



EVIL



love

HE WAS MY FAVORITE  
TYPE OF NIGHTMARE.

ELLA FIELDS



love

ELLA FIELDS

*Evil Love*  
Copyright © 2020 by Ella Fields

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, copied, resold or distributed in any form, or by any electronic or mechanical means, without permission in writing from the author, except for brief quotations within a review.

This book is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

**Editor:** Jenny Sims, Editing4Indies

**Proofreading:** Allison Riley

**Formatting:** Stacey Blake, Champagne Book Design

**Cover design:** Sarah Hansen, Okay Creations

# CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE

COPYRIGHT

DEDICATION

EPIGRAPH

PROLOGUE

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

FIVE

SIX

SEVEN

EIGHT

NINE

TEN

ELEVEN

TWELVE

THIRTEEN

FOURTEEN

FIFTEEN

SIXTEEN

SEVENTEEN

EIGHTEEN

NINETEEN

TWENTY

TWENTY-ONE

TWENTY-TWO

TWENTY-THREE

TWENTY-FOUR

EPILOGUE

MORE NEW ADULT TITLES

STAY IN TOUCH!

ALSO BY ELLA FIELDS

For those who are still trying to find the balance between night and day.

Darling sin,  
why is it, my dear  
that I can love you this much  
when you bring me to tears

# PROLOGUE

## *Jude*

*Seventeen years old*

The island exhaled, blowing smoky tendrils of breath along the cobblestone streets in the market district. It was a beast, and we, its occupants, were the prey.

The mist swirled and eddied as my boots cut silently across the street.

Tucked within the shadows, I waited. A minute or two passed, and then my phone vibrated. Peering into the growing night, I fished it from my jacket pocket.

**Marnie:** Tell me again why you can't come over?

I was about to put my phone away when another text came through.

**Marnie:** I'll do that thing you like with my tongue while you do that thing I like with yours.

A series of suggestive emojis was tacked on the end.

I was hard in a flash, the dull throb taking its time to dissipate after I shoved my phone away and gazed back out at the street.

Marnie and I had been dating since what felt like the dawn of time. Though really, it had been since we'd both left middle school behind and had journeyed into our bodies and high school together. We'd had a lot of fun in figuring them out. So much so, that I couldn't remember the last time I'd looked at anyone else.

Her father, an expert in criminal law, was kept on a tight retainer by Nightingale and had been an acquaintance ever since we'd moved here when I was a kid. That is, until they'd sent Ivan to London. I wasn't sure if he and my dad still stayed in touch, and I didn't much care.

We could have our own playdates now, and we made sure we had many.

Marnie's mother remained, sipping martinis at The Ribbon and maxing out Ivan's credit card in the high-end stores of the market district and sleeping with boys who weren't much older than her daughter. I doubted Ivan cared, for he hardly returned to the island, and he was not the type of man to go without a female companion for long.

Some years ago, my father had been ready and waiting to rule the London chapter, and from what I remembered, he took great pleasure in knowing his future. But we'd been summoned here when I was eight, and ever since, he'd only grown more distant.

As if he'd never wanted to be placed on Peridot Island at all, let alone rule it.

There was no election, no way to see us or my father coming. Hildebrandt had died in a boating accident with his only heir, leaving behind a mayor-less island and an empty throne.

My younger brother and my mother had struggled with the transition, and my mother never quite smiled the way I remembered her smiling before.

Though I wasn't sure if it was the transition so much as it was all the ways in which my father had changed since stepping foot upon the ancient, haunted large expanse of land surrounded by pristine sea.

I'd been too young, too absorbed in video games and my books to give a flying shit what we or my father did.

That was then.

Footsteps sounded, sure and swift, upon the damp street.

A puddle of dull light illuminated the dark but not enough to be certain of who it was approaching.

It was the dead of night, though, and the market quarter was vacant. As it should have been.

The only sound to be heard came from the whispering roar of the sea.

I steeled my shoulders, felt my spine lock and stiffen, and hardened my stampeding heart.

Reaching behind me, I pulled the mask from the back of my jeans. Its scales were cool beneath the iron grip of my fingers.

I refused to look at it. I already knew what it looked like, had memorized the glimpse I'd caught of my father's mask some years ago.

All initiates wore them during their tasks and on some rare occasions, even afterward.

We all did this.

I could do this.

*I had to.*

Everyone had to, and I was sure as fuck not going to ask for special treatment. I wouldn't be given it, no matter who my father was.

I was no different.

*Stop thinking and go,* I inwardly screamed at myself.

Removing the knife from my jacket pocket, I pulled on the provided mask and leaped out from the shadowed alcove.

A scream sliced through the damp air, through the racing organ in my chest, but it didn't slow my hands as I shoved the woman's companion to the ground and stabbed him in the side of the arm.

I jumped over him, his thrashing limbs stilling as the blade remained embedded in his forearm. With my teeth gritting so hard I swore I chipped a molar, I removed it, felt the sickening slide of metal through flesh, and plunged it where I'd been instructed.

Right through the center of his palm.

The word was growled, my head bent low to his ear to whisper as he cried out beneath me, "*Becuman.*" My hand clenched to twist the knife through his tendons, but he screamed like a stuck pig.

The woman joined in. She screamed and screamed beside me, rousing the sleepy crows and gulls from rooftops, their wings pounding above our heads into the star-painted sky.

"Jude," the woman said, and then I was the one to go still. So still that when I pulled back, I saw the man's eyes, wet with pain and horror, rattle with recognition.

The woman shoved me, and I shrugged her off. I knocked her away even as every instinct, as my fucking heart howled in protest to do the opposite. "Jude? Oh my fucking god, *Jude.*"

She sang my name repeatedly, a pain-soaked whine that slithered inside my ears, softened and burned my heart, and reduced it to black ash.

How she'd known it was me, unless she'd known more about Nightingale than she'd ever let on, wasn't something I had the time to figure out.

Pulling the knife from Park's hand, I stood on trembling legs and wobbled back a few steps toward the ever-awaiting shadows.

She was leaning over him now, covered in blood, choking on her tears, her hands pressing at his wounds.

I felt my head twitch, felt ice encrust every cell in my body, as the darkness enveloped me like a fresh layer of suffocating skin.

Turning away to dial the number I needed to, I slid the bloodied knife into the sleeve of my jacket. I'd reached the end of the alleyway when Park yelled, "Help! Jude, please." I froze at the urgency in his voice. "I'm begging you, come—*oh, fuck.*"

Something skittered up my neck, something that made me race back to find the woman almost convulsing on the cobblestones beside Park, who was struggling to sit up and reach for her.

"Jude," he wheezed. "If it's you, please," he said, coughing, "help."

I stepped back out onto the street. Muted light battled the dark and failed while I fumbled with my phone and stumbled through my empty brain for the emergency number.

Not entirely sure I was breathing, I stabbed it in and rambled off the address as soon as the receiver's voice came through.

"Sir, can you tell us what condition the woman is in..." She kept on fucking pressing.

Moving closer, I stared at said woman's shaking form, my heart collapsing, my hand slackening. Rage colored my vision, dotting it with red. "Just fucking come already."

Then I hung up and dialed my dad.

He inhaled, loud, and held it. "The paramedics aren't coming. Get to the warehouse."

The woman gazed up at me with wide eyes, her hands slick with blood, saliva trailing from her mouth.

*No...* I shouldn't have called them. I wasn't thinking. But we couldn't just leave her.

"Then you need to get over here," I said, glancing around the fogged street at the half-shrouded businesses; a shoe store, dry cleaner, and butcher. My eyes held firm on the swaying wooden sign.

*Butcher.*

"We both know I cannot do that."

"Then send someone else." My teeth chattered. I ground them together. "Now."



I stormed into the warehouse, my hands, my entire body, wracked with shaking fury. “You fucking cunts.”

The mask was too tight on my face. I yanked it off, uncaring of the snap of thick elastic at my ear, and tore around crates and boxes loaded with nothing. Fluorescent lights flickered outside the office, the door already open.

January tilted her head, her arms crossed over her white blouse. “Such vulgarity will get you nowhere, Jude.”

I barged into the room. The tattoo artist was there, drinking coffee as he prepared his supplies beneath the bright haze of a lone industrial lamp. “Where is he?” I growled. My eyes were so dry that it hurt to blink. I spun back when the sound of my father’s loafers echoed through the warehouse.

“You left the door open,” he said, toneless.

“I left the...” I gave my head a vicious shake. “What the *fuck*? Did you not—”

“Jude.” He swallowed, throat bobbing. Otherwise, he appeared wholly unaffected.

I knew, though. I knew that façade of his, as well as all that surrounded us, was a carefully veiled lie.

January, my father’s second, owner of The Ribbon, one of two luxury hotels on the island, the distillery, and the brothel masquerading as a men’s shed by the docks, said primly, “You were warned of the cost of initiation.”

Time and time again, especially over the past twelve months.

Every day for the past year, the words had been practically tattooed onto my back whenever I’d left a room—exactly where the bearded guy readying his tattoo gun in the corner of the dank warehouse office would tattoo me.

*Supreme benefits at supreme costs.*

“Dad,” I said, the word croaked. I didn’t care.

I hadn’t done it. I’d destroyed something, I knew that much, but I hadn’t destroyed the infamous painter’s hand as I’d been instructed.

He stepped forward, clapping a hand upon my shoulder, and looked beyond me to the insignia on the wall. The very same one that was about to be forever etched into my skin. “White cannot exist without black, and all that is gray must follow the fucking rules.”

The sound of gloves snapping over skin cracked through my skull, and then I was shoved onto the awaiting stool.

# ONE

## *Fern*

“You should totally keep reading,” Cory said with a dramatic groan, fanning her face with her book. “I’m telling you, it’s worth it for this scene.”

I capped my nail polish and glimpsed the cover of her book again. “I just skipped to that part and yeah”—I blew on my nails—“hot.”

Cory made a sound of outrage, but I threw my hand up before she could talk. “You hear that?”

Her brows knitted. “Hear what?” Then her eyes popped at the sound of a shout. “Is that Marnie?”

I scrambled off the bed and dumped my emerald nail polish onto my desk, hurrying to the sliding glass doors.

They were fighting. Again. I was sure of it.

“It’s happening.” Glee filled my voice, my heart. “This is not a drill.”

Cory laughed. “We’ve never done a drill for this.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Okay, then.” Coraline’s book smacked closed. “They’re always fighting lately, so whatever. I need to get back.”

Coraline Ericson was my best friend, my only friend, and it’d been that way since she’d arrived on Peridot Academy’s doorstep our freshman year.

A farmer’s daughter, she was there on scholarship and had looked comically shell-shocked. I’d shown her the ropes as best I could, being that it was my first year in high school too, but I was no stranger to dealing with the island’s elite.

Technically, I was one of them, but they just acted like I wasn’t. Which was fine. All the better to snoop and daydream without prying eyes.

Cory boarded at school with at least thirty-some other students in our year, a few of which had also been offered scholarships. Most were just tossed out of their parents’ homes under the guise of royal status and stellar education.

Sure, if you counted learning how to bleed and somehow still survive while swimming amongst sharks.

I swatted at her behind my back. “Yeah, yeah. Just wait.” I clutched at my soft black curtains, peering through to the balcony and the French doors that sat across the hedge from my room. That wasn’t his bedroom, but they were in there. A crash sounded, shadows flitting, followed by a scream.

“Fern?”

“Did you hear that? Something smashed.” I couldn’t suck in enough air, and my voice rose higher. “Shit, I think it’s really happening. They’re really over.”

It had to be them arguing in such a this-is-the-end type of way. Jude’s father was hardly ever home, his brother was still in elementary school, and I hadn’t seen their mother in months.

“Don’t sound too upset,” Cory drawled. “It’s not like they’ve dated all through high school or anything.” She paused. “Middle school, too?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

She scoffed. “I think it matters a whole lot. To them.”

I dropped the curtain when the shadows disappeared but reached around them to open the door a smidge.

“Fern?” Cory said again, my name an exasperated nudge.

“What?” I snapped, then froze, hoping like hell no one heard.

They didn’t, and the yelling was coming from outside now.

“Shh, they’re outside.”

“Look, I’m going to call Silas...”

“Yeah, okay.” I peeled the curtain back but growled when I couldn’t see anything. “Bye.”

“I’ll catch up on, ah, all this at school tomorrow.”

I waved her off, almost hissing for her to be quiet.

“... doing this anymore. You’re insane.”

“Oh, I’m insane?” My chest tightened at the sound of his voice. His deep, slightly accented—thanks to hailing from London—voice. Typically, Jude Delouxe sounded aloof. Eternally bored. Always sexy.

Now, well, he sounded angry and maybe even a little panicked.

I hadn’t realized he cared so much. Jude didn’t seem to care about anything except football, his ego, and maybe his little brother, Henry.

“...for real done.”

“You’ll be back.” There he was. That confidence had returned. “How long this time? A few days? A week?”

A scream, throaty with frustration, reached me. “You’re the worst. Like actually *evil* or something.”

He laughed, low and hypnotic, until a car started. The sound of it leaving, crunching over the pebbles of his long drive followed, and then... silence.

I let the curtain fall and closed the door as quietly as I could.

This was it. Yes, they’d broken up occasionally before, but this felt different.

And what mattered most was that I was different.

I’d had my braces removed five months ago. I officially had boobs. I was no longer stick thin but rather, filling out in the ass and hips.

Most importantly, I still had the dream. The dream of us that still burned bright.

I was ready.

I marched to my walk-in closet and flung open the door, switching on the light.

Behind my black school skirts and white blouses, his face, his facts, his accomplishments, and everything *him* gave life to my wall.

I’d waited what felt like forever for this day. In reality, it was probably more like a few years. Ever since Jude had nonchalantly handed me a pen I’d dropped in chemistry, the seed had been planted.

He hadn’t even looked at me, but when I’d stammered out a thank you, he’d smirked down at his tablet.

That smirk had followed me to sleep and had visited almost every one of my dreams since.

We had mere months left of senior year, and if their history was anything to go by, he and Marnie just might get back together again.

I couldn’t let that happen.

He was mine.

He just didn’t know it yet.

# TWO

## *Fern*

The black castle appeared in glittering portions through the dense woods before it.

European cars parked behind the wrought-iron fencing, marring the black and green grounds like shimmering metal beetles between the trees.

Add the white rose bushes lining the walkways and circular drive and the wisteria crawling across the towering four-story slab of onyx stone, and you had yourself something right out of a storybook.

It wasn't. Peridot Academy was a necessary evil.

All sorts of big money types—politicians, investors, military, and hedge fund gurus—sent their spawn here. Almost half of the students were boarders, the other residents of the island.

After my first week at the academy, I'd begged my mom to enroll me in the public school that sat mere miles down Peridot Road. The plead alone had caused her neck to break out in red splotches. The stress rash, she called it. I had inherited the same, though mine didn't just grace my neck. It lit up the top half of my body. Not so easy to hide or flattering for someone with deep crimson hair and pale blue eyes.

I'd inherited the latter from my father—the useless runaway who'd disappeared when I was in the sixth grade.

I hadn't heard from him since.

It used to bother me. Sometimes, I missed having someone to talk to about books, to do puzzles with after dinner at our imported marble-topped dining table, and to play with down on the beach behind our house. Apart from that, he hadn't been too amazing.

It was kind of magical how enough time and distance from something that once broke your heart could open your eyes and make you feel stupid for even caring in the first place.

There were few things I cared about now, and those fortunate enough to fall under that overbearing shadow were stuck with me.

Needless to say, I was also stuck here until I graduated. It would embarrass Mother to no end if I dared try otherwise. She might have been a little cold and crazy, but I liked her enough that I didn't want to upset her too much.

She did pay for whatever I wanted, after all, and that included the roof over our heads so I could spy on the boy next door.

Exiting the long winding drive bordered by the woods, I found a parking spot right next to the tree Cory was leaning against, scrolling through her phone, and then I quickly ran inventory.

Mascara in case I rubbed it off, check. Bobby pins in case my hair got annoying, check. Concealer in case I had a random breakout, check. Tube of intense red lipstick to reapply, check.

A spare pair of panties in case I should get lucky, check.

The latter was most definitely a little optimistic. I mean, Jude had just broken up with his long-term girlfriend. But rebound sex was a thing, and I wasn't opposed to the idea.

Virgin or not.

After making sure my gray socks were sitting just so beneath my knees, I glanced out the window to find Cory's face scrunched in that, *what the hell are you doing, hurry the hell up*, expression of hers. I smiled and hauled my bag out of my white Range Rover.

Her eyes widened as I locked the car and tucked my keys in the front pocket of my bag. "Lipstick? Heels?" She blinked twice at my black pumps. "Really?"

Someone whistled.

"Everyone wears them." I flung a red-painted fingernail in the direction of her own, though they weren't designer. "Even you."

"You don't." Her brows pulled, causing a crease between her brown eyes. "You wear Vans and Converse."

I waved a hand. "That was last we—"

"Wait, are they your mom's?"

"Quiet," I hissed.

"Good morning, ladies."

I froze, giving Cory crazy eyes as the scent of male cologne infiltrated.

Cory smiled, shaking her head. "Hey, G."

G was short for Garry, who detested his name.

I mentally punched myself in the face. If I couldn't turn around and at least say hello to one of the guys on the senior swim team, then I had no business trying to do the same with the most popular guy in school.

Cory bristled when he stopped close enough to brush her arm with his. "Ditched that boyfriend of yours yet?"

"No," she said. "And you'd be the last person to know if I did."

Undeterred, G's eyes crinkled with his megawatt grin. "Any particular reason you'd save me for last, Coraline?"

Her lips thinned, and she stepped back just as Silas's midnight black truck grumbled into the lot and stole the space on the other side of my car.

G removed his eyes from her, and they narrowed at the quarterback through the window. "Save you for later, too, Coraline."

Cory's white blouse creased underneath her arms, which were hugging her torso tight.

Throwing his gym bag over his shoulder, Silas jumped out, his tie hanging askew around his neck. He dragged a hand through his shoulder-length dirty blond hair. "How sweet of you to wait for me," he drawled in his girlfriend's direction, all flashing teeth and hungry eyes.

Cory's fluttered closed when his arm wrapped around her shoulders, his lips smacking into the side of her head. "I was waiting for Fern, and you're late."

The sound of the first bell traveled across the sprawling emerald green lawn, and I walked behind the couple, far enough not to be considered a third wheel, all the while knowing I totally was. I always was.

I didn't mind, though. Not when the black-on-black Range Rover sped into the lot, kicking up weeds and gravel in its wake, and parked half on the grass, half on the drive.

Jude leaped out, his black hair a divine finger-swept mess, and his deep green eyes upon the ground as he rummaged through his bag and locked his car.

I could count on two hands the number of times Jude had caught up with Silas while I just happened to be lingering. Every single time, I'd been a speck of dirt on the wind—totally ignored.

"You're for real leaving it there?" Silas asked when we'd reached the round smattering of steps, dotted on either side with topiary balls in huge sandstone pots. "Taurin will have a shit fit."

Jude glanced back at the car, then shrugged. “We pay the bastard and school enough money; he ought to think twice before so much as looking.”

We paused outside the doors while Silas showed Jude something on his phone.

My eyes were doing this weird thing that could only be summed up as indecision. They weren’t sure where to remain or what to absorb the most of. His hair—god, so thick. The straight disarray of it perfect—not too long up top and not too short on the sides. Those lips, a little plump, but just enough that I knew they’d fit between mine so seamlessly.

He might have lived next door, but I’d hardly seen him since the summer. Only small glimpses like this at school, if I was lucky.

Seeing him now, having him mere feet from me, that hypnotic caramel earthy cologne wafting from his tanned skin... my knees buckled a little.

The last time I was standing this close was in the cafeteria line at the start of the school year. It had been raining, and I’d watched as drops of water slid down his neck to dampen the collar of his shirt.

He wore that same shirt now, as did all the guys at school, but I was willing to bet it was a size larger, judging by the broader expanse of his shoulders and upper arms. The black cotton was only half-buttoned, exposing a gray T-shirt beneath. Lean with muscles that shifted in his beautiful arms and a face sculpted from stone, he was an Adonis. An eighteen-year-old god.

How did I know he was eighteen? His birthday was a month before mine—five months and four days ago—November second. His mouse of an ex-girlfriend had embarrassed him at school with a bundle of black balloons. I knew everything about him. Well, as much as I could discover through eavesdropping, social media, web stalking, and some minor stalking in general.

His gray slacks hung low from his waist. I could tell when he lifted his bag over his shoulder, granting a mouthwatering glimpse of a defined hip. To touch it, trace it, and oh my god, to lick—

“Who’s the gawker?” Jude said, and I blinked. “She new?”

Eyes framed with dark, curling lashes were aimed at me. His thick brows, perfectly shaped, sank low.

Of course, I’d be noticed now, ogling the hell out of him.

Cory laughed, but it was that fake, forced laughter she did when she was nervous or offended. “Uh, no, she’s not.”

Still pinned on me, Jude's eyes widened expectantly. "Does it have a voice?"

This was my time. I could allow the heat slowly infiltrating to grace my entire face or stop it in its tracks by snatching what could be my only opportunity.

"Oh, I do," I said with more ease than I ever could've thought possible because *holy fucking shit*, he was talking to me. "I do," I said again, like an idiot, and smiled in a way I hoped accentuated my eyes. "I can have many voices if you'd like. You can sample them—"

Cory slapped a hand over my mouth.

Jude was openly assessing me now, his expression unreadable.

"Excuse her," Cory said. "She took some of her mom's Valium by accident, thinking it was her iron pill."

I tried to pry her fingers from my face to no avail.

Jude smirked in a way that spoke of sinister whispers heatedly delivered to your ear in the dark. "Remove your hand. I'd like to hear what else she has to say."

That voice... so silken with its slight accent and sensuously deep.

Cory did that fake laugh thing again and proceeded to drag me away. "You really don't."

Silas was laughing silently, staring at the ground.

I shoved Cory off, but she wasn't going anywhere. She grabbed my wrist, tugging hard to the doors. Forgetting I was wearing the stupid heels, I almost tripped. I scowled at her, and hissed, "Quit it."

I could feel Jude watching, but when I turned back, he was in conversation with Silas as two more members of the football team arrived.

I wanted to growl, scream, and kill my idiot best friend.

But considering she was my only friend, that wouldn't be smart. A girl needed her allies.

Peridot Academy was war, and we were but warriors just trying to survive.

"God, I didn't think you were serious," she said between her teeth, smiling at Agatha Jones when we passed. "You can't just do that, Fern."

"I can, and you ruined it," I said as we found our lockers in the seniors' hall.

"More like I stopped you from ruining it," she said. "I can have many voices?" Her tone pitched high with disbelief. "Really, Fern?"

Tipping a shoulder, I failed to see the problem, leaning back against my locker as she opened hers. “He seemed into it.”

“He seemed *confused*.” She lowered her voice, sympathy riding it. “He didn’t even know who you were, Fern, and we’ve been in this cesspit for years.”

Letting my eyes skim the passersby, the excitement and fear that stained the hall under the obnoxious scents of cologne and perfume, I smiled to myself.

He’d noticed me. Not only that, but he’d seemed curious about me.

If there ever was a time to make damn sure I got what I wanted, it was now. “Well, he’s about to know me,” I muttered. “Real well.”

Cory rolled her eyes. “He’ll make a meal out of you and leave you in scraps.”

That was what I was hoping.



After school, I lingered, but there were no more sightings of Jude.

I waited beside my locker for Cory, but she was a no-show. The crowds began to wane, Melanie’s upper lip curling, her sharp eyes dipping up and down my body before she turned to Marnie and laughed.

Marnie kept her head down, clutching her vintage Chanel tight to her side as they rounded the corner and headed for the exit.

Marnie Trench was sweet, the perfect loyal poodle with glossy eyes and brown hair to match our queen bee, Melanie Hillings. Without fail and never a protest, Marnie followed her every order.

Marnie and Melanie, or M&M as I’d once heard Marnie suggest during English in sophomore year, had the type of friendship that seemed to stay afloat due to the amount of dirt they had on one another. The glower blazing from Melanie’s green eyes, followed by the whiny, “Ew, no,” had shut that nickname down real quick.

I’d spent the rest of class wondering what nicknames she’d dubbed Jude with, and if he’d soften for her enough in order to give him one. They’d

supposedly been a couple since middle school, so it was plausible she'd managed to cajole a nickname from the aloof six-foot-three hunk of a male.

At home, I left my car out front and bounded up the shrub-lined steps to our porch. It wrapped around the house, and at the side was a set of stairs leading to the balcony above.

I'd sometimes sit out there in one of the rockers, feigning interest in a book, hoping I'd catch a glimpse of Jude. More often than not, I'd just see his car come and go, and sometimes, his younger brother, Henry, playing soccer outside.

I wondered if Jude liked soccer and if he ever played. As the wide receiver for the school's football team, he spent at least one weekend out of every month of football season traveling off the island to play other schools.

I'd left the island a few times. It sat off the coast of New York. January, my mother, loved to shop, so she'd take me with her to the bustling, claustrophobic giant city when I was younger. Now, I was old enough to stay behind and be left to my own devices.

I was harmless, sure, but there wasn't much I wouldn't do if it meant getting what I wanted.

Which was something January Denane wasn't entirely privy to. The way I'd watch the boy next door was not a secret by any means, but she'd laugh and wave her elegant hand flippantly as though it was nothing but a crush.

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps she might have thought differently if she knew about the pictures in my walk-in. I didn't much care.

Inside, I kicked the death traps off, wincing as soon as I planted my feet on the ground.

With a groan, I sank to the floor and inspected the red splotches on my heels, rubbing at the aching soles of my feet.

I shot a glare at the shoes, then dragged myself to the pantry in search of carbs—something our school didn't have much of.

With a pack of cookies and a glass of milk in hand, I headed upstairs to get my dunk on.

"Girl," Cory called, her footsteps clomping up the aged wooden stairs outside my room. "Did you see Marnie today?" She pushed open my door, scowled at the cookies on my desk, then hurried over and nabbed one. "Sad panda or what?" she mumbled around it, then moaned.

I tugged the package closer. “I did, and where’d you go? I waited for you after class.”

She smiled, pieces of chocolate smearing her perfect teeth. “Silas needed a proper hello.”

I snorted, dunking a cookie into my crumb-littered milk.

The plush green rugs interrupted the clop of her heels as she swayed her hips to the en suite. “Gonna tidy up before he comes back from Jude’s.”

She took her time, so I turned my chair, staring out the small gap in the curtains to the mansion next door. Moonstone white with ivy crawling over its exterior that was so dark green it was almost black, the home was big enough to house most of the school.

A hedge was sandwiched between our properties. Along Crest Road, most of us had land that sprawled behind each home right to the water, yet our wood and stone giant sat much closer than necessary to the Delouxe’s home. I mean, it was no wonder I was obsessed with the guy.

To have a specimen like that so close yet still out of reach would drive anyone insane. For years, I’d been given so many tastes but nothing to actually eat, and I was starving.

Cory’s footsteps ceased outside the bathroom in the tiny hall near my walk-in.

Her eyes zeroed in on my clothes. “Wait a second.” She switched on the light in the closet, then looked at me with her mouth gaping.

Shit. I must have forgotten to cover my Jude wall. “What?”

“I can get down with this obsession of yours.”

I raised my brows, chewing a cookie.

She sighed. “Okay, more like I’ve learned to accept it. It still borderline creeps me out and makes me scared for you. But this?” She stabbed a finger at the wall inside. “How the hell do you know he’s a Slytherin?”

I thought that would have been obvious. “I took the test for him.”

Cory hadn’t been there when I’d started reading Harry Potter in the seventh grade. It was my very first obsession. I’d walked into many a door and tripped over a bag or two in the halls during middle school, one of them being Silas’s.

Jude hadn’t even looked up from his tablet.

Meanwhile, Silas had been annoyed I’d squished his banana muffin. I’d been annoyed I’d irreparably bent the pages of my book in the process. Thankfully, Mom bought me another copy.

Cory knew this about me, about my personality. When I really liked something, I loved that something.

But the way she was staring at me now, as though she'd never truly seen me before, struck a nerve. The pang of it rippled all the way to my eyes.

I wouldn't let her make me feel crazy.

"Look," she started, but I jumped up and ran downstairs to the kitchen.

Unsure what it was I even wanted, just that I knew I needed away from that weird look in her eyes and the note of concern in her voice, I opened the fridge and stared at the contents inside.

She followed, leaning a hip against the island behind me. "I knew you liked him, but I didn't think it was this..." I could see her nose crinkling without looking. "Bad."

"I don't remember asking for your opinion," I said, perhaps a little too coldly.

I heard her expel a loud breath, and I snatched a squeezey strawberry yogurt before slamming the door.

"Okay, I've gotta go."

"Uh-huh," I said, concentrating too hard on unscrewing the plastic lid.

Cory lingered a moment, and I tossed the lid into the trash, only turning around once I heard the front door close.

Back in my room, I slammed the door of my walk-in and sucked voraciously on the yogurt, crossing to the floor-to-ceiling doors.

Mostly, I kept the curtains half closed, but I opened one to see a sparrow dancing across the wooden railing outside. A flash of movement caught my eyes moments later, and I braced a hand on the doorframe, the yogurt hanging between my teeth.

Jude was on the balcony that faced mine, a steaming mug of something in his hand, staring at the ground as he slowly paced.

But even better than this rare sighting... he was shirtless.

Packed muscle shifted in his abdomen when he lifted his free hand to drag it through his tousled hair. His skin gleamed golden in the afternoon light, highlighting every defined inch of his muscular biceps and taut shoulders.

Then he stopped with his back to me, and my forehead pressed into the glass of my door.

As if he'd felt my burning stare, the way I was soaking in every facet of him, he turned a little, narrowing his eyes at me over his shoulder.

My breath hitched, a tumbling exhale fogging the glass. The yogurt fell from my mouth and splattered to the floor.

I could've pulled the curtain shut or backed away, but there was little point.

I'd been caught, and if I were being honest, I totally wanted to get caught.

I waited for him to scowl, to shake his head and march back inside the room that wasn't his but maybe now was, but he didn't.

His lips, dipped in sin and temptation, lifted into a smirk that pulled a strange wheeze from me.

He sipped his drink, lifting the mug into the air my way, then went back inside.

Tripping over my feet and stepping on yogurt, I hurried to my desk. I plucked out the sketchpad I seldomly used since the eighth grade and skimmed past less than stellar drawings of hearts and rainbows and stupid self-portraits to a blank page.

There, I drew what I'd seen inked into Jude's skin. It was rough, but it didn't matter. I tacked either side when done and hung it next to a picture of him holding a trophy from last year's playoffs.

Then I traced them, the three black and gray snakes that intertwined into some kind of diamond, as though I were touching his skin. Shaded birds had taken flight above the snakes' mouths, and stepping back to stare at the picture, I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, I'd seen something like this before.

# THREE

I woke up choking and flew upright to wheeze, “What the hell?”

Mom continued to assault my room with my hairspray. “You slept through your alarm, twice, yet my use of your hairspray wakes you?” She paused with the can in the air, tilting her head this way and that as she inspected her updo of twisting red curls in the mirror above my desk. “I’m leaving, and you should be, too.”

My eyes widened as I glanced at the clock and jumped out of bed.

Mom stood in the doorway of my bathroom as I cleaned my teeth and dragged a brush through my hair. “I’ll be out late, but I’ll have Ricky prepare you dinner.”

Ricky was our cleaner and sometimes chef. A middle-aged Australian, he adored my mother but had yet to figure out she preferred females.

I knew better than to ask questions about her whereabouts. Either she’d smile and bid me farewell or she’d dive into a spiel about which lover she was currently feuding with.

I inwardly sighed when she licked her teeth and pointed at the straightening iron. “You slept on your side, and now your curls aren’t even.” As if I didn’t already know. “Iris wants me to meet her parents.”

“Oh? I didn’t think you were serious.”

“We’re not,” she said. “I’ll be at Kathleen’s.”

With that, she left, and I cursed when I realized the iron was ready.

If January Denane excelled most at one thing, it was freezing people out who’d dared to step too close. Ever since my dad had left, she’d cultivated a stream of revolving lovers but had never seemed interested in committing to just one.

“Been there and got what I wanted from it,” she’d say with a nod my way before dropping the subject entirely.

I didn’t see Jude until the lunch bell rang, and I purposely stalled in the hallway near his locker.

He was talking to Silas, but when the latter's eyes flicked my way, Jude's followed.

His perfect brows furrowed, and I hugged my tablet tighter to my chest and gave my mascara-loaded lashes a slow flutter.

Silas said something. Jude laughed a little and kept staring.

Then he snapped his teeth at me.

*Oh my beautiful god.*

I feared I'd melt into a puddle of desperation on the streaked marble floor.

Laughing again, he stalked off with Silas down the hall to the courtyard outside.

Plucking the black diary from my bag inside my locker, I took note of the encounter in messy, hurried scrawl, then slammed the door.

It would be two days before his eyes danced with mine again.

Tuesday rolled into Wednesday, and on Thursday, I decided I was done giving Cory the cold shoulder. She took her seat across from me in the back corner of the dining hall and pushed a pack of mini cucumbers over the table. "A peace offering."

"An apology is too hard?" I said, eyeing the fresh vegetables while trying to appear disinterested.

Her hand covered the plastic-wrapped cucumbers, her delicate fingers curling around them. "Want them or not?"

I harrumphed and snatched them from her, tearing open the bag. "Fine."

And that was how it always went. We'd fight over something dumb, and then offer each other food when we were sick of being alone. Not that she was ever truly alone with that boyfriend of hers usually watching her every move.

"Where's Silas?" I asked, chewing as I glanced around the half-filled room.

"Outside," she said.

I nodded, knowing that meant he and his friends were either throwing a football around or smoking weed. More than likely, both.

"Did you hear they announced the theme?"

I turned the page of my book, mumbling, "For what?"

"Prom, dummy."

The pages fluttered to a close when my fingers slackened. "You're going?"

“I told you I was,” she said. “I can’t let Silas show up on his own.”

I frowned at that. “You totally can.” Annoyance festered. I knew I was being selfish, but when we’d started high school, we’d made a pact that if one of us didn’t have a date, then neither of us would go. We’d stay home and binge-watch bad eighties thrillers and make bets on who would graduate pregnant.

That was before she and Silas became some type of epic forgone conclusion.

Cory sighed and quit digging at her pasta salad. “Fern...”

“Don’t take that tone with me.”

Her brows jumped, and I winced, waving for her to continue as I slouched in the leather-upholstered chair.

“I think you should come,” she said, leaning forward with her elbows upon the wooden table. “Tons of people go without dates.”

“They do not.” I dug my straw out of my water bottle, taking a sip. I’d learned the hard way what drinking water like a normal person did while trying to maintain my crimson lip look. Nothing good.

Cory’s eyes narrowed, as did mine. I set the water down. “Not here. They go with a date or a friend.”

“Since when have you ever cared about doing what’s normal?”

“Calling me crazy again?” I said. “Really?”

“Oh my god, stop.” Sitting back, she rubbed her temples briefly before crossing her arms. “I’m just saying I think you should think about it. I’m positive someone is going to ask you to go with them, and I don’t want you turning them down instantly and missing out because you’re so god damn stubborn, and you only want Jude.”

I was stubborn, so I couldn’t argue that, but, “No, thanks. What’s the theme anyway? Bubblegum nightmare?”

With Melanie on the committee, I was willing to bet I was close.

“Rainbow memories.”

I gagged loudly and felt eyes swing our way.

Cory laughed. “Right? Lamest of lame.”

Her phone rang. She retrieved it from the inside pocket of her blazer and grinned as she answered. A minute later, she was waving and gesturing outside to her boyfriend.

I flipped her off and returned to my cucumbers and book.



Excitement over prom, murmurings about ticket sales, and talk of whom was already going with whom destroyed any hope the teachers had of operating a normal class schedule for the remainder of the day.

Hell, for the rest of the week, really.

AP English, my favorite as it was the only class I shared with Jude—when he deigned to show up—was ruined for me.

Garry and Tyler snickered, their heads butting too close for me to see Jude, who sat at the front of the class, as per usual.

Cory's ramblings about prom had my mind crawling in dangerous directions. Maybe I didn't need to wait and hope for something that might never happen. Maybe I should just ask Jude, the most coveted guy in school, if he'd go with me.

The guys broke out into a loud burst of laughter as if they could hear my thoughts even though I knew they were cackling over something else. Something I would never be privy to, and I wasn't so sure I wanted to be.

My stomach flipped when Jude swung back on his chair to whisper something to them. I begged for his eyes to meet mine, willed them to, but the teacher snapped at him before he realized I was even watching.

I wondered if he knew I was always watching, and I wondered if I should listen to my best friend. If I should wake up and realize how bad this obsession was and quit it.

I'd never had a crush on anyone before, but I knew this had to be it. That was all this was. I liked someone, and I liked them a lot. She was overreacting. She'd crushed hard on Silas before they'd started dating. I remembered the dopey look and the doodling of his name all over her notebook well enough.

Who was she to tell me what was bad and what was good? Just because she'd actually landed the guy.

Suddenly flustered, I excused myself to the bathroom.

I didn't really need to use it, but I did go there to check my reflection in the mirror. Realizing I'd forgotten my lipstick, I cursed and hurried out and to the stairs leading to the fourth floor where the dorms were located.

I knew Cory had a free period, so she'd likely be in there with Silas, who'd probably skipped, but I couldn't let that stop me. Right now, I had class with Jude, and my lipstick was cracking and fading.

I made a mental note to try to be more adept in the makeup department. Long-lasting, my ass. Though I suppose eight hours didn't mean much after eating a steak as big as my face for lunch and downing half a liter of apple juice.

Cobwebs lined the corners of the stone ceiling, and I cringed, wondering where our parents' money was going if not to cleaners who would venture to every floor. Portraits of past headmasters and famous writers, politicians, and even an actress lined the rendered gray walls between each dark oak door.

I was two doors away from her room, which sat at the end of the long and narrow hall, when that voice called, "Well, if it isn't my nosy little neighbor."

I knew he had to be referring to me. I didn't care if he wasn't. I turned to find Jude Deloux stalking lazily toward me with his hands tucked in his pockets. "What are you doing up here, Red?"

Shocked, I blurted back, "What are *you* doing up here?"

His dark brows rose, green eyes flaring. "I was curious, not to mention bored." Stopping mere inches from me, he said ever so soft, "Answer the question."

His scent was suffocating, killing me in the most wonderful way. Slowly, I dragged my eyes over his half-hidden hands, glanced at his unlaced black boots, then let them feast on his face.

That straight nose, the symmetrical arches of his cheekbones, and that shadowed jawline... perfect. He was too perfect for real life. Too perfect to be standing before me.

But he was, and I could smell him, study him, all I wanted.

Or maybe I could do more than that. "I was waiting for you."

Confusion danced through his eyes, scrunching the beauty of his face. "Wha—"

I closed the distance before he could finish talking. Rising onto my toes, even in these torturous things us women called high heels, I pressed my mouth to his. It was warm, smooth, and I kept my lips on his even when his mouth parted. Fireworks exploded behind my squeezed shut eyes, and my heart cartwheeled, jumping into my throat.

Then strong hands grasped my upper arms, pushing me back. “What do you think you’re fucking doing?”

Dizzy and a little afraid, I struggled to hold his gaze. “What I’ve wanted to do for too long,” I said, too much breath gentling the words.

He still heard them, his eyes widening momentarily before he tilted his head and studied me.

I wasn’t sure what I looked like, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but I could feel my lips tingling, my chest heaving, and my breasts pushing at the confines of my blouse.

He swallowed, his grip on my arms loosening as his gaze dipped to them, then back to my face. To my lips. “So you thought just kissing me was a good idea?”

“The best I’ve ever had,” I said, rolling my lips as I swayed closer.

He nodded once, slowly, as if struggling to digest what I’d said, struggling to believe if I was being earnest. When his teeth dragged over his bottom lip, mine parted in response, and then he shrugged, and we collided.

A brass door handle dug into my back, but I didn’t care. I clasped both sides of his face and parted his lips with my tongue. A groan left him, deep and rumbling, evoking a shiver.

His hands found my hips, pulling my chest flush with his. His tongue skirted over mine, and I heard him whisper, “Have you ever kissed someone before?”

I was too far gone to give a damn about embarrassment, so I shook my head and carefully licked his upper lip.

Another groan, this one softer, accompanied a harsh exhale that heated my skin and tongue.

“I find that hard to believe, but I also don’t.” He squeezed my waist, dragging my lip into his mouth to suck. He released it with a pop. “You’re too cautious, too eager, but far too fucking beautiful to be so inexperienced. How does that even—”

“Dear god,” I whined impatiently. “Just keep kissing me, please.”

Immediately, I turned to stone, fearing I was going to turn bright red and die.

But then he chuckled. “I’m no god, sweetheart,” he whispered, a hand traveling to my lower back and pressing me forward to meet his hard body. I could feel him digging into my stomach, and a strange sound fled me. “I’m the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“Prove it,” I said, my fingers crawling into his hair, my heart rejoicing and spasming dangerously when he smirked.

I had to be dying because he did.

Grabbing the side of my face, he angled my head back for his tongue to sweep into my mouth and lay waste to every dream I’d ever had. For they weren’t coming true, they were being decimated one by one, replaced with the sweetest type of nightmare I’d never dare run screaming from.

His palm was warm and so large, so right as it gently but firmly held my head still for his tongue and lips to assault mine.

Down the rabbit hole I fell, twirling and internally screaming as my wildest imaginations became a reality. He was spearmint and heat, unyielding and exploratory. Control oozed from his every rough breath, his touch, and in the mating of our mouths.

His tongue plunged and stroked, his teeth clamped and dragged, and my heart became a savage beast as I clung to him with the hope of this never ending.

“Jude?” A feminine voice crashed inside our bubble.

But that was another world, another dream, and I was content to ignore it.

Jude, apparently, was not.

He pulled away instantly, violent curses falling from his thoroughly kissed lips.

Marnie stood near the stairs with her hand braced on the gilded wood railing.

She was too far away to make out her expression entirely, but I could tell by looking from her to Jude that she was anything but pleased.

I didn’t know why she’d be mad when she was the one to dump him.

She turned and darted down the stairs.

“Mother of fuck,” Jude hissed. He glared at me, backing away as he ran a hand through his tousled hair. “You better pray you haven’t gotten on my bad side, Red.”

Then he was jogging after Marnie.

A thrill, searing and thick, shot through me, my fingers tracing my lips.

# FOUR

## *Jude*

Marnie slunk back into her history class before I could catch her, so I waited by her bubblegum blue Jeep after school.

If she thought she could outrun me, she was wrong. Complaining of an upset stomach, I skipped out of class five minutes early to make sure I beat her to the parking lot.

Winter's kiss was taking its time to fade, the fine layer of pine needles dusting the gravel lot, and cars parked between the trees not as thick as it should be.

Students poured out of the doors, and I waited, my eyes searching. Though I wasn't sure if they were searching for the right person when I nearly missed her exit.

On her own, thank fuck, Marnie paused on the grass. A breathy laugh preceded tear-clogged words. "I saw you walk by, and I thought..." She threw her arms up and then dropped them. "Perfect. Finally, I get you on your own."

I uncrossed my arms but didn't straighten from where I was leaning against the driver's side door. "For what?"

"To talk to you," she said as if I were daft.

Perhaps I was. She hadn't given me the slightest fucking inclination that she'd wanted anything to do with me for over a week. We'd broken up before, but this had been the longest stretch of time between patching things back up.

"Then I find you sucking face with the only girl in school who still wears braces."

She didn't have braces. At least, she didn't have them anymore. For a moment, I remembered how it felt to drag my tongue over every crevice of her sweet-tasting mouth—definitely no hint of metal. The red-haired beauty was strawberry yogurt and wasted innocence.

I kept those thoughts to myself, of course.

“I’ve called you,” I said unnecessarily. The chick was glued to her phone. She saw every incoming and missed call, not to mention the few texts I’d sent that’d gone unanswered.

She nodded, dragging the toe of her black high heel over the gravel. “I wasn’t ready.”

“But now you are,” I said more than asked.

Marnie lifted a petite shoulder, then pursed those plump lips. Lips I’d missed having wrapped around the shaft of my cock. Lips I longed to see rise into a smile at something stupid I’d said.

A heart-shaped red bow, Red had thinner lips but no less juicy.

I shook my head and straightened with a sigh. “Kay, well, as riveting as this is, I have places to be.”

“Yeah?” Marnie asked. “Like where?”

“Like none of your business.”

She laughed, and my chest clenched. “Jude, I just caught you making out with another girl, and you’re not even going to say you’re sorry? Or explain yourself?”

“It’s pretty self-explanatory,” I clipped without thinking, then hurried to needlessly remind her, “You broke up with me.”

“Because you’ve changed.” Her voice softened then. “You don’t talk. You hardly smile, and when you do, it’s insincere and always snide or mocking.”

“I talk plenty.”

“Not about whatever happened.”

I swallowed and fished my Ray-Bans from my shirt. “Nothing happened.”

“Really, Jude?” She groaned. “See? This is exactly what I mean.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” I meandered to my car.

She followed. “But there is. All those meetings and your mom...”

I whirled on her. “She left.”

Her eyes, wet with unshed tears, studied me as though she couldn’t understand.

“Happy?” I said, knowing she wasn’t.

She confirmed it when she stepped back, and said, “No, Jude. No, I’m not happy. Moms don’t just leave, and neither do happy boyfriends. If you can’t open up to me, then you clearly don’t trust me.” I was about to call

bullshit when she added, “The worst part is, you don’t care enough about me to even try.”

Glancing around to the gathering masses heading to their cars, I gritted, “I’ve been trying.”

She scoffed. “Kissing someone else is trying?”

