you. But you’ve created my demons; you’ve made it so that I can’t trust you. You’ve made me fear you.”

“I would *never* hurt you,” he said with conviction.

“You already have,” she whispered, blinking away tears so that he wouldn’t see her weakness. “I don’t know what you want from me—”

He was there before she could finish, her face in his hands, his forehead resting against hers, there was nowhere else for her to look but up into eyes on fire. “I want you to tell me how to make it better.”

“How can you make it better when we’re already so broken? How can you make it better when I’m so afraid to let you in?”

“Don’t...don’t give up on me,” he entreated. “I know I can be the man you deserve, Eden.”

Eden closed her eyes, squeezed them tight, and in doing so the tears she’d wanted to prevent fell in earnest silently down her cheeks. Biting her quivering bottom lip so that she did not embarrass herself further, she sniffled and reopened her eyes. “Be the father our son deserves.” She swallowed around the lump in her throat. “He needs you.” She slipped away and just before she could break away completely he clamped a hand around her wrist.

“I need you.”

She shook her head, refusing to look back at him. “I’ve already given you what you wanted.” She turned and left him with only a ghost of her impression.

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## *Chapter Nineteen*

He was called away a few days later on business in Greece, and the trip couldn't have come at a better time for Eden, who had once again avoided him after the passion filled night they'd shared. They had been closer than the word. Their shadowed movements a synchronized ballet they'd mastered long ago. Even now, nearly a week later, she could still feel his thickness and the smooth, controlled cadences of his thrusts that had only grown frenzied in their last gasping moments, and it had her feminine walls clenching reflexively. The slutty part of her that she rarely allowed to see the light of day wanted more of that fullness, wanted more of the delicious soreness that hurt so good. But it was a demand Eden could not satisfy, the two main reasons being that: one, thankfully, Dominic was out of the country; and two, she couldn't allow sex to cloud her judgment, not now when the direness of the situation called for a level head. Eden knew it was a moot point, castigating herself on her ultimate failure in resisting his advances, knowing in the end she'd ended up exactly where she'd vowed she wouldn't. Making that vow had been the beginning of the end. A jinx that had come to perfect fruition all because of the unimaginable hunger that had proved impossible to deny, an unquenchable hunger that ebbed when he stroked her only the way he could.

Now she stood in a quagmire of her own making, faced with the aftermath with nothing to save her from sinking but willpower. She had to make a decision, a decisive one that needed to ultimately benefit her. Because that's what this was all about. She'd gone through far too much to be impeded now by something that wasn't even real. There were no feelings in fucking. There was no love in this poisoned garden of a marriage. Forget

that for an infinitesimal breath of time when he'd been buried deep inside her and the dark passion that filled his green eyes had captured hers, she'd seen her husband for the first time. Forget the heart wrenching intimacy he'd roused soon after when they'd been entangled like twine, with their hearts drumming as one to the same longing rhythm. That intimacy that they'd fallen into so easily, so unlike them, was admittedly what frightened Eden more than she dared confess.

Gathering her hair up in its customary ponytail, she wrapped it into a messy bun on her head, and tossed a cursory glance at her rearview mirror before opening the driver's side door. This was her first time back on the night shift, and if Lena had had her way, it wouldn't have happened any time soon. But Carver had intervened on her behalf after Mickey had demanded his liquor slinging girl back at the bar. So now she was working the night shift again, both a blessing and a curse. But it wouldn't be for much longer, Eden thought, tonight she was giving her two weeks. Waiting tables and working for tips wasn't a future she wanted for herself. It had only been a pit stop, getting too comfortable there hadn't been part of the deal.

Not that there was a chance of getting comfortable at Carver's, what with the customers being so charming and everything. She had a little bit saved up now, not anywhere near what she'd had before, but it was enough to put first and last month's rent and a security deposit on a small apartment. Jenna had offered to pay rent with the money she'd earned watching Liam for however long it took for Eden to find a job in real estate. They'd both formulated a tentative plan on their futures, nothing set in stone, but they were going to be there for each other regardless. That was exactly what Eden needed. Distance, time alone, time to think, time to

recuperate and a start fresh. She would only be setting herself up for more heartbreak if she did otherwise.

It was packed. No surprise there. The game playing on the flat screens mounted high on the four walls had everyone riveted, erupting every now and then in a chorus of cheers or disgruntled jeers. It made for an interesting evening but no less demanding. Eden was kept on her toes as the crowd clamored for more salty food which led to their need for more liquor. Mickey had her mixing drinks, but halfway through the night, she was pulled away to help with Brenda's tables. It was while she was coming back from getting a drink order that she saw him, and Eden frowned, not actually recognizing him until she saw the skulls and crossbones tattoo inked into his arm. Her frown deepened as she approached the table he was occupying. There was someone else seated across from him.

Rail thin, stringy ash blond hair, and enough makeup to make any clown jealous, the woman—and Eden used the word rather loosely—appeared to have seen better days. She was scarfing down a basket of fries, a napkin splattered with ketchup just to the right of her. Pulling her eyes away from the professional eating contestant, Eden looked at Jenna's ex and couldn't help her disgust from morphing her face into a scowl. It was a slight consolation that he looked worse for wear but not by much. Eden would rather he be buried in a hole somewhere very far from here. The last time she'd seen him, he hadn't looked this bad. He was wirier, and his gaunt features would look better placed on a corpse, making him look like the grim reaper. There was a stench oozing from him and the clothes that hung off his diminished frame. Cracked lips drew up into a smug grin as his glassy blue eyes raked over her with a look that made her skin crawl. She pulled back from the dirt caked hand that reached out to touch her.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Tsk, tsk, that’s no way of talking to a customer.” He spread his legs and fisted himself through his jeans. “Come have a seat, we need to talk.”

“You need to get the fuck out.” Trying to keep her anger under control was no small feat.

“What the fuck you doing working in this place? Your sugar daddy leave you high and dry?”

Eden turned to leave, resolved to flag down either Carver or one of the guys he hired to handle the crowd when they got out of hand. But Alex was faster, shackling a hand around her wrist in a surprisingly tight grip that hurt far more than she let on. With one forceful tug, he jerked her to him, setting her hand, palm side down on the table. He grabbed the steak knife and held it over her hand. “Make a fucking scene, and I’ll drive this into your hand. Got it?” In the absence of his lascivious look, his cold eyes stared back at her with dark intent.

She nodded jerkily, holding onto the retort that burned her tongue.

“Now smile like the good cock sucking waitress that you are and answer my fucking questions. Why the fuck isn’t Jenna answering my phone calls?”

“I don’t know,” she said icily.

“Don’t fucking bullshit me. I know you’re telling her not to talk to me. You’ve been pulling this shit since she’s met you. You’re going to—”

“Dude, what the fuck?”

Thank God for April! The redhead jumped into action, tossing her plate of hot food at the table causing the much needed commotion she’d anticipated. Alex’s grip on Eden’s wrist slackened, along with the grip he had on the knife, and too soon he was out of his chair, looking for an exit. The woman who’d been sitting with him was screaming bloody murder as

she batted away at remnants of mashed potatoes and mushrooms from her hair and body.

“Carver!” April’s cry of help to their boss was loud enough that more than a few heads turned in their particular direction. “He pulled a knife out on Eden!” she explained frantically once the tattooed man jumped into the fray. It all it took was the word “knife” to have him lunging for the other man, but Alex was already making a run for it, his lady friend scurrying behind him.

“Are you alright?” It took Eden a moment to answer, her nerves shot to hell, her heart thumping furiously in her chest, speaking proved a little difficult.

“Yeah,” she nodded, more for everyone’s assurance than her own, “yeah, I’m fine.”

The odd, quiet hush that fell over the bar was disturbing on so many levels as hushed murmurs made Eden feel like she was under a microscope highlighted by stadium lights. Carver instantly rectified the situation. “This round’s on the house! Cheers to our girl, April!”

“April!” everyone chorused, and just like that everything returned to normal, the patrons returning to their heated game and equally stimulating conversations.

“Thank you for saving my ass, April.”

“Jesus, who the fuck was that guy? Did you know him?”

“He’s my best friend’s ex. I didn’t know he was going to show up here.” God she didn’t even think he knew where she worked! “I’m so sorry, Carver.”

“You sure do keep interesting company, Eden,” he remarked teasingly, a lopsided grin putting on display a dimple in his left cheek.

She flushed red. “Not willingly,” she murmured.

“Well, whatever that was, Carver is buying us a drink, so come take a shot with me. It’ll calm your nerves.”

It didn’t. She was still very much rattled by closing time, the one thought crawling through her mind was that if he knew where she worked then it more than likely meant he knew where they lived. Suddenly the conversation she had with Jenna a month ago about telling Dominic about Alex didn’t seem like such a bad idea now. In fact, it was imperative that she do so now before things spiraled out of her control. Yes, she resolved silently, cleaning out her locker and brusquely shoving her items in her bag. She was going to tell him tonight; as soon as she returned to the mansion she would call him.

“You can head out, girls!” Carver called from the back office.

“Sweet! I’ll see you later, guys. Got a hot date with Spence tonight.” Brenda waved goodbye, her bag in hand, and raced for the car waiting for her outside.

“You coming, Eden?” April asked from the doorway, Maria a few feet from the front entrance.

“Yeah, you guys go ahead. I’ll be right behind you,” she said with a small smile, tugging her hair down from the messy bun and running soothing fingers against her sore scalp.

“Alright, girl. Great work tonight.”

“You too. And thanks again for—”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing you wouldn’t have done for me. We all look out for each other. I’ll see tomorrow.”

“Yeah, tomorrow.”

God, she needed a shower. But first she needed to find the keys to her car, otherwise that shower was going to be only wishful thinking. After

some vigorous searching, her bottomless bag finally yielded her set of keys. Checking the clock on the wall, Eden saw how late it was and sighed.

“Hey, Carver, I’m heading out!”

“Alright, almost done. I’ll close up.”

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing.”

One o’clock in the morning brought with it a cool, yet warm breeze attributed with a summer night. The breeze felt good against her sticky, fevered skin, but with that shower sounding more and more appealing, she bounded for her car, too preoccupied that she didn’t notice him until he shoved her against her car.

“Didn’t think you’d see me again, huh, you stupid bitch?” He was strong despite his frail appearance, strong enough to subdue her attempts to free herself. “Scream and I’m going smash your head against this car,” he said, his rancid breath blowing hot against her ear. The hold he had on her arms prevented her from twisting around. Her mind was in chaos, but Eden kept control of her nerves while hastily trying to formulate a plan of escape. “First, you’re going to call your sugar daddy and tell him I need more money. The amount he paid me the first time wasn’t enough. And then you’re going to kick Jenna out of that nice little mansion she thinks she belongs in. Once she’s out on her own, she’ll come running back to me, and I’ll have enough money to take care of her.”

“You mean beat her to a bloody pulp until she does everything you say?” She needed to keep him talking. The good thing in all of this was that he wasn’t armed, so she wasn’t in any immediate danger. She’d dropped her keys when he’d apprehended her so there was no way setting off the panic alarm to alert anyone in the vicinity. “Even if I could convince Jenna to

leave, she's not going to go back to you. She's done being your punching bag."

"Shut the fuck up!" That struck a nerve and had him tugging painfully on her locked arms with such brute force that she heard a pop in her left shoulder. "Open the fucking door!"

The pain brought on tears, which she furiously blinked away. "The keys are on the..." she trailed off as the weight of his body was lifted off of her, and she spun around to find Carver wrestling Alex to the ground.

"Call the cops," he growled in her direction, and though her arms and shoulders screamed for mercy, Eden did as she was told and dialed nine-one-one with trembling fingers.

They took statements, hers and Carver's, and before they hauled Alex away, they asked if she wanted to press charges to which she replied, "Yes, I do." For Jenna's sake and her own, Eden wanted to put his ass away for good, at least then he would be someone else's problem.

When the red and blue lights disappeared, Eden sagged against her car with a long, wearied sigh. She brought a hand up to nurse her left shoulder, wincing when she touched at the pulled muscle.

"There's never a dull moment with you," he joked in that dark smoky growl of his. "You sure you don't want to go to the hospital or something?"

"Honestly, I just want to go home at this point and maybe ice my shoulder."

"Let me take a look?" Obliging his request was the least she could do right now, after all he'd done for her in this one night alone. She nodded and gave him her back. He handled her with gentle yet skillful hands, careful not to further aggravate the main area.

"Is it dislocated?"

"Doesn't look like it. Try rotating it for me?"



It hurt like the dickens, but she was able to rotate it without too much complication. “That’s good. It’s probably a strain, but I would have someone check it out for you, just to be sure.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” she conceded, turning around to face him again. “How do you know this stuff?”

He shrugged. “High school and college football. You tear, strain, and dislocate a lot. After a while you start to learn the symptoms. Plus I studied sport’s medicine before opening the bar.” Yeah, she definitely pegged him for an athlete, as big as he was. That thought incited a blush that made her grateful it was dark enough in the parking lot that he didn’t see.

“I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t come out when you did. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem. But like I said, you keep interesting company. First the ‘suit and tie’ and now this rat faced bastard.”

“The suit and tie?”

“Yeah, the broody guy in the suit that dragged you out like you were his own personal Raggedy Ann doll.”

“Dominic,” she quietly supplied.

“What’s his deal? Is he someone we have to worry about?”

“No, that was the first and last time, I promise. We’re...we’re actually getting a divorce soon.” It was the first time she’d actually said it out loud to anyone other than Jenna. And the fact that that other person happened to be her very sexy, very gallant boss with a killer smile made it that much more awkward. She needed to go, like yesterday.

“Which means you’ll no longer be sporting this boulder?” he took hold of her hand left hand and grinned down at her wedding ring. “This things huge, it’s a wonder you don’t have a hand injury too.”

Eden gently pulled back her hand with a sheepish smile. "I'm returning it after the divorce. It's way too flashy anyways."

"Yeah, I didn't peg you for the flashy sort of girl." If she didn't know him so well, she would've sworn he was flirting with her. But flirt was part of Carver's charm. It came to him as natural as breathing.

"I'm not, I mean not anymore. It's a long story." She sighed. "I'm going to head out. Thank you again."

Having retrieved her keys from the ground when the cops came, Eden unlocked the door and stepped inside the driver's side. Carver waited until she was settled, with her seatbelt in place, before closing the door for her. "You're welcome." He flashed a smile and she was again taken aback by how gorgeous he was, handsome in the way that he needed to have his own calendar, in her opinion. That smile drew attention to the devastating blue of his eyes that gleamed like sapphires. If she wasn't already so embroiled in this very complicated thing with Dominic, Eden was sure she would've fallen hard for Carver. She was already attracted to him. Honestly the man oozed sex appeal so potent that any woman within the vicinity would've felt it. But she was emotionally and currently physically, unavailable. She had way too many issues that needed to be resolved before she even contemplated getting into relationship with someone. "Take care of yourself, Eden."

That's exactly what she intended to do. With a parting smile, she turned the engine over and headed home.

\* \* \*

It was while settling Liam in his crib and dropping a kiss on his soft, puffy cheek that Eden decided to forgo the shower and bathe instead. On silent, naked feet Eden entered the master bath, and though it had been home to her years before, it felt strange entering this place now that it was his

domain. Even as she stepped inside the all-white bathroom with its reflective milk white walls and glass mosaic tiled floor, she tossed a few nervous glances behind her just to make sure he wasn't there. Eden silently chastised herself for being silly. He was halfway around the world. There was no way he was going to come out of the shadows like some boogeyman and catch her in the act.

Her soaps and bath salts were exactly as she'd left them, nothing out of place, situated right next to his toiletries. She didn't know how to feel about that. But that was nothing new at this point. Surrounded by sumptuous bubbles and nearly scorching hot water, Eden sank deeper into the tub that was big enough to accommodate two more people comfortably. With the painkillers she'd taken doing their job, the pain in her shoulder wasn't as excruciating, but the dull ache was a clear reminder of what she'd faced earlier in the evening. With any luck, Alex was rotting away in a cell right now. Eden hadn't said anything to Jenna when she'd taken Liam, but she would tomorrow. It was Eden's hope to have Jenna press battery charges on him, something concrete that would stick and keep him in prison for years to come. She was willing to testify and would encourage her best friend to do the same. Alex had a record a mile long, the majority were domestic abuse charges he'd accrued since he'd been with Jenna. Jenna needed a fresh start, she needed some peace of mind, and Eden was sure it would start by putting Alex away.

Closing her eyes, shutting off her brain, Eden lounged back and luxuriated. Nearly a half hour later, she emerged from the ceramic tub, clean and relaxed, taking with her the distinct scent of sandalwood and citrus. She slipped back into her robe before exiting the bathroom.

She knew instinctively that he was in the room even before she saw him. The tiny hairs on her skin stood on end as slivers of both pleasure and

fear licked down her spine. Her heart forgot its rhythm at the sight of him, beating erratically against her breastbone. He looked as though he'd just arrived and his first stop had been to Liam's room where he emerged now, silently closing the connecting doors behind him. He was still in his suit, business as usual. Eden felt her body instantly responding to the sight of that suit, and she was startled to find that she'd developed a fetish over the last few months. Dominic in a suit was an aphrodisiac all on its own. It was fitted, tailored as all his suits tended to be; black slacks hugging his strong masculine thighs, while his shirt, a deep burgundy that looked amazing against his complexion, was fitted perfectly to his upper physique.

He'd discarded the jacket somewhere along the way, and Eden knew there'd been a tie at some point, but that too was gone in the way of the missing suit jacket. The sleeves of the shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and he'd unbuttoned the first three buttons so that the column of his neck and a bit of his chest was left exposed. The allure of that exposed golden skin dropped in her the need to press her lips at the point where neck met chest. When her gaze finally met his, it was to find him assessing her with the same deliberate thoroughness that she'd exercised. Heat suffused every inch of her skin, and though she knew there was the barrier of the robe to protect her, Eden couldn't have felt more naked beneath the unerring scope of his predatory gaze.

"Hello," he greeted in his husky timbre.

"Hi." She licked her lips nervously, looking past his shoulder to the exit behind him. Eden knew she needed to make her escape now before things spiraled completely out of control. "I know you must be tired. I'm just going to leave." She didn't take two steps past him before he grabbed her arm and dragged her backwards to the wall by the bathroom door. He backed her against that wall and held her there, dominant to the very core,

every inch of his hard angled body surged against her yielding femininity, rendering her immobile. He swooped down, and with a kiss that instantly set her ablaze, his tongue licked at the seam of her mouth, demanding access. His groan rumbled at the taste of her liquid sweetness, strained and muted in the depth of the mouth he took without permission, but knew was freely given.

Wetness instantly pooled between her thighs as his roving hand frantically moved down the length of her body, cupping her breast through the thin layer of cotton, tweaking a distended nipple until she cried out in pleasure and pain. Her body involuntarily arched towards him, wanting more. But that hand scrambled lower still, down her thighs until fingers found her hot slickness, running satisfyingly down the center. “So wet for me,” he growled, and she whimpered at his mercy. He manhandled her; his large hands firmly gripped her thighs and hoisted her up against the wall until she stared down into his rapacious green eyes, eyes that held hers as he lowered her onto his cock, sliding simultaneously in molten flesh that greedily engulfed him.

Powerful legs maintained her weight as he began to move, long, smooth drives that filled a void in her that she hadn’t known was empty until now.

“Eden...” Dominic rasped. He pinned her arms above her head and nuzzled into her neck, taking into his lungs the sandalwood and citrus that smelled so much better on her skin than it ever did on his. The insane need to feel her heart pushed him to drive deeper into her pliant body, a need he would never satisfy but never tired of trying. “This is Eden,” he murmured in silent wonder almost too quietly to himself, but she heard and her heart took it like oxygen. She dipped her head to steal a kiss that he instantly took charge of, and their tongues tangled. He caught her lower lip between his teeth and nibbled before plunging his tongue back into the sweetness of her

mouth, depriving her of air, but it was breath Eden was all too willing to do without if it meant prolonging this euphoria. His hips drove in hard, slamming into her and she held on, squeezing her legs around his waist while she rode his every thrust, surrendering to the cavalcade of emotions he made her feel.

“Dom...Dom...” she panted, chanting his name like a pagan prayer, her beautiful sounds hailing him her deity as he felt her walls growing tight, her orgasm bearing down on him like a force of nature. “Come for me, Eden,” he demanded, his voice threaded with raw emotion. And her body, the all too willing supplicant, came undone at his command. The force of her orgasm consumed her, engulfed her in a blaze of white hot pleasure that blinded her to anything else. She felt him, heard an almost tortured groan choke him as he came deep inside her.

He took her two more times before dawn broke over the horizon, and Eden readily spread her legs for him, forgetting everything else that should’ve mattered for another dizzying ride on his roller coaster. When it was over and the world righted itself, she silently marveled how she’d gone nearly a year and a half without sex to having it a handful of times in the span of a few short days. But then that spoke more to Dominic’s potent sexual appeal than her lack of available partners. He had a sway over her that she could not shake, no matter how hard she tried. And she *was* trying. But as exhibited, her attempts at putting distance between them always led her exactly where she was not supposed to be—in his arms, in his bed—a cycle that was so hard to break.

She needed to leave. Find her robe and steal away before her hypocrisy made itself known. He wouldn’t know she was gone until much later, and by then, Eden would’ve had time to shower and process things before she had to face him again. At least then she would be better prepared to face the

awkwardness she knew would come. A little dignity would do her well considering she'd exhibited very little of it so far. Easing out of his restrictive hold took some maneuvering, but once she sat up, a cursory glance in his direction gave her pause. His breathing was controlled, his chest rising and falling steadily in sleep. He looked exhausted, and Eden figured it had more to do with the jetlag than the explosive sex they'd had. It took far more to satiate Dominic's unquenchable carnal hunger, Eden remembered all too clearly. She crawled off the bed. Her bathrobe lay strewn on the floor in the empty space between the bathroom and bed, stripped from her body, and tossed haphazardly in the heat of passion. She slid into it, wincing when her shoulder gave a protesting twinge. More painkillers, she thought silently, tying to sash before disappearing inside Liam's nursery.

\* \* \*

He watched her avidly. Transfixed like a man sentenced to a lifetime of blindness, and her brilliance, her breathtaking beauty, was the last thing he was permitted to see. She smiled so ravishingly that he envied his son for putting that smile on her face. She was dressed simply in dark rinsed jeans and a sleeveless chiffon blouse. Hair that he'd threaded his fingers through in the heat of passion, tumbled around her shoulders in loose waves. Her feet were bare as she toddled along in the green grass with Liam between her legs teaching him how to walk, her words of encouragement soothing the happy boy as his legs buckled and he stumbled. It was nothing at all like the childhood he'd had. He'd once believed in his undying cynicism that she would abandon Liam in the same way that Dominic himself had been abandoned. He'd set her up to fail long before giving her the chance to prove herself. But he'd seen in so many ways that she was nothing like his mother; there was no comparison between the two. The love and peace that

he'd never received, she gave to their son in abundance, without reservation and Dominic treasured her for that alone.

There was so much that he could learn from her, so much that he *wanted* to learn, to *know*, but those wants were inconsequential, paling in light of the damage he'd caused her. It pained him to remember her anguished confession when she'd said that he had created her demons and Dominic had known. How could he not when he had been the architect of her torment? But to hear those words from that beautiful mouth, to know that he'd instilled fear in her heart gutted him. Somewhere in hell he knew his mother was cackling, knowing the cycle of her abuse was still very much alive in the son that she'd hated more than life itself. But it was a cycle Dominic was determined to break.

He understood a little more now the reason why he had never been able to cure himself of his obsession with her. Why he'd gone to such lengths to have her. That moment five years ago when he'd seen her on that stage, untouched by his sadism, ignorant to the predator that he'd been, there had been meaning in that moment. Meaning that he was only now beginning to understand. His darkness had been drawn to her light, enticed by that very thing he hadn't known he'd been searching for until he found it in her. His Eden. In her, laid the garden of his peace. In her year long absence from his life, while she had thrived and lived to become this woman who challenged him in all things, Dominic had been aimless, prowling around restlessly like a beast without his trainer. And when she'd returned, he'd done the only thing he knew how to keep her at his side. His recent trip to Greece had been enlightening, his longing for her had been physically and mentally unbearable, so much so that he'd cut the two week long trip short; the private jet couldn't have brought him back fast enough. Sliding back the French doors, he moved towards them. She had her dark head down, so



absorbed in Liam's antics, that she didn't see him approaching until he stood only a few short feet away.

Eden's skin prickled in that peculiar way it always did when he was near. She looked up and found him standing there clad in a pristine white shirt, sleeves appropriately rolled up, in a pair of tailored steel grey chinos and black loafers. Casual and sexy. His intrinsic magnetism instantly drawing her in. She focused her attention on Liam, scooping down to pick him up, she noticeably winced, her face crinkling in pain as her shoulder protested.

"What's wrong?" He was there in an instant. Taking Liam in his arms, he trained his gaze back on her. "Are you hurt?" he urged impatiently, needing her to give him an immediate answer.

"It's my shoulder," she murmured, raising her hand to the site of her pain. "There was an incident at work last night." Leveling him with stare, Eden asked, "Did you pay Jenna's ex-boyfriend to do something for you?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"To find you," he said concisely. "I was desperate enough to employ his help."

She appreciated his honesty. "He came by my job last night, making threats and demanding more money from you. He caught me by surprise when I was leaving work, and I guess he sprained my shoulder when he had me against my car."

A dark cloud of emotion shadowed his hard features for a moment, while his jaw clenched in an obvious bout to control whatever it was he was feeling. He managed the feat, but green eyes were unable to conceal the depth of his rage. A rage Eden was unsure was directed at her.

"Can I see?" The calm of his voice said otherwise.

So completely different than when Carver had asked, Eden silently remarked. For one thing, her heart hadn't hammered this maddeningly in nervousness as she swept her hair to one side of her shoulder and allowed Dominic his perusal. She chewed anxiously on her lower lip as she quite literally felt the touch of his gaze on her skin. "I thought the pain would ease by now, but it hurts...a lot," she admitted softly, "I think I need to go to the hospital. Jenna went out for a little while so I was going to wait until she came back so I could go. But if you could just watch Liam, I can go by myself and—"

"I'll take you," he said decisively, putting an immediate halt to her nervous rambling. "Jacqueline will watch Liam."

"You don't have to. Take me, I mean. I can go by myself."

"I want to go with you. If you will allow me, that is."

Eden did allow it. In fact she found it harder and harder to find reason why she should mind that Dominic was escorting her to the hospital. He declined the chauffeured services and instead they took a different car that got them to the hospital in less time than it would've normally taken. Of course that was also with Dominic driving like he was on a race track. Three hours later, they emerged from the emergency room. There was nothing broken, according to the doctor on duty, but it was a pulled muscle for which he prescribed a higher dose of painkillers and advised her to ice it to keep the swelling down. Nothing she hadn't already been doing.