I could say nothing to that. I had no idea why I’d even humored the girl. Typically, chicks that desperate didn’t interest me in the slightest. But Red—fuck knows what her real name was—didn’t seem desperate.

No, she didn’t seem anything other than hungry. She was, and made no secret of it, fucking starving.

I watched Marnie round her car with my heart slowing. “Wait.”

“For what? An apology that isn’t coming?”

Frustrated, I blurted, “I’m failing to see why you even wanted to talk to me in the first place.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

I walked closer, feeling my chest heat with fear as I dared to ask, “Do you want me back or not?”

Chewing her lip, she eyed my mouth. “I thought I did. Until I saw you with *her*.”

There was nothing I could do to fix that. All I could do was watch her climb inside her car and leave.



I checked my phone again for the tenth time since practice had ended.

Nothing.

“You keep staring at that thing as if it’s going to grow wings, and it just might.”

I grunted, pocketing my phone when what I really felt like doing was tossing it onto the rapidly fading asphalt.

Maybe then I’d stop fucking caring so much.

Though Marnie would argue that was the problem—that I didn’t give a shit about anything.

She was right, and she was so very fucking wrong.

I'd tried to call her all night, but as predicted, she didn't deem me worthy of her precious time.

The dirt was soft from the burst of rain that'd left as fast as it had arrived. Storms and bipolar weather were just some of the wondrous benefits of living on the island.

Silas kept pace with me, heading to his car and smacking the key fob. "Coffee?"

I peered down at my shoes, then at my car, and headed to his.

I'd rather dirty his interior than my own. "Drop me back after."

He chuckled as if he knew, and yeah, he'd known me long enough to pick up on what my father thought was an odious obsessive-compulsive trait when it came to cleanliness.

The way he'd watch me and remark on things in that toneless way of his made it clear he was concerned about who it was I might take after.

Too bad his opinion, of which once meant everything to me, now meant sweet fuck all.

I'd fucked it all up in more ways than one.

And that crazy redheaded chick was the reason I might never be able to fix part of it.

Ray's Little Pot of Sunshine wasn't our usual haunt, but Starbucks was closed until the weekend thanks to their machine undergoing maintenance.

"The coffee at Ray's is better anyway," Silas said, pulling away from the closed drive-thru and back out onto the road.

I didn't believe him until we'd found a booth inside the small boutique. It was more bookstore than café with mismatched mahogany and white shelves slotted between tables and lining the far wall underneath the fading golden business name.

"The walls are bright blue," I said, blinking at them.

Silas shrugged and thanked the waitress for the coffee and three giant donuts she set down. "So?"

I tugged my coffee closer, then lifted the spotted mug to my lips and sniffed it.

Silas laughed. "You've lived here for how long, and you've never been here?"

"Pretty sure my mom used to bring Henry here," I said, just now remembering. "Storytime."

Silas stared at his mug for a moment, then nodded. “How’s he doing?”

“Much the same,” I admitted. “And Elijah gives not one fuck.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” I raised my brows, and Silas sipped his coffee. “He knows now, right?”

Both members of Nightingale, or Chess Club when mentioned at school, Silas’s parents had made sure he was aware of what was expected of him. He knew what was to come, but just like me, he wouldn’t know exactly what it would cost him until it was time—and too late.

*Supreme benefits at supreme costs.*

No one knew when their initiation would arrive, only that it did between the age of seventeen and nineteen.

If what’d happened with mine had spooked him, he didn’t let it show.

I glanced around but found no one sitting close enough to worry about. I felt the tattoo, now months old and completely healed, itch at my back. “I’ve told him, and he said some vague shit about keeping my mouth shut.”

Silas sat with that a minute. “No one’s seen Park around since anyway, and I highly doubt they will, so how are Chess Club to know?”

Silas and my father were the only ones, besides the man himself, who knew I’d technically failed my initiation, and that was how it needed to stay.

I bobbed my head, staring down into the black liquid in the weird mug. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

Though I wasn’t sure it would, all I could do was hope. Stupid really, considering it so often got me nowhere good.

We drank in silence. Silas offered me a donut, but with images of that night still pushing at the seams of my mind, my stomach soured, and I declined.

He left when Cory called, and I said I’d take a cab back before ordering another coffee. It was worth sitting inside a room that reminded me of preschool.

I tore my eyes from the shelf of books behind me when a tiny bell chimed, and someone entered.

Nose deep in a book, Red walked over to the glittering purple countertop and took a seat without looking up once as though she had memorized the path, which spoke of familiarity.

Jesus Christ. Had Silas known she frequented this shack?

What a prick.

It was no secret, thanks to my lovely ex-girlfriend, that I'd made out with the girl everyone was dubbing as the school's biggest nobody.

Yeah, so I hadn't seen Red around much, or maybe I had, and I'd just never cared to really look, but the fact she wasn't somebody didn't make a whole lot of sense to me. My eyes ran down her back, flooded with that fire-engine red hair, to those long, perfectly shaped legs. Not one little bit.

I made a mental note to dig up some old yearbooks when I got home.

Then I remembered January Denane supposedly lived next door, so it didn't make me any type of genius to know Red was her sheltered as fuck daughter.

It all made a little more sense now. No one messed with January, and I was willing to bet that extended to her offspring, too.

A woman with graying blond hair exited the door marked for staff only, and with an affectionate smile, she reached out to lay a finger atop Red's book to slowly push it down.

She laughed. Not the older woman, but Red, and fuck if I didn't get an instant semi.

Raspy and far deeper than her candied-soft voice, it fluttered across the room to target me square in the dick. Something tightened inside my chest, and I downed some coffee to rid the feeling.

The woman was talking as she prepared Red a drink, dousing it in enough chocolate powder to eradicate any taste of the coffee underneath.

*I should get up*, I thought. I needed to leave before I was tempted to do something I shouldn't, like cross the room to see if she still wanted to eat my face with her inexperienced mouth.

Then her entire frame stilled, and she swung her head my way, her expression one of pleased surprise.

*Shit*. I rummaged for my wallet, but she was too quick, the woman at the counter watching her sway those hips as she skirted tables and chairs to seat herself in the booth across from me. Taking a lengthy sip of her coffee, Red lowered the black, gold star dusted mug.

"Red," I said, annoyed and excited. Annoyed she had the audacity to approach me, and annoyed that things began to throb downstairs.

Chocolate powder clung to her red lips. "Hi."

Lips I'd kissed. Lips I'd licked. Lips I'd nipped. Lips that'd look so good wrapped around me, those big blue eyes searching mine to make sure she was doing a good job as she sucked me off.

Fuck.

I tore my eyes away from that damn mouth and glared at her.

She smiled and brushed her thumb over her lower lip, then licked it, wholly unaware, or maybe too aware, of the blood-rushing effect she had on me. "I wanted to say sorry, but I couldn't find you at school."

Because I'd made sure the likes of her couldn't find me. I said nothing, merely stared, growing more infuriated by her presence, the second chance she'd blown with Marnie, and the hard-on in my pants.

I'd never been more thankful for a shitty laminate table in my life.

"What brings you here? I haven't seen you here before." When I remained silent, her smile slowly slipped, and she sat back. Upon her cheeks were faded freckles, but only a few touched her pert nose. "Jude?"

"Oh, I heard you," I said, clearing my throat. Dragging a fingertip around the rim of my mug, I asked, "Tell me, Red. Are you aware of the strife you got me into after putting your lackluster lips on mine?"

"Lackluster," she repeated, almost as if to herself. As if that was the part of my question that mattered.

As if she hadn't realized just how much she'd fucked everything up.

She'd taken the last remaining thread I'd had to my previous life and snapped it as though she owned the fucking right.

It was time to make her understand. Perhaps then she'd learn not to accost gents in the hall and then act all doe-eyed and approach them willy-nilly as if she hadn't pissed them the fuck off.

Pulling my wallet free, I stood. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay very far away from me."

She blinked up at me, but I kept my eyes on the fifty in my clenched hand.

The bell over the door chimed, and male laughter entered, followed by, "Jude, bro, what're you doing?"

A sinister smirk shaped my lips as my eyes met Red's. "Nothing." I set the fifty down, being sure to knock her half-full mug of chocolate coffee over. "I was just leaving."

Red let out a shocked squeak as her school blouse and skirt, surely those ever-long legs too, were now drenched.

Garry and some other half-wit from the public school laughed as I brushed past them and headed home.



Inside, I dumped my keys onto the entry table and kicked off my boots.

“Henry?” I called, not smelling dinner. The house was dark save for flashing lights coming from the theater room opposite the study. I walked in to find my eight-year-old brother playing the Xbox. “Where’s Rhiannon?”

Henry kept playing, and I was about to snap at him when he jumped off the couch and tossed the controller to the Persian rug after his car crashed. “Ugh. She didn’t come today.”

“She didn’t...” I rubbed my mouth. “You’ve got to be shitting me.” Henry’s dark brows climbed into his forehead, his lips pinching. “Fuck the swear jar. She’s not even here.”

Rhiannon was fond of collecting all my spare change, and I swore she made me cuss on purpose most weeks in order to pay for her pedicures each weekend.

In the kitchen, I pointed at a stool at the island and set a pot on the stove. “Homework.”

“How do you know I haven’t done it yet?”

Opening the pantry, I walked in to find the macaroni. “Just do it.”

He groaned but had gone to retrieve it by the time I emerged with the box in hand. Once that was started, I left the room to call the bigger asshole of the house.

“Where’s Rhiannon?” I said as soon as he’d answered.

“She’s sick.”

I gritted my teeth and flinched away from one of the only remaining family portraits in the house. It hung outside the downstairs bathroom, and given the fact most bedrooms had their own, it was no wonder he’d forgotten to have this one removed.

Unless he hadn’t forgotten at all. Once upon a time, he did love her, and she’d supposedly loved him.

Then we moved here, and somehow, all that went to shit.

“Henry’s been home alone for hours.”

Dad mumbled something to someone, then came back. “I thought you’d head home right after school.”

“I had training.”

“Oh,” he said, remembering some things hadn’t changed. “He’s fine, isn’t he? Just make sure he showers before you send him to bed.”

“Or you could come home early enough to make sure he does for yourself.”

“Jude,” he said through a sigh. “Don’t bloody start. I have a list of shit a mile long that still needs tending to.”

So he’d sleep at the office again. I knew his game, mainly because I played it well myself. Well, at least I’d thought I had. “Sure, bye.”

I ended the call and headed back to the kitchen, hurrying to the stove when I saw the water about to boil over. Giving the pasta a stir, I cursed again when water scalded my thumb and sucked on it.

Henry laughed. “Rhia’s gonna be so mad when she hears how many dollars she’s missed out on.”

His laughter, a common yet changing sound, made the dark patches appear brighter, if only for a minute. I grabbed two bowls. “I’ll give them to you if you don’t tell her.”

His lips rounded with his eyes. “Really? That’s at least five whole bucks.”

“Finish your homework and your mac, then we’ll talk business.”

“Deal.”

Once Henry had showered, and I couldn’t hear any noise coming from his room, I went to check he’d fallen asleep before taking a shower myself.

Locked inside the confines of the bathroom, I leaned a hand against the wall and closed my eyes. They reopened with a start when I felt myself begin to sway. I needed a good fuck and a weeklong nap.

I’d have to settle for sleeping alone.

Traipsing naked into my dark room, I saw my phone light up where I’d tossed it on the nightstand.

I peeled back the black silken sheets and fell onto the bed with my phone and squinted at the screen in the dark.

**Marnie:** Heard what you did to Fern. I’ll see you on Monday.

So that was how it would play out, I surmised, and glanced at the door to make sure I’d left it cracked open.

I'd moved rooms some weeks ago. My old room was in the other wing of the house. But as Dad grew busier, Henry's night terrors grew more frequent, and I got sick of stubbing my toes on shit in the middle of the night as I raced to Henry's room when his screams woke me, and he cried for a mother who was no longer here.

So I moved closer to him, and as a result, farther away from Elijah Deluxe.

Not that it mattered. I was willing to bet he didn't sleep even when he was here. At least, not in the room he once shared with Mom.

In the end, I chose not to respond to her text message.

A little tit for tat never hurt. Treat them mean, keep them keen. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Etcetera, etcetera.

Excitement kept me awake for minutes that yawned into hours, chasing away bone-deep exhaustion. That wondrous drug named hope was alive and well once more. Possibility swarmed, stinging every brain cell and keeping my eyes trained on the filigreed ceiling.

I could almost taste it—the reality that would be mine again. I could, and I would, get that missing piece of my old self back.

I would get her back.

Rolling over, I noticed a faint orange glow coming from across the giant hedge outside. It seeped into the cracks of my navy-colored drapes and brought her startled blue eyes and squeaking gasp to the forefront of my mind.

*Fern*, Marnie's text had said.

My naughty, nosy neighbor.

I whispered her name, puzzled over it. Odd yet fitting. In the way she was also fittingly odd as fuck.

Still, I much preferred Red.

# FIVE

## *Jude*

Monday brought with it a whole lot of staring as I slipped inside the arched oak doors of shithole academy and waded through the loitering mongrels to my locker two halls over.

I didn't know who'd stuck a naked selfie of me online, a video of me jacking off maybe, but I didn't care. Dad hadn't come home. He'd flown to London for Nightingale, and I'd hardly slept eight hours all weekend.

Neither was possible anyway, but you'd think I'd nailed a princess with the way they were all gawking. I'd never given Marnie the privilege of a naked picture of myself, let alone taking part in something as delicious as filming ourselves fucking.

Much to her dismay, all she'd received was the odd selfie or two. The most sordid was of her in a bikini. I was wearing a shirt. From memory, she was kissing my cheek, and I was glaring at her phone. Come to think of it, I was pretty damn sure that was most photos of us together.

It was a miracle she hadn't dumped me long before the night that stole me from her.

As fate would have it, I wasn't far from the truth.

One of the asswipes who'd been with Gary at Ray's Little Pot of Sunshine just so happened to be filming a TikTok, and it just so happened to feature the moment Fern got real acquainted with her coffee in the background.

"Well then," I said, watching Fern stare at her soggy lap.

"Yup." Zeek, one of our running backs, pocketed his phone.

It wasn't like I felt bad. After all I'd done and hadn't done, it took a lot for me to feel any kind of guilt, yet... my muscles clenched.

"Hey." Marnie's perfume, one of her many Marc Jacobs favorites, infiltrated.

Zeek joined Silas down the hall, for which I was fucking grateful. Especially when Marnie's teeth released her lip, and she gazed up at me

with those dark brown eyes, looking unsure.

“Nice weekend?” I said, immediately wanting to bang my head into the locker behind me until my stupidity oozed out of my ears.

Her glossed lips curved, and she tucked some hair behind her ear. “I guess. You?”

Great. Small talk with someone I’d known for as long as I’d known my pubes. With someone I knew in varying naked ways.

Internally screaming, I forced my mouth into some semblance of a smile and nodded. “Sure, yeah.” *Say something honest*, I berated myself. Any-fucking-thing would do at this rate. “Uh, Dad worked all weekend, and Rhiannon was sick, so I just hung out with Henry.”

There, that wasn’t so hard.

But then Marnie’s brows furrowed. “You should’ve called me. I could’ve come—”

“Yo, Jude! I hear you owe that red-haired chick a new skirt,” Phin hollered, right as said red-haired chick walked through the throng of students in the hall.

Her head was held high, regardless of the snickering and the comments of, “Great video, so funny.”

I waited for her cheeks to redden, only half-aware of Marnie still standing beside me.

They didn’t. Red just walked on by without a care or a look in my direction until she’d found her locker.

Marnie was saying something, but rather than ask her to repeat it, I just nodded.

Accusation and anger raised her voice. “Wait, so you spoke to her over the weekend and not me?”

“What?” I almost shouted, giving her my full attention.

In doing so, I found a snake coiled and ready to strike. Her eyes were wet, her forehead scrunched with outrage, and her arms were clutching her tablet to her chest as if she were going to smack me with it if she didn’t hold on tight. “You just said you did.”

“I didn’t hear the question properly.”

“Oh, nice,” she said, sniffing as she rolled her eyes. “We’re not even back together, and you’re already not listening to me.”

*Dear whoever is in charge of this shitshow, please roll my ass back home and make sure I stay the fuck in bed.*

I'd learned the hard way that no one was coming to save me, and even if they did, the cost of help was a piece of your soul.

I no longer had anything to bargain with.

"Look," I said, exasperated and unable to hide it.

Marnie's eyes, aimed behind me, widened imperceptibly, and I flung a glance over my shoulder to see Fern coming back down the hall.

Frustration and something I couldn't aptly name curled my fingers, my blunt nails scoring into my palms.

Red's gaze fell upon me, and I waited for her to scowl, to give me anything other than the smile slowly shaping her tempting lips.

Without even knowing her, I had a foreboding feeling that this girl could ruin everything if I didn't stop her.

So, as fast as lightning, my foot kicked out at her ankle, then retreated.

Red tumbled to the marble floor, her tablet flying across it and sliding into some dude's leather shoes.

Her long legs splayed, skirt flying up to grant us a brief preview of lace-trimmed black panties bedecked with apricot polka dots. They hugged half her ass, and annoyance festered when I realized every wanker in this shithole, including myself, could now see just how perfect those creamy globes were.

She muttered something while sitting up and pulling her skirt down, and pushed her long curled locks from her face.

The shock faded. Everything turned deathly quiet. Then laughter erupted, and people began clearing out as the first bell rang.

Marnie squeezed my arm, turning her face into my bicep to muffle her giggles.

Slowly, as if she wasn't a spectacle everyone was still staring at, Fern pulled herself up onto her feet. Her legs wobbled like that of a newborn foal in those heels, and I half-thought she might topple over again all by herself. Someone had the decency to collect her tablet and hand it over.

I didn't stick around to see if she'd finally gotten the message. Clutching Marnie's hand in mine, I walked her down the opposite hall to class.



“I don’t care if you’re drunk. You’re still an asshole,” Marnie said through her teeth as she tried to haul me out of her car.

“Would you fucking stop it?” Using too much strength, I tugged my arm free and fell back across the center console of her Jeep, wincing when something dug into my back. “Mother of an extraterrestrial fucker.”

“Did you seriously just call me that right now?”

“No,” I said. “Your stupid ass c—”

“Unbelievable,” she spat, then shouted, “Out! Get out right fucking now, Jude, before I call the cops and have them come help me.”

The cops wouldn’t do shit when they saw who they were dealing with. Thankfully, even in my inebriated state, I refrained from mentioning that out loud, but I couldn’t help but goad. “Go ahead,” I said, a loud yawn following. “If you want to be that dramatic, who am I to stop you?”

“Dramatic?” A fist came down on my shoulder, followed by a thud to my back. I curled into myself, bearing the assault with gritted teeth. “You just have to ruin everything, always. Every damn thing.”

Who would have thought a night out to celebrate us and our attempt to “reconnect” would wind up with me being beaten up by the girl I loved? Sure as fuck not me, or else I’d have kept my ass at home and told her to come blow me instead.

Nothing says celebration better than seeing your spunk dribble down your girl’s chin.

But alas, Melanie had just turned eighteen, and one cannot turn eighteen without showing people who don’t give a damn about you how special you are.

I’d made one comment. *One*. If you asked me, Melanie had it coming, crapping on about how awesome it was she’d been accepted into Harvard, and how she couldn’t believe it.

I’d just blurted the truth, which never fucking ended well, but whatever.

“Telling everyone Melanie bought her way into her dream school,” Marnie muttered now, pulling at my eight-hundred-dollar jet black T-shirt

so hard, I felt some of the stitching snap. “Just who do you think you are, anyway?”

“Well, it’s true,” I cried. “Not to mention obvious to everyone with how late her acceptance letter to Hogwarts came.” I snorted then, peering up at her to whisper conspiratorially, “She’s a muggle, Marns, not a true wizard.”

She stilled at that, laughter creasing her eyes and flattening her lips.

Finally, she released me to drag a hand through her hair. It swished back over her bare shoulders, the breeze knocking strands across her cheek. “I miss you.”

“I’m right here, baby,” I said, climbing out of the car and throwing my arms out with a grin.

She smiled, but it didn’t linger long. “Sometimes, like right now, you are.” With a loaded exhale, she rounded the car. “Good night, Jude. Don’t offend the trees when you walk up the drive.”

Watching her leave, I stood there a moment, leaves twirling across the empty road. No light could be seen thanks to the houses behind me and across the street sitting too deep within their properties, shrouded by trees. Said trees bent toward one another, swaying and twisting.

Digging my keys out of my pocket, I held them up to the sensor at the gates and waited for the side gate to click open.

The house was quiet, every light out and the scent of teriyaki chicken staining the air from dinner. How like Rhiannon to make one of my favorites when I wasn’t home.

Still, the idea of eating anything right now made me want to hurl, courtesy of too much bourbon and weed.

I settled for a tea, taking it upstairs with me to check on Henry, who’d fallen asleep with his arm and leg dangling off the bed. I set my mug on his nightstand and situated his limbs back on his bed, leaving his door cracked and the lamp on.

The tea was warm when I exited the shower. I was less wasted but still far too drunk to go to bed. I’d eventually learned not to pass out when I was drunk if I could avoid it but rather, to wait a little while to let reality seep back in first.

A buzzkill indeed, but I was ever so thankful the next morning.

After stumbling into some briefs, I plucked up my book and headed for the balcony.

I wasn't sure why I'd thought I could read when just attempting to made my head spin. I tossed the book inside the French doors and reclined on the deck chair.

Across the hedge, the moon bounced off the roof of a black Porsche. January's car.

Finishing my tea, I wondered when it would be Fern's turn, or if January planned on keeping her weird little Red tucked away from our world forever.

Pondering why it'd taken me so long to notice the second tier's daughter in the first place, flashes of that ass and her luscious mouth infiltrated.

The most devious of our kind always laid low, waiting for an opportune moment to attack.

The memory of her lips diving onto mine, the desperate twitching of her hands upon my cheeks, seared. Jumbled pieces attempted to click together, but they fell away before I could make sense of them.

Fern Denane made no sense to me at all.

I made to get up and search for those yearbooks, but I stilled at the bob of a shadow.

Without removing my eyes from the balcony across the hedge from mine, I reached for a white decorative pebble from the potted cacti behind me.

A soft glow emanated from behind her drapes. I wasn't sure if she was awake, and I had no idea what time it was. Wanting to placate and reassure Marnie, I hadn't so much as laid eyes on Red all week.

So I threw the rock at her doors.

# SIX

## *Fern*

A sharp clack upon the glass door had me dropping my diary into the top drawer of my nightstand and rising from the bed.

Opening the curtain, I discovered a shirtless male wrapped in moonlight and shadow across the hedge.

I gave my head a quick shake, sure I was dreaming. Had he not intentionally spilled coffee all over me and then tripped me in front of half the senior class?

No, I might have been obsessed, but I wasn't stupid. Both those things definitely happened, and the message behind them was clear—stay away.

So when he curled his finger in his direction, beckoning for me to go to him, I immediately dropped the curtain.

It had to be another trick.

Then another tap sounded, louder this time, and I worried he might crack the glass if he didn't stop it. Opening the door in my sleep shorts and a loose tank, I crossed my arms over my chest as if that'd solve the problem of being braless.

"Wanna play, Little Red?"

Leaning into the doorframe, I struggled to make out his expression in the dark and with the distance. "I'm not so sure I'm fond of your games, Judy."

"Judy?" he said, aghast with a bark of laughter. His head tilted, green eyes piercing. "I dare you to come over here and call me that."

"I'm good where I am." Though I couldn't deny the electricity that zapped my heart at the mere idea of stepping foot in his domain.

"Fern," he said, soft and without that dark humor. "Come to me."

My name had never sounded so good, and my breath froze at the velvet loaded demand. Toes scrunching over the door runner, I forced myself to stay where I was. "How do I know you won't do something horrible

again?” I didn’t know why I bothered asking after what he’d done, after he’d embarrassed me the way he had, but I did know I still wanted him.

I’d probably always want him.

Maybe I needed to let him mess with me enough to rid that desire.

“I guess you’ll just have to take a chance and see what happens.” He was grinning now, those perfect pearly whites flashing under the glow of the moon and stars.

If his actions hadn’t been enough, then those words said it all. He was playing with me.

I was the toy, and he was the spoiled brat.

Would he touch me reverently, or toss and discard me as soon as he was bored? I wasn’t sure why he was doing this; all I knew was I had his attention.

And as I stepped back inside, slipping my feet into my flip-flops before ducking back out and taking the stairs to the verandah below, I remembered how hot the shame of being his victim had felt.

It singed in a way that would leave a mark, but his actions also validated something I’d been curious about since that stolen kiss outside the dorms at school. I’d managed to crawl beneath his skin, and call me desperate—we already knew I was—but I’d much rather live there than not exist to him at all.

I’d found a gap to slip through in the hedge years ago near the rear of our yards.

The sound of the ocean grew closer as my flip-flops crushed the grass. I failed to remember the last time I’d wandered to the sand behind the low fence, hidden by birch trees and small dunes.

Before my father had left, he’d often take me to visit the ocean and build sandcastles with me. I vaguely remembered visiting on my own sometime after he’d gone, but I hadn’t been able to see through my tears long enough to build anything.

I could hear the lapping, the quiet hum of the sea that surrounded our entire world.

He was out there, somewhere, and perhaps looking at the water was a reminder of that.

Of the fact I remained in our high society fueled bubble while he’d found pastures far richer than anything money could buy.

Slipping through the break in the violently wrapped branches, I slunk into Jude's backyard and almost tripped over a long-forgotten seesaw.

It squeaked, but I wasn't worried about January discovering I was gone. She was notorious for drugging herself to sleep, and she wouldn't wake until exactly seven hours after knocking herself out.

As though he'd watched me, Jude had left the French doors of his back porch open.

Stepping over a soccer ball and walking up the hedge-lined sandstone steps, all I could make out was a dark house. No tall boy with midnight hair and jewels for eyes.

He was nowhere to be seen, even when I quietly stepped inside and clicked the doors closed behind me.

My eyes, adjusted to the dark and with the help of the moon, took in every shadowed feature. The miniature museum the Delouxes called home was old money meets new furniture. Brown leather and rich burgundy rugs filled the large living area leading outside to the porch I'd just left. I soon encountered the kitchen, a monstrosity of marble and stainless steel.

Kicking off my flip-flops at the base of a winged staircase, I glanced around, knowing there were two sets in a house this large. I had no idea where the other was, nor where it would lead. Just as I had no idea where this one would take me.

Even so, I wrapped my hand around the cool wooden railing, the marble steps smooth from being abused by many feet. They narrowed in the center but fanned out at the top, where I stood on a landing and glanced around. Leafy plants in giant pots perched on either side of arched bay windows that overlooked the backyard.

An owl screeched outside. Every hair on my body began to rise. Maybe this was a trick, after all.

Then the sound of a hinge protesting broke the quiet, and I headed in that direction. A game of cat and mouse. Beast and bird. He wanted me to grow comfortable with his detachment. All the more satisfying when he was ready to pounce.

I couldn't help but notice how bare the walls were, how even the smallest of homey touches failed to have a presence in this cold and empty house.

Only, it wasn't empty.

I crept by a cracked open door. A faint light shone inside, and I knew the room belonged to Henry, Jude's little brother. I also knew his dad wasn't home, that he hadn't been home in days, or else I might have reconsidered this lunacy.

Who was I kidding? I'd absolutely still be here, chasing a poltergeist intent on mocking me.

*A sexy as fuck poltergeist*, I thought, coming to a dead stop when I rounded the corner to find Jude leaning in the doorway to what I guessed had to be his bedroom.

Shirtless and pantless.

Wicked as sin.

His arms unfolded from his chest, his pecs and abs twitching as he straightened. "So glad you could make it."

Struggling to keep my eyes from his charcoal briefs, his *very tight* briefs, I blinked and cleared my throat. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

He chuckled, the sound quiet and whispering over my skin like a warm evening breeze. "You're too much fun." I frowned, but he stepped back, gesturing to the dimly lit room behind him. "Do come inside."

I bit my lips, but he could still read the smile in my eyes and returned it with that devastating grin. As I walked past, every muscle stiffened in preparation for an attack. But besides the brushing of his fingers over mine before he closed the door, nothing happened.

I couldn't decide whether I was disappointed or relieved.

Standing on the edge of a dark brown low-pile rug, I absorbed my fascination's lair. His bed was dark, almost as black as the floor-to-ceiling shelving lining two of the walls. Inside them lived so many books it was not so much a bedroom but half a library.

I swore I had a mini orgasm. My feet carried me across the rug, bypassing the monstrous four-poster bed with its luscious-looking inky black bedding to a set of glittering spines.

I reached out to trail my finger over them, but a warm burst of air, coupled with the firm heat meeting my hip, stopped me.

My hand fell to my side, my body softening and stiffening under his touch, yet my eyes wouldn't unglue themselves from the books.

His hand trembled when a weird noise escaped, traveling with my next exhale. "Like what you see?" A finger on his other hand gave the loose

strap over my shoulder a nudge, and it slipped down my upper arm. “I know I do,” he said.

At the same time, I said on a stuttered breath, “So much.”

He paused, another chuckle filling my ear. The dark, caustic rasp evoked a shiver that elicited a rumbling groan, goose bumps pebbling every exposed piece of my skin. “A book lover, I presume.”

“Yes,” I whispered, falling back into him.

His lips ghosted over my shoulder, featherlight. I felt my knees buckle. As if he could, too, his large hand squeezed my hip, the other trailing fingers down my arm. “Can I touch you?”

The question both shocked and thrilled me. Shocked because I expected him to take, wanted him to, and thrilled because, well... duh. “Please do,” I said, thinking I might perish on the spot when his hand crawled under the worn cotton of my tank, sliding across my stomach.

“Did you purposely come over here without a bra?”

His voice was hypnotic and low, heating my flesh and searing my ability to think. “Um.” I swallowed thickly. “Well, yeah.”

His hand crawled up, up, up until it was wrapped firmly around my breast. A harsh squeeze accompanied a harsher rush of expelled breath. “Christ,” he muttered. “It fills my hand completely.”

Then I felt him. He shifted closer, aligning the bottom half of his body with mine.

He was so hard, and I was beyond terrified. What if he asked me... “On the bed,” he said, interrupting my panic. “And worry not, I won’t be fucking you.”

I tried not to scowl as he released me, suddenly freezing in his absence. If only for mere seconds before I was lying on silken sheets, and he was crawling over me.

*He sleeps here.* I took a moment to let that sink in. Every night, he laid this close to me.

“I’m guessing you’ve never made out with someone, let alone found yourself in someone else’s bed, have you, Red?”

I snapped out of my imaginings as the real thing, flesh and bone and moonlit muscle hovered above me, staring. I couldn’t talk, didn’t trust myself to. So I shook my head, the sliding of my hair over his soft pillowcase too loud in my ears, just like my heartbeat.

His lips parted slightly, green eyes glowing as they flitted over my features. “How about another first?”

I was going to die. I was sure of it. “You tripped me.”

What.

The.

*Fuck.*

Of course, I would screw up what could be the only chance I had to make out with Jude Deloux in his bedroom. This could be the only time I ever stepped foot in his room or laid beneath him on a bed, hoping he’d kiss the life from my lungs, and I just had to go and blurt something stupid.

But it wasn’t stupid. I knew that, and so did he.

Still, I laid as still as soon-to-be roadkill, hoping the truck wouldn’t squash me all the while knowing it would.

“I thought you were someone else,” he finally said, though he was smiling.

Why was he smiling? Ugh, his face looked so delicious as it was, but when he smiled, I wanted to lick its perfectness.

“Liar,” I hissed, about ready to squeeze my eyes closed forever or punch myself.

Across my lips, his whispering laughter traveled as his head lowered to mine. “Let me catch you,” he murmured, nudging my chin back with his nose to kiss my neck. “Albeit, rather belatedly...” He parted my legs, his hand slipping inside my sleep shorts and panties.

Oxygen fled my lungs on a hoarse breath. Fingers. Thick, gentle fingers were touching me, parting me. My thighs both widened and clenched on impulse, and I heard him mutter something that sounded like, “Holy mother of sweet hell,” before his mouth latched onto my neck and sucked, hard.

Sweet hell was right. Anxious, I laid there, wanting to coast along the pleasure he was wringing from my body. He introduced me to feelings and sensations I’d never felt before, and all he was doing was touching me.

Yet terror at what he might think of me being all wet, of my innocence, and wondering what it was I should be doing, kept me stiff as a board.

“Relax,” he whispered, releasing my neck and pressing soft kisses to the curve of my shoulder. “You feel so good, Little Red. Breathe and allow me to make you feel just how good.”

At hearing those words, feeling their honesty with every touch of his fingers and lips, I was a pile of goo within seconds. My stomach tightened,

and an odd buzzing erupted from somewhere far, far away. Heat gathered low, my legs twitching.

Jude's lips roamed up my neck, teeth nipping at my chin, and then he was staring down at me, watching me with different eyes. Those bottle-green eyes were heated and hooded. His nostrils flared a little. His hair sprinkled down over his forehead.

Tentatively, I reached up to push it back, and he groaned.

He wanted *me*.

Not only did he want me, but I could feel the tension coiling inside him, the hunger he was keeping leashed.

He wanted to devour me.

And so he did. He kissed me, hard and deep, and then he was between my legs, his hand leaving to rid me of my shorts and panties.

"Jude," I said or tried to say. For it was so choked, I didn't think he heard me over the sound of his throaty groan when he spread my thighs apart.

I stiffened again, about to sit up, but then his mouth was on me, his tongue doing exactly what his fingers had been just moments ago.

I melted and mewled, stars bursting among the shadows on the molded ceiling. "Shit."

His laughter rumbled against my skin, his hands wrapped around my thighs, and then I started to shake. I'd given myself enough orgasms to know what was happening, but that still didn't prepare me for the onslaught of pleasure that ransacked my body from head to toe.

My hand slapped over my mouth as a garbled moan left it, and my legs tried to squeeze Jude's beautiful head.

I hadn't realized I'd closed my eyes until I opened them to find him gazing down at me once more. "You're fucking delicious."

I was breathing as though I'd just ran a half marathon. His eyes darted to my breasts, and he dropped low to capture a beaded nipple, dampening the cotton of my tank with his mouth.

That was nice and all—no, it was fucking incredible—but not as good as kissing him. And I so desperately wanted to kiss him, especially after the gift he'd just bestowed on me.

So I did. I grabbed his head and brought it to mine, my taste buds exploding with the taste of myself and his toxic, drugging flavor. I was on

his tongue, the roof of his mouth, and it was heady enough that spasms erupted between my legs.

Jude pulled away, breathing heavy with his forehead scrunched. "I just ate you."

I felt my own crinkle. "So?"

His eyes widened, and then he grinned. "Chicks usually don't dig being kissed afterward."

I wasn't aware he'd been with anyone other than Marnie, and I doubted he had. Which meant she was an idiot.

We already knew that.

"Don't assume you know me just because I'm inexperienced."

A brow rose. "Oh?"

I moved his mouth back to mine, kissing each corner of it before sucking on his lower lip. "I might not know much, but I already know if it involves you, I'm going to love it."

He stiffened for a heartbeat, and I heard him swallow before he rasped to my mouth, "You're going to be my ruination, Red."

We both knew that wasn't true.

We both knew he'd be mine instead.

He rolled, taking me with him and running his hands down my sides, his mouth fused to mine. Desperate and growling low, he sucked, and he swiped, and he stole brand new pieces of me I never knew existed with every passing moment.

Gripping my ass, he pressed up into me, rocking my damp center over the bulging, hot member inside his briefs.

Threading his fingers into my hair, he whispered into my mouth, "What are you afraid of, pretty Red?"

He flipped me to my back again as I asked, breathless, "Why do you want to know that?"

His hands on my breasts squeezed while his lips danced over the skin beneath them. "Everyone's afraid of something. Multiple somethings, usually." His tongue slid down my stomach, and I lost my vision as the room began to swirl once more. "Tell me."

"Moths," I panted when he reached my mound, needing him to both stop and drop lower.

"Moths?" he repeated, humor lightening his voice.

“Yes,” I said, swallowing as the memory of my dad and I camping out in the backyard closed in to break the magic. We’d lasted until two in the morning, and then something had landed upon my cheek, and I’d woken with a scream.

My dad had snorted, coming awake with a start before leaping to his feet and almost knocking the tent over due to his height. I’d screamed, pointing at the offending giant fluttering over the lantern between our sleeping bags, and he’d laughed, rubbing his tired eyes before leaving the tent.

He’d returned minutes later with a container to trap it in, but I was a shaking, shivering, crying mess. “It’s only a moth, Cherub,” he’d said.

But it was furry and huge and had freaky looking patterns etched upon its wings. Don’t even get me started about the grotesque... “Fern.”

The terse use of my name brought me back. Jude sat beside me with his brows lowered.

“What happened?”

“You were staring at the ceiling, completely frozen.”

I clutched his sheets over my lower half, self-conscious and cold. “Oh,” I whispered. “Sorry.”

Jude was quiet for a minute, but I couldn’t look at him.

He was going to kick me out, call me crazier than thou, and never lay eyes on me again.

An idea sprang to life, and I sat up, throwing him a grin I hoped was believable. “Can I see you?”

Jude stared at me with cool eyes, and I knew the answer would be no before he smirked. Rising from the bed, he crossed the room. “Playtime’s over, Red. Be gone when I get back.”

The bathroom door closed.

Dismissed.

Something stabbed at my sternum, but I didn’t allow it entry. Instead, I collected my panties and shorts and willed my eyes not to well as I stood and tugged them on.

His phone lit up on the nightstand, and I couldn’t help myself. I walked closer to take a look.

**Marnie:** I hope you’ve sobered up. I’m still pissed as hell, Jude. Call me when you learn how to grovel.

Pissed as hell? I wondered what he did as I eyed the books on his nightstand. There were three, and I memorized the titles and the placement of the bookmarks before the first part of Marnie's text slammed home.

My head swung to the bathroom door, the sound of running water coming from the other side.

He was drunk? He hadn't seemed drunk, and I hadn't tasted alcohol. I'd tasted spearmint and tea. That wasn't good enough to stop the sinking that had already been taking place from wobbling my lips.

I brushed a stray tear from beneath my eye, inwardly berating myself for the show of weakness, even though he couldn't see. He was a shark, and the second he scented blood, he'd come looking for something to eat.

With one last glance back at his books, the rumpled sheets, and the too-tidy spines and football trophies upon the sprawling shelves, I walked out the same way I'd come.

# SEVEN

## *Jude*

Marnie was standing out the front of school Monday morning, leaning against one of two black rearing horse statues by the stairs. “I’m still waiting for that apology.”

“You’ll be waiting for the rest of your life,” I couldn’t stop myself from saying.

“Jude?” she said, aghast as she followed me.

I swept between a couple, enjoying their annoyance, and lifted my chin at Adam, the most recent failure on our football team.

Marnie’s tiny hand grabbed my wrist before Gary could harass me. Glancing around, I sneered at the sets of eyes pinned on us, prompting them to look away.

“Seriously?” she said. “You called me a motherfucker.”

“I was talking about your car, and you fucking hit me.” I screwed around with my tie, then gave up and left it undone around my neck. “Like twenty-one times, but who’s counting.”

Her cheeks turned crimson. “Oh, yeah.” With a nod, as if she’d decided something, she then offered me a grim smile. “Sorry. Guess I got mad.”

*Guess she got mad.*

For the love of fuck. I needed a coffee with a shot of bourbon, maybe a line of coke. Once again, I should’ve stayed home, but no great deed should go unwitnessed. Said deed was the reason my eyeballs felt like sandpaper, and for the ache in my limbs.

I hadn’t slept since Saturday night. Even then, Henry had woken with a nightmare, the first one that week, but it made up for it by keeping him awake until four in the morning.

“Sure,” I finally conceded. “Let’s do this some other time. I have a nap waiting for me in bio.”

I walked on without looking at her or anyone else and stalked through the human-stained halls to my locker. Closing it, I came face-to-face with

Marnie once more.

Bloody hell. What was her deal? It was like she knew I'd stuck my tongue in Red's cunt last Friday night. Remembering the way she'd moaned, shocked and damn near hysterical as she came on my mouth...

Marnie's hand clasped mine. She stepped into me, chasing thoughts that never should've arrived away. "I don't know if you're able to give me what I need, but I do know I still love you."

Breath whooshed out of me so fast that I swore it was the reason I swayed into her. I folded my hand around hers and nodded. "Where does that leave us?" Maybe all was not lost after all.

If I could still get her back, then she'd erase some of the darkness. I could already feel the shadows masking my soul begin to retreat at her tender touch.

Marnie's smile was coy as she rose onto her toes, her lips aimed at mine.

My eyes closed, an exhale loaded with relief washing over her lips. I heard a whistle from some jackass, but I hardly noticed. My tablet clapped her in the back as my arms wound around her tiny waist, and my mouth opened to welcome her tongue.

Imminent sunshine was halted by a thunderous bout of laughter, and then a scream bloodcurdling enough to reach the marrow of my bones. Every hair on my body stood at attention as I reared back from Marnie and glanced down the hall to discover Fern sitting on the floor.

Her arms were tucked over her head, her knees to her chest, as a thousand black, red, and brown moths flew above her and swarmed the halls.

Cruel, most definitely, but fuck if I didn't smirk with an immense sense of satisfaction.

Hey, it took twenty phone calls and a back-alley meetup with a reptile breeder in order to get what I needed. Who would've thought that would've been the easy part? Getting those dusty fucks inside her locker, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter of difficulty.

I'd tried to enlist Silas for help, but he'd laughed, giving me a resounding, "Fuck no," before the line went dead. Of course, his girlfriend was BFFs with Red. I should've already guessed that, and if not for Silas's still pure heart, that might have been an issue.

Every initiated member of Nightingale had a key to all facilities on the island, including the schools.

So, I'd trudged into school an hour before midnight with plans to empty the box of moths inside Fern's locker. I'd stood in front of it, feeling like a right wanker for not foreseeing the fact I hadn't a way to break inside the damn thing without ruining the lock.

I wasn't sure what made me try it, but after two failed attempts, I entered my birth date.

The door had clicked and swung open a little, the sound like a sledgehammer meeting glass in the dark of night. All the while, I'd stood there staring at the books and cosmetic bag inside for God only knew how long.

I'd ended up fetching a grinder and welder from the metal shop in the basement to cut open and then fix the top of her locker. I'd welded exactly eight times before in my life. Each time during metalwork, of which I'd taken out of curiosity but quickly grew bored with when I realized it was just another thing I excelled at.

A bunch of moths escaped, and I'd spent at least thirty minutes chasing them through the halls, trying to capture them. A part of me could kind of see why Red hated them. They weren't the nicest things to touch, that much was for sure.

I was no pro, but even I was proud as I'd stood on a ladder, leaning against the locker beside Fern's to marvel at my handiwork. So what if a handful were still roaming the academy? I didn't give a shit. Hopefully, one would find her later on—double win.

Cory raced down the hall, tugging her friend from the ground and clasp her cheeks. She said something. "Breathe," by the looks of it.

Marnie was giggling, clinging to me as she whispered, "Did you do that?"

The smirk I was still wearing said it all, and when Fern finally lifted her head to look for me, I kissed my prize, then dragged her away from the shitshow I'd caused.



“Jude.”

I glanced up from my book to find my father standing in the doorway of my room.

Dressed in his usual suit pants and slate gray dress shirt, the top buttons undone for casual air, he gestured to the closed drapes that were blocking the only source of natural light. “Do you have some type of aversion to sunlight now?”

“Funny,” I said. “Not and no.” What I had was an aversion to the girl next door. I’d asked Rhiannon to wash the sheets yesterday after school on account of her scent still lingering upon my pillow. Strawberry yogurt and something toxic like floral shampoo.

Though I did sniff the place that had once been damp, courtesy of my fantastic tongue, before allowing her in.

I swore I could still smell her cunt, and it rushed to my head faster than any drug.

“It’s almost dinnertime,” I finally said when my father took it upon himself to enter my room and inspect my shelves.

He ran a finger over them, finding them dust-free, of course, and huffed. “I’m willing to bet that fact means nothing and that they’ve been shut for days. It’s stuffy as fuck in here.”

“Is there a point to this visit other than displaying your obvious envy of my den?”

He turned, lifting a brow. Like me, he had dark hair that was thicker at the top and slightly cropped on the sides. Unlike me, he combed his back. Unlike him, I preferred not to look like an obnoxious dick. My shining personality portrayed that just fine on its own.

His eyes were bright blue instead of green, just like Henry’s. I got my weapons from my mother. But I did have his dramatically square jaw and long straight nose.

“You’re getting more grays,” I said in explanation for staring at him too long, then returned my attention to my book.

“I thought I’d say hello, smart-ass. I just got in.”

“Hello,” I said, pretending to read. “Or should I say goodbye? Being that you’ll probably leave before sunrise.”

“Jude,” he clipped. “Cut it out. I have enough rubbish to deal with without adding your petulant attitude to the pile.”

I knew that was likely true. He was the mayor of Peridot Island, after all. Still, he'd managed to rule over our small rotund world just fine while still acknowledging his family before. There were other members to delegate tasks to, not to mention a legit building in town filled with secretaries, personal assistants, and the like.

"Petulant?" I said, bookmarking the page and swinging my legs over the chaise in the corner by the French doors. "I prefer to call it pissed off." Yes, I might've peeked out the drapes a time or two. No, I didn't care if she was crying her eyes out across the hedge. But she hadn't been at school today. Disappointing, to say the least. I thought my Red had more mettle.

"You have everything you've ever wanted. You're in. You can visit her anytime you please." I heard him clicking away on his phone and glanced over to find him staring at it, one hand tucked in his pocket. "You simply choose not to."

And I thought my heart was black.

It turned out that it was just gray in comparison. For if he opened his fucking eyes, he'd see why I couldn't do that. "There's nothing to see."