"Why are you so quiet?" she gently prodded in the silence of the car, knowing he'd taken to the caverns of his mind again.

"I'll take care of him."

Eden frowned. "That's not what I want, Dominic," she said carefully, needing him to understand. "I didn't tell you so you could come to my rescue. I can handle this."

“Handle it by further getting hurt?” he countered derisively, the condescending undertone she hated so much scraping against her skin like thorns. “He will not come near you again.” The finality of that statement was punctuated by him killing the ignition and stepping out of the car.

Eden ran after him, catching his arm before he could walk too far away “So that’s it? Whatever you say goes? I don’t get a say?”

“I will not compromise when it comes to your safety,” he grated, his lips compressing into a thin line of disapproval.

“I’m a big girl, Dominic, I can take care of myself. I spent an entire year away from you, and I was fine. Alex is in jail. He assaulted me and I’m pressing charges. He already has a rap sheet for what he did to Jenna. Getting him convicted shouldn’t be that difficult. It’s not your job to take care of me. At least it won’t be...” she trailed off, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she met his gaze.

“Right. The divorce.”

The inescapable death of this marriage hung over Dominic’s head like the blade of a guillotine. If he asked for more time, she would cry foul. Then there was the very real prospect of her suing him for breaching that damnable contract. The money wasn’t the problem. He had it in abundance and had always shared it with her regardless of the glaring fact that he’d used it to control her in the past. He drew in a deep breath still frustrated by what had happened to her. She had his hands tied in demanding that he not intervene on her behalf when he had the means to do exactly that. He now regretted the agreement they’d made in telling James not to tail her. If his security guard had been there, she certainly would not have gotten hurt.

“Yes, the divorce,” she reiterated. “Four more months.”

“You count the days so diligently.” There was hardly any bite to the soft delivery, nevertheless the statement spoke of his frustrations on the subject.

Eden's brows drew together. "Aren't you? I mean it's what we both want."

His lips curled up into a halfhearted smile as he stepped closer to her reaching out to gently brush a lock of hair behind her ear, his hand lingering on her cheek. "What I want is... not important." He leaned in to brush a heart wrenchingly sweet kiss at the center of her forehead. "I've always cared about you, Eden," he confided truthfully, pulling back, "I've just been horrible at showing it."

She took a step back with a shuddering breath "Well, it doesn't matter now." The lies she told could fill a gorge. She lowered her gaze knowing his perceptiveness would glean the truth from that lie. And the truth was that a very large part of her reveled in his softly spoken words, the ill placed delight reaching down to stroke at her foolish heart.

"No," he murmured, "I guess it doesn't." His long legs carried him away, leaving Eden standing in the wake of his uncharacteristic tenderness, her mind an utter mess of thoughts that did not make the slightest sense, all the while wishing he would return and explain himself.

\* \* \*

"I think this one might be a little stronger," Jenna warned, her voice slightly hoarse from scream-singing half the evening. They were in their swimsuits. Eden's a little black number with red polka dots and Jenna's a dark blue one that displayed her cute little tanned ass. Strawberries and tequila perfumed the warm summer breeze while the intermittent sound of the blender whirred over the Third Eye Blind's "Semi-Charmed Life" playing through the speakers that they knew by heart. It was nineties night, at least that's what they'd dubbed it four margaritas ago as they sang rather horribly with every song they recognized, which was all of them. Drunk wasn't exactly what one would call Eden's current state, but she was bordering on happy,

a.k.a tipsy, two levels beneath absolute inebriation. Jenna on the other hand... Eden chortled as she watched the blond haired woman stumble back from the little bar area they'd set up by the lounge chairs, the frothy, iced drinks she had in her hand spilling all over the ground.

"Here, try." She handed Eden what was left of the coral red, strawberry scented drink before lowering herself down the pool's ledge, plunking her feet back into the warm water.

It was icy tequila with very little strawberry. Eden sipped it. This one was going to take her a minute to finish. "You didn't even try on this one," Eden joked, nudging Jenna's shoulder. "So, are you okay?" It was only right to ask considering Alex had been sentenced to three years in prison today. It wasn't only the assault on Eden that had prompted the judge to convict him. It had been a culmination of petty thefts to drug charges and outstanding warrants for his arrest that had ultimately sealed his fate. They'd gone to court earlier this afternoon and when they'd come out, Jenna had been pale and withdrawn, barely saying a word to Eden until they'd returned to the mansion.

Jenna shrugged. "I didn't want to see him that way. He looked old, worn. Like the world chewed him up and spit him back out. He wasn't the Alex I remembered, the Alex who...who looked out for me, you know?" She turned to look at her best friend with glassy eyes, hoping she would understand what she wasn't able to say.

Eden didn't know, because to her, Alex had always been the asshole that beat up her best friend. She hadn't known any other side to him than the piece of shit he'd been. So no, she didn't know exactly what Jenna was talking about. But that didn't mean she couldn't empathize. Nineties, margarita night was made for reasons like this. "Maybe he had good intentions when you guys first met, but he's not that guy anymore. He's

changed and so have you, Jen. For the better. You deserve so much better than the brand of love Alex gave you.”

“And how about you?” Jenna nudged her back.

A small knit materialized between Eden’s brows. “What about me?” she asked, kicking and splashing the water with her legs and feet.

“What are you going to do about your baby daddy?”

Eden tossed her head back and laughed. “What I planned on doing from the beginning.”

“The divorce?”

Why everyone suddenly seemed surprised that she was still intent on separating from Dominic was news to Eden. Nothing had changed. This was the only end result that would benefit her in the long run. Dominic couldn’t hurt her or control her or lord over her life like he’d done so many times before in the past. Old hurts, the humiliation she’d born as his wife, along with the mental abuse had left a stain on her soul, one that could not easily be washed off. She wasn’t heartless, and on some level she knew his brutality towards her stemmed greatly from the atrocities he’d endured as a child. Even now thinking on it, knowing the constant struggle he faced made her hurt for him. Like the pain was so intense that it struck her chest like a shot put.

“Eden.”

Eden raised a hand to the site of her pain, center left side of her chest and found the muffled battering of her heart against her damp hand. “We had a deal,” she said quietly, distractedly soothing at the dull ache. “It’ll be good for both of us.” Abuse only produced more abuse, in some form or another. This was why Eden needed to leave him. She didn’t want to be the victim who later became the abuser. She would cut off both arms before she ever laid a hand on Liam, but words damaged just as deeply.

“God, fucking listen to us. Ruining our girls’ night talking about fucking men who don’t deserve us! Well fuck that and fuck them.” Jenna wobbled to her feet, gripping Eden’s shoulder when she teetered. She thrust her glass up in the air, the contents spilling on Eden, who deciding to come to her feet lest she end up covered in margarita followed in best friend’s antics. “Let’s fucking drink to us and the awesome dildos that can rightfully take their places.”

Hell yeah fucking right. “Power to the Dildos.” Yes, she very damn well clinked to that. Tossing the too strong margarita down the hatch like it was a shot, she laughed as Jenna grabbed her hand and they jumped around like silly school girls to Chumbawamba’s “Tubthumping”. It was fun being this uninhibited. Jenna ended up using the empty bottle of tequila as her microphone while Eden gyrated drunkenly in front of her to The Divinyls “I Touch Myself”. Eyes closed, mouth moving sensually over those provocative lyrics, Dominic was inclined to scoop her over his shoulder and play out the fantasy for them both. He exercised restraint, however, when he stepped out onto the pool deck. Though he had eyes only for Eden, Dominic’s cock noticeably stirred at the sight of the two women, and the very lurid picture they presented rubbing up against each other. It was a very strong, very male reaction that he instantly stamped down.

Her eyes fluttered open and from beneath dark lashes that curved beautifully in half-moons, she met his gaze levelly, the sultriness of the stare she pinned him with had blood rushing down the cock that instantly stood to salute her. “Look, Jen,” she called, there was an added smokiness to her voice that Dominic found sexy as hell, “it’s my baby daddy.”

“Hello,” he said in greeting, noting that his own voice seemed a bit off as he approached their private party. “I didn’t realize you were having a party.”

“Oh yeah...private party,” she looped her arm back to wrap around Jenna’s neck, her full mouth drawing up. The smile of a temptress. “But there’s room for one more. Wanna join?”

“You’re drunk.”

She caught her full lower lip between her teeth, fluttering those lashes before reaching forward for his tie, wrapping it around her hand to tug him forward. They towered over her as she stood sandwiched between them, and for a brief moment, Dominic’s gaze looked over her shoulder at an equally drunk Jenna, who looked back at him with interest, waiting to see exactly what he would do. “Come on, Dom, I know you want to...” He stood close enough to her that she could feel the prominent length of his arousal. “Should I get on my knees?” she breathed and Dominic’s imagination sparked at those words as his gaze trained on her luscious mouth, tinged pink, like forbidden fruit calling him to taste, calling for something far more indecent than a kiss. “You’re way too overdressed...”

This was a trap. Warning bells clanged, horns blared, and Dominic was wise enough to heed the warning. “Party ends now,” he delivered curtly, easing his tie out of her hold. “Jenna head inside,” he called without a second glance back as he dragged Eden behind him.

She resisted halfway up the stairs, and Dominic’s caveman etiquette kicked in as he hauled her over his shoulder and continued on his way unperturbed. A firm, well deserved smack on her plump ass stopped her flailing legs. He walked past her bedroom. And with their son sleeping peacefully with the housekeeper, Dominic headed towards the master. He dropped her unceremoniously on the bed and heard her giggles. She fought her way up to her knees, tendrils of hair framing her flushed face as it loosened from the ponytail she’d gathered it in. Her radiant smile was three parts alcohol and one part lucidity. “You could’ve had us both, you know.”



She crawled to the edge of the bed, her eyes focused on him, making Dominic her prey.

“That is not what I want.”

“Liar.”

“Eden.”

She failed to take caution. “You know what bugs me about you?” she continued on heedlessly, sitting on the edge of the bed now, facing him completely. “Every time you’re near me, I feel exactly like this.” She slipped a finger into the belted loop of his pants and tugged him towards her, bracketing his strong, masculine thighs with her smooth caramel legs so that she faced nothing but groin.

“Like what?” he prompted, staring down at her with hooded eyes as she worked at the buckle of his belt.

“Like I’m naked and drunk, riding a roller coaster without the proper restraints.” She tugged down pants and briefs with surprising strength, freeing his rigid cock from its dark confines. “You have a beautiful cock, Dominic.” The sultry smokiness of her voice retuned, and he sucked in a sharp breath as she took him in a firm yet gentle hold, her fingers wrapping around it, moving indolently up and down the shaft. “It’s long, and thick, feels like steeled velvet. I love that you’re cut. I love the golden brown color, and,” she caught her lip between her teeth and thumbed the head, using his pre-come to skate over the slit, “this bulbous tip. Do you know how good it feels when it slides in between my wet lips, the way its curves slightly to the right so that it strokes and hits my G-spot so fucking right? I should mass produce it and let other women experience your beautiful cock.” She met his gaze, that kittenish smile reeling him in.

She was drunk, he reminded herself. If she were in her right mind, she wouldn’t be doing this. He needed to stop her. Now. A touch on her

shoulder to push her away turned into a tight grip as she lowered her head and took him into her mouth in one swift motion, swallowing him to the balls.

Honorable intent flew out the window at the engulfing heat of her talented mouth. He stared down, enthralled by the dark head bobbing up and down, sucking and releasing, lips slicked with spit as she tongued him down and took him back in, her stroking hand working in perfect sync with the sweet, hot suction of her heavenly mouth. She cupped his balls, and he released a long groan, his hand in her hair clenched reflexively, while he moved his hips in shallow thrusts.

He filled Eden's senses, completely male. With her hand at the base, she moved her mouth, lips, tongue and hand working simultaneously to increase the sensation. Pre-cum coated the back of her throat, salty, clean, all Dominic. She swallowed it and continued, her head bobbing up and down with vigor.

She made these sexy, throaty little moans as if his cock was the best thing she'd ever had in her mouth, and the vibrations sent tremors up and down his shaft. Dominic wove a hand through her hair, and his eyes narrowed to slits as he watched his cock disappearing in and out of her mouth, her reverent tongue licking him from base to head and back again. Dominic curved a hand to her cheek, his thumb stroking her soft cheek edging closer to her hot, wet lips that stretched wide to accommodate his girth. The controlled suction of her beautiful lips, worked together with the firm grip she had on him, as she went down again, relaxing her jaw and working the muscles in her throat to massage at the tip.

"Fuck." His balls drew up and tightened, with a curse Dominic anchored the hold in her hair as he thrust shallowly in her mouth, against her throat, making her choke. So close. Too damn close. Denying himself

release, he pulled away from her, the release of his cock from her mouth making a wet popping sound. He gripped her hair to tug her head back and bent down to devour her mouth, plunging his tongue between the seam of her lips to taste strawberries, tequila and his cock, a heady cocktail that went to his head.

“Turn around and get on your hands and knees.” Triumph surged through his veins as she carried out his bidding and smiled iniquitously as she presented the delectable globes of her round ass. The bottom half of her swimsuit hid what he wanted to see most, but one simple tug on the strings took care of the issue, the offending piece of clothing falling to the bed, instantly forgotten. She was perfect and he stared, mesmerized at the masterpiece of her backside. His green eyes stroked her as his hands would, starting from the flawless slope of her back to the smooth contours of a waist that rounded out to form her heart-shaped ass. “Spread your knees and arch your back,” he said throatily, and wanted to reward her when she carried out the command without hesitation. She stretched her back like a feline, dipping down so that her ass stuck out for him allowing Dominic a view of her glistening pussy lips and the sweet, tight little bundle of her virgin hole.