His fingers paused, but he kept his gaze on his phone. "She's made improvement."

Emotion clogged my throat—slimy, dirty, and entirely unwelcome.

I swallowed it and coughed. "How wonderful."

Dad sighed and walked to the door, but then he stopped. "Do I need to call in a favor?"

I frowned, lowering my book beside me to the velvet chaise. "What for?"

His eyes penetrated mine, waiting and assessing in that eerie way of his. "To find you someone to talk to. Discreetly."

If anything was worse than failing an initiation you'd waited years for and fucking up your life, I'd yet to find out what the hell that could possibly be. Dad's second and the other higher-ups still didn't know about my botched attempt, and of course, my father would never let me say a word aloud about it.

I knew why, and my frosted spirit warmed a little at the way he was trying to protect me. Not from hurting anyone else, but from further damaging myself.

Belatedly, I shook my head.

I felt him watching me for long moments, and then I heard his Italian shoes clipping down the hall outside.

It wasn't that I had an issue with talking to some therapist. It was that I knew I'd already shamed this family enough, and no amount of money could quiet someone with intel enough to take down the alpha of Peridot's secret showrunners.

Nightingale.

We were but a rumor, but not once had any rumors come close to being facts.

I might not have liked my father, but he was still my father. Besides, I'd wanted this.

I'd wanted this enough to hand over half my soul for it.

Nothing, not even a therapist, could help me get that back.

# EIGHT

## *Fern*

“Clint’s an idiot,” I heard my mom tell Cory from the safety of my room. “So old-fashioned he’s already reached his expiration date. Just ignore him.”

Cory and January gossiped more than Cory and I did, and if there was someone my mother seemed to enjoy sharing her relationship woes with—if you could call them that—it was Coraline.

I’d once broached the subject with her, informing, “You totally don’t need to humor her; she’s crazy.”

“I happen to like crazy,” she’d said with a sharp look at me. “And I happen to find her interesting. You do know she owns two huge businesses, right? She’s an actual, legit badass, your mom.”

Three businesses, to be exact, the main source of income being the distillery on the fraying outskirts of the island that had once belonged to my grandparents. Their private plane had crashed on a return flight from New York when I was young, and they’d never found the bodies.

Mom had inherited it all.

Downstairs, they were discussing Silas’s parents, a hot topic between them given Clint and Sandra’s dislike of their son’s girlfriend. No status, no pedigree, and no wealth meant they did not approve. Silas didn’t care, and being their only remaining child—his older brother had disowned them and fled right after graduation—they could do nothing about it in fear of scaring him off, too.

Silas had set his sights on my best friend when I had on our first day of high school, and the rest was history.

If there was any couple I expected to survive all rounds of education and their debuts into the real world, it was Silas and Coraline.

I groaned, rolling over to bury my face in the pillow. How like Cory to come over and check on me only to get distracted with my mother over coffee first.

Finally, she arrived some minutes later, bouncing on the end of my bed with the dregs of said coffee, and asked, “On a scale of one to ten, how obsessed are you now with the asshole?”

Funny that she knew I still was.

I rolled to my back, sighing. *Ever the faithful idiot* would probably be printed upon my headstone when I eventually let the boy next door officially destroy me.

Boy, *pfft*.

He was all man, his scent and the overbearing carnal presence of him imprinted upon me forevermore. The feel of sinew wrapped in silken skin was trapped within the skin of my fingertips, and the taste of me on his tongue burned into my taste buds.

*What are you afraid of, pretty Red?*

I’d walked right to him and handed him the torch to light my heart aflame.

“A solid eleven.”

Cory half laughed, half groaned. “Jesus, Fern.”

“It’s fine.” It totally wasn’t.

“It’s so not fine,” she practically yelled. “I was so close to telling your mom.”

I sat up then. “Over my dead body and even then, that’s a firm hell no.”

Her lips twisted, head tilting. “Get out of bed and get ready for school then.”

“For real?” I said, grinning now because she had to be kidding. “You’re threatening me?”

“Damn right, I am.” She stood and crossed my room to my walk-in, expelling a sigh loud enough for me to hear as she entered. “Is that his cologne? I thought you’d at least stop adding to his shrine.”

Crinkling my nose, I threw off the comforter and stretched my arms above my head. “Let’s not get too carried away here.”

I’d had his cologne for a while now. She must have missed it upon her first inspection, but I decided not to point that out.

“Get in the shower,” she said, exiting with my school shirt and skirt in hand.

I winced, catching a whiff of last night’s dinner on my T-shirt. I hadn’t showered since Monday, and I’d only done so to rid the crawling, powdery

sensation of those winged beasts from my skin. I had a few tiny cuts from scrubbing too hard under the scalding spray.

Cory laid my clothes over the green polka-dotted armchair beside my bookcase. “Seriously, we’re going to be late.”

“I don’t wanna go. I’ll shower, but I’m giving myself another day.”

“You’re coming. I didn’t pay twenty dollars for an Uber for nothing. I need a ride back.”

Damn it and shit.

“Fine,” I huffed and walked to the shower.

Cory waited for me, smiling down at her phone when I exited the steam in my panties and bra and pulled my damp hair into a messy, high ponytail.

“Ten minutes until the bell.”

“We’re not going to make it in time,” I needlessly told her.

“I know, and I also know it’ll help you to slip right into class without everyone leering at you in the hallways, but I don’t want to be too late. Let’s go.”

She stood, and half-dressed, I cursed. “I haven’t even put mascara on.”

“Do it in the car,” she called. “I’ll drive.”

“Only if we can stop by Ray’s.” I needed more than coffee to survive what was surely coming my way, but coffee would have to do.



Lipstick and mascara on, I felt a little better about the mess that was my hair.

Pulling it back accentuated my cheekbones anyway, so whatever. Not to mention, some might be curious about where I’d gotten the hickey from. It was faint, but a red mark remained.

I was all too happy to let them wonder.

In the dining hall, I waited for a cheese croissant, thankful that the whispers and laughter had died down after second period.

Headmaster Taurin hadn’t so much as looked at me when we’d gone to his office to request a late slip. He had to have heard about the asshole

who'd broken into the school and vandalized my locker in order to fill it with deadly pests. I was sure of it.

Yet not a word had been said.

"He won't do anything," Cory had said, shoving her phone into the hidden pocket of her skirt. "And you don't want him to."

Her words had my mouth opening and closing. I clamped it shut when I acknowledged what she'd meant, and the fact that no, I didn't really want Jude in trouble.

Not because I liked him, but because it would indeed only mean more trouble for me.

Also, he hadn't vandalized my locker at all. I'd stared and stared at it after excusing myself to the bathroom during history. There was no sign of forced entry and no indication it'd been tampered with.

So it was then, Gale calling my name behind the counter with my croissant in hand, that I felt my face drain.

He knew the code to my locker.

Cory would never betray me like that, so he must have figured it out himself. I could almost imagine it. Him standing there, those deep green eyes narrowed upon the metal door.

I couldn't and wouldn't dare imagine what his expression had looked like once he'd guessed and guessed right.

"Sorry," I said to Gale.

"Them fancy high heels and lipstick haven't fixed that fairy dust brain of yours, I see," she said, chewing on a skewer. She waved her hand, dismissing me. "You looked better before anyhow. Now be gone."

I scowled, my painted lips falling open, then found Cory in the back of the long room. "You wouldn't believe what Gale just—"

"There's a party on Friday," she said at the same time.

I gestured for her to continue when she paused.

She splayed her hands. "Now, I know you're not a fan, but I want to go."

A small laugh left me, and I tore a chunk of pastry, pointing it at her. "Since when does something I don't like have to be your problem?" Cory didn't party often, but when she did, she went with Silas, of course.

I'd attempted to show my face at some, but Cory was always busy with Silas somewhere private, and no one cared to so much as say hi to me, let

alone hang out. So I'd see myself home and write about how I'd wished it'd been in my diary instead.

Lame, I know. But it was also kind of fun.

"Since I want you to come. I think it'll be good for you to actually drink a little more this time and give it more of a chance." She stabbed a piece of carrot with her fork. "Besides, everyone knows who you are now."

It would seem they most certainly did. I'd never dreamed of being popular. I'd never really cared. I did care about a certain green-eyed devil, though, and he was as popular as one could get.

Really, I probably should've put more thought into what I'd wished for.

A thought that followed when school let out and I found Jude leaning against my car. "She returns."

"Disappointed?"

"I was yesterday," he said, straightening and tucking his hands into his pockets. "Where were you?"

I told myself to stand perfectly still and give nothing away, all the while knowing I'd eventually fail. "Home."

He hummed, reaching out to drag a finger down the side of my cheek. I couldn't read his eyes because they were shielded behind his sunglasses. But I could read the war within his touch when his thumb ghosted over my bottom lip.

I wanted to scream at him. To wail at him and demand he tell me *why* he did that to me.

But if I knew anything about Jude, it was that he kept every single one of his cards close to his chest, and that to keep his attention, I must do the same.

"Jude," Silas called from farther in the trees at his truck by the fence. "You need to come watch this shit." Laughter followed, but I kept looking at Jude, and he kept looking at me.

With my heart pounding in my ears, I stared at my own reflection in my tormentor's sunglasses, wishing I could see his eyes when my lips wrapped around his thumb, my tongue flicking it.

I didn't need to see them. The stilling of his body, with the exception of his jaw clenching, told me all I needed to know.

He wasn't as done with me as he wanted himself to believe.

He stepped back, his voice gruff and low. "Have you had enough yet, Red?"

“Have you?” I dared ask, then dragged my fingers over the hickey he’d given me.

In answer, he laughed and walked away.



I’d been drunk before.

Cory and I had finished a bottle and a half of champagne on my kitchen floor the night of my eighteenth birthday. Mom had bought it for me, but we’d stolen the other from the fridge. We’d then proceeded to bake brownies and almost burned the house down.

It had been fun and all, but the next day was horrible.

I tried not to think about that as I sipped from my glass, an actual glass, of champagne.

The first of many pre-prom parties was underway, and if I planned to show up to any more, then I knew I should probably pace myself.

Gina’s house sat upon the cliff, a ten-minute drive from mine, and faced the woods that separated what most would call the rich side of the island from the commoners.

Her parents owned the power company. They also happened to be good friends with my mom. So whether she liked it or not, I was here, and she could sneer at me all night, but she couldn’t get rid of me, or her parents would skin her alive.

“Ferrrrn.” Silas slung a beefy arm around my shoulders.

Trying not to collapse under the weight of it, I faked a smile. “Silaaaas.”

He laughed, almost sending us to the floor. “I see what you did there.”

Cory watched him, concern tightening her smile. I wasn’t sure what she was so worried about, but I was sure I’d find out later. For now, I drank and listened to him ramble about how good it was to finally see me having some fun.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Loads.”

He released me and grabbed a bottle of wine from Jeff Springs, our star athlete, who balked.

“Easy, Jeffy,” Silas said, then belched, shaking his shoulder-length hair from his face. “Go see Gina and tell her I owe you one.”

Jeff shrugged and disappeared, likely to do just that. Willowy with breast implants and a killer smile, not many guys would pass up the chance to talk to Gina.

Taking the bottle from Silas after he’d popped the lid, I humored him by taking a huge sip.

I lowered it to find him grinning and giving me a dopey thumbs-up as he backed out of the room.

Cory made to follow, but she lost him in the crowd outside the living room and came back.

“He’s so wasted!” she shouted over the rising music.

“So?” I said, taking another sip and ditching my glass. I tried to make out the label but couldn’t see in the dim lighting coming from the lone chandelier above. “Isn’t that what you guys do at these things? Get wasted?”

She stole the bottle from me and drank.

I watched, my eyes bugging when she kept going. Swiping the back of her hand over her mouth, she shook her head. “Wow, that’s good.”

“Right.” I took it back and drank some more.

“He doesn’t usually get trashed,” she said, moving closer so I could hear. “He enjoys himself, sure, but he doesn’t take it too far.”

I lifted a shoulder. “Exams are coming, and his best friend’s a dick. Let him go.”

Cory seemed to ponder that for a minute, then took the bottle. “Speaking of Jude.” She made a show of looking around. “No sign of him.”

I was both pleased and immensely disappointed.

For maybe the first time in years, I lost the ability to think of him after Cory and I finished the bottle and went in search of another.

Laughing, we got sidetracked on the way to find Gina and somehow wound up playing pool with a bunch of guys from Ardent Falls University.

Leaning over the table, I racked up the balls. A set of hands landed on my hips, and I squeaked as I was lifted onto the table. “Enough pool,” the blond guy said. “You lose, so now you owe us that dance.”

I didn’t remember making any deals with this curly-haired surfer type, but when the music came on, I climbed to my feet anyway.

“Fern,” Cory said, laughing and grabbing for my ankles. “Get down, you idiot.”

“You should listen to your friend.”

As though the way he’d vanished from my mind, if only for a couple of hours, had summoned him, I looked over to find Jude standing in the arched doorway of the games room.

His jaw was granite, arms crossed over his chest, and those eyes... yeah, he was pissed.

I laughed. “Well, would you look who it is.” I made to reach for the surfer dude, but they were leaving. Even Cory had busied herself with her phone as Jude entered the room.

Stopping below me, he leaned back against the wall.

“What are you doing?” I said, confused as to what just happened.

Maybe I was drunk, or maybe I lacked the information needed to piece this weird as hell puzzle together.

“Waiting,” he said.

I sat down to climb off the table. He was there in an instant, gripping my waist when my foot slipped, and I almost rolled to the ground. “What for? Oh,” I said. “Right, Marnie’s here somewhere.”

As soon as my feet hit the floor, he stepped back and plucked his keys from his pocket with a glance at Cory. She waved him off, gesturing at her phone before leaving the room.

Too late, it dawned that he was apparently not here for Marnie but to take me home.

“Why?” Dumbfounded, I eyed him. In dark jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, he didn’t exactly look as though he was here to party, but I was sure his attire wouldn’t faze anyone.

It most certainly didn’t bother me. He looked good in anything.

“Just follow me.”

It wasn’t until I’d squeezed between partygoers and exited the three-story house that I realized he hadn’t waited for me.

He wouldn’t be seen walking with me.

The sting of that was almost worse than the hurt he’d caused by using one of my fears against me—both private wounds in public places.

Walking down the long drive, I stopped and leaned against a Mercedes near the gates. “I don’t want to go home.”

Jude sighed and turned back, his hands in his pockets. “What do you want then?”

His bland expression broke with silent laughter when I lurched off the car.

“What the fuck?” I stepped back some more as it rocked again, noticing the windows were fogged.

“Come on, Red.” He grabbed my wrist, dragging me after him, but save for whoever was in that car, no one was around to see him touching me. And I highly doubted they even knew we were out here.

“Were they...?”

“What do you think?” He opened the side gate for me, then the door of his waiting Range Rover on the other side. Swallowing, I walked over. Before I climbed in, his hot breath warmed my cheek. “Are you thinking of my lips around your clit?”

I nearly squealed, a shocked laugh erupting. “Well, I am now.”

His head fell back, a burst of laughter flying toward the moon.

How like my fascination to seek me out on such a night. When the moon was so full, the stars didn’t dare shine too bright for they didn’t stand a chance.

I was thankful for the side of the leather seat at my back as I let the sound seep inside my ears and travel to my chest. I’d heard him laugh like that countless times before, but it’d been so long. And to be the one who’d caused the rough melodic sound... “You have a great laugh.”

Sobering, he stared at me, then jerked his head at the car. “In.”

Clipping my seat belt on, I peered around the stark interior, absorbing how clean it was. So clean, as if the car had just left the lot.

Jude started the engine. “You never answered the first question.”

I felt my brows drop as he pulled out onto the road. “What I want?” I wasn’t sure how to answer that without being honest, especially while intoxicated. “I want to stay with you.”

He glanced over at me, too long to be considered safe, then looked back at the road and nodded once.

The quiet became stifling, and the warmth in my limbs began to slowly drip away. My short black dress itched, and the suede ankle boots were too tight around my sore feet.

Knowing it might get a rise out of him, I put the window down and waited.

Jude's eyes stayed on the road, one hand on the wheel and the other still in his pocket.

Huh.

I reached for the volume dial, the song growing to a level that could reshape a mood.

That did it. His head swung my way, and then he turned it down.

I slumped for all of a moment before he said, "Like this song?" He then turned up the volume by using the button on the steering wheel and "Cute Without the 'E'" by Taking Back Sunday blared through the speakers.

I didn't need to answer. My bopping hips and the waving of my arm outside the window did that for me.

Towering trees rolled by, dark enough to make the sky seem bright in comparison. Up the hill we went, rounding the bend to head down the other side to our homes.

The song ended before Jude pulled into his driveway and hit a button I couldn't see to open the black wrought-iron gates. They appeared more ominous at night as did his giant manor of a house, its arched windows playing peekaboo with the birch and oak trees.

"Your dad's home," I said, remembering the glimpse of his Jaguar just the other day.

"Was," he said, stopping outside the three-car garage and climbing out. "Gone again."

I immediately felt wretched, saying when he opened my door, "Yet you came to get me."

"Rhiannon just left," he said, helping me down.

I was too busy wondering who that was to be surprised by the gentlemanly action.

"Our cook and cleaner and babysitter," Jude explained. "She stayed back to do some ironing for Dad. She's paid well."

"I'll bet," I muttered. Wait, if she'd just left... "What time is it?"

I hadn't brought my phone with me. I had cash in my bra and a key hidden out front of the gates. I'd thought I'd be hitching a ride home with Cory, not the guy who sometimes hated me enough to break my heart.

For a moment, I wondered how many times he'd need to break it for me to quit coming back.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"It's just after ten," Jude said.

“Seriously?” I wanted to scream. “I was only there for *two and a half hours?*” That was better than the few times I’d ventured out before, but still, I was kind of bummed.

Jude shrugged. “Coming or not?”

“Why’d you pick me up?”

He shushed me as we walked inside, being careful to catch the door behind me before it could slam closed.

I waited until we’d reached his room before I asked again, eyeing the antique frames housing pictures of Jude and his brother as we headed to the stairs. It might’ve been dark, but I could still see there were no pictures of his whole family together or his mother.

Double *huh*.

Where was she? I’d save that question for another time when it might get answered instead of having me sent home.

“Jude,” I whispered, leaning back against the closed door of his room as he kicked off his boots and ripped off his socks. “Why? And how did you even know I was there?”

He gave me a look that said, “*Really?*” As though not one of the idiots from school might tell him the girl he’d bullied was out in the wild mere days after.

I bit my lip and tugged at the lace hem of my dress, eyeing the pointed toes of my boots.

Bare feet and denim wrapped ankles appeared, and then his finger tipped up my chin. “No one else gets to fuck with you. Only me. That’s why I came.”

Before I could demand that he maybe not fuck with me again, his lips were on mine.

I released my dress but wasn’t sure where to put my hands. His finger left my chin, his hand framed my face, and his other met my lower back.

“Red,” he whispered into my mouth. “Just fucking touch me.”

“Okay,” I said, but it was muffled by his tongue when he angled my head, fingers threading into my hair as his tongue slid against mine.

He really shouldn’t have given me permission. My hands became detectives, roaming and searching every inch of his back, slipping under his sweatshirt to discover there was no T-shirt beneath.

I moaned my approval, fingers following the muscular curves on either side of his spine. Letting his mouth do as it wished, I just held on and

enjoyed the stomach-dipping, heart-thrashing ride.

I didn't protest when he grabbed my dress and lifted. Our lips broke momentarily, my hair falling back over my shoulders to tickle my half-exposed breasts. Jude glanced at the cream bra and matching satin panties, then growled when his mouth returned to mine. "I fucking love your mouth," he rasped, then bent low, lips dragging over my chin to my chest. "And these fucking tits..." He tore the cups down to squeeze them, and I fell back against the door, my breathing embarrassingly loud.

"Fancy another first?" I managed to get out, fingers sifting through his deliciously thick hair.

Jude froze, rising back to his full height, a head taller than me even though I was wearing heels. I toed them off. His mouth twitched, the glow of the lamp behind him detailing what I'd done to his hair. It stood everywhere, and god, was it softer than I remembered.

"Fancy?"

"You say that in the UK, don't you?"

"I haven't lived there for years," he said, laughter roughening his deep voice.

"Right, I knew that." His brows rose high, and I hurried to say, "But you still have a bit of an accent." Ugh, I wanted to snatch his face and shove it back to my exposed breasts to kill this moment dead. "I guess."

Reaching behind me, he didn't remove his eyes from mine as he unhooked my bra. It dropped to the floor along with the fifty-dollar bill I'd saved for a ride home. "You've been drinking."

To that, I smirked. "I'm not drunk, and sober or half asleep, we both know I'd want to do it."

As though I'd doused them, his eyes sparked and burned, and he pulled my body flush with his. "I'm tempted to ask why, but I know better."

The fabric of his hoodie against my bare skin lit so many fires that it was hard to tell which one needed extinguishing first. Gazing up at him, I circled my arms behind his back. "What are you afraid of, Jude?"

He hummed, then let out a humorous breath. "Nothing." Something collapsed inside me, and I almost didn't answer when he asked, "What are you afraid of, Red?"

Too much wine, maybe, or too much Jude, his fingers running up and down my spine. I couldn't decide. But if this all came crashing down upon me as I expected, then at least I could say I'd been honest. "My soul."

“That’s...” His fingers stopped, and his head tilted. “Deep.”

“Use that against me, Jude Delouxé.”

He laughed, the sound a silent breath across my lips. “Careful. I just might.”

With his mouth rubbing over mine, he maneuvered me back to his bed, releasing me to remove his hooded jacket and jeans.

I stared at his thick thighs, and I kind of wanted to know what it would feel like to rub myself over them. He left his briefs on, but I was too afraid to ask why as he threw himself over the bed to his back and beckoned for me.

“I think you’re afraid of yours, too,” I said without much thought.

It was a hunch, but judging by the way his eyes darkened, I’d struck him somewhere.

Folding his arms behind his head, he drawled, “Am I now?”

Still wearing my panties, I crawled over him, loving the way his eyes glued to my breasts. “Aren’t we all?” I whispered, straddling one of those thighs just as I’d wanted to.

Eyes hooded, he watched me, unsure where to keep them as I ran my fingers through my hair, scrunching and releasing it while I rocked over him. “My dick is about to punch a hole through my briefs.” His throat bobbed. “Does that feel good?”

“So good.” I dropped my hair. “Why don’t we free him then?” I had no idea where such bravery had come from, but I was glad it’d arrived.

I wanted to see it.

“Him?” Jude asked, a glint in his eyes when they left my dampening panties and met mine.

In answer, I slipped my teeth over my lower lip.

“How about you sit on my face, then I’ll let you meet *him*?”

My center burned. God, I wanted that so bad. But my cheeks flushed, and I felt it spread to my chest at the thought of actually doing it.

Jude pulled me over him, my hands planted on either side of his head as his fingers traced the rapidly spreading rash. “I think I’m becoming obsessed with what I can do to you.”

*I’m obsessed with you*, I almost blurted. Instead, I stared at the few hairs dotting his firm chest. “It’s ugly.”

Gruff, he stated, “It’s sexy as fuck.” Clutching my chin, he pulled my mouth to his. “Wanna know why?”

“Please,” I said, my nose skimming his.

“Because I made it happen.”

Our lips danced, and with every caress and gentle glide, I felt myself relax over him until I realized I was rocking over his length.

Throaty and soft, he murmured, “You’re really getting the hang of this whole kissing thing.”

I smiled against his mouth and then dragged his luscious bottom lip into mine and sucked.

Expelling a rough exhale, he smacked my ass, and I yelped. “Now sit on my fucking face.”

I crawled up his body, nervous as hell and not fast enough for his liking.

Catching my hips, he lifted me over his head. “My panties...”

“They’re staying on,” he said to them as my thighs settled on either side of his face.

His breathing warmed the satin, his nose rubbing. My hands slapped against the thick wooden post to aid in holding me up. For which I was thankful when he grumbled something I couldn’t hear and then licked.

I hadn’t realized it would feel just as good with a barrier between my skin and his expert mouth. My head fell, my hair tickling my back as I got lost in the type of torture I never wanted to escape from.

I was teetering, every muscle tightening in preparation, when cold hit my wet flesh. “You’re bare.”

Disorientated and wishful, I had no idea what he was talking about. “Huh?”

“Your cunt.” A swipe of his tongue emphasized his thick words. “Fuck, it’s so pretty.”

“I waxed,” I admitted, and it’d hurt like seven types of hell.

I’d do it again, though, if it meant I’d have his mouth on me.

He blew a breath over my skin, a dark chuckle leaving him when I shook. Then he lifted me, and my back hit the bed with a bounce. I climbed onto my elbows in time to see him situate himself between my thighs.

He opened them wide. Careful yet curious fingers spread me, trailing through me, exploring. “I’m going to make you come, Red, but first...” He reached my opening, the tip of his finger circling it as his low words washed over me. “First, I’m going to become so well acquainted that it’ll be imprinted in my mind forever.”

*Forever.*

I loved that word.

I loved it way too much.

His fingers toyed, and soon, his tongue returned. Within a minute, I was trapping his head between my legs, my fingers tugging at his hair. “Holy shit.”

Jude was chuckling, pressing kisses to my swollen center. “Even quicker than last time.”

Fear shot through me, hitching a ride straight to my chest. He was going to kick me out again, and I hadn’t achieved what I’d hoped to.

“You said you’d show me,” I reminded him, unable to recognize my own voice. It was husky and gross as though I’d just woken up.

He didn’t seem to care. Staring up at me over my stomach, Jude slid my damp panties back into place and grinned. “A young man like myself doesn’t forget things such as that.” Moving beside me, he laid his head upon the other pillow. “Ever seen one before?”

“Only…” I snapped my mouth shut, my cheeks threatening to color all over again.

“Porn?” Jude offered, intrigue bringing out that mixed accent of his. “Why, watching porn is nothing to be ashamed of, darling Red.”

I wouldn’t dare admit it. No way. Not after what he’d done with the admissions I’d given him thus far. My every word, every affection, was and would be used against me.

I wanted to ask him why. I wanted to ask him if he could never do that to me again.

Yet I knew saying anything would be futile.

“Hey,” he said, his brows furrowed. “Quit thinking and chill.” Rolling to his back, he rolled down his briefs and then tucked his hands behind his head. “Feast your eyes whenever you dare.”

I laughed, turning my face into his pillow to hide it.

It wasn’t that the male genitalia grossed me out. Okay, so it was all a *little* funny looking. I just didn’t want to get caught being a ten-year-old girl.

What if I giggled and laughed? If he was already inclined to humiliating me, then doing the same to him would really make him hate me.

“Fern,” he said, my name jarring in the quiet room.

I peeked at him, then inhaled a deep breath. *Okay*, I thought. *Here goes nothing*.

Releasing it, I sat up, then immediately felt my eyes widen. “Oh, wow.”

The lighting might have been dim, but I could see enough, and I crawled down the bed to his side to take a closer look.

I’d already predicted it was long whenever I’d felt it touch me, but it was way thicker than I could’ve guessed. How these things were supposed to fit inside a woman’s body when they were this size, I had no idea, and I knew I wasn’t yet ready to find out. Solid with bulging veins and swaying a little with Jude’s every harsh breath, it was as if it wanted me to touch it.

I really wanted to touch it. “Can I—”

“Jesus fuck, yes,” he said, sounding pained. “Poke it, stroke it, just touch it before I explode from the sight of your curiosity alone like a prepubescent punk.”

That evoked a giggle I couldn’t hold back, but he didn’t seem to mind. Featherlight, I reached out and dragged my finger down his shaft. A sharp thrill shot through me when he jolted and hissed.

I pulled back.

“Wrap your hand around it,” Jude said, gruff.

Cautiously, I did.

“It won’t break, Red. Now squeeze and stroke.”

My hand moved up and down, and I squeezed gently.

He groaned, but I didn’t look at him. I was too enamored by this giant, heavy member in my hand. “It’s so warm,” I said, not meaning to say the thought out loud. I squeezed a little harder, pressing my thumb into one of the thick veins. I was rewarded with a guttural groan. It fueled my next admission. “And soft... like velvet.”

“Fuck.”

I lowered my head, shifting closer. “I can feel it throbbing.”

“Grip it harder,” he said, and I’d never heard his voice so hoarse. “Then move your hand up and down at the same time.”

Confidence blooming, I tugged and squeezed, and then I saw the wet gathering at the tip of the swollen head. I didn’t ask, and I didn’t even think about it. I just dropped my mouth over him and licked the salty flavor, moaning.

“Christ,” he said. “Yes, wrap those perfect lips around me and suck.”

There was no way I could fit all of him in my mouth, but after a minute of licking and sucking and listening to his breathing, I looked up to find I didn’t have to.

Jude's eyes were stuck to me, his chest rising and falling in heavy bursts, and his teeth denting his lower lip. "I'm totally about to come," he said or rather, wheezed. "Might wanna back up."

I frowned, remembering some of the porn I had indeed watched and how a lot of the women hadn't stopped until the dude blew his load in their mouth or sometimes on their breasts and faces. The very idea grossed me out.

But this was Jude, and the idea of backing up when he was about to expel what I'd done to him... *no way*.

Besides, the fact I'd only been messing around with him for a few minutes had me riding a high. A high that said I had him. Maybe he'd never admit it, but I had him coming down my throat in hot spurts and choking on his expletives with my inexperience and overbearing curiosity.

His hands tugged my hair, his body twitching and spasming.

Lying down beside him, I watched his sated green eyes as I swiped my tongue over my lips. I didn't dare kiss him. I didn't want him to push me away if he thought that'd be disgusting, his semen still stuck to places inside my mouth.

But then he grabbed my hip, pulling my body closer, and opened my mouth with his. "You like him?"

I swallowed his words, pressed my lips into his, and his pressed back. "I fucking love him."

"I can tell." He kissed me harder, held me tighter, my soft stomach against his firm, and then he stared at me for long moments.

I stared back, feeling a million miles away from reality and never wanting to return.

Within minutes, he was asleep.

Unable to move from his hold, even though I knew he might wake and ask me to go, I watched him sleep for what felt like countless minutes.

And, of course, I took the opportunity to sniff his hair—mint and cedarwood.

I glanced behind me at his phone and saw it was almost midnight.

Peeling myself away, I carefully lifted his arm and set it on the bed, my heart thrashing when he curled it into his chest, and a soft snore left his parted lips.

I bit mine when my eyes skated down his alarmingly stunning physique. His briefs were still tucked under his perfect ass.

Spying a knitted throw on the arm of the chaise near the row of French doors, I collected and draped it over him.

That was when I saw it again, and how I'd almost forgotten about its existence after spending two evenings in this very room with it upon his bare back was a testament to how thoroughly Jude Deloux could turn my brain to sludge.

Varying shades of gray and solid black, the serpent tattoo spread from between his shoulder blades across his upper back.

Three snakes. Their eyes dollar signs, and their fangs dripping with blood that cascaded onto vines. No, not vines, I realized as I peered closer, but barbed wire. The barbs dug into their scales, manipulating their bodies into the shape of a diamond.

I grabbed his phone and risked the flash but made sure it was on silent before I snapped a picture. One of his back and another of his sleeping profile, ensuring the flash was off for the latter. I preferred to see him just how he was at this moment, half cast in shadow and feeding my hungry heart.

After sending them to myself, I deleted the evidence and silently dressed before creeping out of his room. I backtracked, grabbing the money I'd dropped, and wondered if I should turn the lamp on his nightstand off. I decided to leave it.

A cry sounded just as I reached the stairs, faint but loud enough to halt my feet.

I looked back at Jude's room, then around the staircase to where a sliver of light crept out from his brother's room. Another cry, this one sharper, and then I was moving toward it, unsure why but doing so anyway.

I opened the cracked door all the way, startling the young boy inside who was sitting on his bed.

"Who are you?" Henry asked, large blue eyes taking me in.

"Your neighbor, Fern." I stepped farther into the room. "I was just leaving and heard you crying. Are you okay?"

He rubbed his eyes, lips pouting and wobbling. "Want Jude?"

I nodded. "I know, but he's asleep. Can I get you something? Water, maybe?"

He shook his head. "Jude..." He drew in a shuddering breath. "He sings to me."

A shocked noise left me, scrunching Henry's eyes. I quickly schooled my features. "Well, I'm a terrible singer, so I'm afraid I can't help you there."

"So is Jude," he said, smiling then, and I noticed a dimple pop in his cheek. "He sings me Mommy's song."

My heart sank a little. "Where is she?" I knew it was wrong of me to ask, but I couldn't stop myself. If I knew where she'd gone, maybe the enigmatic boy in the other room might make more sense to me.

"Gone," Henry said, followed by another wobble of his lips.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath.

Apparently, he still heard. "Rhiannon's swear jar is in the kitchen. You owe her a dollar."

"Right," I said, smiling as I walked over to his bed. "Why don't you lie down, and we can talk a little? Quietly, so we don't wake your brother."

"I do wake him up a lot," he said with a loud sigh, lying back down. "But he doesn't seem to mind."

No, I had a feeling he didn't mind being there for his brother at all.

My throat swelled, my desire to know Jude in more ways than just the physical making itself painfully known. He'd never let me—I already knew that—but that didn't mean I couldn't help his brother back to sleep for him.

"Seems like you and I might have something in common." Keeping my voice low, I dropped my boots to the floor while saying, "I don't know where my dad is, either."

Henry, who'd been rubbing his cheek, stilled. His arm dropped, lids low over his sleepy blue eyes. "You miss him?"

I twisted my lips. "Sometimes, yeah. But I used to miss him every day."

"I miss my mom every day," he said through a yawn. "I dream about her." I waited to see if he wanted to say anything else, and after a moment, he looked down at his hands over his navy comforter. "Every other night, she visits me when I sleep, and so when I wake up and she's not there, I miss her." I heard him swallow. "A lot."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be nine this summer," he said, a little smugness entering his voice. Unlike his brother, and I was sure his father, he had no accent. Likely from growing up here instead of in the UK. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen," I told him. "Though, sometimes, I feel much older and far younger at the same time."

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

“That’s confusing.”

I laughed but cut the sound quickly. “You’ll know what I mean one day.”

“Jude says that too,” he said, sounding annoyed.

He yawned again, and so did I. “I used to write my dad letters.”

“Did he get them? Write you back?”

“I don’t know, and no, he never did.” Old pain became brand new. Pain I thought I’d killed dead years ago. Funny how when we cracked open our souls in the dead of night, the things we told ourselves didn’t matter seemed to be the things that mattered most.

I tensed when a warm hand landed over mine on his bed. Staring down at the small fingers curling around my own, I then looked at Henry, feeling my eyes well. “What’s your middle name, Henry?”

“Dalton,” he said. “Same as my brother.”

I sniffed, nodding, and hugged his hand with mine. “Well, wanna know what I think about people like us, Henry Dalton?”

“People with no parents?”

I arched an eyebrow at that. “We have one; we’re just missing the other.”

He nodded, waiting.

“I think we’re lucky.”

His dark brows scrunched with his lips. “What? How?”

“Because,” I said, leaning forward to move his comforter up and over his chest. “To love someone so much that it makes us really sad means that we have big hearts,” I whispered. “Do you know what big hearts are capable of?”

He shook his head.

I squeezed his hand. “Big love, and with big love, all our wildest dreams can come true.”

“I wanna be an astronaut.”

I grinned and sat back. “Then an astronaut you shall be, but,” I said, looking at him pointedly, “our big hearts also need big rest to do big things.”

He seemed to think about that for a minute, and I could see the anxiety return to his eyes. “Will you stay?”

“Sure.” I crossed the room to a small red patterned chair by a large white bookshelf. “I might not be able to sing, but I can read the house down.”

# NINE

## *Fern*

That morning, I arrived home two hours before my mom got up to get ready for work.

Jude was a no-show at school on Monday and again on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The house next door was quiet. I could tell just by staring at it that there were no beating hearts inside.

I contented myself with printing the pictures I'd taken of Jude's back and face, and also with staring at his number, of which I'd saved in my phone.

He resurfaced on Thursday, looking for all the world as if he hadn't just missed three days of school at the busiest time of senior year.

I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to ask him where he'd been. I wanted to see if he'd thought about me at all, wherever it was he'd gone.

Instead, all I could do was watch him march through the dining hall, carrying a squashed sandwich in his hand and his tie swinging over his shoulder as he headed outside.

I was seated in the corner where I always preferred to hide, but I wasn't sure he knew that.

"Silas?" Cory questioned, nearing the table with her lunch. She pulled the phone away from her ear, checking it and then pushing it back. "What the hell? Silas?" With a groan that sounded days old, she stabbed her thumb at the screen and slumped into the opposite leather-wrapped chair. "I could strangle him."

"Did your Labrador run out onto the road or something?"

"I thought we agreed you'd stop calling him that months ago."

I stabbed a piece of ranch-soaked chicken. "He totally is one, though." Loyal to a fault, goofy in a way I was certain everyone found adorable—yes, even myself at times—the golden child and star quarterback, Silas Rydell was the perfect pet. I mean, boyfriend.

He worshipped the ground Coraline walked on, and rarely had I seen her frustrated with him and hardly ever upset. The only times I'd seen him make my best friend cry was from making her laugh so hard.

Cory rubbed her temples, looking as though she was indeed about to cry or scream. "He got so wasted on Friday that I had to call his parents."

"Oof." That was a last resort most wouldn't bother with, especially if their name was Coraline Ericson. "How'd that go?"

"How do you think?" she spat, struggling to unwrap her burrito. In a crazed movement of her hands, it went flying off the table. She left it on the ground and dropped her head into her hands. "Sorry, I know you went home with Jude, and I've been meaning to ask about it, but he's just been so..." She scrunched up her face rather comically. "He's driving me fucking insane."

"Where is he?" I asked. I remembered seeing him briefly yesterday as he talked quietly with Cory by her car, but nothing today.

"No idea," she said. "That's the thing, he just keeps on disappearing without any explanation, and now I'm *that* girl. The nagging, tell-me-where-you-are-because-you're-acting-weird girl."

"You're not nagging. Your pup's acting up." I pushed my chicken salad across the table to her. "It's out of character and warrants an explanation."

She pulled the salad to her and poked at it with my fork. "There is no explanation. Just the same old song about getting caught up with stuff for his parents, and that he's sorry, and it'll be done with soon."

"What will be done with?"

I knew Silas's parents owned the Hystenya, a luxury hotel, as well as the airport, but they'd never needed him this much before.

"I wish I knew, but he won't say anything else. And just now, he was pretending he had no service." She rolled her eyes, lettuce and chicken entering her mouth. "As if I'm twelve and might actually believe that bullshit."

I withheld a laugh as I imagined him doing that. Which turned out to be smart as a second later, my salad was shoved back at me, and Cory's head dropped to her arms.

Shit.

She was crying or maybe trying not to cry. I couldn't exactly see past all the blond hair and her arms. Glancing around, I felt grateful that everyone

seemed to be focused on their own issues, namely who they were asking to prom, and who was going with who.

Dumbfounded by what to do here, and because I was just awkward as hell anyway, I blurted, “I put Jude’s dick in my mouth.”

Cory bolted upright, a lone tear sailing down her cheek. “What the fuck?”

We garnered attention then, and I shushed her before handing her a napkin. She waited until everyone resumed their own discussions and lunch eating before wiping the tear away. “Jude... you and Jude actually hooked up?”

“Don’t act so surprised. It’s not like he showed up at Gina’s to haul me out of there or anything.”

She pursed her lips at that. “I thought he was going to drop you on the side of the road. I waited for you to call.”

Aghast, I hissed at her, “Cory, I didn’t have my freaking phone.”

Wet eyes rounded. “Oh hell, that’s right.” Her mouth pinched, shoulders tilting. “Lucky he took you home then?”

I tossed a crouton at her head. “Asshole.”

“Hey, I forgot. I’m sorry.” She ate the crouton. “Too much Silas confusion and stressing over how I’m going to afford a prom dress.”

I suppose we were even then, being that I knew she’d be worrying over that, and I’d forgotten too. “We’ll talk to Jan. She’ll fix you up.”

I could tell she had no other alternatives. Her dad would see it as a waste of money, so she didn’t refuse our help for once. “Thank you. What about you?”

“What do you mean?” I grabbed my water and drank three huge sips.

It almost flew out of my mouth when she said, “You put his junk in your mouth. Looks like you might get your prom wish after all.”

We stared at each other, then burst into laughter.

“Hurry,” Cory said, checking the time on her phone. She leaned forward with that twinkle back in her eyes. “Spill everything.”



“Denane, babe,” Kai Anders’ voice stopped me outside the library the following morning. “Heard you like to watch yourself some dick sucking. I have the real thing right here. No need to flick the bean all alone.”

Turning to face him, I felt my cheeks catch fire, the burn spreading everywhere.

The halls weren’t too congested as everyone hurried to their next destination, but they were busy enough that I knew this piece of information would be passed around before lunch.

I blinked at Kai, speechless.

He grabbed his junk and made a lewd motion, his friends laughing beside him. “What?” he said to them. “She’s actually pretty hot.”

“You know the rules,” I heard one of them say, not understanding what that meant and too embarrassed to care.

Because how dare he? How. Fucking. Dare. He.

I hadn’t even admitted it, but the asshole had still decided to use yet another truth of mine against me.

I wasn’t sure where he was, but I was determined to find him.

Walking inside the library, I heard two girls in the year below me snicker, and I glared at them. “Is there something wrong with watching porn?”

Our librarian, Mrs. Crossly, gasped. “Miss Denane, I’ll have you watch your mouth, or else you can go visit Headmaster Taurin.” She lifted her compact mirror back up, though I wasn’t sure why, as she gave me the stink eye while coloring her lips dark red with expert precision.

I was sure she could apply it in her sleep.

I pursed my lips, not bothering with an apology. I was too pissed off. Unfamiliar yet not entirely surprised by the piercing sensation leaking poison inside my chest, I stormed to a table in the deepest corner to sulk alone.



I never did catch Jude.

I saw him. Oh, I saw him plenty and did my best to glare at him until he could feel the heat of it trying to scorch holes into the back of his head. Every time, he was unaware and on his way to somewhere that obviously didn't involve me.

The porn rumor didn't stand on its legs too long as the denizens of Peridot Academy were used to hearing much more sordid and juicy tales. By lunchtime, people were discussing who'd blocked who on social media and what they were drinking, smoking, or snorting tonight.

"Remember that time Romeo Breen got caught screwing around with his girlfriend's mom?"

In the passenger seat and flicking through her phone, Cory laughed. "Yes." She hummed. "What happened to him?"

"He graduated last year, I think." I clicked the button to lower the volume of the music a little. "Didn't they still go to prom together, though?"

"They totally did," Cory said. "Bianca didn't come back, though. Pretty sure she transferred."

I wondered where she went. Perhaps the public school. I was sure I'd see her again if she planned on attending Ardent Falls University. The only one on the island.

Ardent Falls wasn't exactly on the island per se but attached to it by a drawbridge. Ardent Falls Isle.

"What brought that up?"

"Just thinking about the stupid porn rumor Jude tried to get going."

"Oh, it got going," Cory said with a snort that made me reach out and smack her arm. "Sorry." She laughed. "You're right, though. It's no Bianca and Romeo, so it's already dead."

Satisfaction filled me if only for a mere minute. I slowed when we turned the crest, heading back down the cliff to the other beachside homes around the bend from mine. As I leaned forward a little, the cars parked on either side of the road up ahead came into view.

Melanie's parents must have been way stricter about people parking on their lawn than Gina's. Not that most parents wanted their kids to party in their home, but most were hardly here, so party they would.

I pulled over behind a black SUV and killed the ignition. "How do you even know he's here?"

"There's nowhere else he'd be. This is the only party tonight."

We'd already driven past Silas's house. His truck hadn't been there, and we weren't about to ask his parents where he might be.

"So he for real didn't tell you what he was doing tonight?"

"Nothing," she said with a resigned breath. "I've barely heard from him."

*Yikes*, and nor had she seen much of him, hence the wild goose chase.

We got out and checked the road before darting across it to the two-story white and blue Hamptons-style home. The thud of the bass coming from inside bounced through the open windows and down the long drive to greet us. The land was slim, narrow, and the front door was situated on the side of the house.

We climbed the steep flight of stairs, and I gripped the railing as gross images of someone falling on account of being too wasted and breaking their neck entered my mind.

I shook it off with a shiver and replaced it with picturesque, if not somewhat evil, bottle-green eyes.

No one stood guard at the door. It was almost nine, which meant people were too busy and loaded to care who showed up and whether they'd been invited or not.

Bodies bounced and drifted around the living room by the foyer. Girls were dancing with guys I'd never seen before, and other girls, one I recognized from physics, were sprawled over the leather sectional with two guys from the swim team.

I wondered, yet ultimately doubted, if Jude would be here.

It seemed too cozy, too social for his taste. No, my dark and damaged prince preferred solitude or giant crowds, the latter so he could roam and hide away as he so wished.

After trying to search the downstairs living areas, kitchen, and bathroom to no avail, we looked at one another and nodded. It was highly likely if Silas was here that we'd miss him if he was moving around.

"I'll take upstairs," I said.

"Meet outside in ten minutes, or," Cory said, waving her phone, "call me."

I double-checked I hadn't left my phone in the car, relieved to feel its weight in the back pocket of my jeans. In skinny whitewashed jeans with tears in the thighs and a black Arctic Monkeys T-shirt, I was so totally not dressed for the occasion. Thankfully, I'd made the last-minute decision to

don my heeled boots and ditch the Vans I'd almost walked out of the house in.

My hair was down, but it was a crazy half-dried mess of spiraling red curls, and my face was bare of mascara and lipstick.

For once, I was hoping I didn't run into my private lover slash public tormentor.

And so, of course, that was exactly what fate would serve me.

After checking each room upstairs, most of them locked, and the half library, half theater room, I only had the bathroom left to glimpse before I waded back downstairs.