Presenting herself this way, in this very vulnerable, very primal position, handing her submission on a platter for him humbled Dominic to the core. He would make it good for her, he vowed quietly to himself. He wrapped a hand around his rigid shaft to ease the strain, while he moved behind her. Palming one ass cheek, kneading the yielding plumpness, before prying it apart. She made a desperate sound, a sweet little mewl as he teased slid the tip slowly up and down the drenched lips of her pussy. “You’re so wet,” Carnal appetite thickened his voice to a growl as his warm breath grazed sensually against her ear. “I could drown in this pussy...”

“Dom...” she purred, arching so sweetly for him. She tipped back against him, needing him to dive in. But he denied her the fullness, continuing the steady, teasing slide of his tip down the center of her pulsating cunt. He was driving her insane.

“Dom... Please...” she begged so prettily for him, and Dominic wanted to give in, give her exactly what she wanted, but he wanted to pay homage to the perfection of her body that was a pleasure he would not deny himself.

“Soon, sweeting, I promise,” he soothed. She moaned softly as he licked her ear, dropped soft warm kisses across her shoulder blades, he moved down her back, a wet tongue and hot mouth traced and kissed each vertebrae, making a slow and steady progress down her spine. It was a torturous progression that boiled the blood in Eden’s veins as she waited in bated anticipation. Breath stilled in her lungs, eyes widening when he drew apart her butt cheeks and ran his tongue down the wet crevice, from clit to the puckered rosebud of her hole and back again. It was undoubtedly one of the most erotic things he’d ever done to her body, and Eden didn’t know how to breathe properly. She gripped the sheets beneath her hands and bit down hard on her bottom lip to keep from screaming.

It was like a shot of adrenaline straight into her vein. It was blood vessels dilating, her heart galloping uncontrollably in her chest, it was gasping for breath when the air she drew in wasn’t enough. He owned her body, ate it like sun ripened peaches and drank the flowing juices of her weeping womanhood with his rapacious tongue. There were fingers there, slipping between the folds to dive deep into her blistering heat, while his thumb worked at her puckered hole, his wicked, wicked mouth showing Eden exactly how very little she knew her of own body. There was nothing but the explicitness of this act, the hyper awareness that made her feel like each inch of her body was struck by lightning, that killed her and gave her

life all in one electrifying jolt. He was merciless and perfect, inviting her to shove her hips back and ride his face.

Death was imminent, sweet cataclysmic death seduced her into the gaping, welcoming arms of her orgasm. She plummeted, shattered into delicious little pieces on his tongue and fingers. Recuperating wasn't in the stars for her as he gripped her hips and plunged into her depths in one long stroke. Pulling her arms and folding them at the small of her back, he held them there with one large hand as he sank in deeper, so deep that it hurt so good. Ass high in the air, face down in the sheets, Eden was at his complete mercy, filled to absolute capacity with his cock, and she whimpered, the vulnerability of her position giving her a sweet high.

"I'm going to beat this pussy, Eden, and you're going to scream my name."

And she did, a promise made completely true as he fucked her like a porn star. She screamed like the world was falling, his repeated strike against her G-spot making her see stars. It was too damn much, his jarring thrusts so deep that she could taste him, spurred her fall and she orgasmed on every inch of his cock.

\* \* \*

"Well, your resume is very impressive, Eden," said Kennedy Archer with a smile, pulling her horned rimmed glasses from her eyes, she set them on the desk in front of her and regarded Eden down an aquiline nose. Eden returned her smile with a bright one of her own, still unable to believe this was even happening. She pinched her hand beneath the desk and knew by the sting that she wasn't dreaming. Archer Realty was the second largest real estate brokerage in the state, specializing mostly in high end real estates and corporate properties. This was huge! The excitement Eden currently felt was hard to contain. They'd called her two days ago asking if she was

available Friday morning for an interview and she'd been so stunned that she'd nearly blown it. But a quick stammering recovery had reassured the receptionist on the phone that she hadn't called a nutcase.

She'd been in a virtual state of shock, even when she and Jenna had lined outfit after outfit for her to try on. They'd settled on a pair of grey, wide leg tweed pants, a white, sleeveless ruffled top, and her favorite black heels. She'd gathered her hair in a topknot with tendrils framing her face and had kept the makeup light. She wore very little jewelry, only a gold watch around her wrist and gold stud earrings. Shedding the image of waitress in the revealing outfit, Eden reverted back to the woman she'd been a few months ago. The woman who'd built a career and had been filled with drive, but had been knocked down by circumstances was once again. She was back on her feet. Ready and willing to work hard for what she wanted.

"Thank you, Mrs. Archer." She beamed.

"There's no need for formalities, Kennedy will do fine. We're all very casual here, and I think you will definitely be an asset to our team."

Eden's eyes widened. "I have the job?"

Kennedy stood. "Yes, if you want it."

"Oh my God, thank you!" Eden curbed the impulse to hug the other woman and instead reached out to shake her hand.

"I'm sorry I have to rush you out, but I have a meeting uptown in fifteen minutes and need to get going. Franca, our receptionist, will give you a tour of the place and tell you what you need. "

"Thank you so much for this opportunity. You won't regret this," Eden said with sincerity as they walked out of the office together, Kennedy holding the door open for her.

“I know I won’t,” she said confidently. “Aside from your stellar resume, you came highly recommended by one of our best clients.”

Eden’s brow furrowed slightly, but her smile remained. “May I ask who?”

“Dominic Armstrong.” Even before she said the name Eden knew. “We’ve procured a few international properties for him. Have you worked closely with him?”

No, but she’d had his tongue in places that would make most people blush ten shades of red if they knew. Feeling her face warm, Eden hastily shook the image from her head. “No, but I know who he is.”

A little while later found Eden in her favorite flower shop, her feeling of elation from this morning now marred by the thought that Dominic had been the sole reason Archer Realty had even called her. Anger, confusion, and resentment formed a horrible storm that raged in the pit of her stomach. It was a horrible feeling to know that she probably got the job not based on her own merit, but only on Dominic’s clout. That feeling only grew worse the harder she thought on it, realizing no one had called her for months when she’d initially passed out her resume. And then suddenly she gets this amazing opportunity without so much as a “we’ll take a look at your resume and call you.” Places like Archer Realty didn’t just hire small time real estate agents. And despite her many accomplishments, Eden knew she was small time. She didn’t doubt her abilities to do her job; she knew how to close on a home. What troubled her was that Kennedy didn’t necessarily know that.

“Thank you for shopping at Jade, have a nice day.” Eden spared a halfhearted smile for the salesgirl as she grabbed her newly purchased bouquet and walked out of the store.

The drive to the cemetery from this side of town took a little longer than usual but the ride afforded Eden time to think. Damn him for interfering in her life this way. Just when she thought she had him figured out, he does something like this and shifts the ground beneath her feet. This was why she couldn't trust him. Why she couldn't risk loving him like every inch of her heart yearned to do when there was too much fear there; fear that he exacerbated when he did things like this. Wrenched control of her own life out of her hands and manipulated it to his satisfaction, making her feel helpless and lost. He conquered her completely in the bedroom, and she allowed him that, surrendered her body in the way she could not surrender her heart and permitted him to take her to heights unseen. But that was the only place she wanted him in control. Everything else she could manage, but he didn't understand that. And everything reverted back to his disastrous childhood where he'd been made the most powerless. Eden sighed in frustration, pulling at the hair tie in her hair to loosen the pressure at her scalp. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, she shook her hair out and massaged her throbbing head. She arrived a short ten minutes later and parked her car close to the curb.

There was one thing that she could always count on when she came here: the tranquility of the cemetery. The warm air blew sweeter, the sun shined a little brighter through the leaves of giant trees that circled the grounds, and the singing birds made it feel like she was stepping through another realm. She had to walk up an incline to get to her mother's grave and with the heels it was a little difficult, but Eden persevered. When she finally made it to her destination she stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of the man standing over her mother's grave. Her heart skittered along her ribcage because she knew it was him. He had his back to her, the shirt he wore fitting perfectly to his broad frame was tucked into fitted dark slacks.



He had his hands in his pockets with his head bowed low in deference. She heard the timbre of his voice but could not immediately make out what he was saying. Stepping a little closer, Eden saw a bouquet of flowers resting on the ground directly in front of the headstone, the same flowers that she'd seen many times before but had never known who'd brought them. Until now. Stunned couldn't even begin to describe how she was feeling in that moment, but even more pressing she wondered why he was here.

"What," she cleared her throat, "what are you doing here?"

He turned his head to the side to look at her. "Paying my respects."

"Why? You didn't know her."

"She was your mother, Eden; there is no other reason than that," he supplied. "There is something freeing in speaking to the dead."

"Do you...you know where your mother is buried?" Eden regretted the question the moment she uttered it when she saw him tense. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"I don't know and I don't care to." His frigid tone raised goose bumps on her skin.

"I'm sorry." She involuntarily stepped closer to him, her shoulder grazing his arm. "This is the last place I ever expected to see you, Dominic."

"The night you left...I came here, on the off chance that you might be here. I was very desperate to have you back," he admitted dryly. "I've fallen into the habit of coming here when I need to clear my mind."

"She was a good listener." Lowering herself to her knees, Eden rested her bouquet next to the one already there. "Always gave good advice, not that I ever took it." She smiled tremulously, the dull ache of her mother's absence making itself known. "But she was a really good mom. She always made sure I had enough."

“You miss her.”

Eden came to her feet, standing once again next to him she blinked away the tears that refused to ebb. “A lot,” she choked.

There was nothing for a long moment after but the sound of chirping birds and a breeze rustling quietly through the trees. And then she felt it. The ghost of his touch whispering on the back of her hand before interlacing their fingers, his large hand nearly engulfing hers. “I’m sorry she was taken from you.” The sincerity of his words went a long way in soothing the ache, and in that instant, Eden was glad that he was there with her.

\* \* \*

“I would like to take you out later this evening, if you are willing?”

Eden could tell that it was hard for him to ask rather than tell her and although it was weird for her too, she found herself pleasantly surprised by his awkward attempt. “Where to?”

“I’d like it to be a surprise.”

Eden gave him a sidelong glance, wondering what he was up to. Any attempt at gleaning that information from his impassive features proved futile. The man could give a statue a run for its money.

She thought about it long and hard and “no” flirted on her tongue but, “okay,” came out instead. Her signals were all crossed, and she knew she was sending out all the wrong ones, maybe even leading him on a little, but a very large part of her was liking this gentler side of Dominic, even if he was a consummate control freak.

“I didn’t need your help finding a real estate job, Dominic, especially with a prominent brokerage like Archer Realty,” she stated sharply.

“I did nothing but point them in your direction. If you received the job it was strictly on your own merits,” he retorted laconically, his logic grating.

Eden hated that he made her feel ungrateful and she hated even more the embarrassed flush that swept her cheeks at his silent admonishment.

“This intervening in my life thing you do...it has to stop,” she said after a moment, sweeping her hair behind her ear.

“It’s a habit I’m too old to break. Old dog, new tricks and the like,” he imparted with infuriating calm.

Eden sighed in exasperation and pulled her car door open with far more force than she intended. “I’ll see you home,” she said curtly, slamming the door with the same vigor, stepping on the gas, and taking off without a second glance back.

\* \* \*

“He’s trying really hard to get back in your good graces, Ede,” Jenna intoned from Eden’s bed, flipping through the magazine without much care to what was inside. “I bet your letting him hit it again.”

Eden blushed down to her roots and focused a little too closely on her reflection. “Shut up, Jen.”

Jenna laughed. “Fucking knew it. But I don’t blame you. I don’t know how you lasted this long, the man has been practically eye fucking you since you moved back here.”

“What do you think about this one?” Eden asked, turning so Jenna could look at the dress.

The blond woman scrunched her nose in distaste. “Are you going to church?”

Eden sighed and rolled her eyes, tugging the dress over her head and tossing it on the pile of rejected clothes on the floor. “At this point I’d be better off going naked.”

“Something I’m sure Dominic would not mind. How about the nude bandage dress?”

“You don’t think it’s too much?”

Jenna snorted. “Better than the granny dress.”

The bandage dress fit her like a second skin; it was unforgiving in displaying every unflattering flaw of a woman’s body, right down to the awkward stomach pooch. But luckily for Eden, it simply accentuated the litheness of her body, giving her curves where there was little. It made her ass look amazing. “So where’s he taking you.”

Eden was about to shrug but thought better of it as Jenna brought the curling iron to her hair. “I don’t know. He wanted it to be a surprise I guess.”

“He sure knows how to make a girl feel special, though.” She sighed wistfully, meeting Eden’s gaze in the mirror. “He’s trying really hard.”

“I know and that’s what makes this so confusing and frustrating. He wasn’t like this before—the wining and dining, and being kind and gentle—that’s not the Dominic I know.”

“Maybe that wasn’t the real him. Maybe he had reasons for being a prick. I don’t know what went on in your marriage, Eden, and I can’t speak for him because I don’t know him, but I think he’s trying to show you that he cares about you. People can change.”

“Not that quickly. I’m not trying to be a bitch. I just want to protect myself. You don’t know how easily he can hurt me.”

“I know, trust me, Eden, I know. But you can’t let fear of heartbreak keep you from something that might be really good. I’m not saying you have to proclaim your undying love, but maybe you both deserve another chance at this?”

What she said made sense. But saying things was far easier than actually carrying them out. Eden wasn’t ready to walk the talk, not by a long shot. “I don’t know, we’ll see.” It was all she could manage. Time

would tell. It had certainly healed over some wounds, but there were others that could not be so easily mended.

\* \* \*

She never ceased to take his breath away or make his cock stir, and it took incredible restraint to keep himself from hauling her back up to their bedroom to see exactly how much of that dress was painted on her Venus body. Dinner was at Dulce, Franklin's restaurant, and Eden found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on her meal with his smoldering gaze heating her skin. She might as well have been naked with the way he was eye fucking her.

"Stop it." she gritted through clenched teeth, staring at him pointedly across the dimly lit table.

"Stop what?"

"You're staring."

He angled a brow. "Am I?"

"You know you are, and I want you to stop."

When he ran the tip of his tongue across his full lower lip, Eden's pussy clenched reflexively, dampening her thong instantly. "Do you?"

"Dominic."

"Should I tell you what I'm thinking about?" he queried, his voice deep and dark and everything sinful, rousing Eden's passion. The wicked gleam in his hooded green eyes did not bode well for her at all.

"No," she said curtly. She didn't want to know. And she lied to herself so prettily.

His chuckle indicated that he knew it, too. She didn't even remember what she had for dinner or dessert, all that consumed Eden was Dominic's intrusive stare and how wet it made her.

“I wanted to spread you on that table, hike your dress up, slip between your panties, and have you for my dinner,” he murmured huskily in her ear before helping her inside the passenger seat.

It was mean of him to say that to her knowing she couldn't do anything about it. Frustration kept her silent and kept her legs clenched together, hating how embarrassingly wet she was. She fumed all the way up until the moment she saw where he'd taken her, and her anger burned away, the ashes blowing away like plumes of smoke against the dark night sky.

Eden instantly recognized the club, and as though plucked from her memories, it appeared utterly unchanged. She'd been nineteen the last time she'd come to Better Blues. Halting at the threshold, Eden stared at Dominic bemusedly as he held the door for her. She struggled to find words, but they failed her, so she simply shook her head and walked inside.

Everything was the same, from the lazily strung white Christmas lights adorning the low ceiling, to the distinct scent of pot laced patchouli that hung over the dense crowd. The seating was minimal, the prime real estate being the ten small tables with mismatched chairs at the center of the room, which were all occupied. But as luck would have it, a couple abandoned their seats in the far left corner of the room and they were close enough to nab it before anyone else could. Eden looked around her surroundings as memories flooded back.

For a good year of her life, this place had been her escape, her haven when she'd needed a break from life at home, school, and the constant worrying about money. Every Thursday, sitting in these worn, wooden chairs with the scent of patchouli laden in the air, open mic night had ushered in poets who'd shared a piece of themselves and singers who'd awaken the music in Eden. Until one evening she'd finally scrounged up the nerve to expose herself, expose her voice. It had been one the most

frightening and exhilarating experiences of her life, and when she'd finished, the thunderous applause had fed her soul. Singing had been fun back then, freeing, and it had been sheer bliss when her mother had attended. However rare her appearances had been, Eden had delighted in the short three minutes when her mother had heard her sing. She'd been Eden's biggest fan, hell, her *only* fan.

The regulars of Better Blues milled around the room, varying in looks and undoubtedly from all walks of life, but they all had one thing in common, they all came here to feast on beautifully laced words and drink lyrics that flowed from an endless tap. This was where Dominic took Eden, to this mecca of creativity that had been an integral part of her last year of true happiness, before everything had gone to shit. He should not have known this part of her. This intimate, private part of her that she'd never shared with anyone. And what's more was she hadn't realized how much she'd craved this until now. She wanted to turn and ask him questions, questions to answers that only he could provide, but words deserted her as the feminine voice from the makeshift stage had her turning instead. She was backed by only an acoustic guitar; she sang the blues like she was born to do it, with a breathy intonation that provoked goose bumps on Eden's skin. Shutting down all thoughts, Eden allowed herself to be swept away, and when the woman finally whispered the last heartrending lyric, stretching out the note so that everyone felt the word, Eden was sure that she cheered the loudest.

When she finally returned her attention to Dominic, it was to find his glimmering gaze focused on her, watching her intently and very likely garnering emotions that she could not hide from him. "Did you enjoy the performance?" he inquired, genuine interest coating hard bone features.

“Yes, it was good.” She wasn’t up for small talk, not when the questions from before returned with a vengeance, demanding answers from him.

“This...how do you know about this place? I’ve never told you.” They’d never progressed to that intimate part in their relationship.

“This is where I first saw you.”

Startled, Eden looked at him with a frown. That was the last thing she’d expected to hear from him. “What do you mean? I thought—”

“I saw you long before I knew you were involved with Lucas,” he said softly. “I had never wanted anything more than I wanted you that night. I dreamt about you, your voice singing to me about things I needed but did not want to understand. So I allowed my lust to blind me instead, and you consumed my thoughts, became an obsession. I did everything I could to get my hands on you.” There were more than a dozen people around them, the dissonance of their chatter and laughter should’ve impeded on this moment, but all Eden heard was the poignant timbre of Dominic’s voice, all she saw was the grimness of his green gaze as he anchored her gaze, refusing to let her look away. “I wanted to bring you back here because this is where I remembered you being the happiest. I have taken so much of it from you these last five years, that I wanted to return a little of it tonight. Seeing you happy is something that has become very important to me.”

Eden swallowed around the lump in her throat, the words that she wanted to say plummeting back into her stomach, which was just as well because she was sure they wouldn’t have made much sense anyway. A wave of female delight rippled through every inch of her body at his words. She knew they shouldn’t have affected her this much, but they did, burrowing into her racing heart and making a home there. Caught in the trance of his gaze, unable to formulate a concrete thought, she ran her tongue across her lower lip and marveled at how his eyes dilated at that one



simple action. For a man who had very little practice in romance, Dominic surely knew how to appeal to a woman's heart, and he made it so incredibly difficult for Eden to remain unmoved when he did and said things like this. "Thank you, Dominic," she said, reaching for his hands across the table, and though he seemed surprised by the gesture, he instantly interlaced their fingers, his larger hand engulfing hers. "This means a lot to me." More than you will probably ever know, she thought silently.

The remainder of the evening continued on in the same the note and though Eden knew this wasn't his scene, there was nothing in his mannerism that indicated his displeasure at being there with her. In fact, he appeared completely at ease as they listened to poetry and watched the performances. She found that she couldn't really keep her eyes off him; the rarely seen smile making frequent appearances throughout the evening was like the sun peeking out after a rainstorm, and his laughter, even more warming, roused a series of flutters in her stomach that had nothing to do with the cheap beer they were drinking. When they arrived home a few hours later, Eden was quick to identify that tumultuous thrum in her veins as anticipation. It had been building all night, slow and burning, arcing through her body in search of a proper outlet. Dominic. Her drug in Hugo Boss. In the privacy of her mind, Eden could shamelessly affirm that she was irrevocably addicted to him. She needed the dopamine inducing opiate of his kisses, and the total body orgasm of his touch. At the bottom of the staircase of this palatial home that had been both heaven and hell, he looked at her and she back at him, compelling him to close that gap between them and take her up to the master bedroom to satisfy her withdrawal. But he didn't move an inch, in fact the space between them only grew wider as he seemed miles away from here.

"Dominic?" she queried expectantly.

When he did finally close the gap between them, it wasn't to drag her frame to his and ravish her mouth as she'd hoped. He simply pressed a kiss to her cheek, his intoxicating scent invading her senses in the best way possible and turning her brain to mush. "Thank you for letting me share this evening with you, Eden." He was gone before she could register what just happened, leaving her physically and emotionally unsatisfied.

\* \* \*

It was not something he wanted, but it needed to be done in the hopes of salvaging what remained of their marriage. It didn't make the least bit of sense, at least not in the way some would perceive it, and if it had been years prior, months even, the idea, the very notion would have never crossed Dominic's mind, let alone bear contemplating. But now it was all that consumed his thoughts. Vacillating more times than he could count but nearly always returning to same conclusion. It did not need to make sense in order to be right. Freedom was what she craved, what she'd always wanted, and so freedom was what Dominic would provide. He peered down at the first page of the documents his attorney had left him nearly an hour ago and the curving scrawl of his signature on the bottom of the page. Legal and notarized. He'd never thought he'd find this day so dissatisfying.

He rose to his feet and expelled an exasperated breath, a deep contemplative crease settled between his dark brows while his mouth compressed into a grim line. He moved to the full length window of his office without really seeing, his mind too far away to admire the sprawling metropolis at his feet with its kaleidoscope of twinkling lights and the death of the sun splashed across the horizon. Everything in him rebelled at this decision and even his attorney had questioned him several times when Dominic had requested the divorce papers be finalized. But regardless of his misgivings, Dominic had scrawled his name before he could talk

himself out of it. He had been selfish for far too long. And as much as it pained him to let her go, Dominic wanted her happiness more than anything. This was a step in the right direction. There were things that needed to be done, steps he personally had to take if he hoped to find his way to back her again. And he would find her again.

“Mr. Armstrong?” a monotone voice inquired, drawing a reluctant Dominic from his thoughts. He gave a heaving sigh before turning around to finally acknowledge the woman seated primly on the aesthetically pleasing but wholly uncomfortable leather couch in the corner of his office. He regarded Naomi Stanford with an analytical stare, she came highly recommended, one of the best in her field, but not at all what Dominic had expected for a psychiatrist. She appeared quite young for one thing, pegging her somewhere in her late twenties. She was pretty in the prim and proper sort of way, blond with a pair of horned rimmed glasses poised on her button nose. She didn’t flinch away from his stare or react to the skepticism that he made no point in hiding. “Should we get started?” she asked after a time, placing her tablet on her lap and looking at him expectantly.

Dominic moved around to the front of his desk and leaned back against it. Crossing his legs at the ankles, he folded his arms and asked, “You’ve been seeing, Bruce?” He was clearly insinuating something, knowing fully that she was too much temptation for Bruce not to sample. If his best friend was fucking the prim Dr. Stanford then Dominic needed to know before he revealed anything to her that could inadvertently spill out during late night pillow talks. Despite his ongoing efforts to change, under no circumstances did Dominic want his past revealed to the philandering politician. Best friend or not.

“What exactly are you asking, Mr. Armstrong?”

“Have you slept with Bruce?”

The appalled look of indignation that swept over her pale features was answer enough for Dominic. "I think we're done here." She rose to her feet in a huff and stuffed her tablet in her bag before hastening toward the door.

"Come back, Dr. Stanford," he called, and she hesitated, "I apologize for my rudeness, please have a seat."

"Another comment like that and you can find yourself another psychiatrist," she bit out coolly.

"Of course," he assured, "should we start again?"

Once again settled, she held her tablet on her lap and regarded him. "Why don't we start with why you've requested to see me today." The note of anger in her voice couldn't easily be quelled, but she was anything if not a professional and well worth the two hundred dollar an hour she was being paid. "Anything significant in your life you wish to discuss?"

Dominic chuckled drily, returning to his chair he pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment in an effort to gather his thoughts. When he finally looked at her, it was with unfailing certainty that he said, "I want to be a better man."

\* \* \*

She searched him out, not really knowing she was doing it until she stood outside his office door. The handle gave beneath the downward push of her hand, and she entered without a second thought. Missing him had become a debilitating thing that lived inside her now, so Eden had convinced herself that if she only had one good look at him she could put the thing to rest and leave. She'd expected him to be alone, but the sight of his half-brother put an immediate halt to her progression. She'd walked in on something deep apparently, because the energy in the air was so palpable that it settled on her skin like mist. Dominic sat behind his desk; darkly handsome, hard boned features set in granite but seemed to soften slightly when his green

gaze flicked in her direction. The look was a minor one, barely discernable unless one was really looking, and it seemed Lucas had been doing just that as he turned to see what had brought on the sudden change in his brother. Lucas looked at her, but she only had eyes for his brother. Always his damnable brother, the proverbial pain in his ass. How did someone who should've had nothing end up with so much? Even the devotion of a woman who should've rightfully despised him? Eden should've been his to begin with, but Lucas had dulled the ache of losing her with good liquor, countless women, and a few good rounds at the poker tables. Through every bout of disappointment, he'd had his family's wealth to make him happy. But now it appeared that too was gone. All thanks to Dominic.

"You have no legal right to cut me off."

"Actually I do," Dominic retorted with infallible calm, leaning back in his chair to regard Lucas in that imperious way that made one feel like they were nothing beneath his gaze. "I have been named the trustee to your trust fund, and as I've said earlier, you are to meet certain requirements before I will consider relinquishing it back to you."

"Rehab," Lucas spat the word. "I'm not an alcoholic!" he roared, rising he swung his arm and everything on Dominic's desk came crashing to the ground, causing Eden to jump at the loud clatter.

Dominic stood. "It appears alcoholism is the least of your problems, Lucas."

"I didn't have a fucking problem until you came into my life!" he roared, and when he rounded the desk and invaded Dominic's personal space, Eden knew they would come to blows. She didn't know what good she was going to do, but she at least needed to try and diffuse the situation before it got completely out of hand.

"Dominic..." she called tentatively.

Dominic ignored her. “The problem with you is that you are an entitled, spoiled little boy too lazy to get off his mother’s teat and do something with your life.”