I twisted the handle—another locked door.

About to turn away and narrowly dodging a flying throw pillow aimed at a ducking dude, I froze.

“Jude.” His name was giggled. A giggle I knew had to belong to Marnie.

Call me a glutton for punishment, but I stalled for too long, trying to decide if I wanted to know what they were doing behind that locked door, and if I wanted him to see me.

Right as the door swung open, I decided none of the above. “Wait,” Marnie said to him.

Stepping back, I sucked in a breath and held it, not entirely sure why. I heard Jude grumble something, and I inched forward, unable to see anything but a blue-tiled shower with a giant circular head.

Jumping to the other side of the door, I peered inside.

Jude was pressing Marnie up against the vanity between the twin basins, her legs around his waist, her hands under and lifting his dark blue T-shirt. Kissing her. He was kissing her.

Rage curled my fingers into my palms and ignited a wildfire inside my heart.

Was he just another guy playing around, seeing how far he could take things with as many girls as he could for as long as he could?

But as far as I was aware, I was the only one besides Marnie he'd been messing around with. And I prayed to every god out there that he hadn't been messing around with her the way he had been with me.

My stomach sank to my toes when I realized I was even more of an idiot than I already knew I was.

Of course, he'd fool around with her, too. She was his, and he was hers, and I was merely something fun to punish for getting in the way of the future prom king and queen of Peridot Academy.

Another giggle followed by a muffled, drawn-out moan.

*I should move.* I should've definitely fucking moved.

But that was hard to accomplish while shattering on the spot. I feared the second I walked away, I'd leave pieces of myself behind, and I couldn't return for something that might no longer fit.

My throbbing chest and closed eyes made the decision for me. I moved farther around the corner and waited for them to leave.

Ten bruising heartbeats later, Marnie did without a backward glance, tugging at her short lilac dress and dragging her hands through her shoulder-length hair.

She went downstairs. She didn't even wait for him.

Who the hell left Jude Deloux behind without so much as looking back?

I might have been an idiot, but she was a fucking dumbass.

"Nice shirt."

He'd snuck up on me, but I kept staring at the stairs a moment before giving him my makeup-free eyes, wishing I'd bailed when I had the chance. "Like them?"

His sharp gaze dropped to my chest. "I like them a lot less now that they've been introduced to those glorious tits."

I wasn't sure if that was some ass-backward compliment or just a straight-up insult. Probably both.

His eyes floated around the hall, and then he stepped back inside the bathroom.

I knew he wanted me to follow, and I knew I shouldn't, but of course, I did.

"You're not going to follow her?" I had no idea why I'd asked. I didn't want to know.

He pushed the door closed behind me and backed me into it as he flicked the lock. "Watched any porn lately?"

"Just the video of me sucking you off for the first time." His eyes flared wide, then narrowed with what might have been disappointment when I tacked on, "Kidding, I didn't even have my phone with me."

Huffing, he murmured, "Shame."

“Why? Would you have shared that with the entire school too?”

“Absolutely not.” His finger stole and gathered one of my curls. He lifted it to his nose and inhaled. “Some things are far too good to share.”

“You confuse me so much.”

“Don’t care.” He tutted. “You saw my brother.”

Thrown, it took me a moment to keep up. “Uh, well, he woke up crying when I was leaving.”

A hard edge saturated his every feature and voice. “Stay away from him.”

I didn’t know what Henry had told him, but I was beginning to think Jude was more insane than me. “I didn’t do—”

“You won’t use him as a way to get to me. You will never have me, so don’t upset the kid by getting him used to a presence that won’t end up staying.”

Ouch, and *what?* “Jude...” I cleared my throat and pushed off the door. “Never mind, I’m going.”

He braced his hands on either side of my head and chuckled. “Already? Am I not what you were searching for?” I wanted to curl into a ball and hope this was just a nightmare. “Red? Open your eyes.”

I hadn’t realized I’d closed them. I blinked, shaking my head. “I need to find Silas.”

“Silas?” he repeated.

“His girlfriend is looking for him, and I drove her here to help.”

If the knowledge that I hadn’t actually come here for him damaged that gigantic ego of his, I couldn’t tell. When I looked up at him, his expression of bored amusement didn’t falter. “So, if you’ll excuse me.” I forced a smile I knew he could tell was fake. “Cory is probably wondering where I am.”

“No,” he said.

“No?”

“You’re not excused.” He dropped his arms and came too close, always too close. As if he knew doing so would drug me and make me his fool. “Are you trying to suggest you haven’t missed me?”

I swallowed, the sound loud between us.

“Answer me.”

“Yes.”

He cupped the side of my face, his body meeting mine. *Too much*, I thought. Too much heat and tension. His scent, his eyes, his voice, his entire

self. Too much, and so much that I knew I'd only be leaving this bathroom with more regret.

"Do you still want me, Red?"

"Yes," I said, but no sound came out, so I said it again. "Yes, I do."

His mouth twitched, his voice reaching inside me to set everything aflame. "What is another taste of my lips worth to you?"

"Anything," I admitted. "*Everything.*"

"Prove it," he said, husky and wild-eyed, his pointer finger rubbing across my bottom lip.

I could smell something musky, and I figured out why with a jolt to my stomach that made it churn when he rasped, "Suck."

My lips wrapped around his finger, a salty flavor flooding my taste buds. It was then I knew he hadn't just been kissing Marnie. Not while inside this very bathroom with her.

I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to bite his finger until it bled in the same way my heart was—the ever-present drip now a steady stream.

But I did none of those things. Steeling my spine, I held his eyes for seconds that stung every corner of my heart and eyes.

"How does she taste?"

I pulled back, disgusted and breathless. "You tell me. It's your girlfriend."

"Ex," he stated with a flash of his teeth. "Ex, and yeah, she tastes good." I blinked back tears, and then I tried to get away from him, from his heat and the ice to his voice and words.

Before I could step around him to leave, he grabbed my waist and hauled me flush with his body. His other hand sank into my hair, holding the back of my head as his sin-soaked lips lowered to mine. "She really fucking does, but I know that nothing," our mouths touched, skin whispering, "nothing tastes as addictive as you, Red."

As if he'd thrown a net around me, I was caught, stuck, and I didn't want to be freed.

My hands tore at his sides, pulling at his shirt, and my mouth slammed over his. Every wound he'd given me was handed over in a kiss that was all teeth and tongue and panted breaths.

"You're so cruel," I breathed, hating him while clutching him to me.

"You really think I didn't see you there? Feel you watching me?" He chuckled. So dark, I shivered. Teeth dragged over my cheek to nip my ear.

“I saw you walk by, and that right there sealed the deal.” My head tilted as his lips closed around my earlobe. “So I shoved my fingers in her cunt. Two of them.”

“Stop it,” I pleaded, too soft. “Please.”

“No,” he clipped, his forehead resting upon mine. “Never try to corner a wolf, Little Red.” Our noses brushed. “We’ll attack every fucking time.”

Then I was freezing, my hands curling around thin air when he retreated.

“Cory won’t find her guy here,” he said, walking out the door.

I left the bathroom, knowing not to bother looking for him. He was gone.

I found Cory outside on the porch. I’d missed at least two calls from her judging by the vibrating of my phone while I’d been in the bathroom. “Hey, sorry. Nothing.” I was tempted to tell her what Jude said, that she wouldn’t find him here, but then I’d need to tell her I’d had yet another run-in with tall, dark, and sinister, and no, it hadn’t gone well.

I wanted to steal the beer from a passing guy’s hand and wash my mouth out with it, but alas, I had to drive.

“Ugh,” she said, dragging her hand through her hair. “Where the hell is he?”

I jerked my head to the stairs, and when we reached the end of the drive where no one but the crickets and a frog or two could hear us, I told her. I kept the more embarrassing details to myself. The details that filled me with a shame so hot, I wanted to combust.

“So Jude said there was no way he was here after making out with you?”

“Basically.” I shoved my hands into my back pockets, wincing when I jabbed a finger too hard on the case of my phone. “Yup.”

We crossed the road to my car, and I felt her eyes on me, but I concentrated on getting in and starting the engine.

“Are you hiding something, Fern?”

I glanced into the side mirror, then pulled out. “Someone is, but unfortunately, I don’t think it’s me we need to worry about.”

# TEN

## *Jude*

“Fingers, dude,” I told Henry, demonstrating with my own. “Pay attention.”

He nodded, and I tossed the ball to him again. He almost had it this time and shouted as it slipped between his hands and bounced between his feet before rolling away.

I heard tires crunching over the rocks through the hedge. We were playing out the front, the driveway the only place undotted by trees in a long stretch.

A car door closed, and then a ball smacked me in the shoulder.

“Hen, what the fuck?”

He was holding his stomach, doubled over in hysterics. “Pay attention, Jude. Pay attention!” He cackled some more, and I smiled, the sound music to my fucking ears. “Swear jar.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved him off, then grabbed the ball and tossed it.

Again, he missed. But he was never going to catch it. My aim was impeccable.

Henry watched, scowling at the sky as the ball sailed over the hedge and bounced off the hood of Fern’s Range Rover. It would leave a scratch at best, thanks to the distance, but I was hoping it was enough to rile her up.

She was ignoring me.

Which was fine. I was ignoring her, too. As per fucking usual.

Two weeks. Two weeks since her lips had last devoured mine. Two weeks since I’d seen those dusky blue eyes cloud with desperate hunger. Two weeks since I’d seen her in those lucky as hell jeans and a band T-shirt. Two weeks since I’d had her gentle, eager fingers exploring any slice of myself I gave her.

Two weeks since I’d seen her smile.

On the bright side, Marnie had asked if we could go out on a date like we were fucking fourteen again or some bullshit. I’d humored her and had

taken her out to her favorite French restaurant down by the docks.

The following Monday, I'd found myself standing in the middle of the doorway after AP English, knowing Fern would need to touch me to get past.

Oh, she had, and with that insane ass of hers, too.

A snub. That's what it had been. She'd just turned and slid right on by, giving me a sly little "fuck you" on her way.

It'd pissed me off so much that I didn't even look at her for the remainder of the week.

Then on Wednesday, I'd found my car parked next to hers, so I'd lingered a little too long after school. Whatever it was I'd been trying to achieve had been blocked by Marnie, who'd spotted me and raced over, yammering on about our dinner and how she wanted to do it again this weekend.

So we had, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to go inside when I'd dropped her home.

Instead, we'd made out in the back of my car, and I almost blew my load in my jeans when I remembered strawberries and shy smiles, fumbling touches and murmured admissions.

It hadn't happened, thankfully. For although I'd taught her everything she knew—we'd taught each other—Marnie was a selfish lover. Realizing I wasn't going to make her come, she'd climbed out and flipped me off, muttering about this reconciliation being a waste of time.

Henry looked from the hedge to me, then back again, scratching his head. "Uh, want me to go ring their buzzer and get it back?"

Maybe she'd gone inside. I released a forced, dramatic sigh. "Nah, it was my bad. I'll go. Why don't you head inside and take a shower?"

"I don't need one yet. It's like, only four o'clock."

"You do," I said, waving my hand in front of my nose.

Henry's hands balled at his sides. "Do not."

"Do too." I laughed when his face reddened. "Go," I said, backing up down the drive. "I'll jump on the Xbox with you after dinner."

His anger fled rapidly, and he grinned. "Deal."

I waited until he'd gone, then I walked along the hedge, trying to find a large enough gap to squeeze through. I found one minutes later, but I had to head back up the side of the house and into the backyard.

I was guessing that was where Fern had slipped through the first night she'd come to visit.

With the exception of a covered pool that I wasn't sure was ever used and some white tables and chairs, the Denane's backyard was pretty sparse. There were no gardens, only two potted plants outside on the lower verandah, and upon closer inspection, I noticed they weren't even real.

How like January. To be honest, I was surprised she'd kept a child alive for as long as she had. Then I remembered Fern had a father.

Fuck if I knew where he was.

"Looking for something?"

At the side of her house, I halted and looked up to the balcony outside her bedroom.

Fern was holding my football, her hair hanging over the railing. I caught a glimpse of generous cleavage, her breasts resting over it too. "I wouldn't say I was looking."

Her auburn brows perked, and she retreated. "Cool, guess I'll keep it then." She muttered something I couldn't hear as she disappeared inside her room.

I cursed. She was going to make me come inside.

Couldn't have planned it better if I'd actually put some thought into it.

I rang the doorbell. Pointless, seeing as she didn't answer. The doors were unlocked, so I let myself in.

As predicted, January's style was cold and on-trend with leather and corals and hardwood furniture and floor. A few pictures of Fern dotted the gray walls, but none of her and her father, and only one of her and January.

Fern looked to be about twelve, her teeth still delightfully crooked and her eyes shining under a bright floppy pink hat. More freckles lined her nose, and even January's, making it obvious they were on vacation somewhere.

A thud came from above, and I followed the hall to the staircase, taking a peek at the kitchen on the way. Sleek with new appliances, it was so clean that besides the giant coffee machine, it was probably never used.

The wood groaned underfoot, and the sun exploded from an oblong floor-to-ceiling window at the top of the stairs.

Fern's room was the closest to the window, I knew, and the door was wide open.

Inside, she waited for me, cross-legged on her crumpled bedding and what looked to be an assignment sitting before her.

My football was on her lap.

“You must really like this ball,” she said around a pen hanging from her teeth.

A quick study showed organized rainbow mayhem. I felt my spine stiffen, and my hands twitched. I shoved them into the pockets of my gym shorts.

Staring at the polka-dotted armchair overloaded with clothes, and the books dumped in three white cases—one by her bed, one behind me next to her desk, and another that lined the short hall leading to a closet and bathroom—I shifted back a step. “I really like where it’s sitting.”

She half laughed, half scoffed. “Nice to see you, too.”

“I guessed as much.” Traipsing over to her desk, I pushed her laptop and some miscellaneous textbooks back, and leaned against it. “Miss me?”

The pen was still in her mouth, and she didn’t answer. She watched me as if she were trying to decide what to do with me. Feed me or tell me to fuck off.

She would feed me.

“I’m hungry, Red,” I said, straightening. My eyes coasted over her bare legs, the too-large tank that made it seem like she wasn’t wearing anything underneath. “And lately, you seem content to let me starve.” I tutted. “And you think I’m cruel.”

She blinked up at me, long, mascara-free lashes fluttering once then twice. “Jude, you made me s—”

I snatched the pen from between her teeth, my knees hitting her bed, and she swallowed. “Unless you’re about to ask me to eat you, your mouth, or your cunt, then save it.” I clicked the pen, the tip vanishing, and then dragged it down her arm.

Breath shook from her lungs, goose bumps and tiny hairs rising with the slow, purposeful touch. “Lie down or tell me to fuck off.”

After untold minutes of staring, those huge blue eyes flitting over my face, she kicked her notebook away and lowered over her bed.

I removed my sneakers and tried to shove down the bouncing sensation that tightened every breath, not to mention my balls.

I was already hard. I’d been hard since the second I saw her sitting there, and now, it wasn’t just a throb, a want, a means to an end. The need I

felt for this girl was primal, a savage necessity—her desire for me so vital that I could hardly fucking breathe.

Tearing my eyes from hers, those heaving breasts hidden behind nothing but flimsy cotton, I sent them down her body. Over the perfect flare of her curved hips, I discovered nothing but creamy skin. She wasn't wearing anything.

No panties.

Fern parted her thighs, whispering, "I guess I did miss you after all."

A knot the size of my fist lodged in my throat. I couldn't talk. I didn't inhale. I just moved down her bed, ripped off my gym shorts along the way, and stared.

Her hands fidgeted with her tank over her stomach, but I kept my eyes glued—couldn't remove them if I tried—on the glistening gift she'd left unwrapped for me. "Jude?"

So sweet, so nervous, and so fucking wet without so much as a touch from me—I wasn't sure if I'd ever forget this moment. In fact, I was positive I could die happy today.

Just not before I tasted what the mere sight of me did to her.

I cleared my throat, watched her thighs jolt in response, and then fisted my cock. "Your mom?"

"Gone until tomorrow."

I tore off my shirt and knelt on her bed. "Thank fucking Christ." Then I wrapped my hands around her thighs and feasted.

Her cries and moans, the clawing of her fingers in my hair... I loved pussy, and I loved eating it, but fuck if I'd ever enjoyed eating something this much before in my life.

Her taste melted over my tongue, and it wasn't long before she almost did, too, but I pulled away and stood back up.

Fern rose onto her elbows, flushed and her hair a mess.

"Remove your shirt and lie back down," I said.

She did, and naked as the day I was born, I climbed on top of her, my mouth coasting up her stomach to her breasts. I feasted on them too, licking and sucking and shivering from her fingers dragging over my scalp.

Her legs wound around my hips as I moved higher. With my mouth hovering over hers, I planted my arms either side of her head. Dazed and so fucking desperate for me, her teeth scraped over her lip, and those

incredible eyes widened when I allowed my hips to lower all the way to press my cock against her wet cunt. “Are we...?”

I knew she was a virgin, and I wasn't here for that. I'd take as much as she was willing to give me, but I'd never steal that. That belonged to some other asshole who'd put her up in a home just like this one by the beach and give her two point five kids and a cat or three to go with her crazy.

I knew she'd want at least one cat, judging by the prints on every throw cushion in the room.

I could never give her any of that, but not because it wasn't within my power. Anything I wanted was now within breathing distance, and I'd paid with half my soul to make it so.

But because she was a threat, and I knew taking more than I already had from her would just make a mess out of this fucked-up affair.

“No,” I said, kissing her, my tongue parting her lips. “Never.”

If she was disappointed, I didn't want to know. I kissed her again, this time lifting my hips a little to rub myself up and down the wet beauty between her thighs.

Her eyes popped when I pulled back, and I grinned. “Like it?”

She nodded, then croaked, “Yes.”

“Show me.” I bumped her nose with mine, hearing her breathing stall when I rubbed myself over her clit. “Just like you showed me how much you like me when you opened those pretty thighs.”

She moaned, obviously a fan of dirty talk, so I kept it up as I nibbled her lips, licking and biting and whispering, “So fucking filthy for me, aren't you, Red? Just me.”

“Just you,” she whispered, her eyes fluttering closed.

“Eyes on me,” I said, watching her lashes curl up, almost high enough to meet her brows. “Always.”

“Always on you,” she repeated, her smooth as silk thighs trembling around my hips.

I kissed her hard, deep, and swallowed every tiny, choked cry, groaning as I did.

Her nails scored into my back, dragging up and down, and my entire body purred. “I want us to come on each other.” I licked her cheek, then tucked my forearms under her shoulders. “Okay, Red? So wet and so hard, I want to stain our skin with it.”

“Oh, god.” She tore away, and indeed, she came so hard, I had no control—nothing—and I flinched as I unexpectedly joined her.

Her eyes were wide on mine as I cursed and dropped my head, my cock unloading between our bodies. Every part of me shook and shivered, and I hadn’t realized I’d thrown my head into her neck until I gathered enough breath back inside my lungs to open my eyes.

Soft and adoring, her fingers traced every muscle and indent she could reach on my back.

And as I laid there, blinking at the panties she’d tossed under the pillow before I’d entered her room, I knew.

I knew I’d cursed myself all over again. Yet again, I was stained, and I hoped like hell this one would eventually wash off.

I had to get up. I had to stay away or at least put more and more distance between these visits until it was no longer a burn that needed soothing, but a pest that was sufficiently squashed over time.

“Jude?” she asked, quiet, as though she feared I was asleep.

“Mmm?”

“Will you,” she started, her fingers pausing on my shoulder blades. “Will you go to prom with me?”

Those words were a bucket of iced water dumped straight over my head.

Fuck. *Was she serious right now?*

Of course, she was.

She had to have known I was already going with Marnie. It wasn’t announced, and I hadn’t made a show of it. It was just expected. Everyone expected it, including us.

But as I opened my mouth to laugh and reject her, I felt something twinge inside my chest.

I couldn’t do it.

I couldn’t fucking hurt this chick anymore.

She didn’t seem to care enough anyway. She just kept coming right back. And even though I’d pushed and I’d pushed, somehow, I still wound up letting her.

“My dirty little secret is inviting me to prom?”

She flinched beneath me, and I squeezed my eyes closed.

Fear tied up my words, wrapped tight around my vocal cords. “Red.” I felt her clam up, her hands falling from my back, and I sighed. “I’m

going... I'm going to need some time to think about it." I pushed myself up and rolled my neck, ridding some of the tension with a resounding click. "Kay?"

She removed her wet eyes from my neck and met mine, nodding once. "I need to get cleaned up."

Fuck, I hated her.

I hated myself.

I hated that we'd stupidly gone and done this all over again.

Most of all, I hated that I wanted, no *needed*, to see her smile. "Is your mom allergic to cats?"

Her face scrunched at the random question, but I waited. After a moment, I got what I wanted, her lips wriggling into a perfect curve that lifted her flushed cheeks.

I rolled off her as she said, "No, just responsibility," and climbed out of bed.

I watched her ass, the intoxicating swells and arches of her body, and then she was gone, and the bathroom door latched closed.

I sat up and rubbed my hands over my face. "Idiot," I whispered, harshly while digging my palms into my eyes. "You fucking stupid ass idiot." Dropping them, I released a frustrated breath and scooted to the edge of the bed to get dressed.

My stomach was sticky as all hell, but I didn't care. I tugged my shorts back on and grabbed my shirt. I had to get out of here before I did something even more stupid, like telling her yes. *Yes, I'll take you to prom, Red.*

It wasn't that I didn't want to. It was that I couldn't. She was fun and all, and she got me hard like nothing else, but she wasn't for me.

Marnie was for me, and I was being a real jackass by fucking around on both of them like this.

Better late than never to grow a conscience, my mother used to always say. I used to think she was talking out of her ass.

Until I realized I never had a conscience to begin with.

Red was good for something other than curing a raging hard-on, it seemed. Who would've thought? Certainly not me.

My thoughts slammed into a wall when I noticed her homework still lying on the corner of the bed about to topple to the floor. Stepping closer, I plucked up the large black leather-bound journal. Not homework.

A diary.

The sound of running water reached my ears, but I was too busy reading the last few entries to think about Red taking a shower. And as I flipped back to the front... holy shit.

My heart stopped dead.

It was obvious the chick liked me, but this? I had no words. Not enough air in my brain to construct concise thoughts.

She didn't like me.

She wasn't just obsessed with me.

She was into me in a way that reeked of trouble. Chop-my-body-up-and-throw-away-the-pieces kind of trouble.

Her diary hanging loose in my hand, I looked around her room, wondering what else I'd find.

The door of her closet was cracked open, a soft glow emanating from inside.

My feet carried me over without the command, and I shouldered the door all the way open, coming to a stop inside the walk-in.

I stumbled back two steps, then moved forward, unable to believe what I was seeing.

There I was, eleventh grade, my hair sweat-soaked as I held a trophy in the air.

Tenth grade, a picture that'd been taken of my brother and me that I'd shared on my Instagram. Beneath it, a poor depiction of my tattoo drawn upon art paper. Next to it, an actual picture of the tattoo on my back, and to the right, a picture of me asleep.

The Slytherin insignia was taped to the wall beside a yearbook photo taken last year, and on the other side, a piece of paper with my birthday, height, academic achievements, and names of the people I hung out with.

Marnie's name had been crossed out three times with a red pen, each line a harsh slash.

My ears rang, sharp and piercing, my head emptying of oxygen.

She'd taken fucking pictures of me while I was sleeping.

Upon the shelf above sat two bottles of the cologne I wore, as well as a bottle of shampoo.

My stomach lurched and my chest filled with so much air, I was suddenly too afraid to even exhale. Lightheaded and swallowing profusely, I backed up and gripped the doorframe.

Looking at the bathroom door, I heard the water shut off, and I didn't hesitate.

Her diary, love letters, whatever the fuck they were, still in hand, I bailed as if my ass was on fire. I raced down the stairs and threw myself outside, not bothering to close the doors. Thorns and branches sliced me up as I climbed and dragged myself over the hedge.

Fuck finding the hole and running through our yards. I needed out. I needed to get back on solid ground.

I needed away from the girl who was so much more than what she seemed.

Red now made perfect sense to me.

Fern Denane hadn't been a quiet loser all these years, hidden amongst hormonal socialites. She'd been a coiled snake biding her time before she struck.

# ELEVEN

## *Fern*

Coraline and Silas seemed to have made up in the weeks since his weird disappearing acts.

When I'd asked her about it, she'd just sighed, and said, "I don't know what happened, but he swears he's not going to worry me like that again." She shrugged. "What can I do? When you love someone, you want to believe them, and I trust him."

I couldn't relate, and she knew it, swiftly moving the conversation to the Vikings show we'd both been binge-watching.

Sorrow and resentment formed a sour taste in my mouth whenever I watched Silas and Cory be their usual lovestruck selves at school. Usually, I didn't care at all. I was happy she was happy, and Silas was always nice to me.

The sour taste turned bitter after the Sunday afternoon when Jude vanished from my room, and he'd since gone back to ignoring me in the days after.

But he wasn't just ignoring me. He wasn't even bullying me.

He flat-out avoided anything to do with me.

I felt like I was back at square one. Alone and trying not to suffocate on what-ifs.

Prom was now two weeks away, and the preparations and parties had picked up speed. I had no interest in attending any more, though. Not if it meant seeing Marnie and Jude together again, and I undoubtedly would, being that Jude was rarely home.

*I'm going to need some time to think about it.*

I wasn't sure why he'd bothered lying to me. Word on the street was he and Marnie were practically planning their wedding once more.

I'd berated myself for days for asking him to prom. Of course, he'd say no. Of course, he'd take her. The slimy sensation of disappointment and regret worsened the tightness in my chest, creating a swarm of hurt that

made it hard to breathe. I couldn't even bring myself to write about how I'd been feeling in my diary.

I stepped back from the glass doors and into my room, frowning at the bed where I'd last seen it.

And then, an entire week after I'd held his sweat-misted, heaving body over mine on that very bed, the DM came. It was accompanied by a follow on Instagram.

**JDeloux:** I'll arrange a car for us. What's your favorite flower?

Dizzy, I gaped at the message for long minutes, then I tapped out a response.

**Fernlovesfrogs:** Daisies. : )

A moment later, I got a reply.

**JDeloux:** I didn't know you liked frogs.

**Fernlovesfrogs:** They're cute. I used to kiss them and hope for Prince Charming.

**JDeloux:** Gross. You're weird and delusional, Red. Pick you up at 6.

I dropped my phone and squealed.

Then I picked it up to call Cory, and we both squealed.



Mom was supposed to take us dress shopping, but she got held up with a work emergency. She said to buy whatever we wanted, and Cory and I did exactly that.

I had my gown custom made, a rush order that had me cringing when I handed over my credit card.

In my emerald green ball gown, the same shade as Jude's eyes, I stood on my front porch, black clutch in hand. The gown's bodice wrapped snug around my torso. There were no crystals and no frills. It flowed to my feet to kiss my toenails, which I'd painted green.

A black lace bow spread over my lower back, the ribbons dropping and falling into the rippling organza.

I'd straightened my hair, and in doing so, the strands fell to the bow and my hips. I'd kept my makeup light with mascara, red lipstick, and a little blush. Cory got ready with me, but Silas had picked her up thirty minutes ago so they could get their picture taken at the beach as the sun had set.

It was now dark. The stars leaned into the half-moon, wanting its glow but knowing they'd all burn if they crept too close.

Shifting in my black pumps, I checked my phone again. It was six thirty, and the house next door was still and dark as if no one was home.

If he didn't hurry up, we were going to miss dinner. I rechecked my lipstick under the glow of the lights beside our front door.

Then I checked my phone again. I contemplated calling him, but he didn't know I had his number. Maybe he wouldn't care, being that we were going to prom together and all.

I waited ten more minutes before readying myself to do just that when a DM arrived.

**JDelouxé:** Something came up. I'll have to meet you there.

I blinked down at the screen of my phone. It shook in my hand, and I steadied it before calling an Uber and walking down the drive.

That was fine. He'd probably lost track of time while doing something stupid with his friends. Besides, a lot of people arrived on their own, I was sure.

The Uber driver whistled, a sucker hanging out of his mouth. "Prom?"

"No, I'm getting married."

"In green?" he said. "Wow. You look a little young."

Struggling with my gown in the back seat, I huffed and pulled the door closed just as he took off. "Of course, prom."

"Right. The Hystenya?"

Knowing I wasn't going to save my dress from being crushed, I gave in and slumped back against the seat. "Yeah."

There were two hotels down by the harbor. One was my mother's, I suppose mine too, of which I'd seldom visited, and the other belonged to Silas's parents. The dinner and dance were being held inside the ballrooms of the Hystenya. They had been for as long as I could remember, as his parents adored having the attention lavished upon them.

The driver dropped me off out front, and I grumbled as I shuffled out of his black Prius. "Enjoy your night, sweetheart."

"Oh, I will." I tossed him a twenty before slamming the door.

Dress in hand, I rushed up the steps. A doorman opened the door and winked as I sped past him.

The foyer and brown painted halls were quiet. I followed the growing sound of trapped merriment to a cluster of grand rooms at the back of the hotel.

Before I could open the doors, they burst apart, and I leaped out of the way. Students in dazzling arrays of color and glittering dark swept out into the small foyer with their dates and friends.

I tucked myself within the mix and looked for Cory. Dressed in shimmering black that hugged her every curve, she found me within seconds, her arm looping through mine. "Are you okay?"

"He's running late," I said in explanation. I dragged my fingers through my hair as we headed into a ballroom with stars painted upon the blue chandelier bedecked ceiling. "I'm so annoyed. We didn't even get to take a picture."

"Fern," she said, pulling me into the back corner of the room.

A band was starting up on stage, and a table with snacks and beverages laid over it stretched down the wall next to us.

Starving, I grabbed a cookie and almost swallowed it whole. I took a waiting cup of punch, too. "How was dinner?"

It was then I finally looked at Cory and noticed the concern crinkling her features. I backed up on instinct, not wanting to hear whatever it was she had to say.

She followed and stole the drink from me, setting it back on the table. "He's here."

As though willed by magnets, my eyes were pulled to the doors of the ballroom.

Dressed in a fitted black tux with his hair finger-swept to the side, Jude stood there with Marnie in his arms. He said something to her forehead, then kissed it and walked back out.

Marnie's gaze shot straight to me, and then she walked to the snack table. To us.

"No," I whispered.

Cory placed herself beside me, but Marnie was only getting a cookie.

She looked at me as she bit into it, her ruby painted lips dusted with crumbs.

Mine probably were too, but I didn't care. "I want to go home."

Cory's hand wrapped around mine and squeezed. "I've told Silas I'm staying with you, and we're going to dance."

Tears gathered. I begged them not to fall with every ounce of strength I didn't possess.

"Fern," Cory said, turning to me. "Look at me." I did, swallowing twice. "We're going to dance, and you're going to act like you don't even care. Okay?"

I nodded, knowing she was right. Leaving would only serve in giving him far too much satisfaction. "Okay," I think I said. The music was suddenly too loud, battling with the ringing in my ears.

She pulled me onto the dance floor, and within minutes, we were surrounded by a wave of our peers, and I could no longer see Marnie.

Cory spun me and smiled as bright as the sun, doing her best to cajole me into having a good time. That wasn't possible, though.

But it was possible that I'd finally have to admit defeat and forget about him.

I made a mental note to find my diary, rip down the ridiculous junk in my walk-in, and burn it all at the beach where no one could ever see just how much of an idiot I'd been.

The plan made me feel a tiny bit better. Not enough to stop the painful swelling and shrinking of my heart, but easier to force a smile and feel like it might actually be believable.

I was sweating by the time Cory dragged me back over to the corner, and we grabbed something to drink. Plucking her phone from her purse, she glanced around. "I'll be back. Just going to call Silas and see where he is."

I waved her off, content to rehydrate for the moment and take in everyone's outfits.

A sweet laugh broke into my musings, and over the rim of my cup, I watched Marnie approach. She stopped before me, the smile on her face filling her false lashed eyes.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, knowing it was a stupid thing to say the moment the words slipped over my lips.

“You,” she said, clasping her hands over her lilac purse. Her short dress was the same color, and although it looked striking against her olive skin, it only reaffirmed the fact she didn’t deserve him.

“Sweetie.” It seemed she was assessing my dress the same way I’d done hers, for realization curled her mouth into an ugly sneer. “What the hell possessed you into thinking my boyfriend would actually go to prom with you?”

My mouth fell open. I snapped it closed.

*Boyfriend.*

“I mean, I knew you liked him, *everyone* knows, but imagining something so much that you think it’s real? That’s just sad, Fern.” Her lips pinched. “Really, I feel kind of terrible for you.”

The microphone screeched, and we both looked at the stage, but the band was talking amongst themselves and taking a drink break. It wasn’t the microphone.

It was the speakers overhead. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.”

I’d know that voice anywhere. I’d listened to it at school, had conversations with it in my dreams, and had even felt it vibrate against my bare skin.

“A little fun and games, if you will.”

Everyone was glancing around, trying to find him, just as I was.

Marnie stood perfectly still, though, her gaze trained on me as she pulled a flask from her purse and took a swig.

“Before we announce our king and queen for this eve, I thought it best we have a laugh.”

He wasn’t here, and Marnie was well aware of that, offering the flask to me. “You might need some.”

I just stared at it, and she shrugged as Jude began to stab at the dying organ in my chest.

“Without further ado...” The monster cleared his throat. “Jude’s hair smells like mint and cedarwood.” His tone turned nostalgic, as though he were narrating a piece of literature, and he was. He was unveiling my own

for the entire senior class to hear. “I spent half an hour in the drugstore trying to find what shampoo it could be. I sniffed half of them before I realized I was an idiot. There was no way Jude would buy regular shampoo.”

He cleared his throat again as if trying not to laugh. “So I bought ten different types from Sephora, ordering more after until I’d found it. If I can’t have the real thing, then at least I can know what it smells like.”

I couldn’t breathe, the bodice of my gown far too tight.

“Jude looked at me yesterday. I swore he did. Cory says I’m not as invisible as I think I am, and that maybe he did. It doesn’t matter. I’ll keep watching. Maybe one day, he’ll watch me back.”

Laughter sounded, and I felt every eye in the room fall on me.

“They broke up again today. I celebrated with a cheese omelet, a glass of Mom’s champagne, and some male on male action on Tumblr.”

He waited until everyone calmed a little before continuing once more.

“I think I want to write romance novels. God, it feels so good to finally admit this somewhere. Even though she hasn’t said it, I know my mom expects me to work for her in hopes of one day running her businesses. But I’d rather write fiction than live in reality. It’s way more fun. And in fiction, anything is possible. I can create the love story I never got to live. I can create my own Jude, one who knows I exist and who would do anything for me.”

He didn’t stop there.

“Sometimes, I wish I didn’t like Jude Delouxé so much. Sometimes, I wonder if not liking him would leave me with better things to do. But I have nothing else.” There was a lengthy pause, then he finished roughly, “All I have is him.”

It was official.

I wanted to kill him. He had to die.

And then I needed to move off the island. New Zealand, maybe. I was sure Mom would be cool with it.

I heard people saying my name, and it joined the storm of laughter as I retreated farther into the corner of the room.

“Junior year is finally coming to a close. Mom asked if I was applying for any writing courses over the summer. I said I wanted to, but she’d already stated it wasn’t necessary, and I’d get into any school I wanted. I don’t know why I believe her, or how that’s even possible, but I know it’s

true. I don't care what I do, so long as I end up at the same place as Jude." A whoosh sounded as Jude blew out a breath. "Oh, and summers are better spent watching Jude come and go next door anyway. I love seeing how tanned he gets."

For someone who'd just wanted to be seen, I'd never wanted to disappear so badly in my life.

I was crying. I could feel the wetness flooding my cheeks and the tremble of my lips. But I couldn't wipe the tears away.

I couldn't move.

"I found out what cologne he wears. I overheard Marnie mention that she was buying him some for his birthday, and Melanie asked what it was. I wrote down the name, and some months ago, I ordered two bottles. You know, just in case one breaks. The other night, I spritzed a little on my pillow. I'd planned to hug it until I fell asleep; instead, I slipped my hand inside my panties and made myself come to the..."

He stopped, and it was just as well. He wouldn't want his reinstated girlfriend aware of our secret meetings. Cory returned, her eyes wide and her hands reaching for me.

"I'm beginning to think that I need to burn or shred this. We're only growing more serious, even if he'll never admit it to himself. I think he likes me. I think I..." Jude coughed, then spat out, "Love him." There was a thud, as though something had been dropped.

Cory was tugging me out of the room, faces blurring in a cacophony of curiosity and laughter. "Stalker town," someone yelled.

"How dare he?" she said, seething as we entered the quiet foyer outside.

"Cory," Silas called.

"Not now," she snapped. "Your friend"—she stabbed a finger at Silas—"your friend needs to die."

Silas nodded, his lips pinched between his teeth as his eyes flicked between us. "He's out of control. I'll find him, I promise. Right now, we need to head in."

"You're prom queen?" I somehow found the words to voice.

Silas nodded while Cory stood slack-jawed. "Sorry, Fern." He came forward and took her back inside.

Everyone was still laughing and still reeling. I spun around to leave, almost falling over the marble table. A porcelain vase screamed as it hit the

floor, crunching with flowers under my heels as I grabbed my gown in both hands and ran.

“Obsessed much?” I heard Melanie mutter as she exited the ladies’ room with some guy I didn’t recognize. “I’d run, too.”

The tears came harder, faster, and the doormen both looked on with concern as I barreled toward them and slipped out the doors they hadn’t had a chance to fully open.

Down the steps and across the lot, I didn’t stop until I’d passed the hospital, the airport, and I’d reached the darker streets leading home. It would take me hours to scale Crest Road and get there, but I didn’t care.

When I could no longer run, I walked, only pausing long enough to see a familiar black truck speed by when I took off my heels.

Silas. Where was he going? He had to have seen me walking, yet he hadn’t stopped.

*Fuck him.* I flung my shoes at the road, hoping someone crushed them beyond repair, much like the asshole I’d crushed on for years had done me.

Finally, I gave in and called an Uber. A different driver picked me up, thankfully. He was old enough to be my grandfather and only asked if I was okay before keeping his mouth shut.

My phone rang. Cory.

I sent her a text saying I was home and watched the Uber pull away as I stared daggers through blurred eyes at the house next door.



My prom dress, soiled and crinkled from all the walking, still sat in a heap on the armchair in my room a week later.

“I’m going to ask you one last time, Fern,” my mother said, seated on the edge of the bed. “What the hell happened, and who did this to you?”

I couldn’t tell her. Not only because I was hiding under my comforter and I didn’t want to, but because I knew her. She’d insert herself in some way to try to fix it—to fix me.

In grade five, Ryan Jeckle pushed me off the monkey bars, and I broke my arm. She'd had him expelled from school, and his father fired from where he worked at the power plant.

"Fine," Mom said, the bed shifting when she stood. "You leave me no choice."

I closed my eyes over a new wave of tears. I was surprised I had any left to spill.

I trapped them, and eventually, I fell back to sleep.

I woke some hours later to the sound of my mom's raised voice. "I don't care if she doesn't want to see you." There was a pause, and I pushed the comforter off, shying away from the brightness cascading in from the floor-to-ceiling doors. She'd opened the curtains.

*She'd opened the fucking curtains.*

I rolled out of bed to the floor, commando crawling so as not to be seen. I doubted he was watching. I doubted he gave one single shit about what I was doing or how he'd made me feel.

Still, I refused to let him see any part of me.

I tore them closed and fell back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling.

"Fuck school," I heard Mom say into the phone. "I'm sending a car. Get over here and tell me what's happened to my daughter."

School. Right. A place I hadn't been since that nightmare night. I could never show my face there again, and I'd prayed and hoped and wished with every new tear that I'd still be able to graduate without attending.

I'd been a perfect student, after all. Maybe I could take my finals online.

Mom broke my panic with something I'd already guessed at. "Cory's on her way over, Fern! And she will tell me everything."

I would've protested, but I didn't have any room to care.

# TWELVE

## *Jude*

Fern graduated, I knew that much, but she didn't show her face at school until then, and no one besides Cory had seen her since. The brief drop back into the world hadn't gone well for her. Most had found new things to talk about since prom, but her resurgence, the paler complexion, and the gaunt look to her cheeks got their chins wagging in an instant.

She'd been quiet, not even so much as a smile when she'd accepted her diploma.

And then she was gone.

*I think I love him.*

I wouldn't feel bad. No matter how many times I'd reopened that diary of hers to reread some of the inner workings of her mind.

She wasn't only delusional and weird as fuck, but she was downright crazy. Ted Bundy crazy.

Besides, Marnie and I were finally official once more. Better late than never.

After prom, she'd said I'd proven myself. Whatever the fuck that meant. She'd also asked that I try to be honest with her, or that I at least try to open up a little more, explaining that we could be even better than before if I did.

I didn't plan on doing that, but I needed something, and she'd been something I'd needed for months, regardless of how conflicted I sometimes felt.

So the start of summer had been spent getting to know someone I already fucking knew. Her request, not mine, and she wouldn't let me bang her until we'd reconnected properly.

Sex just muddles everything up, she'd said.

But it makes arguing a lot more fun, I'd retaliated.

To which she'd called me a pig and slapped me across the chest, her eyes laughing.

Maybe if she could quit smacking me, I'd feel a little more secure myself in this discomfort that used to be the most comfortable thing on earth.

So much so, I'd destroyed something in order to get it back.

*Butcher.*

I drew in a shaken breath, dragging my fingers through my mussed hair.

Marnie's arm clung to mine. "Is it bad that I can't even remember what movie we watched?"

We skirted people waiting in line and headed for the doors.

Lowering my head, I whispered, "All I remember is wanting to stick..." My words trailed away from me, my thoughts emptying at the sight of my dad standing next to my car by the curb.

His arms were crossed, his long black jacket fluttering in the breeze to reveal his usual attire of suit pants and a crisp gray shirt. If the blank look upon his face wasn't bad enough, then the fact that January Denane was standing beside him sealed the deal.

My stomach turned to cement.

"Jude?" Marnie questioned. "Why's your dad here?"

"I've, uh..." I stopped and glanced around. Spying a cab waiting up the street, I walked her there. "I've gotta go."

"What do you even mean you have to go? Jude." She grabbed my arm when I opened the cab door. "Jude," she growled. "You said you'd be as honest as possible from here on out, so tell me what the hell is going on."

Ice rolled over my body, freezing every breath as I stared at her, knowing I never should've said that. That maybe, I never should've thought this could work out in the first place. "I lied. Please, Marns, just go home." I walked off before she could ask me anything else, my hands tucked inside the pockets of my hoodie.

The breeze carried my name along it, and eventually erased it as I neared my father and his second. I kept my expression neutral. Not the easiest feat under the reproachful sneer of January. I could see Fern in the slender curve of her neck and jaw, that petite nose and her hair. But the rest of her must have belonged to her father. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

January stared me dead in the eye. "Get in the car before I shove my foot so far up your ass, you'll be shitting out your snide attitude via your nostrils for months."

My father coughed to hide a shocked bark of laughter, and I gaped at him, incredulous.

He wiped his expression clean, then gestured to the awaiting Town Car. “Get in, Jude.”

Sighing, I looked at January once more.

A mistake. Again, she sneered. Her red upper lip curled, brown eyes filled with malice.

“Okay.” I raised my hands, then slid into the leather interior. “Chill.”

“Chill?” she screeched.

My father climbed inside, sitting on the same seat as me. “Just get in, Jan.”

Seated opposite us, January plucked a cigarette from her beige blouse pocket and lit it.

I licked my teeth, tempted to ask for one. “I didn’t realize you smoked.”

“Only when I’m extremely pissed off.”

“So at least eight times a day then,” my dad said.

She finally got the cigarette burning and tucked her tiny lighter away. “Eat a fat dick, Elijah.”

“Not my preferred choice—”

*Jesus Christ.*

“What’s happened?” I cut my dad off.

Silence arrived, suffocating as it mingled with cigarette smoke.

Eyes on me, two golden brown pools of fire, January stabbed a finger at the button to lower the window. It was only opened enough to flick her ash outside. “What’s happened?” she said, so calmly, I almost didn’t catch it. “What’s happened, he says.” Laughing silently, she stuffed the cigarette between her lips and closed her eyes, inhaling nearly half of it.

Lungs of steel.

“You.” January exhaled smoke across the car. Her voice rose in venom and volume with each word she spat. “*You* humiliated her. *You* hurt her. *You* used her. *You* tricked her. *You* tarnished her. *You* broke her. *You* completely fucked her up.”

Oh.

*Shit.*

A wave of trepidation poured from my head to my toes, turning everything numb.

“Now,” January said, inhaling and exhaling with a rough laugh that made my skin crawl with fear. “You’re going to fucking pay.”

I didn’t dare look at my dad. It would be a show of weakness. But the way he was sitting silently beside me told me all I needed to know.

January was running this show, and for reasons I’d yet to discover, it seemed he had to allow it.

“January...”

“Shut your putrid little mouth,” she hissed, stubbing the cigarette out on the leather seat. “You thought to ruin her in such a way and get away with it? Really?” Her eyes swirled with rage. “My fucking daughter?”

“January,” my dad finally said.

“You shut the fuck up, too.”

“Enough,” Dad said. “Let us wait until we’ve reached our destination, shall we?”

After a moment of looking as though she were not only going to ignore him but throw herself at me to claw my eyes out, January collected herself and sat back in the seat, crossing her legs.

Her eyes didn’t leave me, though. No, they drilled holes she longed to fill with poison the entire journey to Nightingale headquarters—January’s hotel down by the harbor.

The three top floors were never made available to those outside of the society.

They served as our initiation rooms, meeting rooms, ballrooms, and the immoral list goes on.

I would’ve thought whatever was about to happen would be better suited to the warehouse. I was certain I was going to arrive home with a missing limb, a missing finger at the very least.

The Town Car pulled up at the rear of The Ribbon. The entry point for members of Nightingale disguised as a loading zone and staff exit. Those were around the other side, and I watched the Town Car head that way, wishing I could follow.

“Jude,” Dad said, jerking his head to the door he was propped against, keeping it open. “Best to get it over with.”

January was already gone, likely to ready the torture weapons or forewarn whoever it was that would be using them.

Bloody fucking hell.

I cleared my mind of everything and anything as I nodded and breezed past him into the dimly lit foyer. Geraniums sat upon a gleaming wooden perch in the center, much like the ones Fern had knocked over and crushed after I'd crushed her at prom.

I shook my shoulders and rolled my neck, stepping into the elevator that would take us so high, we could hardly see Peridot Island from the windows, only the crystalline sea beyond.

"Fern Denane?" Dad said through his teeth. "What the fuck were you thinking, Jude?"

It felt like I hadn't been thinking for months. I didn't answer.

Old Isle crept into the corner of my eye, and I shook my shoulders again.

"It'll be fine," Dad murmured, checking the time on his Rolex. "You fucked up, but it'll be fine. You just need to accept the consequences of your actions and be done with it."

I didn't get a chance to ask him what those consequences might be. The elevator pinged, and the doors rolled open, exposing a foyer grand enough for royalty.

Cherubs were swimming amongst clouds in the ceiling between diamond skylights. The sun sprayed light over the brown slate floor, my dad's loafers clipping over it to the same thudding beat of my heart.

We passed the conference rooms, rounding the long corridor to another at the back that led to the room of servitude and the den of integrity. Upon every wall, inside filigreed gold frames and painted in code, were the names of all the initiated. If they were deceased, then their name was wiped over with a damp cloth, turning the black ink gold.

For once a name entered those frames, there was no way to remove it.

Every limb was coiled tight with tension as we neared the room of servitude, usually used for fucked-up rituals or sacrifices all in the name of allegiance.

We kept going, and surprise had my head snapping around.

We'd basically walked in a giant U to a door hidden in the wall. January was there, and she pressed her hand into it as we neared. "My office."

I'd known she likely had one here, being that it was her hotel, but I hadn't realized it would be inside the society's headquarters.

I crossed the room to a tub chair, waiting until January had entered and taken a seat behind her oversized concrete desk. "Sit, filth."

I did. My dad was already seated and crossing one knee over the other.

He was too calm, resigned, as though this was a deal already brokered, and that was that.

“A month ago, I found my daughter in bed, crying her eyes out about something she refused to tell me.”

I sat stone-still, my cold hands linked inside my sweatshirt and my eyes upon the photo frame facing January. I knew Fern’s face would be inside it. The fucked-up feelings Red evoked and that bone-deep resentment resurfaced tenfold.

“A week went by, but she still wouldn’t get out of bed. So I called her friend, who told me the whole nauseating story.”

*Fucking hell, Cory.*

Though I couldn’t exactly blame her. She hadn’t known, and as far as I was aware, she still didn’t know anything about this soul-stealing empire.

I couldn’t hate her, either. Not after what’d happened with her and Silas.

“Nothing to say for yourself?”

I knew anything I said would just make it worse. It was done, and there was no taking any of it back. “What do you need?” I said instead, not recognizing the blandness to my tone.

I felt her eyes on me, trying to murder me where I sat. “Oh, you’ll soon find out.” Her chair creaked as she sat back. “But that’s not the only issue that’s been brought to my attention.”

She had me then, and she knew it, smiling in a way that brightened some of that hellfire in her eyes. “Sandra went to visit her friend on Old Isle.”

I tried, but I couldn’t stop my teeth from gritting. Sandra Rydell and my mom had never been friends. More like polite frenemies. I waited because there was obviously more to this stupid tale and because I couldn’t separate my teeth if I wanted to.

The fact that Sandra had gone there and had likely just put her in a state... I nuked the image.

There was a reason, aside from guilt, that I didn’t visit her myself.

“You’ll never guess who she happened to run into as she was heading to the wharf to catch the ferry back.”

I didn’t need to look at my father to know he’d wrestled every emotion into carefully controlled disinterest. I could feel the storm that still resided inside him vibrating in the air.

If January noticed, then she didn't care. "Park Kelsey."

Again, I waited, though I couldn't keep my shoulders from stiffening.

January hummed. "She couldn't help but overhear a conversation he was having on the phone about an upcoming show in California." She paused for effect. "For his paintings."

Fuck.

"We did ask him to stab someone," Dad interjected. "He did that."

"And it turned out to be nothing more than a flesh wound." January waved her hand, flippant. "In any case, his task was child's play compared to most. So," she said, leaning forward to stare at me with a wrathful twinkle in her eyes. "Not only did you mess with the wrong woman's daughter, but it would seem you failed your initiation. Not only did you fail," she said, her voice softer but not gentle by any means, "but you planned to keep it a secret." She shot a hard, narrowed glance at my father. "You and Elijah both."

My dad didn't say a word.

But I was guessing it was time I did. "I didn't think..." I stopped and straightened in the chair. "What do you need me to do?"

"What a good little brat," January sneered. "So ready to fix your royal mess."

I had no choice, and we all knew it. Silas's parents were now aware, so that meant anyone within Nightingale might also be.

They did not take well to traitors. All it took was one or two for our carefully veiled world to collapse and reveal itself.

"And you will fix this," the woman in control of my every breath said, ice crusting each enunciated word. "You will not only prove your loyalty and remorse to me, but you must also show every member that you are loyal to this cause, and that you deserve to be here."

I was ready, so I nodded. It couldn't be worse than anything I'd already done. Nothing seemed all that bad after losing myself to this asinine cause anyway.

"You will marry my daughter."

I choked instantly. "What?"

"And you will wed her before the entire enclave, so they can see for themselves that you can be trusted."

Marry.

Wedding.

Fern.

No. Hell fucking no.

I glared at my father, who was staring at me, his chin propped on his hand, fingers rubbing. “Yes, Jude.”

January continued, “Nightingale may be aware of this arrangement, but the rest of the island may not.” She lifted a pile of papers off her desk and smacked them on the concrete before laying them near the edge with a pen. “To them, you are in love. To them, you felt so wretched about what you did to her at prom that you took her out for dinner to apologize, and the rest is history.”

I stared at the paper, knowing it was a contract for both Nightingale and the courthouse.

A marriage application.

“January,” I croaked out. “Anything else, I’ll—”

“Quiet,” my father snapped, returning to his rightful throne, and my eyes closed. “You will fix this. January has been extremely generous. Most would be rotting corpses in the ocean, or worse. Sign the paperwork and say thank you.”

January waited, brows poised high with expectancy.

But I couldn’t move. I looked from her to the papers and back again until my eyes were tugged to that frame. To the picture of Fern.

My heart wasn’t beating. It was roaring, rattling the cage it was trapped in, wanting to be done with all the fucking carnage already.

“Sign,” January said.

I picked up the paperwork, unsure why I bothered reading it. It wasn’t like it mattered what it said, but something had my mouth opening before I could control the urge.

“We,” I started, then swallowed. “We have to live together?”

“But of course,” she said. “A marriage isn’t exactly believable if the husband is running around campus, screwing his side piece and doing god knows what else, now, is it? Of which I’m sure you’ll do regardless, like the swine that you are.” My dad made a noise, and January sighed. “If you’re not living together, it’ll be plain as day that you’re married on paper only, and I won’t have my daughter embarrassed again.”

“Why have her marry me then?”

She lifted a shoulder. “It’s a means to many ends. Now sign.”

Rising, I crossed the soft rug to the desk and picked up the pen. I stared down at the marked lines, the spaces awaiting Fern's signature, and wondered how she'd feel once presented with these, when she saw that I'd already signed them.

She'd undoubtedly be far happier than I.

My teeth gritted again. The pen creaked in my fist as I leaned down and stabbed my initials at the bottom of each page.

"When will Fern initiate?" I dared to ask. I may as well, seeing as everything was ruined once again. I'd known the answer before I asked, but I wanted confirmation of how far January was willing to go to protect her daughter.

I was willing to bet Fern still didn't know about Nightingale, and just how ruthless her mother and some of the occupants of the island really were.

"The moment she marries you and realizes what a waste of air you are," January said. "I have hope that this endeavor will have her over you in no time."

I was certain she already was, and if she wasn't... well, then I wanted some of what she was smoking.

"Jude," my father said, buttoning his jacket at the door.

Looking from the man to the woman who'd both sent me straight to the gates of hell for the second time, I said between clenched teeth, "Thank you." Then I followed my father out into the hall, January's smug smile branded into my back as surely as the tattoo.

I waited until we were once again seated in the Town Car before I exploded. "What in the ever-loving fuck, Dad?" I couldn't believe this shit. "Marriage? *Arranged marriage?*"

"They're far more common in this day and age than you'd believe." He pulled out his phone, scrolling. "Settle down. The contract states you can divorce after twelve months."

But we had to live together for a whole year. I had college. I had a girlfriend.

I had a life that I thought no longer included a certain redheaded, desperate girl with gigantic fucking issues. "You're making me spend twelve months with that whack job?"

"Mind your tongue," he clipped with a hard look at me. "You're a fucking idiot if you thought you could mess with her daughter and get away

with it. Again, what were you bloody thinking, Jude?”

“I just wanted her to...” I couldn’t even finish that sentence. To him, it would sound petty and childish and completely unnecessary.

And everything I’d done to that girl was all those things.

But he didn’t know her as I did. He didn’t know how deep her obsession had swum, and therefore wouldn’t understand why I’d had to go to such extreme lengths.

I’d been freaked out, pissed off, and a myriad of other things I would never know what to do with. None of it mattered now, though.

Not when it seemed the psycho was about to get everything she’d wished for after all.

# THIRTEEN

## *Fern*

I stared at the pictures.

They stared back at me.

Rage had been building, slowly gathering force until I was out of bed and at least showering once a day. So what if I stared at the walls most of the time, unthinking and unblinking. Improvement was improvement. He might have stolen something I'd never get back, but I was still breathing, and with every new breath, it hurt less to do so.

With every bright morning, I felt the gathering dark.

I latched onto it. I needed it. It was my lifeline out of this unbearable place he'd shoved me into with such incurable malice. There was no remorse. There was nothing left but me and the broken beat of my heart.

Jude Delouxé wasn't capable of showing remorse.

It would ruin that asshole exterior of his. The one he'd never dare let anyone climb beneath.

In the days, weeks, nearly months that'd passed, I'd sometimes find myself wondering what he'd done or what had happened to him to become the cold-blooded creature he was.

The boy I'd crushed on through most of high school was not the same person he used to be. Over the years, he'd shed that self-assured, king of the world veneer, and in its place now stood cocky defiance, ready to lash out at anyone who crossed him.

And crossed him, I had.

It wasn't my fault he'd found my diary. Okay, so maybe it *was* my fault. I'd stupidly left it on the bed, never thinking he'd care enough to wonder what it was I'd been doing the day he'd first stepped inside my room.

I'd never been more stupid in my entire life—and I'd done my fair share of stupid shit. Crushing on the school's token bad boy being the most stupid.

I'd since moved rooms.

My mom couldn't handle the stench. *You need light, or the dark will fester*, she'd said.

I'd said nothing and continued to close the curtains. If I had to see the doors to his lair one more time, I feared I'd throw my lamp across the hedge and into the glass.

One day after showering, I returned to find the curtains drawn once more. Instead of closing them, I'd grabbed my bedding and pillows and marched down the hall to the spare room.

It sat opposite my mom's bedroom with the stairwell between us, but I didn't mind. She didn't either. For when she returned from work the following day and found me transferring some of my things, she immediately began to help.

Nothing was said about Jude even though I knew she was well aware of all that'd happened.

I had no desire to talk about it, and she didn't appear to harbor any interest.

Which meant Coraline had spilled everything.

So, in silence, that was how we'd spent time together—the only time we'd spent together this summer—but that was okay.

It all had to be okay.

The pictures taunted. His green eyes shining under the small light swaying from the ceiling of my closet. I was willing to bet he'd seen them. I was willing to bet he'd not been happy about it.

I wished I'd never pressed my lips to his.

Pity I couldn't escape him entirely. Last I'd heard from Cory, Jude still planned to attend Ardent Falls University.

But he wouldn't get his way and scare me off anymore.

I was already packing. This new rage would no longer allow me to be a victim. He wanted to be left alone? Fine. I'd leave him so alone he'd never remember what it was like to have my affection in the first place.

I might have done things the wrong way, but that didn't mean I deserved to be the laughingstock of the island for weeks on end.

He never deserved my adoration, and so even though it sucked to exist right now, exist I would until he was nothing but a distant, horrible memory.

Sighing, I launched forward and dragged my chipped, chewed-off nails down the articles, paper, and photographs. One by one, they fluttered into a box I'd laid below it, some missing and falling to the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Just getting rid of my beautiful nightmare.”

“Right,” Cory said, then sniffed. “Good, I’m glad.” I whirled to discover she was crying. Her eyes were red. “Maybe you can help me get rid of mine, too?”

My hands started flapping at my sides. “Where do you want me to stab him?” I didn’t know what to do. Her eyes were leaking, and they were puffy as though she’d been crying long before she’d gotten here.

“In his junk,” she deadpanned.

I dragged her out of my old dungeon and down the hall to my new one. “Wait here; it should only take me an hour or two.”

That rewarded me with a wet bout of laughter. “Fern, stop.” She sniffed some more. “Just get the booze and some tissues.”

“On it,” I said, spinning out of the room and racing to the stairs.

When I returned, Cory was sitting in the center of my bed, staring at her phone. “He won’t stop calling me.”

“What happened?” I finally asked, popping the top on the white wine and handing it over.

“He...” She stopped, took a deep swig from the bottle, then cried, “He cheated on me.”

I felt myself sway, a tiny shocked laugh escaping without permission because there was no way. There was no way the guy who looked at her as if he’d been handed his every dream in life would ever willingly fuck that up. “No,” I finally said. “He wouldn’t.”

“He admitted it,” she said, leaning forward to emphasize each word. “He fucking admitted it, Fern. He came to my apartment last night with dinner, as planned, and just fucking blurted it out like it’d been eating him alive.” She paused then, thinking. “And looking back at how he’s been acting these past weeks, yeah,” she said, nodding and drinking. “Yeah, it probably has.”

“He’s been acting weird again?”

“Worse than weird. He’d see me, but he wouldn’t talk, and he hasn’t wanted to have sex...” she stopped, rubbing her forehead as more tears dripped free. “God, Fern. He really honest to god fucked everything up. It’s all ruined. We...” Drawing in a heaving breath, she choked out, “We’re ruined.”

I grabbed the bottle before it fell over my bed and set it on the floor. Then I sat next to her and plucked several tissues from the box.

She took them, crying but otherwise silent as I rubbed her back. “I just don’t understand,” I said after some minutes had passed. “I don’t understand why he’d do that to you.”

“You and me both, and he said they made him do it.” She laughed then, but there was no mirth to it. “Can you believe that? As if someone can actually make someone cheat on their girlfriend.”

“They?” I frowned. “Wait, was he heaps drunk? Did someone take advantage of him?”

“No,” she howled. “They made him.”

“Who are *they*? His friends?”

“He wouldn’t say,” she said, scrubbing a tissue beneath her nose. “He said he couldn’t say anything else, and so I told him to leave.”

I didn’t dare ask if she’d spoken to him since. His name flashing on the screen of her phone told me they hadn’t. And I didn’t dare ask if they’d broken up.



I peeked at my phone in my lap, waiting for a text from Cory after asking how she was doing. A stupid question, probably, but I needed to check in, and Mom had hurried me out the door as I was texting.

“Where are we going again?” I asked her now.

January, seated across from me in the back of the Town Car, expelled a breath and grabbed a bottle of champagne from the minibar. The Town Car now made more sense. We rarely used them unless she needed to for work, to drink or was planning to drink. “I’ve been in denial, I’m afraid.”

I made a face. “Huh?” She popped the lid. “About what?”

We rolled farther into town, and she put the visor up, ensuring the driver wasn’t privy to whatever it was she was muttering about.

“I’ve tried,” she said, seeming close to tears.

“Mom,” I said, a nervous laugh accompanying my next words. “What’s going on?”

She didn’t answer, just drank straight from the bottle. And then she drank some more. She kept going until she’d nearly polished off half the bottle.

Her anxiety was making me anxious.

“Do I need some of that?” I tried to joke.

“Oh, probably.” She handed it over, and I took it, alarm snaking through me. “We’re almost there, so I’d hurry up and drink.”

I set the bottle back in the fridge, needing something to do. “Almost where?”

“You’ll see. Put your seat belt on.”

I rolled my eyes but clipped it on.

“I daresay you’ve heard rumors every now and then about some of the people who live on the island.”

“You’ll need to be more specific, I’m afraid,” I said, frowning. “Rumors are social currency here, and I’m not a very social person.”

She plucked at nothing on her tight cream dress. “You’ve not heard murmurings of the society?”

“Are you referring to the council meetings you attend?” I wondered what that had to do with anything. “What, are they like secret meetups for singles or something?”

Mom snorted. “Hardly, and no, I’m talking about Nightingale.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Them,” she said. “We’ve been born into it, and the only other way in is via marriage.”

I was so confused right now. “Born into…” I laughed, suggesting with sarcasm, “Oh, like a for-real secret society?”

“Yes, and it’s far more deranged than any rumors could suggest. I’ve tried.” She moaned then and rubbed her temples. “Lord, have I tried, but this day was always coming, and I’ve just been too chickenshit to put my naïve, off with the fairies child through it.”

“Hey,” I said, annoyed. “Wait, what?”

“You heard me. It’s time for you to initiate, Fern, and there’s not a damn thing I can do to stop it. But what I have done,” her voice lowered, her eyes sharp on mine, “is made your arrival far easier than most.”

Initiate.

Arrival.

*What in the love of fuck was happening right now?*

“You’re joking, right?” Laughing again, I shook my head. “This sounds like a cult.”

“Call it what you like, but just keep your mouth shut around those who’re not members.” When I opened said mouth to ask one of the billion other questions, she snapped, “The rest can wait until we’re in my office.”

The car pulled into a driveway behind the hotel, and a man in a dark navy suit opened my door. “Good morning, ladies.”

“The paperwork is on my desk?” Mom asked, throwing her arm around when I failed to move.

I climbed out, and he closed the door behind me. “Ready and waiting.”

“Thank you, Dick.”

*Dick?* “I thought your assistant’s name was...” Oh. “Never mind.”

“Richard does whatever I tell him and that includes tolerating the name Dick.”

“Why not just call him Rich? Rick? Or I don’t know, maybe even Richard?” I asked as we stepped inside two blacked-out glass doors and entered a stark, glowing foyer.

“Life’s a bitch, Fern. One must take enjoyment wherever they can. If that’s at the expense of others, then so be it.” She then added dryly, “Besides, he’s paid too much to care.”

I wasn’t about to argue, but I did withhold a laugh.

We entered an elevator fit for at least twenty people. With the exception of the back wall, which was mirrored, the rest was all glass, granting view to every floor.

I caught glimpses of rooms, and as we rose higher, what appeared to be conference rooms. When we reached the top, I felt my stomach drop. You could see the entire island, and then it just fell away, replaced by water and small glimpses of Ardent Falls and Old Isle. “Wow.”

Mom stayed silent, and then the doors opened with a ping to reveal a huge foyer that broke into two hallways. Upon the ceiling were fat babies with wings, playing amongst the clouds between patches of glass shielded sky.

We moved straight ahead, gliding past weird writing in gold frames. I struggled to keep up, let alone ask what they were.

And then I saw it at the end of the hall.

Inside a black gilded frame was the same picture as Jude's tattoo. This one was larger, more detailed. The birds taking flight from the mouths of the snakes and soaring toward the frame glittered in a way that made it seem like they were moving each time you tilted your head.

Nightingale.

"Fern," Mom called. "You're not supposed to be here yet, so we need to make this quick."

"Mom," I said, at a loss for words. I pointed at the picture, my head swimming.

"Shit, are you going to faint?"

Unsure, I used the wall for support as I waded to her as though I was walking through quicksand. "I thought your office was on the ground floor."

"That's a decoy."

"A what and why?"

"Enough," she said, waving me into what was apparently her real office, the door already open. "Sit."

In a soft brown leather chair, I waited for her to quit pacing behind her desk. She'd be a while, so I looked around and studied the stained floor-to-ceiling shelves. Upon them sat thick black books with silver and gold embossed spines. No words labeled them, but roman numerals.

"Fern, you need to initiate before you turn nineteen."

She hadn't stopped pacing. "Why?"

"It's tradition, and exceptions are rarely made. So," she said, her shoulders rising and falling with a loaded breath, "you need to sign these."

"Um." I stared at the papers she pushed across the concrete slab she called a desk. "I'm going to need more information about what's going on first."

"Younglings aren't usually told more than what they need to know. I've told you all I can, and until you're in, you cannot know more."

Well, shit. "I don't think I want to do this."

"That's irrelevant."

I could tell, peering up into her face, the immovable iced expression, that I wouldn't be leaving here until I'd signed the awaiting papers that laid before me.

"What exactly am I signing?"

Mom didn't falter. "A marriage agreement, your ironclad NDA, and a marriage license."

My eyes blurred, and I wheezed, "*Marriage?*"

"You will marry Jude Delouxe in thirty-five days, and you will do so in front of the entire enclave to swear fealty to a cause that will protect and serve you, as you shall serve it, for the rest of your life."

Breath fled me so fast that I thought I would faint. "Sorry, but could you repeat that?" My voice was thick with shock. "Because I think you just said I need to marry..."

"Jude Delouxe, yes."

I'd always known she was a little unhinged, but this was too much. "If you think I'm going to marry the guy who not only broke my heart but also cut it up and served it on a golden platter for everyone to stare and laugh at, you're insane." I swallowed when she didn't speak. She did nothing but stare at me, her brow ticking with impatience. "And for the rest of my life? This entire thing is just... ridiculous and unbelievable and *no*."

"You and Jude can terminate the marriage after twelve months."

"That's not..." I paused, baffled and about to vomit. "I need that drink."

"You're pale. Are you going to puke?"

I couldn't answer. My head was spinning, and my heart was screaming. I couldn't do this.

Why was she making me do this?

I must have said those last words out loud, or she read the question in my wet eyes.

Sighing, Mom rounded her desk and came to stand before me, tipping my chin up. "No one fucks with you and gets away with it. It was too perfect not to take advantage of."

*Fiancé.*

Husband.

How was it fair that dreams come true only in the form of nightmares?

"Mom..."

"Shhh." Both hands clasped my cheeks, her thumbs rubbing away my fear. Her own eyes glistened with tears she'd never allow to fall. "Right now, you think I've done this to hurt you, but you will see in time that I've protected you. Your heart might be broken, but your soul?" She sniffed, smiling a little. "Your soul will forever remain untouched."

She was wrong. It was already stained beyond recognition.

Before I could ask if hers was, too, she released me and dropped something into my lap.

An engagement ring. “I don’t want it.” Horrified, I stared down at the velvet green box. *Green*. “I don’t want any of this.”

“You don’t get a choice. You’re my only child, and so you have to. Trust me, this could be a thousand times worse. Just ask your new fiancé.” I gaped at her, and she jabbed her finger at the ring. “Put it on.”

My hands shook as I opened the velvet box and stared at the glittering diamonds inside. They mocked me, taunted me with what-ifs that would never see the light of day. A common daydream, to wonder when and how you might be proposed to, what that ring might look like, and how you might feel. Overjoyed, shocked, and so in love.

I was shocked all right, but there was no joy, no love—I highly doubted there ever would be. There was only loathing and resentment and fear.

I snapped the box closed and cleared my throat. “Later. Hand me a pen.”

I stared down at Jude’s signature. The tumbling lines of ink pressed too harshly into paper, so much so, that it was dented. That told me all I needed to know. He didn’t want this, but, like me, he had been given no choice.

And I was determined to find out why.

# FOURTEEN

## *Fern*

Ardent Falls University had almost an entire island to itself.

Bordered by beachside homes and businesses, the campus sat in the very center. Essential stores, small boutiques, restaurants, and apartment blocks separated the elite students and families from what many of them deemed as commoners.

Cory helped me move boxes from the trunk of my car and up the three circular porch steps to my new home. It resembled a brownstone with ivy and overgrown hedges roaming the exterior. The former was a popular pest in Ardent Falls and even on Peridot Island. At least it was a pretty one.

It crawled over the brick to wrap around the white arched windows and planter boxes. Inside them were white roses, and I wondered who would be taking care of the landscaping.

There wasn't much of a backyard behind the two-story home, but there was enough grass that I'd either need to teach myself how to cut it or have to hire someone.

I couldn't exactly picture Jude doing it.

The very idea made my eyes round, and my stomach jump as images of him shirtless and sweat-misted sailed through my mind.

We set the boxes inside along the wall of the narrow entry hall. "I just..." Cory stopped and looked around, hands on her hips. "I still don't understand."

"Neither do I," I muttered, and I could only tell her so much.

"Your mom was so mad," Cory said. "Steam exiting her ears kind of mad. I never would've thought she'd agree to have you guys shoved into the same house in the name of college and saving money."

That was the excuse I'd given her, and I had no choice but to stick with it. "She might be loaded, but she keeps and grows that fortune by being smart with money," I said, coughing a little. "I guess."

She'd soon find out some more, and I hoped to be the one to tell her. I couldn't yet. Too much at once and she was liable to freak out and demand to know what was going on.

I wished I had an answer for that myself.

All I knew was I had to marry the toad who hurt me numerous times because we'd both been born into some secret society.

Yeah, even if I could tell her, there was no way she'd believe that.

I shifted the conversation to her new boss. "How's Alice's hip?"

Alice owned the local bookstore a few streets away from school. Cory not only gained employment there but also boarding. She'd only had to go home for a few short weeks to pack up her life and haul it back to her new apartment. It sat above the store, drowning in so much ivy that she could hardly see out the windows, but she adored it.

"Better." We headed back outside to grab the next load. "She'll probably be climbing the stairs every other hour to offer me tea again in no time."

"That would be amazing," I said.

"If you want to be up peeing all night, sure."

I laughed at that, propping the box on my hip to close the trunk.

Jude wasn't here, thankfully. Mom informed me he was spending the weekend at home with Henry, which was why, with school starting on Tuesday, I'd finally quit living in denial and decided to move my things across the bridge.

An hour later, Cory was still taking stock of my new living arrangements while I was trying not to have a panic attack in my new room. It was huge with a king-sized bed dressed in a fitted white sheet, waiting for my bedding in the center of the room. Either side of it were two high arched windows, midmorning light spilling onto the low lying whitewashed dressers beneath them that served as nightstands.

"Did your mom furnish the place? Or Jude?"

"I think it was purchased furnished," I said, not knowing for sure, but assuming so judging by the bareness of it. If my mom was given the task, she'd have decorated far differently. Our home was old charm meets modern sterility.

This place was antique, old money, everywhere I looked. I pondered whether Mom or Elijah had even purchased it, or if it had already belonged to Nightingale.

I was willing to bet on the latter.

In the kitchen, we marveled at the new appliances and the French provincial cupboards and countertops. “There’s no fucking food,” Cory said, moving to the double door fridge “Protein shakes, fruit, microwaveable meals... you can tell he’s been here a while.” Shutting the doors, she turned to me with a smile. “Let’s go snoop in his bedroom.”

“Let’s not.” I shivered at the mere thought.

“You’re not the least bit curious?” She jumped up onto the counter, chomping on a green apple. “I would be. The universe has given you some rotten as fuck lemons, time to milk them into revenge.”

There was nothing I wanted more than to hand Jude Delouxe his balls, still bleeding and warm, but not like that. “I want nothing to do with him.”

“Well,” she said, chewing. “You’re about to have a lot to do with him, I’m afraid.”

“Not if I can help it.” I inspected the barren pantry myself with a sigh. “I plan to live in my room and never see him.”

She snorted, knowing that was going to be virtually impossible.

The front door opened, and I spun around, throwing my back against the closed pantry door as Silas’s deep baritone bounced off the walls. “You never know.”

I looked at Cory, who was staring wide-eyed at me. “A complication we should’ve foreseen,” I whispered. “Where’s the back door?”

She jumped down and turned in a circle.

It was too late. Jude entered the kitchen, followed by Silas. They both froze, Jude with his hand halfway through his luscious hair, and Silas with his eyes glued to Cory.

No one said a word.

I wondered if anyone besides me was breathing.

Then Jude’s hand dropped to his side, and he dug out his phone from the pocket of his jeans, walking forward to dump it and his keys on the counter.

He didn’t speak, just walked right by me to the fridge, pulled out a water bottle, and headed to the living room.

Silas was still standing there, hands fidgeting at his sides as if warring with what to do.

I decided to back out slowly, but before I was free, Cory’s apple flew across the kitchen toward Silas’s head. He ducked, and it slammed into an

old cross-stitch of a bird on the wall before splattering to the floor among the broken glass.

“Cory...” Silas started.

But she’d taken the opportunity to run straight past him, her sneakers crunching over the glass on her way out.

“Cory, wait!” he yelled, and the desperate hitch to his voice stunned me. Then he gave chase.

The laundry room was next to the kitchen, and I found a dustpan and brush inside a tall cupboard next to the washing machine and dryer.

I couldn’t hear them, and I didn’t know if he caught her, so I closed the front door and cleaned up the mess they’d left behind.

Jude’s boots appeared, and a tiny shard of glass was kicked toward me. “Missed some.”

I collected it into the pan, then lifted the picture from the ground. The frame was fine, but there were jagged triangles of glass sitting beneath it.

I noticed then that it wasn’t just any bird. “A Nightingale.”

“How observant you are,” Jude commented with lethal snide.

I set the picture against the wall and gazed up at him. His eyes were narrowed on me, his jaw flexing and his arms crossed.

Even in just a baggy plain gray T-shirt and dark jeans, he was stunning, and I fucking hated it.

I also hated how small he’d made me feel in just a cluster of seconds. Unsteady, I rose and walked around him, taking the glass to the trash can under the kitchen sink.

“For someone who’s been handed what she wanted, you don’t seem very appreciative.”

I closed the cupboard, a little harder than necessary, and whacked the dustpan onto the counter. “You actually think I wanted this?”

“Sure looked like you did a few months ago.”

Taking in the severity of his face, the lowered brows, and the pressed state of those lips, I laughed. Then I laughed some more.

“What’s so funny?” he said, resentment fading into confusion.

“You,” I said and plucked my car keys from the pocket of my peach shorts. “You’re the last thing I want, Jude, believe me.”

He feigned disappointment with his hand against his broad chest. “You wound me. Wasn’t it your diary I read just a few short months ago?” His

voice deepened as he added, “Wasn’t it you who wrote all those poetic musings about a boy you’d been watching for years?”

Fuck him. I needed to find Cory and get some food into this hellhole.

“Yeah, well,” I said, leaving him and heading to the door. “A lot can change in three months, asshole.” I slammed it behind me and heard the picture inside smack against the floorboards.

# FIFTEEN

## Jude

*A lot can change in three months, asshole.*

No, Red, I'd wanted to shout. A lot can change in an instant.

"I'm sorry," I said for what seemed like the hundredth time. If I were looking at the entirety of our relationship, it probably wasn't far from the truth. "But it's done, Marns. We tried."

"I tried, you mean. I fucking tried."

I waited for her to finish yelling at me, my head in my hand and the darkness of my new room threatening to eat me alive.

"... has to be someone else."

"Marnie," I said, gripping my phone so hard, I thought it was going to break. "You're in New York now, and I'm here, and I need to go."

"What?" she screamed. I lowered the volume and waited once more. "You call me up to dump me when I've only just taken you back, and then you need to go? I don't think so, Jude. You've known I was going to Columbia for months. Something's happened. If you've slept with someone..."

"I haven't," I said, and that was the honest to god truth. I was a scoundrel, through and through, but I would never do that while actually dating someone. I could tell, though, that if I didn't give her a little honesty, enough to hurt her some more, then I wasn't getting off the phone anytime soon. I needed this done before I caved and told her way more than I should. "But there is someone else."

The line went completely silent.

And then it went dead.

Sighing, I stared at the screen, a picture of Henry smiling back at me.

I just hoped he never got too curious for his own good. I hoped he never saw our father the way I used to—as someone to admire and strive to become.

It only led to darkness.

I threw my phone onto the bed and stared at the closed bedroom door.

I wasn't sure if Fern was home. School had started earlier this week, but we didn't share any classes. I was willing to bet that was January's doing. Unless she'd been coming or going at the same time as me, then I hadn't seen her here either, and even then, she was silent, forever in a hurry as soon as I appeared.

I didn't know if she hated me or wanted me, and I didn't care.

Evidently, she wanted nothing to do with me, and I was fine with that—fiancé or not.

This morning, I'd rehung the picture of the Nightingale back on the wall with all its missing glass. She'd walked by me on her way out the door without so much as a pause.

She hadn't appeared shocked by what had been revealed to her.

*Give it time*, I thought and made my way to the en suite. All too soon, she'd be begging Mommy dearest for a way out.

She'd never find one.



Dad crossed his ankles, leaning back against the kitchen counter. “The nightmares are far less frequent now. Dr. Monrow said he’s doing okay.”

“That doesn’t matter.” I stopped myself from pleading with him, standing there with my arms crossed. “Please, just be there. Just fucking be there, and if you can’t, then bring him here.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then he nodded. “How’s Fern?”

“Acts like I don’t exist,” I said, unfolding my arms and grabbing a meal from the fridge. “So I wouldn’t know.”

“Have you apologized for what you did to her?”

I withheld a biting retort and said nothing.

Dad scratched his cheek, expelling a loud breath. “You really ought to let Rhiannon come over and cook for you, too.”

I chucked the meal into the microwave. “Henry needs her.”

“So I’ll find you someone else.”

I knew he could, but something stopped me from allowing anyone else entry into this new home of mine. It didn't feel like home at all, but if there was one thing I was thankful for, it was the lack of memories.

Everything was brand new, even the silent snake who resided here with me seemed different.

"I've already got Silas in my hair most days," I said for an excuse. "It'll get too cramped."

"How's he doing?" Dad asked.

"Wait around another hour, and you'll find out for yourself." Seeing his frown, I snatched a fork from the drawer and explained, "He's been staying in one of the spare rooms most nights."

"His parents," Dad said in response.

"Yup. Wants nothing to do with them."

Dad wiped his hand down his face. "Poor kid."

Poor kid indeed. My once happy-go-lucky friend was now a grumbling dark shadow. I had enough of those already, so I hoped he fixed his shit somehow and got out of here soon. Though, I honestly didn't know if there was any fixing what he'd done.

That was the point.

And I knew firsthand exactly how that made one feel—completely fucking helpless.

Dad saw himself out when the microwave dinged, but then backtracked as I sat down at the counter in front of my risotto. "Oh, don't forget about the engagement party this Sunday night."

I didn't respond, just glared at my food before pushing it away.

The door closed and reopened an hour later, a familiar laugh echoing down the hall into the living room.

Hitting pause on the game, I peered over to find a red dress fluttering, creamy skin, and some prick's Nikes.

She'd brought a fucking guy home.

I was up in an instant, ready to storm after her and ask what the fuck she thought she was doing. Not only because in my eyes, Red's only sexual experience was me, but because she was going to piss a lot of powerful people off if she didn't play by their fucking rules.

I wasn't about to go down because she'd taken my training and had decided to put it to good use.

A thought entered, unwelcome and infuriating that it was highly probable she'd already been doing that. For months.

Anger funneled through me, a sickness with no way out. I sped down the hall to the stairs and ran right into my useless best friend.

He shoved me back from his chest. "Fuck, Judy. I missed you too, but no need for the tackle hug."

I snarled. "Piss off." Glancing behind him at the stairs, I heard a door closing, and it hit me like dynamite in my ears.

Silas followed my gaze, then smirked. "You loved messing with her a little too much, didn't you?" With a pat on my chest, he skirted around me and headed for the kitchen.

I followed and grabbed a beer from the fridge. "She's going to fuck this whole thing up, and knowing January, it'll be my head on the chopping block, not Fern's."

Silas took a seat at the counter and stole my beer.

I got another, turning to find he'd stolen my uneaten, cold as shit risotto, too. "You gotta tell her, then." I didn't like the sound of that, and he chuckled, his hair a stringy mess he pushed out of his eyes. "Your fucking face right now."

"Your fucking hair right now." He just grinned at his food, and I grunted, "I'll leave her a note."

Rice flew as he guffawed. "You're not ten. Man up."

I gave him a look. "Me?"

He grumbled, "Fuck you," and shoved more food into his mouth.

"How long do you plan to hide out here for again?"

"Forever," he mumbled, then glared at me, something I was unaccustomed to. "Problem with that?"

"Well, yeah. Quite a few, actually."

"Write me a note too," he said. "I'll be sure to use it to wipe my fine ass."

Feeling kind of nauseated, I ditched my beer and lousy friend and forced myself upstairs to my room. I probably just needed a shower and sleep.

Let Fern fuck it all up. What did I care? Maybe then I wouldn't have to marry her, consequences be damned.

# SIXTEEN

## *Fern*

Our engagement party wasn't held at The Ribbon like I'd thought it would be.

Horror swept through me as we pulled up outside the Hystenya, and my driver opened the door to reveal my future husband.

"Why here?" I said through my teeth, trying to light the devil on fire with my eyes.

"I had nothing to do with it." Jude tipped a shoulder, taking my arm in his and whispering, "This is not for Nightingale. This is for the outside world."

Even dressed in a dark gray tuxedo, the touch of his arm against mine made my skin crawl, biting shivers cascading over me like stinging nettle.

Inside, the party was already in full swing in a suite that took up the entire floor third from the top. I was sure I had my mother to thank for that much, at least—that I didn't have to be subjected to more humiliation in the same room. Why not spread it out?

I grabbed a flute of champagne as soon as we stepped out of the elevator, and a round of applause greeted us.

Shocked, I stilled, and so did Jude. Then he took an offered champagne and held it in the air, a practiced smile edging his lips but not reaching his eyes. "Thank you for coming to celebrate with us."

That was all he said, and I didn't plan on opening my mouth unless it was to drink.

Everyone smiled and gave us room to wade deeper into the suite.

In a floor-length silver gown that displayed way too much cleavage, Mom stood in the back next to Elijah, but Henry was nowhere to be seen.

My mother stole me from Jude, air-kissing both my cheeks and then pulling my loose curls over my shoulders to drape over the bodice of my dark blue gown.

It was slimline, plain, and fell straight to the floor. I couldn't be bothered to try harder. I'd found it on the discount rack at a boutique in the market square yesterday afternoon. A tiny slight no one but me would know I'd accomplished. The small show of pettiness made me smile, and that was all I cared about these days.

"You look well," Mom said. "He's treating you okay?"

She'd phoned me twenty times since I'd moved in over a week ago. "We don't really see each other, so everything's fine."

She glanced around then and shot me a look that said to keep comments like that to myself.

"... she caught me by surprise, most definitely," I heard Jude say with forced laughter to Headmaster Taurin and his football coach from Peridot Academy.

And so the story went for the next hour until it was passed around the room. "I felt like a dickhead, completely wretched. I liked her, you see. I guess I just liked her so much I didn't know what to do with it."

I wasn't sure how anyone believed him. It was hard for me not to roll my eyes. With an old sadness I didn't think would ever abate, I stood dutifully beside him, our arms linked, and drank until I was using him to stay upright.

Swaying, I laughed at an elderly man who'd said, "Treat them mean, keep them keen."

He winked, and I stabbed a finger at him. "You're so funny." He fucking wasn't. Not at all.

His smile waned as he frowned at me, and Jude chuckled. He snatched the remainder of my champagne and bopped me on the nose. "No more for this one."

"A little young to be drinking, aren't we?" the man asked, knowing full well that there were those of us on the island who did as we pleased, age be damned.

"But it's a celebration," I said, conspiratorially.

That earned me a rich bout of laughter from the gent. "Too right. You young ones enjoy yourselves, even in the bad times, especially then, you hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Jude said through his forced smile, steering me into the back corner of the room. "The fuck, Red?" he hissed, nodding at someone we passed.

“Where are all your school friends?” I said with a hiccup. “They can’t be the last to know, surely.”

“They were invited,” he said, grabbing my waist when I made to get myself more to drink. “Stop it.”

I pouted. “Well, where are they?”

I knew why Silas wasn’t here. He never left our place unless it was to drink or attend school and practice. He was already failing in the last two areas being that he selected when to show up for either.

Jude’s face came into focus, green eyes and sharp lines. “Once they heard it wasn’t a joke, they held no interest in attending.”

“Oh,” I said, sobering a little.

Jude sighed; his hands steady heat at my back, pulling me closer.

In his arms, the rest of the room dripped away until it was just us. I couldn’t not look at him, so I noticed the shadows under his eyes. “Sleep well?”

“Like I was born yesterday.”

My arms looped behind his neck, my wrists tingling at the feel of his warm skin and that soft hair. “Fitting for that attitude of yours.”

“Did you fuck him?”

Shocked into stillness, I blinked at him.

His lashes were sitting high, and his mouth etched into a thin line as he waited for me to explain what happened with Adrian, a guy I’d met at the library on campus. He was just one of many I planned to parade through the house.

But I wasn’t about to explain anything to him. “Did you really think I’d been a saint since that fateful night? That I’d hold out hope and actually wait around for you to apologize? You remember the one, don’t you?” I lifted to my toes, whispering to that gorgeous mouth, “The night you gifted me with the reputation of a crazy bitch all because I used to adore you? No?” I kissed him, his stuttered breath burning, then pulled back to smile up at him. “Mmm, well, I’m just playing the part you gave me, and it would seem that you’re the only one who has an issue with my... personality.”

His laughter was silent mockery. “You’re a fool if you think they care about whatever reputation I gave you. They just want your tits in their faces and your cunt wrapped around their cocks, sweetheart, and don’t you forget it.”

My smile widened as my heart soured. “What a visual, huh?”

His teeth gritted. “You can’t mess around like that. Nightingale won’t stand for this marriage to be known for what it really is.”

“And what is that, dear Jude?”

His hands pressed into my hips. “Fake as fuck.”

“Right,” I said, rocking in time to the slow hum of violins. “Well, I don’t feel like spending the next twelve months celibate, and I know you don’t either.” I whispered to his jaw, his whiskered skin and scent taunting, “How is the lovely Marnie?”

“I don’t know,” he said, gruff. “I ended it last week.”

That halted my hips and train of thought. “What?”

“I loathe repeating myself, Red.”

“But... I don’t understand why you’d do that,” I said, almost to myself. The warmth from the champagne left my veins, leaving me cold and bereft even while in his arms. “Not after you went to such extreme lengths to win her back.”

A half laugh washed over the bare skin of my shoulder. “Sounds to me like someone has the wrong idea.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Tell me how it was then.”

“It might have started out that way, but the truth is, I really just don’t like you.” Even after telling myself I was through with him, and that he could no longer hurt me, I felt the broken shards of my heart fracture. “You were kind of fun until your weird obsession with me became ten shades of fucked up.” Releasing me, he dragged a finger down my cheek to my chin, tipping it up so I’d meet his narrowed eyes. “You think all that was bad? Fuck this second chance up for me, and you’ll see just how much worse I can be.”

With that, he stalked off across the room to clap one of his old teammates on the back.

I stood there, gaping after him with my chest and face burning. I couldn’t tell if it was the ache he’d embedded inside me, or if it was growing fury.

All I knew was I would live my life however I wanted, and he’d just have to deal with any repercussions that might come our way. The days and nights of being a pin cushion for whatever it was that’d messed him up had ended months ago.

He couldn’t hurt me anymore.



Between classes the following Wednesday, I received a text from Cory asking to meet her for lunch in the gardens outside the cafeteria.

I ran through every excuse in my mind, the botched-up story I couldn't quite get right, knowing she was never going to believe me. But it wasn't as if I could avoid her, and I knew she'd heard about the engagement party.

The only difference between college and high school was that people found better things to do than gossip much quicker, but they'd still do it.

Under a willow tree by a pond with a tiny bridge and a statue of a moss-covered frog, Cory waited at a wooden set of table and chairs with her laptop open.

"Hey." I dropped into the bench seat across from her, but I didn't bother unwrapping my burger.

"Now, it could be just a rumor, and by god am I hoping that it is, but supposedly"—her computer was slapped closed, revealing wide, searching eyes—"you got engaged. To your tormentor slash teenage obsession."

"Ex-obsession," I clarified.

"You're not exactly doing a great job of convincing me this shit is real, you know that?"

"It is," I said, leaning forward. "Unfortunately. Look, I can't explain it. I'm not allowed..."

"Not allowed?" she practically screeched, then glanced around before looking back at me with concern. "Fern, is the asshole pulling another outrageously evil prank on you? You need to tell me. I'll help you—"

"He's not."

She kept going. "We can get you out of this, screw him. I'll come over this afternoon, and we can move you into my apart—"

"Cory," I snapped, shocking us both. "I'm fine, and we're getting married, and there's nothing you, him, or I can do about it. The wedding is in two weeks."

She reared back, blinking profusely. "Sorry, did you just say two weeks? Fern, you're *eighteen*."

“Nineteen in a couple of months,” I muttered as though that’d help. Then because I was a god damn idiot who wanted to get this off my chest, I said, “You’re not allowed to come, and I hate that so much, and I’m so sorry. But it’s not like it’s...” I stopped myself from saying more than I should. I had a feeling this meetup was already a big mistake. Jude and I should’ve set this in motion a lot better as soon as I moved in. We should’ve made it at least somewhat believable to those who knew us.