Lucas shoved at Dominic’s chest with enough force to have the other man stumbling backwards and when he grabbed the lapels of Dominic’s shirt bringing them face to face, he snarled, “Your goddamn cum bucket of a mother should’ve killed you the very second she found out about you. You’re nothing but a mistake, Dominic, no wonder why she wanted nothing to do with you.”

“Lucas!” Eden grabbed at his arm to try and pry him off, the words he’d just uttered more than hateful, provoked her protective instincts and she wanted to physically attack him for hurting Dominic this way. “Let him go!” she railed tugging for all she was worth on Lucas’s arm.

“Fuck off!” he jerked his arm back and shoved hard so that she went sailing, crashing first into the desk before falling to the floor from the impact. With her eyes closed from the pain, she didn’t see exactly what happened next but when she did reopen them, Dominic was pummeling at Lucas, fists crashing down connecting with the sickening crunch of bone hitting bone. Eden knew she wasn’t in a condition to move with her head spinning and her back screaming in protest, but she had to get Dominic to stop, otherwise he was going to kill his brother.

“No more...” She crawled to where he stood grounded and wrapped her arms around his leg because that was all her body would allow and held on. “Please...stop...” He did.

“Be very grateful for this day,” he grated, his laborious breath coming in short and fast. “Because the next time you come at me like this, you had better be ready to kill me yourself, Lucas.”

When Lucas finally stumbled out of Dominic's office, it was not only with a bloodied and battered face, but his bruised pride kept his head down. Eden didn't pay much attention to him, all that mattered to her was seeing to Dominic. She called for someone in the kitchen to bring up a towel and some ice which thankfully they weren't made to wait too long for. Seated in front of him on the carpeted floor, with her legs curled beneath her buttocks, Eden put a few cubes of ice in the towel and folded it tightly closed before gently applying it to his bruised knuckles. The adrenaline was wearing off now, but she was still shaken by the display of violence she'd witnessed.

Dominic watched her work almost too diligently on his wounds and knew he'd up screwed once again. He had known when he'd called Lucas over to notify him of his inevitable visit to rehab, that things would get out of hand, given Lucas's explosive temper, and the very real possibility of losing his trust. The situation had been volatile from the start. Which was why Dominic had endeavored to remain calm. A calm that abandoned him the very second Lucas made the mistake of shoving Eden. He'd lost it there for a second, admittedly. However inadvertent the shove may have been, Dominic had failed to see the difference. There'd been a haze of red and the undeniable need for violence. It had taken her touch and her voice to clear that haze and draw him back from the edge of the consuming violence that had felt too good to be right. He didn't like himself that way. Dominic didn't relish her seeing that violent side of him. But these were the demons he was attempting to exorcise.

"There's no bleeding," she whispered unevenly. "Just some bruising..."

Dominic peered down at her auburn head, her hair concealing her face from his view, but he could tell that she was visibly shaken, even if the tremors of her hands didn't give her away.

"Eden."

“I think we need more ice.” She didn’t meet his gaze when she came to her feet. Her legs felt like jelly beneath her she wavered, but his fast reflexes caught her before she could tumble back down.

With his hand at her hip, he interlaced their fingers together. “We don’t need more ice,” he murmured.

She blinked. “But your hands...”

“Will heal. I just...don’t leave.” The slightest tug brought her to his lap. He gently pried the towel of ice from her cold, damp hands and set it down on the edge of his desk, before drawing in a ragged sigh. “I’m sorry you had to see that.” His arm banded possessively around her waist, but he didn’t need to do much to keep her there because Eden wouldn’t have moved if he wanted her to. “I could have handled it better.”

Eden turned to look at him, staring into his stunning green eyes that had so much control over her, her heart especially. “You handled it exactly how you should have.” The tips of her fingers slid along his bristly cheek, caressing, delighting, and taking her absolute fill because she’d gone so long without. “He shouldn’t have said those things to you.”

“It’s nothing,” he murmured succinctly. But still waters did indeed run deep, he said very little yet having come to know him as well as she did, Eden found that there was so much more meaning beneath that flippant reply. Emotions that could not simply be verbalized. She felt him almost like they were her own, and it broke her heart that he had to convince himself that it was okay.

“I know,” she agreed, surprising them both by wrapping her arms around his torso and laying her head on his chest, his strong, steady heartbeats thudding beneath her ear. “I’m still sorry he said them.” She would bear this burden with him. Whatever emotion he wasn’t capable of displaying, Eden wanted to display them for him. “I’m sorry.”



Dominic's brows creased at the catch in her voice, "Hey," he tilted his head down to look at her but she hid her face against his chest, her warm tears dampening his shirt. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not," she sniffled.

A half smile upturned the corner of his mouth. "Then why your eyes sweating?" She snorted and Dominic's smile spread wider. He moved back slightly, enabling him a chance to cradle her cheek in one hand and swipe at her tears with his thumb.

"I just...I didn't like hearing him say those words to you."

She heard him take in a breath before releasing it slowly. "The words did not bother me. The fact that he touched you did. It bothered me a lot." That he would feel so moved to come to her defense when he'd been the one assaulted flooded her with overwhelming warmth. "Are you hurt?"

Eden sat up and sniffled again, chancing a look at him she said, "I just had the wind knocked out of me, but I'm fine now. Honestly, I wanted to jump on his back and scratch his eyes out when he shoved you." That brought a deep, rumbling chuckle that made her instantly giddy. "What's so funny?"

He shook his head, the remnants of his laughter in the ghost of his smile. "I'm just imagining what that would have looked like." Resting his forehead against hers for a moment, he took a deep breath and the scent of her shampoo filled his lungs. "I'm touched that you feel so protective of me."

"I'm..." Eden didn't know what was about to come out of her mouth, but she was sure it wasn't meant to be said as she was interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone. "You should probably get that," she said, swiping at her cheeks while hastening off his lap.

“Eden,” he called, but she was already by the door holding the dripping towel over the bowl of ice she had in her hand.

“I’m going to go check on Liam,” she floundered feebly, before taking her exit.

It shamed her to know that she’d used her child as an excuse to run away. But it’d been the first thing that popped in her mind. She’d panicked because she knew if the phone hadn’t rung she would’ve been prompted to say something that would’ve embarrassed her. Eden practically ran down the hall almost afraid that he would come after her and demand she finish what she had been about to say. Her heart was racing, and she was trembling but it was for a completely different reason now than the shock she’d received earlier. Taking a detour to the kitchen to drop off the items in her hands, Eden continued up to Jenna’s room and before entering she drew in a deep breath and released it slowly.

“Are you alright?” It didn’t help.

“I’m fine.” Eden smiled a little too brightly, resolved not to think any further on what she’d been about to inadvertently reveal to Dominic. Something she had not even admitted to herself yet. She took Liam into her arms and hugged the chubby boy close. “Any luck on those apartment searches?”

\* \* \*

Dressed casually for the day, Eden met Jenna downstairs with Liam. They had a few errands to run before they took him to the park later in the afternoon. Jenna had found a two-bedroom apartment that had looked incredible online, but Eden had wisely cautioned not to take it at face value, considering the amazing things people could do with Photoshop these days. In her experience, a two bedroom apartment was far better than a two bedroom split; it was all about careful wording when it came to hawking

property. Eden could even admit of doing it several times herself. They piled inside her car and commenced their day.

“I don’t know if I’m ready to do this, Ede.” Jenna said nervously as they stood in the front office of the community college.

Eden looked at her friend and smiled. “You’ll be fine, Jen. This is the first step in you owning that business. You need to get your GED and everything else will be a snap,” she quietly reassured, wrapping a hand around Jenna’s arm to move her out of the way of incoming students.

Jenna pursed her lips. “You say it like it’s so easy. I haven’t been to school in like ages. I dropped out when I was sixteen, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember, but I know it’s never too late for you to get your education. Besides, not only do you have this GED class to help you, but I’m here, too. I’m not going to let you give up so easily. I want to come to you for some business advice when I open up my own brokerage firm one day.”

She snorted and flipped her blond hair over shoulder. “Please, like you could afford me.” In saying that, she pushed Liam’s stroller forward, crying out slightly when Eden pinched her shoulder on her way inside.

The apartment, located on the fringes of Langston, but not quite in the suburbs wasn’t as bad as Eden expected. In fact, it met eight out of ten of her requirements and that was great considering she hadn’t hoped for much coming in. The floor plan resembled more of a duplex, with metal stairs winding up to the two bedrooms and bath upstairs, meanwhile the on the first floor the living room and kitchen existed in one large open space delineated by beautiful cheery wood flooring. The walls were newly painted a neutral beige that was meant to go with any sort of furniture and décor. There were four large windows in the living room that allowed plenty of sunlight, and the French door that opened to a small patio was a nice touch.

“So...what do you think?” Eden saw the expectation on her face as she finally turned to look at both Jenna and the property manager, who’d allowed them access to the apartment. “Gorgeous, right?”

The stairs presented a problem for Liam who was quickly showing signs that he was ready to crawl. But that was a problem they could easily fix with a stair gate and another one would need to be placed between the kitchen and the living room. The apartment was beautiful, ready to move in, and if they baby proofed, it would be a great place to live. “Definitely gorgeous,” she agreed with a smile. And the first and last month’s rent, and security deposit would put a dent in their pockets, but Eden had a good job now, granted it was based on commission, but it was commission she knew how to make. Jenna would move in first as they’d agreed, and Eden would join her when the divorce was finalized in a few months. They could make this work. “I think we should discuss this a little further before giving Steve our final answer, what do you think, Jen?”

Jenna nodded. “Of course. You don’t mind do you, Steve?” She smiled at full wattage and did the girly hair flip she excelled at. Steve didn’t stand a chance.

“I’ll wait for your call.”

“You didn’t like it?” Jenna asked once they were inside the car. “You won’t hurt my feelings, Ede, I can keep looking. We need to both love it.”

“No, it wasn’t that I didn’t love it. I think it has great potential. I was just thinking about baby proofing and...”

Jenna looked at her profile with a frown. “And...?”

“I’m just realizing that Liam isn’t going to get to be around Dominic that much anymore.” That very notion was a wound on her chest. “We’re going to have to work out visitations.”

“But it’s what you wanted.”

Was it? Was this what she still wanted? Eden didn’t know anymore. She was at a crossroad, facing that thing she’d convinced herself for so long would make her happy, while on the other side laid the uncertainty of a future she found herself wanting more and more with a man capable of taking her through every spectrum of human emotion and still have her needing more.

“Yeah,” she muttered without much conviction, “yeah it is.”

\* \* \*

Carver’s was only a distant memory now. More sweet than bitter but nevertheless a little sad. There would be no more skimpy outfits for her. Goodbye to reeking of alcohol and grease and icky customers who didn’t know how to keep their hands to themselves. Standing beneath the blistering hot sprays of the shower head, she watched as the dirt from her last night of work trickled from her skin and around the shower drain beneath her feet. However brief, Carver’s had been a big part of her life these last few months. It would be hypocritical of her to say she wasn’t going to miss it, the girls especially. But that part of her life was gone now. A brief chapter closing with another taking its place. She released a slight squeal of excitement. She started working at Archer Realty next week, and the very idea very nearly put her over the moon. Rinsing out the rest of her shampoo, she conditioned her hair, and exfoliated with a loofah before jumping out of the steaming shower.

She would’ve been a stupid woman had she allowed her pride to interfere with her decision in taking this job. Dominic’s interference may have gotten her through the door, but as he’d painstakingly pointed out to her, it was her own merits that had cinched the deal. This was a huge opportunity for her and Eden vowed to herself that she wasn’t going to

blow it, not this time. But then, her mind was quick in reminding her, she hadn't exactly blown it the last time. Waiting for the all too familiar feeling of animosity to overtake her, Eden was startled to find that she no longer held the same sort of resentment as she previously did. In fact, it seemed most of her antagonism towards him had ebbed considerably to the point where she could even find herself understanding why he did them.

Dominic did nothing without reason; every bit of his actions was motivated by something. And in this case, it appeared, she'd been that motivation. As he'd said, he'd done everything he could to have her. What woman could say that she wasn't flattered by that, even if his intentions had been less than admirable? The very idea that he'd known her long before he'd seen to interfere in her life and marry her did incredible things to her insides. *He* did incredible things to her insides. Things that Eden couldn't believe she was able to feel for him considering everything he'd put her through. But things have changed, and it wasn't only recently.

Thinking on it, she realized the changes in him had begun the moment she'd barged into his office and confronted him. It had started there and had only progressed for the better after he'd met Liam. There were all these new facets to him now that were so very appealing to her. She'd seen him at his most vulnerable when he'd opened up to her and allowed Eden to see him for what he was, allowed her to look into his horrible childhood and see how deep his emotional and physical scars ran. He'd been marred in the worse way possible, those adversities shaping him into this indomitable, hardnosed man who did not compromise when it came to his work ethics, but could so easily display his altruism when it came to those of lesser means. He went after what he wanted with an almost frightening zeal, eliminating all obstacles if need be. That was a trait that she both admired and feared, because there was no knowing his limits. But with all that,

Dominic's devotion to Liam was remarkable and Eden had never been happier to be proven wrong each and every time she had the privileged of seeing them together.

And then there was them. Never had something so wrong felt so right. Every melting touch, every soul searing kiss and every time he tattooed his name between her legs, Eden surrendered to him in the best way possible. He laid siege on the glass walls of her heart and chipped away at her doubts, her insecurities, and her fears until there was nothing left but her naked pumping organ, beating only for him. Each and every time she was with him now all Eden wanted to do was wrap her arms around him and tell him to never let go. Lust had burned away a long time ago and from its ashes flourished a love Eden had denied for far too long now. It hadn't come suddenly. It had been there for years, blanketed by the debris of their crumbling marriage, neglected, abandoned and desperately denied because despising him had been so much easier.