Cory blinked some more, then puffed out a breath. “Wow.” Staring at me for a moment that dragged into a minute, I saw the change in her eyes when confusion turned into all-out suspicion. “Hold the fuck up. You’re getting married, and I’m not invited? And to the guy who ruined your senior year?”

I nodded, biting my lips so I didn’t say anything else.

“Something’s wrong here,” she said. “So wrong that I can feel it crawling over my skin, and why do I think Silas...” She must’ve read the panic in my expression, for she leaned forward and hissed, “You know something about that, don’t you?”

Heading downstairs the night before our engagement party, I’d stopped on the landing when I’d overheard Silas talking to Jude about his parents and Cory. I hadn’t heard much, but his regret and anger were enough to piece together what he’d meant when Cory had said *they* had made him do it.

He’d had to destroy his relationship in order to initiate, and I was willing to bet that his parents were behind the orchestration of it. Not just because they didn’t like Cory but because he was still refusing to go home.

No matter what I’d figured out, I had to keep my mouth shut, which officially made me the worst friend ever.

I squeezed my eyes closed. “Cory, please.”

Her hands captured mine, and my eyes snapped open. “Fern, spill. Right now.”

“I can’t,” I said, dragging out the words. “I want to, please believe that, but I honestly can’t.”

Releasing me, she sat back, her brows drawn tight. “You can’t tell me something that concerns my own boyfriend?”

I rolled my lips between my teeth. I didn’t know enough about Silas. Only that he’d cheated on her during, or for, his initiation. It didn’t change

the fact that he still did it. He had the choice. Initiate or don't. He'd gone ahead with it.

Telling her it was all because of some fucked-up secret society wouldn't help her anyway.

"Kay," Cory eventually said, packing away her things. Grabbing her laptop bag, she rose from the bench seat and slung it over her shoulder.

She left, and I battled the urge to cry and run after her while silent laughter fell from my parted lips. It wasn't funny. Nothing about any of this was remotely funny.

But it was ironic, how the things we wanted most could end up destroying us, piece by piece at a time.

# SEVENTEEN

## *Jude*

“Engaged?” Alana, a pretty little blonde thing who’d taken to sitting next to me during American literature, repeated at a wince-inducing volume.

“Yep,” I said, then continued on my merry way from the old room. I was a lover of libraries and historic buildings, but too much mildew in the air was not for me.

Informing her I was off the market hadn’t seemed to work. What good was being engaged if you couldn’t use it to opt out of unwanted conversation? Outside, the sun beating back the graying clouds, Alana grabbed my arm on the cobblestone path. “I’ve never seen you with someone.”

“So?” I said, pulling my arm away.

Her light brows lowered, pink lips twisting. “I guess I just feel kind of bad.” Her tongue snaked out, running over her teeth. “Since we’ve been hanging and all.”

My brows rose at that, and trying not to laugh, I just stared at her for a moment. She was gorgeous, sure. I’d been tempted when she’d first taken a seat next to me after I’d broken up with Marnie, sure.

But that temptation was born from a place that hungered for revenge and the need to rebel. To beat at the box I’d been kicked into with such stunning force.

A glimpse of fiery hair across the quad saved me, and I hollered, “Oh, Red!”

She glanced over, about to keep walking until I gestured for her to get her ass over here.

I wasn’t sure why she humored me. I was just relieved she did.

Alana scurried down the path before Fern even reached us, and I made a show of looking at her ass even though it wasn’t much to look at, and I really didn’t give a shit.

“You’re a pig,” Fern said. “New plaything?”

“Pig? Funny, I thought I was all you had.” She glared. I smirked. “And no, I was just telling her about my lovely fiancée, actually.”

Tucking some of that wild hair behind her ear, she glanced at the students rushing by to their next class. I noticed then she wasn’t wearing her engagement ring. I knew she had one. Looking back at the times I’d seen Fern since she’d moved in, I realized I couldn’t remember seeing it. “Speaking of... Where’s your ring?”

“Gone.”

I cursed. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. What do you want?”

I thought I might pass out even though I hadn’t bought the stupid thing in the first place. My father’s assistant had. “You threw what had to be thousands of dollars’ worth of jewelry into the trash?”

“I donated it to the homeless shelter, if you must know.”

Whoa. I wasn’t sure if she was legit insane, or stupid, or too fucking nice.

Maybe all three.

“Jude,” she prompted, her tone growing huskier with impatience. “What do you want?”

I gave my head a bit of a shake, then grinned. “Not a damn thing, but we are getting married next week, so allow me to escort you to class, my soon-to-be bride.”

“I’m good,” she said, laughing a little as she walked away. “And you’re a dick.”

I caught up with her and slung my arm around her shoulders. “It would behoove us to be seen around campus together at least once or twice.”

“Why?” Pulling at my immovable arm, she groaned.

“Quit it, and act like you still love me for two seconds.”

She stopped moving then, and I couldn’t bring myself to look at her, to read her expression. We walked in tense silence toward the science building, and I smiled, being sure to meet the eyes of a few onlookers as we went.

“She was hitting on me,” I finally murmured and had no idea why. “Alana, and I was fucking sick of it.”

“Poor baby.” She mock-pouted. “I’m surprised.”

“Yeah?” I asked, forcing my eyes off those blues. “Dare I ask?”

“I’m surprised you can’t tell someone to fuck off as easily as you once told me.” Tearing away, she stalked up the stairs, leaving me at the bottom.

“Fern,” I yelled, then waited until she turned back, knowing she would. It was just us, only a few people drifting down the path behind me, but her cheeks still colored when my eyes roamed her tight denim-clad legs to the pink Vans on her feet. “I find I prefer you without heels.”

I laughed when she flipped me off and glided away, her red hair bouncing down her back.



All weddings for members of Nightingale were held at The Ribbon inside the room of servitude.

I thought it fitting and kind of disturbing that the once salaciously used space, reserved for the darker indulgences of our members, was now dressed in white.

It was too clean, too floral, whispering spreads of silk and white roses scattered throughout the entire suite. Even the bloody ground was covered in white petals.

Fern was no virgin, that much had become apparent after she’d blatantly ignored my threat and brought someone home the night before our wedding.

Her moans had reddened my vision, hardened my cock, and I’d gone to bed with my earphones in, hoping I’d actually fall asleep.

I had, but not until the front door had closed, and I’d fucked my hand over the bathroom sink.

Shame and loathing had never made my blood swell and bubble quite like that. I’d stood there, staring at the cum-splattered stone, fuming that I still wanted her after all the trouble she’d caused—after she’d allowed another male inside her room. Inside her.

And that was what stained my mind when the orchestra took flight and the doors at the back of the room opened to reveal my bride.

I wanted to know who’d been the one to deflower her.

Everyone stood, my father behind me—both celebrant and island king—already standing.

Henry smiled at me from the front row, and I managed to give him a small one in return.

Then I followed everyone's eyes to Fern.

*You have got to be shitting me.*

Sheer lace sleeves adorned her arms, and tightly woven silk engulfed her every curve, flaring at her knees to her feet where a short lace train trailed behind her, dragging petals beneath it. It wasn't the style of the dress that had everyone gasping, though. No, it was the color.

My bride came to me dressed in black.

Of course, she did.

Behind a lace veil, those light blue eyes smiled, her red lips still and serene.

January, of course, was delivering her to me, and if she was annoyed by her daughter's dramatics, it definitely did not show. She smiled at those they walked by, her hand patting Fern's arm, of which was curled around hers. All too soon, she gave her daughter to me with a smile that dared me to hurt her again.

Ignoring it, I looked at Fern. Smooth skin slid over mine. Greedy, my fingers curled around hers, pulling her up the steps to stand across from me.

Under my breath, I whispered, "You're not attending a fucking funeral, darling."

"But aren't I?" She might have been smiling, but as my father read us our vows, and we repeated them back to one another, I watched sadness encompass her eyes.

I'd overheard an argument between her and Cory a week ago on the phone, and I'd noticed Fern stare at it since, hoping she'd call after leaving her what I knew had to be numerous voicemails.

My wife did nothing in half measures.

If she wanted something, she was all in, and it was evidently hurting her that not only was her friend not here, but Cory didn't seem to be in her life at all right now.

She was alone in the woods, and her mother had personally delivered her to the wolves. No matter what dress or attitude she wore, nor the fake smile, she was a fumbling lamb easily slaughtered.

I supposed it was my job to protect her now.

An impossible feat, considering I was the one she needed protection from.

We slid our rings on. Mine was a basic gleaming silver band.

Fern's was so loaded with rocks she couldn't hide her distaste, her forehead crinkling behind her veil as she glared at me.

Crimson lips pinched as we stared, and when some of that loathing dripped away, I wondered what she was thinking.

"You may now kiss the bride," my father's voice boomed.

I released her hands to lift her stupid veil, revealing those huge eyes. They were watching me in a way that spoke of fear, as though this were the first time we were going to kiss.

A first kiss as husband and wife and also our last.

We both knew that, and maybe that was why when I clasped her cheeks, I did so gently. Maybe that was why when her eyes met mine a moment before our mouths joined, my heart pinched.

And maybe that was why what I'd planned to be a chaste caress slid into all-out war.

I lost the ability to care about our surroundings, our grudges, and the people nearest us when her breath tumbled from her lips to scorch my own. Her mouth still fit seamlessly to mine, and her tongue still welcomed me with ardent reverence when I tilted her head.

Cheering and clapping erupted, and we broke apart.

Her eyes were wet, sorrow and anger creating cloudy sapphires.

Slowly, I removed my hands and took hers as we turned to each and every asshole in the room.

People from London were in attendance, and I dropped my gaze to the front row, to Henry, before what was happening revealed itself in any more gut-kicking ways.

As we did the rounds, heading to the reception in the connecting room, I realized people from Australia were here, too.

How naïve of me not to realize how big of a deal the marriage of an alpha's son was. I was glad I hadn't known just how big a deal until the matter was taken care of or else I might have arrived drunk or high or not at all.

Fern was pulled away by her mother and introduced to a range of men and women I'd rather not talk to. I stayed with my father, discussing the

political climate in the UK with his old friend while downing bourbon after bourbon.

Henry found me before I could get another refill. “You married that girl. The one who came into my room.”

Fern, now standing in a small group of ladies nearby, glanced over and offered a tight smile.

“I know,” I said, looking away.

“I wonder if she heard from her dad.”

I crunched down on an ice cube too hard and coughed. “What?”

“She told me about him.”

“She did?” I frowned, thinking back to when Henry had informed me of the red-haired girl coming to see him that night. “You never told me she stayed.”

He looked at me as though he couldn’t understand why that would matter. “Well, she did. She read me stories after we talked. Guess you got her big love.”

I swallowed and tried to digest this new, rather unpleasant knowledge. “Big love?”

Henry shrugged. “It’s a secret.”

I looked over at Red, who was wearing a polite smile as Henrietta Gabe talked her ear off. “Right.” I clapped Henry on the shoulder, then told him to find Silas, who was seated in the corner of the room with a bottle of scotch hanging between his knees.

Then I went to steal my bride. “If you’ll excuse us, ladies, I’m already missing my wife.”

They clucked and cooed, Fern waving a little as I tugged her to the dance floor for our first dance.

The room quieted, the lights dimming, and with a tremble in her hands, Fern looped them behind my neck. “You say the sweetest lies.”

I hummed, enjoying the way her stomach pressed into my cock, warm and soft and legally mine. Lowering my head, I pulled her closer until we were almost hugging while slowly rocking from side to side.

My nose skimmed her hairline, strawberries mingling with hairspray, and I clutched her lower back. “Henrietta would’ve eaten you alive.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t leave me there then,” she murmured.

“Red, I’m the only one allowed to taste your tears.”

She laughed, then sighed, leaning into me as though she was trying to relax. “Who is she?”

“Henrietta?”

She nodded.

“She’s the wife of London’s alpha, Benjamin Gabe.”

The name alone evoked a small shiver. I didn’t bother placating her. He was as filthy and crooked as they came, and she’d do well to listen to her instincts. “Your father was in the London chapter.”

“Second Tier. Benjamin had him transferred without warning and consent, knowing he was a threat to his throne.”

Fern snorted, lifting her head from my shoulder. “I need an encyclopedia. A spreadsheet, even.” I chuckled at that, then sobered when she blurted, “And I’ll be needing my diary back, husband.”

Pushing her out, I twirled her, and she came back to me wide-eyed before scowling. “Impossible, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t want to ask, but I know you’ll make me.” Her fingers curved into the fabric of my tux. “Why?”

I licked my lips, then grinned. “All that remains are ashes, and even those are probably long gone by now.”

Her intake of breath was violent enough to rise and drop those fantastic tits, and to be heard over the music. “Fitting,” she said, relaxing against me once more. “Considering it’s rather similar to the disappearance of my feelings for you.”

I felt my eye twitch, and my mouth hardened.

She kissed it until it softened, then fled when the song ended.

# EIGHTEEN

## *Fern*

Our wedding night was spent alone.

We came home in the same car and then went our separate ways as soon as the front door slammed closed behind us.

My dress was a thing of art, so even though I'd planned to throw it out the window of the second story onto the hood of Jude's Range Rover, I decided that would be a waste.

I'd keep it as a reminder that one day, I would have a real wedding in a white dress.

That was why I'd worn black. Jude didn't get to take that from me, too.

Busy with school and an overdue paper early in the week after, I hadn't seen him since.

"You don't need to explain," my aunt Ray said to me when I'd walked into her café the following Wednesday to finish said paper.

She brought me cup after cup of coffee, replacing it with water and a sandwich when the sun began to prepare for sleep.

Sliding into the booth opposite me, Ray eyed my computer.

I hit save and closed it, dragging the food closer with a growling stomach. "Thank you."

"Nice rocks." Laughter filled her eyes as she nodded to my hand, but it was soon replaced with concern. "You doing okay?"

"Fine," I lied, chewing.

She hummed. "Cory came in just yesterday, looking about as exhausted as you."

"She's not talking to me," I said, something pinching inside my chest. "We had a fight." It wasn't so much a fight but rather her telling me we were breaking up over the phone when she'd finally picked up days after I'd left her reeling on campus.

Ray didn't need to ask many questions. It became increasingly apparent that she knew more than she should, but not enough to be a concern to my

mother and her peers. “Well,” she said, scooping up sugar granules into her hand and dusting them into my empty mug. “If she’s your friend, and I wholeheartedly believe that she is, she will eventually come around.”

“I don’t know about that.” And I couldn’t explain why.

Her blue eyes snatched mine, her mouth set. “Patience, Ferny. Do not let your heart grow so disenchanting that you lose the ability to empathize, you hear?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I hear you.”

My phone rang, and my aunt took away my mug and saucer while I dug it out of my bag.

Jude. I ignored it and finished half my sandwich before it rang again.

And then again.

“Gah,” I said through bread and chicken. “What do you want?”

His deep baritone cut the annoyance away and replaced it with trepidation. “Get home and get ready.”

“For what?” I asked, crumbs flying from my mouth.

I picked them up with the pad of my finger as he said, “Your first glimpse of true debauchery awaits. We leave in half an hour.” The line went dead.

Shit. It would take me fifteen minutes to drive home.

Gathering my things, I scrambled out of the booth, waving the other half of my dinner in the air in goodbye.

My aunt watched on, her head tilting as she wiped her hands on a towel. “Drive safe!”

Jude was already dressed in yet another fitted tuxedo, this one a dark green, almost black, when I rushed from the car and darted inside.

He followed me upstairs. “You weren’t going to answer my call. What were you doing?”

After dropping my computer, phone, and purse onto my dresser, I flung open the doors to my small walk-in. “I have a paper due tomorrow.”

“So...?”

“So,” I said, plucking a dress off the hanger. “I was at Ray’s while she caffeinated me, and I finished it.”

“Hardly an excuse, but whatever.” Jude picked up my phone from the dresser, and I didn’t stop him. “You already have my number saved. How?”

I slipped my feet into my black pumps, and uncaring that he was in the room, I stripped off my yellow sundress and replaced it with a dark gray

cocktail one.

It sat over my chest like a snug velvet blanket, the bell skirt exploding around my hips to meet my knees in what resembled an upside-down umbrella. I shoved my hand inside the bodice and pulled off my bra, flinging it onto the bed. It had one built-in, so I didn't bother with a strapless.

"Jesus," I heard him mutter. He then cleared his throat. "My number. How and why do you have it?"

"You no doubt saw my old walk-in back home." He didn't answer, which I took for a firm yes. I dashed into my bathroom, knowing he'd follow. He did, leaning against the doorframe with my phone still in hand while I applied some mascara and lipstick. "How do you think I took the pictures of you?"

I didn't need to look in the mirror to know he'd stiffened. His voice was a little hoarse, as he said with a low laugh, "You used my phone."

I gave him a thumbs-up. "Clever boy." Then I got to work on fixing my hair. With no time to fix the rogue mess of curls, I settled for quickly straightening the top half and then fluffed the ends with a spritz of hairspray.

Jude was still standing there when I turned around. "Ready."

Smirking, he eyed me up and down before handing me my phone. "Let's go."

He left my room, and I stuffed my phone into a tiny black purse with my keys before following him downstairs.

I locked and closed the door behind me, noticing he'd left the passenger side door of his car open. Yeah, not happening. I swallowed down the kernel of curiosity to see if his car was still crystal clean and headed for my own.

Inside, I put the car in reverse, and the sensors immediately exploded. "What the hell?"

In the camera, a dark green suit and slivers of skin could be seen, the rest of his hands inside his pockets. "Seriously?" I called and turned down the volume as he rounded the car and opened my door. "What are you doing?"

"Out. We are enemies on the same team, get in my car."

"I'd rather not go at all."

My gaze moved from the glimpse of skin at his neck, the top buttons of his dress shirt undone, to his eyes. They flashed with humor. “Not an option, unless you’d like to lose a fingernail.”

“What?” I felt my face scrunch.

“You heard me.” He reached in and hit the ignition button, then reached around me, his scent smothering and drowning my senses, to unlatch my seat belt. Pulling back, he stayed leaning inside the car, his face inches from mine to enunciate in a heated whisper that reeked of minty breath and honesty, “There are consequences for missing annual events such as this. You must attend, and we must attend together. Out.”

I waited until he’d stepped back before moving. He then fetched my purse and closed the door. “Lock it. You never know when the campus vultures come out to play.”

“Okay,” I said, doing so as we climbed into his car. “Vultures?”

“The non-island folk who come from no money think it’s cute to search unlocked cars and homes for expensive belongings and cash.”

My brows jumped, and he turned, looking over his shoulder as he backed out of the drive even though he had a reverse camera, too. Our cars were exactly the same model, the only difference being the color and all the fancy exterior extras on his.

Yes, I’d picked it right after I’d seen him bring his home. A decision I felt immensely stupid for now.

Straightening the wheel, he muttered, “There is sheltered, and then there is January Denane’s daughter.”

“Hey,” I snapped, clipping on my seat belt. “She wanted to protect me.”

“She wanted to find a way to keep you out entirely, knowing that would never be possible,” he said. “She should’ve spent more time preparing you.”

My comment was more snide than I’d intended. “What, like your dad did?”

“Precisely.”

I blinked, and then I snorted. “Seems there were many cons to that, too, what with your stellar personality and those inner demons and all.”

He couldn’t refute that, just clenched his jaw and took off down the street.

We sat in silence for the twenty-five-minute drive, and as we sped into town and past our old homes, a pang fluttered and spread inside my chest.

Studying the impeccable interior of Jude's car, I wondered where Henry was. Not a speck of dust lingered on anything. He would've been horrified when he'd opened the door to mine and spotted the gum wrappers and lipstick in the center console, the smudges on the buttons and the screen in the dash.

Whatever. I wasn't a slob; he just had outrageously high standards.

"Where's Henry?" I decided to ask as Jude pulled into The Ribbon and drove down the side to the rear where a valet had been set up.

"Sleepover with one of his school friends."

It made me smile to know the night terrors hadn't chased his childhood away in that respect.

"He told me you read to him," Jude said. "I didn't know until the wedding."

I'd come to learn the dark prince's voice grew lower, rougher, when he wanted something and when he was feeling a certain way about something. The cold apathy vanished, if only for fleeting moments.

I didn't know what to say to that, being that one of the reasons Jude had been cruel to me at school appeared to be associated with the fact I'd introduced myself to his brother. So I said nothing and opened my own door before the valet or Jude could do so, needing away from the heavy air that'd infiltrated his car.

The young man with a large dark tattoo on his neck, dressed in a black vest and matching slacks, nodded at me, then took the keys from Jude. "Evening, Mr. and Mrs. Delouxe." He nodded at Jude. "Your father is already here."

"Thanks, Timmo."

Hearing my new surname out loud knocked me sideways a little. Jude took my hand in his, and I couldn't help but feel a little thankful. "What's the tattoo around his neck?" I murmured out the side of my mouth. Warm and firm, his hold was beginning to feel all too familiar once more.

I hated it. I hated that I didn't hate it enough.

"I don't know, a zombie badger or some shit." Jude nodded at two security guards near the elevator. "Why don't you ask him?"

The suggestion was evidently a barb at what he deemed to be my less than appropriate evenings spent with other guys.

"Rude," I said, watching as he pressed the pad of his thumb to the screen inside the elevator.

“Me? You’re the one spreading your legs even though you’re married.”

I bit back my instinctual retort, deciding with, “Like you haven’t spread someone else’s, hypocrite.”

The doors opened. Jude coughed down a laugh when his father’s brows rose. “Hi,” he said, eyeing me curiously. It was unnerving how he was so much like his son, except for the eyes.

I struggled to find my voice. “Hey, uh, I mean, hello.”

His mouth wriggled, eyes lighting briefly with amusement. He then walked beside Jude as we headed down the hall. “You’ve prepared her?”

Jude’s hand stiffened, his fingers tightening around mine. “We got distracted, but really,” he said, so dry I almost winced, “is there any way to prepare someone for what they’re about to see?”

His dad exhaled, rough with impatience. “You could at least attempt to make it easier.”

“It wasn’t made easy for me.”

“Jude,” he said, tone curt.

Wanting to end this so I could find out as much as I could, I said, “I’ll be okay, I’m sure.”

Both son and father looked at me with mirrored expressions of doubt, brows heavily furrowed.

We rounded the hall in silence, and when Elijah opened the door to a room beside what I now knew was called the room of servitude, I pulled my shoulders back.

Soft chatter and laughter mingled with the light rhythm of three acoustic guitars in the corner.

I wasn’t sure what I had to be afraid of. An elegantly dressed table stretched before us. White linens and black roses littered not just the banquet table but also the smaller circular ones housing refreshments in the corners and on the sides of the room. Black velvet chaise lounges and bench seats sat between them—some filled with couples and others with females gossiping and laughing.

We selected some finger food. I stuck with chicken skewers but added some type of lettuce concoction to the side of my plate to appease my mother, wherever she was.

She appeared when we found a spare seat on the side of the room, still warm from being recently vacated. “Good, you’ve eaten,” she said, seeming flustered as she looked from me to Jude. “Have you spoken to her?”

“About?” he asked, shoving a mini cucumber sandwich inside his mouth, cheeks bulging.

My mother’s eyes swelled, and I refrained from laughing. “This evening, you brat.”

“Oh, that.” Jude took his time dabbing at his clean yet forever bristly chin. “She said she’ll be fine.”

January turned her scowl on me, but it softened, her mouth tightening with worry. “Fern, you really should—”

A woman in varying shades of sheer red chiffon touched my mother’s elbow, leaning in to whisper something in her ear.

Mom looked back at me, but clearly, she was needed elsewhere and rather urgently, for she merely glared at Jude in a way that spoke volumes.

Volumes I knew he’d ignore.

Growing tired of feeling like a third wheel to my own life, I gave my plate to a passing waiter and brushed my hands over my skirts. “Okay, time to fill me in.”

“On what, exactly?” Jude licked his fingers, then waved a waiter over.

“Oh, custard tarts.” I grabbed two and a napkin while Jude selected a chocolate éclair.

Watching him maul it made it obvious he was either a big fan of baked goods or a big fan of evading my desire for information. Probably both, I mused, watching him lick cream from his upper lip.

“Sorry,” he said, turning into me, his arm heavy upon mine. “Would you have preferred to clean it up for me?”

I ignored that. “What’s going on tonight?” I looked around the rapidly filling room. “Seems like a fancy dinner party.”

Jude snorted, then stole my napkin to clean his fingers while I ate.

“It’s called A Night in October. The couple directly opposite us?” he said without looking.

I briefly shot my eyes that way and found a young brunette, maybe a few years older than us, sitting with a graying, handsome man with a goatee. “What about them?” I took my soiled napkin back to clean my own fingers.

Jude grabbed my hand, the napkin tumbling to the floor as I rose. My purse, still strapped over my shoulder, bounced into my back as I collided with the side of his body.

His arm crawled around my waist, keeping me unbearably close, as he said to the side of my forehead, “Hank’s in the drug trade, a retired extortion extraordinaire.”

I blinked, forcing my eyes to remain forward as Jude walked me up two sets of steps into the same ballroom we were married in. The room of servitude.

Colorful Nightingales flitted around the domed glass ceiling, and a myriad of chaise lounges, leather sectionals, bench seats, and other reclining comforts had been scattered over the mosaic floor.

I was about to ask Jude why there were so many... sitting areas when he whispered, “Behind us and to your left. Thomas Verrone and his wife, Jemima. A caretaker on retainer if you will.”

He pulled me into a large cleared space in the center of the room, and we joined another smattering of couples who were slow dancing and kissing. Doing so gave me the opportunity to glance around and discover who Jude had been referring to.

A tall man with dark hair combed back over his head, making his bright blue eyes all the more piercing, turned our way. Swiftly removing my gaze, I caught a glimpse of almost black shoulder-length hair on the slender woman tucked protectively to his side.

Jude nodded at them, taking his hand from my hip to wipe beneath my bottom lip. I didn’t care what had been there, not as darkness crept into the side of my vision. “What do you mean?” I asked. “For their gardens?” That would explain his beautiful olive skin but not his presence here.

“He’s good at garnering intel and taking care of... issues.”

Oh. *Oh.*

I felt my face drain of color as I tried my best to keep my eyes away from the man and his wife.

“Things...” I couldn’t even say it, but I tried again. “They really take things that far?”

“If necessary, yes. Though typically, he comes in handy for intel.”

I didn’t want to ask how handy exactly he was, and so I looked over Jude’s shoulder at two guys who were holding hands as they drank and talked amongst themselves. “The male couple.”

“Theo and Elvis,” Jude said. “Visiting from London with Theo’s parents. They were at the wedding. Theo is Henrietta’s stepson. She adores him, and his father hates him.”

“Because he’s gay?”

“Because he doesn’t want a gay man running their chapter when he retires or dies.”

I frowned. “That’s basically the same thing and stupid.”

Jude hummed in agreement, steering me to the outer wall as the chandeliers above began to wane from a florescent yellow to a dull gold. “We need to stay over here.”

It was as if the change of lighting had taken his relaxed demeanor with it, his body and voice simmering with heightening tension.

I noticed Thomas and his wife bidding people farewell, and a few others doing the same. Not initiated, I knew without asking, but associates.

They knew whatever was to come was nothing they wanted a part in, and I had a feeling they wouldn’t be allowed to remain anyway.

More laughter tumbled into the room, and I peeked over my shoulder to find a bunch of giant green and red velvet cushions had been placed where we’d once been dancing.

And people were starting to make out on them.

It began with couples, and when I swung my eyes around the room, I noticed more and more people moving toward those couples, individuals who were stripping themselves of their jackets. Women unraveled their hair, and some men and women took up seats around the outside, waiting and watching, it seemed.

“Jude...” I gulped and gulped again.

He’d stepped back to a table of refreshments, his expression void as he handed me sparkling champagne. “Drink.”

With a tremble in my hand, I took the glass. He saw it and tugged me close.

Releasing a resigned sounding breath, he said, “Look, you’re about to witness a giant party with an orgy thrown right into the middle for all to see. You don’t need to participate. No one is forced to. But we must bear witness to it.” He downed half a glass of champagne, his throat bobbing. “The annual fuck-fest, as Silas and I call it. All must attend, but not all must share.”

It was then I realized Silas wasn’t here. “Where is he?”

“In severe shit and he knows it.” Jude finished the rest of his champagne, then dumped the glass on the table. “My guess is he wants

nothing to do with the people who stole his beloved from him, nor does he wish to make matters worse for himself with said beloved.”

I looked around for his parents. “You won’t find them,” Jude said. “They use the smaller room with some of the other oldies.”

“Oldies,” I muttered, my expression souring enough that Jude chuckled as I wondered where my mom was. “He’s making matters worse for himself by not attending, though, isn’t he?”

Jude tipped a shoulder. “Being Clint’s son, he’ll get bitch slapped for sure, but not as hard as anyone else would. I’ll bet he merely gets beaten up by his dad’s choice of brute.”

My eyes widened, and again, Jude laughed, but it died quickly. He nodded to the forgotten drink in my hand. “Drink, Red.”

I did, and when I was done, he was ready with another. “I just... why?”

He knew what I was referring to and chewed his cheek for a moment. “It keeps inhouse fighting to a minimum, you know, affairs and the like, and also...” He took my drink when I was done. “Power.”

“Power?”

He poured me another. “Yep. Control under the guise of a sordid gift.”

I frowned at the champagne he handed me. “One might think you’re trying to get me drunk, husband.”

With his jaw set, eyes ablaze with cold, he dared to say, “Trust me?”

Something told me I could with this, but given our messed-up history, I would never admit as much. “Not in a million years.” Still, I tipped the champagne back, handing him the glass to refill it afterward.

We ended up staying on the side of the room as moans diluted with laughter and low chatter. No pictures were allowed to be taken and no filming, Jude had said. If anyone was caught doing so, they’d lose more than their devices.

Jude seated himself on the arm of a cream leather couch by the drink table, his hands upon my hips as I kept my back turned to the many naked people behind me. The music grew in volume with female cries and male grunting, and so did my fraying nerves.

Jude wiggled my hips side to side, and I found myself enjoying his attention, the way his hands fit my hips like they were made to hold them, way more than I should. “Dance,” he urged, gazing up at me with a twinkle I hadn’t seen enter his eyes in months.

I twirled, naked bodies blurring until Jude halted me, and I fell into him, laughing between his splayed legs. “Now kiss me,” he murmured, eyes dropping to my mouth.

I captured his rough cheeks, thumbs rubbing at the bristles, and folded my lips over his.

His hold grew tighter, fingers squeezing, and I was struggling to remember why I hadn’t done this with him since we’d moved in together.

Oh yeah, he’d broken my heart.

Scowling, I pulled away, but he simply handed me more champagne. “Drink.”

Eyeing him over the glass, I then tipped it back, handing him the remains, which he polished off.

“Now dance.” He spun me again, this time pulling me back to his lap. Straddling his knee, I felt myself grow damp when it rose to press firmly into my center.

I moaned, and he held me to him, his lips roaming up my neck to my chin. He nipped it. “So beautiful.” The whispered groan heated me to boiling point. “Kiss me.”

Clasping his face again, I tilted his head, my tongue searching for and finding his. They rubbed, and they tickled, and he sucked mine into his mouth before biting my lower lip as he pulled back. “Drink,” he said, handing me yet another glass of champagne.

Grinning, I was spinning while not moving at all and drank a few mouthfuls as I rocked over his knee.

“Kiss me,” he said when I took the last sip, his voice threaded with want.

He pulled me over him again, drinking the bubbly liquid from my mouth. I licked the remnants from his chin and neck, and heard his breath catch, a rumbled curse scraping up his throat to thrill my ears.

Gripping my chin, he kissed me once more, and this time, he didn’t pull away and tell me to drink.

This time, we fell onto the couch, my legs on either side of his waist.

I woke what felt like hours later on that same leather couch, curled around my husband with my head tucked into his neck, as the party slowly came to a close.

A muscular man with unbound, long dark hair rose from a chaise lounge on the other side of the room, his shirt in hand. Blinking at his chest,

then his face, I startled and glanced away when his eyes met mine. “Is that Headmaster Taurin?”

Jude yawned. “Indeed.”

Wow. I didn’t ask why he was here. That answer was explained by his presence.

Clothes were everywhere, as were champagne bottles, glasses, and naked people. A few were still fucking while others lay spent, kissing lazily and chatting.

Jude handed me the water he’d been clutching, the glass warm, and I sat up a little higher, drinking the entire thing. “What time is it?”

“One,” he said. “It’s after midnight, so we can leave.”

“Please,” I said, handing him back the glass as my mom entered the room, her hair a mess and a half-naked blonde attached to her side.

We didn’t move for untold minutes, and I knew that was my fault, but his neck smelled so good, and I was so tired. Everything developed a haze around it as though the sensation of spinning was fighting to stay a little longer.

“You got me drunk,” I croaked, my finger toying with a button on his shirt.

Jude yawned again. “You’re welcome.” He then rose from the couch, and I squeaked as he carried me out of the room, down the steps, through the adjoining room, and out into the hall. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”



I must have fallen asleep again after he’d set me inside the car, for I woke with a start as soon as Jude pulled into our driveway.

I might have still been half tanked, but as the evening’s events wandered inside my sleep-addled brain, I was filled with many other things too.

Flustered and confused and terrified and other sickened things with no available name, I slammed the door behind me and tossed my purse onto

the couch in the living room. “I will not be blindsided again. You need to tell me everything. *Everything*, Jude.”

He stalked casually to the coffee table and looped a finger through the handle of a mug I’d left there, swinging the black porcelain in the air. “Would it fucking kill you to rinse your shit and put it in the dishwasher?”

“We have a housekeeper.” I frowned. “It’s one cup.”

“Once a week, Red, and I’ve seen fifty more just like it.”

“Keeping count? Really?”

“Fifty-one, to be precise.”

I sighed. “Jude.”

He walked off. “I don’t know how to say this nicely, but you’re going to be blindsided again, and I probably will be, too.” He dumped the offending mug into the kitchen sink and filled it with water before coming back. “I’ve only been initiated for a year. I can tell you what I know, but it’s not everything. Things are only revealed via gossip, which isn’t always accurate, and by experiencing them ourselves.”

In answer, I dropped to the couch, waiting.

He remained standing but folded his hands over the back of the recliner across from me and rolled his neck. “Chess Club. Nightingale. The society. Peridot’s elite and almighty. We now belong to a division that stretches across seas, borders, and is harder to tap into than any other in the world. For not anyone can request entry and initiate. You are born in, or you marry in.”

“Chess Club,” I repeated, remembering some of the guys at school say it now and then. I’d thought they were covering up something stupid, but nothing like this.

Jude continued. “The initiation is brutal, and you only know the half of it. They take what you love most, and they make you destroy it.” He huffed, hands scrunching into the leather as he stared out the window to the night sky. “Why? Because you’re not a connection that members can trust if you aren’t willing to sacrifice all you hold dear.”

*What did you do, Jude?* I didn’t ask.

He stared at me then, green eyes bright in the firstborn hours of a new day. “It’s ancient and outdated, sometimes sexist and cult-like, but it’s a world most people only hear rumors about, dream about, create stories about—never able to hear enough about. If you’re in, you’re protected for life.” He tipped a shoulder. “Any crime you commit, within reason, can be

wiped. Any financial difficulties you may face can be fixed. Any education, job, or even funds to start a business is yours. Any political ties or favors you need can be arranged, and the list goes on.”

And his father and my mother were two of the current ringleaders.

He stalked out of the living room, and I sat with the dark, with the knowledge I might have entered into something that could make or break me.

Returning with a pen and paper, Jude knelt before the coffee table and drew a diamond. A star at each point. “There are factions in four places of the world. Europe, Asia, Australia, and right here on the very edge of the US of A.”

He then went on to write the names of each faction’s alphas.

London’s alpha, of whom I’d briefly met, was Benjamin Gabe.

Australia’s was a woman—Amanda Bright.

Japan had a young man by the name of Leon Arakan.

“His father recently died of a stroke, leaving Leon the youngest alpha in Nightingale history.”

“How old is he?” I whispered, unsure why.

Jude, noticing, smirked. “You would’ve found this out on your own, and you’re in, so I’m allowed to tell you. Chill.”

“You like that annoying word.”

His eyes dipped to my mouth. “I like a lot of other annoying things, too.” They then returned to the paper, and with my heart twisting, I watched him scrawl twenty-two beside Leon’s name.

“Whoa.”

“Yep,” Jude said. “His father was a decent guy, but man, was he tough on him. If there’s anyone equipped to deal, it’s Leon.”

“He wasn’t there tonight,” I said, unless I’d missed him.

“He’s exempt while grieving.” He wrote down dates, one three months from now. “There’s an annual hunt for those who wish or need to find themselves a bride and want to choose from the offspring of members.”

“No,” I said, knowing it was pointless to doubt what he was saying.

“Yes, this year’s ended rather swiftly. The three males knew what they wanted and didn’t fuck around.” While I grappled with that, Jude went on. “If someone betrays us, then they’re tortured before the entire enclave in that country.”

My mind began to spin. I was thinking maybe I was still a little too drunk.

“... out of all the factions, ours has the reputation as the most ruthless.”

I listened, I watched, and I couldn't help but ask, “Did you want to join?”

Jude stood, taking the paper with him to the kitchen. “I did, yeah.”

I followed, getting a glass of water while he scavenged for something in the third drawer. “So you knew it was messed up, and you still wanted in?”

Lighter in hand, he lit a corner of the paper aflame and dropped it into the sink.

We both watched it burn.

“Red, no one knows just how messed up something is until they experience it for themselves.” Jude stared at the vanishing paper, then turned on the tap. “I'd wanted it more than anything in the world.”

He went upstairs before I could needle him further, but I stayed until the scent of smoke cleared from the kitchen, more questions arising than what were answered.



The bell over the door tinkled, and I marched straight for the counter, smiling at Veronica, who was working the old coffee machine. “She in?”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Please, she lives here.”

I laughed, but it died quickly when my aunt appeared, her hair pulled back in a loose braid with a mermaid clip and flour dusting her denim apron. “Twice in one week,” she said with forced surprise. “Am I lucky, or what?”

“Extremely,” I said, grinning.

She leaned over the chocolate powder-coated counter, studying me. “That husband of yours must be a real fraud, after all.”

“The worst kind,” I said, but I was still grinning, unable to quit thinking about the previous night. That could be because I was still feeling a little

worse for wear after all that champagne, or because I was struggling to make sense of Jude's actions.

Protector or extreme tormentor? Both, possibly.

*I'm the only one allowed to taste your tears.*

"Out with it," she said. "You've got that look."

I feigned offense. "I came for the coffee."

"And to ask me something. You know the saying about eyes being the windows into people's souls?" I nodded, and she stabbed a finger at me. "Never believed it until I held you in my arms. They give you away every time."

I'd need to work on that. Pity Jude didn't destroy my soul instead of my heart. Maybe that would have hurt less. I was determined to make sure he didn't decimate both.

I chewed my lip, taking a quick look around the almost empty coffee shop. "My dad."

Ray instantly stiffened. "You haven't asked about him in years."

"He's your brother," I said unnecessarily. "I need to know one thing and one thing only, and I know you can help me."

After seeing the type of people Nightingale kept on the payroll and knowing the lifestyle my mother liked to live, I couldn't help but wonder if I needed to ask more questions.

If I should have done so long before now.

"You know I can't say anything, Fern." Her voice gentled, eyes darting around. "And you know, or you will soon, what could happen if I do."

Hope was squashed by fear.

If Jude was right about their punishments, and deep down, something nudged that he was, then I couldn't do that to her. Reluctantly, I nodded, sliding off the torn plastic of the stool. "You're right, and I shouldn't have thought to ask."

"You should," she said, and my eyes shot to hers. It took everything I had to keep my expression somewhat neutral as she began wiping down the countertop, humming a tune I only vaguely recognized.

"Why are you humming the Australian anthem?" Veronica asked, laughing a little.

"I hear the winters there are like spring here," Ray said, daydreaming and airy. "You know I love me some springtime weather."

"So weird," Veronica mouthed to me.

My aunt raised a brow, and smiling, I backed up to the door. “Catch you crazy ladies later. I need a nap after finally turning in that paper.”

Australia.

She wouldn't have said that unless he was there, but I had to wonder, why so far away?

Before I could ponder it anymore, a black Town Car pulled up to the curb in front of my car.

Shit.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

A tinted window rolled down. “Get in, Fern.”

With my heart beating in my ears, I slid over the leather seat and closed the door, the car pulling away instantly. “What's up?” I said with as much calm as I could force.

Mom was clicking away on her phone. “You're missing something, and we need to rectify that as soon as possible.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, and she didn't deign to fill me in. Her phone rang, and I listened to her squawk into it for the ten-minute drive to the docks.

We pulled up outside a long row of warehouses, and the car waited as we headed inside. Mom's heels clipped over the asphalt, echoing as the roller door went up, revealing hundreds of crates and boxes.

We walked into the dark. The door rolled closed behind us, trapping the scent of brine and erasing the shriek of a lone gull. I followed the winding path between stacked mayhem behind my mom, one that she seemed to know by heart, until a small bright light from a windowed room came into view.

Inside, a guy riddled with tattoos with a piercing through his nose tipped his chin up at me in greeting.

“Uh, hi,” I said, flinching when he snapped on some black gloves.

Then I remembered.

Jude's tattoo. The picture in the foyer of our home. The giant one at Nightingale headquarters.

“Sit down, Fern.”

I think that was the first time I wished my husband was present since the moment he became my sworn enemy. And as my limbs trembled, my every exhale shorter than the last, I knew.

I knew with concrete certainty he'd encouraged me to drink until I could hardly see for my own good.

I wished he was here to do the same now.

Left with no other choice, I swallowed the rising fear and dropped onto the chair, my chest facing the back and my arms hugging it. My back was prepared with clinical swiftness.

I squeezed my eyes closed at the sudden hum of the gun, but the tears escaped anyway.

# NINETEEN

## *Fern*

I was dropped off at the curb, my mom's driver speeding away.

The silence swallowing our street, the darkness seeping from inside the house before me made the eroding ache in my back so much worse.

I wiped beneath my eyes, my fingers were probably black and my cheeks too, and walked up our short drive to let myself in.

A lamp clicked on outside the living room. "Where were you?"

I would've screamed, but just flinching hurt like hell, and I was too spent to bother. "Oh, you know. Just getting maimed for life."

Jude launched out of the armchair he'd been waiting in, wearing plaid pajama pants and nothing else. My eyes dragged up his ribbed, solid torso, every darkened crevice absorbing the buttery glow of the lamp behind him, to his eyes.

They were filled with something I'd never seen before, and I didn't want to take a leap of faith by thinking it was something it definitely was not. Fear.

His next words were sharper than the needle used upon my flesh. "What did they do?"

My tongue was too thick, the sides of it battered from my gritted teeth as a thousand knives had drilled into my back. "The tattoo."

He cursed, gently grasping my wrist and turning me into the light of the lamp. The back of my dress had been cut open, exposing my new scars for him. I felt his hand hovering, fingers curling over the red, freshly inked skin, but they didn't touch.

He knew firsthand just how badly it hurt. "Come upstairs. I have some cream for it."

Too stunned from the evening's events, I didn't think to question why he was being nice or if it was a trap. I simply followed him upstairs to his room and waited outside, not wanting to enter. In the short time we'd lived here, I'd never once stepped foot inside it.

From where I was standing, it was sparsely dressed in a much similar way to his room back home. Grays and blacks soaked up the moonlight, spraying bursts onto the dark bookshelves lining one wall.

I wondered which books he'd brought with him, and what he'd chosen to leave behind. For although his room here was huge in its own right, it paled to the size of his room at his dad's place.

Jude exited his bathroom with some type of cream in hand. Gesturing to the guest bathroom down the hall, I walked there and waited as he uncapped the tube and switched on the light.

His touch was fire, the pain a steady burn that spread with every careful swipe of his fingers. I bit my lip so hard that I tasted more blood.

"Mine was done right after," he said, so soft, I almost didn't hear. "I'm surprised they let you leave the hotel without it."

"We had just gotten married," I whispered, not trusting myself to use my entire voice.

He hummed. "For a shark with the sharpest teeth I've ever seen, your mother is shockingly soft on you."

"I'm beginning to see that," I whispered again. "And that you're probably right about it doing me more harm than good." It was as if I'd spent my life living in the sun, never knowing what true night looked like, nor how it tasted.

Now I knew it was luxuriously toxic, a bitter red wine, and I was still learning. Undoubtedly, I could have been better prepared for this new world that had always existed alongside my own and many others. Maybe then, each new revelation wouldn't feel like a slap to the face.

Not that I'd even know what that felt like.

Jude took his time until every ounce of ruined skin was smothered in the heavy, oily barrier. "No, I think she was right to make you exactly the way you are."

Cold swept in, and I turned to find only the tube of cream remained.



Out on the main street, a cobbled road filled with roaming weeds, I stared up at Cory's vine drowned window and called her.

She hadn't answered the door, so I'd sent her a text telling her I was outside. No response, and as I saw the time, realizing I'd been standing there for twenty minutes, I had a feeling she wasn't about to humor me at all.

I missed her. The diamonds on my hand taunted, flashing under the muted shine from the streetlamp above. I stared at them, then back up at her window.

The light inside went out, and I dragged myself to my car.

Our house was dark, but Jude was home. Surprisingly, he spent a lot of time there, mainly in his room or the gym he'd set up in the garage.

He exited the latter when I walked in and dumped my phone and keys on the entry table. Rubbing a towel down his face, he slung it over his shoulder. It slid down his bare back and hit the floor. He didn't bother picking it up.

"Hey," I said, and not sure why I'd said it, or where to put my eyes. He was shirtless. Again. Gray sweats clung to his defined hips. He was still the worst person alive, but even the worst people could have moments of decency.

There was none of that present now, though. Jude's hand encircled my wrist, halting me in the hallway. "You can't keep doing this. They'll find out, and no one can know it's a fucking sham."

I frowned, then smiled. He thought I'd been on a date. "No one will know," I said, pulling my wrist free. "*Chill.*"

I made it up the stairs before I was planted against the wall outside the guest room. "You will stop," he said through his teeth, eyes so bright, I thought they might actually glow. "You will go to school, see your friend if she'll still have you, but then you're to come home."

Rage. That was rage in his eyes, weighing his words and rolling off his damp skin. The heat of it wrapped around me like a tantalizing hug. "You can't control me, Jude. Now let go."

His nostrils flared, and then, he grinned. "Never. Ask me what I'm afraid of."

I frowned. "Jude..."

He closed the tiny gap, our chests almost touching. "Just ask me."

“Fine.” Tilting my head back to meet his gaze, I asked with as much indifference as I could summon, “What are you afraid of, Jude Deloux?”

His smile vanished, every cruel edge of his beauty returning. “You.”

Our mouths moved at the same time, colliding so hard I tasted blood when his tongue slid over mine. He didn’t seem to care. I didn’t care. I grabbed his waist, fingers dragging and digging into every muscle. They climbed his chest, and he groaned, stealing my lip with his teeth.

A curse, violent and drugging, infiltrated my mouth when my hands pushed at his sweats. “Off,” I panted.

He didn’t listen, but he picked me up and carted me into the spare room. I was thrown on the bed, Jude barking, “Off, too,” as he removed his sweats and briefs.

I peeled off my apricot dress and threw my bra across the white bedding. It tumbled to the floor, and then Jude crawled onto the end of the bed. “Stop.”

Fingers tucked inside the elastic of my panties, I frowned. “I don’t want to.”

His grin was a thing of evil perfection, and I wanted to kiss it off his exquisite face. “Allow me.”

“Oh,” I murmured, my hands falling into his hair when his head lowered and his nose aligned itself with my center.

He inhaled deep, groaning a hot exhale over the fabric, and then he carefully tugged the damp panties down my legs. His mouth visited me for all of a second before he was staring up at me with barely contained need.

I could hardly keep up with what was happening, let alone remember that we shouldn’t do this. That I shouldn’t do this.

The idea of stopping—unfathomable.

He needed me, and I’d never felt it so potently, never as ferocious as right now.

It gave me the courage to say, “Wanna know something fucked up?”

He hummed against my swelling flesh, licking and sucking.

“I wasn’t on a date tonight. I tried to see Cory.” He stilled. “In fact, ever since you slid the ugliest, tackiest ring of all time onto my finger, I haven’t been able to even look at someone else.” I swallowed over the knot forming in my throat. “And I hate it. I hate you.”

He rose onto his knees, a naked god attacked by moonlight. “I fucking hate that I’m so relieved right now, and I hate you, too.”

I couldn't help but laugh, and then he was eating my mouth with his, his body fitting itself over mine.

I made to pull away, to catch my breath, but every time I tried, I couldn't do it. I needed to stay synced with him—swallowing his every breath, touching every part of him—and to drown inside the burning and fizzing erupting under my skin.

And then he was pushing inside me.

I tried to stop it, to just stomach it and hope it wouldn't hurt too bad, but my entire body seized. He was too big, so big, and I'd never had anything thicker than half a finger inside me before.

He kept pushing forward, a slow crawling fire. "You're so fucking tight."

My mouth tore away from his, my head rolling back with my arching spine as I screamed, silent and breathless.

"Fern?" he asked, the sound drenched in a red fog. "Fuck." Fingers gripped my chin, tilting my head down for his wild eyes to search my own. "You... You're a virgin," he said, blinking profusely.

"Was," I wheezed, trying to focus on his face and not the searing pain.

His eyes lit up, and a shocked burst of laughter coated my lips. "You beautiful fucking liar."

"I'm not a liar," I said through gritted teeth. "I never said I wasn't one."

Jude's smile waned. "But the guys you brought home."

"Three," I said. "Three guys who bailed as soon as they realized I didn't want to do anything other than dry hump them and make out." I tried to relax beneath him, but it was almost impossible. "Can you move or something," I whined. "Hurts."

"Searching for what I gave you, were you?" Our noses brushed, and he blew hair from my forehead. "Why? Why not take it further with someone else?"

I didn't want to answer that, and I didn't have to.

His shoulders fell with a rough exhale. "I don't deserve this."

I smiled a little. "You don't think I know that?"

He kissed me tenderly and whispered, "Wrap your arms and legs around me." I did as instructed. "Good. Fuck, you feel like you were made for me to live inside you."

A spark ignited in my stomach, and my arms tightened around his neck.

Dragging his lips across mine, Jude slid his arms under me and began to gently thrust. “Breathe, Red.” I released a huge rush of air I’d been holding, some of the tension fading from my limbs. “Now kiss me.”

I kissed him, felt one of his arms slide out from beneath me for his hand to coast up and down my side. I shivered, clenching around him, and he groaned. “There’s my little freak,” he whispered. “Always so responsive with me.”

I moaned, the heat from the pain morphing into a heady mixture of both pain and pleasure.

“Just for me,” he said, groggy and low, his hips rolling into me now before rearing back and then slowly pushing forward. “I’d almost forgotten how good it feels to taste you, your mouth, your cunt.” His lips glided over my jaw and down my throat. “Your skin.” Teeth sank into my neck, and I gasped. “And your pain.”

My legs quaked. “Jude.”

“Can I make my virgin bride come all over my cock?”

I couldn’t breathe. His mouth stole mine, and all I could do was lay there as his tongue and lips assaulted me. “I’ll bet I can,” he murmured, a wicked laugh spilling over my lips, “I’ll bet you come so fucking hard for me, you’ll forget what your name is, let alone the fact I destroyed your hymen...”

I exploded into fragments, carried among the stars.

Jude gripped the side of my face, our foreheads touching as his hips jerked with mine. “Now look what you’ve gone and done,” he rasped, kissing me long and hard, our eyes unable to detach as we shook and choked on each breath. “I think you’ve more than ruined my life, Wife.” His lashes fluttered as he drank in my face. “You’ve ruined me.”

I laughed, breathless, and forgot that I shouldn’t kiss him.

But I did, over and over again until we were nothing but flesh and bone, wasting away beneath the fading moon.



I stumbled into the spare room's en suite bathroom, tempted to look back at the bed to see if what I knew happened had actually happened.

*It sure happened*, said the ache radiating from between my legs.

Gingerly, I cleaned up, knowing I'd need a shower. Not daring to look at the bed I'd slept in, at the enemy I'd slept with and all over like I was some type of blanket he had to keep pulling over his body, I raced naked out of the room to my own and grabbed my toothbrush.

It was after nine, and Silas was hopefully at school, where Jude and I should be, too.

I threw on my robe, toothbrush hanging from my mouth when I heard my name being called.

Walking back into the spare room, I continued to brush my teeth. I would remain cool, calm, and totally collected. So what if my husband who I hated with every bruised corner of my heart took my virginity and then kissed me until I passed out in his arms? Nothing else needed to happen, and nothing needed to change.

I would never dare allow myself to think it might.

I leaned into the door a little too hard as Jude gazed at me from the bed. His hair was a mess from my fingers, deliciously and adorably unkempt, and his eyes were hooded from sleep and... *no*. No, he was just tired. I wasn't reading into this foolish situation.

"Come here," he demanded, sleep coating the words.

My hand paused, the toothbrush still in my mouth. My feet started walking, and I scowled at myself before turning to the bathroom and spitting out foam. I washed it down the sink, then marched into the room to find Jude waiting.

"Red."

"No."

"Yes."

As if his eyes were the bait, I swayed closer without realizing it. His arm shot out, and he nabbed the toothbrush from my hand.

Horrified, I watched him put it into his mouth. "Ew, gross."

"I've swapped saliva and other bodily fluids with you all night, and you worry about sharing a toothbrush?" he mumbled around it. Brushing quickly, he tossed the toothbrush to the floor, and I gaped at the gray toothpaste-speckled rug. "If you don't come here, I'm going to have to get up and bring you back to bed."

“Why do you want me to?”

His brows gathered. “Because I want you. What’s the problem?”

What was the problem? I half laughed. “Uh, the problem is I already feel awful enough about what I gave you. I don’t want to regret anything else.”

“Awful?” he repeated, then his expression smoothed. “Right, you think I’m going to hurt you.”

“You have before. You put moths in my locker right after my first”—I scrunched my nose—“oral experience.”

“Oral experience,” he laughed out, then licked his lips. “Come on, Fern, lose the robe and get your ass over here. We’re not going to school today anyway.”

My hands fisted at my sides, but then I smiled and crossed my arms. “It must be hard, being that this time, you can’t make me do anything. Leave or stay.”

“If you’re referring to what I think you are”—he yawned, tucking his arms behind his head—“I kicked you out because watching you clam up over some fucked-up memory while muttering for your father made me feel something...” His eyes met mine, honest and wide open. “It made me want to hug you or some bullshit. I couldn’t do that, Red.”

“So you filled my locker with moths.”

“Yes,” he said simply. “I wanted you, but I also hated you. I hated how badly I wanted you. The way it felt when I was with you made it seem like I’d never truly known what it was to want something before.” Stunned, I let my arms fall. “That made you a threat. You felt like a threat.” His eyes dropped to my mouth, his own curving. “You tasted like one, too.”

I blinked. Unbelievable.

“Fuck you, Jude.” I stormed out of the room.

“Mhmm.” His voice chased me. “Oh, and Fern?” I paused in the hall where he couldn’t see me, but he continued as if knowing I was there. “You didn’t clam up and have some type of breakdown over dusty-ass moths. You just miss your dad.”

Withholding tears, I slammed the door to my room and locked it.

# TWENTY

## *Jude*

Fern didn't leave her room for the rest of the day.

I'd listened to the shower running for half an hour, wondering how it felt between her legs after I'd marked her for life.

*A virgin.*

I'd grinned at the ceiling before taking a nap.

Fuck knows why, but I decided to make her dinner, knowing she had to be starving.

You could say she needed to refuel. I'd drained a lot of her energy, and if I had it my way, there was going to be a repeat looming once the sun set.

That was my excuse, and I was making one hell of a meal with it.

"What's that?" she asked, rubbing her makeup-free eyes as if she'd just woken up.

She was wearing some flimsy, frilly looking pajama ensemble, and I drank in the way the shorts sat loose on her magical hips, the matching top's straps falling down her satin shoulders. No bra, I noticed the lack of straps and the way her tits jumped when her arms dropped.

"Jude," she said, clicking her fingers.

"Huh? Oh, food." Already wearing the mitt because I'd been waiting for what felt like forever, I grabbed the dish from the oven and set it atop the stove.

"Food," she said, laughter thickening her voice.

"Your tits are distracting."

I heard her snort and the fridge open and close. "I didn't know you could cook."

"I don't exactly love it, but I can." I plucked up the spatula, sliding some lasagna onto the two awaiting plates. "My mom taught me."

Fern, drinking from a water bottle, lowered the plastic to the counter and hopped onto a stool. "She must be amazing because this smells so good."

“Did it entice you out of your cave?”

She leaned over the counter to open a drawer. I beat her to it, snatching a knife and fork and holding them before her as I stared at her tits.

“Jude,” she said, tugging them from my hand to no avail. “Yes, it smelled so good I had to come down here, happy? Give me the cutlery, you savage.”

I gnashed my teeth at her but relinquished my hold. “Fine.”

I wanted to sit next to her, but I wanted to see her, so I got myself a fork and stayed standing. It was worth it to see those big eyes roll and her mouth stop moving as she savored her first bite. “I’ll admit, I didn’t know if it would taste as good as it smelled, but damn, Delouxe.” She took another bite, mumbling, “So good.”

“I’ll admit to wondering the same thing myself,” I said, sinking my fork into the warm meat and cheesy mess. “About you.”

Fern quit chewing, her cloudy eyes shooting to mine. That maddening rosy tint flooded her cheeks, and she looked down.

I smiled around my fork, chewing with immense pleasure that I still affected her, perhaps even more than I once did.

We ate in silence for a few minutes even though I longed to hear her babble in that way of hers. She was starving, so I let her eat, content to watch as I demolished everything on my plate and went for seconds.

“More?” I asked, setting my food down.

“Please,” she said, her eyes huge.

I slid another slice onto her plate and handed it over. Her tongue swept around her lips to clean them, and then she dug in again.

“You regret last night?” I wasn’t sure why I wanted to know. It was probably better I didn’t. I also probably should’ve felt a little bad about taking that from her after all the shit I’d put her through, but I didn’t.

She was well aware of that, too.

Fern ate a few more mouthfuls, and I could tell by the way she watched her plate that she was struggling with what to admit. “I wouldn’t say that,” she finally said and set her fork down.

I straightened, taking her water and draining half of it. “What would you say then?”

She frowned at the red smudges from my mouth around the bottle’s rim, then gave me her eyes. “I just... I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. Did you lace this?”

I almost spat water into her face, choking as I forced it down my throat too quickly. “Sure, Red. I laced it.” I leaned over the counter, whispering with a grin, “With love.”

Her face was instantly on fire, her lips parting.

The front door crashed open. “Jude?”

Sighing, I tore myself away from my wife as Silas entered the kitchen. His face was busted up, blood coating his sweaty hair. “I was wondering where you were last night.”

He looked from Fern to me. “I’ll bet you were.” He jerked his head to the doorway.

Reluctantly, I followed him upstairs.

“Where’d they find you?” I asked, entering the bathroom as he ripped off his soiled T-shirt.

“I was conned into a nice family dinner,” he said, his voice strained. “They didn’t need to find shit because I walked right into the lion’s den. Again.”

I turned on the shower for him, then opened the cupboard to search for the rubbing alcohol and drugs. We had nothing.

Fully stocked house, my ass.

Standing, I muttered, “I’ll go get you some shit.”

“Weed, too please.”

“There’s some in my bathroom.” I cursed when I saw his back and chest; every inch of him was black and blue, and smeared with blood. “Why didn’t you just fucking show up?”

He pulled off his jeans, stumbling into the wall with a groan. Even his legs were scratched and bruised. “I’ve hurt her enough.”

Usually, I’d have a retort along the lines of, “stupid, pussy-whipped motherfucker.”

Now, the twinge of empathy in my chest stopped me from being a prick.

Most likely because I knew the feeling. I’d tried to get rid of it, but I’d learned I’d never be able to forget it.



When I returned, Fern was in bed.

I'd stood outside her room, hand hovering over the handle, then lifting and poised to knock. I think I repeated the pointless process seven times before forcing myself to leave her alone.

Aside from watching her run out the door yesterday, I hadn't seen her in two days.

I hated how much that bothered me, and how much it thrilled me to see her car pull in the drive from my bedroom window.

I felt like I was living back home and messing with the girl next door all over again.

Only now, she was my wife, and there was nothing secret about it.

I wasn't sure if that was why this growing desperation to make it real had unsheathed itself, unfurling like a wanton beast's wings, growling with eagerness to take flight.

All I knew with a certainty that plagued my every thought of her, was that I couldn't leave her alone.

The curtains had been removed, exposing the savage internal struggle within. The only difference between now and five months ago was that I couldn't close them again. I couldn't shut her out if I tried, but I attempted to anyway.

I tried, and I failed, and after I heard her finish in the shower, I followed the sound of her horrendous humming downstairs. I was greeted by the clang of a stainless mixing bowl and a pan hitting the counter, and the fabulous sight of her ass swaying beneath an oversized worn blue sleep shirt. Her earbuds were in, her hips wriggling as she doused a baking tray with butter.

Amused, I leaned against the arched entryway, waiting until she noticed I wasn't sleeping.

"You think I don't see you there?" she said, tossing flour into the bowl and grabbing some eggs. "Feel you watching me?"

Jerked back in time, I released a gruff laugh, but it faded when I remembered what I'd done at that party. The way just a glimpse of her had made me want to crawl to her. "No one has ever infuriated me as much as you."

"I suppose that should be a compliment," she muttered, mixing her ingredients.

“Of epic proportions,” I said, meaning it.

She thought it was a joke, shaking her head as she smiled sadly at the bowl.

“Cookies?” I asked, pushing off the wall to stalk closer.

Fern didn’t move, just kept mixing away, so I enclosed her from behind and braced my hands on the counter. “Choc chip.”

I could’ve imagined it, or maybe I’d pressed forward, but her back hit my chest, and the scent of her shampoo infiltrated. My eyes shuttered. Her hair was in a topknot, spirals spilling down to kiss her slender neck.

I kissed it, too, holding my breath while I waited to see if she’d pull away.

Her shoulder tipped up, a small giggle leaving her as she lifted her finger toward me.

I stared at the batter sitting there, and then I sucked her finger into my mouth. Instead of releasing her, I turned her around so those tits pressed into my chest instead of her back. “I’ve thought about you.”

She stuck her finger in her mouth even though I’d left not a trace of batter behind.

The blatant desire for me in the action spiked through me, and blood rushed to my already hard dick.

She released her finger with a pop and leaned back into the counter, her eyes narrowing. “And in what manner have you thought about me?”

I wasn’t scared about possibly giving her the wrong answer. That was one of the things I liked most about this wife of mine—her innate excitement for me, no matter what I said, and no matter what she said or did to try to prove otherwise. “Every manner possible.”

Breath fled her parted lips, and I captured them with mine. I kept them locked, unmoving, and just feeling long enough for some of the tightness to leave my chest and shoulders.

“Cookies,” she said, pecking me once before ducking beneath my arm.

Patience had never been my strongest suit, but I let her be. To help with that, I helped her and grabbed another tray and a spoon.

Once they were in the oven, I plucked an earbud from her ear and stuck it in mine.

Taking Back Sunday exploded when Fern hit play on her phone that was sitting next to the bowl on the countertop.

“Why do you listen to this song?” I had to ask.

She just grinned and sauntered out of the kitchen.

I gave chase, catching her in a fit of laughter in the living room and not letting go. “Tell me,” I said, hands stuck to her hips.

“You don’t need me to,” she whispered, throwing her arms around my neck.

Smirking with extreme satisfaction, I skimmed my lips over her cheek to whisper in her ear, “Dance for me.”

She hesitated, but when I kissed her mouth, each corner before opening it for our lips to slide over one another, she did.

Behind the couches, we rocked together, and I could hardly stand to quit her mouth long enough to breathe. So when her phone rang, killing the music but by no means my desperation, and she removed my arms from her body, I scowled.

She laughed, stabbing her phone at me. “It’s my mom. Keep an eye on those cookies.”

I was sure she’d set the timer, so I parked my ass on the couch with a glass of OJ and the game and waited.

And waited.

And then I caught a whiff of something burning.

“Fuck.” I launched off the couch and slid into the kitchen, grabbing the dish towel and pulling each scalding tray from the oven.

They were done for, and the floor above my head creaked, the sound of Fern’s muted voice evaporating.

“Shit,” I hissed, waving the towel over the smoke and switching the oven off.

“So he can cook lasagna, but he can’t pull a tray of cookies out of the oven on time.”

I glared, and she laughed. “They’re black,” she said, her forehead creased. “What did you do?”

My shoulders lifted to my ears as I slowly backed up. “I thought it’d be cool if they resembled my soul.”

She threw one of the rocks at my head. “There’s nothing wrong with your soul, Jude Delouxé.”

I ducked, and it hit the floor, splintering into hundreds of crumbs. “No?” I watched her prowl closer, waiting. Then I snatched her, making her smile soar into a grin. “We both know that’s not true.”

“Nightingale?” she pressed, her teeth denting her bottom lip.

“You should probably know.” I tugged it free. “There are two Judes, Red. The Jude from before, and the Jude you’re unfortunately stuck with.”

Fern shook her head, then bumped her nose into mine. “The old you didn’t exist. This is you, like it or not, and...” She smiled, her eyes bright and burning. “I happen to think I might just like it.”

“You like me?”

“I can like you and hate you at the same time.”

I pouted, then sighed. “Fair.”

She laughed, and I wanted to maul her on the spot, but after kissing her, I wondered if maybe she was right. If I’d always been this guy, and she was always meant to find me at my absolute worst, and I decided it was past time I earned something that’d been given to me.

# TWENTY-ONE

## *Fern*

I woke to find Jude asleep on my lap, and for the longest time, as the credits rolled on, I just stared. I stared, and I wondered how we'd gotten to this place of not just sharing a home, but living in it.

Movies, binging TV series, cooking, sometimes studying at the dining table after dinner... I wasn't sure what to make of it all. I'd even arrived home from my afternoon class yesterday to the sound of a roaring lawnmower. I'd peeked out the back door and then traipsed onto the small porch to discover Jude in gym shorts, sunglasses, and nothing else, mowing the backyard. Since we'd moved in, I'd thought we'd hired someone to do that. I'd likely just missed seeing the beautiful sight until then.

I'd retreated inside, but not before he'd caught me spying on him. He'd puckered his lips at me, laughing when I backed into the screen door.

I was confused, but that confusion didn't and couldn't stop my instinctual response when it came to this man.

Even after all he'd done, I was so weak for him that it was disgusting.

That was what confused me the most. The shame and the want were constantly at war with one another, and I found myself so often thinking, *just one more time*, as though I were an addict swearing I would quit tomorrow.

But tomorrow still hadn't arrived.

It'd been ten days since I gave him a forever lasting piece of me, and I'd started taking birth control. But although his bruising kisses and the rock-hard erection I so often felt told me he wanted to, he hadn't been back for seconds.

Leaning down, I inhaled the dizzying scent of mint and cedarwood.

"Are you sniffing my hair?"

Okay, so perhaps he wasn't asleep after all.

Turning in my lap, he narrowed sleepy eyes on my flaming face.

"Maybe."

“Fear not, dear Red.” His wicked smirk had my stomach flipping so hard that I thought he’d feel the commotion against the side of his head. “I still haven’t let the housekeeper wash the bedding in the spare room.” His voice lowered as though he was sharing a secret. “Sometimes, I stare at it and grow hard in an instant at the reminder of what I stole from you.”

“That’s probably for the best,” I murmured, my chest crackling. “Bernie might get the wrong idea and wonder what kind of people we’re inviting into our home.”

Bernie was a sixty-year-old legend who stole into our two-story haven once a week while we were in school to clean.

Jude laughed, the sound silent but loud in those jade eyes. “We wouldn’t want to offend his sensibilities.”

“Absolutely not,” I laughed out while Jude grabbed the remote from his stomach and flicked over to the sports channel.

He seemed content to stay exactly where he was, and even though I kind of needed to pee, I didn’t want to move him off me just yet. “Why’d you quit football?”

His tone lost that playful edge. “Heard about that, did you?”

“I heard both you and Silas quit the team.”

Jude turned onto his side, facing the TV. “He didn’t quit. They kicked him off the team, and while our fathers could have him reinstated, he doesn’t want to be, and I’d rather go home and kick the ball around with my brother than add another thing to my to-do list.”

“You’d rather play soccer.” I’d often guessed at that.

“When I was a kid, soccer was everything. Then we moved here, and everything was football, so that’s what I did.” He yawned. “It doesn’t matter. My future isn’t sports, Red. We both know that.”

Saddened, I brushed my finger over the side of his face, tracing his hairline.

“When you touch me, it’s like you’re memorizing me.”

“Don’t change the subject, Judy.” He shook with silent laughter. “I’ll never tell anyway.”

“You don’t need to,” he said softly as though worried I’d snatch the truth away from him.

I was fine with him keeping it.

Silence descended as he stared at the game, and I stared down at him.

Ironic, how his every dream seemed to have been tied up in something that would only squash them in the end. “And here I thought they could give you the world.”

“But of course,” he said dryly. “Just as long as it suits them.”

“Jude,” I said after a couple of minutes had created goose bumps upon his arms from my dancing fingers. “What did they ask you to do? To get in?”

I felt him consider it, the idea of telling me, of setting what plagued him free.

But deep down, I knew what he’d choose to do. That he’d dance around the darkest part of himself.

“What they ask of everyone. To destroy myself,” he murmured, “and so I did.”

I didn’t press for more details. With my fingers still in his hair, I just pieced together what I knew, and within minutes, he had fallen back asleep.



I arrived home late the following night after seeing Ray when I was done with class.

But Jude hadn’t been there anyway. I didn’t call him. I didn’t know if doing so would make whatever it was that we’d been doing seem real, and if he wanted that.

And after having enough space from him to stare at the dark ceiling in my room, wondering what he was doing, I didn’t even know if that was what I wanted.

When I walked into the kitchen the next morning, I was met with, “Henry called me.”

Climbing onto a stool at the counter, I nodded, relief quick to curdle into concern. “A nightmare?”

“He had one the night before, and he was worried he might have another. Dad’s home now.” He pushed a bowl of my favorite cereal toward me and then grabbed the milk.

He rounded the counter. "You didn't call me." Turning me and stepping between my thighs, he glared. "You didn't so much as text me."

I noticed he was still wearing the same ripped jeans he'd left the house in yesterday morning, his shirt different, gray instead of black. He must have left some things at his dad's. "You didn't call or text me, either."

"I wasn't sure you'd want me to."

"I do," I said, clutching his crinkled T-shirt when he leaned down to plant a lingering kiss on my cheek. "I think I do."

His mouthed tickled into a grin against my lips, where he kissed me so softly, I felt my eyes flutter. "You think you do?"

I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to figure things out for fear of not being able to like them once they were. So I cupped his rough cheek with one hand and his hip with the other, pulling him closer to devour his mouth.

"Fern," he whispered, sounding pained as he pulled back.

Maybe he was just as confused as I was, just as unready as I was.

The possibility helped me to admit, "I don't know what I'm doing."

His teeth scraped his lower lip, his hand at the back of my head holding me still for him to whisper against my mouth, "I know exactly what I'm doing."

I smiled even as trepidation set in. "What's that?"

"Tasting euphoria."

I leaped up, and he laughed, catching my ass and carrying me to the couch as the stool clattered against the floor.

Pulling him down over me, I lifted his shirt, wanting my hands to comb every inch of his skin. I kissed him with a tenacity I'd never felt before, needing so much more. I wanted his skin on mine, his body connected to mine, his mouth forever on mine.

"Red." Jude lifted his head, breathing heavily.

I tried to bring him back, but he couldn't be moved. He just stared at me with that infuriating amusement. Amusement that soon dripped away, revealing something that looked a lot like fear and adoration in its wake. "Red, I..."

The front door opened and slammed closed. Jude groaned.

I bit my lips to keep from laughing when his head dropped to my breasts, rubbing back and forth. "Not home."

"Don't care, shithead." Silas came into view over Jude's shoulder, his hair tied back at his nape, and his face tinged red from the cool air outside.

“No wonder you didn’t wanna come for our run.” He gave me a flat smile. “Hey, Fern.”

“Hi,” I said, then shoved at Jude’s shoulders. “You should probably go get ready.”

He groaned again, but got up, leaving me lying on the couch in a position that suddenly felt way too awkward.

Clearing my throat, I sat up and returned to the kitchen to right the stool and pour milk into my bowl of cereal. “Cory still won’t talk to me.”

Silas got a bottle of water from the fridge. “That makes two of us.”

“I miss her,” I said.

“Yeah.” He stared at the ground. “Miss isn’t exactly the right word, but yeah.”

He drank his water, and I ate half my cereal, unsure what else there was to say.

“So you and Jude are a thing now?”

My brows jumped, sarcasm drenching my voice. “Um, we’re married.”

Silas chuckled. “Sure, you are.”

I lifted a shoulder. “It’s fun, I guess. I don’t know.”

“You were obsessed with him,” Silas stated, brows low. His nose was still kind of bruised as if maybe it’d been broken. “Finally being with him is just fun?”

“It’s not meant to be more than that.”

“Why’s that?” When I said nothing, he set the bottle on the counter. “Look, you might have been obsessed, but he was fucking terrified.”

“I wasn’t that bad,” I said, feeling that familiar sting return to my chest.

He huffed, scrubbing a hand over his mouth. “Not of your obsessive ways, sweetheart. But because he secretly loved it.”

My mouth fell open, but he only winked before heading upstairs to shower.

I didn’t hang around to say goodbye. I doubted Jude would do that in front of his friend anyway. After quickly rinsing my bowl, I collected my keys and bag and got out of there.

My first class wasn’t until ten forty-five, so I decided to take a drive home.

Mom wasn’t there, as I’d hoped she wouldn’t be. Driving up to the house, I realized this was the first time I’d come back since moving in with Jude.

Everything was the same—silent, sterile, and far too much. Upstairs, I found what I was looking for in my old walk-in, exactly where I'd left it.

Ricky must have moved it into the corner and closed it up. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before, but that red-hot embarrassment still arrived.

Silas was right. I had been obsessed, and the scariest part was that I didn't think it'd lessened. It had only multiplied and grown into a shapeless, more permanent entity.

That was why I grabbed the box, and that was why I took it into my old room and sat on the bed, which had been dressed in fresh, crisp blue linens to look at the contents inside.

I needed to remember. Perhaps if I remembered how much it'd hurt to be knocked down by Jude Delouxé, I'd be more rational about whatever the hell it was that we were doing.

Thirty minutes later, I was hungry again but resolved to put some distance between the dark prince next door and my heart.

We were only supposed to stay married for a year—in our eyes anyway—and I didn't want to be the one walking away broken yet again.

Before I reached the stairs, I glanced down the hall. Mom's bedroom door was open, and I left the box on the landing.

Her favorite color was red, and it showed in the rugs adorning her bedroom floor, the ruffled duvet, the curtains shielding doors that gave way to a balcony overlooking the backyard, and in the throw pillows sitting just so upon the black chaise lounge near a desk on the side of the room.

I rounded the bed and went straight for her nightstand, cringing when I saw a large black box taking up the entirety of the drawer. "Gross."

Shivering a little, I hurried to the desk and searched there. I found nothing and stopped to gaze around the room, wondering where I'd hide something I didn't want my daughter to find.

*If she'd hidden them. Innocent until proven guilty.*

I was about to leave when a bird called outside the window behind her bed. The sparrow took flight, and my eyes bounced to the right. To her walk-in closet.

Inside, I switched on the light and marveled at the size. As a kid, I used to dream of being able to come in here and play dress-up. It was bigger than our downstairs bathroom, gowns and business attire and antique dressers filling the space. Mirrors hung on each wall, and in the center was a huge chest filled with shoes.

I spied her wedding dress, which sat wrapped in a zippered plastic bag behind all her ball gowns. I walked over, staring at it for a moment too long, wondering if she'd been happy when she wore it, and if I really wanted to find the answers I was searching for.

I unzipped the bag and dug around inside but found nothing there save for silk and organza.

That was probably for the best.

Rehanging the gown, I stepped back to make sure it looked untouched.

And that was when I saw the box I'd given my mother when I was five.

It was covered with painted hearts and flowers, and I borrowed the stool from Mom's dressing table to stand on and get it down from the shelf sheltering the long line of elegant clothes.

Inside were pictures of her and my dad, but not as many as one would expect for someone who'd been married to and had created life with the man.

My eyes squeezed closed at what I saw beneath them. The reason I'd felt compelled to invade her privacy in the first place.

Letters. Every single letter I'd written to my dad.

They were still in the envelopes I'd made sure to steal from Mom's office. I remember thinking the less she had to do, then the less she'd make a face at me every time I asked her to send one to him.

That face wasn't made in annoyance as I'd once thought, though. No, I knew her much better now. Far better than I ever had before.

It had been guilt.

# TWENTY-TWO

## *Jude*

The island came alive in a way rarely seen unless for important holidays.

Settlers Eve was one of them, and this one was expected to be a blowout to end all others being the hundredth anniversary of Peridot Island.

Carnivals were set up down by the docks and the beaches. The pub and two nightclubs overflowed. The movie theater and bowling alley were open free of charge. Restaurants took their business out into the market square to feed the many people coming and going from one activity to the next.

People came from all over to visit the island every year on its birthday. It wasn't its real birthday. It'd been here, awaiting our arrival for fuck knows how long. But it didn't matter. People came home from school, returned from their new lives off the island, and some even visited just for the experience.

We'd loved it as kids—the ability to sneak around the market square and the darker recesses of town virtually unnoticed.

So it was pretty damn inconvenient, for Fern anyway, that I should just so happen to wind up at the same party she was at. Especially after she'd been ignoring me for the past couple of days.

Perhaps I was being paranoid, but I hadn't realized she'd been a part of any study group when I'd finally cornered her coming down the stairs this morning. "It's recent," she'd said.

"You're the worst liar I've ever met," I'd told her.

She'd just blinked at me before walking straight out the door.

I tipped the bottle of bourbon back, relishing the burn, and watched the stars wink at one another out on the back porch of Tyler's place.

The party raged on inside, people spilling out of the narrow beachside condo every so often, laughing, singing, or sucking face on their way down to the water.

I froze, the neck of the bottle in my clenching hand, when I saw a flash of red hair and that smile.

Fern was walking back from the water with some guy I didn't know or give two shits about.

"Well, well." I drank some more, if only to keep from leaping at the preppy looking prick, and smirked up at my wife. "If it isn't my wife."

The guy next to Fern made a comical expression of half disbelief, half shock. "What?"

Fern shot her eyes my way, but there was no guilt, no remorse or fear for being caught. "We were just taking a walk."

I looked down at the bottle in my hand, then I rose from the deck chair and headed inside.

"Jude," Fern called, but I wasn't stopping.

If she searched for me, she didn't try very hard. I sat in the dining room, talking shit with Gary for the better part of an hour.

It was possible she'd left, and the thought of her leaving with that guy... I kept drinking until the room began to change color. Golden swathed bodies darted around the table, drinks spilling when a chick was lifted over it for some dude to attack her neck.

They left. Gary left. More drinks were poured. Discarded chip bags were knocked to the floor, many sets of feet crunching the plastic.

"Hey, stranger."

I looked up to find a blurred yet all-too-familiar face. "Marns," I slurred.

Her smile wobbled, or maybe I was finally trashed enough not to see straight after all. Mission accomplished.

Standing, I swayed, and she laughed as she grabbed my arm to try to steady me.

She fell into my lap on the chair instead, still reeking of that same perfume, her soft hair a little longer. "I'd ask how you're doing"—she tapped the bottle in my hand—"but I heard you married the school nobody, so you must be miserable."

"You're not entirely wrong."

Marnie laughed. "I told all my friends it had to be arranged. That maybe she's pregnant or something."

I widened my eyes, thinking that'd help me see better. "Sure."

"So, then maybe you didn't want to break up with me, and you've been missing me as much as I've been missing you."

I belched, and she shoved my face away. “I haven’t missed fighting with you, that’s for damn sure.” Me and my stupid mouth. Though there wasn’t much reason to keep my less than lovely thoughts to myself anymore.

“But we fought so well,” she said, her hand cupping my cheek. When I didn’t say a word, she continued, “I almost didn’t come home for Settlers Eve. But I wanted to see you, to see if this Fern thing was real.”

*Fern.*

Her name bashed into my skull. The weight in my lap felt wrong, the shape of a hip under my hand too bony. “Okay, I guess.” I blinked, then blinked again, trying to get a clear image of this woman.

Marnie’s soft laughter was all the reminder and warning I had before her face was right in front of mine, and our lips met a second later.

I’d already been ninety-nine point nine percent certain I didn’t need to kiss her to know I was over her, but now I was one hundred and ten thousand percent fucking sure I felt nothing.

Nothing save for a colossal amount of regret.

I tore my mouth away, mumbling, “Don’t want to.”

“Huh?”

“Off,” I said, patting her back. “I need to piss, love.”

“Ew, god,” she whined, standing. “You’re still gross.”

“And you’re still not Fern,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?”

I ran away before she could pummel me with those tiny fists, my drink knocked from my hand in my haste. Staring back at it, I decided to leave it be and raced down the porch steps to the garden around the side of the house.

“Fuck me,” I said to the moon. “What a fucking night.”

“I’ll say,” Fern’s velvet voice slithered inside my ears.

I gave myself a shake and tucked my dick away, zipping my fly as I turned to find my scowling beauty. “Red, ditched your loser yet?”

“He’s got a boyfriend, Jude. He’s in my calculus class.” Chewing her lip, she stared at me with shimmering eyes. “How’s Marnie?”

They weren’t shimmering. They were tears.

Oh.

Fucking shit.

“Great, yeah,” I said, clearing my throat. “But she’s not you.”

Fern huffed out a weird-sounding laugh, then marched down the driveway.

Stumbling after her, I tried to think of something useful to say in my addled state. “She kissed me, Red, so don’t get all pissy with me.”

“Pissy?” she said, stopping beside her car. “She kissed you? So for the entire six point five seconds, you didn’t think once to push her away a little sooner?”

“Six point five seconds,” I repeated to myself, frowning, and then I grinned. “You counted.”

She opened her car door.

“Wait, wait, wait.” I grabbed the door. “Shit, I’m drunk, okay? The messy it’s-going-to-take-me-forty-eight-hours-and-a-rapid-detox-to-get-over kind of drunk.”

“That’s your excuse?”

“It’s true, and you’re one to talk about excuses.” I flung my arms out. “Tell me why you’ve been avoiding me.”

She winced at the volume of my voice, then sighed. “I haven’t.”

“You fucking have, and you know it, Red.”

She looked around, then said just above a whisper, “I found letters I wrote to my dad, okay? Every single one.”

“Wait, so... wait.” Swaying, I closed my eyes for a second. “I’m a little too intoxicated to figure out what that means right now, but what’s it got to do with me?”

Her brows rose. “Wow, okay.” Waving her hand between us, she said, “Look, this is... whatever, Jude. You’ll always do what you want, and I’m an idiot for forgetting that this whole thing is actually fake.”

“It’s not fake,” I snapped, offended as fuck. “Not fucking fake at all. That’s why I got mad when I thought you were hooking up with that guy.” I took her waist, squeezing her to me. “This feeling,” I whispered, probably way too loud, but I didn’t care. “The stupid addictive shit you make me feel? I know you feel it, too.”

When she tried to push away, I reminded her, “You *counted*. You have a bloody shrine of me, Fern Delouxe.” I smiled then because she totally did have one but also because hearing her new surname made me feel a little giddy.

“*Had*,” she said, killing my vibe. “And it wasn’t a fucking shrine.” Unprepared and embarrassingly unbalanced, I stumbled back when Fern

shoved me off her, my arms pinwheeling as she climbed inside her car. “How can I trust you, trust this feeling, when you keep hurting me every time you feel threatened by what you feel?” I gripped the mailbox to steady myself, her voice growing more distant, lower. “I’m so sick of being tricked into believing I can.” The car door slammed, and she turned out onto the street.

I began to run, then realized that wasn’t going to work out. Not when she was heading home, all the way across the fucking bridge. The party wasn’t far from Dad’s, so I kept walking anyway. It sobered me a little, but not enough for father dearest’s liking.

My hands wrapped around the wrought-iron gates, and I accidentally banged my forehead on them, peering inside. Dad was out in the front yard with Henry, playing ball. “Yo, losers! Let a fellow inside.”

Dad said something to Henry, then trudged down the driveway in sweats. “You’re dressed wrong,” I informed him. “Where’re the slacks?”

“Can’t play soccer in a suit, dickhead. How drunk are you?”

“About five hundred, but that’s an improvement, believe me.”

He glared before finally opening the side gate.

“Henry,” I hollered, making a run for the rolling ball.

I missed, skidding to my ass on the damp grass just as the fireworks on the beach began to go off.

Henry busted a nut laughing, holding his tummy. “When did you get so bad at soccer, Jude?”

“When he decided to make himself stupid.”

“What do you mean?” Henry asked Dad.

“Never mind. Run down the back, and I’ll meet you there.”

Henry walked backward, smiling at me. “You coming, Jude? The fireworks have started!”

Groaning, I muttered, “Yeah, I can see that.” I waved him off. “I think my ass needs some ice. I’ll see you later, dude.”

Henry laughed. Dad scowled, walking over to offer his hand.

I took it, noticing his grip was a little tighter than necessary. “What? A guy can’t let loose once in a while?”

“You’re completely legless.”

I journeyed to the house. “Should try it sometime, old man. It’s good for our moth-eaten souls.”

The mention of moths and souls brought back the memory of Fern on the ground at school and of her dancing in my arms in our living room.

I cursed and went inside.

After putting Henry to bed, Dad found me sprawled on my old one and staring at the swirling ceiling. It'd lessened a little in the time he'd spent with Henry down at the beach, but I still didn't want to get up.

A bottle of water thumped to the nightstand. "Drink."

"Vodka?"

"Not funny." The bed dipped. "What's brought this on?"

I rolled my eyes. "I've been drunk before, come on."

"Not like this," he said curtly. "I know you, and if there's one thing you cannot stand, especially after initiating, it's lack of control."

He had me there. "Sometimes, it's warranted." Like when it seemed your heart was being squeezed right before your fucking eyes.

Dad hummed. "Once." He swallowed so hard, I heard it. "I needed to do that once."

"When?" I asked, the question tasting like another bad decision.

"I never met your mother in England," he started, and I felt every violent piece of me suddenly grow quiet. "She was stolen from a drug runner who owed one of our members an extreme sum of money. My father flew us here, where most of the heinous shit is done"—he paused—"was done, and told me my test had arrived."

I'd met my grandfather exactly twice when I was a kid, and both times, he'd been an insufferable royal prick. He died from an accidental overdose when I was seven.

Dad shifted, his voice uncharacteristically quiet. "I was petrified, damn near pissed my pants." He exhaled a humorous breath. "I snorted two lines of my father's coke on the plane and emptied the minibar in the limousine on the way to The Ribbon. I was..."

He cleared his throat, and I could no longer feel the blood in my lips due to biting them too hard.

"They, ah, they filmed it so people could watch without being in the room. She was already there, half-drugged but aware of what was about to happen. They told her she'd be free to go after, and her boyfriend's debt would be wiped. Still, she shook so hard her teeth clacked. She cried, yet I still..."

He didn't elaborate, and he didn't need to.

“I tried to find her after, to apologize. Hell, I even handed myself into our local police station back home. But they were already informed the event had been consensual.” He said the word as though it were a joke.

And it was.

“I’d thought I knew how far our influence ran, but it was that afternoon, face-to-face with the law, that I realized just how little I really knew. That we were, *that we are*, the law. I was sent home with a pat on the fucking back,” he spat the words. “As though I’d told a good old joke.”

“Dad,” I tried to interrupt, my vision so very clear when I so desperately wished the ceiling was still dancing.

He didn’t let me. “Four months later, I was brought to a meeting. She was pregnant. She was now a liability. So I said I’d take care of it, and I married her. But Lizzie, even after being plucked from the dregs of London and thrown into wealth, she wasn’t happy. I tried to change that, and in doing so, I grew to love her, and she grew to like me. She forgave me, she’d said. But I knew she couldn’t love me when she could never shake the fear of Nightingale and what they’d had me do to her. Of what they could do to anyone.”

Quiet swept in on a freezing mist.

I wasn’t sure what to say. He’d raped my mother. I was a product of an initiation.

A thing she should despise, yet she never had.

The blank stares, the forced serene smiles, and the flinching every time my father so much as hinted at the organization... it all became irreparably obvious.

People were right to fear what they did not know.

But those who’d experienced the horrors of the unknown for themselves and still could not look it in the eye were never going to find the balance between night and day.

Fern did that.

Fern did what I never thought anyone or anything else could do.

She chased shadows to dance in the sun, and she dragged me with her, exposing me to a balance I never thought imaginable.

Love.

Dad was watching me as I choked on the silent acknowledgment. “I know you might think me a monster, and that’s okay. For the rest of my life, I will carry the shame of what I did to her.”

“As do we all,” I reminded him.

“Since then, I fought to ensure anything like that was consensual. That there could be no disputing it. Since then, everything is kept within Nightingale, no outsiders, and everyone is tested, every precaution taken.”

Swallowing, I nodded. “You’re no monster.” I grinned when his expression laxed into surprise. “But you’re an obnoxious prick, and I’m sorry she didn’t love you back.”

Laughter, rough and unused, burst out of him. “You had to have gotten it from somewhere.”

“Let’s hope Henry takes after Mom.”

It felt weird to say that, to call her that, but kind of good, too. The type of foreign that meant you missed something.

“When are they releasing her?”

“She doesn’t want to leave,” Dad said, sounding resigned. “She’s made friends, and I guess she... well, she feels safe there, Jude.” He sighed. “And after years of being afraid, even in her own home, I have no fucking idea how to take her away from that.”

“So you don’t,” I said, unsure and guilt-wracked, but knowing it was right. “So we leave her there.” I licked my lips. “I’ll go see her. I’ll make more of an effort, and hopefully, with time, she’ll find herself ready.”

Dad frowned at me. “You’ll see her?”

“Well, not tomorrow.” Or the next day. “I’ll be busy with some asshole named hangover.”

He huffed, rising from the bed. “Drink the water, and don’t go anywhere else tonight.”

I wanted to see Fern, but I knew going home like this and trying to reason with her wasn’t a sound idea.

“Dad?” I called, and he turned back in the doorway, half shrouded in shadows. “I need a favor.”



Dad drove me home the next day.

The car ride had been silent as I rummaged through every dark place inside my mind, trying to organize it all into some type of order so I could explain.

I stood before our front door, not sure I was ready. I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready, but for her, I'd suit up and do it anyway.

Florence Welch blared from the Bluetooth speakers in the living room. Fern was in the kitchen, standing at the sink, and...

Setting shit on fire.

"What the fuck?" Every planned speech I'd fumbled around with vanished.

"Oh, hi," she said, radiating nothing but calm as she plucked another piece of paper from the cardboard box on the counter and held the lighter to its corner.

It wasn't just a piece of paper, though. It was a picture of me sleeping.

Leaning against the doorway, I slid my hands inside my pockets. I was still wearing the same jeans as the night before, but I'd showered and changed my shirt. I'd made sure to leave a couple behind, as well as briefs, when I'd moved out.

I'd make a mental note to take more clothes there for whenever I stayed over, but I didn't want to have to.