His money was the reason why she'd married him, but love had made her stay. She found herself missing him more and more, craving not only his touch, but his presence as well. He had a very wry, often times self-deprecating humor was incredibly endearing. Eden loved the warmth of his smile and how it softened his otherwise hard features, she loved the sound of his laughter and how it formed crinkles at the corner of his devastating green eyes. She enjoyed his company and loved that he took a genuine interest in everything she did. They'd started off so wrong, but now Dominic was attempting to right those wrongs, and it was impossible for Eden to continue denying him another chance at her heart when he seemed so determined to have it all now.

Releasing a long sigh, Eden unfastened the lid from her favorite lotion and applied a generous amount to her skin, paying extra care to elbows,

knees and the heels of her feet. A grimace touched her lips as she felt the bit of callous there and knew she needed to visit a nail salon as soon possible.

\* \* \*

“Come here, Liam, come to Daddy.”

Eden stopped short at the threshold of Liam’s nursery, a bottle of milk in hand, she silently watched father and son. Liam lay prone on his tummy, arms extended in front of him, legs intermittently kicking behind him, head raised in avid interest of what his father was doing. Dominic, for his part was on all fours, positioned just a few paces in front of Liam, a motley assortment of toys placed between them, more incentives for Liam to crawl. “Come on, Liam, come get your toy.” Dominic wiggled the stuffed monkey rattle and it appeared that was enticement enough to prompt Liam into action. There were squeals and excited coos as he used his chubby arms and belly to drag himself forward, his legs kicking excitedly behind. “That’s it, son, come to Daddy, come on.”

Eden’s grip on the bottle tightened as a beaming smile touched her lips. This sight alone was enough to obliterate her previous bad mood. She remained silent, unwilling to disturb such a pivotal moment. “Come get Mr. Monkey, Liam. You can do it.” And he did. It took him some time, stopping every now and then, but Dominic’s encouragement kept him moving until finally he reached his father who joyously scooped him up and threw him up in the air. “I knew you could do it, son.” Dominic held Liam up and stared at him, his pride so strong that Eden could feel it standing where she was.

“My heart drops every time you do that,” Eden said quietly, waiting until Dominic caught Liam in his arms before making her presence known. “You’re not working today?” He wasn’t in his usual business attire, but he was no less handsome in tailored Chinos and the checkered shirt that



brought out the green in his glimmering eyes. “I thought we would take Liam to the fall festival in town.”

Her amber eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected suggestion. “Sure,” she murmured, blinking owlishly at him. “That would be great.”

He was allowing personal greed to rule his decision; old habits that would undoubtedly take some time to change, but Dominic could not let her go. Not yet. He wanted a little more time with her. It was an inevitable end, but one that he would postpone for another few hours. Dominic wanted to give himself this last day before he unshackled her from his side.

They walked down Main Street, Dominic holding Liam while Eden walked beside them. “I love the fall,” she imparted with a smile. “It’s like nature’s perfect painting. The beautiful colors of the trees, the cool weather and there’s like this sense of comfort in it. It’s like coming home. You know?” She looked at him and flushed noting the imperceptible grin of his face. “I sound silly.”

He touched her arm to halt their progress. “Not silly,” he said firmly, “I love hearing you speak of the things you love. It allows me to see the world through your eyes, and there is nothing better for me than this.” His candor and the intent way he peered at her further heightened the color in Eden’s cheeks. She said nothing, but her heart managed to say enough when he interlaced their fingers.

“Tell me more,” he ordered gently, and she did with a secret smile as they continued their stroll.

The sign of fall was everywhere, but no more than at the heart of the Langston Fall Festival held at Langston Square. There were a multitude of tents with an array of games, food, and drinks to attract the milling crowd. Eden, Liam, and Dominic visited nearly every tent. They bought a small basket of apples after sampling fresh apple pies. Eden had her face painted

along with Liam's, a cat and a cute little puppy respectively. Dominic however declined. But he redeemed himself by winning them some stuffed animals, and by the time they returned home, it took Eden three trips to the car to retrieve all of the things Dominic had won.

"Have dinner with me." He captured her wrist before she could turn away and made the request.

"Ok." No was a word temporarily erased from Eden's vocabulary, at least when it came to him.

She found him out on the veranda later that night, a table set for two reminiscent of the evening he brought up the divorce contact. An odd feeling trickled down her spine making Eden suddenly uneasy. She ignored it, however, when his paralyzing gaze landed on her, and she forgot to breathe. Her heart skipped like a school girl in love and made a desert out of her mouth. He was brooding, and as she neared him, Eden could tell that something was upsetting him.

"You look lovely." His husky compliment made her feel beautiful even though she only wore a simple summer dress and sandals.

"Thank you," she said shyly, tucking her hair behind her ear. He pulled her chair out for her, and she shivered when he ghosted a kiss against her cheek, the scent of his cologne hitting her in the right the spot.

"Is everything alright?" she inquired over their first course, setting down her glass after taking a long sip of the port.

"Is Liam asleep?" he asked in lieu of answering.

"Yes, I came down as soon as I put him to sleep. Jenna has the baby monitor," Eden replied with a frown. "Are you okay, Dominic?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Taken aback by the coolness of his tone, Eden looked at him trying to find something in the flinty hardness of his gaze or why he suddenly

appeared so grim. “You look like you’re angry.” She licked her lips nervously. “Did I...did I do something to upset you?” She felt stupid for asking it, and even stupider when she realized exactly how much it suddenly mattered to know whether she’d upset him in any way. If it was her, then she wanted to fix it. If it was someone else, something else than she would fix that, too.

“No, you have done nothing to upset me.” His gaze softened and Eden was allowed to breathe. “I’m was just thinking.”

“About what?” she urged.

“Nothing in particular,” he replied evasively. “Have you found a suitable apartment yet?”

The question stopped Eden’s heartbeat as cold sweat thickened across every inch of her skin. She blinked owlishly at him, like she just got caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to. “Am I being followed again?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. “Hate me on this all you want, but as I have said, I will not compromise when it comes to your safety.”

“I don’t hate you.” I’m more than likely in love with you. That last bit she kept to herself though she felt the burn of those words on her tongue. “I was going to tell you about it. I was just afraid of how you would react.”

He angled a brow. “And how exactly is that?”

“Like this,” she murmured, “cold and distant. I wasn’t planning on moving any time soon.” She attempted soothingly. “I just thought that...”

“You should have somewhere to go when our contract is over,” he finished for her. “I’ve always admired that about you, Eden. This very thorough ability you have to plan ahead. It’s a trait that will take you very far.” It was hard for Eden discern whether he was being sincere or was insulting her in that roundabout way he used to.

She couldn't remember the rest of dinner, but she knew it tasted like ashes, and she guzzled down the port to wash it away, only to realize a short time later that the taste in her mouth had nothing at all to do with the venison. When he asked her to follow him inside, she felt like an inmate on death row who'd just been given her last meal and now faced capital punishment. Their trek was a short and silent one, and when they entered his office she watched him walk around his desk to retrieve something from the locked drawers.

"I've been battling with myself for weeks about this," he waved the folded piece of paper in his hand as he approached her but did not come any closer, "even now, I'm not sure I want to give it to you. But it's the only way I know to show you that I'm trying to change."

Dread poured ice water in her veins and while anxiousness pushed her heart into a full gallop. She tried swallowing around the constriction in her throat, but even that proved difficult. "What it is?" She was too afraid to ask and even more afraid to hear the answer.

"The divorce document, signed, sealed and reluctantly delivered," he quipped without much humor, extending the document to her. It took Eden a short eternity before reaching for it with trembling fingers. She unfolded it and looked down without really seeing much of anything, except his signature at the bottom of the page and the seal that made it official. "You don't have to worry about the contract. Everything we have agreed on will be upheld. I have transferred everything I took from you back into your possession."

"Dominic—"

He held up a hand. "Please, let me get this out before I lose my nerve," he beseeched in a low voice, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. "In the five years that we've been married, I have not been a good

husband to you. Hurting you as I have, disappointing you to this degree, has been my greatest failing as a man, and for that I am deeply regretful. You deserve better than me, undoubtedly. There are far better men out there who are free to love you in the way that you need. And I know when you walk out that door you will live and thrive and laugh and smile because that is the sort of person you are. And however much I want that for you, I can honestly say that everything will stop for me.”

Blood rushed between her ears and Eden knew she wasn't breathing as he closed the space between them and tenderly cupped the side of her face. She saw only him and the glimmering intensity in his green gaze. “I don't know what love is, Eden, but if I did, I know it would not come close to how deeply I feel for you. This thing, this feeling I have is unconventional. It's emotion right down to its most basic element, and it rules me, it controls every aspect of my life until all I can see, all I can taste, all I can feel is you,” he breathed huskily. Taking hold of her hand, he placed it on his chest, right over his beating heart. “You've given my heart its rhythm and it beats only because of you. I come to you in fractured pieces with the hope that you will have the patience to help put me back together again.” He made himself emotionally naked to her, finally permitting Eden to see him, see the rawness of emotions he felt for her, see how deeply it ran and how fiercely it burned. “I am not worthy of you, but how can I live when you hold my heart in your hands, Eden?”

Tears gathered in her eyes as she attempted to gain control of her own emotions, but Eden was altogether overcome with awe and exhilaration when she gazed into the very depths of his eyes and saw his soul. “I...” she drew in a shuddering breath and tried again, “I'm...” words...words were not enough to express what she felt, so Eden rose up on her toes and sealed her mouth to his, needing to speak in lips and tongue everything she could

not say. She spoke and he listened in a kiss that rocked the ground beneath their feet. Their tongues tangled in hot, frenzied carnality, shattering all reservations, crumbling all of Eden's barriers. And in a state of absolute madness to feel him, to have him, to claim him and jump into his skin if need be, Eden frantically pulled at his shirt and pants. Buttons were sacrificed; the very loud tearing of clothes splintered through the breath laden silence as he too blindly tore at her clothes, drove her back and scooped her up on his desk. She reclined backwards, her torn dress hanging haphazardly at her sides as she slowly propped herself on her elbows in offering Dominic a banquet of sumptuous breasts with nipples puckered to delightful peaks, the macchiato river of her flat belly led to the bare ocean of her salted caramel pussy. His mouth watered but the desire to sink into her won out as he fell upon her, wrapping his arms around her parted legs to yank her towards him until her bottom hung off the edge of the desk and without a second's hesitation Dominic slid and sunk in deep swallowing her sweet feminine gasp.

She was full of him, yet not satiated, but it was problem easily rectified as his long, even thrusts slammed into her with delicious accuracy, jarring every nerve ending in her body. He set a punishing speed that she fought desperately to match, her legs dangling at his sides as he drove hard and fast into her hot melting passage. She was the ebb and he the flow, her gasping whimpers harmonizing with his grunts and groans. He toyed with her clit, a very slow and deliberate brush of fingers that brought the world shattering down on her. He flooded her with his own release muffling his groan between her breasts.

How was he able to shatter her so completely and put her back together again? Eden breathed in deep, and with her head on his chest, she listened to the steady beats of his heart. They were on the carpeted floor now and

her body covered his like a blanket while his arm curved around her waist. They said nothing. Eden bit her lip, remembering the forgotten divorce paper that he'd handed her a while ago. He'd finally given her what she'd asked for, but it appeared it was no longer what she wanted.

"Stay," he murmured huskily above her, almost reading her thoughts. When he shuffled beneath her, moving forward to bring Eden up to a sitting position, he curved fingers beneath her chin so that she looked into his green eyes that had darkened considerably. "I love you more than words can ever begin to define. I know I have no right to ask, but I'm asking you to please stay with me, Eden." He leaned his forehead against hers and whispered a kiss on her quivering lips.

Tears filled her eyes and leaked down her cheeks from beneath her shuttered lids, overwhelmed beyond words. Eden had never once believed that she would ever hear these words from Dominic's beautiful mouth. All that had been endured for this one moment of complete perfection.

"Stay..."

That decision had been made for her a very long time ago, maybe even before she'd been ready to admit to it.

## Epilogue

“Is that the last of the boxes?”

“Just this one left.” Eden replied handing Jenna the box marked ‘Liam’s Toys’. She grabbed the duffel bag from the back seat of her car and hurried after the blond haired woman.

“I’m so glad we’re done. I hate moving.”

“Me too, but just think, now we get to decorate!” she said cheerfully, toeing the door closed behind her, and depositing the duffel bag on the lone futon in the living room.

Jenna groaned, “I’m leaving all that up to you. Do you want something to drink?”

“Just a bottle of water.” Walking around the partially furnished apartment, ideas flitted around in Eden’s head. She wasn’t exactly interior decorating inclined, but she’d staged a few homes in the past to know what would work, and besides that, she and Jenna had similar taste when it came to décor. “Are you sure it’s okay to have Liam’s toys here?” she asked, accepting the bottle of water from Jenna.

Jenna rolled her eyes. “For the umpteenth time, its fine! It’s not like I have a roommate who’s going to mind anyways,” she teased, giving Eden a sidelong stare.

Eden had the good grace to look sheepish. “I’m really sorry, Jen.”

Jenna laughed. “I’m just kidding. I hold no grudge whatsoever. I’m just glad you finally made up your mind. So you’re really staying?”

Eden nodded. “We owe it to ourselves to see where it goes.”

“So did you get the divorce?”