This was our home. As new and tense and strange as it all was, it had become a home all the same, and Fern was the reason for that.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, my heart swelling my throat. "Not just for last night, but for every cruel, moronic thing I've ever said and done."

Fern watched the crumbling remains in the kitchen sink. "That's nice."

I stared. Her hair was up with rogue tendrils brushing over her neck and shoulders. She was wearing a tank that read, *I'd rather be dreaming*, and what I knew had to be tiny as hell sleep shorts, judging by the glimpses of her thighs.

She wasn't going to hear me. Wherever she'd gone, it was no place that was ready for apologies.

So I stepped forward and slid the folded piece of paper housing an address over the counter and headed upstairs.

Five minutes later, the smoke alarm finally exploded, and I heard footsteps on the stairs.

She didn't come find me for another twenty, and I was growing more and more anxious by the minute. When she did, it was in sweats and a faded

pink T-shirt with matching Vans on her feet.

“I knew you didn’t burn it,” she said, standing in the doorway.

Lying on my bed, I crossed my ankles and turned the page. “As if I’d ever do such a thing. I kept it in my safe. It’s my favorite bedtime story.”

She said nothing, and I peered over to find her face beet red.

I grinned, patting the space beside me. “Come sit with me, darling Red.”

“I want it back.”

“Why?” I asked, admiring a rather piss-poor depiction of my face from a year or so ago. “So you can burn it, too?” I turned the page. “I don’t bloody think so.”

“Jude,” she growled.

It only made me smile bigger.

“Wait, are those sticky tags?” She finally stepped inside my room but stopped a safe distance away from my bed. Little did she know, wherever she went, whatever she did, she’d never be safe from me.

“Yup. In case you haven’t already figured it out, Wife, I never truly wanted Marnie. I wanted what she represented.”

She stuffed her arms over her chest, her expression one of furious beauty. “Wholesome and sweet and popular?”

“No. My innocence. The Jude from before.” Ogling her without one fleck of shame, I watched her lips, bare of lipstick, roll between her teeth. “The Jude who hadn’t yet screwed everything up. I thought if I could just get some semblance of what I’d deemed as normality back...”

She sat on the edge of my bed, curling a leg beneath her. “Then everything might feel a little better, less changed.”

“Right.”

Our eyes stayed locked, and hers gentled. She gestured for the diary, and I gave her a look that made her laugh before handing it over.

Flipping through the pages, Fern took her time, fingers reverent over her writing as she went to every page I’d tagged.

Pretty much all of them.

“Those are my favorites,” I said.

“You reread them?”

Fighting the urge to shift and squirm, I admitted, “I do.”

“Present tense,” she whispered, probably without meaning to. “Holy shit.”

Emboldened, I said, “I miss it. I miss her. The girl with hearts for eyes whenever she looked at me. The girl who doodled wild imaginings in there every time she saw me. The girl ballsy enough to create a picture wall of me...”

“You killed her,” she said, so very quiet. “Repeatedly.”

I nodded even though she was still staring at her diary and felt my chest spasm. “I know. But I want to bring her back, somehow, and make her stay. If you’ll let me try.”

Her eyes swung to me, narrowed with suspicion. “Why?”

“Because I...” I blew out a huge breath and sat up. “I want her. I want her more than I’ve wanted anything, and that makes me feel so out of control.”

Fern waited while my heart squeezed itself into a ball, closed the door, and reinforced its every barrier.

“I know the feeling,” she eventually said, dropping her diary onto my bed when she stood. “And I need to go.”

I was on my feet before I could breathe. “Where?”

“I have a plane to catch.” She walked out.

“Fern,” I yelled, knowing this was most likely going to happen, but not like this and not yet.

The front door closed.

She’d been ready and waiting to go.

# TWENTY-THREE

## *Fern*

Sick was the only word fitting enough to describe the aftermath of the events from the night before.

Everything inside me had rotted into a muddied puddle of revulsion when I'd seen Jude with Marnie. In the past, watching them at school, I'd felt curious and somewhat fascinated—I just loved watching him.

I wasn't sure when obsession had turned into something far more formidable, but it had.

I wanted to cut Jude's eyes out and rage at him for this insidious feeling poisoning my veins, my chest, my every breath. I wanted to scream at Marnie for daring to touch something that no longer belonged to her.

When I'd started seeing him as something more than an object to covet, and a threat I despised, I couldn't decide.

I'd tried for almost twenty-four hours, but even as the wheels of the plane hit the runway, I was left with more confusion than I was concrete convictions.

Jude Deloux, my teenage crush turned high school bully, had done the unthinkable. He'd stolen beneath my skin, and with every encounter, every touch, and every earnest word, he'd crawled closer to my heart. And now I was certain it would be a death sentence to admit he'd sunk inside it.

So I wouldn't.

Sydney was nothing I was ready or prepared for, its streets bustling with people and traffic in steady streams that never seemed to end. It reminded me of a smaller, less volatile version of New York.

A part of me longed to stay beneath the crystal blue skies, birds flying alongside planes, and listen to the music drifting from every other street corner.

I could see why he chose this place, even if I chose not to run away from my wounds.

A bus ride and an Uber to the outer suburbs later, and that bright sun was beginning to grow tired.

I could relate, but the exhaustion I felt hadn't yet kicked in enough to warrant stopping. Adrenaline and that overabundant curiosity I'd always harbored for things better left alone dragged my feet from the weed-speckled sidewalk and up a brick-paved garden path.

The house was brick too, covered in a cream layer of concrete that was chipping away at the corners and around the edges of the square windows. Lace curtains covered them, allowing the last vestiges of daylight to creep inside a single-story fortress that shielded my father.

I walked up the two maroon steps and marched straight to the black screen door.

Then I knocked.

A dog growled and snarled inside, barking the entire journey to the door.

The wooden barrier opened, and there he was, dressed in navy sweats and a stained sports jersey. "Hello..." He blinked so hard it opened his eyes wider. "Fern?"

He was nothing like I remembered while being everything I expected. His medium brown hair held streaks of gray, and he'd grown a beard. He kept it tidy and short, his mustache shifting as he scrubbed his cheek.

Large dull blue eyes looked at mine, blinking again. "Holy shit, it is you." Tears glistened in those eyes, the eyes he'd given me, a couple dropping to his cheeks. "Christ, you've grown. But you..." He made a show of looking down the empty street. "You shouldn't be here."

I kept looking at him, clutching my backpack tight before me. "I know, but I am. May I come inside?"

He hesitated, and I licked my teeth in an attempt to keep a harsh word at bay.

The dog kept sniffing at the door and shoved its head around Daryl's legs. A Rottweiler.

He'd need more than that and an ocean to protect him from them, and he knew it.

Still, we all had our comforts.

I wondered what it meant that I wasn't crying, too.

Grabbing his dog by the black collar around its neck, he opened the door. "Barney, stay."

“Well trained,” I commented, studying the dog after I’d stepped into the short hallway.

Barny stared at me, and I stepped forward, holding out my hand.

He growled but then sniffed away. Five seconds later, he was licking me. “Good boy,” I said, patting his huge head.

“Are you, um…” Daryl closed the door. “Are you staying or…?”

He was eyeing my bag, which I’d dropped to the floor beneath an entry table covered in mail. Above it, a small wooden plank with a red heart in the middle and two hooks either side of it sat on the wall. One of them hung his keys; the other was awaiting someone else’s.

He didn’t live alone.

“I won’t take up too much of your time.”

“It’s fine. I’ve not long got in from work, and Danni should be home soon.”

“Wife?” I asked.

“Girlfriend.” He gestured down the hall, and I let him take the lead while I took note of the suede sectional in the living room, the flat screen on a glass entertainment unit, and the numerous dog toys littering the tiled floor. “She works at a call center in the city.”

“Where do you work?”

He froze in a stark white kitchen, his back to me as he stared inside his fridge. “Drink?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

He grabbed a beer and shut the door, popping the top.

I followed him to a large brown dining table outside the kitchen. A sliding glass door overlooked a kidney-shaped pool and an outdoor wicker setting.

I lowered to the cushioned suede seat, and he moved to the opposite end with his back to the pool. “I’m a high school gym teacher.” He still had an American accent, though some of his pronunciations were lower, some words rolling into the next as I’d experienced with the few Australians I’d met today.

“I sent you letters,” I said, folding my hands on the table. “I recently found them all in my mother’s room.”

Something moved over his face, frosting his features a little. “Right. How is she?”

“Fine. Why would she keep them? And why haven’t you ever called, let alone visited?”

His brows furrowed. “You’re one of them now, I assume.”

I lifted the hand wearing my bling. “Married at the tender age of nineteen.”

“Your birthday’s not for another two months.”

Surprised he’d remembered, a jolt traveled through me, straightening my spine. “It’s nice to know you haven’t forgotten that much, at least.”

He sipped his beer, thumbs dragging down the chilled sides for a heavy minute as he stared at it. “I haven’t forgotten anything, Fern. I never will.”

“What happened?” I finally dared to ask.

His head began to shake. “You can’t ask me that, and I can’t tell you. You know that.”

“I don’t know nearly enough,” I said, my voice roughened with anger. “All I know is that one day, you were there, and the next, you were gone. You were my best friend, my only ally, and you left me to rot in the dark.”

“Fern...”

“No,” I said, slamming a fist on the table. “I came all the way here for answers. I don’t want anything from you other than the god damned truth.”

He cupped his mouth with his hand and rubbed. “You’re right. You’re right, but you know what they’ll do to me when they find out I talked?”

“They won’t.”

“You’ve met your mother by now, correct?” His brow arched. “The real January Denane. Ever wonder why you had her last name and not mine?”

I sat back, slouching a little. “Sometimes.”

“Because although my blood runs through your veins, you were never going to be mine.”

Cold brushed over my bare arms, and I blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“I was plucked from college graduation, working two dead-end jobs with a degree I’d hoped would make all the difference while knowing it would make none.” Leaning forward, he lowered his voice. “Her parents were so meticulous in their selection. I was a fucking orphan through most of elementary school until some wiseass shoved me into the system, and I jumped from home to home. I have no family, Fern. I never have, and I never will. I was a tool for them to fuck their daughter with, nice and hard while they watched on like the sick fucks they were.”

As though remembering who he was talking to—his daughter—his eyes popped, and he drank half his beer, collecting himself.

“I loved her. I won’t lie. She’s incorrigible and insane, but I eventually fell for her.” He licked his lips, cheeks billowing as he set a large exhale free. “January hasn’t loved me a day in her life. She might love women, but I highly doubt she’ll ever truly love any one of them either.” He jabbed a finger at me. “You’re the only exception. The moment you were born, I saw the immediate shift in her. I watched as the snake became the wolf.”

Stunned, I stared, some of the ice in my blood thawing.

“Make many friends at school?” Daryl asked, then huffed when I couldn’t answer that. “Didn’t think so. Had many boyfriends?”

*You know the rules...* I remembered some of them saying to one another and struggled to swallow. “You make her sound like a monster,” I rasped. January was many things, but for every fault she never hid was a promise to protect me while surviving this life as best she could.

“She’s not,” my father said, expelling a pained breath. “She’s not. She did it for your own good, but I bet it sucked for you.”

“Enough about me.”

He studied me for a moment, then nodded. “I tried, Fern. They promised me the world when I agreed to marry their daughter for reasons I would soon find out had nothing to do with me, but I knew, shortly after my entire life had changed at their hands, that world they’d promised me? It wasn’t fucking worth it.”

“You were her initiation,” I said.

“Correct. We married right out of school, but they refused to ink her skin and allow her all the way in until she bore them a child.”

My own skin began to tingle at my back, and a muddled sense of disorientation spun me where I sat. “You initiated.”

He nodded. Barny whined at his side, anxious.

“She couldn’t until she had me.”

He nodded again and finished his beer. “Look,” he said. “She gave me a choice after what happened to your grandparents. She was already second tier. She and Elijah...” He flicked a hand. “They have some weird silent pact. There was no way I’d stand a chance at fighting them. So when she offered me the money, a chance for a normal life if I never returned to hers or yours, a life I could keep if I stayed away and kept quiet, I took it.”

His hands spread as though he'd lost a game of poker and his yearly savings. "I'm sorry. Do I regret leaving?" He shrugged. "Sometimes, yes. But only because of you. You were the only light in that fucked-up world I'd willingly walked into, and I loved you so much." He sniffed then and wiped beneath his nose before looking at me with wet eyes. "I still do, but this is where we are, and we can't change that."

*This is where we are...*

And I was beginning to think these answers weren't worth escaping where I needed to be.

Blinking away tears, I nodded once. "How much?"

"Fern," he warned. "We're not—"

"How fucking much?" I yelled, and Barny shifted.

"Two mil."

I glanced around his home, then at the shame disguised as a man in worn comfort attire, and laughed. It was wet, and I coughed. "Wow." I stood and tucked my chair back in. "I'm sorry, too, because I'm worth more than two million, and I was fucking worth swimming in the dark for."

"I know," he said, tears on his cheeks once more. "I know, Cherub."

Staring at the man who once told me fairy tales before bed, who made me princess bread and dug out splinters from my fingers after playing with driftwood in the sand, I smiled. "Don't waste time looking over your shoulder. She wouldn't do that to me." Then I forced myself down the hall to my bag. "Have a magical life, Dad."



I was on a return flight five hours later, and I didn't wake up until it was nearly time to catch the connecting flight.

Feeling the exhaustion and a dire need for a shower, I cleaned up as best I could in the bathroom and then gazed out the window to the world hidden below the clouds until we touched down in New York.

A shower and a steak were at the top of my list of things to accomplish as soon as feasibly possible. Seeing my husband waiting for me in the

airport was not.

I halted outside the baggage claim even though I had no baggage to pick up. I'd left most of it behind in Sydney. "Jude."

"Red."

Dressed in black jeans and a long-sleeved gray shirt that hugged his biceps, he stepped forward and took my bag. "Hi."

"Hey," I said, knowing I had to look like hell but too weary to care. "What are you doing here?"

"That's not obvious?" His hand slipped over mine, and he led me to the gates that would take us to our plane home. "I'm picking up my wife."

I couldn't summon the energy to grill him anymore. In our seats on the small jet, I hugged my bag to my chest and stared up at him.

"Glean anything of use?"

"Enough to move on and close that door." I was sure he knew enough about my parents, maybe not as much as me, but more than I'd known until these past forty-eight hours. Nevertheless, I didn't want to talk about it, and we both knew it was not the place to do so anyway.

But there was one thing that refused to stay hidden. "January created some type of invisible bubble around me." He knew exactly what I was talking about. "With the exception of Coraline, no one ever came near me."

"My guess is she didn't want your pure heart tampered with, but she also didn't want you to hear any rumors, as untrue as they might be. Cory was safe, and she isn't a spoiled brat, so that explains that." Jude's eyes drifted to the window. "And me?" His head tilted, as did his lips. "Well, I am. I wanted you, and so I didn't care. I still don't." His eyes returned with his next statement. "We aren't a door you can close, Red. I'll stand there and block it for the rest of my days if need be." Fingers fluttered over the hair tickling my cheek, shifting it behind my ear.

"The terrifying thing is"—I closed my eyes—"I think I might actually believe you."

Pushing the armrest up, he pulled me into his side, and I drew what felt like my first full breath since seeing that address he'd given me. "Thank you." I knew it had to cost him to ask his father for that intel, and that they were both risking a lot by giving it to me.

He squeezed me. "Don't mention it."

We landed just under an hour later, but instead of heading straight home, I said, "Please take me to Cory's."

Jude glanced over at me, but I kept my eyes facing forward. Flicking the turn signal on, he said, “Only if you’ll call me if she doesn’t answer.”

“Deal.”

It was near dark when he dropped me off outside the closed bookstore. I listened for the sound of his car pulling back out onto the road, but it never came.

Then I waited at Coraline’s door after banging the knocker. My legs ached. I was about to slump to the cracked concrete step when I heard a latch clunk and hinges squeak.

“You’d better have something tasty in that bag of yours.”

I smiled and raced inside before she could change her mind.



I ended up spending the night at Cory’s, unable to answer her many questions but hearing her and offering what comfort I could when she talked and cried and cursed.

When I arrived home the following morning, it was to an empty house.

I showered and washed my hair, then tossed the clothes from my bag into the washing machine. I ordered that steak I wanted as well as two extras for Silas and Jude, but neither of them came home.

I wrapped and put their meals in the fridge, then stole Jude’s current read from his nightstand and took it to bed with me. Another thriller. I was hoping he’d gone back to something more fantastical in my short absence. He seemed to binge one genre before needing to change things up again. He’d made a habit of leaving the books he’d finished on the living room coffee table, so if I wanted to read one, then I wouldn’t need to go into his room to steal it.

I didn’t want to wait. I wanted to feel close to him in some way while wishing I didn’t need to.

I was on chapter five when I heard the front door open and close, then footsteps coming up the stairs.

I knew he was staring at me from my doorway without having to look. I could feel him, taste his presence in the crisp night air. “Are you okay?” The question came from nowhere, falling into the world without my approval.

I lowered the book when he said, “You could say you inspired me to do something I should’ve done a long time ago.”

I bookmarked the page. “You saw your mom.”

Jude crossed the room but then paused, toeing off his boots.

I placed the book on my dresser in answer, and he continued before climbing into my bed next to me. “Are you liking it?”

I turned to face him. He tucked his hand beneath his cheek, his eyes a little bloodshot and his hair finger mussed. “Bored. The last one was better.”

He smirked. “You’ve done better than me.”

“I know,” I said, remembering where he’d placed the bookmark.

We stared for a while, his long lashes bobbing and curling up as he studied my face. “She asked how Henry was.”

“Yeah?” I said. “What did you tell her?”

“That he missed her,” he whispered. “That I missed her too, and that I was sorry.”

My teeth caught my lip, and I nodded, waiting.

“I was asked to maim her lover’s hand. I didn’t know who it was, only that he’d be at the location I was sent to, and no one else should’ve been there.”

“What if there had been others there?”

“They said he had a partner, but to continue if she was present. Otherwise, wait to get him alone.”

I felt his breath grow colder as though it were my own, and I reached beneath the duvet to hold his hand.

He lifted our hands to my mouth to tug my lip free of my teeth, then tucked them into his warm chest. “Park paints and is world-renowned. Mom met him during an exhibition here near campus. I don’t know much about what happened with them after that, and I don’t think I want to.”

I squeezed his hand.

“I didn’t know him. I’d only heard the rumors, and I, uh...” He stopped, clearing some of the emotion from his throat. “I stabbed him in the arm and in the hand. I was supposed to...” His eyes closed. “I was supposed to twist

the knife, Fern. I was supposed to fucking twist it, but then she screamed, and I knew who it was—*who she was*—and then I ran away. I almost left her in the street while she had some type of intense panic attack.”

“But you didn’t,” I said.

“No,” he rasped. “I called an ambulance, forgetting I shouldn’t bother, and then I called my dad...”

“Then you were in,” I finished for him.

“I failed. Not only is his hand fucking fine, but I ruined Henry’s life. I took away his mother all because I wanted inside this fucked-up society. I looked up to my dad; I noticed the way people looked at him. I saw the reverence. I overheard the phone calls, the mystery, the power... I was enthralled, drunk, and addicted to the idea of one day getting to be something so coveted and untouchable that people would trip over themselves when they saw me.”

I smiled, sad and short-lived. “Instead, you got a broken spirit and me.”

Jude sniffed, his eyes glimmering as they smiled back at me. “You were everything I hated because you’re everything I want and nothing I could survive losing. I’d pick you over anything, Fern. Everything.”

The rough conviction to those words slammed me in the chest. I steered back to the topic I wanted to know more about. The one I knew he needed to talk more about. “So you failed, they eventually found out, and here we are...”

*This is where we are...*

“Here we are,” he repeated, then his voice quietened. “She’s... I can’t make her come home. She doesn’t want to. She doesn’t seem to care that we need her, or that I’m sorry. She wants to make pottery and read a million books, maybe write one herself.”

The water in his eyes crested, spilling onto his cheeks. I clasped his head, gathering him to me and hugging him tight.

“I did this,” he said. “I took away the light in her dark, and now she’s stuck in that fucking place, and she doesn’t want to try again. She’s given up.”

That place being Old Isle. A ferry ride across the bay. The only buildings there were a small jail, a church, and a mental institution.

“She hasn’t given up, Jude. She’s just taking a time-out. You’ll see.” I kissed his hair. “You’ll see, I promise. We’ll help her. Together, we’ll visit and help her.”

I didn't know if he believed me, but I knew he wanted to, and I was achingly aware of how that felt.

He didn't need me to talk anymore. He shook in my arms, his tears dampening my sleep shirt, and he held me so tight, I could hardly breathe.

Still, I held him back. My head laid over his, my hand rubbing up and down his back until eventually, he drifted off to sleep, and I did too.

I woke some time later to soft kisses on my forehead, my cheeks, and whispering.

Jude lifted my shirt, murmuring to my chest. "Forgive me," he pleaded to my skin, to my mouth, to my heart, lips pressing over my breast. He pulled off my sleep shirt, and breathless, I pushed at his jeans. "Forgive me for hurting you when I was hurting."

His shirt joined mine on the floor, his jeans somewhere in the bedding with his briefs. "Forgive me for scaring you away, time and time again, due to my own fears." Warm fingers climbed down my stomach and tore down my panties. I kicked them off, and his touch returned to slide through my excitement. One thick digit entered. I moaned, needing more, and his thumb brushed over me, his finger hooking but otherwise unmoving.

"Forgive me for seeing you as a threat to my fucked-up life. Forgive me for knowing that with just one kiss, there was a chance I might never get my old self back if I let you in."

"Jude..." I writhed a little, forever unable to control myself with him. "You got what you wanted. This world, the power, my broken heart, and her..." I couldn't finish, couldn't think, his worshipping fingers, that sinful mouth on my chest—too much and not enough at the same time.

"You know what they say about wanting." I did. I knew just as well as he did where it so often led us. "And you... I couldn't place that much importance on something again. So I chose her. Easier to stick with comfort, with the familiar, than to risk finding yourself swimming alone in the dark all over again."

Tears filled my eyes, dried up my throat, and stole my voice.

"But I give in. I fucking surrender, Fern. I'll drown in the dark forever if it means I get you."

Our mouths joined once more when our bodies did, slow and torturous, every panted breath shared. My back arched as he filled me, my nails scoring down his back.

He kissed my throat, staying so perfectly still as I adjusted to him and absorbed everything he'd confessed. His lips skimmed my jaw, and I stared back up at him. "There's no such thing as true dark, Jude." I kissed each side of his mouth, then whispered against it, "For no matter how little of itself it gives, the moon will always shine."

A throaty groan entered my mouth, and then his tongue did. "Forgive me," he rasped. "Forgive me for falling in love with you the wrong way." His hips moved, careful and determined to destroy me.

Staring into those earnest green eyes, feeling him shudder with every touch of my fingers, I wondered if perhaps this time, it was safe to let him.

# TWENTY-FOUR

## *Fern*

The sun had climbed high into the sky when I left Jude in bed the following day.

He'd called me six times, but I couldn't talk to him right now. Right now, the one person I needed to see wasn't home yet, but I was in no hurry. I'd wait.

"College isn't doing your complexion any favors." Ricky waved a wooden spoon at me. "You look pale."

"Thanks," I said, uncaring. "Haven't exactly had the time to skip around outside like I used to." Too much had changed, had happened—and not just with my education.

"I'm just saying that it wouldn't hurt to get a little vitamin D." He returned to the dinner he was preparing, and I returned to watching the news on TV and munching on popcorn.

*Forgive me for falling in love with you the wrong way.*

He'd meant every whispered word. I saw the vehemence in his eyes, felt the message in the slide of his skin over mine. Against every odd we'd thrown at one another, he'd fallen in love with me.

And I'd raced out of there the moment my eyes had opened and all that he'd said crashed into me.

Self-preservation had been at war with potential happiness since I'd learned the raw truth of infatuation and falling. Since I'd discovered that love wasn't what I'd once dreamed it to be.

Love was evil.

It stole, and it harmed, and it left you with your bleeding remains flayed wide for the world to dissect.

It left you to run and hide as though you'd done something shameful. For many of us were ashamed when our hearts were no longer our own, and the thieves refused to give them back.

We were hurt. We were embarrassed. We were disappointed in ourselves for entrusting someone with something they'd never earned in the first place.

He was earning it now.

But I was still struggling with *then*.

Ricky entered the living room with his motorcycle jacket slung over his arm. "Dinner is in the oven, and I dug out some of your mother's multivitamins." He opened the curtains, the late afternoon sun racing in to smack me in the face. "Take them."

He walked out as I was still cussing, my bowl of popcorn on its side on the couch.

Grumbling, I plucked up all the pieces and tossed them into the bowl, then headed into the kitchen. Two fat tablets sat on the countertop. I dumped the popcorn into the trash and the bowl into the sink.

"That boy must be good for something if you're actually bringing your soiled dishes back to the kitchen."

I almost choked on the vitamins, banging my chest before grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

Mom sorted through the mail, her hair out and framing her face in soft curls. "Don't die. I just got here." She restacked the mail and dropped it to the counter. "And it would seem we have much to talk about, my dear."

I sipped from the bottle, then recapped it and left it on the counter. "Elijah told you."

"Of course, he did." She eyed me, her lips twitching. "You used my credit card, Fern. Did you really think just because I'm busy as fuck that I don't keep a subtle eye on you?"

It was official—I was a lovestruck moron.

I moved out of the way as she checked on dinner and lowered the temperature of the oven, then I followed her to the living room.

Her heels were kicked off, landing side by side neatly on the rug. "How is Daryl?"

"Fine," I said, knowing I'd said the same thing to him about her.

She hummed. "Girlfriend or wife?" At my crinkled expression, she tittered. "I could look into it, but I don't care to. All I know is that man can't stand being alone. So which is it?"

"Girlfriend. Works in a call center."

“Cute,” she said, checking her phone with a scowl and crossing her legs.

Annoyance thundered through me, too fast for me to stop myself from blurting, “What happened to my grandparents?”

If she thought she could just sit there and return emails while I simmered in all I’d uncovered, she was wrong.

Mom didn’t pause, fingers flying over her screen. “They’re dead. You attended their funeral.”

“How?”

She blinked and slowly looked up. “How?”

“Yes,” I said. “How.”

She powered off her phone and tossed it to the couch, then leaned forward. “What did he tell you?”

“Not nearly enough, so don’t worry.” Struggling to hold that dark gaze, I repeated myself, “I want you to tell me how they died. I know it wasn’t an accident.”

My grandfather had owned his fair share of helicopters and small planes. While returning from New York one stormy morning with my grandmother, his favored plane crashed into the sea.

“It sounds to me like you don’t need me to tell you anything.” She clasped her hands between her stocking covered knees. “You’ve already pieced it together.”

She’d had his plane tampered with. “Why?”

“They arranged my marriage. They forced me to bear a child. They never accepted me.” I waited because surely, there was more. “I did everything they ever asked of me to make sure I gained control of what was rightfully mine, but there was always this fear that no matter what I did, I would never be good enough. I’d disgraced them. I’d trusted them with my true self, and they nearly shunned me.”

I swallowed.

Mom scratched at her temple, then gazed at the rug. “They’d planned to adopt.” She laughed. “My mother couldn’t have any more children, and in the end, I guess I wasn’t good enough. They were already in the midst of plucking some riffraff kid from a boys’ home on the Lower East Side when I found out.”

“A teenager?”

“All the better to be their successor in case they didn’t live long, unbearable lives.”

“You wouldn’t have the hotel, the brothel—”

She cut me off. “Excuse me? It’s a men’s shed.”

“Come on.” I rolled my eyes. “I’ve known for ages.”

A frustrated noise left her, and she stood, taking a seat next to me on the loveseat. “There’s no nice way to say this. I was promised an empire, to be a ruler of this small kingdom, and when that was threatened...”

“You attacked.”

“I also had a child to protect. What’s mine will one day be yours if you want it, but no one was taking the choice away from us. I’ve worked too hard, and I sacrificed so much of myself in the process.” She smiled, but it didn’t touch her eyes. “Quit beating around the real reason for your visit, Fern. That pie smells amazing, and I’m starving.”

Fine. “Did you want me?”

Rearing back, she balked. “Are you serious?”

I said nothing, merely waited.

“Foolish girl, I’ve wanted you from the moment I first heard your heart beating. Yes,” she said, her tone hard. “I wanted you. Just because I like women does not mean that I didn’t want to be a mom.” Sliding closer, she said, “Being part of Nightingale meant I didn’t want to become the type of mom I knew it’d make of me. Someone who forced you to your doom.”

Relief, rapid and bone-crushing, drenched me. “It’s not all bad,” I said. “Right?” It couldn’t be, or else there wouldn’t be as many members as there were across the globe.

“No,” Mom said, and she smiled a little. “No, it’s not, but when it’s bad, it’s bad, Fern, and it’s my job to protect you. But how can I protect you when it was me who cursed you?”

I smiled too and took her hand in mine, my fingers linking with hers. “Like this.”

I felt her go entirely still.

I leaned into her, and whispered, “This is all the protection I’ve ever needed.”

Tears rushed out of her eyes, and she swiped them with her free hand as though she were trying to squash bugs. “I hate you so much right now for fucking up my face.”

“I love you too.”



Two days passed, and I still hadn't left home to return to my new one.

To my husband.

I'd tried, but every time I thought about leaving, I then thought about what would happen when I arrived home. It could be the start of something amazing, life-changing in the best way, or it could be the end of a cruel, wounded male's bad joke.

Said male had called a couple more times, and I'd watched my phone ring before letting him slide into voicemail.

He never left one.

Sitting on the balcony of my old room, I stared at the giant hedge looming below. For long minutes, maybe even hours, I wasn't quite sure if I could trust myself to look at the balcony opposite mine.

I wasn't sure I could trust this feeling that I'd once dived straight into without knowing if the water would catch me or stand back to watch me slam headfirst into hell.

I wasn't sure if it was far too late to be worrying about any of that.

"You know, I thought I'd been in love." My eyes finally darted to Jude's balcony. "But then you stamped into my life and showed me otherwise."

I blinked as though that would help me figure out if this was real.

Taking his time, Jude stepped out from his room. He didn't smile. Gripping the railing, he looked at me for the longest time, and I looked at him. "I knew you were probably still here, but I'd hoped you'd want to come home by now."

"I wanted to," I admitted. "I do want to."

"But I'm an asshole, and just because I told you I love you doesn't mean you're going to believe it." He grinned then and pushed off the railing to retrieve something from the pocket of his hooded sweatshirt. "Well, then you leave me no choice."

My mouth fell open as he dropped to one knee.

His smile slipped, his playful tone earning itself a firm edge. “Fern, my Red, my sweetest, most deadliest threat...”

My lungs shrank. My hands trembled. The sun wasn’t able to dry the water stinging my eyes.

He presented a red velvet box, and it opened to reveal a silver ring. The sun bounced off the small band of inlaid diamonds. “Will you marry me for real?”

I laughed, unbidden and uncaring of the blubbering that followed. “You’re serious?”

“Tasteful ring, and I’ll make a shrine of you and write a million diary entries about you if I have to serious.”

“Jude,” I croaked.

He waited, ring poised in the air, unmoving, and I laughed again. “Yes,” I said, wiping at my cheeks. It was pointless for the tears didn’t stop. “Yes, I’ll marry you for real.”

He was over the hedge and climbing up the steps of my balcony within seconds, and I didn’t wait. I didn’t hesitate. I threw myself at him.

He caught me, the ring falling to the deck, and kissed away my tears. “I guess that means you’re in love with me, too?”

“Yeah,” I said, and smooshed my nose into his. “I’m in love with you, too.”

# EPILOGUE

## *Fern*

*Twelve months later*

The church was tiny and in need of repair, but it didn't matter.

Daisies of every color and size had infiltrated the wood and brick building on Old Isle.

The doors had been left open, allowing the sea breeze and sunlight to climb across the pews to the gentlemen waiting at the dais.

Dressed in all black, even the dress shirt underneath, with a red daisy pinned to the lapel of his tux, Jude stood with his hands tucked behind his back.

The priest stood behind him, no doubt confused by our antics but not unhappy. We'd made a handsome donation to have the place to ourselves.

No one else was here. No one knew we were here—only us.

Just the way we'd planned it.

We were renewing vows already made. Only this time, we meant every word exchanged when Jude took my hand, and I stood before him and the rotund middle-aged man with a warm smile.

"I do," I said at last.

Jude's grin was so wide that I almost laughed, tempted to kiss his face off.

Luckily for me, I got to do just that. Not just in my dreams, in the wild imaginings of my mind, but right now, and until death did we part.

My husband gathered me around the waist. As instructed, the priest took photo after photo of us kissing, and we only stopped to smile against one another's mouths.

Before we left, we had him take our photo in front of the church doors, the wooden arched entryway lit up from the outside and bathing us in a cocoon of sunlight.

We ran out of there as though we'd be caught at any moment, which was stupid, considering we weren't doing anything wrong. Our contracts

stated we could divorce, but they said nothing about remarrying.

We didn't make it home.

We made it to an old, dilapidated barn behind the ferry station, my poor lace gown mauled by Jude's hungry hands. "I got to wear white, after all," I said between kisses. My dress was an exact replica of the one I'd worn to our first wedding; only it was white instead of black.

"What do you mean?" He unzipped his pants, then got back to work on peeling the flowing sea of silk and lace up to my stomach. "Tits out."

I slipped my arms free of the sleeves, and Jude groaned, tugging the fabric until my strapless bra and wedding dress were bunched around my middle. Picking me up, he dropped his mouth to my breasts, sucking and kissing. "You dreamed of marrying me in a white dress, did you?"

I nodded, my voice fleeing. The damp wooden wall behind me scratched at my back, and coupled with the swiping heat of Jude's tongue on my skin, I tensed my thighs around his waist. "Fuck me," I whispered. "Now."

"Always so impatient for me," he muttered, grinning around my nipple.

I growled and pulled his cheeks, forcing our lips together while he reached between us. With his eyes hard on mine, I saw every trace of humor leave. "I love you."

He impaled me, cursing when my eyes fluttered. He licked at my lips until I gathered my bearings and whispered on a harsh breath, "I love you, too."

"Tell me, Red." He moved hard and fast. "Do I measure up to your dream Jude, yet?"

A breathless laugh suffocated on his lips, my fingers sinking into his hair. "You're my favorite type of nightmare."

He paused and pouted.

Smiling, I gently bit the tip of his nose, then his lower lip. "And I don't ever want to wake up."



## ***Jude***

*Seven years later*

“Hands! You can’t play soccer with your hands, Mil,” I hollered between my own.

Parents surrounding the field laughed while others stepped back as I ran, still in my suit pants and dress shirt from a business meeting, down the field.

“Millie,” I said, followed by, “Shit,” when I nearly went face-first onto someone’s picnic blanket.

Finally, the little thing with bouncing dark brown curls stopped, hands on her hips as she glared my way. “Daddy, leave me—”

“Behind you, oh, bloody...” I couldn’t help it. It just happened.

“Daddy, why?” Millie cried when I kicked the ball toward the goal. And scored. “Not again.”

“What have I told you about attending games?” my wife said ten minutes later in the car, handing Millie her juice box, but only after she’d downed half her water bottle.

She’d ushered us off the field, apologizing profusely to the other parents, and straight to the car. I didn’t know why she cared. They wouldn’t say a word even if they wanted to. It was more comical than annoying.

Okay, so the coach was a little pissed—but even she wouldn’t dare say too much.

“I know,” I said with feigned self-disappointment. “I know, and here I thought wearing all this shit would help curb the urge.”

Millie giggled.

Fern shot me that squinty look of hers that meant she wasn’t pissed, but she would be soon if I didn’t watch myself.

Sometimes, I didn’t heed her warning just to see her get mad. It was a thing of beauty. Plus, she never beat me up, so that was a win. I got to watch that gorgeous face turn as red as that stunning hair of hers—of which she now kept a little below her shoulders.

Fern was a sight to behold when in a rage. She didn’t even talk, she just stood there, cussing up a storm while opening and closing her tiny as fuck hands.

“Jude,” she warned now.

I bit my tongue, taking the main road home, and made a sound of compliance. I didn't trust myself to speak without laughing.

We still lived right near campus. Alone, thank fuck. We'd tossed the idea around of moving to someplace bigger, but just because we could didn't mean we wanted to.

We'd both agreed that for right now, we wanted to remain in the same place that brought us together.

"I don't know what you want me to say here other than the whole truth and nothing but the truth—the ball came to me." I slapped a hand against my chest. "I'm the chosen one, right, Mil?"

She giggled again. "You're the embarrassing one, Daddy."

"Hey," I said, turning to make a face at her. "I'm hardly old enough to be called embarrassing."

She wasn't even five years old yet, and she was already thinking this? Unbelievable.

As though she could read my mind, my wife sighed and placed her hand on my thigh.

My balls instantly tightened. "Too high, darling."

"Don't you tell me what to do."

"I'm just saying." I cleared my throat. "We wouldn't want to embarrass our lovely little girl anymore today, now would we?"

"How?" Millie asked at the same time as Fern said, "Stop talking, Jude."

I forced a mock-gasp. "Am I about to be objectified again?"

"What's obnextified?" Millie asked.

"Never mind, Mil. And yes," Fern said in that husky voice that told me she was daydreaming and that I really should shut up if I wanted playtime when we got home and could escape from our child. "You most definitely are. It's already begun."

I mimed zipping my lips, then waggled my brows, already raging hard as we waited for the drawbridge to lower.

Fern laughed. "Don't ruin it."

"Impossible," I muttered. "You've said so yourself."

"You guys say things I don't understand," Millie said. "Can we just make sure Daddy doesn't steal the ball again? Maybe he shouldn't be allowed to come, Mommy." She made a huffing sound. "I mean, maybe never."

Fern and I both laughed.

“But won’t you miss me, Mil? I would’ve loved for my dad to watch all my football games growing up.”

“No,” she said, no hesitation or humor whatsoever. “Pa can come, but not you.”

Fern’s hand squeezed my thigh, and then she doubled over, laughing into her lap.

Sighing, I made to loosen my tie, then remembered I’d already taken it off.

I was Peridot’s new mayor in training, and I couldn’t say I hated it. Not one bit. Dad hadn’t retired yet—and so we kind of ran this crazy place together—but he would be in the next few years, and he wanted to make sure I was ready. He was still alpha of Nightingale here on Peridot Island. I wasn’t sure when he planned to step down—alphas could step down at any time if they had an initiated successor—but he’d been making more changes, especially since Millie came along.

Staring into my daughter’s eyes for the very first time, I’d known I had to find a way out of the compulsory initiation for the children of our members. And when Elijah met Millie, he’d taken one wet-eyed glimpse at her before nodding at me, as if he too would ensure that specific changes were made.

We couldn’t go back.

But we could always go forward, and the journey didn’t seem nearly as dark with sunshine in my life. In fact, I was dreading that the journey wouldn’t be long enough.

Dad never remarried, and my mother still hadn’t left the institution. But with the new additions to our family coming to visit her, I could see the longing return to her eyes when it came time for us to leave. She’d ask more questions about our lives—what we were up to and where we might see ourselves in the future.

I no longer pressured her to come back. I trusted that she knew with every hug and smile exchanged that she was wanted, and that we’d be ready whenever she was.

Millie was asleep before the clock in the kitchen reached eight, her head lolling on the side of the couch as her beloved TV show played for no one in the background.

Fern had been on and off the phone since we'd gotten home with some type of launch drama. Thanks to Nightingale and her mother, she was now co-owner of the island's newest and only publishing house.

I left the last of the dishes and carried Millie upstairs to bed.

Fern found me in her room, messing with her sun-shaped night-light. She'd told me she didn't need it, but I wanted her to have it, and old habits forever died hard.

Fern bent down to sweep some rogue curls from her face. She kissed the cleared space of smooth skin, then whispered, "Quit fussing. I've been waiting."

Midnight, our dark gray rescue cat, lay curled up in the corner of the bed. Fern gave his chin a scratch when he lifted his head, blinking sleepily at us.

Out in the hall with Millie's door cracked open behind me, I said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you I was taking a shower," she said with a roll of her eyes, traipsing down the hall to our room.

Over time, we'd moved into the spare room. The same one I'd made her mine in. After sleeping in there the night after I'd proposed to her from my bedroom balcony at Dad's, we just kept coming back. Eventually, so much of our stuff had ended up in here with us that we decided to finally overhaul our deserted rooms months later and make it official.

We'd both laughed when we realized how stupid that had been, all things considered.

I closed our bedroom door. "I didn't know shower was our new code."

She turned at the end of the bed and opened her robe to reveal nothing but beautiful skin. "It's not, but I winked."

"I didn't see you wink." I stared at her tits, which had done what I'd thought impossible and had only gotten better since Millie came along. I moved closer, my eyes still pinned on them, and squeezed.

"You nodded," she said.

"Okay, all right." I lifted my hands to her shoulders, my fingers sliding down her arms until the robe hit the floor. "I failed, and you're probably soaking wet after waiting so long, happy?"

She laughed, then grabbed my cheeks in one hand, squeezing them. "Undress and I will be."

"On it." I stripped in record time, then chased her onto the bed.

My body glided over hers, pressing her into the bedding. Our mouths touched, whispering without words, and I rocked into her, teasing, watching her eyelashes flutter. “Let me see if I’m right.”

I slipped my hand between us, my fingers finding her cunt just as I’d expected to—soaked and needy.

Fern moaned.

And then her phone rang again.

“Ignore it,” I murmured to her neck, kissing a path to her tits. It rang out, and I flipped us. “Sit on me.”

About to, she froze when her phone rang once more. With one look from those blue eyes, I knew I was about to die a slow death. “It’s Mom.”

“Fuck no.”

Fern laughed, reaching over to silence her phone. Her mom still wasn’t my biggest fan, but I didn’t give a shit. At times, she was just as fun to rile up as her daughter.

“Red,” I snarled, gripping her hips when her phone lit up again.

“It’s a text, just wait a minute.” She scanned the screen, then fell to my chest, her hair spilling over my mouth. “She’s pissed at you.”

“What else is new?” I muttered. “No more talk of this. Time to sit on my—”

“She must have heard.” Fern laughed. “She said to tell you that if you show up to another soccer match again, she will be forced to show up, too.”

If there was one thing January disliked more than men, it was sports.

I snort-laughed. “Tell her I’m shaking in my fucking soccer boots, born ready.”

Fern gasped, her eyes shining with mirth and lust. “I will not.”

I snatched her phone and smacked out a reply while she howled behind me.

Then I switched it off and tossed it onto her nightstand. It missed and hit the floor, but it didn’t matter. I lifted my wife over my body, waiting to be inserted inside hers.

Slowly, with her lip stuck between her teeth, she did.

Heaven. Every damn time. Pure heaven.

I sat up, brushing her hair back over her shoulders, and kissed her chin. “Legs.”

She wrapped them behind me, and her arms around my neck, her hips rolling side to side, shivers coasting up and down my spine. “Kiss me.”

Her lips rubbed over mine, once, twice, and then I grabbed the back of her head and tilted it for my tongue to mate with hers. “Fuck me.”

She moaned down my throat, and my other arm smoothed up her back to her shoulder to hold her down, taking me as deep as I could get.

Fern squirmed, panting, but I wouldn’t release her, and I wouldn’t release her lips. “I don’t want to... not yet.”

I didn’t care. “Come.”

She tried to push off me, but then, with a flutter of her eyes, they met mine, and she let go.

I held her tight to me, moving that glorious body over mine as she splintered, and then I rolled her to her back and threw her leg over my shoulder. “I can still feel you clenching...” Her face was flushed, tight spasms around my cock making me still. I didn’t want to come yet. “Kiss me,” I said, voice ragged.

Breathing heavily, she cupped my face, pressing her lips gently to mine before nipping them.

“Touch me,” I choked out, my blood heating to dizzying levels.

Her fingers dragged up my spine, sank into my hair, and her leg left my shoulder to climb up my back with the other.

I lowered until my chest pushed into hers. As per usual, she took my weight without complaint. If anything, it seemed like it wasn’t enough.

Never. I could never get enough. Get close enough to quench my thirst for her, this bone-deep desperation for more.

We’d stained our souls with one another as surely as the ink upon our backs had stained our skin—forever. And though we might not have known how to handle it, what to do with something as volatile and irreversible as this love, we could never wipe ourselves clean.

We were eternity, and nothing, not even our past transgressions or future failures could ever change that.

I’d never allow it anyway, and I knew Fern wouldn’t either.

I’d made mistakes—plenty of them—yet staring down at my wife, her lips red from mine, her eyes heated for me, and her body hungry for more, I was reminded yet again that she was the best mistake I’d ever made. The only regret she’d allow me to keep was that I should’ve made it sooner.

She’d always been there, my little orb of light. I just hadn’t been able to see her until it had grown completely dark.

And now, she was the only woman I was capable of seeing.

I pressed my forehead into hers and pushed deep inside. “Love me.”

She whispered my favorite words. “All through the night.” Her lips brushed over mine. “And every second of daylight.”

THE END



Want to be the first to know about new books?

[Make sure you've signed up for my newsletter!](#)

# MORE NEW ADULT TITLES

GRAY SPRINGS UNIVERSITY:

[\*Suddenly Forbidden\*](#)

[\*Bittersweet Always\*](#)

[\*Pretty Venom\*](#)

MAGNOLIA COVE:

[\*Kiss and Break Up\*](#)

[\*Forever and Never\*](#)

[\*Hearts and Thorns\*](#)

# **STAY IN TOUCH!**

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook page](#)

[Facebook reader group](#)

[Website](#)

**ALSO BY**  
ELLA FIELDS

STANDALONES:

*Bloodstained Beauty*

*Serenading Heartbreak*

*Frayed Silk*

*Cyanide*

*Corrode*

*A King So Cold*