“Yeah...I’m a single woman dating my husband,” she quipped, “He’s been really good.” That was an understatement and color tinted her cheeks at the thought.

“I can see the love all over your face, skank,” Jenna tsked. “You are so far gone, you’re oozing it.”

Eden had to agree. She’d fallen quite hard for Dominic, and there really was no cure for what she had. She had yet to say those three little words to him, but he hadn’t pushed and that made Eden love him all the more for it. “Yeah,” she said simply, refusing to say anymore. She would save the words for tonight, for him. He would hear them first.

“What time are you dropping off the butterball?”

“Probably around eight. Now, let’s get out of here. We need to grab you some stuff before tonight.”

\* \* \*

Tonight they were dining in. The rest of the mansion was quiet, empty except for the two occupants seated on the marbled kitchen floor. The only source of light in the otherwise dark room came from the open refrigerator to their left. They faced each other with legs intertwined and there was nothing in between a giggling Eden and Dominic but skin and more laughter.

“You cheated.” Eden accused with a pout, which Dominic could not seem to refuse as he leaned in to taste the sweet strawberry on her breath.

“I don’t cheat,” he refuted after a beat, swiping the tip of his tongue erotically across her bottom lip. “I just don’t play fair.” Taking a plump red strawberry from the bowl of fruits at their side, he brought it to her mouth. “Say ah,” he ordered raggedly, and she obliged without hesitation. “Bite.” Another command she carried out eagerly, her supple lips wrapping around the ripe red berry instantly had Dominic thinking of her sweet little pussy

and his cock pulsed between them. With a groan he went in for another kiss, plunging his tongue deep within her honeyed mouth to chase down the strawberry and take in her addictive sweetness.

“Dom,” she called breathlessly, laying gentle hands against his bristly cheeks, she pressed a kiss where her thumb skated against his mouth. “I’m so in love with you...” she whispered, so quietly like it was a secret from her soul.

Everything stopped for a second and Dominic’s thudding heart lurched in his chest, while he stared at her bemusedly questioning whether he’d heard correctly.

“I love you,” she said again with love soaked amber eyes and a smile that was the sun itself gracing her lips. “I was so afraid to say it before. I was so sure that I wanted to be free from you, but I’ve realized that freedom is loving you. You are exactly where I want to be, Dominic.”

Overcome. That was the closest thing that could best describe the intense feeling that swept through Dominic in that instant. Her words were the breath of life to his shriveled heart, manna to his starving soul and Dominic intemperately consumed them, gorged himself until he was replete. Finally loved. Finally wanted. A monster no longer. “I am going to spend the rest of my life being worthy of this love you’ve given me, Eden,” he vowed sealing the promise with an all-consuming kiss.

-THE END-

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—SNEAK PEEK AT MY NEXT STORY—

Until It Hurts

“We’re all mad here.”

— Lewis Carroll

Carver

I love going down on a woman. Eating pussy is an art form that I’ve mastered since Minnie Rodgers in middle school. It’s not a means to an end but a delicious buildup to an explosive evening. Now don’t get me wrong, I do enjoy doing it for whatever girl I end up taking home, but my intentions aren’t completely selfless. Deep sea diving, I’ve come to learn, always ensures the best sex of the evening. My current buffet was a blue eyed, buxom blond with a huge rack and legs for days, which she currently had wrapped around my head.

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod....Carver...I’m gonna...I’m gonna...”

Yeah, she’s going to come, but I want it on my dick so I maneuver out of the neck lock, grab her by the waist to turn her around, and I’m eight inches deep, feeling her tight wet pussy like the sweetest vise. “Harder... Carver...hit it harder...” Who am I to deny her this request? I wrap her hair around my hand to gain better leverage and repeatedly ram into her. She’s a screamer, its irritating as all fuck, but I’m not about to pull out because she can’t keep it down. Rectifying the situation quickly enough, I shove her head down on to the mattress to stifle her screams. Her release is like lava on my dick and with two more pumps I’m filling the condom.

“God, that was un-fucking-believable,” she sighs “I can never get over how amazing it is with you.” Her fingers glide over my sweat slicked skin. “You picked me again tonight,” she says with something akin to smugness

tinging her voice, and I suddenly want her to leave. I achieved what I wanted for the night, and she knew I wasn't much for pillow talk.

"You're a good time, Michelle." It was the gentlemanly thing, to know the name of the girl you were currently fucking. Sometimes getting the name and the face was a challenge, but I've overcome a lot of challenges in my life.

The dance of her fingers suddenly stops and she gives me this look from dark brown eyes that instantly sets me on guard, and the need for her to leave becomes a monkey on my back. "I think I'm more than that, Carver," she says quietly, but then her eyes shift down, and she starts the dance again, long fingers down the length of my left arm, tracing the tattoos there. "You should take me to get one of these."

"Alright, I think it's time to say goodnight." I'm off the bed like a rocket. Shit's getting too fucking weird for me. This is what I get for double dipping. Fucking the same girl more than once is never a good idea. I made up that rule a long time ago but because she's been one of the best lays in a long time, I've broken it a few times already. Well, this is the last time. On to the next one.

"What's wrong? Did I do something?" She's all doe-brown eyes and pouting pink mouth, and if I didn't see the weird glint in her eyes a second ago, I would've been inclined for another round, but at this point I'm not even sure I can get my dick up.

"I'll call you." *Not fucking likely.* "Close the door on your way out," I say as I head for the shower. Cold but it gets the point across.

\* \* \*

Michelle

I'm there for a long while after he leaves. He just turned on the shower so I know I have time. I fall back against the mattress and wrap the sheets

around me. His pillow emanates his scent and my nostrils drink until I can taste him on my tongue. Carver Reston. My love. My King. My reason for being. The very personification of masculine beauty. Michelangelo couldn't have done any better. And the tattoos. God, the tattoos just add to the masterpiece that is him. The very moment I laid eyes on him a year ago in his bar, I knew he belonged to me. Like the clouds belonged to the sky and the soil to the earth, he was for me. The very first time I spent in his arms was unlike anything I've ever experienced in my life; it wasn't just sex, we came together, we were as close as any two human beings could be, and I've made it a point since then to make him mine. It hasn't been easy. *He* hasn't made it easy. It hurts me so much when he flirts and takes home those skanks that hang around his bar, but I've learned to be patient. They're nothing compared to what he and I have. And we're going to have more. He just needs a little time...a little convincing.

It almost kills me to get out of his bed, but I know he'll be upset if he finds me here when he gets out of the shower. I slip into my jeans, doing a little hop to get them over my hips and put on my bra. By the time the shower shuts off I have my shirt buttoned and my bag in hand. My latest mementos are his black on black Movado watch and the condom he'd flicked into the waste basket. I want to see him wet and naked from the shower, but I won't risk it so I slip out the front entrance before he enters his bedroom, my imagination will be a poor substitute.

***-Sneak peek at Author Kimber S. Dawn follow up Novel-***

Holding Her In Madness:

The Leo Phillips Story

By Kimber S. Dawn

## Prologue

*Or some pussy-ass way of writing a damn letter to the ones who have read AWGM*

What's up? How the fuck are you doin'? I know. Probably worlds better than I am right now. Look, all right? I'll fucking tell you like I told her. It ain't gonna fix a fuckin' thing, but I'll say it...

I fucked up, okay? I fucked up and I know... I know I did. I let my little firecracker down so many Goddamn times.

*Fuck!*

I know I don't fucking deserve her, but I'll be Goddamned if I leave her again, and I'll be even more fucking damned if I let what I deserve or don't deserve in life keep me away from her. Period.

I told her that everything I touch, I fuck it up. Why the hell do you think I ran from her little ass all those years ago? I was trying to shut her out before she got under my skin. But I couldn't. She wouldn't let me keep treating her like an irritating gnat.

Shit, I even told April I thought she was a narc. Damn, that was lifetimes ago... I'd give anything to go back and keep shit from falling apart. I would tell her dad to fuck off, just grab her up, and fucking run.

I never should have let her out of my car that night when we were kids. I could have protected her from fucking everything. From all of it...  
*Fuck!*

I'd ask where I went wrong, begging for an answer that would soothe this fucking terrible ache, this guilt that I've carried for decades. Even though I don't deserve a break from my pain.

As for you, I know you think you know Lil, now that you've read her story and walked in her shoes through this fucked-up life of hers. But until you hold a woman like Lil, until you stare into her drunken eyes, heavy from ecstasy while your balls deep inside of heaven, inside this woman that is so fucking unlike anyone else on this Goddamn earth...

Until you hold her shuddering body as her tears soak your shirt while she cries out for something even she doesn't understand, just so long as it takes away her pain... Until you've been where I've been with Lil, you don't truly know her.

Not like I fucking do.

That fateful May night, I felt the dread in my bones. It really started that morning, another of my countless mistakes, I ignored the hair-raising sense of dread that hit me that morning. I was supposed to be on my way to Atlanta for some stupid fucking merger meeting between my company's marketing department and another new upcoming marketing company.

I was hauling fucking ass from one terminal to another, trying like hell to catch my connecting flight from Houston to Atlanta, when it hit me like a motherfucking brick across the face. I stopped right where the fuck I was, assholes crashing into me from behind, cussing at me.

I took my ass to the nearest fucking ticket counter and asked for the next flight to get me back home. Shit, I'd been gone for almost three months straight. I hadn't seen Lil in over six months—that she knew of. I'd still kept an eye on her. I just couldn't fucking explain what the hell my eyes were seeing. She was so far gone, I couldn't see a single thing in my wife that resembled the woman I had fallen in love with over twenty years ago. The woman I'd waited all my life for was truly and irrevocably fucking gone.

Do you know what it's like as a fucking man to have to look at your wife and watch her all over these cheesy fuckers, drunk and high out of her goddamn mind, so fucking lost she's beyond ever being found?

Oh, I knew what the fuck she was doing. I knew about the drugs and *ALL* the men. But I was such a fucking coward! I just walked away like I had all the other times. I told myself that at least she was happy; at least they made her smile. For more than a year after my boy died, I could only get her to look at me or speak to me when we were in the throes of passion.

I was a pussy, that's what I was. I just wanted her to be happy, and she was only ever happy when I wasn't home. Every time she looked me,

all she really saw was what could have been had our son lived. With me or my presence came memories of what should have been. And if there is one thing Lil and I have, it is a fucking world full of what-should-have-beens. And there isn't a fucking thing in this world worse than what should have been.

When the plane finally touched down, I drove like a motherfucking bat outta hell to get home. Only, she wasn't at home... Shit! She was never home. I couldn't find her at any of her normal hangouts. I hit every bar and lounge up and down Common and Market Streets.

I called every Goddamn five-star hotel within a hundred-mile radius and still couldn't find her.

That's when I got scared. I was sure that I was too late. I hadn't been there when she'd needed me. I knew she'd finally done it. She'd taken her life and killed the love of mine... She'd killed my firecracker.

As far as I was concerned, I'd fucked up and all but handed her whatever drug or weapon she'd needed to get the job done. When she finally, really needed me, I'd been off being a pussy because I didn't know how to take care of my own wife. I didn't know how to bring her from the darkness and depth of misery she fed off.

Instead of manning the fuck up and grabbing Lil's demons by their throats, killing them one by one, snuffing out every single one of those bitches fucking with her head, I'd stood aside, waiting for her to come back to me, waiting for her to need me enough to come back.

Fucking thank *FUCK* my cell rang! I knew it was her. Even though she didn't say a word, I knew it was my firecracker. I knew I wasn't too late. I knew it was her calling me for help, calling because she finally needed me.

I will thank God every night of my life for that call... 'Cause I had a motherfucking number.

In only twenty minutes, that abundant victory immediately gutted me, leaving in its wake nothing but bleak desolation.

Shit, y'all were there. You know what the fuck I saw when I walked in the bathroom of her hotel suite.



Her beautiful head was lulled back. Fuck, I'll *never* forget that shit. It's imprinted in my brain, etched across my skull. It's seared into the back of my eyelids.

She had a blood clot smeared from behind her ear, stringing like a fuckin' spider web to her shoulder. Her skin was as pale as a full moon, not a fucking trace of my firecracker, not a trace of that beautiful tan skin of hers that I loved. Lying there in a pool of bloody water was the woman I fuckin' swore I'd never leave. How many times had I fuckin' promised her?

Too many fuckin' times. And I swear, I swear, I was there.

It just wasn't enough. I wasn't enough. I'd never be enough.

After the docs got her physically well enough to be moved to the psychiatric unit, she was admitted to The Center. I knew then that my fate, my happiness, my fucking LIFE depended on being strong enough for her. Everything in our Goddamned life depended on me stepping up and doing any and every damn thing I could to save my firecracker, be there for her, and make fucking sure she knew I was there and that I wasn't going anywhere.

And I did.

I made fucking sure I was enough. I killed all those fuckin' bitches in her head. I went through hell for my fuckin' firecracker and brought her back to life.

And now, even if I have to stay here in Hell for the rest of my life in order to keep her out, that's what the fuck I'll do. As a man, sometimes you have to do what the fuck you have to do.

When you've been where I've been, seen the shit I've seen, and been shredded as many times as I have, there is no other option. Even if it means your life is hell. Even if it means from this point on, you are the one who carries all the weight and burden.

You fuckin' do it because you love a woman, the only woman in this whole damn world. You do it because she's your soul mate. And without her, *YOU* would rather be fucking dead.

## *Note from the Author*

Thank you for taking this journey with me. I hope you've enjoyed Dominic and Eden's story. Please leave a review. Thank you.

*Contact Me*

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# *Other Novels by Francette Phal*

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